

THE STRATEGY THAT REACHES THE FLOOR · CHAPTER SIX

The First Ninety Days

Five practices set in order, from reading the strategy as the floor reads it to reading the strategy the firm already follows.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

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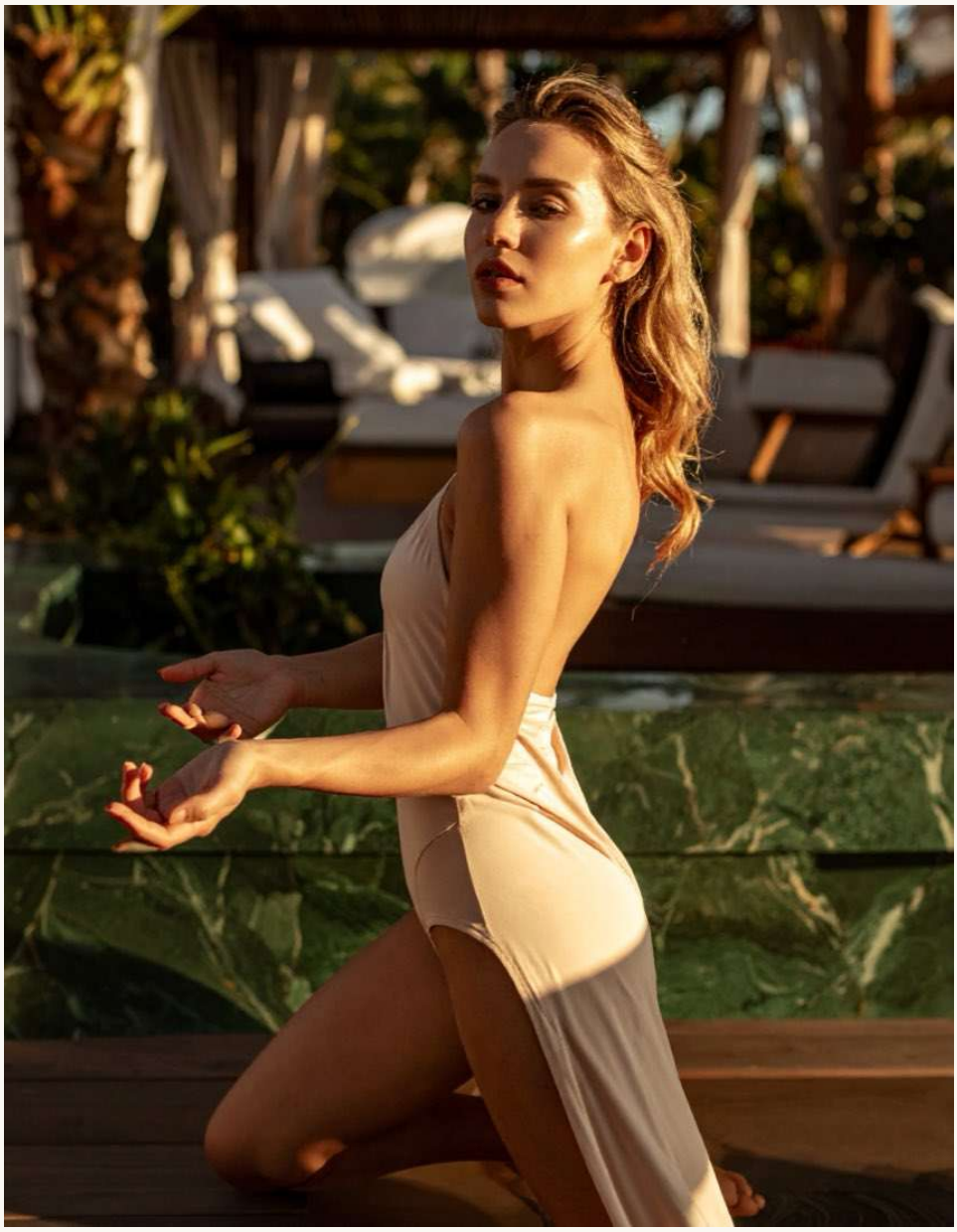
ABSTRACT

Five practices set in order, from reading the strategy as the floor reads it to reading the strategy the firm already follows. It is twenty past seven on the first Monday in February, and the chief operating officer of a firm of about six hundred people is at her desk before anyone else on the floor. The strategy was approved by the board in December. It fits on one slide and three cards, and it has been launched: a video from the chief executive, an all-staff meeting, the cards on every desk. She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she has a suspicion that the strategy has been distributed and not yet deployed. She has a notebook, a cup of coffee and the diary of every standing meeting she chairs. She does not have a plan, and she feels in her jaw the familiar pull to write one before nine and present it on Thursday.

CHAPTER SIX

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The First Ninety Days

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Monday, day one

It is twenty past seven on the first Monday in February, and the chief operating officer of a firm of about six hundred people is at her desk before anyone else on the floor. The strategy was approved by the board in December. It fits on one slide and three cards, and it has been launched: a video from the chief executive, an all-staff meeting, the cards on every desk. She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she has a suspicion that the strategy has been distributed and not yet deployed. She has

a notebook, a cup of coffee and the diary of every standing meeting she chairs. She does not have a plan, and she feels in her jaw the familiar pull to write one before nine and present it on Thursday.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these first weeks are described in the research the earlier chapters read and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. This chapter is written to her, and to anyone in her position: the person responsible for making a strategy real who wants to begin. It describes the first ninety days in order, with who is in the room, what each step needs, roughly how long it takes, the decisions that change the result, the mistakes that are made at each step and how to see them early, how to read what comes back, and what to do on the first Monday. The working pages it refers to are gathered in Chapter 7.

Two things should be said before the plan. The first is that nothing here should be launched. A strategy that has just been launched does not need a second launch about its launch, and the canon's warning about governance applies with force:[45] "Adding process to an unconscious governance system is like adding lanes to a highway that is going in the wrong direction." The practices in this book are not a programme. They are changes to five things the organisation already does: how it explains a priority, how it sets a target, how it measures progress, how it reviews, and how it allocates. The second is that the order matters more than any single step. The chapters were written in the order a strategy travels down the building. The ninety days run in the order the practices depend on each other.

Why this order

The five practices are the back-brief (Chapter 1), catchball (Chapter 2), the pair (Chapter 3), the learning review (Chapter 4) and the quarterly reading of the realised strategy (Chapter 5). In the first ninety days they run in nearly that sequence, preceded by ten days of reading.

The reasoning is this. Every practice asks people to send something upward that they have been keeping to themselves: what the strategy actually asks of them, whether a target can be met, what a number is hiding, why an initiative is late, where the money really went. People send such things when they have seen that what is sent is answered. So the first change is made where the leader controls the conditions and everyone can watch the result: in the meaning of one priority, settled at the top and tested through a back-brief. Only once a back-brief has been answered does it make sense to throw a target down and ask for it back, because catchball depends on the same trust and asks for more of it. The pair is set on the targets that came back, because a second number is easiest to agree when the first has just been agreed honestly. The learning review reads those pairs, and so it comes after them. The reading of the realised strategy comes last, because it is the most exposing for the people at the top, and they should have seen the other practices work first.

One thing is done out of order, on purpose. The history against which any change will later be read is copied and dated in the first ten days, before any practice could move it. The canon puts the reason for be-

ginning with perception in a sentence: "The discipline of sensing before strategizing does not mean never strategizing. It means ensuring that strategy is grounded in accurate perception rather than wishful projection." The first ten days are spent perceiving.

Who is in the room

Three roles carry the first ninety days, and they should be named before anything else is done.

The sponsor is the most senior person whose decisions the practices will touch: often the chief operating officer, sometimes the chief executive, in a large firm the head of a division. The sponsor's job is to go first, in her own meetings and her own back-brief, to answer what comes up quickly, and to protect the people who send bad news. Expect it to take four to six hours a week, most of it inside meetings she already holds.

The working group is small, five to seven people. It should include someone from planning or strategy, someone from finance who will later read the history and the realised strategy, two managers from the middle of the organisation who carry targets down and results up, one person within a level of the work itself, and, deliberately, one person who joined recently, because newcomers still notice when a priority means nothing to the people who repeat it. The group meets for an hour a week. It reads what the practices produce and brings back what it finds. It should not include anyone whose presence would make the middle managers cautious, and the sponsor should ask them privately, not in the group, whether that is so.

The convenor keeps the record: the floor readings, the back-briefs and their answers, the returned balls, the pairs, the review pages, the three lists, and the dates of each. Often this is the person from planning. The convenor needs about three hours a week, and the quality that matters most is that people trust the convenor to write down what they said rather than what the sponsor would like to hear.

One decision changes the result more than any other at this stage. The sponsor must decide whether she will write her own back-brief, upward, about the strategy as she received it from the board, and show it to the working group. A sponsor who asks the middle for candour about the strategy and offers none of her own has told everyone what the practice is for.

Days one to ten: reading before changing

The first ten days change nothing visible. They gather four inputs.

The first is the floor reading. The sponsor, or a member of the working group whom people trust, asks ten people the question of Chapter 1, privately and without notice: what does the strategy ask you to do differently on Monday? At least half are within two levels of the work. The answers are written down word for word and sorted into three kinds: the card repeated, a manager's instruction repeated, a real choice described in the person's own words. Chapter 7 gives the page.

The second is the truce test, held with the leadership team in one meeting of about ninety minutes. For each priority on the card, the convenor brings one ordinary case from last month, drawn from the floor reading where possible, and each executive writes, privately, what the priority means for that case. The answers are read aloud together. Where they differ, the difference is the first finding of the ninety days. It is not resolved in that meeting; it is written down.

The third is a list of the organisation's targets for the year and of the reviews that read them: which meetings review which numbers, how often, and by colour or otherwise. The convenor notes, for each key target, whether a second number already exists in the organisation's records that would rise if the first were met the wrong way. Nothing is changed yet.

The fourth is the history. Finance and the convenor copy, date and file, unaltered, the records that the later practices will be read against: the last two years of targets and results for the priority chosen, the approvals of money and people for the last four quarters, the review packs, and whatever second numbers exist. This is the history the measurement conversation will read on day sixty and the realised-strategy reading on day seventy-five, fixed before any practice could move it.

At the end of the ten days the working group meets and writes, on a single page, its first guess: which priority is most a truce, which targets will not hold, which reviews report green over a known problem, where the money seems to go. It is a guess, labelled as one, and it is kept for day ninety.

What goes wrong at this stage. The commonest mistake is to announce. A sponsor who tells the organisation that a strategy deployment programme has begun will receive back-briefs written for a programme. The early sign is a question in a corridor: *what is this new thing called?* The second mistake is to begin with a survey of strategic alignment, which tells people they are being measured before anything has changed and produces a score that describes what they were willing to tick. The third is to try to resolve the truce in the first meeting it appears. The leadership team will resolve it with a fourth phrase.



Days eleven to thirty: one priority, settled and briefed back

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Days eleven to thirty: one priority, settled and briefed back

The second and third weeks do two things in order.

First, the leadership team settles the truce on one priority, the one where the truce test showed the widest difference. It does so in writing, with the case from day ten in front of it, and the result is two or three sentences that say which good thing governs when two conflict, and how much risk the firm will carry to honour it. The canon's distinction between what is held firmly and what is held lightly is useful here: "Purpose

is held firmly." The priority's purpose does not move. What the leadership team writes is the current answer to the conflict, which can be revised as the practices produce evidence.

Then the back-brief runs for that priority in one division. Each manager two levels below the leadership team writes a page in her own words: what the priority now asks of her team, the one or two decisions it changes as if-then sentences with a real case, what the team will stop, and what she needs from above. The sponsor's own back-brief goes first. The person who receives the pages reads all of them before replying to any, sorts them by the choice each makes, takes the disagreements upward unedited, and answers every page within the week.

The decision that changes the result is what happens to the first back-brief that says the priority cannot be done as written. If it is answered with a decision and the meaning of the priority visibly changes, the practice will hold. If it is answered with a correction, the next round of back-briefs will be copies of the card.

What goes wrong. The back-briefs are graded for their wording. The pages ask for budget and become negotiations. The person receiving them answers the easy ones and leaves the awkward. Or the leadership team, shown that its settled sentences have been read four ways, rewrites the sentences without asking why. The early sign is easy to read: if the back-briefs are more alike than the floor reading was, people are writing what they think is wanted.

How to read what comes back. By day thirty the convenor's record should show a settled priority, a set of back-briefs, a list of what each team will stop, and a list of what was asked of the level above, with the answers. The list of things to stop is the most useful single output. It shows what the strategy has actually displaced.

Days twenty-one to forty-five: the target thrown back

Overlapping with the back-brief, the working group chooses the targets that serve the settled priority and runs catchball on them, in the division that wrote the back-briefs. If the year's targets have already been announced to the board, catchball runs on the next quarter's share of them, or on the targets for one region, so that a returned ball can still change something.

Each target goes 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. Each level below answers the three questions of Chapter 2: what it would take with what is there now; what could be reached if one named thing changed; and what reaching it would cost elsewhere. The returns separate what is committed, what depends on a decision above, and what cannot be reached without a cost to something else the strategy values. The middle managers meet for an hour without their director before returning their balls, to compare what they have heard. The director reads everything before answering anything, and answers in writing within the week.

The decision that changes the result is what the director does with the first returned ball that says a target is wrong. A decision, in writing, that changes a target or a priority, keeps the practice. A restatement of the target ends it.

What goes wrong. The ball is thrown without its reasons, so it can only come back as yes or no. The returns are softened into a single number. The director treats the returns as a negotiation over a shortfall. The early sign is in the third question: if no return names a cost elsewhere, people have not yet believed that the third question is meant.

How to read what comes back. By day forty-five the record should show a set of targets that have been returned and answered, a list of the decisions the level above had to make to keep them, and a list of the costs elsewhere that were named. The last list is where the strategy's real trade-offs are, and it is often where the first gain is.

Days thirty-one to sixty: the pair

Once the targets have come back, each key result for the settled priority is given its pair, at the level that will be held to it. The team writing it answers the question of Chapter 3: if a sensible, tired person wanted to hit this number without doing what it is for, what would they do, and what record would show it? The pair, the purpose sentence and a line beginning *we will not* are written on one page and signed on the same day as the target. Each key result is marked, out loud, as committed, aspirational or a learning goal. Where the team does not yet know how to do the work well, the outcome target is replaced for this quarter by a learning goal.

The two numbers go on the same page, the same size, wherever the first number was shown before. The team reviews them together each week, and the first question is always whether they moved together.

The decision that changes the result is how the leader responds the first time the pair disagrees, the first number improving and the second getting worse. If she treats it as the most useful information the month has produced, the pair lasts. If she treats it as a problem with the second number, the pair is over.

What goes wrong. The second number is chosen because it is easy to improve. The *we will not* line is never read again. Only the first number is reported upward. The early sign is on the page itself: if the second number has not been looked at in a review by week three, it has become decoration.

How to read what comes back. By day sixty the record should show, for each key result, its pair, its kind, and at least four weeks of both numbers. Where they have moved together, the improvement is probably real. Where they have separated, the separation is the finding.

Days forty-one to seventy-five: the learning review

From the sixth week, one monthly operating review that reads the settled priority's numbers changes its form. A monthly meeting is chosen so that the review can be held three times inside the ninety days; the quarterly strategy review changes later, when its members have seen the form work in a smaller room.

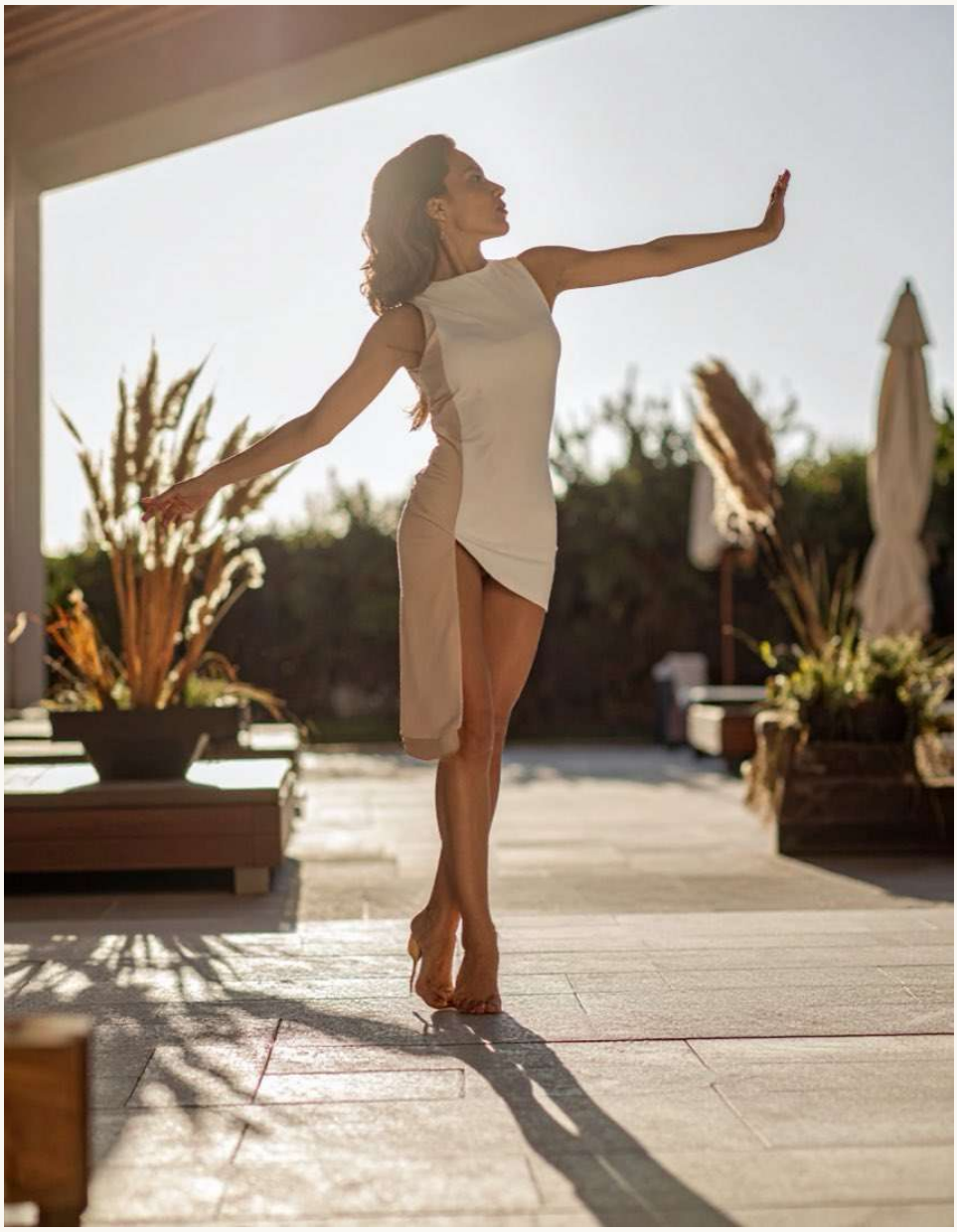
The colours and figures go out three days before the meeting, set by each owner together with the person nearest the work, and the meeting does not repeat them. Every owner is told, in writing and in advance, that an early amber will be thanked and never questioned on the day it appears. The meeting reviews three items, chosen by what the room can learn: usually one amber, one green that has moved its milestones, and one green that seems to be going well. For each, the owner answers the four questions of Chapter 4 in ten to fifteen minutes. The last fifteen minutes produce the page of what in the strategy changes because of what was heard, with an owner and a date for each line, and the page goes to the leadership team.

The canon names the reason this is harder than it looks: "This flexibility is harder than it sounds. Organizational culture — and the human psyche — are deeply invested in the appearance of certainty." The first review will be smooth. The second may not be. The third usually produces the first change to an assumption.

The decision that changes the result is what the room does with the first owner who answers the third question honestly about her own initiative. If the room moves to the assumption and she leaves with help, the review holds. If it moves to her, the next review will be held in the old language.

What goes wrong. The pre-read is not read and the meeting walks through it. The three items are always the troubled ones. The page of changed assumptions is empty, or written and never read by the leadership team. A late amber is met exactly as an early one, so that timing teaches nothing.

How to read what comes back. By day seventy-five the record should show three reviews, three pages of changed assumptions, and at least one change to the strategy's own sentences, not only to dates. If there is none, the review is not yet real.



Days sixty-one to ninety: reading the strategy you already follow

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Days sixty-one to ninety: reading the strategy you already follow

In the last month the working group assembles the three lists of Chapter 5 for the previous quarter, from the records fixed on day ten and from the quarter since: where the money went, where the new hires went, and where the leadership team's hours went, each sorted by the strategy's own priorities, with a column for *none of these*. Two people who did not make the decisions do the sorting. The working group also finds the unwritten allocation rule, by asking the people who decided the last twenty approvals and twenty refusals for the reason as they remember it, and writes the rule beside the strategy.

The leadership team spends one meeting of about two hours on the page, and only on the places where the two strategies disagree. Each divergence receives one of three answers on the record: adopt, stop or test. A test is designed as Chapter 5 describes, with a hypothesis, a measure, a date and a point at which it stops.

In the same weeks, the working group chooses one gain the earlier practices have found, a cost elsewhere named in a returned ball, a second number that has fallen since the pair went up, an assumption corrected early in a learning review, and holds the measurement conversation described in *Where the Flow Stops*, against the history fixed on day ten: what changed, what records would show it, what moves the number for reasons nobody controls, what second measure would expose gaming, who calculates and how it is checked. Finance leads it, and the output is one page signed by the people in the room.

The decision that changes the result is whether the first reading is allowed to embarrass anyone. It will usually show that the leadership team has approved one strategy and described another. If the team treats that as a finding about its rules, it will read the next quarter with interest. If it treats it as a finding about who approved what, the lists will be tidied before the next reading.

What goes wrong. The calendars are left out. Every divergence is answered *stop*, or every one *adopt*. The unwritten rule is written down and left unchanged because changing it means refusing sensible requests. The measurement conversation is held on a gain whose history was not fixed in time; if so, agree the measure from today, and do not count the earlier improvement.

What this step does not settle is how a measured gain is then shared with the people who found it: the proportions, the timing, the thresholds and the terms. Those depend on the organisation, its people and its history. They are decided with the people who will be covered, and for an organisation working with Luminous Prosperity they are the substance of the engagement, not of a book. What the first ninety days can do is make that later decision honest, by producing a gain that both sides already believe, measured against a history neither side could move.

Day ninety: reading what you have

The working group meets on day ninety with the sponsor and seven things on the table: the first-guess page from day ten, the floor reading, the settled priority and its back-briefs, the returned balls and their answers, the pairs with their weeks of numbers, the three review pages, and the realised-strategy page with its answers and the signed measurement page.

It asks a short list of questions, in order. Where was the first guess right, and where wrong? Does the floor now describe the settled priority as a choice, in its own words? Which targets changed because a ball came back, and what did the level above have to decide? Where did a pair separate, and what did the team learn? Which assumptions changed in a review before they would otherwise have been discovered? Where do the written and realised strategies still disagree, and which answer did each divergence receive? Is there a gain

both sides believe? And then the question that matters most for the next ninety days: who has started sending bad news early, and who has stopped?

What not to conclude is as important. Ninety days are too short to say that the strategy has been deployed; they are long enough to say whether the practices are being kept for one priority. A single month in which a pair moved together is not yet a gain. And an absence of findings is itself a finding. It usually means that one of the earlier practices is not yet real, and the first place to look is the answer given to the first back-brief that disagreed.

The next ninety days take a second priority through the same order, and the quarterly strategy review adopts the form the monthly review has tested. The practices do not need to be expanded faster than that, and they are more likely to last if they are not.

What to do on Monday

If the whole of this chapter is too much to begin with, three things can be done on the first Monday, and none of them needs anyone's permission.

Ask three people who work within two levels of the floor what the strategy asks them to do differently on Monday, and write down exactly what they say.

Take one priority on the card and one ordinary case from last month, and write, before you ask anyone else, what you think the priority means for that case. Then ask one colleague on the leadership team to do the same, without seeing yours.

And at your next review, ask the owner of one green item the four questions, and keep the last five minutes for the only question that matters: what, if anything, should change in the strategy because of what you have just heard.

Santa Anna's canon describes the kind of capacity these three things build, writing of the moment in a meeting when a room could either deflect or tell the truth: "It requires no formal authority, no budget, no strategic plan." The same is true of the first Monday. It requires a notebook, three conversations, and the willingness to hear an answer that does not match the card.

Monday, day ninety-one

It is twenty past seven on a Monday in May, and the chief operating officer is at her desk before anyone else on the floor. The card is still on her desk, with two sentences in her own hand written under the first priority. In the monthly review pack that went out on Friday, each key result for that priority has a second number beside it, the same size. A page of changed assumptions from the last review lies under her coffee

cup. In the finance director's drawer there is a signed page with a measure, a history and two adjustments, and beside it a page headed *adopt, stop or test*, filled in.

None of these has a name. Nobody has launched anything. She looks at the first meeting of the week, notes what she is least sure the strategy means for it, and closes the notebook.

References

1. Sources for this chapter: The practices and their sources are those of Chapters 1 to 5: Sull, Homkes and Sull, Hambrick and Cannella, Kaplan and Norton, Bungay and Gollwitzer on communication and translation; Guth and MacMillan, Floyd and Wooldridge, Westley, Huy, Balogun and Johnson, Akao, Witcher and Butterworth, and Tennant and Roberts on the middle and catchball; Locke and Latham, Seijts and Latham, Ordóñez and colleagues, Schweitzer and colleagues, Bevan and Hood, Kerr, Grove and Doerr on goals and their measures; Tannenbaum and Cerasoli, Ellis and Davidi, and Witcher and Butterworth on review; Mintzberg, Mintzberg and Waters, Burgelman and Bower on realised strategy. Full references are in those chapters' notes; the measurement conversation is set out in Santa Anna, A. (2026), *Where the Flow Stops*, Chapter 5 and Chapter 7; Santa Anna, A. *Conscious Governance Models*, "Why More Process Is Not the Answer", "Principle 1: Sense Before You Strategize", "Principle 2: Experiment Rather Than Execute" and "Principle 4: Hold Direction Lightly". The Luminous Developmental Canon; Santa Anna, A. *The Keystone Effect*, on holding the moment in a meeting. The Luminous Developmental Canon; The time estimates in this chapter are planning guides from practice, not findings of a study; adjust them to the organisation.

The First Ninety Days

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