The LITTLE BOOK of STRATEGY

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Actionable advice to get you unstuck and move you along on your strategy and leadership journey.

INTRO

For the last 15+ years, I've worked as an advisor to organizations large and small, from big corporations to public broadcasters to start-ups, and more recently to foundations and NGOs. While I was advising leadership there, I was running my own businesses — sometimes just me by myself, sometimes a small organization. Along the way, I also co-founded a volunteer-driven non-profit, and occasionally had interim management roles for other organizations. What I'm trying to say is: I've seen strategy work up close from all sides, and seen all kinds of leadership styles. I've seen the pitfalls and mistakes that leaders encounter in the day to day, and maybe most importantly, I made a great many of these mistakes myself. (For those in the room with me on these occasions, thank you for your support and patience with me.)

Here's a thing about strategy work I deeply believe: Strategy isn't one big thing, one giant process. It's not capital-S Strategy. It's an ongoing process of analyzing where you are now, where you want to go, and figuring out the best — or at least a plausible — way to get there. At its best, strategy is organic, messy, iterative. And while strategy work needs to be pretty process-focused at a certain scale (think global corporates) like anything at that scale needs to be process-focused, this is definitively not true at a smaller, more intimate scale. This book here is for this more intimate scale.

Strategy also comes alive in the practice, in the day-to-day. So whenever possible, I'd stay away from overly formalizing things too early: The moment something is turned into a slide deck, the more it is frozen in time — a statue rather than a living thing. Instead, focus on getting the next step right, and preparing for the 3-4 steps after that. As long as these steps take you into more or less the right direction, it's all good!

No matter your experience, every now and then it is normal to get stuck. This is what this document is for: It's a short, skimmable booklet with little strategies, stratagems and short reminders. Think of it as a cheat sheet for your day-to-day life leading your team or organization. It's structured into 3 sections:
- Strategies: A menu of useful approaches.
- Ways of thinking: Lenses to use to analyze and mindsets worth cultivating.
- Leadership skills: Helpful ways to manage a team or organization.

I wrote it down because I sometimes get stuck, too, and this helps me get past those moments. Hopefully it gets you unstuck, too.

I'd be remiss not to mention that I work as an advisor for hire, too. If you'd like explore working together, hit me up at peter@thewavingcat.com .

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STRATEGIES

Growing pains

There is a rule of thumb for organizational growth: With every doubling of team size, established communications and governance systems tend to break down. What works for 2 people does not necessarily work well for 4, and what works for 10 probably does not work for 20. Meeting cultures and structures, chats, team lunches, documentation — even, to a degree, culture — all break down and have to be rebuilt or reinforced as the team grows. Think of it as a corollary of Metcalfe's law: Between 2 people, there is just 1 connection. Between 4 people, there are 6 possible connections. 5 people make 10 connections, 12 can make 66 connections. Group communications get messy quickly.

What that means in practice is that frictions tend to increase: First slowly, then suddenly. Meetings start getting missed, miscommunications arise, some work is done redundantly while other tasks fall through the cracks. All too often, this leads to a palpable sense of frustration.

If you see the signs, hurry up: Be intentional about analyzing new needs, adapt meeting styles and frequency, chat etiquette, documentation of workflows, etc.

As a rule of thumb, as an organization grows, documentation tends to become more important, and centralized coordination and dissemination of information take on a more central role. That said, it really depends on the context, and it is not a linear process. Growing, especially once it gets from single to double digits, is where there is a high risk of over-formalizing, of putting too rigid a structure into place. Keep things nimble wherever possible. It's easier to go from nimble to rigid than the other way, so be careful not to commit too quickly to overly formalized processes.

Some examples:

Formalizing communications: A small team of 4-5 people can easily share an office or monitor the single team chat channel, so communications loops are tight, and ambient awareness of what the others are working on or thinking about is high. A team of 10 looks very different. This is where weekly stand-up meetings to coordinate and provide extra awareness become essential, and where more specialized chat channels will form organically. Core work times are a necessity, and planned shared team lunches can stabilize team culture. When you get to 20, written documentation of workflows and processes becomes absolutely necessary. Things like onboarding and off-boarding procedures will have to be streamlined and formalized. HR processes need to be tight, IT should probably be centrally managed and secured. Regular additional all-hands meetings and in-house notes keep people in the loop about bigger developments that management is thinking about, and team sharebacks make sure that teams know about each others' work.

Management structures: Up to 10 people, the founders are probably accessible to anyone at more or less anytime. With 20 people, founders/leaders need to gatekeep their calendar pretty tightly, time is their most valuable resource. Open office hours, regular 1:1 check ins with individual team members, some level of hierarchical system of management — like team leads with teams of up to 5 direct reports — become more important.

Meeting culture: Meetings change, too: Early on, impromptu conversations and the occasional 1 hour meeting that meander from topic to topic organically are best as few people try to tackle a large range of activities. By the time a team reaches 10 people, meetings should have clear agendas, start and end on time, and end with clearly agreed and documented notes and goals. Meetings should also have the minimum number of necessary participants; no more meandering, no more all-team-member meetings as a rule of thumb (other than rare all-hands meetings of course). Meeting times should be shorter, too: 30min max except for working meetings. Meeting types should also be clear and intentional: Is this a decision meeting (where options are presented and chosen), a work meeting (writing something together in real time), informational (sharing of information or knowledge), or conversational (a negotiation or exploration of a topic)? If it's not clear what type of meeting, it's not a meeting that should happen: It needs a clearer focus first. By the time an organization reaches 20, leaders might also have short 10min meetings for just quick decisions with team members who need input from up top.

Development paths

Often, strategy revolved around the challenge to find points of intervention that offer some kind of leverage. One useful model to think about these points are *development paths*. Cribbed from transformation studies, the idea goes back to a 2019 paper by Elmqvist, Andersson, Franzeskaki et al [1]. I learned first about this model through my long-time collaborator Simon Höher while co-writing a report together and found it tremendously useful.

The idea here is that any ecosystem has a number of different potential development paths. While the ecosystem's resilience is high (i.e. it's healthy), it's likely to go on developing as it is (it stays on its current path). But while resilience is low (i.e. if there is a lot of pressure on the ecosystem, through a change in environment, a lack of resources or other stressors), the direction of where and how it develops might change more easily. This is where pathways might diverge, the point where interventions are most likely to have an outsized impact — either to nudge development into a new, more desirable direction, or to stabilize against deteriorating. Only in rare cases is an abrupt jump from one pathway to another possible or likely, in which case we speak of an abrupt transformation. Examples include some technological breakthrough, or maybe an external event like the eruption of a volcano, or a new piece of regulation.

In strategy work, it helps to look out for points of leverage, as well as ways to strengthen ecosystems (or organizations) by making sure they are as resilient as they need to be.

[1] Elmqvist, T., Andersson, E., Frantzeskaki, N. _et al._ Sustainability and resilience for transformation in the urban century. _Nat Sustain_ **2**, 267–273 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0250-1. Available at https://beijer.kva.se/wp-r/uploads/2019/09/99599992_Elmqvist-et-al-2019-NS.pdf

Cultivate an action bias

Cultivate a bit of an action bias. As a strategist, I tend to value diligent analysis highly. That said, analysis paralysis is usually worse than intentional action — not just when it's about getting results, but also for learning. In many cases, trying is better than talking to figure out quickly what works and what doesn't.

Establishing the larger, more long-term goals is mostly a thinking task: Align values and goals to set up an organizational compass to orient with. But anything below that, the tactical level, the how-to, is often figured out much easier by feeling the way forward. Creating a culture that encourages feeling the way forward ("crossing the river by feeling the stones", as the famous line goes) allows for quick learning. It's the tight feedback loops of learning by doing that when couple to rigorous analysis (debriefs, reflections, evaluations, or whatever is most useful for any given context) that create valuable insights very quickly. Then, of course, these insights need to feed back into the larger strategic process.

If in doubt, get to the doing and watch closely what is working and what is not.

De-risking

If risks are perceived as too high (for the organization, an individual or an outside party), are there ways to *de-risk*? De-risking here refers not so much to *reducing* risks, but to *shift risks to places/actors who can absorb them more easily*.

What type is the anticipated risk, and what ways might there be to mitigate the risk? Of all the parties involved, which have the best capacity to absorb one type of risk over another? Just like well-funded organizations are better equipped to shoulder financial risks, smaller organizations can often do things that are considered too risky for the brands of larger organizations, or deemed too much of a risk to operational protocols of more process-focused larger organizations. Often, the trick here is to look at all the parties involved and play "responsibility tetris" until risks and capacities align well.

For example:

Move financial risk up the chain. If a financial commitment is too risky for an NGO, maybe a funder can shoulder the financial risk through a cash injection or no-risk loan. In this case, a party that can easily absorb the financial risk at very low risk to their own organization de-risks the project for the original party.

Move reputational risk down the chain. If a publication is deemed too much of a potential brand risk for a large organization, it could be funded and promoted by that organization but published under the authors' names instead, which might well be beneficial for both — assuming of course that the authors stand behind their writing and want their names to be visible.

Safe enough to try

"Is it safe enough to try?" This question out of the Holocracy playbook serves to unlock options, to prevent ideas from being shut down prematurely. Making decisions means taking risks. Avoiding risk altogether is rarely possible or advisable. Consider the scale and potential impact of implementing your ideas. Usually, things don't have to be *safe* — just *safe enough* not to wreck your organization. If a proposal is *safe enough to try* — if trying and failing won't cause damage that is too big or grave to recover from — then it is okay to move forward. Much like *de-risking*, this is all about maximizing the options space. So: Is it safe enough to try?

Is it reversible?

Along the same lines as *Safe Enough to Try*, can you take a few steps towards your idea in a way that might be reversible? If that is possible, it's decidedly low risk. Just try, and if things don't work, take your new insights and turn back the clock. Irreversible decisions warrant more consideration than reversible ones.

Reducing complexity

A lot of my work is helping orgs (and more importantly, people) navigate through transitions of some kind or another, which means: Navigating complexity and change. This quote has always stuck with me. I see it as a core part of what I try to contribute:

> *"Ideally you're a complexity sink. Chaos goes in, order comes out." — Najaf Ali*

With that i mind, here is an incomplete **list of approaches to reduce complexity:**

- **Reduce.** Find out what is at the core of what you are attempting to do, and cut out the rest. (You can always add stuff back later.)
- **Standardize.** Complexity can stem from too much variation. Sometimes, it's time to clean house and standardize (processes, products, salaries...)
- **Segment.** Identify things that are similar and sort them into (mental) buckets to reduce the mental load, and to make your systems more legible.
- **Modularize.** Can you break a complex thing (strategy, process, re-org) down into smaller pieces?
- **Increasing legibility.** Generally, the easier it is to "read" your systems/portfolios/org chart, etc., the lower the complexity of navigating what's going on.
- **Stretching things out along the time axis.** Sometimes, things are or appear unnecessarily complex by being too compressed. If you can, stretch things out over a bit more time, which makes it easier to tackle every step along the way. Think of it like untangling a thread of yarn: You need to loosen things up to see and be able to get in there, if it's too tight it's harder than it has to be.

Also, complexity often seems to go through the roof during intense phases when people are overwhelmed. In those cases, the perceived complexity is really mostly a problem of priorities. In those cases, it's on you to bring back some clarity by ruthlessly prioritizing: If something isn't key to meeting your mission (because it is crucial to reaching your organization's goals, to meet its own cultural standards or to advance the mission significantly), it has to be down-ranked. Make sure to give your team members the mandate to treat things accordingly, i.e. make sure not to criticize someone for not tackling a low-priority task. If you're in too deep yourself — there's no shame in that! — bring in outside help for a fresh perspective.

Progress over perfection

An idea phrased so beautifully by Markus Andrezak: Progress over perfection, anytime. Analysis paralysis and over-planning are much more damaging than taking a small step forward in roughly the right direction. So as long as you can figure out options – a direction — that have low downside and high upside, they don't have to be perfect. Not even near-perfect. They are good enough to get going, and to feel your way forward, one step at a time.

Mental models

Mental models help us interpret what is going on around us. If they are good, they are useful. Conversely, if they are useful, they are good. It is absolutely essential to have a mental map of the world that both reflects reality *and also works for your organization and context*.

> *"„When you think ‚this doesn't make sense', really what you're saying is ‚my model of the world doesn't make sense'" — Ezra Klein*

It would not be very helpful to just list mental models: They are highly individualized. Just remember at all times that what makes sense for you individually, for your organization, in your context, does not necessarily make sense for anyone else. Find what works for you, and try to find ways to connect your mental models to those of others where necessary. Approach this like learning a new language: Even a few spoken words mean tremendous progress, and it gets easier from there.

Loosely related: The corporate world overflows with mapping tools and exercises for all kinds of purposes and contexts. One of the consistently most useful mapping methodologies I have encountered (though it leans towards product development) are Wardley Maps.[2]

WAYS OF THINKING

The power of frames

Framing and re-framing problems is one of the key skills as a leader at any level. It allows for different perspectives, and hence new insights and new strategies, to emerge.

Think about frames as different lenses you can try on to look at an issue or event from different angles. This is not some exercise of mindless positivity, although getting into a constructive

[2] Wardley Maps creator Simon Wardley wrote up a solid intro here: https://medium.com/wardleymaps/

mindset is part of the goal. It truly is about uncovering other, possibly less obvious truths to analyze and narratives to contextualize something that occurred.

For example: A classic example is angry customer complaints online. If customers complain online about your product or service, they are (first and foremost) angry. But they are also engaged, and still consider it worth seeking out some type of conversation. If someone is unhappy with a product, they are usually well within their rights to simply walk away and take their business elsewhere. Instead, a complaint online indicates that they think that what you are offering is worth fighting about. Honor their energy investment — it is truly a gift! — and improve by working with them to figure out what and how to improve.

Just be wary of confusing re-framing with the dark arts of a spin doctor, after all you do not want to end up accidentally lying to yourself.

One-sentence descriptions

To get out of over-analyzing things, try describing what is actually happening in one short, simple and — *this is important!* — neutral sentence.

Example: Instead of "our competitors are attacking us unfairly by invading our turf", try "another company published a book about market X." Instead of "I feel slighted by X saying that things are moving too slowly." try "X expressed a feeling about the speed of the rollout."

When a team member is anxious or upset, you can ask them to do that, too, but make sure to read the room. While this exercise can help take unhealthy emotions off the table, you also do not want to minimize a team member's distress.

Framed vs framing enquiries

Through Céline Henne, I was introduced to the idea of framed vs framing enquiries[3], a tremendously useful tool to consider what types of questions you really are trying — or ought to try — to ask. The short version is this: *Frameworks* are "constellations of concepts, methods and assumptions that reflect our understanding of the world around us and regulate how we think and act."

Hence, a *framed* enquiry is one where we already know exactly what we're looking for, we just need to reveal the facts. It's a much more limited scope, there is a clear, factual answer. Examples she provides are questions like "what was the average surface temperature on earth a million years ago" (hard to figure out, but clearly, a factual answer exists) or having a map that has a blank spot that needs filling in.

A *framing* enquiry is much more open-ended and usually doesn't have a factual answer. This is rather about *how* we should think about a certain issue. These types of enquiries are "are

[3] Henne, C (2024). Frameworks. *Aeon.co*, 29 July 2024. https://aeon.co/essays/the-realist-vs-the-pragmatist-view-of-epistemology

concerned with the creation, revision or expansion of our frameworks". As an example, she offers the paradigm shift from Newtonian physics of absolute space and time of Einstein's relativistic paradigm of physics. Or how different interpretations (frameworks) of looking at what constitutes good governance might focus on either economic productivity or on health outcomes or quality of life, for example.

In strategy work, both are important: Do we need to reveal facts to make better decisions or should we reconsider how we think about the issue? Most importantly, it's important to find out what type of question it is we should be asking in the first place.

Managing your attention

The most important thing you need to manage is your own attention: At any point in time, there are most likely more demands on your attention than you could possibly fulfill. Everyone is a little different, so your mileage may vary. Whatever works for you, works for you. That said, here are a few suggestions:

Manage your energy level throughout the day. Consider what type of activity you should be doing today, and what you feel your brain is best at at any given time of day. For example, if you are most focused in the mornings, you might want to block that time off for deep work, and schedule your meetings in the afternoon.

Input, throughput, output. For me personally, it helps to think about activities and tasks as *input*, *output* or *throughput*: Am I trying to absorb information or knowledge (input), to write (output) or shape the flow of information, for example in meetings (throughput)? I'm much better at input and output tasks in the mornings, so I try to schedule them there as far as possible. Again, find what works best for you.

Guard your time fiercely. In an early-stage, small organization (say, up to 5 people), your team should have pretty much constant access to you throughout the workday as everyone coordinates constantly. At this stage, tight feedback loops, constant coordination, ambient awareness and redundant communications are essential. As the organization grows, that's neither possible nor desirable anymore. As roles get more defined, the need for efficiency goes up. Start guarding your time and calendar fiercely, first by reducing unscheduled availability, then the number and length of meetings, then at some point by adding an assistant who gatekeeps your calendar relentlessly. (Also see the section on Growing Pains.)

Try the opposite

Taking a cue from Brian Eno's famous creativity game Oblique Strategies: Mentally try the opposite: If you are stuck with one approach, try the opposite. If you want to double check if your approach feels good or not, try on the opposite. Spending less doesn't work? What if you spent more? Not sure about delegating more? What would delegating less look like? Too many meetings lead you to shorten the default meeting time? What about instead doubling it? It's a simple trick to consider options from a range of different points of view.

How far is your horizon?

How far is your and your organization's "visibility"? Can you see to the horizon or (through foresight) beyond? Can you only see a short way, and need to more carefully feel your way forward? Figure out what speed and what level/distance of planning ahead is appropriate for your current situation.

Example: During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, planning horizons noticeably shrunk from months or years down to weeks as organizations of all sizes adapted to basically just get through the week or month with as little disruption as possible. It was all flying-by-sight type dynamics. Then, as we learned more and both organizations and individuals found their feet in this new and altered context, the horizon started expanding again.

The further out you try to plan, the lower resolution your plans should be. Once you plan anything beyond your visibility horizon, it is usually best to think any plans as a rough guide, like the cardinal directions on a compass rather than actionable items.

Centers of gravity

When we consider activities, projects, etc., think of them as a center of gravity: Will this attract a lot of my own — my team's, my organization's — attention, or a little? How about the attention of other stakeholder groups? Will it shape or reshape the organization in a meaningful way?

Examples from personal life help illustrate the point:
- A new job would likely constitute a strong center of gravity as full time jobs tend to take up a lot of attention, time, space. Life shapes around them as much as the other way around.
- Getting a child is a strong center of gravity as it restructures the parents' lives significantly and for a long time.

Equally, in an organizational context this can help prioritize projects and activities. It's important to try to avoid multiple strong centers of gravity that create too much tension: If they work well together, that's great. If they're competing, they risk tearing the organization (or you) apart. Pick wisely to only allow multiple centers of gravity if they are truly compatible.

Not-knowing

A slightly academic but worthwhile thing to consider is what we know and do not know. I find the concept of *not-knowing*, popularized by UCL strategy professor Vaughn Tan, helpful.[4] Tan differentiates between **four different types of not-knowing**:
1. Not-knowing what concrete outcomes are possible;
2. Not-knowing what actions we can take to achieve particular outcomes;

[4] https://vaughntan.org/notknowing

3. Not-knowing how likely an outcome would be given particular actions taken;
4. Not-knowing how much to value a particular outcome.

Also, be mindful of the difference between *risk* and *not-knowing*: A risk might be very well known and as such can be treated accordingly.

LEADERSHIP

Find your own leadership style

Everyone has a different style of leadership. Find yours. Some questions to ask yourself: Do you prefer control or autonomy? Tight feedback loops or just results? Process or outcomes? Large teams or small? Strict hierarchies or controlled chaos? Team members' deeper individual motivations or a larger vision? Alignment or being challenged? Top-down or bottom-up? Individual responsibility or co-creation & collaboration? Do you prefer to have clear roles and fill them with anyone capable to fill that role, or to hire individual talents and shape the roles around them?

There's no right or wrong here, everyone's brain works differently. But/and depending on what you prefer — how your brain works, and how you intuitively work as a leader — you will create vastly different types of teams and organizations, and need to hire the right people for the culture you create.

For example: I like to make sure that team members are empowered and to give them the latitude to make decisions, and to coordinate well. I also very much dislike micromanagement. That means I need to create structures, processes and the culture that allow for excellent communications and coordination, that provide everyone with the info they need, and that allow for embracing mistakes. I also need to work with individuals that thrive on autonomy and ambiguity, that communicate well and are excellent team players, and that are self-organized to a very large extent.

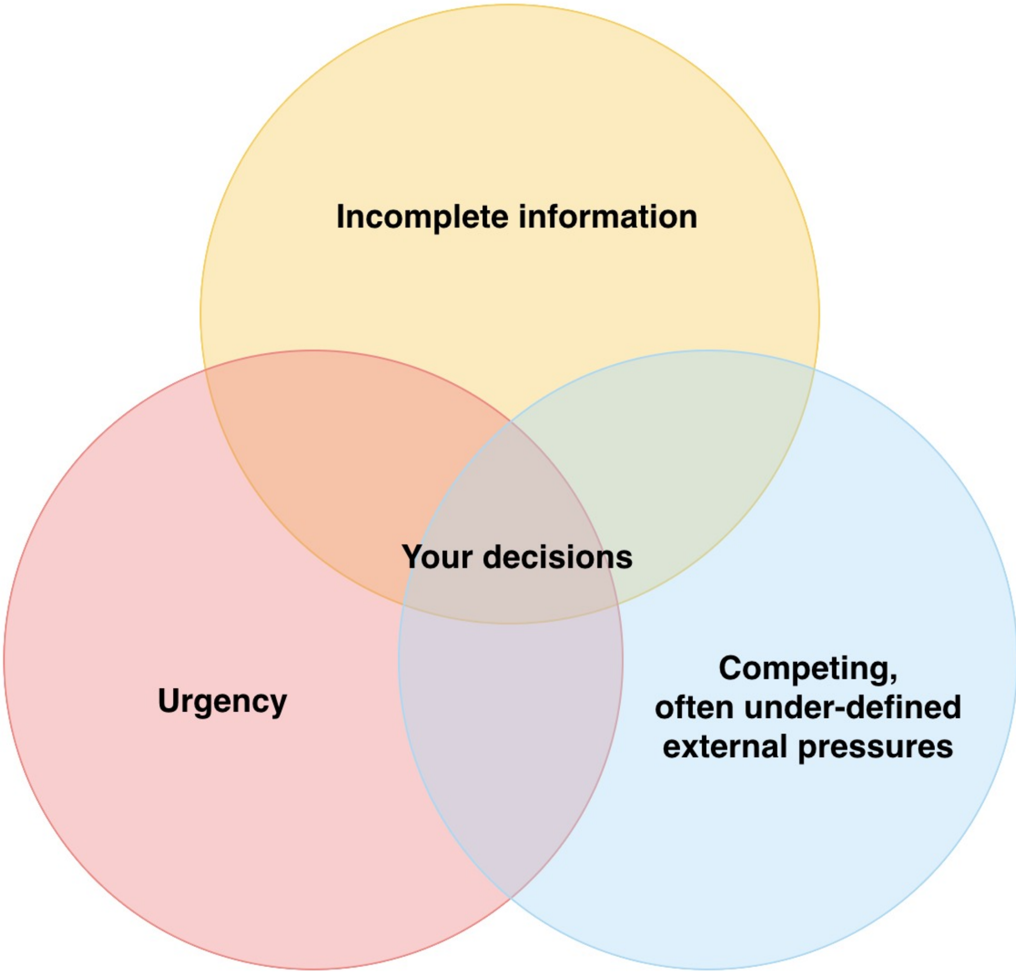
Hire for your leadership style

Once you've found your leadership style, hire accordingly. This is easier said than done, but try to find the right personalities for whichever culture you try to create. If you prefer team members to follow orders and fall in line (alignment) over people bringing their own ideas to you and being constructively critical (being challenged), you need people who either prefer hierarchies and clear role descriptions and the accountability and clear expectation management that requires, or those who have the confidence and entrepreneurial mindset — maybe even a contrarian streak — to feel comfortable stand up to their boss. If I had to pinpoint a single mistake I've seen most often, it might be hiring people who don't fit the intended leadership and culture, and hence setting everyone up for failure rather than success.

Personally, I prefer to work with people who are empowered and confident to take the lead in their area to get stuff done. People who think on their feet. Does that sometimes lead to friction because activities aren't always perfectly coordinated top-down? Absolutely. But that's a type of friction I don't mind dealing with. However, if someone needs exact instructions at any step of the way, I'm the wrong boss for them.

Know your decision-maker Venn

As a decision-maker, you tend to be constrained by a number of factors that all compete. There are many versions of this, and this one is the one that helps me most. These 3 factors are more or less constantly at play:



1. Incomplete information
2. Urgency
3. Competing, often under-defined external pressures

And you sit in the middle and need to make decisions. When doing so, it can help to be aware of the types of pressures these factors exert, so that you can then find ways to better deal with them. Because decisions are required, and you are the person making them. So first, take a breath. It's fine! Then take stock.

Incomplete information: Usually, or certainly more often than not, you do not have all the information there is, or even just all the information you would like. Ask yourself: What information would make this decision easier? How could I get to a point where I could make a more informed decision? What is the bare minimum I need to make a responsible decision?

Urgency: If you look past the imminent feeling of urgency that you or your team members might experience, how urgent is it really? Where does it fall on the urgent-vs-important spectrum? What would happen if the decision was delayed, if for example you were not around right now? Often this helps put things into perspective. If it is something urgent, you will also notice if you prepared a plan for a situation like this, and might want to put this on the to do list to be more ready next time.

Competing, often under-defined external pressures: Often, there are external pressures of various kinds. Sometimes they are well defined, be it a delivery deadline, bills to pay, venue bookings to confirm, sign-offs of one sort or another. Other times, these external pressures are much less well defined. Say for example, board members, clients or other stakeholders have been grumbling, or there are rumors about a competitor doing something that would steal your thunder. There may be one or multiple external pressures. All you can do is try to be aware, and act as best as you can. If you can name it, you are already a big step ahead.

As always, once you know what environment you are operating in, you can proceed to make your decisions, or delay them, or to gather more information: Just make sure you stay calm and intentional.

CHeF method

The CHEF method is a mnemonic that walks you through basic communications as a leader: Clarify, Help, Follow-up.
- Clarify: Manage expectations, the why and exact what.
- Help: Support the team in implementing that. Provide any necessary support along the way.
- Follow-up: Reminders, feedback, debrief, etc.

To give credit, I first encountered the CHeF method through Mike Manzi.

Hold yourself accountable

As a team's or organization's leader, you need to hold yourself accountable. After all, due to the inherent power dynamic of being the boss you're the only one who can. If there are multiple leadership roles, also make sure to hold each other accountable. And of course create a culture where your team members know they can speak up safely when (not if) you mess up without needing to fear any repercussions. Whenever someone points out a mistake or misstep of yours, acknowledge it, thank them (and mean it) and work towards making things right. People who take the risks and initiative to criticize you and hold you accountable are the people you need to keep around the most. They might also make for great team leads.

Create a culture of accountability

Just like you should hold yourself accountable, hold your team accountable. Encourage your team members to hold each other accountable, too: Whenever there is a mismatch between communications and action, it's a red flag. First, the individual should be accountable for what went off-track. Second, look for structural or systemic impediments that might force things to go sideways and fix them.

Find your confidante

When they first find themselves in a leadership role, most if not all people experience new types and new levels of pressure. This is normal, widespread, and not an indication of weakness or incompetence! Quite the opposite, it shows awareness of new demands in the new role.

Anecdotally, I found that the few people who do not feel such pressures just have blind spots so large not as to be aware of what is required, and mostly seem ill-equipped for leadership roles to begin with.

A typical pattern is that a new leader will simultaneously feel a lot more pressure and responsibility than before, but might lack people to discuss these pressures and feelings with. They feel they cannot talk to their team, so as not to unsettle their team members. They also might not feel it safe to talk to their superiors, say the board of directors, for fear of appearing like they are not up to the job.

This leaves them feeling isolated, alone in their coping with the new stressors. That is not a good place to be. It rarely ever ends well.

Depending on your personality, confidence and the context, I urge you to consider a few options:

Seek out peers, confidantes. It might be a friend with similar job experiences, a mentor, someone at the same seniority level but in a different part of your organization, a former colleague, a career coach, or an external advisor. (In my work, this aspect of just allowing for confidential conversations at a peer level often turns out to be among the most valuable for my clients.) But these are things you cannot face alone, and you should not try.

Figure out how much you feel confident to share with your team. This is not easy, but you might find that you can share more than expected without causing any harm and without creating insecurities among your team members. For example, while I would not recommend telling everyone that you feel inadequate and have no plan, I would consider it safe to say that you do not yet have an answer for a thorny problem, and that you invite inputs from your team. Your team members are there to support your joint success just as much as you are. (They are not, however, your therapists.) You might be positively surprised by how some team members step up to the challenge, and discover who might want to take on more responsibilities.

Do learn to trust the board, and learn how to use it. A good board is made of experts who are there for a reason. Don't let the expertise, experience and network go to waste. The board is just as invested in your organizations success are you are: They want you to succeed, and everyone knows that not everything works perfectly all the time. Again, they are not your therapists, but they are experts you can lean on in many ways.

Leadership is not about going it alone. It is about coordinating and empowering a team or organization. Part of it is to acknowledge one's own limits, to give others a chance to step up.

Learn about handling pressure

One aspect of leadership at any level is that there will be pressure. In fact, many different types of pressure: Sometimes it is metrics to meet, sometimes it is a board demanding explanations or solutions, sometimes it is putting out proverbial fires as part of the day-to-day operations while time is sparse.

It is important — absolutely essential! — to learn what types of pressure you personally feel strongly, and what your gut response is when facing those types of pressure.

Everyone responds differently to pressure, and different types of pressure. Some delight in multitasking and context switching, others feel their blood pressure shoot up when there are too many incoming requests and messages. Some feel most alive when faced with a challenge, others need time to process things calmly by themselves. Know thyself! There is no right or wrong, but if you don't know which types of pressure stress you out and which energize you, you'll run into problems.

Also be aware that under pressure, we tend to act less rational than when things are calmer. What this means is that under high pressure, we might revert to intuitive, impulsive and — crucially — non-deliberate responses which might be healthy or toxic, so we need to know what they are and possibly put safeguards in place.

In other words, there are three different aspects here:

1. Learn how you respond to different types of pressure. What stresses you out, what energizes you?
2. Learn what your default reactions are to different types and levels of stress, so that you can make sure to build safeguards around possibly bad behavioral patterns.
3. Learn what helps you detect oncoming stress early and how to calm you down.

This is the important bit. To illustrate what I mean, I will highlight a few typical stressors and pressures and how to deal with them.

Inbox madness: If you know you do not handle lots of requests for your attention well, i.e. if you get stressed out by hundreds of unread emails and Slack messages and people sending you DMs all day and night make sure to take the necessary steps:

– Set up structures to relieve you of some of the burden. Filters, assistants, delegating, hierarchies, separate work devices and accounts all can help lower the volume.
– Communicate clearly your expectations, for example no messaging in the evenings, or that certain types of requests should be brought to you in person, etc. — and then

create the structures that allow your team to still make sure they are heard by you or the right person in a timely manner.
– Consider if the role is right for you or if you need to make changes. It could mean handing over some responsibilities to another member of leadership or promoting someone to leadership, or dedicating some time every day to disconnect for a while by taking a walk, etc.

Everything everywhere all at once: It's very common for people in their first leadership roles to feel overwhelmed. There is a steep learning curve, and suddenly people who are used to be seen as overachievers find themselves discovering limits to their own skills they did not know existed, or could possibly exist. It can be deeply intimidating.

At the same time, often the change of role means that hierarchies get in the way of pouring out their hearts to former colleagues the way they could have before: As someone's boss you usually cannot commiserate with your direct reports without creating additional trouble. Often, this is made worse because someone in that position feels pressure to look confident to both their team and their bosses on the board. Here, having confidants in similar roles in other organizations can be truly helpful.

I've personally experienced this from just about any angle, including being the new leader, the confidant, or being brought in as an external advisor which allowed me to offer some support and relief to the new leadership at eye level, outside of the organization's reporting structure.

Just make sure to never ever (ever!) fall for the oldest of traps for new leaders: To hide behind your screen or closed door by pretending to be too busy. This is the toughest spot to come back out of, and it usually leads to massive discontent and insecurity across the team, and is likely a path to burnout — and it's an early warning sign, too: If you feel the need to hide, make sure to seek out help!

Fighting stress through action: If you find you are the kind of person who responds to strong pressure brought on by bad news (Sales are down! Money is tight and we have to meet payroll!) by quickly giving directions, you might have a strong action bias. While I do not think there is anything wrong with action bias (the opposite of analysis paralysis), it can mean you're not driving your organization but rather are in a constant reactive mode.

To your team, it can be confusing or frustrating to see you give quick gut reactions to every new bit of news, especially if the decisions and instructions are inconsistent, do not add up to a larger strategy, or even worse they are mutually exclusive. It undermines trust in your leadership, and rightfully so.

So make sure to build structures and habits to counter these tendencies while you work on them: Create meetings where you just listen, and before you decide take the time to absorb things. Ask the team to come up with options, rather than jumping into an ill-informed decision yourself. Involve your co-leaders or advisors in larger decisions. In other words, use the time axis to redistribute pressure: Give yourself time to think rather than acting on impulse. Anything that helps stifle an unhealthy impulse is a net positive.

Analysis paralysis: If, on the other hand, you find yourself freezing up under pressure, consult this booklet's section on risk: Most likely you will find that there are steps you can take that are reversible or can be de-risked to a degree that you might feel more comfortable taking the next step. And then another, and so on. You got this.

Burnout

Burnout is real, and it's serious, and it can hit anyone. I know it hit me, very unexpectedly and hard. I got through it with professional help and am much better in my role (and frankly, as a person) for it. But while you're sliding into burnout or are in the middle of it, it can be hard to know what is going on, and harder still to seek out help or even to just accept help. It is scary, confusing, and hard to recognize until you are deeply in it.

Learn about burnout before you encounter it. Learn how to spot the early warning signs in yourself, your colleagues and peers, your team members. Learn how to talk about it, how to prevent it, and how to seek out or offer help discreetly if needed. Do all these things now, and make sure your team knows, too. This goes beyond what I can offer here, but there are plenty of resources out there. Make sure to familiarize yourself with them. Like with many health and mental health issues, prevention is much easier than treatment.

A bouquet of miscellaneous leadership basics

Finally, some basics: Little bits and pieces everyone hopefully knows that are well worth repeating nonetheless, and of course worth modeling to your team:

Lead by example. No exceptions! Your team almost certainly takes more into account what you do than what you say. If you expect your team to do things a certain way or to behave a certain way, you should walk the walk. You cannot ever be the exception to your own rule. So if, for example, you want all meetings to start on time and for people to be prepared, make sure to be there on time and be prepared yourself. This is how, step by step, culture is built.

Keep expectations realistic. As a side benefit, leading by example also helps tremendously with managing unrealistic expectations because you'll be the first to notice if a suggested process or behavior is not working well.

Praise publicly, criticize privately. Always give credit in front of others, only criticize 1:1 without anyone else around. If there's an audience, it's time to elevate your team.

Respect boundaries. Be friendly, polite, professional — always. None of the people on your staff have to be as emotionally invested in your company as you are. When people aren't at work, don't expect them to work or respond to work messages. Exceptions to the latter might apply, but only under exceptional circumstances and hence: very rarely.

Accommodate personal needs. Your team works for you; this is primarily a transactional relationship. Some people have personal needs or external constraints. If they can be accommodated in a work setting even if they are unusual, accommodate them. For example: True introverts might prefer not to speak up at the beginning of a team meeting, so work around it; someone might have times during the day where child care necessitates them not to be in a meeting. Everyone has different needs, and that's ok. Accommodating personal needs is not just the right thing to do, it's also great to minimize staff turnover and to prevent burnout.

Responsibility should move up the chain, praise should trickle down. If something goes wrong, pull the responsibility up to you whenever possible. If something goes well, use the opportunity to elevate the team members that made it happen. Good bosses don't kick down, they pull their team up. Or to put it more bluntly: Shit should float up, praise should float down.

Keep your word, always. If you make promises, keep them. If you don't know if you will be able to do something, make no promises. If in doubt, keep your promise even if the context has changed and it is no longer ideal for you: Whatever the issue, it is likely less problematic than loss of trust. Consistency — saying what you will do and then doing it like you said — is what builds trust more than anything else.

ABOUT

Peter Bihr is a senior advisor & leader at the intersections of tech, policy, public interest & philanthropy. Working with philanthropic foundations, non-profits and public sector, his focus is on how emerging technologies can benefit society. The through-line of his career has been to understand and shape how digital technology changes power dynamics, and to strengthen democracy and digital rights.

With an experience of 15+ years, his work focuses on areas including tech policy, platform accountability, strengthening civil society, the impact of social media on democracy, as well as technologies including the Internet of Things (IoT), smart cities, and artificial intelligence (AI).

In addition to working as a consultant, Peter served as Interim Director for the European AI & Society Fund (2022). He served as special advisor to Stiftung Mercator's Center for Digital Society. Peter co-founded ThingsCon e.V., a non-profit that advocates for responsible Internet of Things practices and was Executive Director of the independent consultancy The Waving Cat GmbH. Peter has co-founded several acclaimed emerging technology conferences including ThingsCon, UIKonf, and Cognitive Cities Conference, and chaired or curated leading conferences such as Interaction16, NEXT, and TEDxKreuzberg.

Peter was a Senior Mozilla Fellow (2018-19) investigating trustable technology, and an Edgeryders Fellow (2019) studying smart cities from a civil rights perspective. He co-wrote View Source: Shenzhen (2017) and Understanding the Connected Home (2015). Postscapes named him a Top 20 IoT Influencer (2019). Peter co-hosted the Getting Tech Right podcast, a series of interviews about how to think about the role of technology better.

His projects, ideas and antics have been featured in Forbes, the New York Times, SPIEGEL, The Guardian, ZDF, ZEIT and many other publications. His work has been shown at London Design Festival, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Fuori Salone. He blogs at thewavingcat.com.