

WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER THREE

# The Meeting That Could Not Close

*A room with an owner and enough information can still fail to decide, for want of a rule for when it is finished.*

Ammanuel Santa Anna

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## THE LICENCE

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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

A room with an owner and enough information can still fail to decide, for want of a rule for when it is finished. It is ten past six on a Thursday, and the executive team of a software company has been in the long room on the second floor since half past four. On the whiteboard, in four colours, are the options for the old scheduling product, written up in March: A, retire it at the end of the year; B, retire it next summer; C, keep it on maintenance only; D, sell the customer base to a partner. Under each is a list of points that has grown at every meeting. There are thirty customers still on the old product. Two engineers spend most of their week keeping it running. Everyone in the room has said, at one meeting or another, that A or B is the right answer.

CHAPTER THREE

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*The Meeting That Could Not Close*

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## Ten past six, the fourth meeting

It is ten past six on a Thursday, and the executive team of a software company has been in the long room on the second floor since half past four. On the whiteboard, in four colours, are the options for the old scheduling product, written up in March: *A, retire it at the end of the year; B, retire it next summer; C, keep it on maintenance only; D, sell the customer base to a partner.* Under each is a list of points that has grown at every meeting. There are thirty customers still on the old product. Two engineers spend most of their week keeping it running. Everyone in the room has said, at one meeting or another, that A or B is the right answer.

The chief technology officer has just asked for one more piece of analysis, on the cost of migrating the last eight customers. It is a reasonable request. It was also, in a different form, the request at the end of the third meeting.

The head of customer success has the thirty names in a spreadsheet on her laptop. Her stomach has been tight since five o'clock, because she knows that every week without an answer is a week in which she cannot tell those customers anything true. She is a composite, drawn from the way these evenings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. The chief executive, who owns the decision and knows it, looks round the room and says that she wants everyone to be comfortable before they commit. There is a murmur of agreement, and a fifth meeting goes into the diary.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's book on decision-making names what has happened in the long room, and it does so by describing the rule the team is using without knowing it:

> *Traditional consensus asks: "Does everyone agree this is the best option?" This is an extraordinarily high bar that often leads to watered-down compromises, endless deliberation, or the tyranny of the most persistent objector.*[12]

This chapter makes one claim. A meeting that cannot close usually has an owner and usually has enough information; what it lacks is a rule for when it is finished. The research on fast decisions does not find teams that know less or argue less. It finds teams that decide how they will decide before they begin, and that close a question on a different test from the one the long room is using.

## Eight firms in a fast market

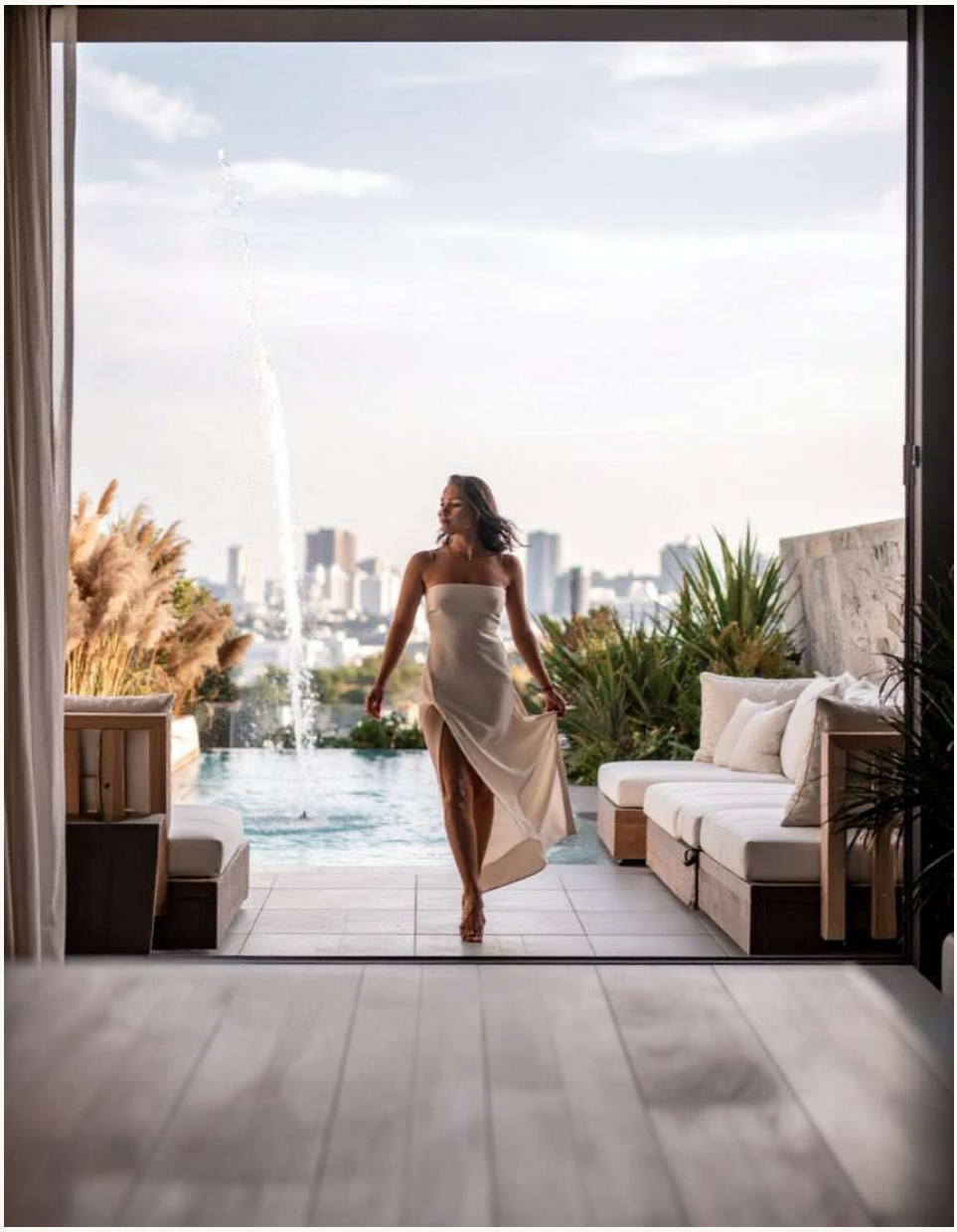
In 1989 Kathleen Eisenhardt published a study of how top management teams made strategic decisions in what she called high-velocity environments, markets in which technology, demand and competitors change quickly and information is often out of date.[13] She studied eight microcomputer firms in the 1980s, interviewing their executives and following particular decisions through. Some of the teams were fast and some were slow, and the differences between them were not the ones the slow teams would have predicted.

The fast teams, in the study's best-known finding, used more information, not less, and it was real-time information about current operations rather than forecasts. They considered more alternatives at once, side by side, rather than one at a time. They relied on what Eisenhardt described as a two-tier advice process, in which an experienced counsellor, often an older executive outside the line of the particular decision, was consulted closely. And they resolved conflict by a rule she called consensus with qualification: the team sought agreement, and if agreement did not come, the executive responsible decided, with the others' views heard. In her sample, the faster decision makers also performed better.

The grade of this evidence should be stated plainly. It is an inductive study of eight firms in one industry and one decade, and its findings are propositions built from cases, not a test across many firms; the text was not reopened for this book, and the findings are given as the decision literature has long summarised them. A larger study, by Robert Baum and Stefan Wally in 2003, gathered measures from three hundred and eighteen chief executives between 1996 and 2000 and found, in their abstract's words, that "fast strategic decision-making predicts subsequent firm growth and profit."[14] It is survey evidence, and it cannot show that speed caused the growth rather than travelling with whatever else those firms did well. Taken together, the two studies say something modest and useful. Speed in strategic decisions is not the enemy of quality, and in fast markets it seems to go with it.

Read the long room through Eisenhardt's findings and the difference is not that this team is short of information. It has a whiteboard full of it. It is short of a rule for what happens when the information is enough and the agreement is not complete.

Eisenhardt's second finding, the alternatives considered side by side, also has a direct reading in the long room. Its whiteboard does hold four options, but the meetings have treated them one at a time: a meeting largely about A, then one about whether C was safer, then one about whether a partner would buy the base. Each option has been examined in isolation and found to have a weakness, which every option has. Held side by side, the four would have been compared with each other rather than with an imaginary option that had none, and the comparison would have been quick. A team that weighs alternatives in sequence is always one meeting away from the option it has not yet discredited. The chief executive's wish that everyone be comfortable is consensus without the qualification. It gives every person in the room, as Santa Anna's book puts it in a sentence of its own, the thing that keeps the whiteboard full: "It grants veto power to every individual."



*A trap on the other side*

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## A trap on the other side

The research also contains a warning, and a team that has just discovered the cost of slow decisions should hear it before it overcorrects.

In 2002 Leslie Perlow, Gerardo Okhuysen and Nelson Repenning published a study of an internet start-up under intense pressure to move fast, and called what they found the speed trap.[15] As the decision literature has summarised it, and the text was not reopened for this book, the firm's habit of deciding quickly created the conditions that demanded still quicker decisions: choices made without enough thought produced

problems that had to be answered at once, and the pace fed on itself until the firm could no longer step back. Fast was not the fault. A single speed for everything was.

Santa Anna's canon describes a case of exactly this shape, a technology company whose founders had built their culture on deciding within hours, and its diagnosis is the clearest sentence in this part of the literature: "The problem was not that the company was moving too fast. It was that it was moving at one speed for all decisions." The case records the chief technology officer's verdict once the firm had learned to tell its decisions apart: "We used to make decisions in an hour and spend six months cleaning up the mess. Now we spend a few days making the decision and the mess doesn't happen."

The canon's answer is to give a decision a speed before it is discussed, and it names three. Swift decisions are those that are "clear, time-sensitive, and reversible", and for them the canon is unsentimental: "Spending two hours in committee deliberation on a decision that could be made in ten minutes by a competent individual is not conscious governance. It is bureaucratic performance." Deep decisions are the consequential ones that are hard to reverse, and they deserve the full weight of deliberation. And some questions are not yet ripe, and the canon allows a group to say so out loud: "We don't yet have the conditions for a good decision on this. Let us hold it, continue gathering intelligence, and return to it when the field is more clear." It is careful to separate this from the long room's habit. Holding a question on purpose, with a date to return to it, "is deferral from discernment". Holding it because nobody will close it is something else.

The long room's agenda shows the cost of a single speed in both directions at once. The same team that has held the scheduling product for four meetings has spent parts of those meetings on matters that should never have reached it: the choice of a conference stand, the wording of a holiday notice, a request from one engineer to work from another city for a month. Each was swift by the canon's definition, clear and reversible and someone's to decide, and each took ten minutes of seven people's evening. The team was not slow on everything. It was slow on the one decision that mattered and thorough on the ones that did not, which is what a single speed produces.

The scheduling product is not a swift decision, and it is not unripe. It is deep, and it has been ready since June. What the team has been doing is treating a deep decision as if it were permanently unripe.

## Consent, not consensus

There is an old alternative to consensus, and it changes one word of the question.

Sociocracy, the governance method the Dutch engineer Gerard Endenburg developed in the 1970s from older Quaker and educational practice, decides by consent. The house's Luminous 100, its reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, describes it in a line: a "Decision-making method where decisions stand unless someone has a "paramount objection" (reasoned, based on the organization's aim)." Its verdict

on the method's balance is as good as any in the literature: it "Elegantly balances efficiency (not everyone has to agree) with inclusion (everyone has the power to object)."

The canon's book on governance spells out what consent asks of a person in the room, and the difference from consensus is the whole of the practice. "You don't need to love the proposal. You don't even need to think it's the best option. You need only to be able to say: "I can work with this. It falls within the range of tolerance for me. I have no objection that would make this decision harmful to the organization's purpose."" Its book on decision-making puts the test as two questions a convenor can ask aloud: "Can everyone live with this decision? Does anyone have an objection that signals this decision would cause harm or move us backward?"

Consent is not a rubber stamp, and the house is careful to say why. A room can arrive at a false consent as easily as a false consensus; Irving Janis's account of groupthink, in *Victims of Groupthink* (1972), describes teams that mistook their own silence for agreement and made disastrous choices in good spirits.[16] The canon's guard against this is a sentence every convenor of a consent round should carry: "Inclusive decision-making requires learning to read silence — not as consent, but as information that needs investigation." A consent round in which nobody objects because objecting is dangerous has decided nothing that a vote would not have decided worse.

The order in which people speak matters as much as the question asked. The canon's book on decision-making is direct about it: "When leaders speak first, they anchor the conversation in their perspective." In the long room the chief executive has spoken first at every meeting, warmly and in favour of B, and every person since has framed what they said as a response to her. A consent round that begins with the newest member of the team and ends with the owner hears more objections, and better ones, than one that begins with the owner and asks whether anyone disagrees. The canon notes, too, what a simple vote would have hidden: "A 51-49 vote looks the same as a 99-1 vote in the outcome, but they represent vastly different levels of collective alignment." A round that asks each person in turn shows the difference before the decision is taken.

The canon adds one more caution, in the context of the body's own signals, and it applies to the head of customer success's stomach as much as to anyone's: "Somatic consent is not a veto power for discomfort." A tight stomach in a meeting is information. It may be a forecast about the thirty customers. It may be fear of the conversation she will have to have with them. A consent round asks her to say which, and if it is a forecast, to say what harm she sees, so that the decision can be changed to meet it.

## What the fourth meeting costs

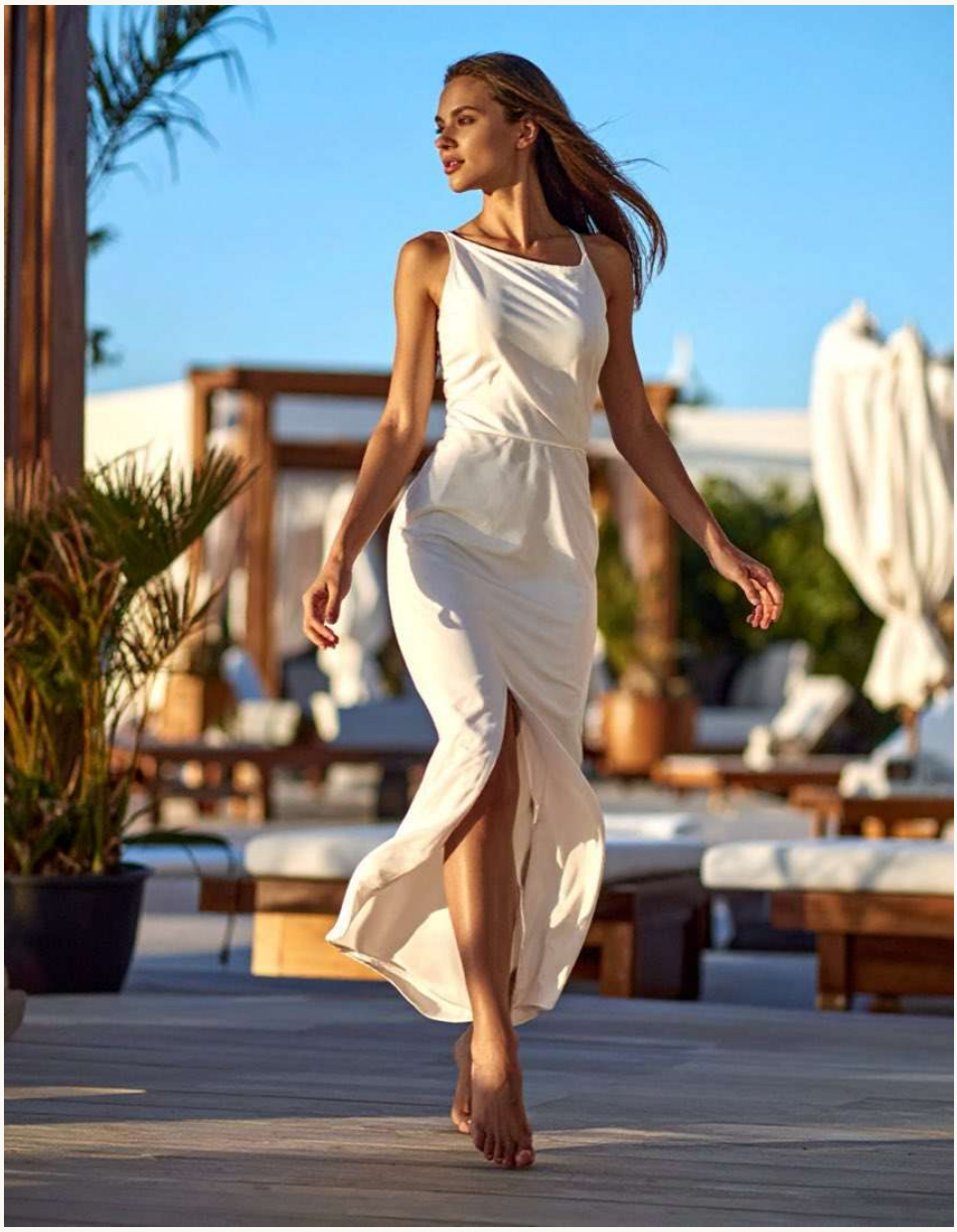
The long room's evenings are expensive in ways the company's accounts can see and in ways they cannot.

The visible cost is in the engineering time. Two engineers have spent most of their working weeks since March keeping the old product alive, and every month of delay is a month of that. The thirty customers are paying, but each is also waiting to hear what will happen, and some are planning around a silence. Those figures exist in the company's own records, in its time-sheets and its renewal dates, and that is where they should be read; this chapter does not put a number on them.

The less visible cost is in the team. Santa Anna's canon, writing about the shadow emotions that governance cultures leave unnamed, gives the most accurate description of the chief technology officer's last request, and it is not an accusation: it describes "the paralyzing "analysis paralysis" that is often fear disguised as thoroughness." The extra analysis is a real question. It is also, quite possibly, the form his doubt has taken because there is no other place in the meeting for it to go. A room with no rule for closing turns every doubt into a request for more data, because a request for data is the one form of objection that cannot be refused.

The thirty customers are paying a cost of their own, and it is the one that will be remembered longest. Several have asked their account managers whether the product has a future, and have been told, truthfully, that a decision is expected soon. That answer has now been given four times. A customer who is told something will be decided soon, four times, does not conclude that the company is careful. She concludes that it does not know, and she begins, quietly, to look at alternatives of her own. The company's renewal records will show this in a year, and nobody will connect it to a whiteboard in March.

The habit also spreads. A team that watches its leadership take four meetings over a decision everyone already agrees on learns that decisions here are slow, and plans accordingly, by building in delay, by asking for decisions earlier than they need them, and by holding their own decisions until they are sure nobody above will reopen them. *Where the Flow Stops* reads [the meeting after the meeting]({{BOOK:orgdev-flow}}), where a firm's real assessment of a project is held in the lift; the long room has a corridor of its own, and in it the engineers have been saying for months what the whiteboard says in four colours.



*Closing the room*

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## Closing the room

What changes this is a rule stated at the start of the meeting, and the discipline to keep it at the end.

Picture the fifth meeting. The chief executive opens it with three sentences she has written down. *This is a deep decision, and it is a decision for today. We will look for agreement until half past five. If we have it, good; if we do not, I will decide, and each of you will be asked one question: can you live with it, and if not, what harm do you see?* She has done one more thing beforehand. She has asked the company's longest-serving board member, who sold a product line of her own a decade ago and has no stake in this one, to read the whiteboard and

tell her privately what she would do. That is Eisenhardt's counsellor, and the conversation took twenty minutes on the telephone. And she has gone through the agenda for the next month and marked every item with its speed. Three of them were swift decisions that had been brought to the executive team only because nobody was sure they could be taken anywhere else, and she has sent each back to the person who raised it with a note saying it is theirs to make.

The chief technology officer's analysis has arrived, and it says what everyone expected: the last eight customers will cost more to migrate than the others, and the cost is manageable. The discussion that follows is short, because everyone knows when it ends. At twenty past five the chief executive decides: option B, the product retired next summer, the last eight customers migrated first with an engineer assigned to each. Then she runs the round. The chief technology officer has no objection. The head of finance has none. The head of customer success has one, and states it as a harm: two of the thirty are hospitals with a regulatory audit in the summer, and a migration in the same month would put them at risk. The decision is changed in the room to meet it. The two hospitals move in the spring.

The order of what the chief executive did matters more than the rule itself. She named the speed of the decision before anyone spoke, so nobody had to argue that it was ready. She set the time at which agreement would stop being sought, which made agreement easier to reach before it. She heard an outside counsellor before the meeting rather than during it, so the advice informed her without becoming one more voice at the whiteboard. And in the round she asked for harms, not preferences, which gave the head of customer success a way to say what her stomach had been telling her that was neither a veto nor a complaint.

There are predictable ways this goes wrong, and Chapter 7 carries them with the run sheet for the round. The owner decides before the hearing and runs the round as a formality, and the room learns that consent means compliance. An objection is answered with an argument rather than a change, and the next one is not raised. The rule is used for swift decisions that should never have come to the meeting at all, and the meetings grow longer.

A closed meeting raises a question of its own, which is what the four earlier meetings had cost, and how a firm can count it (Chapter 5) without inventing a number. The canon's three speeds carry one more lesson the long room has not yet needed. A deep decision, once made, is also the hardest kind to revisit, and a firm that cannot bring itself to stop what it has started (Chapter 4) has a closing problem of a different shape.

## Setting the speed, and running the round

The chapter closed one meeting. The book can go further, into the finer points of closing every meeting that should close, and leaving open the few that should not.

Begin with the agenda. Before a leadership meeting, the person who chairs it marks every item with one of the canon's three speeds. Swift items are clear, reversible and someone's to decide; they come off the agenda and go back to that person with a note, and the meeting hears only the decision. Deep items are consequential and hard to reverse; they stay, with a named owner, a time by which agreement will be sought and the rule for what happens if it is not. Patient items are not yet ripe; they are listed with the date on which they will return and the information that is being gathered in the meantime. An item with no speed marked is not ready for the meeting.

The second finer point is the page the room decides from. Eisenhardt's fast teams held their alternatives side by side, and the practical form is a single page with the options in columns and the same few questions in rows: what it would cost, what it would risk, what it would need, what it would make impossible. A team that has the options in columns compares them with each other. A team that discusses them one by one, at successive meetings, compares each with a perfect option that does not exist.

The third is the counsellor. For a deep decision, the owner speaks before the meeting with one experienced person who has no stake in the outcome: a board member, a former colleague, a senior person from another part of the firm. The conversation is short and private, and its purpose is not approval. It is to hear, once, how the decision looks to someone who has made one like it.

The fourth is the round itself. The owner states the decision she is minded to take. Then each person is asked, in turn, beginning with the newest member and ending with the most senior, one question: *can you live with this, and if not, what harm do you see?* There are three permitted answers. *No objection. An objection*, which must name a harm to the organisation's purpose, not a preference. Or *a question*, which is answered before the round goes on. Nobody is asked whether they agree, because agreement is not what the round is testing.

The fifth is what is done with an objection. There are three honest responses, and the owner should choose one aloud. The decision can be changed to meet the harm, as the hospitals were moved to the spring. The objection can be tested, by a named person by a date, if it rests on something that can be checked. Or it can be answered, with a reason, if the owner judges that the harm is real but smaller than the cost of meeting it; in which case the person who raised it is thanked, and the reason is recorded. An objection that is simply overruled without one of these three teaches the room not to raise the next.

The sixth is silence. A round in which every answer is *no objection*, quickly, should make an owner more careful, not less. The canon's sentence on silence is the rule: read it as information. The simplest check is to ask, after the round, one person who said nothing whether there is something she would want the owner to know before the decision is announced, and to ask it privately, afterwards, so that it costs her nothing.

And the decision that most changes the result is what the owner does when the round produces an objection she did not expect from someone she did not expect it from. If her face hardens, the round is over before it has begun, whatever is said afterwards. If she says *tell me more about the harm*, the next objection

comes sooner and better. Chapter 6 places the three speeds and the round in the first month of a ninety-day plan, and Chapter 7 gives the speed of a decision and the round as a page each.

## Ten past six, the fifth meeting

It is ten past six on a Thursday, and the long room on the second floor has been empty for forty minutes. On the whiteboard the four options are still there in four colours, and someone has drawn a ring round B and written a date beside it, and under it, smaller, *hospitals in spring*.

The head of customer success is at her desk with the spreadsheet open. She has written the first of the thirty letters. It says what will happen, and when, and who will help.

Tomorrow she will send the other twenty-nine.

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