THE

# CLARITY

# SHIFT

What No One Tells You About
Leading Past the Point Where
the Playbook Stops Working

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# The Clarity Shift

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the Point Where the Playbook Stops Working*

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INTRODUCTION

There is a moment in the life of every founder, and I suspect every leader, when the thing you built stops making sense in the way it used to.

Not financially. Not operationally. The numbers might be the best they have ever been. The team might be stronger than at any point in your history. Your reputation might be growing. People might be reaching out, asking how you did it, wanting your advice.

And yet.

Something has shifted. The work that once consumed you in the best possible way now consumes you in a way that feels hollow. You are still performing at a high level, but performance has become the point, and performance was never supposed to be the point.

I wrote this book because I have lived that moment. More than once. And because, in twenty-five years of building a business across 160 countries, advising leaders on five continents, and sitting in rooms with some of the most accomplished entrepreneurs I have ever met, I have watched this moment arrive for nearly all of them.

It is quiet. That is the thing about it. It does not announce itself like a crisis. There is no single day where you wake up and think, "I have lost the thread." It is more like a slow dimming. The light is still on, but the warmth has gone out of it.

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This is not a motivational book. If you are looking for someone to tell you that you can do it, that the world is yours, that success is a mindset, you have the wrong book and probably the wrong author.

I have no interest in motivation. Motivation is what gets you to start. It is useless for the long middle, which is where most of us actually live.

This is not a step-by-step framework, either. I have studied frameworks, EOS, Scaling Up, dozens of others, and I believe in their utility. Frameworks give you structure. They give you language. They give you a way to talk about things that otherwise feel too amorphous to address. But a framework is a tool, not an answer. And this book is about the questions that sit underneath the tools.

This is not a success story. Or rather, it is not only a success story. It is also a story about doubt, about misalignment, about the distance that opens up between what you are building and who you are becoming.

What this book is, what I hope it is, is an honest conversation. The kind you might have over a long dinner with someone who has been where you are. Not someone who has it all figured out, because I do not. But someone who has at least learned to name the patterns. And naming the pattern, in my experience, is always the first step to moving through it.

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Let me tell you how I got here.

In 2000, my husband Gerard and I moved from the Netherlands to Brisbane, Australia. We had been together since 1996, married, and ready for something we could not quite articulate. We started The Art of Service from our living room. We had no office, no employees, no clients in Australia, no network to speak of. We had each other and a set of skills we believed in, and we had the somewhat naive conviction that if we built something genuinely useful, people would find it.

They did. Slowly at first, and then with a momentum that surprised us both. Over the next twenty-five years, we built the company into a global

operation serving professionals and organisations in more than 160 countries. I wrote certification guides that became bestsellers. We developed assessment tools, training programs, an entire ecosystem of products and services.

By any external measure, it worked.

And it did work. I want to be clear about that. I am not one of those people who looks back on success and pretends it was empty. It was not empty. Building something from nothing with someone you love, watching it grow, seeing the impact it has on real people in real organisations, that is meaningful. That is worth doing.

But meaningful is not the same as sufficient. And somewhere along the way, I could not tell you the exact year, because it does not work like that, I began to feel the gap between what I was building and what I actually needed.

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I joined the Entrepreneurs' Organisation early in our journey. EO became, in many ways, my second education. Not because of what it taught me about business, though it taught me plenty, but because of what it taught me about myself.

The structure of EO is built around honesty. Forum, which is the small-group experience at the heart of the organisation, operates on a principle that is deceptively simple: share your experience, not your advice. Sit with what is true for you, not what you think should be true. Listen without fixing.

That sounds easy. It is not. Most entrepreneurs are wired to fix. We see problems and we reach for solutions. Forum taught me to sit with the problem long enough to understand it. And the problems I kept sitting with, year after year, were not operational. They were existential.

Who am I in this business? What does this business need me to be? And is that the same thing as who I want to become?

I took on more responsibility within EO, Chapter President, then Area Director, then APAC Leadership Director, then Regional Leadership Academy Chair. I became an Official EO Mentor, working with members running businesses over a million in revenue. I coached Accelerator members. I facilitated Strategy Summits.

Each role gave me a wider lens. And through that lens, I kept seeing the same pattern.

Founders build something that works. They get good at the building. The building becomes their identity. And then, somewhere around year five or year ten or year twenty, they look up and realise that the identity they have built is a cage as much as it is a platform.

Not always. Not for everyone. But for enough people that I stopped thinking of it as individual and started thinking of it as structural.

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I went to the MIT Entrepreneurial Masters Program because I wanted to learn from peers. What I found there was something more uncomfortable and more useful: I found the limits of my own thinking. I found people who challenged me not by arguing with my ideas but by operating from entirely different premises. That experience did not give me answers. It gave me better questions.

This book is the product of those questions.

It is organised around a pattern I have observed, in myself, in the leaders I advise, in the entrepreneurs I mentor. The pattern goes roughly like this:

You build something. You become the person who built it. That identity serves you until it does not. And then you face a choice, keep performing as that person, or do the harder work of asking who you are becoming.

The first part of this book is about the building. The early chapters deal with foundations, what it means to start something, to make the thousands of small decisions that accumulate into a company and a life. I have tried to be honest about what those early years were actually like, not just the triumphs but the uncertainty, the quiet fear, the way your relationship with your partner shifts when you are also business partners.

The second part is about the scaling, not just of the business, but of yourself. What happens when the thing you built requires you to become someone different? How do you grow without losing the core of what made you effective in the first place?

The third part is about the reckoning. The moment when achievement and meaning come unglued. When you have done the thing, hit the targets,

earned the recognition, and realise that none of it answers the question you did not know you were asking.

And the fourth part, the final section, is about what comes after. The second mountain, as the concept goes. Not bigger, necessarily. But more aligned. More honest. More yours.

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I want to say something about who this book is for.

It is for founders and leaders who are successful by external measures and feel the misalignment growing. You might not be able to name it yet. You might describe it as restlessness, or boredom, or a vague sense that something is off. You might be at the top of your game and feel, quietly, that the game itself has changed without telling you.

It is for people who are tired of being told to hustle harder, dream bigger, optimise more. Not because those things are wrong, but because they are insufficient. They address the surface. This book is about what is underneath.

It is also, honestly, for a slightly younger version of myself. The version who was building and scaling and achieving and who needed someone to say: "The thing you are feeling is not weakness. It is not failure. It is not burnout. It is the natural consequence of being someone who actually pays attention to their own life."

If I could go back and hand that version of myself one book, I would want it to be this one. Not because it has all the answers, it does not, but because it names the pattern. And once you can name it, you can stop being afraid of it.

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A note on tone. I have been told that I am direct. This is true. I have little patience for language that obscures meaning, for jargon that makes simple things sound complex, for the kind of corporate-speak that allows people to say nothing while appearing to say something important.

I have tried to write this book the way I talk, clearly, specifically, and without padding. If a section feels short, it is because I said what I needed to

say and stopped. I would rather leave you with something true and brief than something comprehensive and hollow.

I am also not interested in pretending I have it all figured out. I am fifty-one as I write this. I am still building. I am still learning. Some mornings I wake up with perfect clarity about what I am doing and why. Other mornings I do not.

The difference between now and twenty years ago is not that I have arrived somewhere. It is that I have stopped pretending arrival is the point.

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A note on how to read this. This book moves chronologically, roughly, but it is not a memoir. I have included the stories and experiences that illuminate the pattern, not every story I have to tell. Some years are compressed. Some moments are expanded far beyond their duration because their significance justified it.

I have also tried to protect the privacy of the people in these pages. Where I have told someone else's story, I have done so with their permission or I have changed enough details that they are unrecognisable. The principles remain true even when the specifics have been altered.

If you are the kind of person who reads introductions and then skips to the chapter that seems most relevant, I understand. I do it too. But I would encourage you, if you have the patience, to read the chapters in order. The pattern builds. Each section depends on the ones before it. And the final chapters will mean more if you have taken the journey rather than jumped to the conclusion.

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If this book resonates with you, if you read it and think, "She is describing something I recognise", then it may be worth a conversation. Not a sales pitch. A conversation. That is how most of my best work begins: two people sitting across from each other, being honest about what is actually happening.

This book is my side of that conversation. Your side begins whenever you are ready.

# The Quiet Shift

Part One

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# The Pattern

There is a photograph somewhere, I think Gerard has it on a hard drive in a box we never open, of the two of us standing in the living room of our first house in Brisbane. It was 2000. We had just moved from the Netherlands, the boxes were barely unpacked, and we were setting up a folding table against the far wall because we had decided that this was where we would build a company.

I remember the light in that room. Queensland light is different from anything I grew up with in the Netherlands, it comes in hard and bright, even in winter. The room was small. The table was cheap. We had one computer between us and a printer that jammed every third page. Gerard sat on one side, I sat on the other, and we started.

The Art of Service. That was the name. We chose it because we believed that service management, the way organisations deliver and support their core functions, was both a discipline and a craft. Not just process. Not just compliance. Something closer to architecture. Something that, when done well, becomes invisible because everything simply works.

In those early days, the work was all-consuming in the way that only founders understand. There was no separation between life and business because they occupied the same physical space. I would be writing certification guides at midnight, formatting study materials on the weekend, answering emails from the other side of the world before the sun came up. Gerard handled the technical architecture, the platform, the systems. We divided the labour not by job description but by instinct, whoever saw the gap, filled it.

We were building something for a market that barely existed yet in Australia. IT service management was still a niche concern, and most of the serious certification bodies and training providers were based in Europe. We were two Dutch immigrants in a Brisbane living room, betting that we could serve a global market from a place most of our future customers could not find on a map.

It worked. Not overnight, and not without the kind of grinding, thankless effort that nobody posts about on LinkedIn. But it worked. Within a few years, we had customers in dozens of countries. The certification guides I was writing, ITIL, ISO 20000, later cloud computing and leadership, started selling in volumes that surprised us. We moved from the living room to a proper office, then outgrew that. The team grew. The product catalogue grew. The reach grew.

By the time we were operating in over a hundred countries, I had become something I never set out to be: a person other people described as successful. I had been named one of Australia's 50 Most Influential Women Entrepreneurs. I had completed the MIT Entrepreneurial Masters Program. I held expert-level certifications in fields I had helped define. The business was generating revenue across six continents. On paper, and in reality, things were very, very good.

And that is exactly when the shift began.

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I want to be precise about what I mean, because this is not a story about crisis. There was no dramatic collapse, no moment where everything fell apart. If you had asked me at the time whether something was wrong, I would have said no. And I would have meant it. The numbers were strong. The team was capable. The clients were satisfied. Gerard and I were still aligned on the big picture. Our son Frank was growing up. We were building a life that, by any reasonable measure, was working.

But somewhere around year eight or nine, I cannot pin it to a single moment, which is part of the problem, the texture of my days changed. The decisions that used to come easily started requiring more effort. Not because they were harder in any objective sense, but because I could no longer make them from instinct alone. The business had grown past the point where I could hold the whole thing in my head, and yet I kept trying to hold the whole thing in my head, because that was the only way I knew how to lead.

I would sit down to review a new market opportunity and find myself unable to commit. Not because the analysis was incomplete, I had done the analysis, probably too much of it, but because the decision felt different now. It carried more weight. More people depended on it. More things could go wrong. And the version of me that had built this business by trusting her gut was no longer sure her gut was calibrated for the scale we had reached.

This is the quiet shift. It does not announce itself. It does not show up as a red line on a dashboard or a difficult conversation with a board member. It shows up as a vague sense of friction. A feeling that you are working harder to produce the same results. A suspicion, never quite confirmed, never quite dismissed, that the way you have been doing things is no longer the way things need to be done.

I have since learned that nearly every founder I respect has experienced some version of this. But at the time, I thought it was just me. I thought I was tired, or distracted, or losing my edge. I did what most driven people do when they feel something slipping: I worked harder. I added more hours. I took on more responsibility. I told myself that discipline was the answer, that if I just pushed through, the clarity would return.

It did not return.

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The early years of building The Art of Service had a simplicity that I did not appreciate at the time. When there are two of you in a living room, every decision is immediate. You see a problem, you fix it. You see an opportunity, you chase it. There is no committee, no approval chain, no strategic alignment workshop. There is just the work, and the two of you, and the relentless forward motion of trying to make something exist that did not exist before.

Gerard and I developed a rhythm in those years that served us extraordinarily well. He built the systems. I built the content and the relationships. He thought in architecture. I thought in language and frameworks. We could have a conversation over dinner that would reshape our entire product strategy, and by the next morning, we would be executing on it. The feedback loop between idea and action was immediate, and that immediacy was our greatest competitive advantage.

We were remote before remote was a word anyone used to describe work. This was the early 2000s, well before the pandemic made distributed teams fashionable. We had team members in different time zones, clients on every continent, and a business model that existed almost entirely online. People would ask me where our office was, and I would explain that our office was wherever we happened to be, and they would look at me as though I had said something slightly eccentric. Now, of course, everyone works this way. But we were doing it when most companies still measured commitment by how early you arrived at a physical building.

That early model, lean, fast, distributed, instinct-driven, created the foundation for everything that followed. It is also, I would eventually understand, what made the quiet shift so disorienting. Because the skills that had built the business were so deeply embedded in how I operated that I could not distinguish between the skills and myself. I did not use a playbook. I was the playbook. And when the playbook started to fail, it felt like I was failing.

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I remember a specific moment, though I suspect the moment is less important than what it represents. We were in the middle of expanding into a new market, I will not say which one, because the details are not the point, and I had been going back and forth on the approach for weeks. Gerard had laid out the options clearly. The data supported a decision. The team was waiting. And I could not pull the trigger.

It was not indecision in the way people usually mean it. I was not paralysed by fear or overwhelmed by complexity. I simply could not find the signal in the noise. Every option seemed equally viable and equally risky. The certainty that had carried me through a decade of decisions, the ability to look at a situation and know, in my body, what to do, had gone quiet.

I sat with that feeling for longer than I should have. I compensated by gathering more information, commissioning more analysis, having more conversations. I told myself I was being thorough. What I was actually being was lost.

That experience, the gap between competence and clarity, is what this book is about. Not failure. Not burnout. Not the kind of entrepreneurial struggle that makes for a compelling podcast interview. Something quieter, and in many ways more dangerous, precisely because it is so easy to ignore.

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In the years since, through my work with the Entrepreneurs' Organisation, as a chapter president, area director, mentor, accountability coach, and in more roles than I can usefully list, I have sat across from hundreds of founders and leaders who are experiencing some version of what I experienced. They are smart. They are successful. They are doing well by every external measure. And they are carrying a weight they cannot name.

Some of them describe it as boredom, though it is not boredom. Some call it burnout, though they are not burned out, they still have energy, they still care, they are still showing up every day. Some frame it as a strategy problem, and it is partly that, but strategy problems have solutions, and this

does not feel like something a new strategy will fix.

What they are experiencing, what I experienced, is the moment when the identity you built to create your success becomes the barrier to your next chapter. The moment when the very things that make you effective start making you stuck. The moment when growth, paradoxically, requires you to become less of what you have been.

I did not have language for this when I was living through it. I have language for it now, and I wrote this book because I believe that language matters. That naming a thing gives you power over it. That the quiet shift is not a personal failing but a structural inevitability, something that happens to almost every founder who builds something that outgrows the original version of themselves.

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This book is not a framework. I have written enough frameworks in my career, certification guides, assessment models, maturity matrices, to know that frameworks are useful for what they are useful for, and useless for everything else. What I am offering here is something different: a way of seeing. A set of patterns that I have observed over twenty-five years of building, mentoring, and advising. An honest account of what happens after the success, and what it takes to move through it without losing yourself or your business in the process.

I am writing this for the founder who is doing well and feels stuck. For the leader who has built something real and cannot figure out why it feels like the thing they built is now building them. For the person who lies awake at 2 a.m., not with anxiety exactly, but with a low-grade hum of uncertainty that will not resolve itself no matter how many strategic plans they write.

If that is you, I want you to know two things. First: you are not broken. What you are experiencing is predictable, even mechanical. It follows a pattern, and once you see the pattern, you can work with it instead of against it. Second: the way through is not what you think. It is not more effort, more discipline, more strategy. It is something closer to subtraction. A willingness to let go of the version of you that got you here, so that the version of you that is needed next can emerge.

That sounds abstract. I intend to make it concrete. But first, we need to understand the pattern, what it looks like, why it happens, and why it is so effective at hiding in plain sight.

That is what Part One is about.

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When Frank was born eight weeks premature, Gerard and I learned something about control that no business school could have taught us. We learned that you can do everything right, every appointment, every precaution, every careful plan, and still find yourself in a situation where the only thing you control is how you respond.

I mention this not because it is directly analogous to business strategy, but because it changed something in me that I think made me a better entrepreneur and, eventually, a better mentor. It taught me that the illusion of control is exactly that, an illusion. And that the most capable people are not the ones who control everything, but the ones who can function clearly when control is not available.

In the early years of building The Art of Service, I operated under the illusion of control, and it served me well. I could see every part of the business. I could touch every decision. I could hold the entire operation in my hands and shape it directly. That feeling, of being the animating force behind the whole thing, is intoxicating. It is also, as I would learn, unsustainable.

The quiet shift is what happens when the illusion breaks. Not dramatically, not all at once, but in a slow erosion that leaves you standing in the same place, doing the same work, but feeling fundamentally different about it. The confidence is still there, but it is thinner. The instincts are still there, but they are slower. The drive is still there, but it is competing with something new, a weariness that has nothing to do with how many hours you are sleeping and everything to do with the gap between who you are and what your business now requires.

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I want to be clear about something before we go further. I am not writing this book from a place of having figured it all out. I am writing it from a place of having lived through the pattern enough times, in my own business, in my mentoring work, in the hundreds of conversations I have had with founders around the world, to recognise it when I see it. To name it. To describe its stages with some precision.

But I am still in it, in some ways. The quiet shift is not a one-time event. It recurs at every new stage of growth, every new level of complexity, every new version of yourself that the business demands. The difference now is that I recognise it when it arrives. I do not panic. I do not work harder. I do not pretend it is not happening.

I sit with it. I name it. And then I do the work, the real work, which is almost never the work you think it is.

That is what the coming chapters will explore. The pattern behind the shift. The playbook problem. The loneliness of leadership at this particular threshold. And then, in the parts that follow, the practices and perspectives that can carry you through.

But it starts here, in the living room. Two people, one folding table, and the naive, beautiful belief that if you just work hard enough and care enough and build something good enough, everything else will sort itself out.

It does not sort itself out. But something better can happen, if you are willing to see it clearly.

# Strategic Drift

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I want to tell you about a founder I will call David. I have changed enough details that you will not recognise him, but you might recognise yourself.

David runs a technology services company. About forty employees, strong margins, growing steadily. He has built something real, clients trust him, his team is loyal, and he has never missed a commitment. When I first met him through an EO accountability session, he looked like the picture of a successful entrepreneur. Confident. Articulate. In command.

Except he was not sleeping. Not because of anxiety, he would have told you he felt fine, but because his mind would not stop running. Every night, he lay awake reviewing decisions, second-guessing priorities, mentally rearranging the pieces of a puzzle that never quite fit. His days were consumed by meetings that felt urgent but rarely moved anything forward. His inbox was a scroll of requests, each one reasonable, none of them aligned to any single direction. He was working sixty-hour weeks and could not have told you, if pressed, what his company's top three priorities were.

When I asked him that question directly, what are your three priorities right now, he paused for a long time. Then he listed seven things. Then he revised the list. Then he said, "I think the real answer is that I don't know."

David was not failing. By every conventional measure, he was succeeding. Revenue was up. Clients were happy. The team was performing. But something was off, and the something had been off for so long that he had stopped noticing it as a problem and started accepting it as the normal cost of running a business.

What David was experiencing, and what I have watched dozens of founders experience in various forms, is strategic drift. And it is the central pattern this book is built around.

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Strategic drift is not dramatic. That is its defining feature and its greatest danger. It does not arrive as a crisis. It does not announce itself with alarm bells or failing metrics or angry phone calls. It arrives as a subtle misalignment, a degree or two off course, that compounds over time until you find yourself somewhere you never intended to be, doing work that no longer connects to what matters most.

Think of it this way. If you set sail from Brisbane to Auckland and your compass is off by just two degrees, you will not notice for a long time. The ocean looks the same. The wind feels right. You are making progress. But over hundreds of kilometres, those two degrees add up. By the time you realise you are off course, you may be closer to the middle of nowhere than to your destination.

Strategic drift works the same way in a business, and in a life. The daily decisions still feel reasonable. The effort is still there. The intention is still good. But the aggregate direction has shifted, slowly and silently, away from where you actually want to go.

I have come to believe that strategic drift is not an exception in the life of a growing business. It is the rule. Every company I have worked with, advised, or studied, including my own, has experienced it. The question is not whether it will happen, but whether you will see it in time to correct it.

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Let me describe what strategic drift looks like in practice, because it is easy to talk about in the abstract and much harder to recognise when you are living inside it.

The first symptom is usually busyness. Not productive busyness, the kind where you are deeply engaged in meaningful work, but the reactive, scattered kind. You start your day with a plan and by 10 a.m. you have abandoned it in favour of whatever was loudest in your inbox. Your calendar is full, but when you look back at the end of the week, you cannot identify the three or four things you did that actually moved the business forward. You are active. You are not effective. And the gap between activity and effectiveness is growing.

The second symptom is misalignment in your team. Not conflict, conflict would actually be healthier, because at least conflict is visible. What you get instead is something more insidious: good people working hard on things that do not quite fit together. Marketing is running campaigns that sales does not value. Product is building features that customers did not ask for. Operations is optimising processes that no longer serve the strategy, assuming there is a clear strategy to serve, which increasingly there is not.

No one is doing anything wrong. Everyone is doing their best version of what they think is right. But without a clear, shared direction that is actively maintained and communicated, "best" drifts in as many directions as you have team members. The result is energy leakage, a phenomenon where the organisation is spending enormous effort and producing far less than that effort should yield.

The third symptom is decision fatigue in the leader. This is the one I know most intimately, because I lived it. When your business is in drift, every decision feels heavier than it should. Not because the decisions are inherently complex, but because you lack the clear strategic frame that would make them simple. Without that frame, you are evaluating every choice from first principles, every time. Should we enter this market? Should we hire this person? Should we invest in this technology? Each question becomes a standalone analysis rather than a straightforward application of a clear direction. It is exhausting, and it produces a particular kind of fatigue that rest

does not cure.

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I want to tell you about another founder. I will call her Sarah. She ran a professional services firm, about sixty people, well-regarded in her industry, growing at a healthy clip. She came to me not because the business was in trouble, but because she was. Tired in a way she could not explain. Frustrated by a team she genuinely respected. Unable to shake the feeling that something important was slipping away.

When I asked her to describe a typical week, she outlined a schedule that would have broken most people. Client meetings, internal reviews, sales calls, operational problem-solving, financial oversight, HR conversations, she was involved in everything, and everything was urgent.

"What would happen," I asked, "if you did not attend the operational reviews for a month?"

She looked at me as though I had suggested she stop breathing. "Things would fall apart," she said.

"Have you tested that?"

She had not. She had assumed, as most founders do, that her presence was essential, that her judgment was the irreplaceable ingredient, that without her direct involvement, quality would suffer, decisions would stall, and the business would drift.

The irony, of course, was that the business was already drifting. It was drifting precisely because Sarah was involved in everything. By trying to maintain quality across every function, she had made herself the bottleneck. Decisions waited for her. Priorities shifted based on whatever she was paying attention to that day. The team had learned, through years of subtle conditioning, that the safest course of action was to wait for Sarah's input rather than act on their own judgment.

Sarah was not micromanaging in the traditional sense. She was not hovering over people's shoulders or second-guessing their work. She was simply present in too many rooms, involved in too many conversations, holding too many threads. And because she was talented and well-intentioned, the impact was not obvious, the business still ran, decisions

still got made, clients still got served. But everything was slightly slower, slightly less sharp, slightly more dependent on one person's bandwidth than any healthy organisation should be.

This is strategic drift in its most common form. Not a failure of strategy, but an absence of one, masked by the competence of the founder.

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Through my years in EO, first as a member, then as chapter president, area director, and eventually in various leadership and mentoring roles across the Asia-Pacific region, I have had a front-row seat to this pattern. The forum model that EO uses, where small groups of entrepreneurs meet regularly and share their experiences with radical honesty, has given me access to a depth of insight that no case study or business book could replicate. These are not curated stories. They are raw, real-time accounts of what it feels like to lead a growing business.

And the theme that emerges most consistently, more than funding challenges, more than competitive threats, more than talent scarcity, is this feeling of drift. Of working hard and getting somewhere, but not quite the right somewhere. Of building something impressive and feeling, privately, that it is building you more than you are building it.

One founder I mentored, I will call him Marcus, described it this way: "I feel like I am pushing a boulder up a hill, and every time I get close to the top, the hill gets taller." He was not being dramatic. He was being precise. His business had grown from a startup to a mid-sized company, and at every new level of growth, the challenges changed faster than his capacity to address them. He would solve one set of problems only to discover that solving them had created a new set. The growth was real, but it felt like running on a treadmill that kept increasing its speed.

Marcus had a strategy. He had a plan. He had goals and metrics and dashboards. What he did not have was alignment between the strategy on paper and the reality of what his company was actually doing every day. The plan said one thing. The calendar said another. The budget said a third. And the gap between these three versions of reality, the aspirational, the actual, and the financial, was where the drift lived.

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I want to name something that I think is important, even though it may be uncomfortable. Strategic drift is not always a systems problem. Sometimes it is a leadership problem. And sometimes, I say this with compassion, because I have been this person, the leader is the primary source of the drift.

This happens in a specific way. The founder or CEO has a vision. The vision is compelling and authentic. But the vision is not translated into a clear, operational reality that the team can execute against. It lives in the leader's head, vivid, detailed, constantly evolving, and the team gets fragments of it, delivered inconsistently, in the spaces between other conversations.

The leader assumes that because the vision is clear to them, it is clear to everyone. They mistake their own clarity for shared clarity. And when the team's output does not match the vision, the leader feels frustrated, not with the team, exactly, but with the persistent gap between what they see in their mind and what shows up in the world.

I have done this. I have stood in front of a team and described a direction that made perfect sense in my head, and then been genuinely surprised when the execution went sideways. It took me years to understand that the problem was not in the execution. The problem was in the translation. I was expecting people to read a map that I had never actually drawn.

This is one of the hardest lessons in leadership: the distance between your vision and your team's understanding of that vision is almost always greater than you think. And that distance is where drift breeds.

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There is another form of strategic drift that is even more subtle, and it is the one that I find most dangerous. It is the drift that happens not in the business, but in the founder.

You start a company with a certain set of values, a certain sense of purpose, a certain idea of what success looks like. And then, over years of building, those things shift, not because you change your mind deliberately, but because the daily demands of running a business slowly reshape your

priorities without your consent.

You start out wanting to build something meaningful. You end up optimising for revenue. You start out wanting to create a great workplace. You end up managing performance issues and worrying about utilisation rates. You start out with a clear sense of why you are doing this. You end up doing this because it is what you do, and you cannot remember the last time you asked yourself why.

This is personal strategic drift, and it is the silent partner of organisational drift. They reinforce each other. When the founder drifts, the business drifts. When the business drifts, the founder drifts further. It becomes a cycle that is very difficult to interrupt from the inside, because the founder is both the problem and the person responsible for solving it.

I saw this in myself most clearly around year ten of The Art of Service. Gerard and I had built something extraordinary, a company operating across 160 countries, serving professionals on every continent, generating impact at a scale we never imagined when we set up that folding table in Brisbane. And somewhere in the middle of all that success, I had lost track of my own relationship with the work.

I was still performing at a high level. I was still making good decisions. I was still showing up every day. But the animating force behind the effort, the deep, personal why, had become blurry. Not gone. Blurry. Like a photograph that someone had moved slightly out of focus. Everything was still recognisable, but nothing was quite sharp.

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The reason I am spending so much time describing this pattern is that I believe naming it is the first and most important step. Not fixing it, we will get to that. But seeing it. Because the greatest danger of strategic drift is not that it is unfixable. It is that it is invisible to the person who is experiencing it.

When I work with founders now, whether in formal advisory engagements, in EO mentoring sessions, or in the more informal conversations that happen at conferences and retreats, the most valuable thing I can do is often the simplest: hold up a mirror. Not to judge. Not to prescribe. Just to reflect back what I am seeing, clearly enough that the

founder can see it too.

"You told me your top priority is growing the enterprise segment. But looking at how you have spent your time this quarter, eighty percent of your energy has gone to operational firefighting. Can you see the gap?"

"You said your leadership team is strong and aligned. But when I spoke to each of them individually, I got five different descriptions of the company's direction. Did you know that?"

"You described yourself as a strategic thinker. But the last decision you made from strategy rather than reaction, when was that, exactly?"

These are not comfortable questions. They are not meant to be. They are meant to interrupt the drift, to create a moment of clarity in the fog of busyness. And almost every time, not sometimes, not occasionally, but almost every time, the founder's response is the same: a long pause, followed by recognition. "You are right. I did not see that."

They did not see it. Not because they are not intelligent. Not because they are not self-aware. But because strategic drift, by its nature, is the thing you cannot see from inside it. It is the water the fish does not notice. The air the bird does not think about. It is the medium you are swimming in, and you need someone outside it to point at it and say: this. This is what is happening.

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Before we move forward, I want to acknowledge something. Describing the pattern is not the same as solving it. And there is a particular frustration that comes with recognising strategic drift, the frustration of seeing the problem clearly and not yet knowing what to do about it.

If you are reading this and feeling that frustration, I want you to sit with it for a moment. Do not rush past it. The discomfort of recognition is useful. It means the pattern has become visible to you, and visibility is the prerequisite for everything that follows.

In the chapters ahead, we will look at why the playbook that built your success is now working against you. We will examine the loneliness of this specific leadership challenge, and why it is so difficult to find honest counsel when you need it most. And then, in the later parts of this book, we will explore what comes after recognition, the practices, perspectives, and shifts

that can move you from drift to direction.

But for now, stay here. In the discomfort. In the recognition. Because this is where the real work begins, not in solving the problem, but in admitting that it exists. And if you have read this chapter and seen yourself in any of these descriptions, in David's scattered priorities, in Sarah's indispensable presence, in Marcus's ever-growing hill, in my own blurry sense of purpose, then you already have something that most drifting leaders do not have.

You have the awareness that you are drifting. And that, I promise you, is enough to start with.

# The Playbook Problem

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Here is something nobody prepares you for: the things that made you successful will eventually become the things that hold you back. Not because they were wrong. Because they were right, so right, so effective, so deeply woven into how you operate, that you cannot imagine functioning without them. And that is exactly the problem.

I built The Art of Service on a specific set of instincts. Move fast. Stay close to the work. Trust your judgment. Outwork the competition. Maintain quality by maintaining control. These were not theories I had read in a book. They were behaviours I had developed through years of doing, of writing certification guides at midnight, of answering client emails at 5 a.m., of making every significant decision myself because the business was small enough that I could, and because I was good enough at it that it made sense.

For the first several years, these instincts were not just useful. They were essential. A two-person company operating from a living room in Brisbane, serving a global market in a niche that barely existed in Australia, that kind of business does not survive on delegation and process. It survives on the

founder's willingness to do whatever needs to be done, whenever it needs to be done, to whatever standard it needs to meet. And I was willing. Relentlessly, unapologetically willing.

That willingness built the company. It also, over time, built a cage.

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Let me describe what I mean by "playbook," because I am using the word in a specific way. I do not mean a documented strategy, a written plan, or a formal set of operating procedures. Most founders I know, myself included, did not have anything that deliberate. What I mean by playbook is the set of unconscious patterns, reflexes, and defaults that govern how you lead.

Your playbook is how you respond to a crisis. It is how you make hiring decisions. It is what you pay attention to and what you ignore. It is your first instinct when something goes wrong, and your first instinct when something goes right. It is the version of leadership that you have rehearsed so many times, in so many situations, that it no longer feels like a choice. It feels like who you are.

And that is the trap. Because when your playbook is fused with your identity, when you do not use a set of behaviours but are those behaviours, changing the playbook feels like changing yourself. Letting go of the approach that built your business feels like letting go of the person who built it. And at a certain level, it is. The version of you that needs to lead the next chapter of your company is different from the version that built the first chapter. Not better, necessarily. Not worse. But different. And the transition between those versions is one of the hardest things a founder will ever do.

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I can locate the moment when I first collided with my own playbook. It was not a single event but a series of small, accumulating frictions that eventually became impossible to ignore.

The Art of Service had grown beyond the point where I could be involved in everything. This was an objective fact, the number of products, markets, clients, and team members had exceeded any one person's capacity

to oversee directly. But I kept trying. Not because I was irrational, but because involvement was my playbook. Being close to the work was how I maintained quality. Touching every decision was how I maintained coherence. Staying in the details was how I knew the business was healthy.

When I began to pull back, not by choice, initially, but by necessity, because there were simply not enough hours in the day, things started to slip. Not catastrophically, but noticeably. A product launch that did not quite hit the standard I would have set. A client communication that was competent but lacked the nuance I would have brought. A strategic conversation that went in a direction I would not have chosen.

My response, predictably, was to re-insert myself. To add more review steps. To attend more meetings. To tighten the controls. And for a while, this worked, in the same way that a tourniquet works. It stopped the bleeding, but it also cut off circulation.

What I did not understand then, and what took me years to learn, was that the slippage I was seeing was not a sign that the team could not handle the work. It was a sign that I had never built the systems that would allow them to handle the work at the standard I expected. I had been the system. My judgment, my eye for quality, my feel for the market, these were not transferable assets. They were personal capacities that I had never translated into organisational capabilities.

This is the playbook problem in its purest form. The founder who built the business through personal excellence has never built the infrastructure that would allow the business to achieve excellence without the founder's direct involvement. Not because they are selfish or controlling, though it can look like both, but because building that infrastructure requires a fundamentally different set of skills from the ones that made the business successful in the first place.

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I see this pattern in almost every founder I work with, and it manifests in predictable ways.

There is the founder who cannot stop firefighting. They have a capable team, a clear strategy, and more than enough resources to delegate effectively.

But every morning, they wake up and wade into the operational chaos as though the business would collapse without their intervention. When I ask them why, they usually say something about standards, or about the team not being ready, or about the complexity of the work requiring their specific expertise. What they are actually saying, though they do not realise it, is: this is how I know I am valuable. This is how I know I matter. If I am not fighting fires, what am I even doing here?

There is the founder who has analysed the decision forty times but cannot commit. They have spreadsheets and scenarios and models and forecasts. They have consulted advisors and surveyed the market and stress-tested every assumption. And still, they cannot decide. Not because the analysis is incomplete, it never will be, and they know that, but because deciding means accepting risk, and their playbook is built on minimising risk through thoroughness. The playbook says: if you just gather enough information, the right answer will become obvious. But at a certain scale, the right answer never becomes obvious. You have to choose in the face of uncertainty, and the playbook has no instructions for that.

There is the founder whose team delivers consistently but never quite the right things. Targets are met. Deadlines are honoured. The organisation performs. But the output is always slightly off, not wrong, exactly, but not what the founder envisioned. And the founder cannot figure out why, because they have communicated the strategy, they have set the goals, they have held the reviews. What they have not done, what their playbook does not include, is create the conditions for true alignment, the kind where people do not just know what to do but understand why they are doing it, deeply enough that they can make good decisions in situations the founder has not anticipated.

Each of these patterns has the same root cause. The founder's playbook, the set of instincts, habits, and reflexes that built the business, has reached the limit of its effectiveness. And rather than evolving the playbook, the founder is running it harder, faster, more intensely, hoping that more of the same will produce different results.

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I want to be honest about how difficult this is. Not in the abstract, but personally. Because when I talk about letting go of the playbook, I am not describing something I did gracefully or willingly. I am describing something I fought against for years, something I resisted with every fibre of my achievement-oriented, control-loving, detail-obsessed nature.

I had built my professional identity on a foundation of expertise and direct involvement. I was an ITIL Expert. An ISO 20000 Expert. A PRINCE2 Practitioner. I sat on the EXIN Expert Panel. I had written the certification guides that professionals around the world used to advance their careers. My credibility was built on knowing the material deeply and personally, not through delegation, but through direct mastery.

When the business grew to the point where I could no longer maintain that level of direct involvement in everything, I did not feel liberated. I felt diminished. As though the thing that made me valuable, my proximity to the work, my command of the detail, was being taken away. Not by anyone else. By the success itself.

This is the part that nobody talks about. The loss that is embedded in growth. The grief, and I do not think that word is too strong, of watching the business you built evolve beyond the version of leadership that built it. You should be proud. You should be grateful. And you are. But you are also mourning something, and because the mourning is wrapped in success, there is no space to acknowledge it.

I see this in the founders I mentor. The ones who should be celebrating but are instead quietly grieving the loss of the hands-on, in-the-trenches version of themselves. The version that knew every client by name. The version that could walk into any part of the business and add immediate value. The version that was, in every meaningful sense, the business.

That version is not wrong. It is just finished. And accepting that it is finished, truly accepting it, not just intellectually but in your bones, is one of the hardest transitions an entrepreneur will face.

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When Gerard and I were building The Art of Service from our living room, I did everything. Content creation, customer service, marketing, sales, quality

control, strategic planning, all of it flowed through me. And because the business was small, this was not only manageable but optimal. I was faster than any process. I was more accurate than any system. I was more responsive than any team could have been, because there was no team. There was me.

As we grew, I held on to that operating model far longer than I should have. Not because I did not understand the concept of delegation, I had read the books, I knew the theory, I could have given you a lecture on scalable organisational design. But there is a vast difference between understanding something intellectually and being able to do it when it means letting go of the very competence that defines you.

Every time I delegated a task and the output was not quite right, it reinforced my playbook. See? My instinct told me. You need to be involved. The standard slips without you. And the instinct was not wrong, the standard did slip, at first, because I had not built the capability for it not to slip. But instead of investing in building that capability, I would take the task back. It was faster. It was easier. It produced a better immediate result. And it guaranteed that the business would remain dependent on me.

This cycle, delegate, observe imperfection, reclaim, is one of the most common patterns I see in growing businesses. It looks like high standards. It feels like conscientiousness. It is actually a failure to invest in the organisation's independent capability, driven by the founder's inability to tolerate the short-term quality dip that comes with genuine empowerment.

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I learned, eventually. Not from a book or a framework, though I have studied many. I learned from the slow, painful accumulation of evidence that my playbook was no longer serving the business or me. I learned from Gerard, who has always been more naturally systems-oriented than I am, and who could see what I was doing more clearly than I could see it myself. I learned from peers in EO, who reflected back to me, with the directness that only true peers can offer, that my strength had become my constraint.

And I learned from the work itself. From building assessment frameworks that required me to think systematically about maturity models, about how organisations evolve through stages, and how the capabilities that define one

stage are different from the capabilities that define the next. I spent years helping other organisations understand that a Level 3 maturity requires different practices than Level 1. And then, one day, I realised that I was asking my clients to do something I had not yet done myself: let go of the practices that had gotten them to their current level and adopt the ones required for the next.

The playbook problem is, at its heart, a maturity problem. You are operating at one level and the business requires the next. The practices, instincts, and identity that defined your current level are not deficiencies, they are the foundation that made this level possible. But they are not sufficient for what comes next. And the transition is not additive. You do not get to keep everything you have and add new capabilities on top. You have to subtract. You have to let go of behaviours that feel like strengths because, at this new level, they have become limitations.

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I want to be practical about this, because I know from experience that abstract insight does not change behaviour. So let me describe, as concretely as I can, what the playbook transition looked like for me.

I had to learn to define quality in terms that other people could apply without my involvement. This meant moving from "I will know it when I see it", which is how most founders define quality, to explicit standards, rubrics, and examples that could guide someone else's judgment. It was tedious work. It felt bureaucratic. It was some of the most important work I have ever done.

I had to learn to tolerate imperfection in service of capacity. This was perhaps the hardest shift. When someone on my team delivered something at ninety percent of what I would have done, I had to resist the urge to bring it to a hundred myself. Instead, I had to invest in helping them reach ninety-five next time, and ninety-seven the time after that. This is slower. It is frustrating. And it is the only way to build an organisation that can operate at scale.

I had to learn to lead through questions rather than answers. My instinct was to walk into a room and solve the problem. The new playbook required me to walk into a room and ask the questions that would help others solve it. This felt inefficient. It felt indirect. It also felt, at first, like I was not earning

my place, like if I was not providing answers, I was not adding value. That was my identity talking, not reality.

I had to learn to measure my contribution differently. Instead of asking "What did I accomplish today?" I had to start asking "What did I enable today?" The shift from personal output to organisational output is disorienting for any founder, because the satisfaction of doing, of creating something with your own hands and mind, is replaced by the much more ambiguous satisfaction of watching others create.

None of these transitions happened quickly. None of them happened without resistance, from me, and sometimes from the team, which had grown accustomed to the old playbook and was uncertain about the new one. The shift was messy, incomplete, and ongoing. I am still, in some ways, in the middle of it.

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If you are a founder reading this and recognising your own playbook in these descriptions, I want you to know something. The playbook is not the enemy. It is the foundation. Every instinct you developed, every habit you built, every reflex you honed, these are the things that created your success. They deserve respect, even as they require revision.

The task ahead is not to reject who you have been. It is to expand who you are willing to become. To hold your hard-won expertise with an open hand rather than a clenched fist. To let the business grow into something that does not need the old version of you, while trusting that the new version, the one you have not fully met yet, will be equal to what comes next.

This is not easy. It is not supposed to be easy. But it is possible. And it starts with the willingness to look at your own playbook with honest eyes and ask: is this still serving the business I have, or is it serving the business I used to have?

The answer, if you have been building long enough, is almost certainly the latter. And that recognition, painful as it is, is not an ending. It is the beginning of something new.

# Why Nobody Tells You This

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There is a specific kind of loneliness that comes with this stage, and it is not the loneliness that people write articles about. It is not the loneliness of the early days, when you are unknown and unproven and nobody returns your calls. That loneliness, while painful, has a simplicity to it, you are alone because you have not yet built anything. The loneliness I am describing is the opposite. You are alone because you have built something. And the thing you have built has created a set of expectations that makes honest conversation nearly impossible.

I became aware of this slowly, the way you become aware of most things that matter. Not as a revelation but as an accumulation. One conversation at a time, one swallowed doubt at a time, one moment of choosing silence over vulnerability at a time, until I realised that I had constructed an entire life in which almost no one knew what I was actually thinking.

This was not intentional. I did not set out to isolate myself. It happened as a natural consequence of the role I occupied. As The Art of Service grew, as my public profile expanded, as I took on more leadership positions, chapter

president of EO Brisbane, area director for the Asia-Pacific region, mentor, coach, facilitator, the number of people who related to me as a person decreased, and the number of people who related to me as a function increased. I was a founder. A leader. An expert. A mentor. All of these are roles, and roles come with scripts, and the script for a successful leader does not include the line: "I am not sure I know what I am doing anymore."

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Let me map out the geometry of this isolation, because I think it is important to see how complete it can become.

You cannot talk to your board, if you have one, because boards operate on confidence. Their job is governance and oversight, and their capacity to do that job depends on believing that the CEO has a clear vision and a sound plan. The moment you walk into a board meeting and say, "I feel strategically adrift and I am not sure my current approach is working," you have not started a productive conversation. You have started a crisis. The board's response will not be curiosity and support. It will be concern and scrutiny. They will want action plans and timelines and reassurance. They will want you to demonstrate that the problem is contained and that you have a solution. Which means you will end up performing confidence rather than exploring uncertainty, which is exactly the opposite of what you need.

You cannot talk to your team, at least not about this. Your team needs you to be the steady centre. They need to believe that someone is holding the map, that the direction is clear, that their efforts are building toward something coherent. This is not because your team is fragile. It is because uncertainty at the top cascades through an organisation in unpredictable and destructive ways. A CEO who expresses doubt does not create a culture of openness. They create a culture of anxiety. People start updating their CVs. Key players start taking calls from recruiters. The organisation's immune system activates, and the response is self-protective, not collaborative.

I have watched this happen. A founder I was mentoring, I will call him James, decided to be radically transparent with his leadership team about his uncertainty. He gathered them together and shared honestly that he was questioning the company's direction and wanted their input. His intention

was admirable.

What actually happened was that three of his top performers started quiet conversations with competitors within the month. Not because they were disloyal, but because the certainty they had relied on, the certainty that someone was steering the ship, had been removed, and they responded rationally. They looked for more stable ground.

Vulnerability in leadership is not universally beneficial. It depends entirely on the conditions. In a team with a strong foundation of trust and the psychological resources to handle uncertainty, a leader's honesty can be galvanising. In a team that is already sensing drift, a leader's admission of doubt confirms their worst fears. James had applied a principle, transparency is good, without considering the conditions in which that principle operates.

The same dynamic applies to investors, if you have them. Your uncertainty is their risk. The moment you signal doubt, the relationship shifts from supportive to evaluative. And so founders learn to maintain an exhausting performance of certainty, projecting confidence they do not feel, defending strategies they privately doubt, celebrating milestones that feel hollow. The gap between the public narrative and the private reality becomes another source of stress.

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And then there is the person closest to you. Your spouse. Your partner. The person who, theoretically, should be the one safe harbour where you can be completely honest.

I have been fortunate. Gerard is not just my husband. He is my co-founder, my business partner, and the person who understands the work as deeply as anyone can. We built The Art of Service together, from that living room, and his perspective has been invaluable in ways I could never adequately describe.

But even with that foundation, even with a partner who is inside the business, who understands the challenges, who has been there from the first day, there are dimensions of the struggle that are hard to share. Not because of any deficiency in the relationship, but because of the way the burden distributes itself.

When you come home and say, "I had a hard day," your partner absorbs that. When you come home and say, "I am not sure our strategy is right," they absorb more. When you come home and say, "I do not know if I am the right person to lead this anymore," you are not just sharing a feeling. You are shifting weight onto a person who has their own weight to carry, their own relationship with the business, their own fears and hopes and uncertainties. And if you care about that person, if you love them, you become aware of the transfer, and you hold back. Not to be dishonest. To be kind.

I know founders who have had entire internal crises that their partners never knew about. Not because the relationship was broken, but because the founder loved their partner enough to shield them from a burden they could not fix. This is a specific form of loneliness, the loneliness of choosing silence to protect someone you love.

I have been there. During some of the more uncertain periods of building The Art of Service, when the market shifted, when a major product bet looked like it might not pay off, when I was questioning not just the strategy but my own capacity to execute it, I filtered more than I should have. Gerard saw more than most partners would have, because he was inside the business. But even he did not see everything. Because I made the calculation, consciously or not, that the cost of sharing everything was too high. Not for me. For him. For us.

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This is how the isolation becomes total. Board, team, investors, partner, each relationship has a structural reason why full honesty is either risky or unfair. And so the founder carries the weight alone. And the weight of carrying it alone makes the drift worse, because the thing you most need, an honest external perspective, someone who can see what you cannot see from inside the fog, is the thing the structure of your life has made nearly impossible to access.

I want to be careful here not to paint this as tragic. It is not tragic. It is structural. These are not personal failures. They are predictable consequences of the geometry of leadership. And understanding that it is structural, that the isolation is not your fault, not a sign of weakness, not evidence that you

are doing something wrong, is the first step toward addressing it.

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The Entrepreneurs' Organisation changed this for me. I want to describe how, because I think the mechanism is important and under-appreciated.

EO operates on a model called Forum. A small group of entrepreneurs, typically eight to twelve, meets once a month in a structured, confidential setting. The format is specific and somewhat unusual. Members do not give advice. They share experiences. When someone presents a challenge, the rest of the group does not solve it. They respond with their own stories, moments from their own lives where they faced something similar. The idea is that experience sharing is more valuable than advice, because advice assumes you know someone else's situation well enough to prescribe a solution, while experience sharing trusts them to draw their own conclusions from the resonance.

I was sceptical at first. The format felt constraining. My instinct, that damn playbook again, was to solve. Someone would describe a challenge and I would immediately see three possible approaches, and the discipline of holding back, of responding with experience rather than solutions, felt almost physically uncomfortable.

But over time, I understood why the model works. And it works for a reason that is directly relevant to the problem of founder isolation.

Forum creates the conditions for honesty that do not exist anywhere else in most entrepreneurs' lives. The confidentiality is absolute. The group is composed of peers, people at a similar stage, facing similar challenges, with no power dynamic or evaluative relationship. There are no investors in the room. No board members. No employees. No one whose confidence you need to maintain or whose feelings you need to protect. There are only people who understand, from personal experience, exactly what you are going through.

The first time I spoke honestly in Forum about my own strategic drift, about the gap between the external success and the internal uncertainty, I expected judgment. Or at least surprise. What I got was recognition. Head nods. "Me too." Half the room had been carrying some version of the same weight, alone, for months or years. And the relief of that recognition, the

simple, profound relief of knowing you are not the only one, was more valuable than any strategic advice I have ever received.

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This experience, the power of peer-to-peer honesty in a structured, safe context, is what eventually led me to become a mentor. First within EO, and then more broadly. I served as chapter president of EO Brisbane, as area director, as APAC leadership director, as chair of the Regional Leadership Academy. I became an official EO mentor and an accelerator coach. I facilitated strategy summits. Each of these roles deepened my understanding of the pattern and my conviction that the solution to founder isolation is not therapy, not coaching in the traditional sense, and not the kind of advice that most business books offer.

The solution is truth-telling. Honest, peer-to-peer, experience-based truth-telling in a context where it is safe to be uncertain. Where the script of the successful leader can be set aside, temporarily, in favour of the messier, more human reality.

This is rare. Vanishingly rare. Most founders go through their entire careers without ever having a conversation in which they can be completely honest about what they are experiencing. They attend conferences where everyone projects success. They read articles about resilience and grit. They sit in meetings where the implicit rule is: you can discuss problems as long as you immediately follow with solutions. The space for genuine not-knowing, for saying "I am stuck and I do not know the way forward", simply does not exist in most professional contexts.

And so the weight accumulates. And the drift accelerates. And the founder becomes increasingly skilled at performing a version of leadership that looks right from the outside and feels hollow from within.

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I want to tell you about a moment that stayed with me. I was facilitating an EO event, perhaps twenty founders in the room, and I asked each person to write down, privately, the one thing they were most uncertain about in their

business.

The exercise was anonymous. And yet, the room went quiet in a way that told me something important was happening. These were successful, accomplished people. The act of writing down their uncertainty, even privately, was uncomfortable enough to change the energy in the room.

I collected the cards and read a few aloud, without attribution. The themes were remarkably consistent. "I do not know if my team is aligned." "I think I may be the bottleneck." "I feel like I am performing rather than leading."

The masks slipped, just slightly. And in that brief window, a real conversation became possible. Not about solutions or best practices. About the actual experience of leading when you are no longer sure you have the answers. Those moments are what I live for now, when someone puts down the weight and allows themselves to be seen clearly, and realises that what they thought was their private failure is actually a shared condition.

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I became a mentor because I had been the person who needed one. Not a consultant. Not an advisor. Not someone who would give me a framework and a set of KPIs. Someone who had been where I was, who had felt what I was feeling, and who could sit across from me and say, without judgment, "I see you. I know this place. You are not lost. You are in transition."

That distinction, between being lost and being in transition, is one of the most important things I have learned. They feel identical from the inside. The confusion is the same. The uncertainty is the same. The self-doubt is the same. But being lost means you have no idea where you are. Being in transition means you are between two places, the place you have been and the place you are going, and the disorientation is not a sign of failure but a feature of the passage.

When I sit with a founder who is in drift, who is carrying the weight alone, who has been performing certainty while feeling anything but, the first thing I try to do is not to fix anything. It is to normalise the experience. To say: what you are going through has a pattern. Others have gone through it. It is not a sign that you are broken. It is a sign that you are growing. And

growth, at this level, is not comfortable. It is not supposed to be.

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There is one more dimension of this loneliness that I think is the most corrosive. The loneliness of competence.

When you are good at what you do, when you have a track record and a body of work that speaks for itself, people stop asking if you are okay. They assume you have it figured out. Your competence becomes a shield, and behind that shield, the real human being is struggling with the same doubts as everyone else.

I have been that shield. People looked at me and saw an ITIL Expert, a bestselling author, an MIT graduate, a woman who had built a company to 160 countries. They saw the credentials. They did not see the 2 a.m. uncertainty. And because they did not see it, they did not ask. And because they did not ask, I did not offer. The silence on both sides became an unspoken contract: you will perform strength, and we will not look too closely.

I broke that contract in Forum. And then again when I became a mentor. And again when I began writing this book. Each time, the response was not judgment. It was recognition. Someone else exhaling and saying, "Thank God. I thought it was just me."

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If you have read this far and you are carrying something alone, a doubt, a fear, an uncertainty about the business you have built or the direction you are heading, I want to say something directly.

It is not just you.

The weight you are carrying is real, but it is not yours alone. It is the structural consequence of a position that demands confidence while generating uncertainty. A position that rewards performance while punishing vulnerability. A position that surrounds you with people who need you to be strong, which makes strength the loneliest thing you can be.

You do not have to solve this today. You do not need a plan or a framework or a twelve-step programme. What you need, first, is to be honest with yourself about the weight. To stop pretending it is not there. To stop treating the loneliness as a personal failing rather than a predictable feature of the landscape you are navigating.

And then, when you are ready, at your own pace, in your own way, you need to find someone to be honest with. Not someone who will fix it for you. Not someone who will give you advice. Someone who will listen. Someone who has been where you are. Someone who can sit across from you and hold your honesty without flinching.

That person exists. I promise you. You just have not found them yet, or, more likely, you have not yet given yourself permission to look.

That is what Part Two of this book will help you do. But first, sit with this. The pattern is named. The playbook is exposed. The loneliness is acknowledged. You are not at the end of something. You are at the beginning.

And beginnings, though they rarely feel like it, are the most powerful place to be.

# Identity Risk, When You Become the Business

There is a question I sometimes ask founders when we sit down together for the first time. I don't ask it right away. I wait until they've told me about the revenue, the headcount, the market opportunity, the strategic plan. I let them get it all out. And then, when they pause, because they always pause, I ask them something quiet.

"If your company disappeared tomorrow, who would you be?"

The silence that follows tells me everything I need to know.

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I want to tell you about a conversation I had with my son Frank. He was fifteen at the time. We were driving home from one of his events, I can't even remember which one now, and the car was quiet in that comfortable way it gets when you've been together long enough that silence doesn't need filling.

I'd had a difficult quarter. Not disastrous, but the kind of quarter where the numbers are flat and you know flat isn't good enough. Gerard and I had built The Art of Service from our living room in Brisbane back in 2000, two Dutch immigrants with more ambition than sense, and by this point we were

operating in over a hundred countries. But that quarter, something had stalled. A major product launch hadn't landed the way we'd expected. A partnership we'd invested months in had quietly fallen apart. The pipeline looked thin.

I was carrying all of it. Not on paper, on paper I was fine. I was carrying it in my body, in my jaw, in the way I'd been snapping at small things for weeks.

Frank looked over at me from the passenger seat and said, "Mum, you've been weird lately."

Fifteen-year-olds don't mince words.

"I'm just stressed about work," I said.

"No," he said. "It's more than that. It's like you're not really here."

He wasn't being dramatic. He was being precise. And the precision of it stopped me cold. Because he was right. I wasn't really there. I hadn't been really there for weeks. My body was in the car, at the dinner table, in the living room, but my mind was circling the same anxious loop about revenue targets and market positioning and whether we'd made the right call on that product.

What Frank saw, without having the language for it, was that I had disappeared into my business. Not in the romantic, entrepreneurial-hustle way people celebrate on social media. In the corrosive way. The way where your identity has become so fused with the company's performance that when the company wobbles, you don't just worry, you unravel.

That night, after Frank had gone to bed, I sat in the kitchen and did something I rarely did. I sat still. And I asked myself the question I would later learn to ask other founders.

If this company disappeared tomorrow, who would I be?

I didn't have a good answer.

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Identity risk is the term I use for this phenomenon, though it doesn't really capture the full weight of it. What I'm describing isn't a branding problem or a work-life balance issue. It's something structural that happens to people who build things from nothing.

When you start a company, especially from a living room with your partner, the boundaries between you and the business are nonexistent. You

are the business. Your energy is its energy. Your reputation is its reputation. Your decisions are its decisions. In the early days, that fusion is an asset. It's what gives you the intensity and the unreasonable commitment needed to survive the first few years.

But the thing that saves you in the beginning can destroy you later. Because what starts as dedication quietly becomes dependency. Revenue up, you feel worthy. Revenue flat, you feel worthless. A big client signs, and you walk taller. A big client leaves, and you can't sleep for a week, not because of the commercial impact, which might be manageable, but because it feels like rejection. Personal rejection.

I've sat across from hundreds of founders and executives over the past twenty-five years. Through my work with the Entrepreneurs' Organization, as Chapter President, Area Director, APAC Leadership Director, and now as a mentor, I've had the kind of conversations that don't happen in board rooms. The real ones. The ones where someone closes the door, leans forward, and says something they've never said out loud.

And what they say, more often than I can tell you, is some version of this: "I don't know who I am without this company."

They don't say it dramatically. They say it the way you'd admit to a bad habit, half embarrassed, half relieved. And it cuts across every demographic. The thirty-two-year-old tech founder says it. The fifty-eight-year-old manufacturing CEO says it. The woman who built a services empire says it. The man who inherited a family business and transformed it says it. The details differ. The underlying condition is the same.

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Here is why this matters strategically, not just personally.

A founder whose identity is fused with their business makes predictably bad decisions. Not because they lack intelligence or experience, but because every significant decision gets filtered through the wrong question. Instead of asking "What does the business need?" they unconsciously ask "What does this mean about me?"

Let me show you how this plays out.

Consider the decision to hire a CEO or a senior leader who is genuinely more capable than the founder in a key area. For a healthy leader, this is obviously the right move. You find someone brilliant, you give them the reins in their domain, you free yourself to work where you add the most value. For an identity-fused leader, this decision feels like an existential threat. If someone else can run this better than me, what does that say about me? So they hire someone slightly less capable. Someone who won't outshine them. Someone safe. And the company pays the price.

Or consider the decision to kill a product line that isn't working. The identity-fused leader built that product. They pitched it, championed it, defended it. Killing it feels like admitting they were wrong, and being wrong, for someone whose self-worth is tied to their business acumen, is intolerable. So they keep funding it. They keep "giving it time." They keep circling. And the company pays the price.

Or, and this is the most common version I see, consider the decision to step back. To take a genuine break. To go on holiday and not check email. To attend a conference and actually be present instead of half-reading Slack under the table. The identity-fused leader cannot do this, because stepping back feels like stepping away from themselves. If I'm not working on the business, who am I? What am I?

So they stay. They hover. They micromanage. They burn out. And they call it dedication.

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I want to be clear: I'm not describing this from a position of having solved it. I'm describing it from a position of having lived it.

That conversation with Frank in the car didn't fix me. It woke me up. And there is a vast distance between waking up and being well. What followed was years of gradual, often uncomfortable work to untangle my sense of self from the performance of The Art of Service.

Some of that work happened in EO, in Forum, specifically, where you sit with a small group of fellow entrepreneurs and tell the truth about what's actually happening in your life, not just your business. Forum is where I first heard other successful, competent, accomplished founders say the words I'd

been thinking. It normalised the problem for me. It didn't solve it, but it gave me permission to take it seriously.

Some of that work happened through education. When I went through the MIT Entrepreneurial Masters Program, I was surrounded by founders who had built remarkable things. And I noticed something. The ones who seemed most settled, most clear, most capable of making hard calls without spiralling, were the ones who had interests, identities, relationships that existed entirely outside their businesses. They were not less committed. They were more grounded. And that grounding made them sharper, not softer.

I started riding again. Dressage. I'd been a rider before the business consumed everything, and I'd let it go. Coming back to it, eventually becoming a C-level dressage judge with Equestrian Australia, gave me something that had nothing to do with revenue or strategy or market share. In the arena, nobody cares about your P&L. The horse doesn't care about your growth rate. You are simply a person, trying to communicate clearly with another living thing. The simplicity of it was medicinal.

I don't tell you this to suggest that the answer to identity risk is to take up a hobby. The answer is deeper than that. But I tell you this because the first step is creating any space at all between who you are and what you do. Any space. Even a sliver. Because that sliver is where clarity lives.

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There is a particular version of identity risk that I see in founders who've been successful. This might seem counterintuitive, you'd think success would resolve it. But success often makes it worse.

When you've built something significant, your identity becomes attached not just to the business but to being the kind of person who builds significant things. Your reputation precedes you. People introduce you at events by your company's achievements. Articles are written about what you've built. You become, in the eyes of the world, your business.

And then the stakes of failure become catastrophic. Not commercially, commercially, most successful founders could weather a significant setback. The stakes become catastrophic to the self. Because if this business fails, I don't just lose revenue. I lose me. I lose the person everyone thinks I am. I lose

the story that makes sense of my life.

I've watched this dynamic keep founders trapped in businesses they should have sold, exited, or radically restructured years ago. They're not staying because of the money. They're staying because they cannot imagine introducing themselves at a dinner party without the company name attached.

One founder I worked with, I'll keep the details vague, had a standing offer to sell his business for a life-changing sum. The business was in a market that was shifting, and the offer was unlikely to improve. Every advisor he spoke to said sell. His spouse said sell. His accountant said sell. He knew he should sell.

He didn't sell. He held on for another three years, watching the value erode, because selling meant answering the question he couldn't face: "If I'm not the founder and CEO of this company, who am I?"

By the time he finally sold, the price was a fraction of that original offer. The commercial cost was significant. But what struck me most was what he said afterwards. He said the hardest part wasn't the money. The hardest part was the six months after the sale when he had to wake up every morning and figure out what to do with a day that didn't revolve around the business. He described it as grief.

That's identity risk. When selling your company feels like a death.

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I want to offer something practical here, because I know that simply naming the problem is not enough.

The work of separating your identity from your business is not a one-time exercise. It's an ongoing practice. And it starts with noticing.

Start noticing how you feel when the business does well. Not what you think, what you feel. In your body. Do you feel relieved? Validated? Worthy? Now notice how you feel when the business struggles. Do you feel anxious? Ashamed? Diminished?

If the emotional gap between those two states is enormous, if good quarters make you feel like a good person and bad quarters make you feel like a fraud, that's your signal. That gap is the measure of your identity fusion.

The next step is more difficult. You have to build a self that exists outside the business. Not a hobby, though hobbies help, but a genuine sense of who you are when the title is stripped away. What do you value? Not what does the market value. What do you value? What kind of parent are you? What kind of partner? What kind of friend? What do you care about that has nothing to do with growth curves?

These sound like simple questions. They are not. Most founders I work with struggle with them profoundly. They've spent so long building the business that the muscles for self-reflection outside that context have atrophied.

I also encourage founders to build relationships, real relationships, with people who don't care about their business. Who couldn't name their company if you asked. People who know them as a person, full stop. This is harder than it sounds when you've spent a decade in an industry where every conversation circles back to work. But it matters. Because those relationships become mirrors that reflect back something other than your professional identity.

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There is one more thing I want to say about this, and it's the thing that makes this chapter uncomfortable rather than merely instructive.

Identity risk is not just a risk to your business. It's a risk to the people who love you.

Frank saw it before I did. My son, born eight weeks premature, who fought his way into the world with a tenacity that still humbles me, he saw that his mother had become a ghost in her own home. Not absent, exactly. Present but hollow. There in body, gone in spirit.

That is the cost nobody puts in the business plan. That is the line item that never appears on the P&L. And it is, for my money, the most important reason to take identity risk seriously.

Not because it will make you a better CEO, though it will. Not because it will improve your decision-making, though it will. But because the people sitting across from you at the dinner table deserve a person, not a founder. They deserve someone who is actually there.

When I think about that drive home with Frank, I don't feel proud of the insight it eventually led to. I feel the quiet ache of knowing it took my teenage son to tell me something I should have seen myself. And I feel grateful, deeply, simply grateful, that he said it. Because some conversations change the direction of everything that follows.

This was one of them.

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If you recognise yourself in this chapter, if the question "who would you be without your company" makes your stomach tighten, then I want you to know two things.

First, you are not alone. This is not a personal failing. It is a structural consequence of building something from nothing. Nearly every founder I know has been here.

Second, the way out is not to care less about your business. The way out is to become more than your business. To expand the territory of your identity until the company is one important thing among several important things, not the only thing.

That expansion is not soft. It's not indulgent. It is, I would argue, the single most strategic thing a founder can do. Because a leader who knows who they are, independent of their company's last quarter, is a leader who can make the hard calls without flinching. Who can hire people smarter than themselves without feeling threatened. Who can kill a product line without feeling killed. Who can step back without feeling erased.

That is the leader your company needs. And becoming that leader starts with a question you might not want to answer yet.

But you know the question. You've known it since the first page of this chapter.

# Decision Risk, The Cost of Circling

I once worked with a founder who spent six months deciding whether to part ways with his co-founder.

Six months. Half a year. A hundred and eighty days of internal deliberation, late-night conversations with his spouse, quiet polling of advisors who gave him the same answer each time, journal entries that circled the same terrain like a dog trying to settle.

During those six months, his company lost two senior engineers who couldn't stand the tension at the top. A product roadmap stalled because nobody knew whose vision to follow. Three potential clients sensed the dysfunction in meetings and chose competitors instead. A board member, frustrated by the paralysis, quietly began looking for other investments.

None of these losses appeared on any spreadsheet as "cost of indecision." They were attributed to market conditions, talent scarcity, competitive pressure, timing. But they were all consequences of a single decision that refused to land.

When the founder finally made the call, when the co-founder departed and the dust settled, he told me something I've heard variations of dozens of

times. "I knew what I needed to do in week two. I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

Six months. For something he knew in fourteen days.

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Decision risk is the quiet killer. It doesn't announce itself the way a cash flow crisis does, or a product failure, or a PR disaster. It operates in the background, silently compounding, consuming resources that never show up as a line item. And it is, in my experience, the most underestimated risk in any founder's life.

Let me be precise about what I mean by decision risk. I'm not talking about making bad decisions. Bad decisions are painful, but they're clean. You make a call, it doesn't work, you learn, you adjust. There's a beginning, a middle, and an end. The cost is finite and knowable.

Decision risk is the cost of not deciding. Of circling. Of gathering one more piece of information, having one more conversation, running one more scenario, not because you genuinely need more data, but because deciding feels like falling off a cliff and you'd rather pace along the edge.

The cost of circling is not zero. It is not neutral. It compounds daily, in ways that are invisible until you look back and see the wreckage.

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I want to break down the anatomy of a stuck decision, because understanding the structure can help you recognise it in yourself before the cost becomes severe.

Every stuck decision I've ever seen, in my own business, in the hundreds of founders I've worked with through EO and my advisory practice, follows the same pattern. And the pattern is this: the real decision is not the decision you think you're making.

That founder with the co-founder problem. He framed it as a complex strategic question. He talked about equity structures and IP ownership and market positioning and founder dynamics. He hired a mediator. He consulted lawyers. He created spreadsheets comparing scenarios. All of this

activity felt productive. It felt like he was working on the problem.

But the actual decision, the one he was avoiding, was much simpler and much harder. The actual decision was: am I willing to hurt someone I once trusted in order to protect what we've built?

That's it. That was the decision. Everything else, the spreadsheets, the scenarios, the legal consultations, was elaborate scaffolding around a question he didn't want to face.

This is the first thing to understand about stuck decisions. The complexity is almost always a disguise. Underneath the analysis and the options and the "it's complicated" narrative, there is usually a single, sharp question. And the sharpness of it is exactly why you keep circling. Because answering it requires you to accept a cost you don't want to pay.

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The second pattern I see in stuck decisions is this: the thing stopping you is not information. It's commitment.

This is a difficult thing to hear, because "I need more information" is the most socially acceptable reason for delay. It sounds responsible. It sounds prudent. In a culture that celebrates data-driven decision-making, saying "I need more data" is practically a virtue.

But I want you to be honest with yourself. Think about the decision you're currently circling, and I suspect there is one, or you wouldn't be reading this book. Ask yourself: if you had the additional information you think you need, would you actually decide? Or would you find another gap in the data that requires filling?

Most founders, when they sit with this question honestly, admit the truth. The information is a delay tactic. They already know enough. What they lack isn't knowledge, it's the willingness to commit to a course of action that has real, irreversible consequences.

Commitment is frightening because it closes doors. And founders, people who built their careers on seeing possibilities, are pathologically uncomfortable closing doors. Every option kept open feels like optionality, which feels like safety. But in practice, keeping every door open means standing in a hallway going nowhere.

I learned this in a very specific way. When Gerard and I moved from the Netherlands to Australia in 2000 to start The Art of Service, that decision closed an enormous number of doors. Careers we'd been building in Europe. Family proximity. Professional networks. A language and culture we understood intuitively. All of it, gone, in exchange for a container of belongings shipped to Brisbane and a business plan that existed mostly in our heads.

That commitment, that door-closing, bridge-burning, terrifying commitment, is what made everything that followed possible. Not because Australia was objectively the right choice. It was one of several reasonable choices. What made it work was that we chose it completely. We didn't keep one foot in the Netherlands. We didn't hedge. We committed, and commitment created momentum, and momentum created opportunity.

Every stuck decision I see in founders is a failure of commitment masquerading as a need for more information.

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Let me tell you about the compounding cost, because this is where the real damage happens.

When a strategic decision circles without landing, it doesn't sit quietly in a holding pattern. It radiates outward, consuming resources in at least four ways.

First, it consumes bandwidth. The decision occupies mental space, yours and your team's, that could be directed toward execution. I've watched leaders spend hours each week thinking about a decision they won't make, while urgent operational matters get half their attention. The cognitive load of an unmade decision is staggering, and it's entirely invisible. It doesn't show up in your calendar. It shows up in the quality of everything else you do.

Second, it erodes team confidence. Your team knows when you're circling. They can see it. The repeated "let's table this for now" in leadership meetings. The strategy discussions that end without conclusions. The priorities that shift weekly because nothing has been anchored. Teams can handle bad news. They can handle hard decisions. What they cannot handle is the absence of decisions, because it makes the ground beneath them feel

unstable. And unstable ground makes people cautious. They stop taking initiative. They wait for direction that never comes. They update their LinkedIn profiles.

Third, it narrows the window of opportunity. This is the most insidious cost because it's counterfactual, you can never see the opportunities you missed. But they're real. Markets move. Competitors advance. Talent goes elsewhere. Partnerships expire. Every week you delay a strategic decision, the landscape shifts slightly, and options that were available last month quietly disappear. By the time you finally decide, you're often deciding in a diminished context, with fewer good options than you had when the decision first presented itself.

Fourth, it creates secondary decisions that pile up behind the primary one. Because the big decision isn't made, all the decisions that depend on it get stuck too. Hiring decisions wait. Budget allocations wait. Product priorities wait. The unmade decision becomes a dam, and behind it, a rising reservoir of other decisions builds pressure. When the dam finally breaks, when the decision is finally made, there's a flood of consequential choices that all need to happen at once, under pressure, without adequate time.

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I want to share another example, because I think the pattern is easier to see in someone else's situation than in your own.

A CEO I advised, a composite of several real situations, as always, had been "exploring" a new market for the better part of a year. Exploring is a generous word. What she was actually doing was commissioning research, attending conferences, having preliminary conversations with potential partners, and building financial models that she would then refine, adjust, and rebuild.

The question on the table was simple: should we enter this market or not?

Every time we spoke, she had a new piece of information. A new data point. A new consideration. The models got more sophisticated. The analysis got deeper. And the decision didn't get made.

What I noticed, and eventually said to her, was that she wasn't exploring the market. She was exploring the idea of herself as someone who enters new

markets. The research and the models and the conferences gave her the feeling of forward motion without any of the risk of actual motion. She was rehearsing the decision without performing it.

When I asked her the sharp question, "If you had to decide today, right now, with what you know, what would you do?", she answered immediately. "I'd do it. I'd enter the market."

"Then why haven't you?"

Long pause. "Because if it doesn't work, everyone will know it was my call."

There it was. The real decision wasn't about market analysis. The real decision was: am I willing to be visibly responsible for something that might fail?

She entered the market the following month. It worked out reasonably well, not spectacularly, but well enough. What struck both of us, looking back, was how much opportunity had been lost in the ten months of circling. Early mover advantages. Partnership deals that had gone to competitors. Internal momentum that had dissipated. Ten months of compound cost, paid in full, for a decision she'd known the answer to in month two.

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So what do you actually do about this? How do you break the circling pattern?

I'll share what I've learned, both from my own experience and from sitting with leaders who've worked through this.

The first step is naming the real decision. Strip away the complexity. Remove the spreadsheets and the scenarios and the "it depends" qualifiers. Find the sharp question underneath. Usually it's one of a small number of recurring forms: Am I willing to let someone go? Am I willing to commit resources to something uncertain? Am I willing to close this door permanently? Am I willing to be responsible for a decision that might not work?

Name it. Say it out loud, if you can. Write it on a piece of paper. The sharp question loses some of its power when it's no longer hiding beneath layers of analysis.

The second step is separating the decision from the outcome. This is crucial and widely misunderstood. A good decision is not the same as a good outcome. You can make an excellent decision, well-reasoned, well-timed, well-informed, and have it produce a poor outcome because the world is uncertain and unpredictable. Conversely, you can make a terrible decision and get lucky.

The quality of a decision should be judged at the time it's made, with the information available at that moment. If you're waiting until you can guarantee a good outcome before you decide, you will wait forever. Certainty is not available. What's available is informed commitment.

The third step is setting a deadline, a real one, with consequences. Not "I'll decide by the end of the quarter" spoken vaguely to yourself. A specific date, communicated to someone who will hold you accountable. Tell your co-founder, your coach, your board, your spouse. "I will make this decision by the fifteenth. I will tell you what I've decided on the sixteenth." The social contract changes the calculus. Circling becomes harder when someone is waiting for your answer.

The fourth step, and this is the one that sounds almost too simple, is to decide. Not to decide perfectly. Not to decide with complete confidence. Just to decide. To pick a direction and commit to it with the understanding that you can adjust course once you're in motion. A moving ship is easier to steer than one sitting in the harbour.

I learned this in a way that had nothing to do with business. When I was studying for my dressage judging certification, my instructor told me something about riding that I've never forgotten. She said, "A decisive mistake is better than an indecisive correct movement." The horse needs to know where you're going. If you're unclear, the horse becomes confused, anxious, resistant. It doesn't matter if you're technically correct in your aids, if you deliver them with hesitation, the horse can't follow.

Leadership works the same way. Your team is the horse. They need to know where you're going. Not perfectly. Not infallibly. But decisively. A clear direction, committed to fully, is almost always better than the theoretically optimal direction delivered with chronic uncertainty.

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I want to acknowledge something that might be sitting uncomfortably as you read this. The advice to "just decide" can sound glib when you're the one facing the decision. I know. I've been there.

When Gerard and I had to make significant strategic shifts in The Art of Service, pivoting our content delivery, restructuring our product lines, entering new markets, walking away from revenue streams that were comfortable but declining, those decisions didn't feel simple in the moment. They felt enormous. The weight of twenty-five years of building, of employees who depended on us, of clients who trusted us, of a reputation we'd carefully constructed, all of that sat on every major decision.

But I've come to believe that the weight doesn't diminish through waiting. It increases. The longer you carry an unmade decision, the heavier it gets. The stakes feel larger because you've spent more time contemplating them. The fear feels more justified because you've spent more time feeding it.

The founders I most admire, the ones I've met through EO, through MIT, through years of working in this space, are not the ones who make perfect decisions. They are the ones who make decisions and then pour their full energy into making those decisions work. They decide, and then they execute with commitment. And that commitment, more than the rightness of the initial choice, is usually what determines the outcome.

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There's a final dimension to decision risk that I want to address, because it connects to something we'll explore more deeply later in this book.

Chronic indecision is not just a tactical problem. It's a signal. It's telling you something about your relationship with control, with certainty, with the fear of being wrong.

When you find yourself circling the same decision for weeks or months, the decision itself is rarely the issue. The issue is usually one of the things we've already discussed or will discuss: an identity so fused with the business that a wrong call feels like a personal verdict. A lack of clarity about direction

that makes every choice feel arbitrary. A team misalignment that means any decision will be undermined in execution.

Decision risk doesn't exist in isolation. It's connected to everything else. And sometimes the most productive thing you can do when you're stuck on a decision is to stop looking at the decision and start looking at yourself.

What are you afraid of? Not what does the analysis show, what are you afraid of? What is the worst thing that happens if you decide and it doesn't work? And can you survive that worst thing?

Almost always, the answer is yes. Almost always, the worst-case scenario, honestly examined, stripped of catastrophic thinking, is survivable, recoverable, and far less devastating than the slow bleed of never deciding at all.

The cost of circling is real. It is large. And it is a choice, not a choice you make consciously, but a choice nonetheless. Every day you don't decide is a day you decide not to decide. And that non-decision has a price.

The question is whether you'll pay it, or whether you'll make the call.

# Alignment Risk, Good People, Wrong Direction

I want to start this chapter by defending your team.

Whatever is going wrong in your organisation right now, the missed targets, the conflicting priorities, the projects that stall halfway through, the meetings that end with everyone nodding and nobody doing, it is almost certainly not because your people are bad. It's not because they're lazy, or incompetent, or don't care. Most of the teams I've worked with over twenty-five years are full of capable, committed people who genuinely want to do good work.

They're just not pointed in the same direction.

And the reason they're not pointed in the same direction, and this is the part that's uncomfortable to hear, is usually because the person at the top isn't clear. And the reason the person at the top isn't clear is usually because they haven't done the difficult work of getting clear themselves.

That's alignment risk. Not a people problem. A clarity problem. And the clarity it demands starts with you.

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Let me tell you what misalignment actually looks like from the inside, because it's subtler than most people think.

It doesn't look like open conflict. It doesn't look like people arguing in meetings about which direction to go. If anything, open disagreement would be a good sign, it would mean people care enough to fight for their perspective.

Misalignment looks like quiet drift. It looks like departments that gradually develop their own priorities, their own definitions of success, their own unspoken strategies, all of which are reasonable in isolation and collectively incoherent. It looks like a sales team pursuing clients that the delivery team can't serve well. A product team building features that marketing doesn't know how to position. An operations group optimising for efficiency while the executive team is talking about innovation.

Everyone is working hard. Everyone is professional. And the organisation is pulling itself apart, slowly, from the inside.

I saw this in The Art of Service at a particular inflection point in our growth. We'd expanded rapidly, from our living room in Brisbane to operating in over 160 countries, and along the way, we'd hired good people and given them significant autonomy. That autonomy had been a strength. It attracted self-directed talent and allowed us to move quickly in new markets without bottlenecks.

But at a certain scale, autonomy without alignment becomes fragmentation. I started noticing that different parts of the business were telling slightly different stories about what we were. Our training division had one understanding of our core value proposition. Our content publishing arm had another. Our certification programmes had a third. All three stories were plausible. None of them was wrong, exactly. But they weren't the same story.

And when your own people can't tell a consistent story about what you are and where you're going, your clients certainly can't. Your market certainly can't. The drift is invisible from inside any single team, everyone in their own lane feels perfectly coherent. It's only when you step back and look at the whole picture that you see the divergence.

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The natural response to misalignment, especially for founders with an operational excellence background, and I count myself in this group, is to reach for systems. Frameworks. Processes. Structure.

I've spent decades in this world. ITIL. ISO 20000. PRINCE2. I've studied EOS. I've worked through Scaling Up. I've helped organisations implement frameworks that bring order and clarity to complex operations. I believe in the power of good systems.

But here is what I've learned, sometimes the hard way: systems don't fix unclear leadership. They amplify it.

If your direction is right, a good system will get you there faster and more efficiently. It will align resources, create accountability, reduce waste, and build momentum. This is the promise of frameworks like EOS and Scaling Up, and it's a real promise. When the direction is clear, these tools are extraordinarily powerful.

But if the direction is wrong, or, more commonly, if the direction is vague, a good system will amplify the problem. You'll execute more efficiently on the wrong thing. You'll build accountability structures around the wrong priorities. You'll create dashboards that measure progress toward a destination nobody has actually chosen.

I've seen this happen more times than I can count. A leadership team adopts a framework, quarterly rocks, annual planning, departmental scorecards, and for a quarter or two, it feels transformative. The structure creates the illusion of alignment. Everyone has goals. Everyone knows their numbers. The meetings have agendas and cadences.

But six months in, the energy fades. The goals start to feel arbitrary. The scorecards measure activity but not impact. The quarterly planning sessions become exercises in rearranging priorities that keep shifting because the underlying direction was never truly set.

And then someone says, "This framework doesn't work for us." And they move on to the next one. And the next one. And the cycle repeats.

The framework was never the problem. The clarity was.

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So what does clarity actually mean in this context? Let me be specific, because "get clear on your direction" is the kind of advice that sounds wise and means almost nothing without definition.

Clarity, as I use the term, means being able to answer three questions simply and consistently, not perfectly, but simply and consistently.

First: where are we going? Not a vision statement. Not a wall-mounted plaque with inspiring language. A plain, specific answer to the question: what does this company look like in three years if things go well? What are we selling, to whom, and why do they choose us over everyone else?

Second: what matters most right now? Not everything that matters. Not the twelve strategic priorities your leadership team brainstormed at the offsite. The one or two things that, if you got them right in the next ninety days, would create disproportionate progress toward where you're going.

Third: what are we not doing? This is the hardest question and the most important one. Clarity is as much about what you decline as what you pursue. If you can't articulate what you've said no to, which markets, which products, which customers, which opportunities, then you haven't really made a strategic choice. You've just made a wish list.

Most founders I work with can answer the first question reasonably well. They have a sense of where they're going, even if it's not perfectly articulated. The second question is harder, the discipline of choosing one or two priorities from a field of many is genuinely painful. But the third question is where most leadership teams fall apart.

Because saying no means closing doors. And as we discussed in the previous chapter, founders are allergic to closing doors. Every opportunity feels like it might be the one. Every market looks like it could be profitable. Every new product idea seems like it could be a winner.

The result is a strategic direction that includes everything and therefore means nothing. And a team that is technically aligned, everyone is working toward the same sprawling, all-encompassing vision, but practically misaligned, because the vision is too broad to guide daily decisions.

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I want to share a pattern I've seen repeatedly in the teams I've worked with, because it illustrates how what looks like a people problem is almost always a clarity problem in disguise.

A founder calls me because they have a "leadership team issue." The specific complaint varies, the VP of Sales and the VP of Product aren't getting along, the COO is going rogue, the head of marketing isn't delivering, but the narrative is always the same. I have good people who aren't performing. Something is wrong with them.

We sit down. I listen. I ask questions. And within an hour, usually less, the same thing emerges.

The founder hasn't been clear about priorities. Or they've been clear, but they've changed the priorities three times in the past two quarters without acknowledging the shift. Or they've given two leaders overlapping mandates without defining boundaries. Or they've said yes to a new initiative without saying no to an existing one, creating an impossible resource conflict.

The "people problem" is a clarity problem. The leaders aren't failing, they're navigating an environment where the rules keep changing, the priorities keep shifting, and the direction is a moving target.

One team I worked with had this exact dynamic. The founder was brilliant, genuinely one of the sharpest strategic minds I've encountered. But she had a pattern of falling in love with new ideas and communicating her enthusiasm to the team before she'd fully thought through the implications. Every few weeks, there was a new thing. A new market to explore. A new partnership to pursue. A new product concept that was "going to change everything."

Her team, to their credit, tried to keep up. They pivoted, they adapted, they reorganised. But after a year of this, they were exhausted and demoralised, not because the ideas were bad, but because no single idea was ever given enough time and focus to succeed. Everything was a priority, which meant nothing was.

When the founder and I worked through this together, the breakthrough wasn't a new framework or a new organisational structure. The breakthrough

was her recognising that her lack of internal clarity, her own unresolved uncertainty about what mattered most, was being transmitted directly to the team. Every enthusiastic announcement about a new direction was, from the team's perspective, an announcement that the last direction had been abandoned. Every new priority was a signal that the previous priority didn't matter.

She wasn't a bad leader. She was an unclear one. And the difference matters enormously, because a bad leader needs to be replaced. An unclear leader needs to get clear.

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Getting clear is not a comfortable process. I want to be honest about that.

When Gerard and I went through this in our own business, it required us to confront some things we'd been avoiding. We'd built The Art of Service into a broad, diversified operation, training, publishing, certification, consulting, digital products, and the breadth had been a source of pride. We were doing so many things, serving so many markets, reaching so many countries.

But breadth without focus is another word for drift. And when we finally sat down and asked ourselves the hard questions, where are we going, what matters most, what are we not doing, we had to let go of things we'd built. Lines of business that were profitable but distracting. Markets that were interesting but not strategic. Opportunities that were real but not ours to pursue.

That letting go felt like loss. It felt like admitting that we couldn't do everything, which, for two people who'd built a global company from a living room, was a hard thing to accept. We'd succeeded by saying yes to everything. Scaling required us to learn to say no.

The clarity that emerged on the other side of that process changed everything. Not because we suddenly had perfect strategic vision, we didn't. But because for the first time in years, everyone in the organisation could tell the same story about what we were and where we were going. Decisions at every level got easier, because people had a frame of reference. "Does this serve our core direction?" became a question anyone could answer, not just Gerard

and me.

That is the power of alignment. Not that it eliminates disagreement or uncertainty or the need for judgement calls. But that it gives the organisation a shared frame that makes disagreement productive rather than fragmentary. Two people arguing about how to achieve a clear goal are doing useful work. Two people arguing about which goal to pursue are just generating heat.

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There is a specific leadership behaviour I want to name, because it's one of the most common sources of misalignment and one of the hardest to see in yourself.

I call it ghost pivoting. It's when a leader changes direction in their own mind, subtly, often unconsciously, without ever explicitly communicating the shift to the team.

Here's how it works. You go to a conference. You hear a keynote that reframes how you think about your market. You have a conversation in the hallway that sparks a new idea. You fly home with a slightly different mental model of your business. Not radically different, just shifted. A few degrees off the previous heading.

You don't call a meeting about it. You don't write a memo. You don't even fully articulate the shift to yourself. But it starts showing up in your behaviour. In the questions you ask. In the ideas you champion. In the feedback you give. In what catches your attention and what you ignore.

Your team notices. They're not stupid. They pick up on the signals. But the signals are ambiguous, the leader hasn't said "we're changing direction," so maybe they're reading too much into it. They adjust their behaviour slightly. They hedge their bets. They start trying to guess what the leader wants instead of executing against a clear mandate.

Multiply this by several ghost pivots a year, each one small, each one unannounced, and you get an organisation that is technically working toward the same goals but practically chasing a moving target.

I've been guilty of this. More than once. The antidote, I've found, is almost embarrassingly simple: when your thinking changes, say so. Out loud. To the people who need to know. Not after you've fully resolved the new

thinking, that's the trap, waiting until you're certain, which might be never. But early enough that your team isn't left interpreting tea leaves.

"I've been thinking about this differently since the conference last week. I'm not sure where it leads yet, but I want you to know my assumptions are shifting. Let me tell you what I'm considering."

That simple act of transparency, even when the thinking is incomplete, prevents more misalignment than any framework, any planning cadence, any organisational structure.

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I want to return to something I said at the beginning of this chapter, because I think it bears repeating. Your team isn't the problem.

I know it feels like they are. I know it feels like if you just had better people, more strategic, more aligned, more proactive, everything would work. I know the fantasy of the perfect team, because I've had it myself. The team that anticipates your needs, executes flawlessly, pushes back when you're wrong and follows when you're right.

That team doesn't exist. Or rather, that team does exist, it's your current team, under conditions of genuine clarity. The same people who seem misaligned and underperforming in a vague environment will seem brilliant and cohesive in a clear one. I've watched this transformation happen repeatedly. It never gets less striking.

The work of alignment starts at the top. Not with a new strategic plan or a new org chart or a new operating system, though all of those might follow. It starts with you getting clear about where you're going and what matters most. It starts with you having the discipline to choose and the courage to communicate those choices plainly, even when they're imperfect. It starts with you stopping the ghost pivots, naming the trade-offs, and trusting your team to execute against a clear direction rather than guess at a moving one.

This is not easy work. But it's the work. And if you do it, genuinely, consistently, with honesty about what you know and what you don't, you will find that the people problem you thought you had was a clarity problem all along. And clarity, unlike talent, is entirely within your control.

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One last thought.

The founders I admire most are not the ones with the most sophisticated strategies or the most talented teams. They are the ones who can stand in front of their people and say, simply and without hedging: "This is where we're going. This is what matters most. This is what we're not doing. And I need your help getting there."

The power of that statement isn't in its content. It's in its clarity. It's in the fact that it gives every person in the room a frame for every decision they'll make that day, that week, that quarter. It transforms a collection of capable individuals into a team, not through charisma or motivation or culture-building exercises, but through the simple, radical act of being clear.

Your people are waiting for it. They've been waiting for a while. Not for a perfect plan. Not for a guaranteed outcome. Just for someone to tell them where to point.

Be that someone.

CHAPTER 8

# The Compound Effect

I once sat with a founder, let's call her Sarah, who described her situation with a metaphor that has stayed with me for years.

"It's like being in a washing machine," she said. "Everything is spinning. I can see the individual pieces flying past, the team issues, the strategic decisions I'm not making, the feeling that I'm losing myself, but I can't grab any one of them because the spin is too fast. So I just stay in the machine."

Sarah wasn't in crisis. Her company was profitable. Her team was decent. Her market was stable. By most external measures, things were fine. But she was drowning in a way that didn't show up on any dashboard, and she couldn't understand why, because she was looking at each problem in isolation.

The team misalignment. The strategic decisions she kept deferring. The creeping sense that she didn't know who she was outside the business any more. She saw these as three separate problems requiring three separate solutions. Hire better people. Get more data for the decisions. Maybe take a holiday.

But they weren't three problems. They were one problem with three faces. And until she saw the connections between them, no amount of effort on any single face would make the spinning stop.

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This chapter is about the compound effect, the way identity risk, decision risk, and alignment risk interact with and amplify each other. It's the chapter where the three separate threads of Part Two come together into a single, self-reinforcing pattern. And understanding this pattern is, I believe, the most important insight in this book.

Because the three risks don't just coexist. They feed each other. They create loops. And once you're inside a loop, your instinctive responses, working harder, gathering more information, trying to motivate your team, tend to make things worse, not better.

Let me trace the loop.

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It usually starts with identity risk. Not always, but usually. Because the founder's relationship with themselves is the foundation on which everything else sits.

A founder whose identity is fused with their business, whose sense of worth rises and falls with the company's performance, develops a particular relationship with risk. They become risk-averse in specific, predictable ways. Not all risk, many identity-fused founders are happy to take market risk or product risk or financial risk. What they can't tolerate is personal risk. The risk of being visibly wrong. The risk of making a call that doesn't work and having everyone know it was theirs.

This personal risk-aversion is the genesis of decision risk. The founder starts circling on strategic decisions, not because they lack the intelligence or information to decide, but because deciding means committing, and committing means accepting that they might be wrong, and being wrong feels like a verdict on who they are.

So the decisions circle. The strategy remains vague. The priorities stay fluid. And the team, good, capable people who want to do good work, starts to drift.

Not because they're bad. Because they're unled. Because the decisions that would give them clarity and direction haven't been made. Because the founder is circling instead of committing, and the organisation is faithfully mirroring that circling at every level.

Now the team is misaligned. Projects compete for resources. Priorities conflict. People work hard on things that don't add up to a coherent whole. Tension rises, not the productive tension of a team debating how to achieve a clear goal, but the draining tension of a team unsure what the goal actually is.

This misalignment creates problems, missed targets, client complaints, lost opportunities, turnover. And those problems feed directly back into the founder's identity risk. The company is struggling, and because the founder's worth is tied to the company's performance, they feel the struggle as a personal failing. Their sense of self erodes further. Their risk-aversion deepens. Their decision-making gets even more paralysed.

The loop closes. Identity risk drives decision risk. Decision risk drives alignment risk. Alignment risk creates organisational problems that intensify identity risk. And around it goes, each rotation increasing the speed and the pressure.

That's the washing machine Sarah described. That's the compound effect.

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I want to be very honest: I have been in this loop. I'm not describing it from the outside. I'm describing it from the lived experience of having been caught in it, having struggled to see it while I was in it, and having found, slowly, imperfectly, a way through.

There was a period in The Art of Service, I won't be specific about the timing, when all three risks were active simultaneously. My sense of self was thoroughly entangled with the business. Strategic decisions about our direction were circling without resolution. And our team, reflecting our indecision, was executing in multiple directions at once with diminishing coherence.

I knew something was wrong. The feeling was unmistakable, that low-grade hum of anxiety that never quite resolves, the sense that you're

working harder than ever and gaining less ground. But when I tried to diagnose the problem, I kept focusing on the symptoms rather than the system.

I thought the issue was the team. So we restructured. That helped for a while, the way rearranging furniture makes a room feel new for a few days. Then the same patterns re-emerged, because the restructuring hadn't addressed the actual issue.

I thought the issue was the strategy. So we did a strategic planning exercise. We hired a facilitator. We spent two days in a conference room with whiteboards and sticky notes and ambitious goals. That helped for a while too. But the strategy was built on a foundation of unclear priorities, on my unclear priorities, and it gradually dissolved into the same vague, all-encompassing everything-is-important non-strategy we'd had before.

I thought the issue was me, specifically, that I needed to be better. More disciplined. More decisive. More strategic. So I pushed harder. Woke up earlier. Read more books. Attended more programmes. And the pushing, rather than resolving the problem, intensified it. Because "I need to be better" is itself an expression of identity risk, it assumes that the problem is a deficiency in the founder rather than a pattern in the system.

What I eventually understood, through EO Forum, through coaching, through the kind of conversations that happen at three in the morning when the pretence drops, was that I couldn't solve any of the three risks in isolation. They were too interconnected. Fixing the team alignment without first addressing the unclear direction was pointless. Clarifying the direction without first making the strategic decisions I'd been avoiding was impossible. Making those decisions without first loosening the grip of identity fusion was terrifying.

The three risks were a system. And the system needed to be seen as a system before any intervention could work.

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This is the point in the book where you might expect me to offer a neat framework. A three-step process. A matrix. A diagnostic tool with quadrants and arrows and a satisfying sense of completeness.

I'm not going to do that. Not because I don't believe in frameworks, I've spent my career in them. ITIL, ISO, PRINCE2, EOS, Scaling Up, I know the power of a good framework. But this particular problem, the compound effect of the three risks, resists that kind of packaging. Because the solution isn't a process you implement. It's a shift in how you see.

The most important thing you can do is stop.

Not permanently. Not dramatically. But long enough to see the pattern you're in. Because the pattern, by its nature, is invisible from inside. When you're in the loop, each problem looks separate and urgent. The team issue demands attention now. The strategic decision needs more data now. The anxiety about the business needs to be managed now. The urgency keeps you moving, and the movement keeps you from seeing.

I think of it as the difference between being in traffic and looking at traffic from above. When you're in traffic, every car is an obstacle, every lane change is a tactical decision, every red light is a frustration. You can't see the flow. You can't see the pattern. You can only see the car in front of you.

But from above, from a helicopter, from a tall building, the same traffic reveals its structure. You can see the bottleneck. You can see where the flow breaks down and why. The individual cars don't matter. The pattern matters.

Leaders in the compound loop need to get above the traffic. And that usually requires outside help, a coach, a mentor, a peer group, a Forum, because the loop actively prevents you from seeing it. Your identity fusion makes you interpret problems as personal failings. Your decision paralysis makes you avoid the conversations that would create clarity. Your team's misalignment keeps you busy firefighting, which prevents you from stepping back to see the bigger picture.

The loop is self-concealing. That's part of its power.

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There is a metaphor I've used with many of the leaders I work with, and I want to share it here because it captures something essential about how to respond when you're caught in this compound pattern.

When a pilot enters a spin, a genuine aerodynamic spin, where the aircraft is rotating and descending rapidly, every human instinct says the same thing:

pull back on the stick. Gain altitude. Fight the fall. The ground is approaching and the plane is spiralling and every fibre of your being screams: pull up.

But pulling back on the stick is exactly the wrong response. In a spin, pulling back deepens the spin. It tightens the rotation. It accelerates the descent. The aerodynamics are counterintuitive, the instinct that feels like survival is actually the path to disaster.

What saves the pilot is the opposite of instinct. You push forward. You let go of the back pressure. You allow the nose to drop further, which feels absolutely wrong, but it breaks the stall that's causing the spin. Only then, once the spin is broken, can you pull up and recover.

Leadership in the compound loop works the same way. Every instinct tells you to grip tighter. Work harder. Push through. Gather more data. Motivate the team. Prove yourself. These feel like the right responses. They feel like strength. But they deepen the spin.

What actually breaks the pattern is counterintuitive. It's loosening the grip. Stepping back. Admitting uncertainty. Saying to your team, "I don't have this figured out yet, and I need to take some time to get clear before I can lead us well." It's making the decision you've been avoiding, not because you've finally achieved certainty, but because you've accepted that certainty isn't coming and the cost of waiting is worse than the risk of being wrong.

It's letting go of the stick.

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I want to walk through what this looked like for me in practice, because the metaphor is only useful if it translates to real behaviour.

The first thing I did was create space. Actual, calendared, protected space. Not a holiday, though I took one of those too, but a regular practice of stepping out of the operational flow to look at the business from above. For me, this was a half-day every fortnight, off-site, with no agenda other than thinking. No emails. No calls. No laptop. Just a notebook and the questions I was avoiding.

This sounds indulgent. I know how it sounds. I'm a founder who grew up in Dutch practicality, the idea of spending a half-day "just thinking" felt

absurd. But the doing was what had kept me in the loop. The relentless doing, the meetings, the decisions, the emails, the fires, had consumed all the space where insight could occur. I had to carve the space deliberately, because the business would never offer it voluntarily.

In that space, I started to see the connections. I saw how my anxiety about a flat quarter was driving me to micromanage the team, which was demoralising them, which was making performance worse, which was intensifying my anxiety. I saw how the strategic decisions I was avoiding, about which product lines to keep and which to cut, were forcing the team to work on everything simultaneously, diluting their impact. I saw how my need to feel essential to every major decision was bottlenecking the organisation and preventing the very autonomy I said I wanted.

Seeing the pattern didn't instantly resolve it. But it changed my relationship to it. Instead of reacting to each symptom as it appeared, firefighting, problem-solving, pushing harder, I could see the system and choose where to intervene.

The second thing I did was address the identity piece directly. Not through some grand therapeutic process, but through small, deliberate practices. I reconnected with my dressage. I invested in relationships that had nothing to do with business. I started distinguishing, in my own self-talk, between "the business is struggling" and "I am struggling." These are different statements with different implications, and I had been treating them as synonymous for years.

The third thing I did, and this was the hardest, was make the decisions I'd been avoiding. Not all at once. But I set a deadline for the three biggest circling decisions, communicated that deadline to Gerard and to our team, and committed to deciding by that date regardless of whether I felt ready. I didn't feel ready. I decided anyway. And the relief, in myself and in the team, was immediate and tangible. Not because the decisions were perfect. Some of them required significant adjustment later. But the act of deciding broke the paralysis that had been cascading through the entire organisation.

The fourth thing I did was rebuild alignment from a position of clarity rather than anxiety. I sat with the leadership team and said, plainly, "Here is where we are going. Here is what matters most this quarter. Here is what we

are not doing. I'm open to pushback on any of this, but I need you to know that I've decided, and I need us to commit."

The shift in the room was palpable. Not because I'd said anything brilliant. Because I'd said something clear. And clarity, after months of circling, felt like oxygen.

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I want to say something to the leader who is reading this chapter and recognising the pattern. Who is seeing the loop, identity risk feeding decision risk feeding alignment risk feeding identity risk, and feeling the weight of it.

You are not broken. You are not failing. You are caught in a pattern that catches nearly every founder at some point. The pattern is structural, not personal. It emerges naturally from the conditions of building something from nothing. And it is escapable.

But escaping it requires you to do the thing that every instinct resists. You have to stop. You have to see the pattern as a pattern, not as a series of isolated problems. You have to resist the urge to work harder, gather more data, push through, prove yourself. You have to let go of the stick.

I know how frightening that sounds. When the ground is approaching and the plane is spinning, letting go feels like surrender. It feels like giving up. It feels like the opposite of what a strong leader should do.

But it's not surrender. It's the precondition for recovery. The pilot who lets go of the stick isn't giving up on flying. They're breaking the stall so they can fly again. The leader who steps back, gets honest about the pattern, and loosens the grip isn't giving up on the business. They're breaking the cycle so they can lead again.

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There's one more thing I want to say before we move on to the next part of this book, where we'll talk about what the path forward actually looks like.

The compound effect has a counterpart. Just as the three risks reinforce each other in a negative spiral, addressing any one of them creates positive momentum that makes the other two easier to address.

When you begin to separate your identity from the business, even slightly, you become more willing to make hard decisions, because being wrong no longer feels like a death sentence. When you start making decisions, even imperfect ones, the team gets clearer direction, and alignment improves almost automatically. When the team is aligned and executing well, the business performs better, and the pressure on your identity eases.

The loop can spin in both directions. The same interconnection that creates the downward spiral can create an upward one. You don't have to solve all three risks simultaneously. You just have to break the pattern at any point, and the positive effects compound from there.

That is the real insight of this chapter. Not that the three risks are connected, though they are. Not that they amplify each other, though they do. But that a single point of intervention, sustained with consistency and honesty, can reverse the entire system.

You don't have to fix everything. You just have to start somewhere, and mean it.

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Sarah, the founder who described the washing machine, eventually found her way through. It took time. It took help. It took the uncomfortable work of seeing her own patterns and choosing, deliberately, to respond differently.

The last time we spoke, she said something that I think about often. She said, "The spinning didn't stop because I solved all the problems. The spinning stopped because I stopped pretending they were separate problems."

That's the compound effect. And that's the way out. Not solving each problem in turn, but seeing the system clearly enough to know where to intervene. Not working harder, but working differently. Not pulling back on the stick, but finding the courage to let go.

The next part of this book is about what comes after the letting go. What you find when the spin breaks and the nose lifts and the horizon levels out. What it actually looks like to lead from a place of clarity rather than drift.

But first, you have to be willing to see the pattern. And if you've read this far, I suspect you already do.

# The Mirror, Not the Map

There is a moment in almost every conversation I have with a founder where I can feel them bracing. They have come prepared. They have their narrative. They know the version of the story they want to tell me, the version where the problem is the team, or the market, or the timing, or the board. They are ready for me to nod and hand them a strategy.

And then I ask a question that has nothing to do with the problem they presented.

Not because I am trying to be clever. But because I have been listening to what they are not saying, and that is almost always where the real conversation lives.

I do not give advice. I know that sounds strange coming from someone who has spent twenty-five years building a company that exists to help organisations get better at what they do. But the work I do now, the advisory work, the one-on-one intensives, the coaching, is not about telling people what to do. It is about helping them see clearly what they already know but have been too close to recognise.

There is a difference, and it matters.

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Most leadership advice fails for a simple reason: it gives you more maps when what you actually need is a mirror.

Think about the last time you were genuinely stuck. Not the polite kind of stuck where you weigh options over a flat white. I mean the kind where you wake at three in the morning with your chest tight and your mind circling the same three scenarios, none of which feel right. In that moment, someone handing you a framework, a two-by-two matrix, a decision tree, a set of best practices from a Harvard Business Review article, is not helpful. It is noise dressed up as signal.

What you need in that moment is someone who can see you clearly. Someone who can reflect back what is actually happening, not the story you are telling yourself, but the thing underneath it. The fear you have not named. The decision you have already made but are not ready to own. The relationship that is shaping your thinking in ways you have not admitted.

That is the mirror.

I learned this not from a coaching certification. I learned it from twenty-five years of being in the water myself.

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There is a metaphor I come back to often when I explain what I do. Imagine you are drowning. The water is over your head, the current is pulling you sideways, and you are spending all your energy just trying to keep your face above the surface. Now imagine two people on the shore.

The first person is standing safely on dry land with a megaphone. They are shouting instructions. "Swim to the left. No, your other left. Use your arms more. Kick harder. Have you tried a different stroke?" They mean well. They have read books about swimming. They may even have a qualification. But they are dry, and you are drowning, and everything they are saying is technically correct and completely useless.

The second person has been in this water before. They know this current. They know it pulls to the right and that fighting it only exhausts you faster.

They do not shout. They wade in. They throw you a rope, not from the shore, but from close enough that you can reach it. And they stay calm, because they have survived this before, and that calm is the thing that lets you stop panicking long enough to grab hold.

That is the kind of help I try to offer. Not from the shore. From the water.

I have built a company from a living room in Brisbane to one hundred and sixty countries. I have navigated the terror of a premature birth while running a business. I have renegotiated a marriage in the middle of renegotiating a partnership. I have made decisions that cost us money and decisions that cost us relationships and decisions that cost us sleep for months. I have been in the current. I know what it feels like when the water is over your head.

That does not make me an expert in your situation. But it makes me someone who understands the water.

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A few years ago, a founder came to me, someone running a technology company, about forty employees, growing fast. On paper, his problem was a hiring decision. He had two candidates for a senior role and could not decide between them. He had spreadsheets. He had interview scorecards. He had talked to his advisors and gotten contradictory opinions.

We sat down, and I let him talk through the candidates. For about twenty minutes, he walked me through the strengths and weaknesses, the cultural fit, the compensation expectations. He was thorough. He was analytical. He was, I could tell, exhausted by the analysis.

When he finished, I did not weigh in on the candidates. Instead, I asked: "What happens to your role if you make this hire?"

He stopped. And in the silence, I watched something shift behind his eyes.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "I would not be needed for the day-to-day anymore."

There it was. The real conversation. It was never about which candidate was better. It was about what it meant for him to bring in someone senior

enough to take over the part of the business he had built with his own hands. The part that made him feel essential. The hire was not a staffing decision. It was an identity decision.

We spent the next hour on that. Not on resumes. On who he wanted to become.

He made the hire within a week. The right one, as it turned out. But not because I told him which candidate to choose. Because once he could see what was really at stake, the choice became obvious.

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This is what I mean when I say the mirror, not the map. A map assumes you know where you are. Most founders I work with do not. They think they know. They have a confident narrative about their position, where they are, what is blocking them, what they need next. But that narrative has been constructed by the same mind that is stuck. It is a map drawn by someone who is lost.

The mirror shows you where you actually are. And sometimes where you actually are is not where you thought.

I learned this the hard way in my own business. For years, I told myself a story about what The Art of Service was and where it was going. I had my map. And the map was not wrong, exactly, it described a real landscape. But it did not account for how I had changed, or how the market had changed, or how the relationship between me and the business had shifted. I was navigating with an old map, and I could not see it because I was the one who had drawn it.

It took people around me, Gerard, my EO Forum, mentors who had no stake in my story, to hold up a mirror. To reflect back what they actually saw, not what I wanted them to see. That was uncomfortable. But it was the beginning of every meaningful shift I have made.

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The power of not rushing to solve is one of the hardest things to learn, both as a leader and as someone who works with leaders. We are wired to fix. When

someone presents a problem, the instinct is to engage with it immediately, to start generating solutions, to demonstrate competence through speed. I have spent most of my career in environments that reward speed, ITIL implementations, ISO certifications, scaling operations across multiple countries. I know how to move fast.

But in the kind of work I do now, speed is often the enemy. Because the faster you solve, the more likely you are to solve the wrong thing.

I once sat with a founder who spent the first thirty minutes of our conversation describing a conflict with her co-founder. It was vivid and specific, who said what, when, how it made her feel, what she thought it meant. She wanted help figuring out how to have the confrontation. She had been rehearsing it for weeks.

I listened. And when she was done, I said: "You have told me a lot about what he did. Tell me what you are afraid of."

She was quiet for a long time. Then she said: "I am afraid that if we have this conversation, we will not be able to come back from it. And if we cannot come back from it, I lose the business. And if I lose the business, I do not know who I am."

We were no longer talking about a co-founder conflict. We were talking about a woman whose identity was so intertwined with her company that she could not separate the threat to the business from the threat to herself. The co-founder issue was real. But the reason she could not resolve it was not about communication skills or conflict management. It was about the fact that she had no floor beneath her that existed independently of the business.

That is a fundamentally different problem. And it requires a fundamentally different kind of help.

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I want to be honest about something. The way I work is not for everyone.

Some people come to me wanting a playbook. They want the seven steps. They want the template. They want me to look at their situation and tell them, from my experience, exactly what to do. And I understand that desire. When you are in pain, clarity feels like it should come from the outside.

But it does not. Not the kind that sticks.

The clarity that transforms a business, the kind that does not just solve this quarter's crisis but changes the trajectory, has to come from the founder. It has to be theirs. My job is not to supply it. My job is to create the conditions in which it can emerge.

That means asking questions that are sometimes uncomfortable. It means sitting in silence when the other person wants me to fill it. It means naming things that the founder already knows but has not said out loud, and there is a strange alchemy that happens when a thing is said out loud. It becomes real. It becomes something you have to deal with.

In my EO work, years of it, from Chapter President to Regional Leadership Academy Chair to mentoring founders across the Asia-Pacific region, I saw this pattern repeat hundreds of times. The founders who made the biggest breakthroughs were not the ones who got the best advice. They were the ones who finally saw themselves clearly. Who stopped performing confidence and admitted confusion. Who stopped optimising the plan and questioned whether it was the right plan.

The mirror does not tell you what to do. It shows you who you are. And from there, the path forward becomes clearer than any map could make it.

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There is a practice I have developed over the years that I want to share, because it is simple enough that anyone can do it, and I have seen it shift conversations in ways that surprise me every time.

When someone comes to you with a problem, a partner, a colleague, a friend, anyone, before you respond, ask yourself: Are they asking me to solve, or are they asking me to see?

Most of the time, they are asking to be seen. They do not need your answer. They need to hear themselves think out loud in the presence of someone who is paying real attention. Someone who is not formulating their response while the other person is still talking. Someone who is not filtering what they hear through their own experience and agenda.

Just seeing. Just reflecting back, clearly and without judgement, what you observe.

"It sounds like you have already decided, and the thing you are struggling with is not the decision but the consequences."

"I notice you keep coming back to what your father would think. Is that relevant here?"

"You have described the business problem in detail. But you have not mentioned how you feel about it."

These are not clever interventions. They are mirrors. And they work because the person on the other side, for perhaps the first time in a long time, feels genuinely seen. Not evaluated. Not coached. Not managed. Seen.

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I think about this often in the context of the advisory industry as a whole. There is a vast and lucrative ecosystem built around telling leaders what to do. Consultants, coaches, advisors, strategists, thought leaders, all offering maps. Some of those maps are excellent. I have used many of them. I studied frameworks at MIT. I have implemented operational methodologies across organisations on six continents. I believe in structure. I believe in models. I believe in the disciplined application of proven approaches.

But I also believe that no map will save you if you do not know where you are standing.

And knowing where you are standing, truly knowing, without the protective narratives, without the comfortable stories, without the identity you have built around being the person who has it figured out, that requires a mirror.

I am not the only person who can hold one up. Your partner can do it, if you let them. Your peers can do it, if you create the right environment, which is what the EO Forum model does so well, and why I have given so much of my time to it. Even your own journal can do it, if you are honest on the page.

But someone has to do it. Because the alternative is navigating with an old map, drawn by a version of you that no longer exists, toward a destination you chose before you understood the terrain.

And that, in my experience, is how most founders stay stuck. Not because they lack information. Not because they lack talent or resources or ambition. But because they are solving the wrong problem with great precision, and no

one in their life is willing to say so.

I remember the first time someone held a mirror up to me. I was early in my Entrepreneurs' Organization journey, sitting in a Forum meeting, this was years before I became Chapter President or took on any regional roles. I had just delivered a beautifully packaged version of a problem I was having with a key hire. I had the narrative polished. I knew how the story went and what the moral was.

A fellow Forum member, someone I respected enormously, listened to the whole thing and then said, very quietly: "That was a great presentation. Now tell us what is actually going on."

I was annoyed. I had just told them what was actually going on. In detail. With context.

But the room was silent, and in the silence I heard what they had heard: a founder performing competence instead of admitting confusion. A leader who had rehearsed her narrative so thoroughly that she had lost access to the truth underneath it.

When I stopped performing and started speaking honestly, haltingly, without the polish, the real situation emerged. And it was nothing like the version I had presented. The problem was not the hire. It was my fear of being seen as someone who had made a bad judgement call. I was so busy protecting my reputation, even in a confidential Forum setting, that I could not see the actual decision in front of me.

That moment taught me something I carry into every conversation I have now: the quality of help you receive is directly proportional to the honesty of what you bring. If you bring a polished narrative, you get polished advice. If you bring the messy, uncomfortable truth, you get something that can actually change things.

That is the work I do. Not giving answers. Giving clarity. Not providing maps. Holding up mirrors.

It is quieter work than most people expect. But it is the work that changes things.

# Naming the Real Decision

Here is something I have learned after twenty-five years of sitting across from founders: the decision they bring to me is almost never the decision they need to make.

They arrive with something specific. Should I fire my COO. Should I take the Series B. Should I expand into the US market. Should I bring on a co-founder. They want help deciding. They have usually done significant analysis. They have weighed pros and cons, consulted their board, talked to their spouse, read a few articles. They are informed. They are stuck.

And the reason they are stuck is almost always the same. They are trying to make a decision about the wrong thing.

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I once worked with a founder, a woman running a professional services firm, about sixty people, solid growth trajectory, who came to me with what she described as a pricing problem. Her margins were compressing. Her team was overservicing clients. She had tried adjusting rates, restructuring packages, implementing time tracking. Nothing stuck. She was frustrated and tired and beginning to wonder if the business model itself was broken.

We sat down for one of my Strategic Clarity Intensives, a ninety-minute session designed to cut through exactly this kind of fog. I did not start with pricing. I started with a question that seemed unrelated.

"Who are your best clients?"

She listed them easily. Three or four names. Long-standing relationships. Great work. Fair expectations.

"And who are the clients causing the margin pressure?"

Different names. Newer relationships. Larger contracts. More prestigious logos.

"Why did you take them on?"

Silence. Then, carefully: "Because I thought we needed to grow."

The pricing problem was not a pricing problem. It was a client selection problem, which was actually a growth strategy problem, which was actually a founder identity problem. She had built a firm that did excellent work for a specific kind of client. Somewhere along the way, she had decided that excellent was not enough, that she needed to be bigger, that revenue growth was the measure of progress. So she had started chasing clients who looked impressive but did not fit the firm's strengths. Those clients demanded more, paid relatively less, and eroded the culture that made the firm good in the first place.

The real decision was not how to fix her pricing. It was whether she was willing to stop chasing growth that was making her company worse.

That is a much harder decision. But it is the right one.

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This pattern, the stated problem masking the real decision, is so consistent that I have built my entire advisory approach around it. When a founder comes to me, I assume that what they are presenting is the surface layer. Not because they are being dishonest. Because they genuinely cannot see past it. They are too close. They have been circling the stated problem for so long that it has become the entire landscape. They cannot see the terrain it sits within.

My job is to help them zoom out far enough to see the actual choice.

Here is how I do it. Not as a rigid formula, but as a way of thinking that you can apply to your own decisions, starting today.

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Step One: Separate Signal from Noise

When someone describes their situation to me, roughly eighty percent of what they say is context, history, and emotional processing. It is not irrelevant, it tells me a lot about how they think and what they are attached to. But it is not signal. Signal is the thing that, when you name it, makes the other person go quiet. Signal is the sentence that lands differently.

You can find signal in your own thinking. Write down everything that is on your mind about the decision you are facing. All of it. The arguments, the fears, the competing priorities, the things your board said, the thing your spouse said at dinner that you cannot stop thinking about. Get it all out.

Then read it back and ask: Which of these sentences, if I said them out loud to someone I trust, would make me feel exposed?

That is the signal.

The noise is everything that feels safe to say. The signal is the thing you keep circling around but never quite land on. The thing you have thought but not spoken. The thing that, if it were true, would change the nature of the decision entirely.

I find that most founders can identify the signal within ten minutes, if they are willing to be honest. The problem is not that they do not know. The problem is that the signal is usually uncomfortable, and the noise is a very effective way of avoiding it.

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Step Two: Identify the Cost of Delay

Most decisions that keep founders up at night are not actually urgent. They feel urgent because the anxiety around them is intense. But the decision itself often has no hard deadline. No one is forcing you to decide this week. You could defer. You could gather more information. You could wait and see.

And that is exactly what most people do. They defer. They call it being thoughtful. They call it gathering data. They call it waiting for the right moment. What it actually is, most of the time, is avoidance.

So I ask: What is the cost of not deciding?

This is not a rhetorical question. I mean it literally. What happens to your business, your team, your health, your relationships, your strategic position, if you do not make this decision for another three months? Six months? A year?

Sometimes the cost of delay is low. Some decisions genuinely do benefit from patience. But in my experience, the decisions that founders agonise over are precisely the ones where delay is expensive. The team member who is not performing, every month you wait, the culture erodes a little more. The market you should be entering, every quarter you defer, a competitor gets further ahead. The partnership that is not working, every year you tolerate it, your resentment grows and your options narrow.

Name the cost. Be specific. Write it down in concrete terms, not "things might get worse" but "I will lose my best engineer because she is tired of covering for someone who is not pulling their weight, and replacing her will cost me six months and two hundred thousand dollars."

When you quantify the cost of delay, the decision often becomes much clearer. Not easier, clearer. You can see what inaction is actually costing you, and that reframes the risk. Because every decision has risk. But so does every non-decision. And founders consistently underestimate the risk of standing still.

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Step Three: Find the Irreversible First Step

Here is where I part company with a lot of conventional decision-making advice.

Most frameworks treat decisions as single events. You decide, and then you execute. But real decisions, the ones that matter, are not single events. They are sequences. And within any sequence, some steps are reversible and some are not.

When I work with a founder on a major decision, I do not ask them to commit to the whole thing. I ask them to identify the smallest irreversible

step.

What is the one action you could take that would meaningfully advance this decision and that you could not easily undo?

For a hiring decision, maybe it is having the conversation with the person you are planning to let go, not the termination itself, but the honest conversation about performance that you have been avoiding. Once you have that conversation, the dynamic changes. You cannot un-have it. But it is a small step, and it gives you real information.

For a strategic pivot, maybe it is telling your top three clients about the new direction, not launching it publicly, but having the private conversations that test whether your instinct is right. Once those conversations happen, you have data you did not have before, and you have set expectations that shape what comes next.

The irreversible first step is powerful because it breaks the paralysis of trying to see the whole path. You do not need to see the whole path. You need to see the next step, and you need to take it in a way that generates information and momentum.

I have watched founders who were stuck for months make their irreversible first step within days of identifying it. Not because the decision got easier. Because they stopped trying to decide everything at once and found the one thing they could do now that would make the rest clearer.

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Step Four: Name the Decision You Are Actually Making

This is where everything comes together. Once you have separated signal from noise, identified the cost of delay, and found the irreversible first step, you are usually looking at a very different decision than the one you started with.

The pricing problem becomes a question about what kind of company you want to build. The hiring decision becomes a question about who you need to become. The partnership conflict becomes a question about what you are willing to tolerate in exchange for what. The growth strategy becomes a question about what you are optimising for, and whether that thing is actually what you want.

I ask founders to complete this sentence: "The real decision I am making is whether I am willing to ___."

Not "whether I should." Whether I am willing to. That distinction matters. "Should" keeps you in your head, weighing abstract pros and cons. "Willing" puts you in your body, confronting the actual cost and the actual commitment.

"The real decision I am making is whether I am willing to shrink the company in order to save it."

"The real decision I am making is whether I am willing to have an honest conversation with my co-founder that might end the partnership."

"The real decision I am making is whether I am willing to stop doing the work I love in order to lead the company that does it."

When you can say that sentence out loud, when you can name the real decision in plain, honest language, the fog lifts. Not because the decision becomes easy. But because you are finally looking at the right thing.

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I want to share a framework I use in my Strategic Clarity Intensives. It is not proprietary or complicated. It is a set of questions, designed to be worked through in order, that move you from the stated problem to the real decision. You can do this alone, but it works better with someone who will push back on your comfortable answers, a peer, a mentor, a partner who is willing to be honest.

The Clarity Questions:

1. What decision am I telling myself I need to make?

2. How long have I been circling this decision? What does that duration tell me?

3. If I imagine having made the decision, either way, which outcome creates more fear? What specifically am I afraid of?

4. What would I advise a friend in this exact situation? Why am I not following that advice myself?

5. What is the cost, in money, time, energy, relationships, opportunity, of not deciding for another six months?

6. What is the smallest irreversible step I could take this week?

7. Complete the sentence: "The real decision I am making is whether I am willing to ___."

I have watched these seven questions, worked through honestly, cut through months of analysis in under an hour. Not because they are magic. Because they do the thing that most decision-making processes fail to do: they move the conversation from the intellectual to the personal.

Because every major business decision is, in the end, a personal decision. It is about what you are willing to risk, what you are willing to lose, what you are willing to become. The spreadsheet cannot tell you that. The board cannot tell you that. Only you can, if you are willing to sit with the questions long enough for the honest answers to surface.

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I think about my own experience with this. When Gerard and I were at a crossroads with The Art of Service, and there were several, as there are with any business that spans twenty-five years, the decisions that felt most overwhelming were always the ones where I had not yet named what I was really deciding.

I remember a period, years ago, where I was agonising over a product strategy. Should we go in this direction or that direction? I had data. I had opinions from people I trusted. I had spreadsheets that told compelling stories on both sides. I was paralysed.

And then, in a conversation with my EO Forum, a group of peers who had no stake in my decision, only a commitment to helping me see clearly, someone asked a version of the question I now ask others: "What are you afraid will happen if you choose wrong?"

And I realised I was not afraid of choosing the wrong product direction. I was afraid that any choice would close a door, and I was not ready to close doors. I wanted to keep all options open because open options felt like safety. The product decision was a proxy for a much deeper pattern: my resistance to commitment, my fear that choosing meant losing.

Once I saw that, the product decision made itself. Because the real work was not about products. It was about my relationship with uncertainty, my need for control, my difficulty trusting that a committed path, even an

imperfect one, would yield better results than an uncommitted hedge.

That is what I mean when I say the stated problem is almost never the real problem.

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Let me address something directly, because I know some readers will be thinking it.

This sounds slow. This sounds like navel-gazing. When the business is burning, who has time to sit with seven questions and explore what they are really afraid of?

I understand the objection. And here is my answer: you do not have time not to.

The fastest way to waste six months is to solve the wrong problem quickly. I have watched founders make rapid, decisive moves that felt like progress and were, in fact, expensive detours, because they acted on the stated problem without ever naming the real one. They fired the wrong person. They launched the wrong product. They restructured the wrong team. They were efficient and wrong, which is worse than being slow and right.

The ninety minutes it takes to work through these questions, genuinely, honestly, without rushing, will save you months. I have seen it happen so many times that I no longer think of this as introspection. I think of it as operational efficiency. The most efficient thing a founder can do is make sure they are solving the right problem before they start solving.

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One more story. A founder I worked with recently came to me with what he described as a team alignment issue. His leadership team was not executing against the strategy. Meetings were unproductive. People were working hard but in different directions. He wanted help building better systems, accountability structures, execution cadences, reporting frameworks.

I asked him to describe his strategy.

He talked for ten minutes. It was articulate and ambitious and, I noticed, slightly different each time he rephrased it. The vision shifted depending on

which part of it he was explaining. Not dramatically, but enough.

"Would your leadership team describe the strategy the same way you just did?" I asked.

Long pause. "Probably not exactly."

"Would any two members of your leadership team describe it the same way as each other?"

Longer pause. "No. Probably not."

The team alignment issue was not an execution problem. It was a clarity problem. You cannot align a team around a strategy that the founder has not fully articulated, even to themselves. The strategy was not crisp. It was a collection of good instincts and broad aspirations that had never been refined into something specific enough for a team to execute against.

The real decision was not about systems. It was whether he was willing to make the strategy specific enough that it could be judged, specific enough that, in a year, it would be obvious whether it was working or not. And that meant giving up the comfort of ambiguity, which is something founders are surprisingly reluctant to do, because ambiguity lets you redefine success after the fact.

He made the decision. He rewrote the strategy in language so specific it felt uncomfortable. Then the team alignment problem largely resolved itself, not because the team changed, but because they finally had something clear enough to align around.

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Naming the real decision is not a one-time exercise. It is a practice. A discipline. Every time you feel stuck, every time a decision feels heavier than it should, every time you catch yourself gathering more information instead of acting, pause. Ask the questions. Separate the signal from the noise. Identify what you are actually afraid of. Name what you are really deciding.

The answer is almost always simpler than the problem felt. Not easier. Simpler. And simplicity, in my experience, is where courage lives. Because once you see the decision clearly, you can no longer hide behind complexity. You have to choose.

That is the work. Not analysis. Not strategy. The willingness to see the real decision and make it.

# Releasing What Made You Successful

This is the chapter I almost did not write.

Not because the ideas are complicated. They are not. But because living them has been the hardest thing I have done in twenty-five years of building a business, harder than the financial crises, harder than the strategic pivots, harder than any external challenge. The external challenges, at least, have a clear enemy. This one requires you to be both the surgeon and the patient.

Releasing what made you successful means deliberately letting go of the behaviours, roles, and identity attachments that served you brilliantly at one stage, and that are now the very things holding you back. It means accepting, with open eyes, that the version of you who built this thing is not the version of you who can take it further.

That is not a comfortable truth. For most founders, it is a devastating one.

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Let me start with a confession. For the first decade of The Art of Service, I was involved in everything. Every major client decision. Every product launch. Every operational hiccup. I knew the details because I lived in the

details. Gerard and I had built this company from our living room in Brisbane, two people who had moved from the Netherlands to Australia with a marriage, a vision, and very little else. Of course I was involved in everything. There was no one else.

And that involvement is what made us successful. In the early years, our competitive advantage was not capital or scale or brand recognition. It was the fact that the founders cared about every single interaction. I answered emails at midnight. I personally reviewed content. I knew our clients' names and their specific challenges. That closeness, that obsessive attention, it built trust, and trust built the business.

But here is the thing about what builds you: it does not know when to stop.

The behaviours that created the company became, over time, the behaviours that constrained it. My involvement in every decision, which had been our strength when we were small, became a bottleneck when we grew. My attention to detail, which had been a gift, became a form of control that prevented others from developing their own judgement. My identity as the person who knew everything about the business became a ceiling, both for me and for the team.

I did not see it for a long time. That is the cruel part. The very thing you need to let go of is the thing you are most proud of. It is the thing that people praise you for. It is the thing that, in your story of yourself, explains why you succeeded. Letting go of it feels like letting go of the explanation for your own success. And without that explanation, who are you?

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Gerard saw it before I did. He usually does, when it comes to these things.

I want to tell this part of the story carefully, because it involves the most important relationship in my life, and also, for many years, the most complicated one.

Gerard and I are business partners and life partners. We have been both since the beginning. We met in 1996 in the Netherlands, married, moved to Australia together in 2000, and built The Art of Service from nothing. That means we have navigated every business decision inside a marriage and every

marriage decision inside a business. There is no separation. There never has been.

In the early years, that was a source of strength. We could talk about the business at any hour. We understood each other's context without explanation. We could make decisions over dinner that other companies would need a meeting for. The intimacy of our partnership, personal and professional, was an accelerant.

But as the company grew, it also became a source of tension that we did not initially know how to manage. Because the roles that had served us as co-founders building something from nothing were not the roles the company needed as it scaled. And renegotiating roles in a business is hard enough. Renegotiating roles in a business that is also a marriage is something else entirely.

The conversation we needed to have, the one that took us far too long to have honestly, was this: we had different strengths, and the business needed us to stop overlapping and start specialising. That sounds rational and clean. In practice, it was neither.

Because specialising meant that one of us had to step back from certain areas. It meant that things I had always handled, things I was good at, things that made me feel valuable, needed to become Gerard's domain, or needed to be delegated entirely. And things Gerard had always been part of needed to become mine alone. The overlap that had felt like partnership began to feel like redundancy, and redundancy in a business context has an uncomfortable echo in a personal one.

I will be honest: there were months where this felt like loss. Not logical loss, I could see, intellectually, that the change was right. But emotional loss. The loss of a certain version of our partnership. The loss of being needed in all the ways I had been needed. The loss of being able to tell myself that I was essential to every part of the business.

What replaced it, eventually, was something better. A partnership where we each had genuine ownership of our domains. Where we trusted each other to make decisions without checking in. Where the business did not require both of us to be present for everything, which meant, critically, that we could also be absent sometimes. We could take a breath. We could have a weekend

that was not also a strategy session.

But getting there required both of us to release the version of the partnership that had made us successful. And that release was not a single conversation. It was a hundred conversations, some calm and some not, stretched over years.

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I see this pattern in almost every founder I work with. The thing they need to let go of is the thing they are most identified with.

The founder who built the company on the strength of their personal relationships with clients needs to stop being the primary relationship holder, and that feels like abandoning the people who trusted them.

The founder who succeeded through sheer force of work ethic needs to stop working eighteen-hour days, and that feels like admitting they are not as committed as they once were.

The founder who built their reputation on technical expertise needs to stop being the smartest person in the room, and that feels like losing the thing that makes them valuable.

The founder who grew the business by saying yes to everything needs to start saying no, and that feels like closing doors that should stay open.

In every case, the identity attachment is the same. This is who I am. This is what I do. This is what makes me me. Without it, what am I?

That question, without it, what am I?, is the question that keeps founders stuck in roles and behaviours they have outgrown. Because the answer feels terrifying. The answer feels like nothing.

But the answer, I have learned, is not nothing. The answer is: someone new. Someone you have not met yet. Someone who cannot emerge as long as the old version of you is taking up all the space.

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There are specific things I had to release, and I want to name them concretely because I think specificity is more useful than abstraction here.

I had to release the need to review everything. For years, nothing significant left The Art of Service without my eyes on it. Content, client communications, strategic documents, I reviewed them all. This was not micromanagement in the traditional sense. I was not hovering over people's shoulders. But I had made myself the final quality checkpoint, and the team had organised itself around that expectation. The result was that everything was good, but nothing moved faster than I could review. I was the bottleneck and the quality assurance function rolled into one, and I could not be both at the scale we were reaching.

Letting go of the review function meant accepting that some things would go out that I would have done differently. That sounds small. It was not. Every time I saw something that was not quite how I would have done it, I had to resist the urge to correct it. I had to ask myself: Is this wrong, or is it just different? And if it is different, can I live with different?

Mostly, I could. And something unexpected happened. The team got better. Not because my feedback had been unhelpful, but because when they knew I was the safety net, they did not develop their own quality instinct. When the safety net was removed, they rose to meet the standard. Not instantly. Not perfectly. But meaningfully.

I had to release the identity of being the hardest worker. This one cut deeper than I expected. For much of my career, I wore my work ethic like armour. I was the first to log on and the last to log off. I took pride in it. It was part of my story, the immigrant entrepreneur who outworked everyone. And in the early years, that story was true and it mattered.

But there came a point where my work ethic was no longer a competitive advantage. It was a coping mechanism. I was working long hours not because the business required it, but because I did not know how to feel valuable without the hours. Busyness had become a proxy for worth.

Releasing that meant sitting with the discomfort of an empty afternoon and not filling it. It meant trusting that my contribution to the business was not measured in hours. It meant redefining productivity away from volume and toward impact, and accepting that impact sometimes looks like doing less.

I had to release the need to defend past decisions. This is a subtle one, but it is corrosive if you do not catch it. As a founder, every current reality in the business is, in some way, the result of a decision you made. The team structure, the product architecture, the client mix, the brand positioning, you built it all, layer by layer, decision by decision. And when someone suggests that something needs to change, it can feel like a criticism of the decision that created it.

I had to learn to separate the quality of a past decision from its current relevance. A decision can have been right at the time and wrong now. That is not failure. That is growth. But my reflexive instinct was to defend, to explain the context, to justify the reasoning, to protect the decision because protecting the decision felt like protecting myself.

Releasing that defence meant allowing the business to evolve beyond my original design. It meant letting other people reshape things I had built, sometimes in directions I would not have chosen. It meant accepting that the business was not a monument to my judgement but a living thing that needed to keep growing, even if growth meant outgrowing my fingerprints.

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I want to talk about delegation, because it is the mechanism through which most of this releasing happens, and because most founders think they understand delegation and most of them do not.

Delegation is not assigning tasks. That is just distribution of work. Real delegation, the kind that changes the founder's role and frees the business to scale, is the transfer of authority, judgement, and ownership. It means that another person does not just do the work; they decide how to do the work, they evaluate whether the work is done well, and they own the outcome.

For most founders, that is terrifying. Because what you are really delegating is your sense of control. And control, for someone who built something from nothing, is not a management style. It is a survival mechanism. Control is how you navigated the chaos of the early years. Control is how you ensured quality when there was no one else to ensure it. Control is how you managed the anxiety of uncertainty.

Releasing control does not mean becoming passive. It means shifting from controlling the work to setting the standard. It means defining what good looks like and then trusting others to get there by their own path. It means intervening only when the outcome is genuinely at risk, not when the process is different from what you would have chosen.

This distinction, controlling the work versus setting the standard, changed everything for me. It was the difference between being a bottleneck and being a leader. Between being needed and being valuable. Between running the business and building the business.

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There is a grief in this process that I do not think is acknowledged enough.

When you release the behaviours and roles that made you successful, you are grieving a version of yourself. The founder who did everything. The leader who was indispensable. The person whose identity was inseparable from the business. That person was real, and they mattered, and they achieved something remarkable. And now you are being asked to let them go.

I do not think you can do this without mourning. I do not think you should try. The founders who attempt to make this transition purely through logic, who treat it as a rational organisational redesign, tend to either revert under stress or become bitter. The emotion needs somewhere to go.

For me, it went into conversations with Gerard that were sometimes difficult and always necessary. It went into my EO Forum, where I could be honest about the grief without being judged. It went into long mornings with the horses, where the rhythm of the dressage arena gave me space to think without producing.

And eventually, it went into something new. A different kind of contribution. Not less valuable, different. More strategic. More leveraged. More sustainable. A version of leadership that did not require me to be everywhere, because the system was strong enough to hold without me.

That is the freedom on the other side of releasing. Not the freedom of doing less, though there is that. But the freedom of becoming someone new. Someone who leads not through presence and control but through clarity and trust. Someone whose value is not in the doing but in the seeing.

It is a better way to lead. But you have to walk through the grief to get there.

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If you are reading this and recognising yourself, if you are the founder who is still reviewing everything, still working the longest hours, still defending decisions that were right three years ago and may not be right now, I want to say something directly.

You are not the problem. The instincts that are now holding you back are the same instincts that built everything you have. They are not flaws. They are strengths that have outlived their context.

But the context has changed. And you know it. You can feel it in the way the business pushes against your involvement, the way the team waits for your approval instead of moving, the way the strategic decisions keep getting deferred because you are buried in operational details.

The business is asking you to become someone new. Not because who you have been was not enough. But because what comes next requires a different version of you.

Letting go is not giving up. It is growing up. And it is, I believe, the most important work a founder will ever do.

# Building the System Around Clarity

Clarity without a system is just a good idea. It sits in your head, vivid and compelling, and slowly fades as the week fills up with meetings and emails and small fires that feel urgent. You had the insight. You knew what needed to change. And then Monday happened.

I have watched this cycle destroy more strategic progress than any external threat. Not because founders lack vision. Because they lack the operational architecture to translate vision into execution. The insight happens in a ninety-minute intensive or a quiet Sunday morning or a conversation with a mentor. It is real and it is right. But without a system to carry it forward, it joins the growing list of things the founder knows but the organisation never acts on.

This is where my background becomes relevant in a way that might surprise people. Before I was an advisor, before I was a coach, before any of it, I was an operations person. ITIL Expert. ISO 20000 Expert. PRINCE2 Practitioner. I spent years inside the machinery of how organisations actually work. Not the inspirational parts. The plumbing. The cadences and checkpoints and accountability structures that turn intention into outcome.

I know that is not glamorous. But I also know that the founders who build enduring companies are not the ones with the best vision. They are the ones who build the best systems around their vision.

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Let me be direct about something. I am not a licensed implementer of any particular scaling methodology. I have studied frameworks like EOS and Scaling Up, I have seen them applied across dozens of companies through my work with Entrepreneurs' Organization, and I have taken what works from many sources. What I offer is not a branded system. It is the distilled learning from twenty-five years of building a company that operates in over one hundred and sixty countries, combined with the operational disciplines that come from deep certification work across international standards.

What I have found, across all of it, is that the specific framework matters less than people think. What matters is that the framework exists, that there is a structure, a rhythm, a set of recurring practices that force the organisation to confront reality at regular intervals.

The enemy of execution is not a lack of plans. It is the drift that happens between plans. The gradual, invisible sliding away from what was agreed toward what is comfortable. Good systems exist to interrupt that drift.

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Here is how I think about building the system around clarity. There are four layers, and they build on each other.

Layer One: The Articulated Clarity

This sounds obvious, but it is where most companies fail. The founder has clarity, they know where the company is going and why. But that clarity lives in their head, in their own language, filtered through their own context. Ask three members of their leadership team to describe the strategy, and you will get three different answers.

Articulated clarity means writing it down in language so specific that anyone in the organisation can repeat it accurately. Not a mission statement, those are almost always too vague to guide daily decisions. Not a strategic

plan, those are usually too detailed to remember. What I mean is a small number of clear statements that answer three questions:

Where are we going? Not aspirationally, but concretely. What does the company look like in three years? What revenue? What clients? What capabilities? What are we known for?

What are we saying no to? This is the one most companies skip, and it is the most important. Every strategy is defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes. If you cannot name the opportunities you are deliberately walking away from, your strategy is not specific enough to execute against.

How will we know if it is working? What are the three or four measures that, looked at together, tell you whether the strategy is on track? Not the forty metrics in your dashboard. The three or four that actually matter.

When a founder can answer these questions in plain language, language that a new employee could understand on their first day, the clarity is articulated. Until then, it is personal insight. Personal insight does not scale.

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Layer Two: The Quarterly Execution Rhythm

Twelve months is too long. One month is too short. In my experience, the natural rhythm of strategic execution is the quarter. Long enough to make meaningful progress. Short enough to course-correct before you have gone too far in the wrong direction.

Here is what a quarterly execution rhythm looks like in practice.

At the start of each quarter, the leadership team identifies three to five priorities, not twenty, not ten, three to five, that represent the most important things to advance in the next ninety days. These are not the only things happening in the business. But they are the things that matter most for the strategy. The things that, if they do not get done, the annual goals are at risk.

Each priority has an owner, a single person who is accountable for the outcome. Not a committee. Not "the team." One name. This is not about blame. It is about clarity. When everyone is accountable, no one is accountable. When one person owns it, the path from intention to action becomes visible.

Each priority has a measurable outcome, not an activity, but a result. Not "work on improving client retention" but "reduce quarterly churn from eight percent to five percent." The difference matters. Activities can be performed without achieving anything. Outcomes cannot be faked.

And then, and this is the part that most companies resist, you check in on these priorities every week. Not in a long, painful meeting. In a short, focused cadence where each priority owner reports: on track, off track, or stuck. If on track, great. If off track, what is the plan to recover? If stuck, what help is needed?

This weekly check-in is not micromanagement. It is the immune system of the execution rhythm. It catches drift early, before it becomes a crisis. It creates social accountability, not punitive, but real. When you know you will be reporting on your priority next week, you are more likely to advance it this week.

I have seen organisations implement this rhythm and see results within a single quarter. Not because the rhythm is magic, but because most organisations have no shortage of talent, energy, or strategic instinct. What they lack is the structure that keeps those resources focused on what matters most.

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Layer Three: The Accountability Architecture

Rhythms without accountability are rituals. They look good on the calendar, but they do not change behaviour.

Accountability, in the way I mean it, is not about consequences for failure. It is about commitments that are visible, specific, and regularly examined. It is about creating an environment where it is normal to say "I committed to this, and I did not deliver, and here is what happened, and here is what I am going to do differently."

That environment does not happen by accident. It has to be designed.

Here is what I have seen work. First, the leadership team models it. If the founder and senior leaders are not publicly accountable for their own commitments, if they exempt themselves from the same discipline they expect of others, the system collapses. I have watched this happen more times than I

can count. The founder who insists on quarterly priorities for the team but does not report on their own. The CEO who demands weekly updates but never provides them. Accountability flows from the top. If it does not start there, it does not work anywhere.

Second, accountability is paired with support. When someone reports that they are off track, the response is not criticism. It is curiosity. What happened? What got in the way? What would help? This is not softness. This is intelligence. If a capable person is not delivering on a commitment, there is a reason, and that reason is usually systemic, not personal. Maybe the priority was not realistic. Maybe a dependency was not identified. Maybe the person needs a resource or a decision that has not been provided.

An accountability conversation that surfaces those blockers is valuable. An accountability conversation that punishes the person for being honest about being off track is destructive. It teaches people to hide problems, which is the exact opposite of what you need.

Third, accountability includes the right to renegotiate. This was something I learned the hard way in my own company. Early on, when I set quarterly priorities, they were sacred. If something changed, a new opportunity, a market shift, a client crisis, we still held to the original priorities because changing them felt like weakness.

That is not discipline. That is rigidity. And rigidity breaks under pressure.

The better approach is to create a clear process for renegotiating priorities mid-quarter. Not casually, you do not want people abandoning commitments because something more interesting came along. But formally, with a real conversation about why the change is warranted and what the implications are. This gives the system flexibility without sacrificing structure.

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Layer Four: The Feedback Loop

The final layer is what closes the circle. At the end of each quarter, before setting the next quarter's priorities, the leadership team conducts a retrospective. Not on the business results, though those matter. On the system itself.

What worked in our execution process? What did not? Where did we lose focus? Where did our priorities prove wrong? What surprised us? What would we do differently if we could do this quarter again?

This meta-learning, learning about how you learn, executing on how you execute, is what separates organisations that improve over time from organisations that repeat the same mistakes in different costumes. Most companies do some version of a quarterly review. Very few review the review process itself. And so the system stays static while the business changes around it.

I have drawn this discipline directly from my work with quality management systems and operational standards. In ISO thinking, continuous improvement is not an aspiration, it is a structural requirement. You build the feedback loop into the process so that the process itself gets better with each cycle. The same principle applies to strategic execution.

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Let me tell a story about what this looks like in practice.

I worked with a founder, a manufacturing business, about two hundred employees, growing rapidly but chaotically. Revenue was up, but so were errors, client complaints, and employee turnover. The founder was brilliant, visionary, energetic, full of ideas. But the business could not absorb the ideas fast enough. Every week brought a new initiative, a new priority, a new direction. The team was exhausted from changing course, and the founder was frustrated that nothing seemed to stick.

The problem was not the founder's vision. It was the absence of a system to carry it.

We started simple. Three priorities for the quarter. Not twelve. Three. The founder resisted, three felt insufficient for the pace of opportunity. But I asked a question I ask often: "If these three things were done excellently by the end of the quarter, would you be satisfied?"

After some honest reflection, the answer was yes.

We established the weekly check-in, fifteen minutes, standing up, each priority owner reporting red, yellow, or green. The first few weeks felt mechanical. By week four, it was the most productive meeting in the

company. Not because of the format, but because it was the first time the leadership team had a shared, real-time picture of what was actually happening against what they had committed to.

By the end of the first quarter, all three priorities were delivered. Not two of three. All three. The founder was surprised. He said something I have heard many times since: "I thought we needed more capacity. We just needed more focus."

That is the power of building the system around clarity. The clarity tells you what matters. The system makes sure it happens.

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I want to address a concern that operationally-minded readers might have. There is a risk, when you formalise execution this way, of creating bureaucracy. Of adding layers of process that slow the organisation down rather than speeding it up. I have lived this risk. I have seen companies implement quality management systems that became ends in themselves, where compliance with the process became more important than the outcome the process was supposed to serve.

The antidote is simplicity. Every element of the system should pass a single test: does this make it more likely that we will do what matters most? If the answer is no, if the meeting exists because it has always existed, if the report is produced because someone once asked for it, if the process serves the process rather than the outcome, remove it.

Systems without clarity are bureaucracy. I said that at the beginning of this chapter, and I mean it. If you do not have clarity about where you are going and what matters most, any system you build will be a cage. The system exists to serve the clarity, never the other way around.

But with clarity, real, articulated, shared clarity, the right system is liberating. It takes the strategy out of the founder's head and distributes it across the organisation. It creates shared language and shared expectations. It makes progress visible and problems surfaceable. It lets the team execute without waiting for the founder to tell them what to do next.

And it lets the founder do the work that only they can do: seeing the horizon, shaping the direction, making the decisions that no system can make

for you.

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I think about my own journey with this. The Art of Service did not always have good systems. In the early years, the system was me, my attention, my memory, my capacity to hold everything in my head. That worked when we were small. It broke as we grew.

The transition to real operational discipline was not instant. It was iterative. Each quarter, we got a little better at identifying what mattered. Each cycle, the accountability conversations got a little more honest. Each retrospective, we learned something about our own patterns, where we tended to overcommit, where we tended to lose focus, where the drift happened and why.

Over time, the system became something I could trust. Not blindly, I still paid attention, still engaged, still shaped the priorities. But I no longer needed to hold everything. The system held it. And that freed me to think at a different level, to see patterns I could not see when I was buried in execution, to ask questions that do not occur to you when you are focused on this week's deliverables.

That, I believe, is the real gift of building the system around clarity. Not efficiency, though you get that. Not accountability, though you get that too. Freedom. The freedom that comes from knowing that the important things are being attended to, so that you can attend to the things that no one else can see.

Every founder I know wants that freedom. Very few have built the structure to make it possible. They are still the system. They are still the one holding everything together through personal effort and attention and will.

That works. Until it does not. And by the time it stops working, you have usually lost more than you realise, time, health, relationships, the very perspective that made you valuable as a leader in the first place.

Build the system. Trust the system. And then use the space it creates to do the work that only you can do.

CHAPTER 13

# Leading Whole

Frank arrived eight weeks early.

I want to tell you the story calmly, because I have told it many times and I have learned how to tell it with composure. But the truth is that there was nothing calm about it. One moment I was managing a growing business, planning for a baby, thinking about timelines and logistics, and the next moment I was in a hospital room watching my son fight for air, smaller than seemed possible, and everything I thought I knew about priorities rearranged itself in an instant.

He was so small. That is what I remember most vividly, not the machines or the medical terminology or the conversations with doctors who were careful with their words. Just how small he was. And how the world I had been living in, the world of strategic plans and quarterly targets and client deadlines, suddenly seemed very far away and very unimportant.

I do not tell this story for sympathy. I tell it because Frank's arrival was the moment I stopped being able to pretend that the different parts of my life existed in separate compartments. Until then, I had been remarkably good at compartmentalisation. Business in this box. Marriage in that box. Health in another. Personal identity somewhere else. I moved between them with efficiency, giving each one focused attention and then closing the lid when I

moved to the next.

Frank blew the lids off all of them at once.

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When your child is in the NICU, you do not check your email. You do not think about product roadmaps. You do not care about the client proposal that was due on Friday. Every cell in your body is oriented toward one thing, and that one thing makes everything else feel absurd.

But here is the difficult truth: the business does not stop. The clients still need things. The team still has questions. The work still exists, indifferent to your personal crisis. And so you are pulled, not in two directions, but in all directions at once. Your body is in the hospital. Your mind is with your child. Your guilt is with the business. Your fear is everywhere.

Gerard and I navigated those weeks together, and they were among the hardest and most clarifying of our lives. Hard because there was no way to do everything well. Clarifying because when you are forced to choose, truly forced, not theoretically, you discover what actually matters. Not what you say matters. What your body and your instincts and your deepest self actually prioritise when the compartments collapse.

Frank is fine. I want to say that clearly, because the story does not deserve to carry unnecessary tension. He grew strong and healthy and became the centre of our world in the way that children do. But the experience left a mark on me that has shaped everything since. It taught me that leadership is not sustainable when it requires you to be fragmented. When it requires you to sacrifice your health for your business, your relationships for your ambition, your identity for your company.

That kind of leadership works for a while. It works until the NICU. Until the marriage crisis. Until the health scare. Until the moment when the compartments fail, and you discover that the version of you that exists in the business box cannot function without the version that exists in all the other boxes.

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I want to be careful here, because I am not offering wellness advice. I have no interest in telling founders to meditate more or drink green juice or practice gratitude journaling. That is not what this chapter is about.

This chapter is about operational reality. It is about the fact that a founder who is physically depleted, relationally disconnected, and emotionally running on fumes will make bad strategic decisions no matter how good their framework is. Not because they are weak. Because they are human. And human cognition, human judgement, human creativity, they all degrade under sustained neglect.

I have seen this so many times. The founder who is brilliant in the morning and erratic by the afternoon because they slept four hours. The founder who makes sharp strategic calls in the boardroom and terrible emotional decisions at home because they have nothing left to give. The founder who built an extraordinary company and woke up one day to find that their marriage was a business partnership with a shared address and nothing else.

These are not personal failings. They are predictable outcomes of a system that treats the founder as an infinite resource. And most founders, especially in the early years, especially when the company is fragile, especially when every dollar and every hour feels critical, willingly participate in that system. They sacrifice sleep and exercise and time with the people they love, not because someone forces them to, but because the culture of entrepreneurship tells them that sacrifice is the price of building something meaningful.

I believed that for a long time. I do not anymore.

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Let me talk about the move from the Netherlands to Australia, because it is part of this story.

When Gerard and I left the Netherlands in 2000, we were leaving everything familiar. Family, friends, language, culture, the landscape that had shaped both of us. We were moving to Brisbane, a city we barely knew, in a country we had visited but never lived in, to build a business from nothing.

That move was exhilarating and isolating in equal measure. Exhilarating because everything was new, because we were young and in love and building

something, because the distance from everything familiar felt like freedom. Isolating because we had no network, no safety net, no one to call when things went wrong except each other.

Gerard and I became each other's everything. Business partner, spouse, best friend, confidant, co-strategist, emotional support. That intensity bonded us in a way that I think only people who have built something together far from home can understand. But it also created a dependency that was not entirely healthy. When your partner is also your co-founder, there is no one to complain to about your co-founder. When your co-founder is also your partner, there is no one to complain to about your partner. The circuit is closed.

We had to learn, over many years, how to open that circuit. How to build friendships and support structures that existed independently of our partnership. How to have separate identities, separate interests, separate relationships, separate sources of meaning, so that the business and the marriage did not consume each other.

This is harder than it sounds. When you share a business with your life partner, the business is always available as a topic of conversation. It is always there, demanding attention, creating urgency. A dinner that starts personal drifts to business within twenty minutes, because the business is the biggest shared thing in your life and it always has something that needs discussing.

We had to become deliberate about protecting the non-business parts of our relationship. Not because the business was not important. Because the relationship was the foundation the business stood on, and if the foundation eroded, the business would eventually follow.

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I do not think enough founders talk about this, the guilt of competing priorities.

When I was at work, I felt guilty about not being with Frank. When I was with Frank, I felt guilty about the things I was not doing for the business. When I was at a conference, I felt guilty about missing a dressage event. When I was at the arena, I felt guilty about the emails piling up. The guilt was omnidirectional and constant, a low hum that accompanied every activity

and prevented me from being fully present in any of them.

I have spoken with hundreds of founders through my EO work, as Chapter President, as Area Director, as APAC Leadership Director, as a mentor and coach, and this guilt is nearly universal. It is especially acute among founders who are also parents, and it is especially unspoken among men, who are often expected to simply manage it without acknowledgment.

The guilt does not resolve through better time management. I tried that. I optimised my calendar. I batch-processed. I created systems and routines and boundaries. And still the guilt was there, because the guilt is not about time. It is about identity. It is about the impossible feeling that you should be able to be fully present in every role simultaneously, and the constant evidence that you cannot.

What resolved it, or at least reduced it to a manageable level, was a shift in thinking that I am going to try to articulate, though it resists neat formulation.

I stopped trying to be equally present everywhere and started trying to be genuinely present wherever I was.

Not half-present, with my phone in my hand and my mind on the quarterly results. Not performatively present, going through the motions of family time while mentally drafting an email. Actually present. Which meant that sometimes the business did not get my attention when it wanted it. And sometimes the family did not get my attention when they wanted it. But when each part of my life did get my attention, it got the real thing. Not the depleted, distracted, guilt-ridden remnant.

That shift was not a productivity hack. It was a decision about what kind of life I wanted. And I made it because Frank's premature arrival had shown me, in the starkest possible terms, what happens when the compartments collapse and you discover you have been spread so thin that there is nothing substantial left in any of them.

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I want to talk about dressage, because people are sometimes surprised when they learn about it, and because it illustrates something important about maintaining identity outside the business.

I am a C-level dressage judge with Equestrian Australia. I judge most weekends. This means that on Saturday and Sunday mornings, while many founders are catching up on email or squeezing in extra work hours, I am standing in an arena watching horses and riders perform movements that require extraordinary precision, balance, and communication between two beings who do not share a language.

People ask me why. How do I justify the time? Would those hours not be better spent on the business?

And my answer is: no. Those hours are what make the rest of the hours work.

Dressage judging requires a quality of attention that is completely different from business thinking. It is embodied. It is immediate. It is about what is happening right now, in this movement, with this horse and this rider. There is no strategy, no quarterly targets, no email thread to resolve. There is only the arena and the test and the quality of what I am seeing.

That quality of attention, sustained, focused, non-commercial, is something I cannot get from the business. And I have come to believe that it is essential. Not as a hobby. Not as a luxury. As a practice that keeps me whole. That reminds me, every weekend, that I am a person with eyes and judgement and expertise that exists independently of any company.

When I come back to the business on Monday, I am sharper. Not because I rested, judging is not restful. Because I was fully engaged in something that had nothing to do with The Art of Service. My mind had to work differently. My identity had to be sourced from something other than the business. And that temporary disconnection created perspective that is available no other way.

I tell this to founders who have lost every interest outside their company. Who cannot remember the last time they did something that was not business, networking, or business-adjacent networking. Who have allowed their identity to narrow until it is indistinguishable from their role.

That narrowing is dangerous. Not because it is unhealthy, though it is, but because it degrades your leadership. A founder with no identity outside the business will make decisions that are warped by the need for the business to succeed at any cost, because the business succeeding is the only way they

know how to feel okay. They cannot evaluate an opportunity objectively because they need it too much. They cannot walk away from a bad deal because walking away threatens the only thing that gives them meaning.

Maintaining something outside the business, something real, something you care about, something that makes demands on you, is not self-care. It is strategic infrastructure. It is the foundation that allows you to lead with perspective rather than desperation.

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I want to come back to the relationship between physical health and decision quality, because this is where the operational argument is most concrete.

There is extensive research, which I will not cite in detail because this is not a textbook, demonstrating that sleep deprivation degrades cognitive function in ways that are measurable and significant. Decision-making, risk assessment, emotional regulation, creative problem-solving, they all decline sharply when you are consistently underslept. The research is not ambiguous. A founder operating on five hours of sleep is cognitively impaired in ways that are comparable to being mildly intoxicated.

And yet. The culture of entrepreneurship celebrates the early riser, the late worker, the person who sacrifices sleep for progress. The founder who tells you they sleep four hours a night is often admired rather than concerned about. The one who leaves the office at five to go for a run is sometimes viewed with suspicion, are they really committed?

I have been on both sides of this. I have been the founder who wore exhaustion as a badge. And I have been the founder who decided, deliberately and against cultural pressure, that seven hours of sleep was non-negotiable. That exercise was not optional. That the physical vehicle carrying my judgement needed to be maintained if I wanted the judgement to be any good.

The difference in decision quality is not subtle. It is dramatic. I make better decisions when I have slept. I am more patient, more perceptive, more creative, more willing to sit with ambiguity instead of lunging for a premature answer. I am a better leader when I am physically well. This is not a confession. It is a fact.

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Sustainable leadership is not a separate topic from business leadership. It is the same topic. Because the business does not exist in a vacuum. It is led by a person. And that person is a biological, relational, emotional being whose capacity for good judgement is directly tied to how well they are cared for.

I learned this through experience that I would not wish on anyone, through the terror of a premature birth, through the strain of building a marriage while building a business across continents, through years of giving so much to the company that there was not enough left for anything else.

And I learned it through the slow, deliberate process of rebuilding a life that was integrated rather than compartmentalised. Where the business, the marriage, the parenting, the dressage, the health, the friendships were not competing priorities fighting for a finite resource. Where they were different expressions of a single, whole person.

Leading whole. That is what I call it. Not leading and then trying to have a life in the margins. Leading from a place of integration, where the business is important but not everything, where your identity includes your company but is not consumed by it, where you can make clear-eyed strategic decisions because you are not running on fumes and desperation.

This is not idealism. This is what I have built, imperfectly and over many years, through a process of trial and error and loss and recovery.

And it is what I believe every founder can build, if they are willing to stop treating themselves as an infinite resource and start treating themselves as the most critical piece of infrastructure in their company.

Because you are. Your judgement. Your perspective. Your capacity to see clearly. Your ability to be present, truly present, for the decisions that matter. These are the most valuable assets in your business. And they are the most neglected.

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Frank is grown now. I look at him and I see the person whose arrival rearranged my entire understanding of what matters. Not because children

are more important than work, I do not believe in that simple hierarchy. But because his early, dramatic entrance into the world showed me that the compartmentalised life I was living was an illusion. That I was not five separate people, founder, wife, mother, professional, individual, but one person, and that one person needed to be whole if any of the roles were going to be done well.

Gerard and I built something remarkable together. Not just the business, though the business, operating in over one hundred and sixty countries after twenty-five years, is something I am genuinely proud of. But the partnership. The marriage that survived the pressures that destroy most entrepreneurial relationships. The family that grew alongside the company rather than in spite of it.

None of that happened by accident. It happened because, at a certain point, we decided that the business would not be allowed to consume everything else. That our health mattered. That our relationship mattered. That our separate identities mattered. That Frank mattered more than any deal or deadline.

Those decisions cost us, sometimes. There were opportunities we did not pursue because the timing conflicted with something personal. There were growth rates we did not achieve because we chose sustainability over speed. There were moments when a different founder, one willing to sacrifice more, might have built something bigger.

But I do not believe they would have built something better. And I do not believe they would have built something that lasted.

Because the companies that endure are led by people who endure. And people endure not by being tougher, but by being whole.

# From Achievement to Meaning

There is a dinner I remember. It was at an EO event, I cannot recall which one, because after twenty years they layer on top of one another, and I was sitting next to a founder who had just sold his business for more money than he had ever imagined making.

He should have been celebrating. People around the table were congratulating him, raising glasses. And he was smiling, saying the right things. But at one point he turned to me and said, very quietly, "I thought I would feel different."

I knew exactly what he meant. Not because I had sold a business, I had not, and still have not, but because I had experienced that same strange gap between achieving the thing and feeling the thing. The distance between what is supposed to matter and what actually does.

That gap is what this chapter is about. And it is, in many ways, what the second half of this book has been building toward.

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There is a concept that has been articulated by various thinkers, David Brooks wrote about it, though he was building on older ideas, called the "second

mountain." The metaphor is straightforward. The first mountain is achievement. You climb it because that is what ambitious people do. You set goals, you work hard, you accumulate success. The view from the top is meant to be the reward.

And sometimes it is. For a while.

But for a certain kind of person, the kind who is reading this book, I suspect, there comes a moment on that first summit when you look around and think, "Is this it?" Not with ingratitude. Not with cynicism. But with a genuine confusion that the thing you chased for years, the thing that consumed your best energy and sharpest thinking, has not delivered what you unconsciously believed it would deliver.

It has delivered success. It has not delivered meaning.

These are different things, and the failure to distinguish between them is the source of enormous quiet suffering among people who, by any reasonable standard, should be thriving.

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I want to be careful here, because I know how this can sound. It can sound like a wealthy person complaining about being wealthy. It can sound ungrateful, tone-deaf, indulgent.

It is none of those things. The search for meaning after achievement is not a luxury problem. It is a human problem that happens to afflict people who have been successful enough to see through the illusion that success solves everything.

I have sat with founders who run hundred-million-dollar businesses and who have not slept well in years, not because of stress, but because they have lost the sense of why they are doing what they are doing. I have sat with leaders who have more freedom than they ever imagined and who feel more trapped than ever, because the business they built has become a golden cage and they cannot see a way out that does not look like failure.

This is not weakness. It is clarity arriving late. It is what happens when you are so good at climbing that you never stopped to ask whether you were on the right mountain.

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My own experience of this shift was gradual. There was no single moment where I transitioned from the first mountain to the second. It was more like a long season of rethinking.

For the first decade of The Art of Service, the work was pure building. Gerard and I were creating something from nothing. Every new country we reached, every product we launched, every milestone we hit, it all felt urgent and meaningful in the way that only new things can. There was no gap between achievement and purpose because the achievement was the purpose. We were surviving, growing, proving that the thing we had started in our living room in Brisbane could actually work.

That phase has its own particular energy. If you have ever started a business, you know it. The adrenaline of uncertainty. The satisfaction of solving a problem that no one else was going to solve for you. The intimacy of building something with the person you love, where every decision is shared and every setback is personal.

I do not romanticise that period. It was also exhausting, frightening, and lonely. But it was coherent. What I was doing and why I was doing it were the same thing.

Somewhere in the second decade, they started to separate.

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The Art of Service continued to grow. We were in more than 160 countries. The products were selling. The business was healthy. And I was increasingly restless in a way I did not have language for.

I poured that restlessness into EO. I became Chapter President of EO Brisbane. Then Area Director. Then APAC Leadership Director. I chaired the Regional Leadership Academy. I became an Official EO Mentor, working with entrepreneurs running businesses above a million in revenue. I coached Accelerator members. I facilitated Strategy Summits.

Each role was meaningful. I want to be clear about that. I was not collecting titles for the sake of my curriculum vitae. Each role taught me

something real, challenged me in a specific way, connected me with people who made me sharper and more honest.

But each role also required me to answer the question "why am I doing this?", and the answer kept changing.

When I became Chapter President, the answer was straightforward: I wanted to give back to an organisation that had given me so much. I wanted to serve. That was true and it was sufficient.

When I moved into Area Director, the answer shifted. I was not just serving a local chapter anymore. I was shaping something larger, influencing how the organisation operated across a region. The "why" became about impact at scale.

When I took on the APAC leadership roles, the answer shifted again. Now it was about legacy. About building infrastructure that would outlast my involvement. About asking what the organisation needed to be, not just what it needed to do.

And when I became a mentor, when I started sitting across from individual entrepreneurs and trying to help them see what they could not see themselves, the answer became the simplest and the hardest of all: I was doing this because it was the truest expression of what I had to offer.

Not my knowledge. Not my experience. Not my network or my credentials or my track record. What I had to offer was the ability to see patterns that other people were living inside of. And the willingness to name those patterns honestly, even when the naming was uncomfortable.

That was the second mountain. I just did not recognise it as such for a long time.

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In 2013, or maybe it was 2014, the years blur, I was named one of Australia's 50 Most Influential Women Entrepreneurs.

I should tell you what that felt like, because it is instructive.

It felt good. Of course it did. You do not spend years building something and then feel nothing when someone recognises the building. I was proud. Gerard was proud. My family was proud. People sent messages. It was, by any measure, a lovely thing.

And it changed absolutely nothing inside me.

That is not false modesty. It is the honest truth. The recognition validated what other people already saw. It did not address what I was wrestling with privately, which was the growing awareness that external validation, no matter how meaningful or well-deserved, is not the same as internal alignment.

I think about this often when I work with founders who are chasing awards, or press coverage, or a spot on a list. I do not tell them to stop chasing it. Recognition matters. It opens doors. It builds credibility. It is a legitimate tool in the business of building a business.

But I do tell them this: if you are hoping that the recognition will resolve the thing you feel when you are alone with your thoughts at two in the morning, it will not. It will give you a lovely moment and then deposit you right back where you were, with the same questions and the same unease.

The work of resolving that unease is internal. And it does not come with a trophy.

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The experience that actually shifted something fundamental for me was the MIT Entrepreneurial Masters Program.

I need to explain why, because it was not what I expected.

I went to MIT expecting to learn. I am a learner by nature, it is one of the things that has served me well as an entrepreneur and one of the things that occasionally trips me up, because learning can become a way of avoiding action. But I went expecting the education to come from the curriculum, from the professors, from the structured content.

What I got instead was the education that comes from sitting in a room with people who are smarter than you in ways you did not know existed.

The MIT EMP cohort was extraordinary. Not because they were all billionaires or visionaries, though some were, but because they operated from premises I had never examined in myself. They asked questions I had not considered. They challenged ideas I did not even realise I held.

That experience taught me something that I now believe is one of the most important lessons for any leader: the difference between learning

information and learning to think differently.

Information is what you can get from a book, a course, a podcast. Thinking differently is what happens when you are surrounded by people who destabilise your certainty, not aggressively, not disrespectfully, but simply by being different enough that your own assumptions become visible to you.

Before MIT, I knew a lot. After MIT, I knew how much of what I knew was framework and how little was genuine understanding.

That distinction, between framework and understanding, became central to my work. It is why I tell the leaders I advise that tools are necessary but not sufficient. EOS is useful. Scaling Up is useful. Strategic planning is useful. But if all you have is tools, what you have is a very efficient way of doing things that may not need doing.

The question underneath the tools is always the same: what are you actually trying to build, and why?

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The shift from achievement to meaning is not a one-time event. I want to be honest about that, because I think there is a temptation to narrate it as a neat before-and-after story. "I was chasing success, and then I had an epiphany, and now I chase meaning."

That is not how it works. At least, that is not how it worked for me.

It is more like a gradual reorientation. The compass is slowly recalibrating. Some days it points clearly toward meaning, and you feel aligned and purposeful and sure. Other days it swings back toward achievement, toward the old metrics, toward the scoreboard that used to be the only one that mattered.

The difference is not that you stop caring about achievement. I still care about building things that work. I still care about results, about impact, about doing excellent work. I am not some ascetic who has renounced worldly success in favour of spiritual contemplation.

The difference is in the order of operations. Achievement used to come first, and meaning was something I hoped would follow. Now meaning comes first, and achievement is how I express it.

That sounds simple. It took me about fifteen years to figure out.

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What I have noticed in my work with founders and leaders is that the transition from achievement to meaning often begins with a feeling of boredom or restlessness that the person cannot explain.

They come to me and say something like, "I should be happy. I have everything I wanted. Why do I feel like this?"

And the answer, in my experience, is almost always the same: because you have outgrown the question you were answering.

When you start a business, the question is, "Can I make this work?" That is a compelling question. It has urgency, stakes, drama. It organises your energy and your attention.

When you scale a business, the question becomes, "Can I make this bigger?" Also compelling, though in a different way. It is more about systems, leverage, multiplication.

But at some point, and this is the point most people are at when they find their way to me, the question shifts again. It becomes, "What is all of this for?" And that question does not have a clean answer. It does not resolve through better systems or more ambitious targets. It requires a different kind of thinking entirely.

It requires you to sit with the discomfort of not knowing. To resist the entrepreneurial instinct to fix, optimise, solve. To let the question be a question for long enough that a genuine answer can emerge, not a borrowed answer from someone else's framework, but your own.

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I remember a conversation with a member I was mentoring through EO. He was running a business doing about four million in revenue, growing steadily, profitable. By any measure, he was doing well. But he was miserable.

We sat together for nearly two hours, and for the first hour he talked about the business. The operational challenges. The team issues. The strategic decisions. I listened and nodded and asked clarifying questions.

Then, about seventy minutes in, there was a pause. A long one. And he said, "The truth is, I do not care about any of that."

That was the moment. Not the first hour of business talk. The single sentence underneath it.

He did not care about the business problems. He cared about the fact that he had spent twelve years building something that he no longer recognised as his. It had become a machine, and he had become a component of the machine, and the thing he had loved about starting the business, the freedom, the creativity, the sense of building something that mattered, had been optimised out of existence.

That is the first mountain. That is what it looks like when you reach the summit and realise you climbed the wrong one.

The second mountain, for him, was not a new business. It was not a pivot or an exit. It was a fundamental reorientation of his relationship to the business he already had. It was finding a way to reconnect the daily work with the deeper purpose that had started the whole thing.

That is harder than starting over. Starting over is exciting. Reconnecting is just hard.

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I am still on my second mountain. I do not know if I will ever reach its summit, and I am no longer sure that summits are the point.

What I know is this: the work I do now, advising, mentoring, speaking, writing this book, comes from a different place than the work I did in my first decade of business. It comes from a desire to be useful in a specific way, to the specific people who need what I have learned.

Not everyone. Not the whole market. Not the broadest possible audience.

The specific people who are standing where I once stood, feeling what I once felt, and looking for someone to tell them that the feeling is not a problem to be solved. It is an invitation to be accepted.

The invitation is always the same: stop performing and start asking. Stop optimising and start reflecting. Stop building and start noticing what you have already built, not the business, but yourself.

Because in the end, the business is a vehicle. It is a magnificent, complicated, absorbing vehicle. But it is still a vehicle. And the question that matters most is not "how fast is it going?" but "where is it taking you?"

If you cannot answer that, if the question makes you uncomfortable, if you instinctively reach for metrics or milestones instead of meaning, then you may be on the first mountain.

And the second one is waiting.

# The Leaders Who Changed Me

I do not believe in self-made anything. The term is a flattering lie we tell in entrepreneurial circles, and I stopped using it years ago.

Every idea I have ever had that was worth having came from, or was sharpened by, someone else. Every shift in my thinking, every moment where I moved from one level of understanding to another, was catalysed by a conversation, a challenge, a question from someone who saw me more clearly than I saw myself.

This chapter is about those people. Not as a list of acknowledgements, I have no interest in the kind of gratitude that reads like an awards-show speech. This is about specific moments. The exact words, the exact context, the exact way a particular person broke through my certainties and left something more useful in their place.

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I should start with Gerard, because he was first.

People sometimes ask me what it is like to build a business with your spouse. The honest answer is that it is the hardest and most rewarding thing I have ever done, and those two qualities are inseparable. You cannot have one

without the other.

Gerard and I met in the Netherlands in 1996. By 2000 we had moved to Brisbane and started The Art of Service from our living room. That was twenty-five years ago, and we are still building together, which either makes us exceptionally compatible or exceptionally stubborn. Probably both.

What Gerard taught me, and this is something I did not fully appreciate until years into our partnership, is the discipline of seeing things as they are, not as you want them to be. I am an optimist by temperament. I see possibilities. I lean toward action, toward movement, toward the next thing. Gerard is more measured. He sees the structural reality of a situation. He asks the questions that slow me down just enough to make better decisions.

Early in our business, I found this frustrating. I wanted to move faster. I wanted to try things, take risks, follow my instincts. Gerard's measured approach felt like resistance.

It was not resistance. It was rigour. And the business we built, the one that has endured for twenty-five years and operates in over 160 countries, was built on the foundation of that rigour. Not on my energy alone, and not on his caution alone, but on the productive tension between them.

That is the first thing I learned about mentorship, though I did not call it that at the time: the people who change you most are not the ones who agree with you. They are the ones who care enough to hold up a different lens.

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When I joined EO, I entered a world structured around a radical premise: that entrepreneurs learn best from each other, not from experts.

This was counterintuitive to me. I had been trained to seek expertise. To find the person who knew the most about a subject and learn from them. The EO model inverted that. It said: sit in a room with people who are living the same challenges you are living, and share your experience, not your advice.

The distinction between experience and advice is one of the most important things I have ever learned, and I learned it in Forum.

Forum, for those unfamiliar, is the small-group experience at the heart of EO. You meet monthly with the same group of entrepreneurs. The structure is precise: you share what is happening in your life and your business, using

specific protocols designed to prevent the conversation from devolving into problem-solving.

This sounds simple. It is extraordinarily difficult. Because every entrepreneur I know, including me, is wired to solve. Someone describes a problem, and my first instinct is to offer a solution. Forum trained me to override that instinct. To sit with someone else's experience without trying to fix it. To trust that the act of sharing, of being witnessed, of having your reality reflected back to you, that this is more powerful than any solution I could offer.

I resisted this at first. I thought it was soft. I thought it was therapy dressed up in business language. I was wrong. Forum was the hardest intellectual and emotional discipline I had ever encountered, and it changed the way I lead, the way I listen, and the way I think about my own experience.

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There was a moment in my Forum group, I will not share names or details, because the confidentiality of Forum is sacred, when a member was going through something that I recognised immediately. The pattern was so clear to me, the path forward so obvious, that I was physically leaning forward, ready to speak, ready to lay out the solution.

The moderator caught my eye and shook her head. Barely perceptible. Just a small motion.

I sat back. I listened. The member continued to speak, and over the course of the next twenty minutes, he arrived at his own answer. Not the answer I would have given. A different one. A better one, because it was his.

That is when I understood what Forum was actually doing. It was not preventing me from helping. It was teaching me the difference between helping and imposing. Between seeing someone clearly and seeing them as a version of myself.

I carry that distinction into every advisory conversation I have. When I sit with a founder now and they describe their challenge, my first job is not to solve it. My first job is to make sure I am seeing them, their reality, their context, their particular version of the problem, and not projecting my own experience onto their situation.

This is simple to describe and almost impossibly hard to practise consistently. I still get it wrong. But the intention is there, and the intention matters.

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The EO accountability lunch is something I want to describe, because it illustrates a kind of mentorship that does not look like mentorship at all.

Once a month, I would sit down with a small group of EO members, sometimes just two or three of us, and we would ask each other one question: "What did you say you would do, and did you do it?"

That is it. No wisdom. No frameworks. No coaching. Just a straightforward accounting of promises made and promises kept.

It sounds almost trivially simple. It was anything but. Because when you sit across from someone who has no agenda except honesty, and you have to answer for the gap between your intentions and your actions, you learn something about yourself that no amount of self-reflection can teach you.

You learn where you lie to yourself.

Everyone lies to themselves. I do it. You do it. The most honest person you know does it. We tell ourselves we are prioritising the important things. We tell ourselves we will get to it next week. We tell ourselves the reason we did not follow through was external, the market shifted, the team was not ready, the timing was wrong.

The accountability lunch stripped away those stories. It did not do it cruelly. It did it simply, by creating a space where the only acceptable answer was the true one.

I learned more about my own patterns of avoidance in those lunches than in any coaching engagement, any seminar, any book. And I learned it because the format demanded honesty without providing any place to hide.

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I want to talk about Verne Harnish, because his influence on my thinking has been significant and specific.

Verne is the founder of the Entrepreneurs' Organisation and the architect of Scaling Up, a methodology that has shaped how thousands of companies think about growth. I have studied his work deeply. I have sat in rooms where he taught. I have watched his ideas ripple through the businesses of people I mentor.

What Verne taught me was not a methodology, though. Methodologies are useful, I have said this before and I will say it again, but what stays with you from a genuine teacher is not the framework. It is the way they think.

Verne thinks in patterns. He sees the underlying structure of business challenges the way a musician hears the chord changes beneath a melody. And being around that kind of thinking, watching someone move fluidly between the specific and the systemic, between the detail and the principle, changed the way I approached my own work.

I began to see that the best leaders are not the ones with the most knowledge. They are the ones with the most pattern recognition. They have seen enough, failed enough, paid attention enough, that they can walk into a new situation and see the shape of it before anyone else does.

This is not magic. It is not genius. It is the accumulated residue of experience, combined with the discipline of reflection. And it is learnable, but only if you are willing to be around people who are further along the path than you are.

That willingness is not always comfortable. It requires you to sit with the reality of what you do not know. It requires you to stop performing expertise and start practising curiosity. For someone like me, someone who had built an identity around being knowledgeable, being competent, being the person with answers, this was a genuine challenge.

Verne's work gave me permission to be a student again. Not a student in the formal sense, but in the deeper sense of someone who is genuinely open to being changed by what they learn.

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The MIT Entrepreneurial Masters Program was where this openness was tested most rigorously.

I have mentioned MIT earlier in this book, but I want to go deeper here, because the experience was formative in ways that are difficult to articulate.

The EMP is not a traditional degree program. It is a cohort-based experience designed specifically for entrepreneurs. You spend time on campus in intensive residencies, and you work on your own ventures between sessions. The curriculum is world-class, but the curriculum is not really the point.

The point is the cohort.

I arrived at MIT expecting to learn from professors. I did learn from professors. But what I learned from my fellow participants was more profound, because it was not theoretical. It was lived.

These were entrepreneurs from around the world, running businesses across every industry imaginable. They were brilliant, driven, accomplished, and they were also, many of them, struggling with the same questions I was struggling with. The questions about meaning and purpose and identity that I described in the previous chapter.

What MIT did was give those questions a context. It gave them legitimacy. In most business environments, asking "What is all of this for?" is seen as weakness, or as a luxury you cannot afford. At MIT, among peers who had earned the right to ask that question, it was seen as the most important question on the table.

I remember a conversation with a fellow participant, I will call him David, which is not his name, over coffee one afternoon. He had built a business doing something like fifty million in revenue. He had a team, a reputation, a track record. And he said to me, "I feel like I have been so busy building the thing that I forgot to decide whether I wanted it."

That sentence lodged in me. It has stayed with me for years. Because it captures the central paradox of entrepreneurship: the very qualities that make you good at building, the drive, the focus, the relentlessness, can also prevent you from stepping back far enough to see what you are building and why.

David did not need advice. He needed a witness. He needed someone to hear what he was saying and not try to fix it, not try to reframe it, not try to make it more palatable. He needed someone to say, "Yes. I see that. It is real."

That is what the best mentorship looks like. Not wisdom dispensed from above. Not frameworks applied from outside. Just one person seeing another person clearly and having the courage to reflect back what they see.

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I want to be honest about the mentors who told me things I did not want to hear.

There have been several. I will not name them all, because some of those conversations were private in a way that does not belong in a book. But I want to describe what it feels like to receive feedback that you are not ready for, because I think this is one of the least discussed aspects of leadership development.

There was a period, I think it was around 2015 or 2016, when I was taking on too much. This is a chronic tendency of mine, and if you are reading this book, it is probably a chronic tendency of yours as well. I was running the business, holding multiple EO roles, advising other companies, travelling constantly. I was productive. I was also, though I did not see it, hollowing out.

Someone I respected, someone who had earned the right to speak plainly to me, said, "Ivanka, you are confusing activity with purpose. You are doing a great deal. But I am not sure you know why."

I did not want to hear that. My first reaction was defensive. I had reasons for everything I was doing. I could justify every commitment, every trip, every role. The justifications were legitimate. They were also beside the point.

Because the point was not whether each individual commitment was worthwhile. The point was whether the aggregate of all those commitments was leading somewhere coherent, or whether I was using busyness as a way to avoid the harder question of what I actually wanted.

It took me months to sit with that feedback honestly. Months. Not because I disagreed with it, I knew, somewhere beneath the defensiveness, that it was true, but because accepting it required me to change. And change, for someone who is performing at a high level, feels like risk.

That is the thing about uncomfortable feedback from people who see you clearly: it is not the hearing that is hard. It is the acting. You can hear the truth

and nod and even agree and then go right back to doing what you were doing. The real work is in letting the truth change your behaviour.

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The importance of being mentored as a prerequisite for mentoring others, this is something I feel strongly about and want to address directly.

I have been an Official EO Mentor for years. I work with entrepreneurs who are building businesses above a million in revenue. It is some of the most meaningful work I do. But I would not be able to do it well if I had not first done the work of being mentored myself.

Being mentored requires vulnerability. It requires you to sit in the position of not knowing, of being seen, of being challenged. It requires you to put aside the identity of the expert and take on the identity of the learner.

If you have not done that work, if you have not sat across from someone who sees your blind spots and felt the discomfort of having them named, then you will not be able to hold that space for someone else. You will default to advice-giving, which is easy. Or to cheerleading, which is pleasant. Or to projection, which is human. But you will not be able to do the thing that actually matters, which is seeing another person clearly and reflecting back what you see.

Every mentor I have valued has been someone who was, themselves, actively being mentored. They were still learning. They were still being challenged. They had not arrived at a plateau of wisdom from which they dispensed insights to the less enlightened. They were in the process, messy, ongoing, unfinished, and that is precisely what made them trustworthy.

I am still in that process. I still have people in my life who tell me what I do not want to hear. I still have moments where I resist the truth of what they are saying. I still have to do the work of letting feedback change me, not just inform me.

This is not a weakness. This is the practice. And anyone who tells you they have outgrown the need for mentorship is someone who has stopped growing.

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There is a thread that connects all of these experiences, Forum, the accountability lunches, Verne's influence, MIT, the mentors who challenged me. The thread is structured honesty.

Not spontaneous honesty. Not the kind of honesty that happens in a crisis or an argument. But the kind that is designed into the fabric of your relationships and your routines. Honesty that is expected, scheduled, inescapable.

I believe this is one of the most undervalued tools in leadership development. We talk endlessly about strategy, about execution, about culture and values and vision. But we rarely talk about the structures we build to ensure that someone, somewhere, is telling us the truth.

Most leaders do not have those structures. Most leaders are surrounded by people who, with the best of intentions, tell them what they want to hear. Not because those people are sycophants, usually they are loyal, hardworking, well-meaning, but because the power dynamics of organisations make honesty risky and agreement safe.

The structures I have described in this chapter, Forum, accountability lunches, the MIT cohort, deep mentoring relationships, all share a common design principle: they remove the risk of honesty. They create a context where truth-telling is not just permitted but required. Where the social contract is built around seeing each other clearly, not around maintaining comfort.

If you do not have those structures in your life, you are flying blind. You might be a good pilot. You might have excellent instincts. But you are still flying blind, and eventually that catches up with you.

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I want to end this chapter with something that might seem small but is, I think, the most important point.

The people who changed me most were not the most impressive. They were not always the most successful, the most articulate, the most credentialed. Some of them were. But some of them were people you would

not notice in a room. People who spoke quietly, who did not perform their intelligence, who did not need to prove anything.

What they shared was a quality I have come to value above almost everything else: the willingness to be present with what is actually happening, rather than what should be happening.

That sounds abstract. Let me make it concrete.

The most important conversation I had at MIT was not with a famous professor or a celebrated entrepreneur. It was with a fellow participant who asked me a single question over lunch: "What would you do if you were not afraid of disappointing anyone?"

I did not have an answer. I still do not have a complete answer. But the question opened something in me that has not closed. It gave me permission to examine all the roles I was playing, business owner, EO leader, mentor, author, mother, wife, and ask which of them I had chosen and which of them I was performing because I was afraid of what would happen if I stopped.

That is what the best mentors do. They do not give you answers. They ask you the question you have been avoiding. And then they sit with you in the discomfort of not knowing, for as long as it takes.

If you are lucky enough to have people like that in your life, protect those relationships. They are rarer and more valuable than you think. And if you do not have them yet, go find them. Not through networking, not through strategic relationship-building, but through the simple act of being honest about what you need and asking for help.

It is, in my experience, the bravest thing a leader can do.

# Who Are You Becoming?

Let me ask you something.

Not about your revenue. Not about your headcount, your market share, your growth rate, your net promoter score. Not about any of the numbers that dominate the conversations you have during the day.

Who are you becoming?

It is a question most leaders never ask, because the doing is so loud that the becoming is inaudible. You are so consumed by what you are building that you never look at what the building is making of you.

But it is the only question that ultimately matters. Because the business will change. The market will shift. The products will evolve or become obsolete. The team will turn over. Everything you are building today is, in some form, temporary.

What is not temporary is who you become in the process of building it.

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If you have read this far, you already know the pattern. You may have recognised it in the first chapter. You may have been reading with a growing sense of familiarity, not because your story is the same as mine, but because

the underlying structure is the same.

You built something. You became good at building. The building became your identity. And now you are standing in the gap between what you have accomplished and what you actually need.

You already know this. You have probably known it for a while. The question is not whether you see the pattern. The question is what you are going to do about it.

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I want to be direct with you, because directness is a form of respect, and I think you have earned it by getting to this point in the book.

The drift you are feeling, if you are feeling it, will not resolve on its own. It will not get better with time, with more success, with a new project, with a sabbatical, with a reorganisation of your calendar. Those things might help at the margins. They will not address the root.

The root is a misalignment between the life you are living and the life you actually want. And the only way to address that misalignment is to look at it directly, name it honestly, and make choices that bring the two closer together.

This is simple to say. It is the hardest thing I know how to do.

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Here is what twenty-five years of building, failing, learning, and sitting across from hundreds of founders has taught me. I will lay it out plainly, not because it is conclusive, it is not, but because I think there is value in naming what I have seen, even if the naming is imperfect.

The best leaders I know are not the most confident. They are the most honest.

Confidence is overrated in leadership. I know this is heresy in entrepreneurial circles, where confidence is treated as a cardinal virtue. But the most effective leaders I have worked with are not the ones who walk into a room certain of their position. They are the ones who walk into a room certain of their commitment to finding the truth, even when the truth is

uncomfortable.

There is a difference between being confident in your ability and being honest about your uncertainty. The best leaders hold both simultaneously. They trust themselves to navigate whatever comes, and they are unflinching in their acknowledgement of what they do not know.

I spent years confusing confidence with certainty. I thought that being a strong leader meant having answers. It does not. Being a strong leader means having the courage to sit with questions long enough for real answers to emerge, not the borrowed answers of frameworks and best practices, but the genuine answers that come from understanding your own situation deeply.

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Clarity is not a permanent state. It is a practice.

This is the second thing twenty-five years has taught me, and it may be the most important.

We talk about clarity as though it is a destination. "I need to get clear." "Once I have clarity, I will act." As though clarity is something you achieve once and then possess forever, like a degree or a certification.

It is not. Clarity is more like physical fitness. It requires daily attention. It atrophies without use. It is never fully achieved, only maintained, refined, and occasionally lost entirely.

I have mornings where I wake up knowing exactly what I need to do and why. I have other mornings where I feel as lost as I did in the first year of business. The difference between now and then is not that I have achieved permanent clarity. It is that I have built the practices, the relationships, the structures, the habits of reflection, that help me recover clarity when it fades.

This is what I try to teach the leaders I work with. Not clarity itself, I cannot give you that, no one can, but the practice of returning to clarity. The discipline of checking in, over and over, with the fundamental questions: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? Is this aligned with who I want to become?

If you ask those questions daily, genuinely ask them, not rhetorically, you will never drift too far. You will still lose your way sometimes. Everyone does. But you will have a compass, and the compass is not a strategy document or a

set of OKRs. The compass is the practice of honest self-inquiry.

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The work of leadership is ultimately the work of becoming someone worth following.

I want to sit with this for a moment, because I think it gets to the heart of everything this book is about.

We spend enormous energy on the external dimensions of leadership. Strategy. Execution. Communication. Culture-building. Decision-making. These are all legitimate and important aspects of leading an organisation.

But underneath all of them, supporting them, animating them, giving them their real power, is the quality of the person doing the leading. Not their skills. Not their experience. Not their intelligence or charisma or track record. The quality of who they are.

I have seen technically brilliant leaders fail because the people around them did not trust who they were. And I have seen leaders with modest technical abilities succeed beyond any reasonable expectation because the people around them could feel the integrity of who they were.

You cannot fake this. You can fake confidence. You can fake competence, at least for a while. You can fake strategic thinking and emotional intelligence and all the other leadership qualities that business schools teach. But you cannot fake being a person of substance. People feel it. They feel the presence or absence of it in every interaction, in every decision, in every moment of pressure.

Becoming a person of substance is not a project with a timeline and a set of deliverables. It is the ongoing work of paying attention to your own life. Of noticing where you are aligned and where you are not. Of making the small corrections, daily, weekly, continually, that keep you moving toward the person you want to be.

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I want to talk about what I see when I look at the leaders who get this right. Not perfectly, no one gets it perfectly, but well enough that their work and

their life feel coherent.

They are honest about their limitations. Not performatively humble, that is a different thing, and I find it grating. Genuinely honest. They know what they are good at, and they know what they are not good at, and they do not spend energy pretending the second category does not exist.

They prioritise relationships over transactions. Not because they are soft or sentimental, but because they have learned that everything of lasting value in business is built on trust, and trust is built in relationships, not in deals.

They take time to think. This sounds obvious, but it is extraordinarily rare. Most leaders I know are so consumed by doing that they have no time left for thinking. And thinking, real thinking, the kind that challenges your assumptions and opens new possibilities, requires time and space and the willingness to not be productive for a while.

They have people in their lives who tell them the truth. Not employees, who have incentives to agree. Not customers, who have their own agendas. But peers, mentors, friends, people who have nothing to gain from telling them what they want to hear and everything to gain from telling them what they need to hear.

They have done their own work. They have looked at their patterns, the habits, the fears, the default responses that shape their leadership, and they have done the unglamorous work of changing the ones that do not serve them.

None of this is exciting. None of it makes for a good keynote or a viral LinkedIn post. But it is what separates the leaders who are building something meaningful from the ones who are building something that merely looks successful.

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I think about Frank sometimes, when I am working with a founder who is struggling with this question of who they are becoming.

Frank, my son, was born eight weeks premature. I have mentioned this elsewhere in the book, but I bring it up again here because the experience of his birth taught me something about leadership that I could not have learned any other way.

When your child is in the neonatal intensive care unit, you discover very quickly what matters. Not intellectually, you already knew intellectually. But viscerally, in a way that rewires your priorities.

Every meeting, every deal, every strategic initiative that had seemed so urgent the week before, it all receded. Not because it stopped being important, but because something more important had arrived, and in the light of that arrival, everything else found its proper proportion.

I do not wish that experience on anyone. But I am grateful for what it taught me, which is this: you do not have to wait for a crisis to recalibrate your priorities. You can choose to do it deliberately, through the practice of asking what actually matters and having the courage to reorganise your life accordingly.

Most people wait for the crisis. The health scare, the relationship breakdown, the business failure. They wait for life to force the reckoning. And then they rebuild, and the rebuilding is often beautiful and meaningful and genuine.

But you do not have to wait. That is the whole point. You can begin the work of alignment right now, today, from wherever you are. Not because something is wrong. But because something could be more right.

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I want to address you directly one more time.

If you have read this far, you are not the kind of person who needs to be convinced. You already feel the pull. You already know that something in your current trajectory needs to shift, not dramatically, perhaps, but fundamentally.

The question is not whether to act. It is when.

And I can tell you, from twenty-five years of experience, that the answer to "when" is almost always "sooner than you think." Not because the situation is urgent in the crisis sense, but because the cost of drift is cumulative. Every day you spend misaligned is a day you cannot get back. And while no single day matters much, the aggregate of hundreds of misaligned days becomes a life that does not feel like yours.

I do not say this to create anxiety. I say it because I have watched too many capable, intelligent, well-meaning leaders defer the hard questions until the deferral became its own answer. They did not decide to stay misaligned. They just never decided not to. And one day they looked up and realised that the life they were living had been shaped by default rather than by design.

You deserve better than default. You have worked too hard, built too much, sacrificed too much to let the most important questions of your life go unanswered because you were too busy answering everyone else's.

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Here is what I believe, stated as plainly as I can state it.

You already have what you need. Not the perfect strategy, not the ideal circumstances, not the right mentor or framework or moment. You have something more fundamental: the awareness that something needs to change. That awareness is the raw material. Everything else is just the work of giving it form.

The form will be different for every person reading this. For some, it will mean restructuring the business so that it serves the life they want, rather than the other way around. For some, it will mean stepping away from a role that no longer fits. For some, it will mean having a conversation they have been avoiding, with a partner, a co-founder, a board, themselves.

For some, it will mean something I cannot predict, because the specifics of your situation are yours alone. I do not know your business, your family, your history, your particular brand of fear and hope and ambition. I cannot prescribe a path. What I can do, what this book has tried to do, is illuminate the terrain.

The terrain is not unfamiliar. You have been here before, even if you did not have a name for it. Every time you outgrew a role, every time you felt the misalignment growing, every time you made a change that scared you and then wondered why you waited so long, you were doing this work. You were answering the question of who you are becoming.

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I started this book by telling you that I do not have all the answers. That is still true. It will always be true. The day I believe I have all the answers is the day I should stop writing, stop advising, stop doing this work entirely.

But I do have this: I have a clear view of the pattern. I have seen it in my own life, in Gerard's, in the lives of hundreds of founders and leaders I have worked with over twenty-five years. And the pattern is this.

The things that got you here will not get you where you need to go. The skills, the habits, the identity that made you successful are necessary but not sufficient for making you whole. At some point, you have to let go of the person who built the thing and become the person who can lead it, or leave it, or transform it, with intention.

That transition is not a failure of the first identity. It is its fulfilment. The builder built well enough that the building is no longer the point. What is left is the question that was always underneath the building, the question you have been circling since the very first chapter of this book and perhaps since long before you picked it up.

Who are you becoming?

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I will leave you with this.

Twenty-five years ago, I sat in a living room in Brisbane with Gerard and a handful of ideas and no certainty about anything except that we were willing to try. I did not know what The Art of Service would become. I did not know that it would reach 160 countries, that I would write bestselling books, that I would be named among Australia's most influential women entrepreneurs, that I would stand on stages and sit in boardrooms and mentor hundreds of founders.

I did not know any of that. And honestly, if I had known it, if someone had laid out the entire trajectory in front of me, I am not sure it would have mattered. Because the achievement, as gratifying as it has been, is not the story. The story is who the achievement made me. Who it forced me to become. The parts of myself I had to shed, and the parts I had to find, and the ongoing negotiation between the two.

That negotiation is not finished. It will never be finished. And I have made my peace with that, not as a resignation, but as a recognition that the work of becoming is the work. There is no final version of yourself that you are heading toward. There is only the practice of paying attention, day after day, and making choices that bring you closer to alignment.

If this book has resonated with you, if you have seen yourself in these pages, if the pattern I have described is one you recognise, then it may be worth a conversation.

I am not selling you anything. I am extending an invitation. The same kind of invitation that the best mentors in my life extended to me: straightforward, without agenda, offered in the belief that honest conversation between two people who take their work seriously is one of the most valuable things in the world.

You know where to find me. And whenever you are ready, I will be here.

Not with answers. With questions.

The good kind.

# A Note on Clarity

Writing this book was not the experience I expected it to be.

I thought it would be an exercise in articulating what I already knew. I have been doing this work, building, advising, mentoring, for twenty-five years. I have given keynotes. I have written guides and frameworks and assessments. I assumed that a book would simply be a longer version of what I had already been saying.

It was not.

Writing this book required me to look at my own patterns with a specificity I had been avoiding. It is one thing to talk about misalignment in a coaching session. It is another thing entirely to sit with a blank page and try to describe, honestly, what misalignment felt like from the inside. To name the moments where I drifted. To admit the times I chose activity over purpose, performance over honesty, the appearance of clarity over the real thing.

The patterns I described in these pages, the drift, the gap between achievement and meaning, the slow hollowing out that comes from building without asking why, I described them because I have seen them in the founders I work with. But I also described them because I have lived them. Every one.

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There is a particular vulnerability in naming these things publicly. In private, in Forum, in mentoring conversations, in the quiet hours with Gerard, I have been honest about this journey for years. But private honesty and public honesty are different animals. Private honesty costs you comfort. Public honesty costs you the carefully constructed image of someone who has it all figured out.

I do not have it all figured out. I want to say that one final time, clearly, without any hedging.

I am still learning how to balance the business with the life I want. I am still learning how to say no to commitments that are meaningful but not essential. I am still catching myself in the patterns I warned you about, the busyness that masquerades as purpose, the achievement that masquerades as fulfilment.

The difference between now and ten years ago is not that I have solved these problems. It is that I have stopped expecting them to be solvable. They are not problems in the engineering sense, things with solutions. They are tensions in the human sense, things that must be managed, attended to, held with care.

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This book is not a destination. It is a mirror.

I held it up to myself first. These pages are the reflection I saw, imperfect, incomplete, but honest. If the reflection resonated with you, it is not because we are the same. It is because the underlying pattern is shared. The specifics of your life are yours. The drift, the questioning, the desire for something more aligned, that belongs to all of us who have built something and then had to ask what it was for.

I do not know what you will do with what you have read. I do not know if it will change anything, or if it will simply confirm something you already felt. Either outcome is fine. This book was never meant to be a catalyst. It was meant to be a companion, something you could sit with, return to, argue

with, set down, and pick up again when the timing was right.

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I want to end with a small truth that took me a long time to learn.

Clarity is not something you find. It is something you practise. And the practice is not grand or dramatic. It is quiet. It is the five minutes before the day starts when you ask yourself what actually matters today. It is the conversation with someone you trust where you say what is true instead of what is convenient. It is the moment of stillness between one commitment and the next, where you check, honestly, without judgement, whether you are still heading in the direction you chose.

That practice is available to you right now. Not after the next milestone, not after the restructure, not after the kids are older or the market settles or the strategy is finalised. Right now.

The rest, the strategy, the growth, the building and scaling and all the magnificent machinery of a life in business, the rest will follow. Or it will not. But you will be awake for it. And being awake, I have come to believe, is the whole point.

Thank you for reading this far. It means more than I can easily say.

Now go be honest with yourself. You already know how.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ivanka Menken is a strategic advisor, executive coach, and international keynote speaker. A graduate of the MIT Entrepreneurial Masters Program, she has spent twenty-five years building The Art of Service into a global operation spanning more than 160 countries.

She has served as EO Chapter President, APAC Leadership Director, and Official EO Mentor, working with founders and senior leaders navigating the complexities of growth, identity, and strategic clarity.

She is a C-level dressage judge with Equestrian Australia, a bestselling author, and lives in Australia with her husband Gerard and their son Frank.

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