

WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER THREE

# The Question Nobody Asks

*The newest person in the room often holds the question that matters, and keeps it in a notebook until someone senior goes first.*

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## THE LICENCE

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Chapter Three of Where the Flow Stops. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/where-the-flow-stops (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989196).

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## ABSTRACT

The newest person in the room often holds the question that matters, and keeps it in a notebook until someone senior goes first. It is a quarter past nine on a Monday, and the planning meeting is on the third slide. The analyst is in her fourth month. She has a notebook open on the table and a pen in her hand, and in the margin of the page she has written one line, underlined twice: churn = last year's? The forecast on the screen assumes that the rate at which customers leave will be what it was last year. Last year was before the price change. She has been looking at the cancellation data for a week, because it was her first real task, and the rate since the change looks different to her. She is not sure. She is new, and the people around the table built the model.

CHAPTER THREE

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*The Question Nobody Asks*

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER THREE

## Quarter past nine, the notebook

It is a quarter past nine on a Monday, and the planning meeting is on the third slide. The analyst is in her fourth month. She has a notebook open on the table and a pen in her hand, and in the margin of the page she has written one line, underlined twice: *churn = last year's?* The forecast on the screen assumes that the rate at which customers leave will be what it was last year. Last year was before the price change. She has been looking at the cancellation data for a week, because it was her first real task, and the rate since the change looks different to her. She is not sure. She is new, and the people around the table built the model.

The director finishes the slide and says, pleasantly, *Any questions?* There is a pause of about three seconds. The analyst's throat tightens in a way she will later describe as feeling as if the words were physically too large to get out. Nobody speaks. The director moves to the fourth slide. The forecast goes to the board on Thursday.

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. The board will approve a budget built on last year's churn, and in the second quarter the revenue will come in below plan, and the finance team will spend three weeks finding out why. One of the people who could have told them was in the room in February, with the answer underlined in her notebook.

It is worth slowing down the three seconds, because a great deal happens in them. *Any questions?* sounds like an invitation and works as a closing. It is asked at the end of a slide, by the person who wrote it, in a tone that expects the answer no, and it gives the room a choice between silence and a public challenge to the most senior person present. The analyst weighs, in the time it takes to draw a breath, what she knows about this room: that the last junior person who queried a number was told, kindly, that it had been checked; that the director is busy and the agenda is long; that she might be wrong, and that being wrong in her fourth month would be remembered. None of this is irrational. All of it is accurate. The room has taught her these things, and she has learned them well.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon lists this silence first among the things people do not say in meetings, and it describes her almost exactly.[17] "Questions that go unasked. The new hire who doesn't understand the process but has learned that asking "basic" questions signals incompetence."

This chapter makes one claim. The question nobody asks is the most expensive silence in an organisation, because it carries the cheapest correction: a sentence, at the right moment, from the person who noticed. Whether that sentence is said is not mainly a matter of the person's courage. It is a property of the room, and the research on it, read honestly, says that the person who sets the room is usually the one with the most power in it.

## The wards that reported more

In the early 1990s Amy Edmondson, then a doctoral student at Harvard, was working on a study of medication errors in hospital nursing units. The study expected to find that the best units, the ones with the strongest leadership and relationships, made fewer errors. The data appeared to say the opposite: the better units recorded more. Her 1996 paper, *Learning from Mistakes Is Easier Said Than Done*, reported the resolution.[18] The differences between units were not only in how often errors happened but in how likely they were to be detected, discussed and learned from. In the units where people felt able to speak about mistakes, mistakes were reported. In the others they were not, and so they looked rarer.

The finding has been told many times, including in this magazine, in a reading of [the margin a leader writes on someone else's work](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-master-rsd-in-acedemia-final-manuscriptt/page/). It is worth retelling here for what it says about the analyst. The units that looked safest on paper were the ones in which the most information was being lost. A silent room is easy to mistake for a room without problems.

Three years later, in the *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Edmondson gave the condition a name and a measure.[19] Team psychological safety, she wrote, is "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking." In a study of fifty-one work teams in a manufacturing company, she found that psychological safety was associated with what she called learning behaviour (asking questions, seeking feedback, discussing errors, experimenting) and that learning behaviour in turn mediated the link between safety and the team's performance. A second belief she measured, the team's confidence in its own ability, did not predict learning once safety was taken into account.

Two features of that definition matter for the meeting on the third slide. The first is the word *shared*. Psychological safety in Edmondson's account is not a personality trait of the analyst. It is a property of the team, held in common, and different teams in the same company can have very different levels of it. The second is the phrase *interpersonal risk*. The risk the analyst was weighing was not that she would be fired. It was that she would look slow, or presumptuous, or wrong, in front of the people who would decide how her first year went.

Interpersonal risk is easy to underrate from the head of a table, because the person at the head of a table rarely runs it. The director has been right about enough forecasts, for long enough, that being wrong about one costs her little; she can say *I'm not sure about that number* and be heard as careful. The analyst cannot yet say the same sentence and be heard the same way. The words are identical. The price is not. That asymmetry is what Edmondson's definition captures in the word *interpersonal*: the risk is not in the content of the question but in what asking it does to the asker's standing, and standing is distributed unequally in every room.

Santa Anna's canon describes the arithmetic that keeps such a room quiet, and it is the arithmetic the analyst had already learned in four months: "The less people speak, the less evidence there is that speaking is

safe. The less evidence of safety, the less people speak." In a room where questions are rarely asked, every new person learns from the silence that questions are not asked here, and adds their own.



*One hundred and eighty teams*

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER THREE

## One hundred and eighty teams

The research reached most managers by another route. In 2012 Google's people-analytics group began a study it called Project Aristotle, asking what made some of the company's teams more effective than others.[20] Its public guide, published on the company's re:Work site, says the researchers "identified 180 teams to study": one hundred and fifteen engineering project teams and sixty-five sales teams. They measured effectiveness through four sources together: evaluations by executives, by team leaders and by team members, and sales performance against quarterly quota. They tested a long list of possible factors, among them seniority, team size, whether members sat together and how much they socialised.

The finding the guide reports is that "what really mattered was less about who is on the team, and more about how the team worked together." It lists five dynamics, in order of importance: psychological safety, dependability, structure and clarity, meaning, and impact. Psychological safety, defined in Edmondson's words, is first. In 2016 the *New York Times Magazine* carried a long account of the project by Charles Duhigg, and from then on it was the study most managers had heard of.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* gives the project its strongest form, and it is worth quoting as he wrote it, because the passage is a good example of how far the popular reading has travelled from the evidence. Project Aristotle, the book says, "which studied hundreds of its own teams to discover what made the most effective ones effective, reached the same conclusion: psychological safety was the single most important factor". That is a fair summary of what the guide says. It is a stronger claim than the guide can support, and the guide is candid about why.

Its own account of its method notes that the qualitative assessments "had inherent subjectivity" and that the quantitative measures "lacked situational considerations". The study was conducted inside one company, on its own teams, with its own definitions of effectiveness, and its data and analysis have not been published for outside review. It shows that, among those teams, psychological safety stood out in the company's analysis. It does not show that safety causes effectiveness, or that the ranking would hold in a hospital, a law firm or a distributor. It is best read as a large internal study that agreed with Edmondson's peer-reviewed work, which is worth something, and not as a proof of it.

The house's Luminous 100, its reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, offers a better way to hold the five dynamics than as a ranked list. Its entry on Project Aristotle reads them as parts of one living thing, the soil, the roots and the fruit, and draws the practical conclusion in a single clause: "you cannot produce fruit by optimizing the fruit; you must nourish the soil." The analyst's question is fruit. It grows, or does not, from conditions set long before the third slide.

There is a reason the project's finding travelled so fast, and it is not only that it came from a famous company. It told managers something they could act on without hiring anyone. If the best teams were made by who was on them, the remedy was recruitment, which is slow and expensive. If they were made by how the team worked together, the remedy was in the manager's own conduct, starting on Monday. That is a hopeful message, and largely a true one. Its risk is that it was quickly turned into a score. Many organisations now survey psychological safety each year and report it on a dashboard, and a score is a useful thing to have. The Luminous 100 warns against stopping there. Its entry suggests that the practice moves from the diagnostic, "how safe do people feel on a 1-5 scale?", to questions a team can answer from its own experience: "When has this team felt most alive? What conditions were present? What made risk-taking feel natural rather than courageous?" A survey can tell a director that her team scores lower than the one next door. Only the second kind of question tells her what to do differently on Monday at a quarter past nine.

## What the later studies can and cannot show

The more serious test of Edmondson's idea came from the accumulation of studies that followed it. In 2017 a team led by M. Lance Frazier published a meta-analysis in *Personnel Psychology* drawing on one hundred and thirty-six independent samples, representing over twenty-two thousand individuals and nearly five thousand groups.[21] It mapped what tends to come before psychological safety, including the behaviour of leaders and the support of peers, and what tends to come after, including task performance, learning and the willingness to go beyond one's job. It also examined whether the findings changed with research design and national culture. Two reviews by Edmondson and colleagues, in 2014 and 2023, describe a literature that has grown from a handful of studies into one of the most cited topics in organisational behaviour.[22]

What that body of work shows, with confidence, is a consistent association. In many settings and countries, teams and individuals who report more psychological safety also report, and are rated as showing, more learning, more speaking up and somewhat better performance. What it cannot yet show is as important. Most of the studies are surveys, and many collect the measure of safety and the measure of outcome at the same time, often from the same people; such designs cannot establish which causes which. Some of the relationship may run the other way, since successful teams may come to feel safer. And the effects on performance, while real, are moderate; psychological safety is a condition for good work, not a substitute for skill, structure or a sound plan. Edmondson herself has been at pains to say that it is not about being nice, and not about lowering standards.

One finding runs through nearly all of this work and it is the most useful for a leader. Psychological safety varies a great deal between teams inside the same organisation, as Edmondson's first studies found and later work has repeated. Two teams on the same floor, under the same policies and the same chief executive, can feel entirely different to the people in them, because the climate is set mostly by the person who runs each team and the habits that team has formed. That is discouraging for anyone hoping to fix it with a company-wide programme. It is encouraging for a director, because it means the room she runs is largely hers to change, whatever the rest of the building is doing. The analyst's team is quiet. The team across the corridor, working on the same products with the same data, may not be.

One study is particularly close to the analyst's situation, because it looks at the people with the most to say. In 2007 James Detert and Ethan Burris surveyed more than three thousand employees and two hundred managers in a restaurant chain.[23] They found that managers' openness, their visible willingness to hear and act on suggestions, was more consistently related to employees speaking up with ideas for improvement than the broader style of leadership usually called transformational, and that the link ran through employees' sense of psychological safety. The effect of what leaders did was strongest, they reported, on the voice of the best-performing employees. It is one company, and the measures are surveys. Its message is the one the meta-analysis implies: the people most likely to have something useful to say are the ones most attent-

ive to whether saying it is welcome. On a ward or a shop floor, those are often the people closest to the work, who already know, and Chapter 4 follows them there.

Santa Anna's canon draws the conclusion for practice in a sentence that a cautious reading of this literature supports exactly. Before a leader invites truth, it says, the conditions for telling it safely must be established, and "those conditions must be real, not merely announced."

## What the leader does first

Two of Edmondson's studies in hospitals come closest to answering what *real* means, because they watched what leaders did.

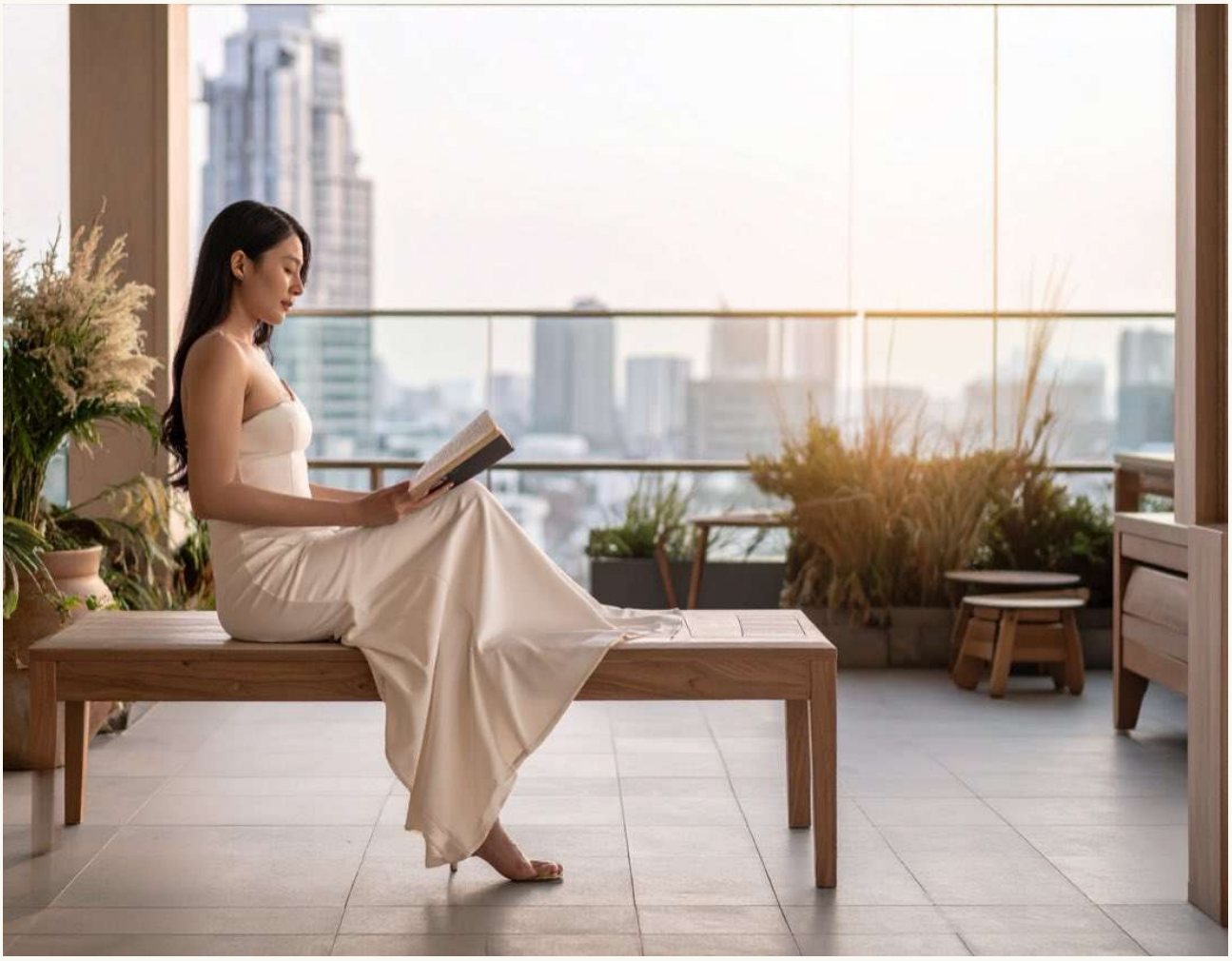
In 2003 she reported on sixteen operating-room teams learning to use a new and demanding technique for cardiac surgery.[24] The teams that adopted it successfully were not the ones with the most senior surgeons. They were the ones whose leaders communicated a motivating reason for the change, and who worked to minimise concerns about power and status, so that nurses and perfusionists would speak up with what they saw during operations. In 2006 Ingrid Nembhard and Edmondson surveyed staff in twenty-three neonatal intensive care units engaged in quality improvement.[25] They introduced a term for what the best leaders did, *leader inclusiveness*, defined as "words and deeds exhibited by leaders that invite and appreciate others' contributions", and found that it predicted psychological safety and helped close the gap in safety between higher- and lower-status professions.

Both studies are small by the standards of the meta-analysis and specific to medicine, where hierarchy is steep and its costs are measured in lives. Their value is that they name behaviour. Inclusiveness, in the second paper's sense, is not a mood. It is a set of things a leader says and does, and a team can see them.

Santa Anna's canon puts the same point in the language of the body, and it explains why an invitation alone does not work: "The nervous system doesn't read posters. It reads bodies." The analyst did not decide to stay silent by weighing the evidence. Her throat decided, in three seconds, on the strength of four months of watching what happened to the people who asked. The canon is careful not to blame her for it. "In the absence of genuine psychological safety," it says, "silence is not cowardice. It is rational self-preservation."

It is a humbling sentence for a leader to read, because it means the room reads her more closely than she reads it. The analyst was not watching the slide when the director said *Any questions?* She was watching the director's face, and the half-second glance at the clock, and the slight lift of the voice that signals an agenda to get through. None of these was meant. All of them were seen. A leader who wants questions has to accept that the invitation she issues with her words is checked, instantly and by everyone, against the one she issues with her body, and that when the two disagree, the body is believed. That is not a reason for a leader to perform calm. It is a reason to arrive at the meeting with time in hand, so that the welcome is true.

That sentence turns the problem round. If the silence is rational, the remedy is not to ask people to be braver. It is to change what the room has taught them, which only the person who set the room can do quickly. *The Cairn*, another of the house's books, reads [the four steps between a piece of feedback and the verdict a person hears in it](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence/page/), and the same sequence runs in a meeting: what a leader says, what the room sees on her face, what the newest person concludes, what she does next time.



*The director goes first*

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER THREE

## The director goes first

What changes it, in practice, is a director who decides to spend some of her authority on the room.

At the next planning meeting she does three things differently, and she does them before the slides. She says, in a sentence, what she is least sure about in the forecast, and it is a real uncertainty, not a performance of one. She replaces *Any questions?* with a question that cannot be answered with silence: *If you had to*

*check one assumption in this model before Thursday, which would it be?* And she goes round the table, starting with the person who joined most recently, so that the newest voice is heard before the most senior one has set the direction. The canon's guidance on mapping the work of an organisation names the reason for that order precisely, as a structure that prevents the highest-status voice from speaking first and drawing everyone else after it.

The analyst says, *Churn. It's last year's rate, and the cancellations since March look higher.* Her voice is quieter than she would like. The director does not say *good question*, which would make the moment about the analyst's courage. She says, *Show me*, and the analyst turns her laptop round, and the head of finance leans in. The model is changed by Wednesday. On Thursday, in front of the board, the director names the analyst as the person who found it.

That last act is the one most leaders skip, and it is the one the research suggests matters most. Detert and Burris's finding was that openness, the visible willingness to act on what is said, predicted voice. A question that is welcomed and then quietly ignored teaches the room exactly what silence taught it. A question that changes a decision, and is credited in a room the asker was not in, teaches the opposite. *The Cairn*, another of the house's books, reads [a second file of recognition that other people keep about us](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence/page/); the board meeting adds an entry to the analyst's, and every person who hears about it adds one to their own estimate of what speaking is worth.

The first month is uneven, and the director should expect it to be. At the second meeting the round produces two real answers and three polite ones. At the third, someone raises a concern that turns out to be mistaken, and the director's response to that moment matters more than her response to the analyst's, because a room learns most from what happens to the person who was wrong. She thanks him, explains in a sentence why the number holds, and moves on without a trace of impatience. By the sixth week the round has stopped feeling like an exercise. People arrive with the assumption they would check, because they know they will be asked.

There are predictable ways for this to go wrong. A leader who asks the question and then argues with the first answer has answered the question for everyone. A leader who praises the asker extravagantly makes asking a performance. And a leader who does this once, after a failure, and not again has taught the room that questions are a crisis measure. Chapter 7 carries the run sheet for this practice, and Chapter 6 places it in the order of a first ninety days.

The gain is easiest to see in the analyst's forecast. A board that approves a budget on last year's churn spends the second quarter discovering the error, and the third correcting it, at the price of a revenue shortfall, a hiring freeze and three weeks of a finance team's time. A board that approves it on the right rate spends nothing. The difference was a sentence, and the sentence was in the room. It is worth being exact about how cheap it was. Asked in February, the question costs the analyst a moment of discomfort and the head of finance an afternoon. Unasked, it costs a quarter of revenue planned on the wrong basis, the de-

cisions made on that plan, and the time of everyone who later has to reconstruct what went wrong, most of whom were never in the meeting. Across a year, across every meeting in which a junior person notices something the model missed, that difference is a gain the organisation already holds and does not collect. The same knowledge, saved for the lift after a meeting, is the more visible half of the loss, and Chapter 1 traces it there.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics*, whose claim for Project Aristotle this chapter has set beside the evidence, makes a broader argument that the evidence supports better than any single study. Safety, it says of the vitality-centred workplace, is the foundation from which performance emerges, and it adds, of its own argument, "This isn't softness." Ecstatic Economics reads a firm as a living system whose information has to circulate, and a question asked at the right moment is the smallest unit of that circulation.

## The round, in practice

The director's round looks like a small change in how a meeting opens. It is, and its finer points decide whether it changes the climate or becomes one more ritual.

Replace the closing question with an opening one. *Any questions?* fails for three reasons: it comes at the end, when the agenda is pressing; it is asked by the person who presented, whom any question will appear to challenge; and it can be answered, by everyone at once, with silence. A working replacement has the opposite properties. It is asked before the material is approved. It assumes there is something to find (*which assumption would you check first?*, *where is this plan most likely to be wrong?*). And it is put to each person in turn, so that silence is not an available answer and nobody has to volunteer.

Choose the order of speaking on purpose. The round starts with the person with least standing in the room, usually the most recent to join, and ends with the most senior. The reason is the one the canon gives for its mapping teams: the highest-status voice, heard first, sets the direction, and everyone after it adjusts, consciously or not. A round that begins with the director's deputy is a round in which everyone else agrees with the director's deputy.

Answer the content, not the courage. When the first real answer comes, the reply that most helps is about the substance: *show me*, *what would we need to check*, *who knows the cancellation data best*. Praise for having spoken, however kind, turns the moment into a test of bravery and tells the room that speaking was unusual. The director in this chapter credited the analyst later, in the board meeting, for the finding, which is the right place for credit: attached to a result, and heard by people whose opinion matters to her.

Handle the wrong answer with more care than the right one. Sooner or later someone will raise a concern that turns out to be mistaken. The room learns more from that moment than from any other, because everyone is watching to see what being wrong costs. The useful response is brief and warm: thank the per-

son, explain in a sentence why the figure holds, and move on with no change of tone. If being wrong in the round costs nothing, people will risk being wrong, and some of the time they will be right.

Watch for the signs that it is working. They arrive in a predictable order. First, the answers in the round become specific. Then people begin to arrive with their assumption already chosen. Then questions start to come before the meeting, in writing, to the person who built the model, which is the best sign of all, because it means the question no longer needs the meeting's protection. A director who sees the third sign can begin to shorten the round.

Do not mistake a score for the climate. Many organisations survey psychological safety each year. The survey is useful as a rough comparison across teams and over time, and Edmondson's measure has been used in hundreds of studies. But a score is a summary of what people were willing to say about safety on a form, and the analyst would have ticked a reassuring box in February. What a director can observe directly, who speaks, in what order, about what, and what happens next, is a better guide to her own room than any annual number.

Know what this does not fix. A round will not make a team safe if the person running it punishes dissent elsewhere, in appraisals, in who gets the next project, in the tone of a private message afterwards. The canon's warning applies with full force: the conditions must be real, not merely announced. The round is a way of showing, every week, in a form the room can see, that they are.

Chapter 6 puts the round in the first month of a ninety-day plan, because the later practices depend on it, and Chapter 7 gives the questions that replace *Any questions?*, the order of speaking and the signs of progress as a page a director can keep beside her notes.

## Quarter past nine, again

It is a quarter past nine on a Monday in September, and the planning meeting is on its third slide. The analyst is in her eleventh month. Her notebook is open on the table and there is nothing underlined in the margin, because the two things she noticed over the weekend she sent to the head of finance on Friday, and one of them is already in the model.

The director finishes the slide. She does not say *Any questions?* She asks which assumption the newest person in the room would check first, and the newest person in the room, a graduate in his second week, looks at the analyst. She nods at him, slightly.

He clears his throat and asks his question.

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The Question Nobody Asks

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