

WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER ONE

The Meeting After the Meeting

A decision is made twice, once at the table and once in the lift, and the second is usually the true one.

Ammanuel Santa Anna

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THE LICENCE

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ABSTRACT

A decision is made twice, once at the table and once in the lift, and the second is usually the true one. It is twenty past eleven on a Thursday, and the quarterly review on the fourth floor has just ended. Nine people approved the date. The new warehouse system goes live on the first of March, and there were nods all the way round the table, and the chief executive thanked everyone for the candour of the discussion. The operations director is standing at the lift with a paper cup of coffee that went cold during the second agenda item. The window at the end of the lobby has the flat grey light of a February morning. The doors open, and the head of logistics steps in beside her, and as soon as the doors close he says, without looking at her, It won't be March.

CHAPTER ONE

The Meeting After the Meeting

A decision is made twice, once at the table and once in the lift, and the second is usually the true one.



The Meeting After the Meeting

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER ONE

Twenty past eleven, the lift

It is twenty past eleven on a Thursday, and the quarterly review on the fourth floor has just ended. Nine people approved the date. The new warehouse system goes live on the first of March, and there were nods all the way round the table, and the chief executive thanked everyone for the candour of the discussion. The operations director is standing at the lift with a paper cup of coffee that went cold during the second agenda item. The window at the end of the lobby has the flat grey light of a February morning. The doors open, and the head of logistics steps in beside her, and as soon as the doors close he says, without looking at her, *It won't be March.*

She says, *I know.*

That is the whole conversation. It lasts the four floors down. Her stomach has known since the first slide, the one with the green milestones, and it knows now that in six weeks she will be the person explaining why the date slipped, to the same nine people who nodded. She is a composite, drawn from the way these mornings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. Most people who have worked inside an organisation of any size have stood in that lift.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon describes the same moment from a governance table, and it is unusually exact about where the second conversation happens.[1] A proposal passes; a body in the room registered something the mind overrode; and the doubt comes out later, in another place:

> *The vote proceeds. The proposal passes. And six months later, when the initiative has collapsed under the weight of consequences that were, in retrospect, entirely foreseeable, someone will say: "I had a feeling about that from the beginning." They will say it privately, of course — in the hallway, over coffee, to a trusted colleague. Not in the boardroom. Never in the boardroom.*

This chapter makes one claim. An organisation that holds its truest information in the corridor is not short of that information; it has simply arranged not to collect it. The meeting after the meeting is the first place the flow of knowledge stops inside a firm, and because it stops in a place everyone can see, it is also the cheapest place to begin.

A memo with its edges rounded

The organisational psychologist Chris Argyris spent time inside the United States State Department, and in a short essay published in 1980 he described what he had seen there.[2] He watched memoranda written by young foreign service officers "get edges rounded off" on their way up, each superior softening the text before passing it to the next. He quoted a senior official asking, in frustration, whether he could get a memo on China that he could not read in *Time* magazine. And then he made the observation that the rest

of his career would elaborate. In most cases, he wrote, "the information required to discuss the issues intelligently is available (albeit scattered) in the organization." The problem was not ignorance. It was that discussing risky issues was unacceptable, and that the unacceptability was itself never discussed.

Argyris called those issues undiscussable, and the title of the essay is the whole idea in one line: *Making the Undiscussable and Its Undiscussability Discussable.* Santa Anna's canon, writing about organisational silence, calls the result a double seal: you cannot talk about the thing, and you cannot talk about the fact that you cannot. He gives the plainer cost a sentence of its own. Shadow culture, as the canon names the corridor, is "the inevitable consequence of organizational silence — a parallel communication system in which truth circulates outside official channels, ungoverned and unaccountable."

The scholarly frame behind the essay had been set out six years earlier. In *Theory in Practice* (1974), Argyris and the philosopher Donald Schön drew a distinction that has since become ordinary vocabulary in organisational development.[3] Every professional, they argued, carries two theories of action. The espoused theory is the one a person will describe if asked: I value candour, I welcome challenge, decisions here are made on the evidence. The theory-in-use is the one that can be inferred from what the person actually does, and it is often quite different. The two are not lies. Most people sincerely believe their espoused theory and are unaware of the gap, which is why it persists. In *Organizational Learning* (1978) the two authors carried the distinction from the person to the firm.[4]

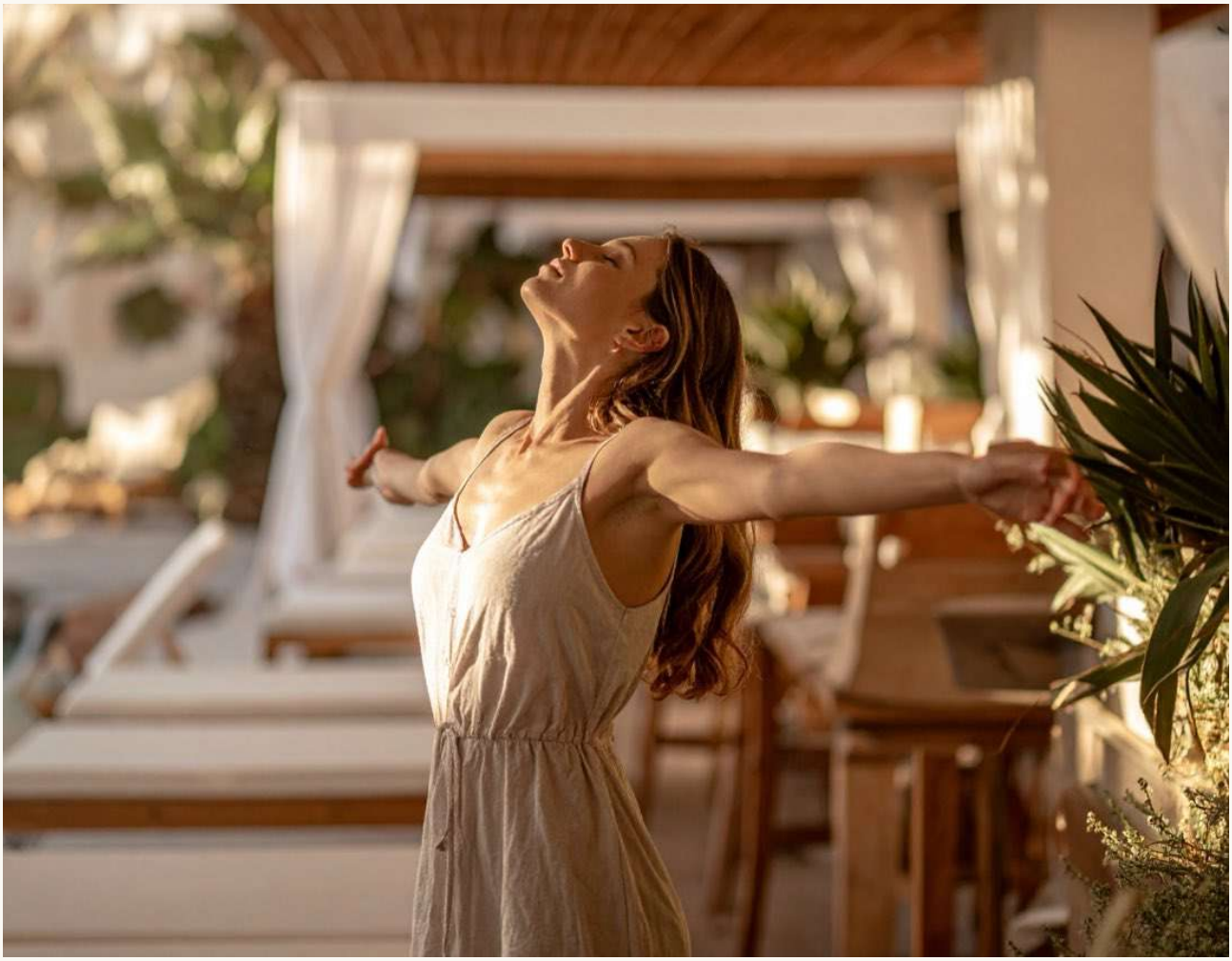
The method Argyris used to show the gap is worth describing, because it is the closest thing in the literature to a photograph of the lift. He asked managers to recall a difficult conversation and write it on a page in two columns: on the right, what was actually said; on the left, what they were thinking and did not say. Across his books, the left-hand column is where the organisation's real assessment of the situation tends to live, and the right-hand column is where its meetings take place. Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) carried the exercise into many management courses, and it is still taught in that form.

A word on the strength of this evidence. Argyris worked mostly by intervention and case, with transcripts, recorded meetings and his own participation, and much of his later writing is argument from those cases rather than measurement across many firms. The two-column method is a teaching instrument, not a study design. What the work shows with confidence is the pattern and its mechanism; what it cannot show is how common the pattern is, or what it costs. Those questions were taken up later, by other people, with other tools.

Argyris added one more distinction that matters for anyone who runs a meeting. In a 1976 paper on research into decision making he separated two ways an organisation can learn from an error.[5] In single-loop learning it corrects the action and keeps the assumptions: the date slipped, so the next plan gets a contingency week. In double-loop learning it questions the assumptions that produced the action: the date slipped because the people who knew it would slip were not able to say so, and the next plan changes how dates are agreed. The first kind of learning is common and useful. The second is rare, and the meeting after

the meeting is one of the reasons. An organisation cannot question an assumption whose evidence it has arranged to hear only in the lift.

Santa Anna's canon puts the distinction in its own terms, and in the place where it does the most damage. Writing of the room every organisation keeps without a door, it lists what lives there, and one of its exhibits is simply the gap Argyris named: "It determines what gets said in meetings and what gets saved for the parking lot." That is the espoused theory and the theory-in-use, located in a building.



A drive to Abilene

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A drive to Abilene

In 1974 the management scholar Jerry Harvey published an essay that opens on a family afternoon in Coleman, Texas.[6] It is hot. Someone suggests driving to Abilene, about fifty miles away, for dinner. Each member of the family agrees, and they go, and the trip is long and the dinner is poor, and on the drive home it emerges that nobody had wanted to go. Each had agreed because each believed the others wanted it. Har-

vey called this the Abilene paradox, and he gave it a subtitle that is more precise than the paradox: *the management of agreement*. His point was that organisations are often less troubled by conflict than they believe, and more troubled by their inability to manage agreement, the private agreement that the plan is wrong, which nobody voices.

Harvey's essay is an anecdote and an argument, not a study, and it should be read as one. It has lasted because it describes a mechanism that later research could test. Social psychologists call it pluralistic ignorance: each person privately disagrees with what they take to be the group's view, and conforms because they believe the others hold it.

In 2005 James Westphal and Michael Bednar tested that mechanism in a setting where the stakes are recorded in public filings: the boardroom.[7] Surveying a large sample of outside directors at medium-sized American companies, they found evidence that when a firm performed relatively poorly, directors tended to underestimate how far their fellow directors shared their own concerns about the firm's strategy. Believing themselves alone, they were less likely to raise those concerns in board meetings, and boards were less likely to change course. How strongly it held, the study found, depended on how alike the outside directors were and how closely they were tied by friendship. It is survey evidence, with the limits of self-report, and it measures belief and behaviour in one kind of room. But it is a careful test of exactly the mechanism Harvey described, among people paid to speak.

Read the lift again with that study in mind. Until the doors closed, the operations director did not know that the head of logistics shared her doubt, and he did not know that she shared his. Each had sat through the meeting believing the other was, if not confident, at least content. Each had therefore judged that saying *it won't be March* would be to stand alone against a room that had already agreed. The four floors were not the first time either of them doubted the date. They were the first time either of them learned that the doubt was shared, which is the one piece of information that would have changed what they said upstairs. Pluralistic ignorance is usually described as a failure of courage. In the lift it looks more like a failure of information: two people holding the same assessment in the same room, neither able to see the other's.

That reframing matters for what a leader does next. A failure of courage is answered with exhortation, and exhortation rarely works. A failure of information is answered with structure: a way for the room to see, before the vote, how many of its members hold the doubt.

Santa Anna's canon describes the same arithmetic of silence, in a sentence that reads as if written for Westphal's directors. The organisational bystander effect, it says, produces a paradox: "the more widely known an unnamed truth becomes, the less likely it is to be spoken." The canon's explanation is that responsibility diffuses as knowledge spreads. Everyone knows; everyone assumes someone better placed will say it; everyone waits.

The Margin, another of the house's books, writes about the people who walk past help they need, and about why [the ones who most need a door are rarely the first to knock](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-

master-rsd-in-acedemia-final-manuscriptt/page/). The board study suggests the same holds for doors in the other direction. The people best placed to say *it won't be March* are often the ones most sure that someone else will.

What the lift costs

If the meeting after the meeting were merely awkward, it would not deserve a chapter. It deserves one because it is expensive, and because the expense is of a kind that most organisations cannot see on any report they produce.

In 2003 Frances Milliken, Elizabeth Morrison and Patricia Hewlin interviewed forty employees about the issues they had not raised with their bosses.[8] Most of them had been in such a situation. The issues ranged from colleagues' performance to concerns about the organisation's direction, and several respondents said they did not feel comfortable raising any concern at all with those above them. The reason given most often was not fear of being fired. It was fear of being seen, or labelled, negatively, and so damaging relationships they valued. Forty interviews is a small exploratory study, and its authors present it that way. Its finding has held up in larger work. Three years earlier, Morrison and Milliken had proposed that silence can become a property of an organisation, not only of its individuals, sustained by shared beliefs about what speaking up is worth.[9] In 2011 James Detert and Amy Edmondson, across four studies including interviews in a large corporation and several surveys, identified what they called implicit voice theories: taken-for-granted rules about when speaking up is risky, held even by people with ideas that would help the organisation, and predictive of silence beyond what other measures explained.[10]

None of this research prices the silence, and it would be dishonest to put a figure on it here. What the research does show is where the cost lands. It lands as decisions made on incomplete information, as plans that slip in ways the planners privately expected, and as rework done by the same people who foresaw it. Santa Anna gives the mechanism its most practical form, in a passage on what an organisation's silence does to its decisions: "Leaders make choices based on the official reality rather than the actual reality — like navigating with a map that omits certain mountains and rivers."

Consider what the operations director in the lift actually holds. She has a specific forecast, that the date will not hold, and probably a specific reason: the data migration has not been tested on the full catalogue, or the two sites are on different label printers, or the supplier's integration team has changed. The head of logistics holds another. Between them, in four floors, they have the most accurate project review of the morning. The firm has paid for that knowledge: in their salaries, in their years, in the incidents that taught it to them. It is not collected, because the place where it was spoken is not a place the firm reads.

This is the sense in which the corridor holds a gain. When the date slips, someone will spend money recovering it. Contractors are extended, the old system is kept running in parallel for another quarter, customers are told, a team works weekends. Every one of those costs was foreseeable at twenty past eleven, by two

people, at a time when it was cheap to act. The difference between what the plan costs when the corridor's knowledge reaches the table and what it costs when it arrives six weeks late is real money, and it belongs to nobody, because nobody measured it. Chapter 5, on how a gain is baselined and attributed honestly, takes up what it would mean to measure it.

The canon adds one more cost, and it is the one leaders tend to feel first without naming. Organisations that live with a busy corridor, it says, develop a peculiar warmth: "warmth without depth, friendliness without intimacy, collegiality without the kind of raw trust that allows people to take real risks together." People like each other. They do not tell each other the date is wrong.

Euphemism, and the rounded edge

There is a reason the two meetings sound so different, and it is not that the people in the room are dishonest. Argyris's own explanation was that most of us are taught, early and thoroughly, a set of rules for difficult conversations: stay in control, save face, avoid upsetting people, keep negative feelings to ourselves. The rules are learned as courtesy and practised as skill. In a meeting they produce what he later called skilled incompetence: people who are very good at avoiding the conversation the organisation most needs.[2]

Santa Anna's canon gives the product of that skill a name. Writing of the language organisations use to discuss what they will not discuss, it says: "Euphemisms are not lies. They are something more insidious: they are truths with the nerve endings removed."

It is worth reading the fourth-floor meeting through that sentence. Nobody said the date was safe. The project lead said there were *some dependencies to manage*. The finance director said the plan was *ambitious but achievable*. The head of logistics, asked directly, said the team would *do everything it could*. Each of those phrases is true. Each of them is the operations director's forecast with the nerve endings removed, and the room approved the date on the strength of nine sentences, all of which knew better.

It is worth staying a moment with the operations director's body, because it is doing something useful. The tightening she felt at the first slide was not anxiety in the clinical sense. It was a forecast, arriving before she had words for it, built from years of watching migrations run late. The rules of the meeting asked her to treat it as a private feeling and to say something constructive instead. She did. The cost of that small act of courtesy was that the most accurate instrument in the room, which was her own experience, was switched off at the moment it was needed, and switched on again in the lift, where nobody could use it.

That is also why the corridor is tiring in a way the meeting is not. Holding two assessments of the same project, one for the room and one for the lift, is work, and it is done every week by the people an organisation most relies on. The canon describes the result as a fatigue that has nothing to do with workload. Most leaders recognise it in their best people before they recognise its cause.

The canon's sharpest line on the subject explains why the habit survives a leader's best intentions: "You cannot question an avoidance you don't know you're practicing." The chief executive thanked the room for its candour. She meant it. Her espoused theory is that her meetings are candid, and the theory-in-use, visible only from the lift, is that they are not. She will not learn the difference from the meeting itself, because the meeting is the one place the difference does not appear.

The house's Luminous 100, its reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, describes the cognitive half of the same mechanism under Argyris's other famous instrument, the ladder of inference: people climb from data to conclusions "in milliseconds, unconsciously, and then treat our conclusions as facts." A room of nine climbs that ladder together, and arrives at the first of March.



The question moved into the room

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The question moved into the room

What changes this is less dramatic than most leaders expect. It does not require a culture programme, a survey or an offsite. It requires that the second meeting be held inside the first, and that the person with the most power be the one who makes that possible.

Picture the next quarterly review, and the operations director, who has decided to do one thing differently. She has read Argyris, or something like him, and she has noticed that the corridor conversation is always about the same three things: the date, the dependency nobody owns, and the person who will be blamed. So before the vote on her own project, she asks the table a question she has borrowed from the canon's chapter on governance, word for word: "What are we saying in the hallway that we're not saying at the table?"

The silence that follows is long enough to be uncomfortable. She does not fill it. Then the head of logistics, who has been here before, says the migration has not been run against the full catalogue, and nobody knows how long it takes. The finance director says she assumed the parallel running was budgeted, and asks whether it is. The project lead says, carefully, that the supplier's team changed in January. None of this is new information. All of it was in the building on Thursday.

The order of what she did matters more than the question. She spoke first about her own project, so the question cost nobody else anything. She asked it before the vote, not after, so the answer could change the decision. She waited. And when the first answer came, she thanked the person and asked the next question about the substance, not about why it had not been said before, because the second question turns a disclosure into a confession. The canon's practice notes describe the same discipline in a different setting, and the point is identical: the person with positional power goes first, names something specific, keeps it about the pattern rather than a person, and then watches what happens in the room.

Two further habits make the question stick. The most senior person speaks last on any decision, because the canon's mapping guidance is right that structure, not courage, "prevents the premature convergence that occurs when the highest-status voice speaks first and everyone else aligns (consciously or unconsciously) with that perspective." And the meeting keeps a few minutes, every time, for what the canon calls the parking-lot audit, so that asking is ordinary rather than brave. *The Cairn*, another of the house's books, reads [the sentences that are hardest to hedge when you have to say them out loud](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence/page/), and the same principle holds: a sentence that has been said once, in the right room, is easier to say the second time.

There are failure modes, and they are predictable. A leader who asks the question and then argues with the first answer has taught the room the answer to the question. A leader who asks it only when things are going badly has made it a signal of trouble. And a leader who asks it in front of her own superior, about a project her superior sponsored, is asking her team to take a risk she has not taken. Chapter 7 carries the

run sheet for this practice, and Chapter 6 places it in the order of a first ninety days. What the article can say is that the first time is the hardest, and that most rooms answer by the third.

The practice also changes the chief executive's position, and this is the part leaders tend to underrate. Before, she had one source of information about her projects: the meeting, which told her what people thought she wanted to hear. After, she has two, and the second is better. She did not have to become a different leader to get it. She had to let a director borrow her authority for ninety seconds, and then not punish what the room said with it. Over a year, the difference between those two positions is the difference between a leader who learns about her slipped projects from her finance director and one who learns about them while they can still be moved. The first leader feels, often, that her organisation is slow and that people do not take ownership. The second has found that ownership was there all along, in the lift, waiting for a table to sit at.

None of this guarantees that the date holds. Sometimes the second meeting, held in the first, produces the same date with a plan attached. Sometimes it produces a different date. Either outcome is a decision made on the actual map. The gain is not that the project is faster. It is that the cost of being wrong is met at twenty past eleven, when it is a conversation, instead of six weeks later, when it is a recovery.

The next place the flow stops is less visible than a lift. It is the week a piece of work spends waiting between two teams, the subject of Chapter 2.

Beneath both lies a quieter question, why one person in the room does not ask what she wants to ask, which Chapter 3 takes up and which the research on psychological safety has been trying to answer since the 1990s.

Reading your own corridor

The article this chapter began as ended at the lift. The book can go further, into the finer points a leader meets when she tries this in her own building, and the first of them is knowing whether her corridor is busy at all.

There are signs, and none of them needs a survey. A decision approved in a meeting is reopened by email within the week. Important meetings have pre-meetings, held by the people who will speak, so that nothing is said in the room that has not been agreed outside it. The same three people talk in every review, and the others speak afterwards, in ones and twos. A project's owner learns that it is late from the finance director rather than from her own team. The minutes record agreement that nobody can later remember giving. Any one of these can happen in a healthy organisation. Three or four together are the espoused theory and the theory-in-use, visible from the outside.

The second finer point is that not everything said in the corridor is information. The lift carries three kinds of sentence, and they need different answers. Some are forecasts: *it won't be March*, *the migration hasn't been*

run on the full catalogue. These are the gain this chapter is about, and they should reach the table before the decision. Some are preferences: *I would have done it differently*. They are worth hearing, but they are not evidence, and treating them as evidence teaches the room that the loudest preference wins. And some are grievances: *this is going to land on us again*. A grievance is usually a forecast with a history attached, and the way to honour it is to separate the two, ask what the forecast is, and deal with the history somewhere else. A leader who answers all three kinds the same way, with gratitude and a note, will soon find her meetings full of preferences and her corridor still full of forecasts.

The third point is timing. The question moved into the room works only if it is asked before the decision, and with enough time left to act on the answer. Asked after the vote, it produces confessions; asked in the last five minutes, it produces silence, because everyone can see there is no time to reopen anything. The practical rule is that the hallway question is the first item under any decision, not the last, and that a decision is not taken in the same meeting in which a serious forecast against it was first heard, unless the forecast can be tested in the room.

The fourth is anonymity, which leaders reach for early and should hold loosely. The canon's governance chapter describes a practice in which each person writes one unsaid thing on a card, and the cards are read aloud without names, and it is useful for a room in which nobody yet believes speaking is safe. The canon is also clear, in its chapter on acknowledgment, that an anonymous process "is a bridge to deeper work, not a substitute for it." A team that can only tell the truth on unsigned cards has learned that the truth is dangerous, and the cards will not unteach it. Use them to open the door, and then stop.

The fifth is the leader's own corridor. Every leader has a lift of her own, the conversation she has with one trusted peer after her own superior's meetings. The fastest way to change a team's corridor is often to close one's own, by asking, upward, the question one wants the team to ask. A team watches what its leader does in the rooms above it far more closely than she imagines.

And the decision that most changes the result is the simplest. It is what happens to the first person who answers. If the head of logistics says the migration has not been tested, and the project lead's face hardens, and the chief executive asks why this was not raised earlier, the practice is over before it has begun, whatever is said afterwards. If the first answer is thanked in a sentence and then worked on, the second answer comes faster. Chapter 6 places this in the first weeks of a ninety-day plan, and Chapter 7 gives the hallway question, the three kinds of sentence and the signs of a busy corridor as a single page.

The lift, next quarter

The review ends at a quarter past eleven this time. The date has moved to the middle of April, and the migration test is in the plan with a name beside it, and the parallel running is budgeted, and the chief executive did not thank anyone for their candour, because she did not need to. The operations director walks to

the lift with the same paper cup. The window at the end of the lobby has a little more light in it than it had in February.

The head of logistics steps in beside her. The doors close. Neither of them says anything about the project, because there is nothing left to say about it that was not said upstairs. He asks about her weekend. She tells him.

It is four floors, and it is only a lift.

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The Meeting After the Meeting

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