

WHERE THE FLOW STOPS · CHAPTER SIX

The First Ninety Days

Five practices set in order, from listening before changing to measuring what was found.

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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

Five practices set in order, from listening before changing to measuring what was found. It is half past seven on a Monday, and the managing director of a firm of some four hundred people has a clear diary for the first time in months. She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she has decided to do something about the places where her organisation stops collecting what it knows. She has a notebook, a coffee and a list of the firm's standing meetings. She does not yet have a plan, and the temptation, which she feels in her shoulders, is to write one by nine o'clock and announce it by Friday. 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 who runs something and wants to begin.

CHAPTER SIX

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The First Ninety Days

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Monday, day one

It is half past seven on a Monday, and the managing director of a firm of some four hundred people has a clear diary for the first time in months. She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she has decided to do something about the places where her organisation stops collecting what it knows. She has a notebook, a coffee and a list of the firm's standing meetings. She does not yet have a plan, and the temptation, which she feels in her shoulders, is to write one by nine o'clock and announce it by Friday.

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 who runs something and 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 worksheets and run sheets it refers to are gathered in Chapter 7.

Two things should be said before the plan. The first is that nothing here requires a programme, a budget line or a name. Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon, writing about the relational side of a value stream, puts the warning in two sentences that every first ninety days should begin under:[42] "Relational value is not a program. It is an emergent property of how people are treated within the system." A leader who launches the practices in this book as an initiative, with a title and a slide, will find that people respond to the initiative and not to the practices. The second is that the order matters more than any single step. The chapters were written in the order a reader meets the problem. The ninety days run in the order the practices depend on each other.

Why this order

The five practices in this book are the hallway question (Chapter 1), the order walk (Chapter 2), the round (Chapter 3), the page on the wall (Chapter 4) and the measurement conversation (Chapter 5). In the first ninety days they run in a different sequence: listen, then the table, then the walk, then the page, then the measure.

The reasoning is simple. Every later practice asks people to say something they have been keeping to themselves: a forecast, a question, the time an order sat, a fault they work round every night. People say such things when they believe it is safe and useful to do so, and they decide whether it is safe by watching what happens in the rooms they already sit in. So the first visible change is in those rooms, in the leader's own meetings, where she controls the conditions and everyone can see the result. Only once the table has shown that speaking is received does it make sense to walk the work and ask people where it waits, because the walk depends on honest answers. The page on the wall depends on both: on safety, and on the experience of seeing something that was said get fixed. The measurement conversation is held last, because it measures

what the other four have found. Its first move is made on day ten, though: the history against which any change will be read is copied and fixed before anything changes, for the reason Chapter 5 gives. A firm that begins with the whole conversation has nothing yet to measure, and has taught everybody that the exercise is about numbers; a firm that leaves the baseline to the end has nothing left to measure against.

The canon makes the same argument about perception in a sentence that is worth reading before the first step: "Most organizational interventions begin with the assumption that we already know what's happening in the system." The first ten days are spent finding out.

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 meetings and decisions the practices will touch. In a small firm it is the chief executive. In a large one it may be the head of a division or a site. The sponsor's job is not to manage the work. It is to go first in her own rooms, to be present on the floor, and to protect the people who speak. Expect it to take three to five hours a week, most of it inside meetings she already holds.

The working group is small: four to six people. It should include someone who runs operations, someone from finance who will later be part of the measurement conversation, two people from the front line of the work being looked at, and, deliberately, one person who joined the organisation recently, because newcomers still see what everyone else has stopped seeing. The group meets for an hour a week. Its job is to walk the work, read what the page collects, and bring back what it finds. It should not include anyone whose presence would make the front-line members cautious, and the sponsor should ask the front-line members privately, not in the group, whether that is so.

The convenor keeps the record: the dates, the counts, the lines on the page and what happened to each, the decisions taken. Often this is the operations member of the group. The convenor needs about two hours a week, and the one 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 do the walk herself, at least once, and stand on the floor at the hours the work is done, including the inconvenient ones. Tucker and Edmondson's observation that managers who were physically present heard about problems that absent ones never learned of (Chapter 4) applies to sponsors with even more force. A sponsor who delegates the floor entirely will receive a summary of it, and the summary will have been smoothed.



Days one to ten: listening before changing

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Days one to ten: listening before changing

The first ten days change nothing visible. They gather four inputs, and the sponsor does most of the gathering herself.

The first is a list of the standing meetings in which decisions are made, with who attends and who speaks. The sponsor sits in on two or three she does not usually attend and, in each, does one thing: she counts. How many people spoke? In what order? How long was the silence after *any questions?* What happened in the ten minutes after the meeting ended, and where? Chapter 7 gives the signs of a busy corridor as a single page, and the sponsor ticks them as she sees them.

The second is a list of decisions from the previous quarter that were reopened after they were taken, or that slipped in a way someone could have foreseen. For each, the sponsor asks one or two people, privately, when they first suspected it would go wrong. The question is asked with curiosity and without any sugges-

tion of blame, and the answers are written down. Most leaders who do this are surprised by how early the answers are.

The third is three ordinary pieces of work that crossed several desks recently: an order, a request, a case, a claim, whatever the organisation's work is called. The convenor pulls whatever time stamps the records hold. Nothing is walked yet. The point is to know which items the walk will follow.

The fourth is an inventory of the records the organisation already keeps that bear on the work: scrap, rework, lead times, overtime, returns, complaints, absences, the time stamps in its systems. Finance is asked what exists, how far back it goes and who maintains it. Before day eleven, finance and the convenor copy out the last one to two years of each record that bears on the work likely to change, date the copy and file it unaltered. Nothing is decided about it yet. It is the history the measurement conversation will read on day sixty, fixed before any practice could move it.

At the end of the ten days the working group meets for the first time and writes, on a single page, its first guess at where the flow stops. It is a guess, and should be labelled one: two or three meetings where the corridor is busiest, one or two kinds of work where the waiting seems longest, one or two places on the front line where people seem to be coping with something. The page is kept and revisited on day ninety.

What goes wrong at this stage. The commonest mistake is to announce. A sponsor who tells the organisation that she is starting an initiative on candour or flow will find that the meetings she sits in become performances of candour. The early sign is a question in a corridor: *what is this new thing called?* If people are asking what it is called, it has been named, and the sponsor should stop naming it. The second mistake is to begin with a survey. A survey of psychological safety in week one tells people they are being measured before they have seen anything change, and it produces a score that describes what they were willing to tick. It can come later, if at all. The third mistake is to diagnose. The canon's chapter on attunement is right that perception comes first; a sponsor who writes conclusions in the first ten days will spend the next eighty defending them.

Days eleven to thirty: changing the table

In the third week the sponsor changes two of her own standing meetings. Not all of them; two, chosen because decisions are made there and because the corridor around them is busy.

In each meeting she does three things, every time, in the same order. Before the first decision, she names in a sentence what she herself is least sure about in it. She asks the round question, put to each person in turn, starting with the newest member and ending with herself: *if you had to check one assumption in this before we decide, which would it be?* And before the vote, she asks the hallway question: *what are we saying in the corridor that we are not saying at this table?* Then she waits. Chapter 7 gives the run sheet for both, with the scripts for the moments that matter, and the replacement questions for *any questions?*

The round adds about ten minutes to a meeting of eight people. The hallway question adds whatever its answers need, which in the first weeks is usually very little, because the first weeks produce silence. The silence is not failure. The canon's chapter on acknowledgment describes the right expectation in an image: "Genuine acknowledgment is more like dawn than like a lightning strike." The sponsor should expect three or four meetings of polite answers before the first real one.

The decision that changes the result is what she does with the first real answer, and the second, and above all the first wrong one. Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 describe this in detail. In short: she answers the substance, not the courage; she acts on what was said, visibly, within the week; and she treats a mistaken concern exactly as warmly as a correct one. If she does those three things, the room learns quickly. If she misses one, the room learns that too, and more quickly.

What goes wrong. The sponsor argues with the first answer. She asks the questions only when things are going badly. She asks them in her own meetings but not in her superior's, where her team can see that she says nothing. Or she lets the round become a ritual, the same polite sentences each week. The early signs are easy to read. If the answers in week four are no more specific than in week one, something is being punished somewhere, and the sponsor should ask one person she trusts, privately, what it is. If the corridor after the meeting is as busy as before, the hallway question is being asked too late, or answered with a defence.

How to read what comes back. By day thirty the convenor's record should show a handful of answers that changed something: a date moved, an assumption checked, a dependency given an owner. Chapter 1 described three kinds of sentence that the corridor carries, forecasts, preferences and grievances. The convenor sorts what the round and the hallway question produced into the three, and the working group looks at the forecasts first. They are the gain.

Days thirty-one to fifty: walking the work

In the fifth week the working group walks the three ordinary items chosen in the first ten days. Each walk follows one item backwards, from its completion to its first contact, with the record of times in hand. At every desk the walkers ask three questions and write the answers on the walk sheet in Chapter 7: when did it arrive here; when did someone start on it; what did it need from the previous desk that it did not have?

A walk takes forty minutes to an hour per item. The sponsor walks at least one of the three. On the same days the convenor counts the open items at each desk, honestly, including those waiting for a customer and those parked because they are awkward. The count takes about an hour across a site. Then the group meets for ninety minutes and does the arithmetic of Chapter 2 on a whiteboard: for each desk, the open items divided by the items it finishes in a day, which gives that desk's share of the waiting.

The decisions that change the result are about order. The first change should be the cheapest: the missing facts that cause round trips between desks. In the order walk of Chapter 2 it was two questions asked on every first call, and the longest-serving clerk wrote them down. The second change is to make the elapsed time visible where everyone who touches the work can see it, in days, without praise or blame attached. A limit on work in progress comes third, and is set close to the current count and tightened as the team learns.

What goes wrong. The walkers choose the worst item instead of an ordinary one, and design for an emergency. The count leaves out what is hard to see. The visible lead time becomes a target, and people start closing items early. A manager breaks the first limit in the first busy week. Each has an early sign. If the walk produces a story everyone already knew, it was the wrong item. If the count at a desk is lower than the person there says she is holding, it is incomplete. If the lead time falls sharply in the first week, look at how items are being closed. And if work starts piling up at the front door, the limit is working; it is showing a queue that was always there.

How to read what comes back. The walk produces three things worth keeping: the flow efficiency of each item (time worked divided by time elapsed), the share of the waiting at each desk, and the list of missing facts. The first is usually startling, and should be reported without drama. The second shows where to look. The third is where the first gain usually is. The Luminous 100's note on the theory of constraints is a fair caution for this stage, since the real bottleneck "isn't where you think it is". Walk again in four weeks, and expect it to have moved.

Days forty-one to seventy: the page on the wall

Overlapping with the walk, the working group chooses one or two teams on the front line where the first ten days suggested people are coping with something, and puts up a page. Chapter 4 described it and Chapter 7 gives its layout: one line per problem, in the person's own words, with a date and, if they wish, a name.

Three commitments go with it, and they are made out loud, to the team, by the manager who will keep them. She will read the page every day. Every line will receive one of three answers within a week: fixed, and how; cannot be fixed now, and why, and who now holds it; or passed to someone named, on a date. And she will be on the floor for part of every shift, including the ones she would rather not work.

In the first week the page usually collects a handful of lines, often about the same thing. The manager groups them, takes the pattern with its dates to whoever can change the system, and writes the answer beside the lines with the names of those who wrote them. By the third week there are more lines, and some she cannot fix. She says so, with the reason. This is the step at which the page either becomes part of how the team works or quietly becomes a suggestion box. The difference is almost entirely in the answers.

The decision that changes the result is how the manager treats her own workarounds. Chapter 4's manager found that she had some, and wrote one on the page in her own hand. A manager who does this has shown the team, more convincingly than any announcement, that the page is for everyone, including her.

What goes wrong. Lines go unanswered for a fortnight. The manager answers the easy ones and ignores the awkward. Someone proposes turning the page into a system with categories and fields. A line that criticises another department is taken down. The early signs are visible on the page itself. A page with fewer lines each week is a page people have stopped believing. A page whose lines all concern trivia has been read as unsafe for anything else. And a page with many lines and few answers is worse than no page at all.

How to read what comes back. By day seventy the page and the walk between them should have produced a short list of faults removed, each with a date, the names of the people who found it, and a rough sense of what it was costing: time lost per shift, orders delayed, materials wasted. That list is the input to the last step.



Days sixty-one to ninety: measuring what was found

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Days sixty-one to ninety: measuring what was found

In the last month the working group chooses one or two of the gains found, the ones where the effect is likely to show in records the organisation already keeps, and holds the measurement conversation of Chapter 5. Finance leads it. The operations member, the front-line members and whoever will do the calculation are in the room. The sponsor attends and says little.

The conversation follows the order in Chapter 7: what is being changed, in plain words; what would show in existing records if it worked; what the records show over a long enough history; what moves the number for reasons nobody controls, and how each will be allowed for; what second measure would expose gaming; who calculates, and how it can be checked; how the result will be shown to the people who produced it. The output is one page, signed by the people in the room. The first conversation usually takes two meetings of ninety minutes. Later ones take one.

By day ninety the first monthly figure should be on the wall where the team can see it, plotted against the ordinary range of its history, in the same form finance sees it.

The decision that changes the result is timing, and most of it was taken on day ten, when the history was fixed before the walk or the page changed anything: the January conversation of Chapter 5, begun early. If a team had already begun to change its work before day ten, agree the measurement for that change from now. The earlier improvement is not counted. That is a real cost and a small one beside a number nobody believes.

What goes wrong. The baseline is taken from the worst recent period, because it makes the gain look large. An adjustment is added after the results are in. A single measure is used alone. The calculation is done privately and announced. The early sign of each is the same: someone in the room, often from the front line, goes quiet. The sponsor's job at this step is to notice who has stopped speaking.

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.

Day ninety: reading what you have

The working group meets on day ninety with five things on the table: the first-guess page from day ten, the convenor's record of the table, the walk sheets and counts, the page from the wall with its answers, and the signed measurement page with its first figure.

It asks a short list of questions, in order. Where was the first guess right, and where wrong? Which decisions changed because something said at the table reached the decision in time? How much of the elapsed time of the work walked was waiting, and has it moved? Which faults on the front line were removed, and who found them? Is there a gain both sides believe, and what does it show? And then the question that matters most for the next ninety days: who has stopped speaking, and who has started?

What not to conclude is as important. Ninety days are too short to say the climate has changed; they are long enough to say whether the practices are being kept. A single month's improvement in a measure is not yet a gain, for the reasons Chapter 5 gave. And an absence of findings is itself a finding. It usually means one of the earlier steps is not yet real, and the first place to look is the table.

The canon describes the effect of steady practice, at the scale of one conversation, in a sentence that fits the whole ninety days: "One degree of additional honesty, practiced consistently, shifts the organizational field more than you might imagine." Ninety days of one degree is a great deal.

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.

Choose one meeting you run, and before its first decision, say what you are least sure about. Then ask each person, starting with the newest, which assumption they would check first.

Choose one piece of ordinary work that finished last week and crossed at least three desks. Add up the time anyone spent on it, and the time it took. Write both numbers down.

And ask yourself, once, the question the canon gives a leader for the end of each day: "What am I not saying that the people I lead need to hear?"

Santa Anna's canon on value-stream mapping says of the lean tools what could be said of every practice in this book: "We do not reinvent these tools because they do not need reinventing. They need companionship." The companionship is the leader's. It is the steadiness with which she keeps them for ninety days, and then for the ninety after that.

Monday, day ninety-one

It is half past seven on a Monday, and the managing director's diary is full again. Two of the meetings in it start with a round. On the wall by the order desk, three floors down, the lead time is written in days. The page in the staff room on the night ward has a column of answers beside its column of lines. In the finance director's drawer there is a signed page with a measure, a history and two adjustments on it.

None of these has a name. Nobody has announced anything. The managing director looks at the first meeting of the week, notes what she is least sure about in it, and closes the notebook.

References

1. Sources for this chapter: The practices and their sources are those of Chapters 1 to 5: Argyris and Schön on espoused theory and theory-in-use, Little and Kingman on queues, Edmondson and colleagues on psychological safety, Tucker and Edmondson on frontline problem solving, and the measurement literature and the energy-savings protocol of Chapter 5. Full references are in those chapters' notes; Santa Anna, A. *Integrated Value Stream Mapping*, "The Relational Field" and "Material Value". The Luminous Developmental Canon; Santa Anna, A. *Organizational Soul Work*, "Why Attunement Must Come First", "The Art of Creating Conditions for Acknowledgment", "Luminous Invitations". The Luminous Developmental Canon; Santa Anna, A. *Integrated Value Stream Mapping*, on the lean tools and companionship. The Luminous Developmental Canon; Santa Anna, A. *The Luminous 100*, "Theory of Constraints (Goldratt)". Luminous Prosperity Inc; 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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