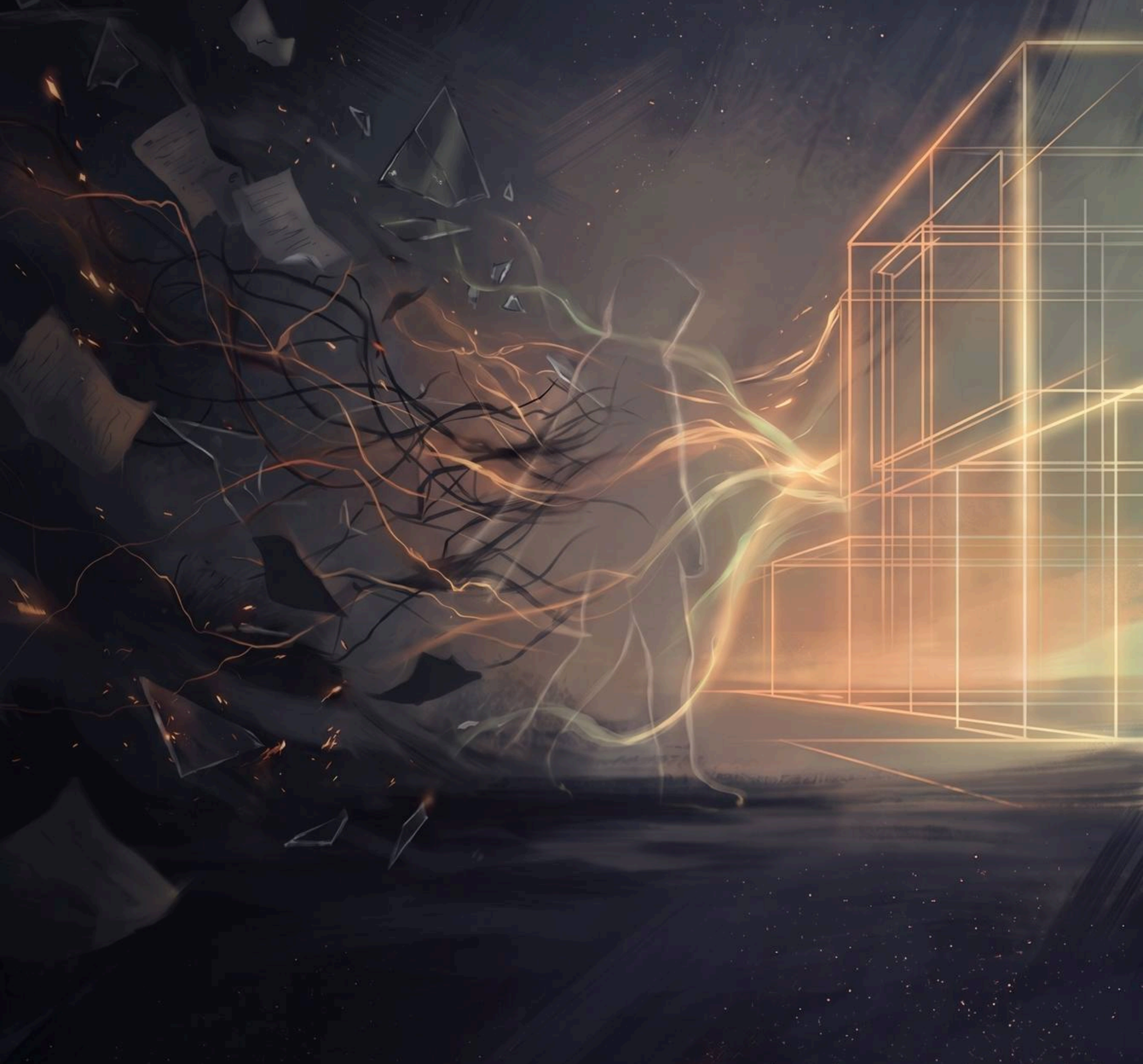
OWN *the* WORK

Your Guide to Personal Responsibility, Initiative, and Performance at Work



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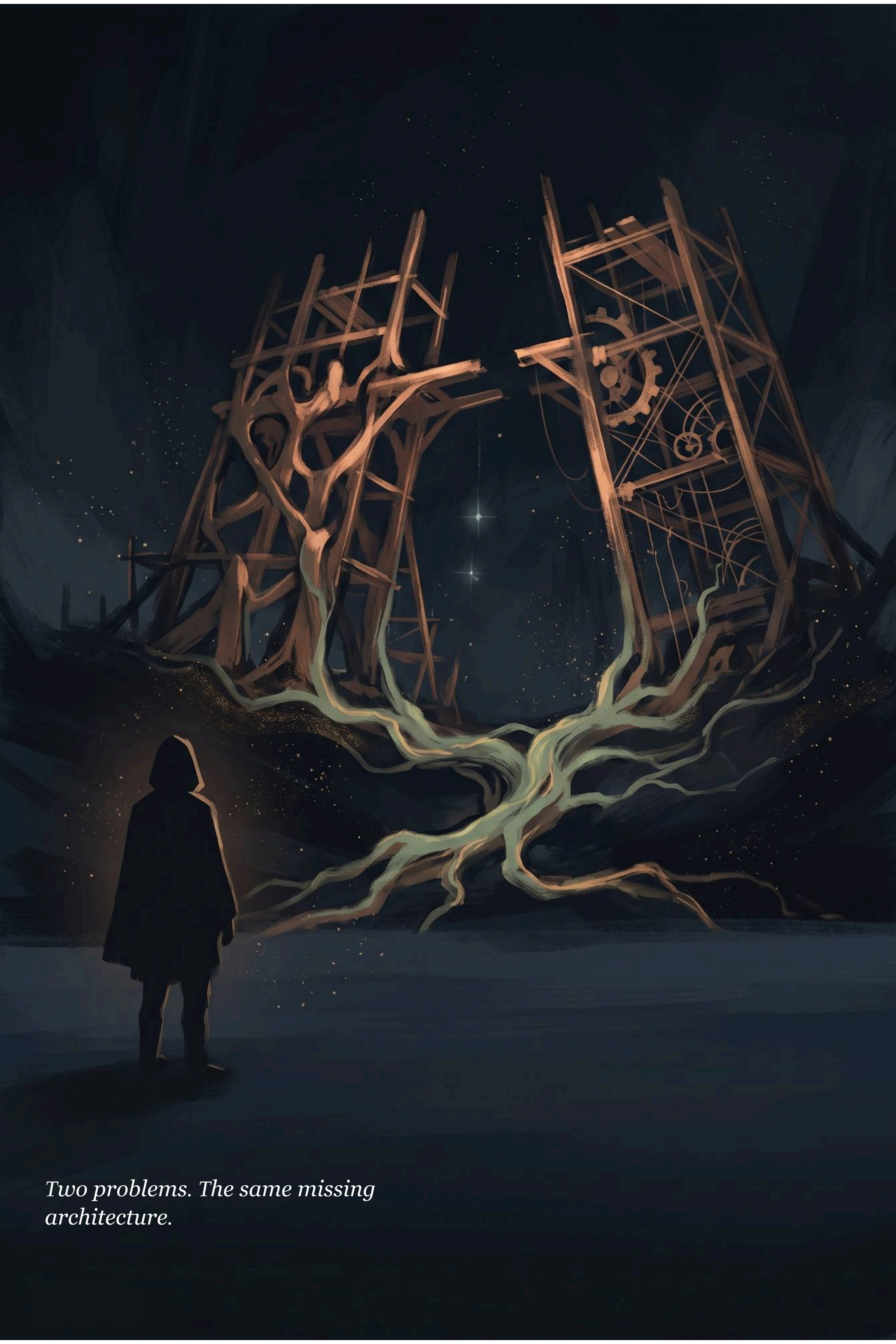
Published in association with TAG.



Two problems. The same missing architecture.

Preface

I have been working for nearly 48 years. Twenty-nine of those years were spent in some form of leadership. In all that time, I have never felt a greater sense of urgency about the need to learn than I do right now.

That urgency is what drove me to write this guide.

This is not a guide about theory. It is not a guide about what leadership ought to look like in the future. It is a guide about you—what you can do, what you can build, and what you can become if you choose to take personal responsibility for your performance and career.

Before I explain what this guide is, I need to explain why it exists.

Two Problems That Share the Same Root Cause

In the last several years, two major workplace transformations have struggled to deliver what organizations expected: artificial intelligence adoption and self-directed teams. Organizations invest heavily in AI tools, platforms, and capabilities, yet broad adoption does not automatically translate into enterprise-wide value. Recent research finds that most organizations are still navigating the move from experimentation to scaled impact, and that workflow redesign is a distinguishing factor among organizations realizing meaningful value. [10] [11] Organizations have also attempted to move toward more autonomous team structures for decades, yet many efforts regress into dependency and supervision.

Across both, I have observed the same root cause: *the transformation was never architected.*

It was announced. It was funded. People were trained. But the work was not designed as a system. You cannot remove a supervisor and call a team self-directed any more than you can hand someone AI tools and call them AI-enabled. In both cases, you create disruption without direction.

Autonomy without structure is not empowerment. It is abandonment.

Why Now Is the Right Time

AI, when used correctly, is not a replacement for human capability. It is an amplifier of it. When a person has the discipline of personal responsibility, the habit of initiative, and the standard of consistent performance, AI can make them faster, sharper, and more capable than an individual working alone.

The human leads. The AI amplifies.

But amplification without architecture produces noise. Handing someone an AI tool without defining what good looks like, what the standards are, and what must always be true is the same mistake as removing a supervisor without replacing supervision with systems. The tool accelerates whatever already exists: discipline or chaos.

That is why human-led, AI-amplified is a discipline, not a slogan. It means encoding standards, frameworks, and decision rules into AI so the system operates within the same architecture you do. Think of it as the pre-flight checklist the co-pilot reads before every flight. You decide where to fly. The checklist ensures the flight is safe.

When both halves are in place, the result is a professional whose AI carries the same standard their employer has defined. The person brings the discipline. The system brings the consistency. Together they produce capability that neither could sustain alone.

The tools now exist to make work visible, learning continuous, and performance measurable in real time. But the technology does not do the work. You do.

What This Guide Is For

If you use this guide well, you will improve how you create and deliver value to your employer. That matters because the value you create is the foundation of every compensation discussion, promotion conversation, and career opportunity you will have.

This is not about working harder. It is about working with greater clarity, ownership, and impact.

The three dimensions developed in this guide—*personal responsibility, initiative, and performance*—are the same dimensions that determine how much trust an organization places in you and how much autonomy you earn as a result.

This guide is equally useful whether you want to build a stronger future with your current employer or explore opportunities elsewhere. Your goals are yours. Your career is yours. What this guide provides is the foundation that makes any destination more reachable.

The World You Are Working In

To own your career, you need to understand the environment you are operating in—not as a victim of it, but as someone who can navigate it with clarity.

Large organizations can sometimes absorb significant disruption because they have layers, resources, and redundancy. Small and medium-sized businesses often cannot. When an SMB loses two or three key people—or when those people are not performing—the entire organization feels it immediately. There is no buffer. The leader who built the organization to grow it can become consumed by managing noise instead. Strategic work stops. Growth slows. The business begins to feel like an exercise in fighting fires.

This is what navigating Class 6 rapids looks like: turbulence so severe that it is not a challenge to manage but a situation to avoid entirely. The individuals who create that turbulence are rarely doing so intentionally. They simply have not developed the discipline, initiative, or performance standard that makes self-direction possible.

Understanding this is not about blaming anyone. It is about seeing clearly what the stakes are—for the organization and for your career within it.

The Law of Diffusion of Innovations—and What It Means for Your Career

Everett Rogers documented a pattern in how new ideas, technologies, and ways of working spread through a population. His diffusion model describes five broad groups. [1]

Group	Share of a Population
Innovators	2.5%
Early Adopters	13.5%
Early Majority	34%
Late Majority	34%
Laggards	16%

Laggards are not bad people. They are not lazy, malicious, or incapable. They simply require more evidence and external pressure before they change. In their personal lives, that is their right. In a business context, particularly in an SMB where every person is load-bearing, that resistance has a cost the organization may not be able to absorb.

You have seen this: someone who makes every change harder than it needs to be and drains the energy of people trying to grow and contribute. That is not a character judgment. It is a development challenge—and one that can be addressed when the right system is in place.

For you, the diffusion model is a career tool. You should be able to answer one question with evidence:

Where do I sit on the adoption curve—and how do I know?

Most people answer a hiring question with skills, experience, or enthusiasm. The person who can say, *"I am an early adopter . Here is the evidence. Here is how I have moved toward change before it was required of me,"* offers a more distinctive answer. This guide helps you build that answer as a documented reality.

The Compensation Conversation—and Personal Responsibility

Compensation is a consistent source of tension between individuals and organizations. In many cases, both sides approach it in a way that makes alignment harder.

Individuals ask for what they need or feel they deserve. Organizations respond based on what they can afford or what the market dictates. The conversation becomes a negotiation rather than a shared examination of value.

A more useful question is this:

Here is the value I believe I deliver to the organization. How do we align my career and compensation with that contribution?

That question requires you to understand what most employees never consider: your employer can sustainably increase compensation only when it has the economic capacity to do so. In an SMB, that normally means increasing revenue, value, or productive capacity without increasing headcount at the same rate.

There will be times when an organization genuinely cannot pay what you are seeking. That is not automatically a betrayal. It may be a business reality. When it is, you have a decision to make. You can help the organization grow to the point where it can. You can find an organization that already can. Or you can stay and accept the current reality while you build toward something better.

What is not useful is to blame the organization, reduce your contribution in protest, or wait for someone else to solve a problem that is yours to address.

Stop blaming. Start deciding.

How to Use This Guide

Read this guide actively, not passively. Each chapter ends with one *Put It Into Practice action*. Complete it, then return to your work.

Before you begin, create a digital document on your computer called *My Own the Work Record.* Use any no-cost tool available to you: a local text or Markdown file, Google Docs, Apple Notes, or another basic document tool. It belongs to you—not your employer—and it can travel with you throughout your career.

After each chapter, add five things to the record:

Record	Purpose
Date	Creates a visible timeline of growth.
Action taken	Documents what you chose to do.
Evidence	Records what happened—not only how you felt.
Client or team impact	Connects effort to value created.
Next improvement	Keeps the journey forward-looking.

Create a recurring 15-minute weekly task or calendar reminder in the tool you already use. Each week, ask:

> *What value did I create this week? What evidence supports it? What will I improve next week?*

This is not a journal. It is a portable *career-value evidence record.* When you have a career or compensation discussion, you can send a concise version ahead of the meeting. Instead of entering with a general request, you can show actions taken, value created, evidence, and the path you are building next.

This guide is short by design. Each chapter is written to be read in roughly 8-12 minutes. Read it once in sequence, then return to the chapters most relevant to your current reality.

Every factual claim is sourced. Personal observations are identified as personal observations. This guide does not tell you who to become. It provides evidence, frameworks, stories, and questions. Your decisions remain yours.

Why I Wrote This

I wrote this guide because the people who most need this thinking are rarely the people who receive it.

The individuals doing the work, managing commitments, serving clients, and navigating the complexity of modern business without the title or the budget determine whether any transformation succeeds. They also have the most to gain from owning their work.

This guide is for them.

The trend toward self-directed, AI-amplified performance is not slowing down. Individuals have a choice: learn and adapt, or risk being left behind. This is not a threat. It is the reality of the moment we are in.

My hope is that this guide makes that choice easier and the path forward clearer.

Own the work. The rest follows.

One Final Word Before You Begin

I offer this not as a warning, but as a genuine appeal.

Personal responsibility, when truly embraced, is one of the most liberating forces in a career—because it returns control to the only place it has ever actually resided. Not in your employer. Not in your leader. Not in the economy, timing, or circumstances. In you: specifically, in how you choose to respond to whatever situation you face.

This guide will challenge some of what you currently believe about work, value, and responsibility. That discomfort is not a sign that something is wrong. It is a sign that something is changing.

I hope you stay with it.

Paul Poirier

Co-Founder | Performance Architect

TAG

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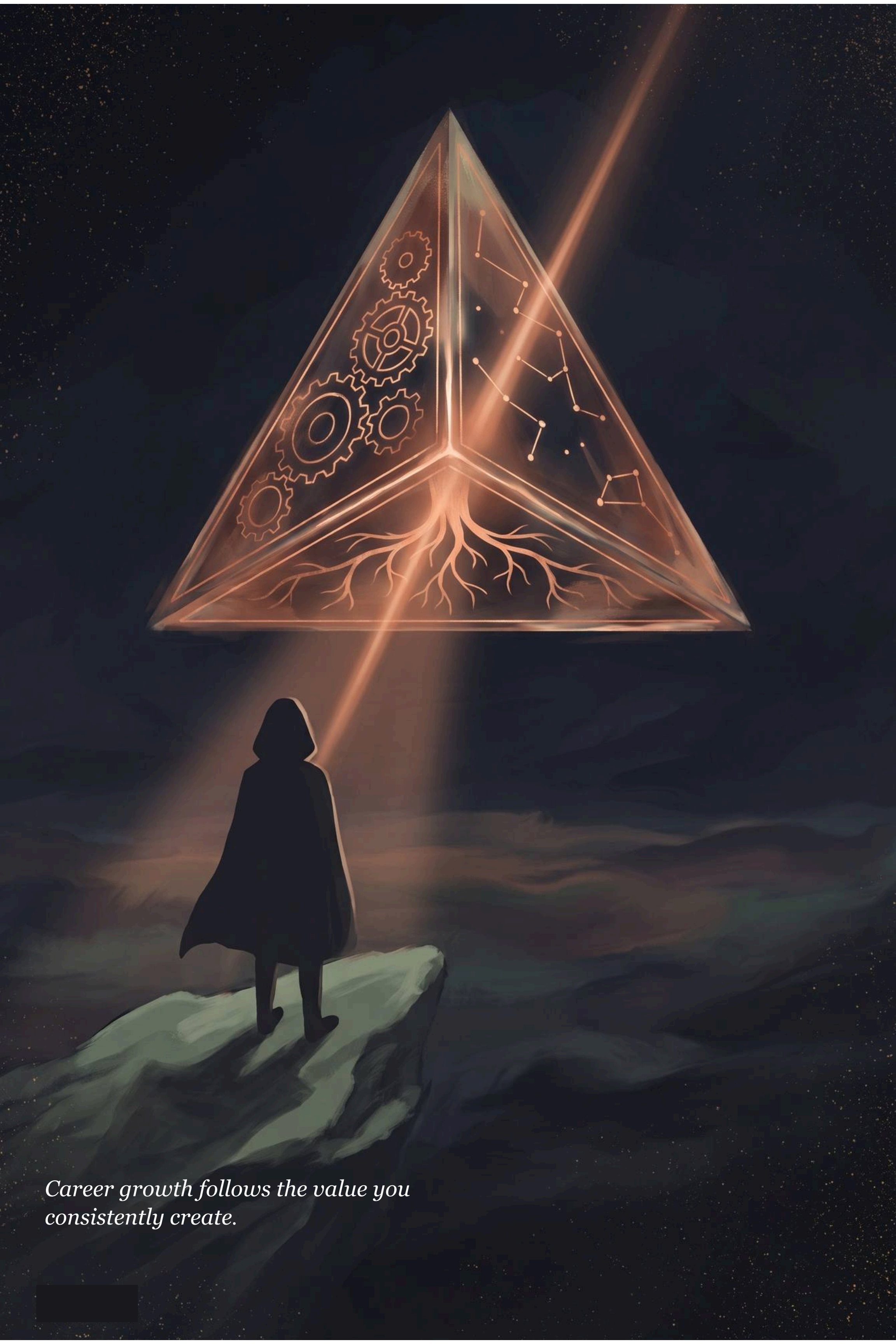

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CHAPTER ONE

The Path to Self-Directed Teams and Career Success

Most people begin a career-growth search with the outcome they want: a stronger role, more recognition, higher compensation, greater autonomy, or a better opportunity. But the outcome is not the mechanism.

Career growth does not appear because you want it, promote yourself more aggressively, or wait for someone to notice your effort. It follows from the value you consistently create and deliver.

This guide is about building that value.

The career question most people miss

Visibility matters. A strong personal brand matters. Being known for your work matters. This guide is not asking you to stop any of that.

It asks a different question:

What will people see when they look?

Visibility is how people see you. Personal-brand value is what they see when they do.

The substance behind a credible career is not a title, a personality, or an ability to stay busy. It is the observable pattern of how you work: whether you take personal responsibility, act with initiative, and produce performance others can trust.

That is why this guide begins with the individual before it turns to the team. A self-directed team is not simply a group that works without a supervisor. It is a group of people who can own their work inside a system that makes expectations, decisions, performance, and support visible.

Your reality is personal

Your career is yours. What works for someone else may not work for you, and that is not a problem to fix. It is a reality to understand.

One person may want to build a long and meaningful future with a current employer. Another may want to become ready for a new opportunity. One person may thrive through a strong network and high visibility. Another may build their reputation through quiet, consistent excellence.

Neither is wrong.

This guide does not prescribe one destination. It helps you examine your current reality and make informed decisions about what will serve your career best.

The destination is yours to choose. The foundation that makes it reachable is universal.

The Trust Lens

The central framework of this guide is the Trust Lens. It is built on three dimensions.

Dimension	What it means	What others experience
Personal Responsibility	You own your response, commitments, and development.	Reliability and maturity.
Initiative	You see what needs attention and act purposefully before being asked.	Momentum and confidence.
Performance	You produce visible, consistent results against defined standards.	Evidence that you can be trusted with more.

These dimensions build on one another. Personal responsibility changes the question from "Who should fix this?" to "What can I do next?" Initiative turns that ownership into action. Performance is the result when both are supported by the right standards, tools, and systems.

The framework does not measure your worth as a person. It helps you see the conditions under which trust and autonomy are earned at work.

Self-direction does not mean freedom without structure

When leaders hear "self-directed teams," some fear loss of control. When individuals hear it, some assume it means unlimited freedom.

Both interpretations are incomplete.

A self-directed team does not work without structure. It works with a different kind of structure: clear decision rights, visible standards, shared service commitments, access to support, and responsibility for improving the work.

When organizations remove supervision without replacing it with these systems, they do not create self-direction. They create an unsupervised team. The difference matters.

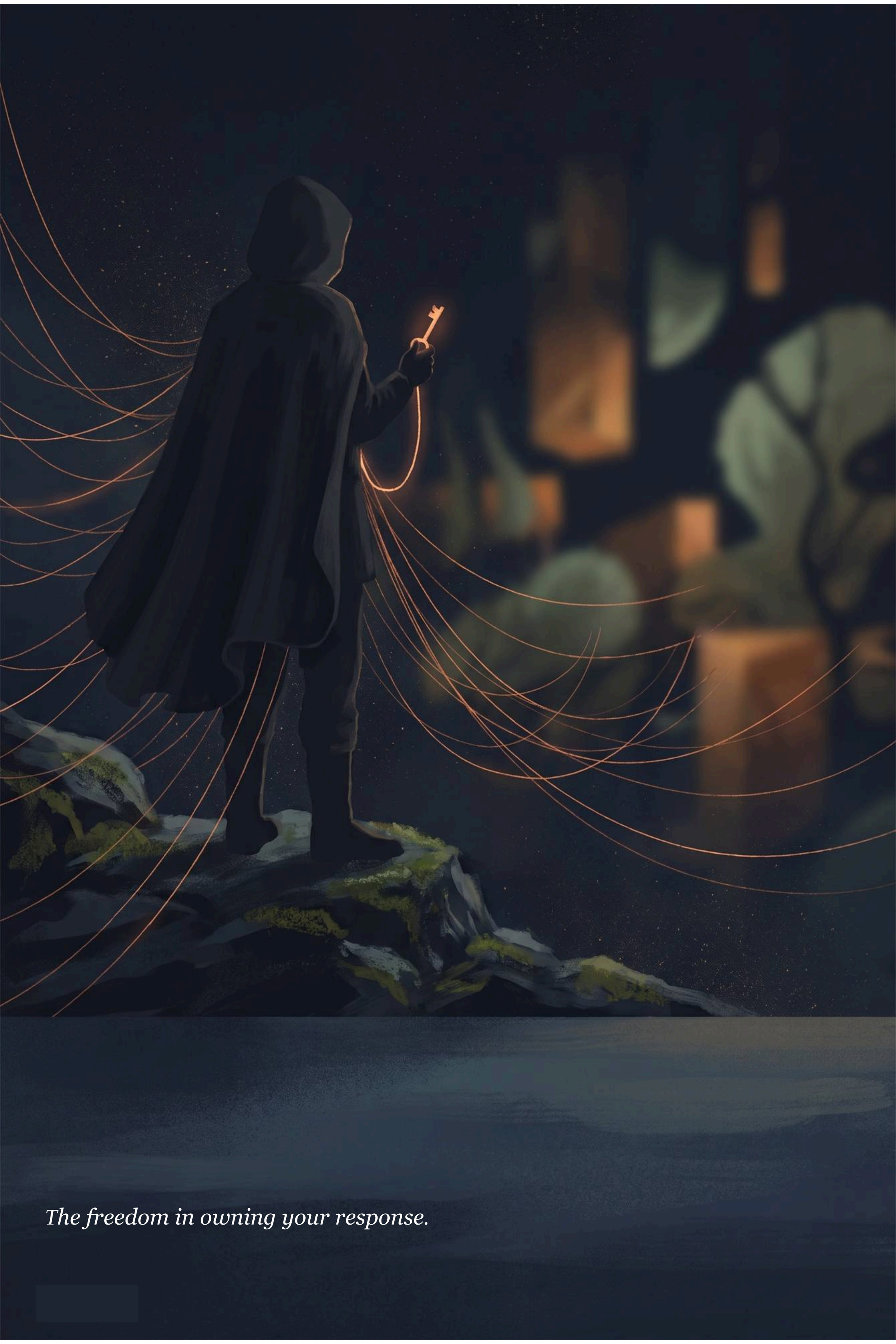
The path described in this guide works whether or not you are currently part of a self-directed team. It helps you create more value where you are, develop the evidence that supports a stronger career conversation, and become more ready for a self-directed environment when the opportunity appears.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Open My Own the Work Record and write three short answers:

1. What career destination matters most to me right now: stronger contribution where I am, a new opportunity, greater autonomy, compensation growth, or something else?
2. What value do I already create for an internal client, customer, or external client?
3. Which Trust Lens dimension would most strengthen that value if I developed it over the next 90 days?

Record the date. This is your starting point.



The freedom in owning your response.

CHAPTER TWO

Personal Responsibility

Personal responsibility is often mistaken for accountability with better branding. It is not.

The difference changes how people experience work.

Accountability is usually backward-looking. Something went wrong. Someone asks who missed the deadline, failed to follow the process, or did not deliver the result. Accountability may be necessary when a serious standard has been violated. But it is a poor foundation for building a high-performing career or a self-directed team.

Personal responsibility is forward-looking. It asks:

> *What can I do now? What do I need to learn?*
> *How can I help improve this?*

That is not a small distinction. It is the shift from control to ownership.

The freedom in owning your response

There are circumstances you do not control: a poor decision by a leader, an unclear process, an unreasonable client request, a stalled economy, or a role that no longer fits who you are becoming.

Personal responsibility does not deny any of those realities. It simply refuses to hand them control of your next move.

When you blame someone else for your situation, you give them power over your future. When you ask what you can do, learn, improve, communicate, or decide next, you take that power back.

This is not a demand to tolerate poor conditions. You can surface a problem, have an evidence-based conversation, help redesign the system, or choose to pursue a different opportunity. The key is that you act from clarity rather than grievance.

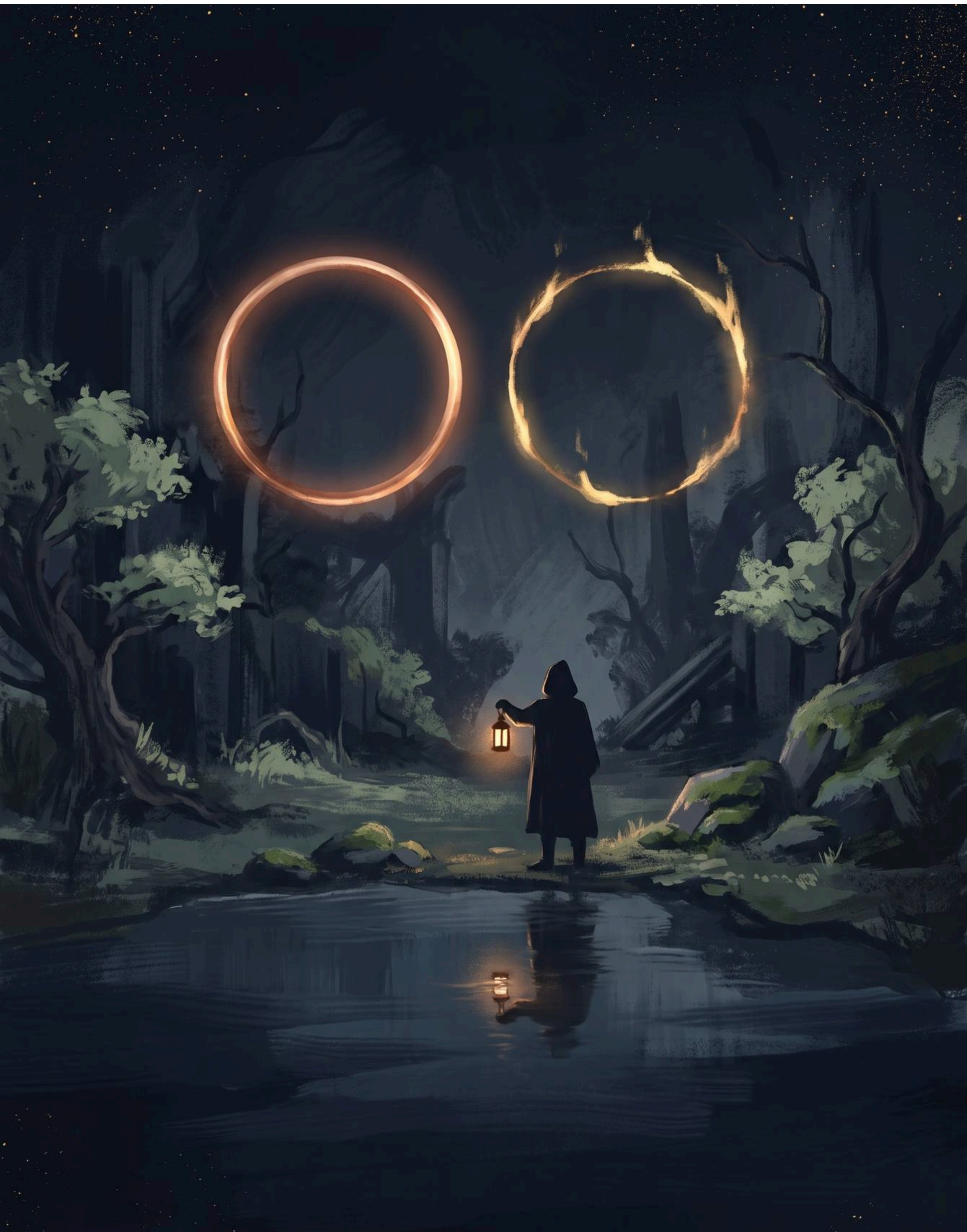
A personal lesson

My grandparents, who I loved dearly, were married for 63 years before my grandfather passed away. Their relationship was always something I wanted for myself.

I have been married twice. I could have chosen to blame my former wives for those marriages not lasting. I have not. Instead, I have asked myself a more difficult and more useful question: *What do I need to change about myself—or about how I choose a life partner?*

That question does not erase hurt, complexity, or the actions of other people. It does something more practical. It returns attention to the one place where meaningful change is available: my own choices.

The same discipline applies at work. It is easy to explain why a system, leader, colleague, or employer is preventing your success. It is far more empowering to ask what you can change about yourself, your contribution, or your next decision.



Some lessons are quieter than others —
but no less important.

Personal responsibility is visible in ordinary moments:

- You communicate before a commitment is at risk, not after it fails.
- You own the outcome, not only the task assigned to you.
- You make a problem visible early and bring evidence with it.
- You distinguish between what you can control, influence, and accept.
- You document the value you create rather than assuming someone else will remember it.

None of these practices require a title. They require a decision you make about how you show up.

The organization that relies only on accountability builds systems designed to catch failure. The individual who practises personal responsibility helps build systems designed to enable ownership.

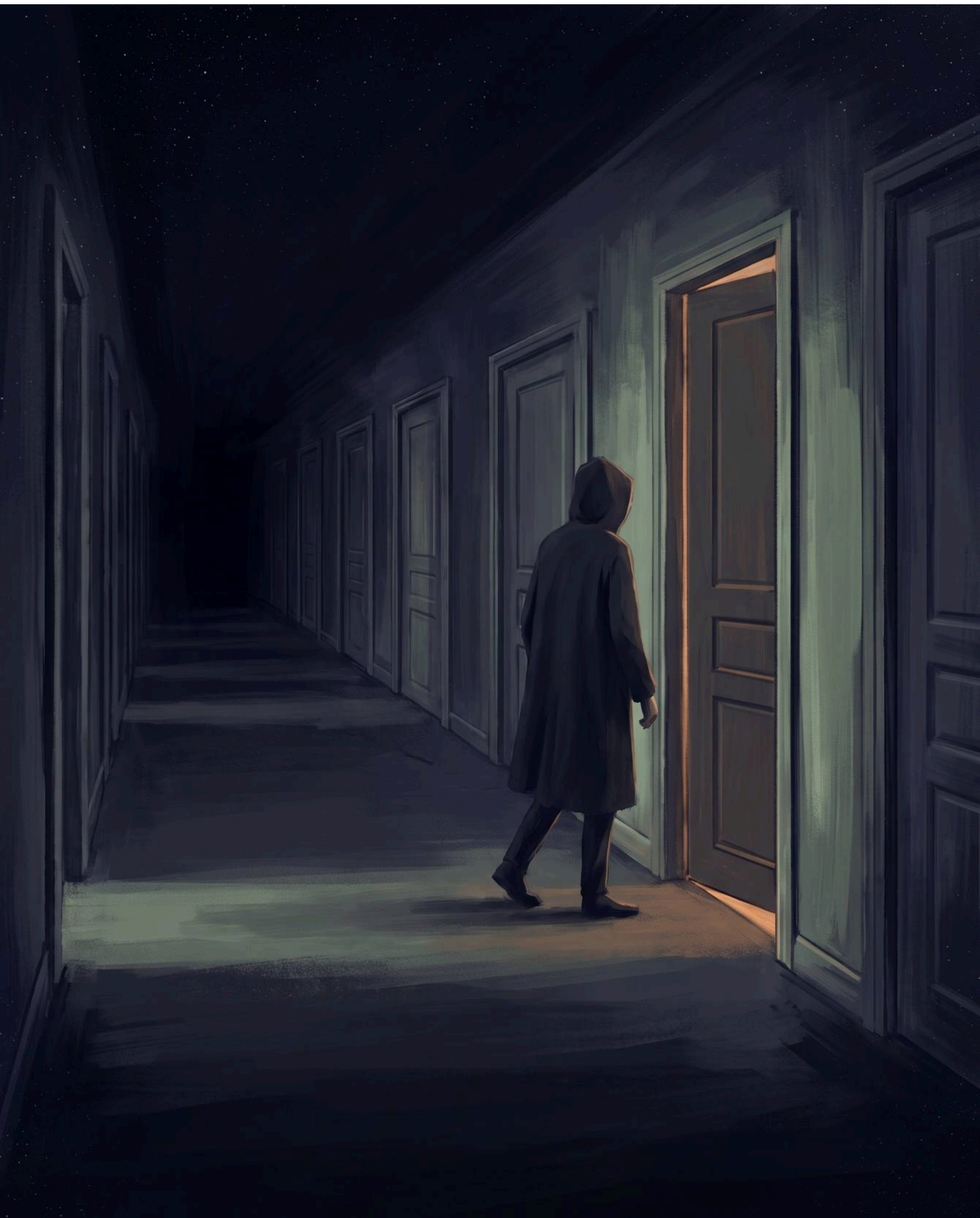
One requires surveillance. The other makes surveillance less necessary.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Think of one current work challenge that you have been tempted to blame on someone or something else. In My Own the Work Record, make two columns:

What I cannot control	What I can control, influence, or decide next

- Write one specific action you will take this week. Make it observable and date it.



Initiative is a discipline, not a personality trait.

Initiative

Initiative is the disciplined habit of seeing what needs attention and taking purposeful action before you are asked.

It is the second dimension of the Trust Lens. Personal responsibility says, "I own my response." Initiative adds, "I will move the work forward." Together, they produce stronger performance.

Initiative is a practice, not a personality trait

The strongest performers in any field do not rely on inspiration. They practise fundamentals until those fundamentals become instinct.

Initiative works the same way. The essential question is simple:

Is there a better way?

Asked consistently, that question changes how you see your work. You start to notice a recurring client question, a delay that no one has addressed, a handoff that adds no value, a task that can be simplified, or a way AI could help you gather information, test an option, or communicate more clearly.

Initiative is not a personality trait reserved for extroverts or people with senior titles. It is a discipline developed through deliberate practice.

A standard I saw in action

When I transitioned from UPS management into lean manufacturing, I had the opportunity to visit a Toyota plant with the President of Pattison Sign Group. I saw a different standard for initiative.

The plant employed just over 4,000 people and, during the visit, we learned that employees collectively generated about 10,000 improvement suggestions each year. The number matters, but the operating standard mattered more. Initiative was not an exception. It was expected. People were routinely asking how the work could be improved.

That is the discipline a self-directed environment requires. People do not wait for a manager to notice every problem, assign every next step, or author every improvement. They learn to see the work, understand the purpose, and contribute to making it better.

Work at two levels

A practical way to develop initiative is to hold a 30,000-foot view while completing the work immediately in front of you.

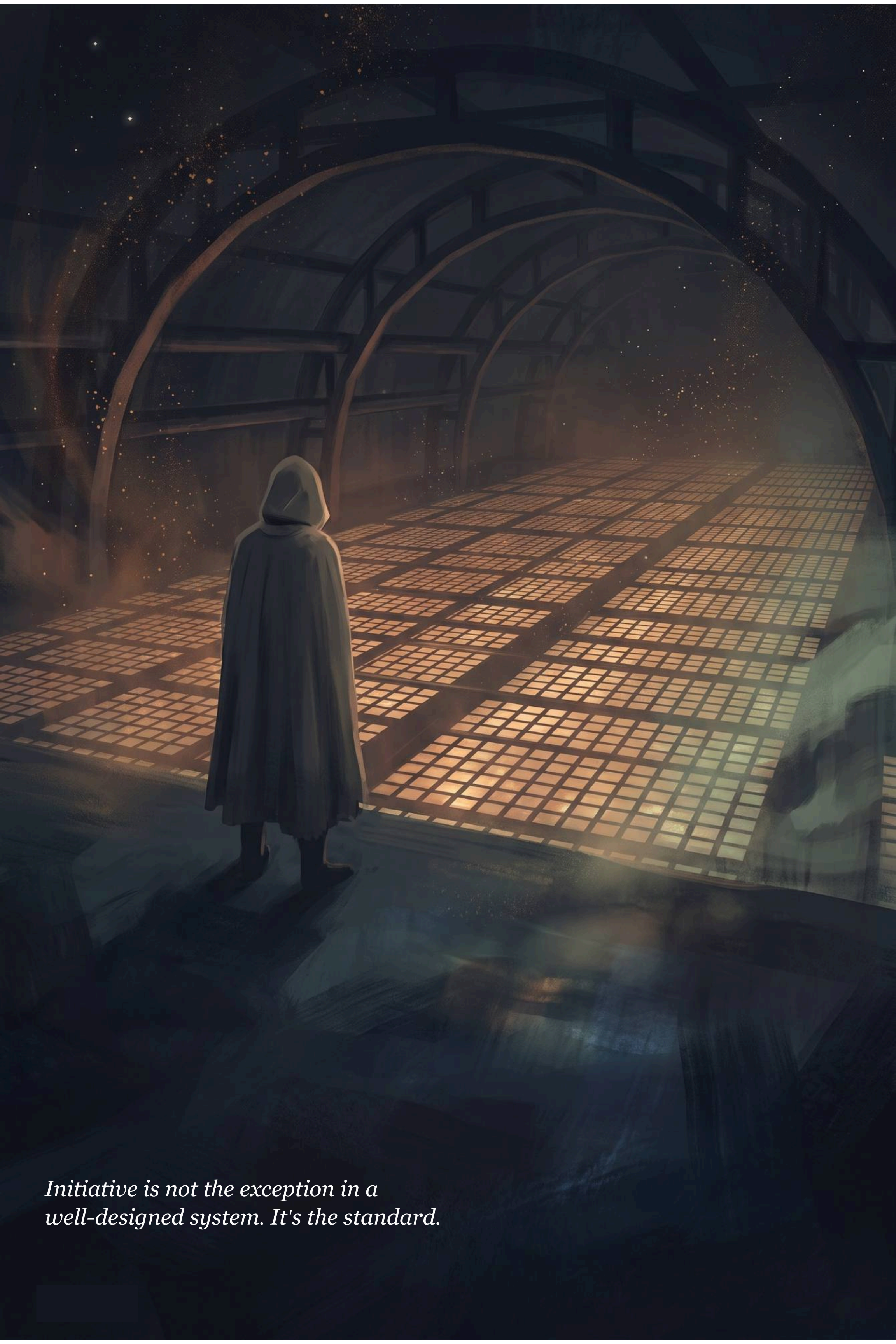
Ask yourself two questions:

1. What is the outcome this work is meant to create?
2. Is there something else I can and should be doing at the same time to improve that outcome?

That does not mean multitasking without discipline. It means understanding the larger flow well enough to see a useful next move.

For example, this guide was developed while TAG's 10-week Self-Directed Teams Transformation Program was being built. The work was connected. Developing one sharpened the other. Seeing that connection created more value than treating the two projects as isolated tasks.

AI increases the advantage of this habit. It can help you summarize information, explore options, test language, organize data, and identify patterns. But AI does not replace initiative. It amplifies the initiative of the person who knows what to ask, what to verify, and what outcome matters.



Initiative is not the exception in a well-designed system. It's the standard.

Use the 1-3-1 discipline

When you surface a problem, do not stop there. Use a simple structure:

Step	Discipline
1 Problem	State the issue clearly, with evidence.
3 Options	Identify realistic ways to respond.
1 Recommendation	State the option you believe best serves the client and explain why.

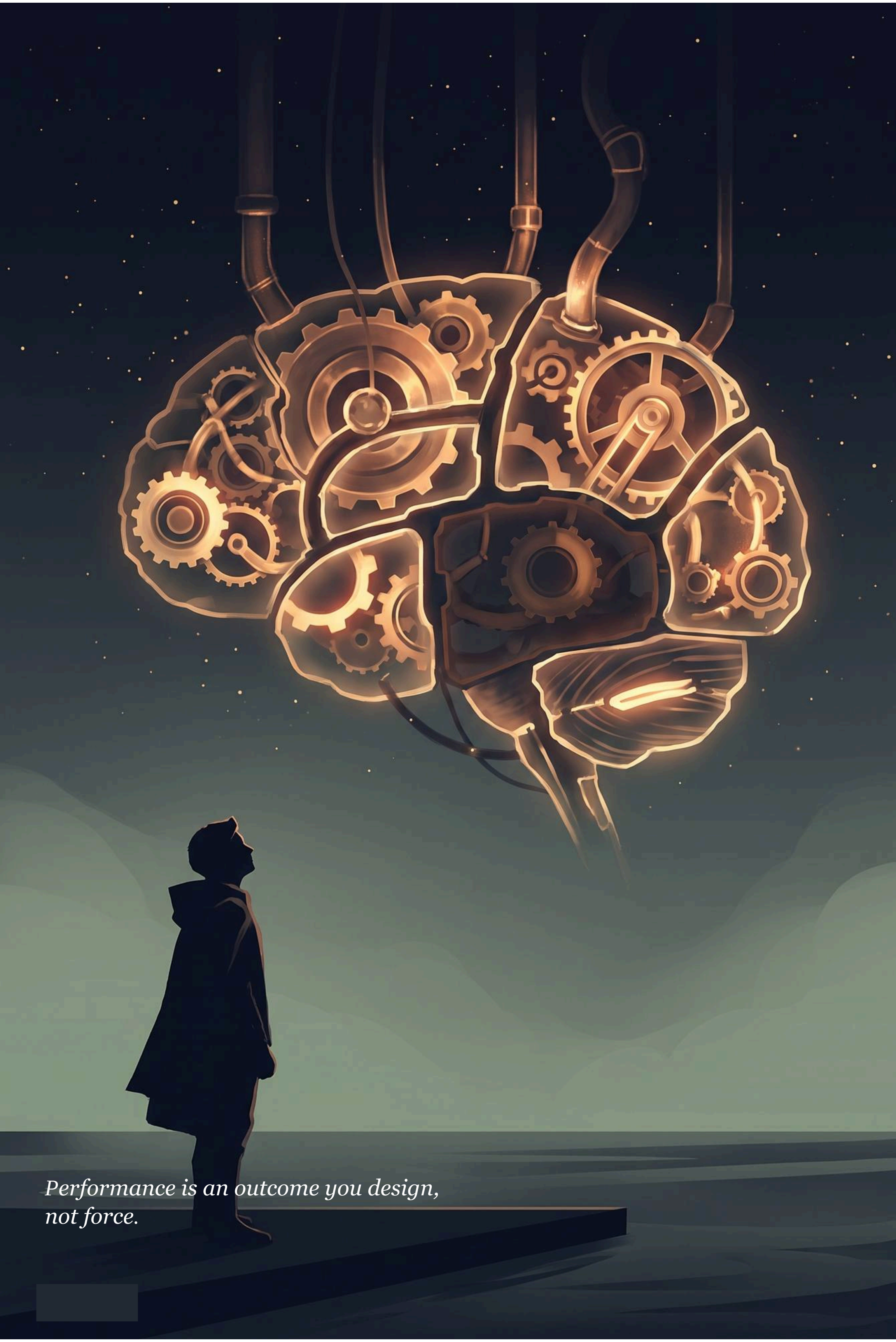
This approach respects leadership time, demonstrates judgment, and keeps you from becoming someone who only reports problems.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Choose one recurring frustration, delay, or client need in your

1. One problem: What is happening, and what evidence shows it?
2. Three options: What are three credible responses?
3. One recommendation: What should happen next, and why?

Take the recommendation to the person or team that can act on it—or act within your own decision rights.


Performance is an outcome you design,
not force.

CHAPTER FOUR

Performance

There is a leadership mistake I have seen repeatedly. A leader talks constantly about performance, yet performance does not improve. The same leader demands more initiative, yet people continue to wait. The leader declares the desired workplace environment, yet day-to-day behaviour remains unchanged.

The issue is not always commitment. It is often the point of focus.

Performance, initiative, and culture are outcomes. You cannot manage an outcome directly. You can only design the conditions that produce it.

Performance is an outcome

Trying harder may create a short-term improvement. But effort is a finite resource. When effort becomes the only performance strategy, people eventually reach their limit. Output becomes inconsistent, quality declines, and the organization starts rewarding exhaustion rather than improvement.

Performance improves when the work is broken into its components. Each component needs a clear standard. And people need to see where the system is helping or limiting their ability to meet that standard.

This is why performance is not best defined as effort. In a self-directed environment, performance is:

Not this	This
Effort	Output that serves the client

A temporary peak	Consistency over time
Invisible activity	Visible evidence against a standard

The fastest sprinter did not practise "running faster"

Usain Bolt is widely regarded as the fastest sprinter in history. His 100-metre and 200-metre world records remain the standard.

A high-performance sprint coach does not stand at the finish line and simply tell an athlete to run faster. The race is broken into components: start position, reaction, drive phase, transition, top-speed mechanics, and finish. Each component is studied, a standard of excellence is established, and practice is directed toward the component limiting the result.

The same principle applies to a business value stream.

You cannot improve a client outcome by demanding "better performance" in the abstract. You need to ask:

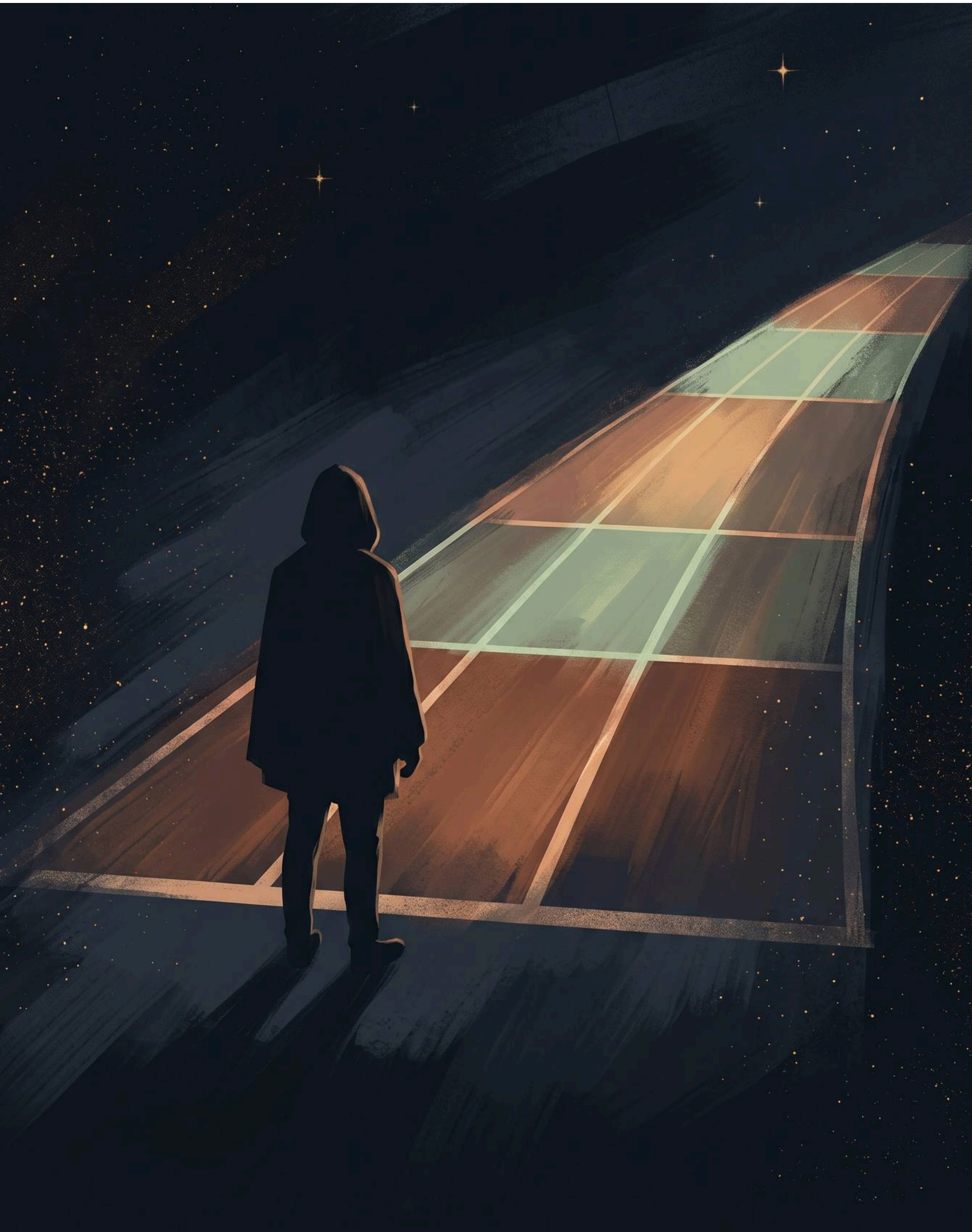
What are the components of this work? What does excellence look like in each one? Which component is constraining the outcome?

Until you can answer those questions, you are not developing performance. You are hoping for it.

The SLA connection

A service-level agreement, or SLA, is a promise to a client, customer, or internal client. It defines what will be delivered, by when, and to what standard.

That makes it the most useful measuring stick for performance.



Excellence is never one thing. It's every component, refined.

When a commitment is clear, the team can see whether it has been met. When the commitment is not clear, performance becomes subjective. Everyone may believe they are working hard, while the client is still being failed.

This applies internally as much as it applies externally. Marketing serves sales. Operations serves finance. Technology serves the people who depend on the platform. Human resources serves the leaders and teams filling critical roles. When the commitment between functions is undefined, performance is managed by assumption.

A self-directed team does not wait for someone else to tell it whether it is succeeding. It knows its commitments, sees its data, and investigates the system when results fall below the standard.

Do not borrow performance from your future

Research on long working hours has found diminishing returns beyond a certain point. A frequently cited Stanford analysis found that productivity per hour falls sharply after 50 hours of work in a week, with little additional output produced at substantially higher hours.

The lesson is not that hard work does not matter. It does. The lesson is that performance gains built entirely on greater effort are often borrowed from your future. They are paid for later through fatigue, errors, disengagement, and reduced capacity.

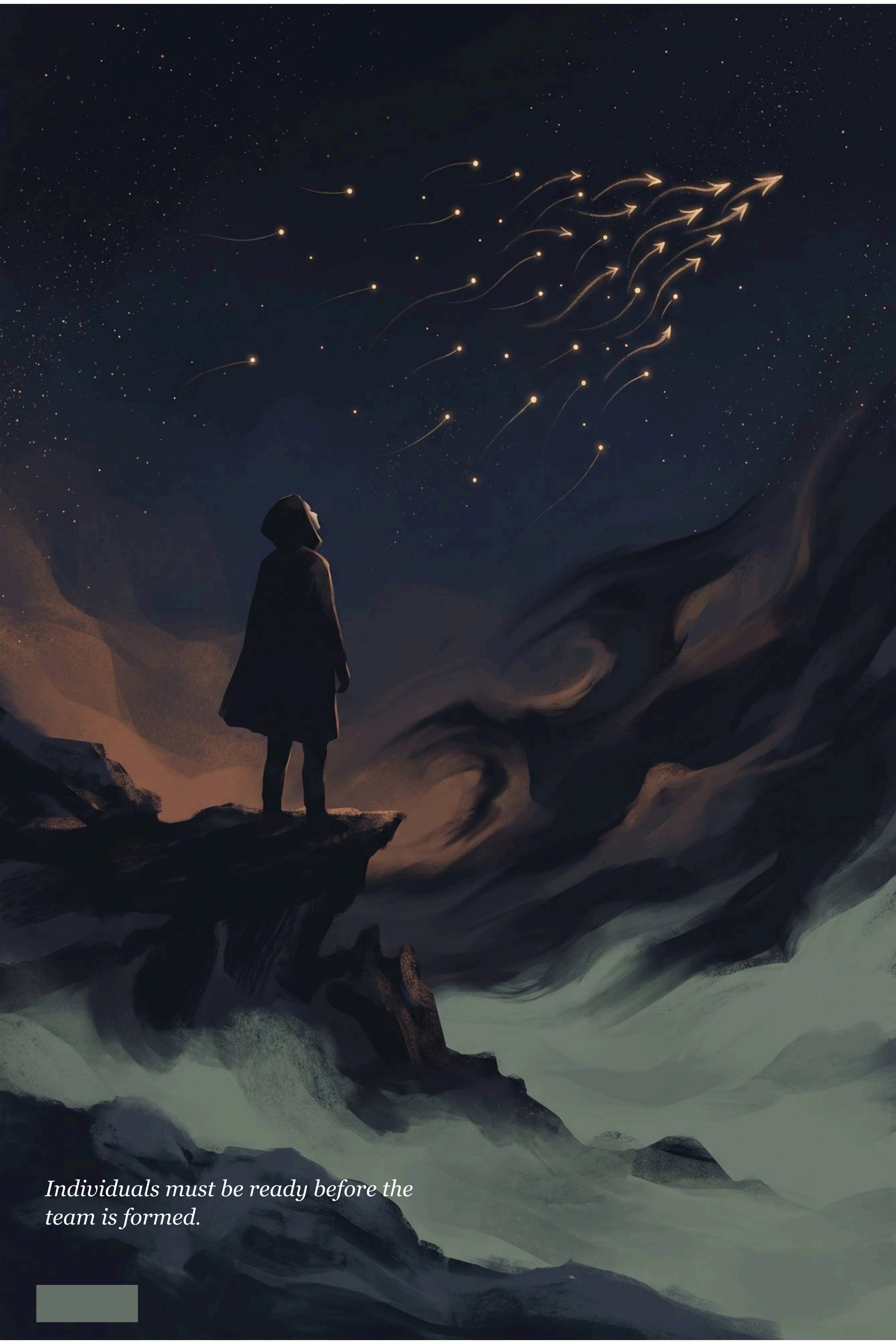
Performance gains built through better system design are different. They compound.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Choose one outcome you are responsible for delivering. In My Own the Work Record, write:

1. The client outcome you are responsible for.
2. Three to five components that determine whether that outcome is delivered well.
3. The current standard for each component—or the fact that no standard exists.
4. The one component most likely constraining your performance today.

Do not try harder before you can see more clearly.



Individuals must be ready before the team is formed.

CHAPTER FIVE

What Makes a Successful Self-Directed Team?

A single person who practises personal responsibility, initiative, and performance is valuable. A team of people who practise those disciplines together—inside an architecture built for clarity, coordination, and improvement—is something different.

It is not merely a team without a manager.

It is a team capable of owning a value stream, responding to clients, improving its work, and using leadership as support rather than as supervision.

The first condition: individuals must be ready

The most important lesson in this chapter is simple:

Individuals must be ready before the team is formed.

A self-directed team is not an organizational chart. It is the result of individuals who have developed the discipline to own their work, combined with a system designed to coordinate without controlling.

If an organization removes a supervisor before people have personal responsibility, initiative, performance discipline, and clear decision rights, it does not create a self-directed team. It creates an unsupervised one.

That distinction explains why many efforts fail before they have a chance to mature.

What becomes possible

Imagine a team that knows its performance data before anyone asks. A team that makes waste visible before it becomes a recurring client problem. A team that can resolve routine issues within defined decision rights, improve its own value stream, and bring evidence-based recommendations when it needs support.

The leader's work changes. Instead of assigning every task and approving every routine decision, leadership develops capability and removes barriers. The team succeeds because the conditions were designed for it.

That is not less leadership. It is better-designed leadership.

Buurtzorg: the system coordinates, the crew flies

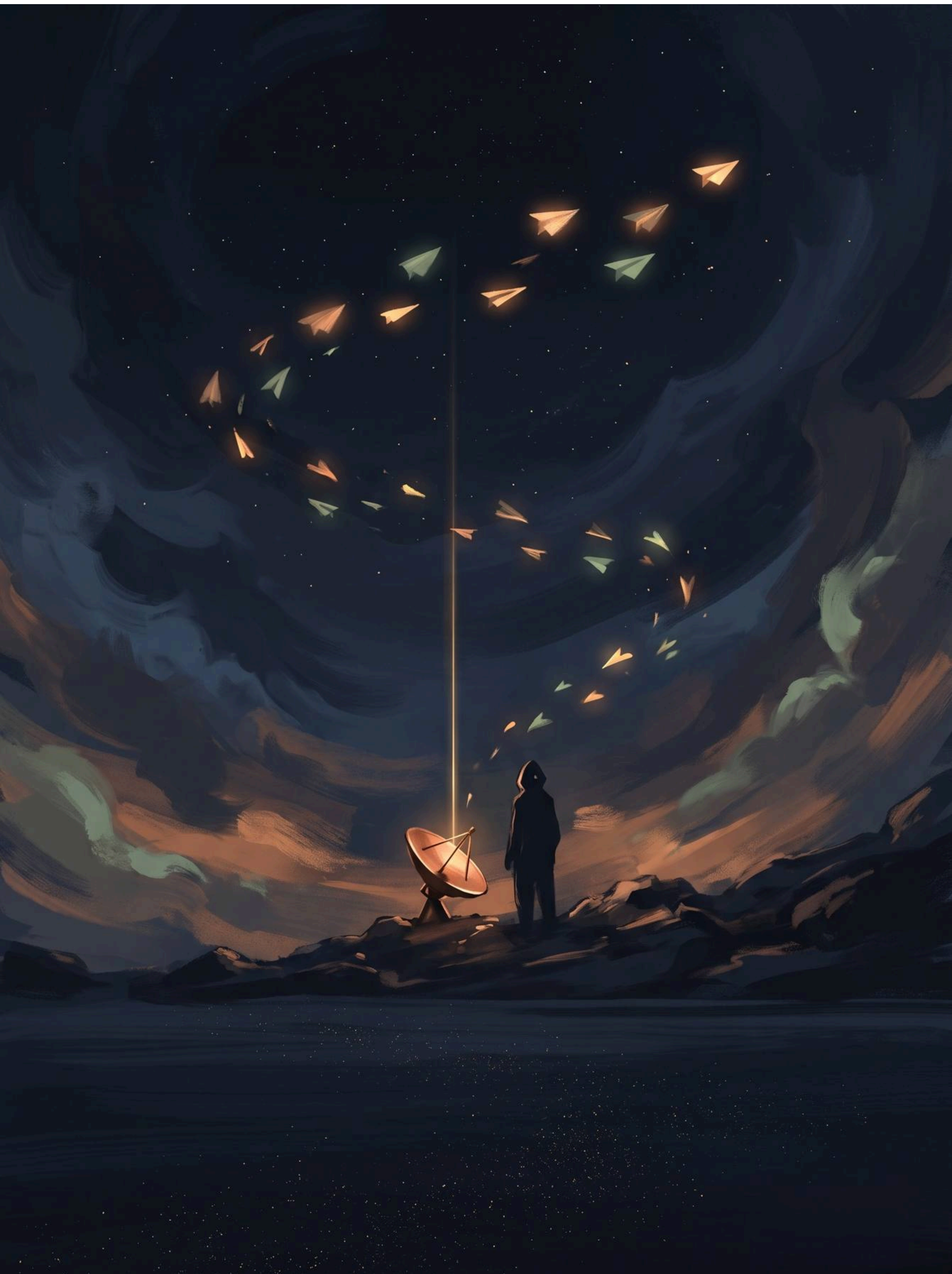
Buurtzorg, a Netherlands-based home-care organization, is a useful example. It began with four nurses in 2006 and grew to more than 14,000 people working in roughly 1,000 self-managing teams by 2018. The organization used small teams, a purpose-built information system, and coaches who supported rather than supervised the work. Its model has been associated with high patient satisfaction and lower costs than traditional competitors.

The numbers are impressive, but the mechanism is more important.

Buurtzorg did not simply tell people to manage themselves. It created the architecture that made self-direction possible: small teams, clear purpose, visible systems, and support roles dedicated to development rather than command.

This is the Air Traffic Control model made real.

The system coordinates. The crew flies.



The system coordinates. The crew flies.

A preview I have seen

I have not yet seen a client organization operating as a fully mature self-directed team at scale. That is precisely the work I am focused on now.

I have, however, seen a powerful preview through Kaizen events. In lean projects across Canada, we brought people together from across the work, gave them a defined scope, a structured improvement process, and the freedom to think. The recommendations routinely surprised C-level leadership teams because the people doing the work could see constraints and opportunities that were not visible from a distance.

In my experience, approximately 90% of the recommendations were adopted. The rest were often deferred because the organization was not yet ready or did not have the financial capacity to support the change. The results of the adopted improvements were, in almost every case, outstanding.

A Kaizen event is temporary. A self-directed team makes that same capacity for collective ownership part of daily work.

The second condition: support must be designed in

Even capable teams will encounter barriers they cannot remove alone: a cross-functional dependency, a technical issue, a resource need, a capability gap, or a decision beyond the team’s authority.

That is why leadership does not disappear. It changes.

The support role is MEACT:

MEACT responsibility	What it provides the team
Mentor	Perspective and guidance from experience.

Educate	Knowledge needed to understand the work.
Advise	Sound counsel for decisions of consequence.
Coach	Development through questions, feedback, and practice.
Train	Verified capability in required standards and tools.

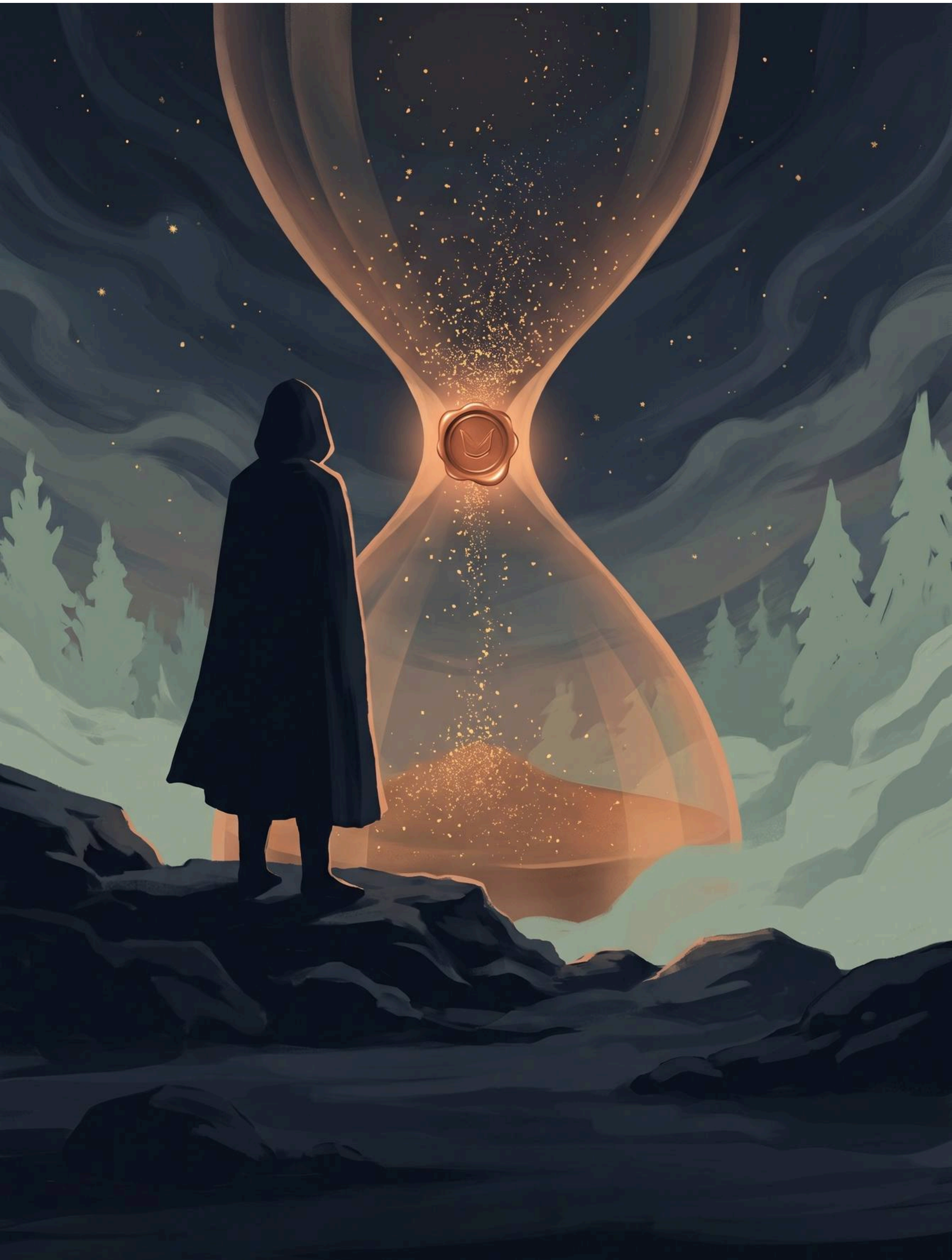
A self-directed team without this support system is like a high-performance aircraft without a ground crew. The aircraft may be capable. It will not remain airworthy for long without the system that maintains it.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Think of the team you work with most closely. In My Own the Work Record, answer:

1. Which individual disciplines are already strong: personal responsibility, initiative, or performance?
2. Where does the team still depend on a manager for routine clarity, decisions, or task distribution?
3. What support would help the team improve without creating new supervision?

Use your answers to start a constructive conversation—not to judge your colleagues.



A commitment isn't real until it's visible.

CHAPTER SIX

Service Level Agreements

Every meaningful service relationship begins with a promise.

A client may sign a formal agreement. A customer may see a published response-time commitment. An internal client may receive an informal assurance from another function. The form changes, but the principle does not:

A commitment has been made. There is a clock. The work must be delivered to a standard.

That is a service-level agreement.

If you cannot articulate the commitment your work delivers against, you cannot demonstrate performance.

The Brown M&M test

Van Halen's concert rider is often used as a story about demanding performers. The deeper lesson is different. The band required a bowl of M&Ms with no brown ones. The clause was not about candy. It was a quick test of whether a venue had read the technical and safety requirements in the rider carefully. If the small requirement had been missed, the crew knew it was time to inspect the more consequential requirements closely.

Every organization needs an equivalent of the brown M&M test: an early, visible indicator that tells the team whether the client commitment is being honoured before the client has to complain.

Digital systems and AI now make that practical at scale. A CRM, help-desk platform, workflow tool, or dashboard can track commitments, show approaching breaches, surface patterns, and help the team investigate why the same service issue keeps recurring. Technology does not replace ownership. It makes ownership easier to see and act on.

Clients, customers, and internal clients

In this guide, a client is a person or organization making a decision of consequence: hiring a consulting firm, choosing a healthcare provider, selecting a financial partner, or buying a home. A customer generally makes a more transactional decision: choosing a restaurant, buying a product, or requesting a routine service.

SLAs apply to both.

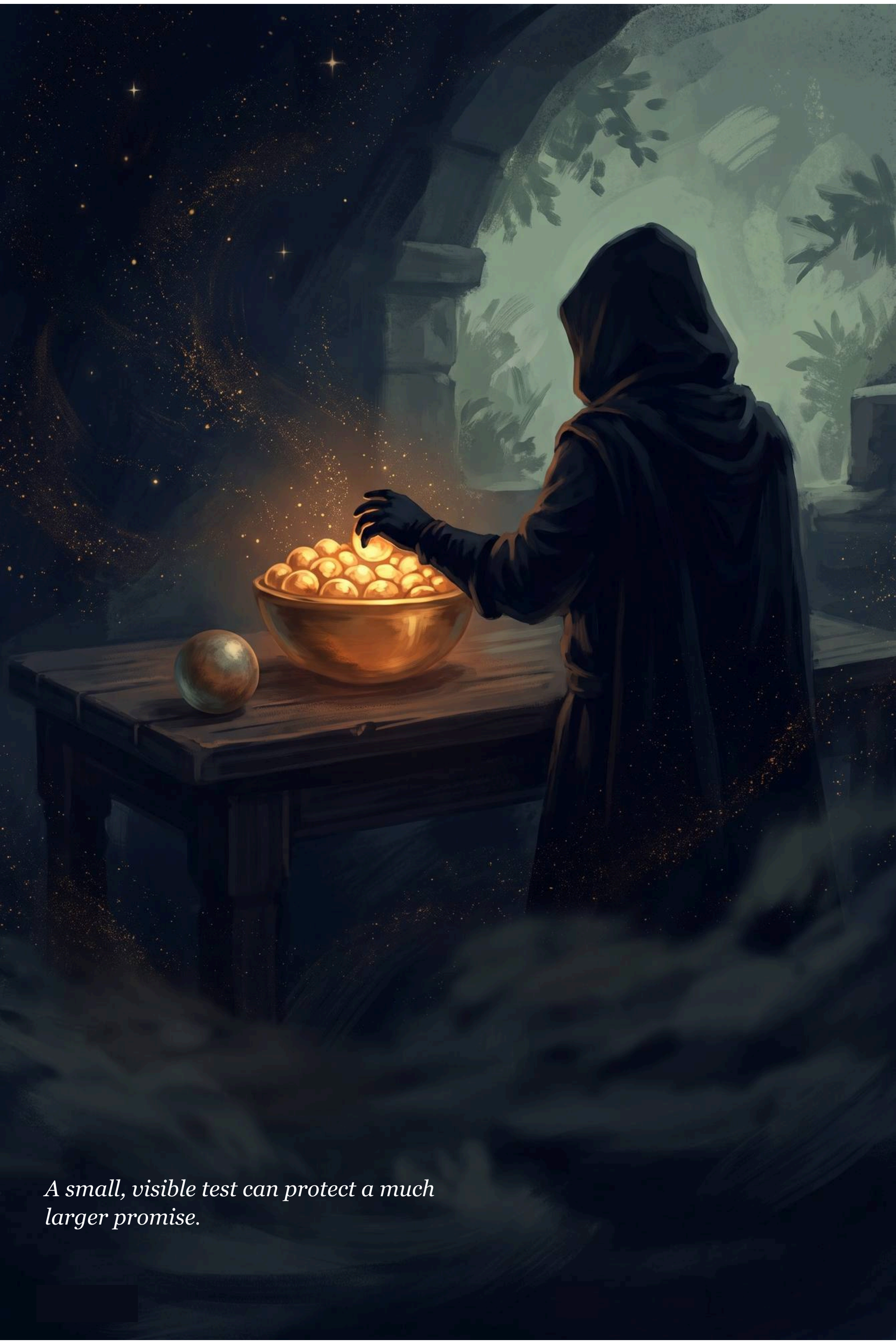
With clients, the SLA is often negotiated, documented, and signed. With customers, it may be communicated as a response-time, delivery, or resolution promise. Internally, it may be the commitment marketing makes to sales, operations makes to finance, or technology makes to the people who rely on a platform.

The commitment matters just as much when money is not changing hands between two internal functions.

Why SLAs matter to a self-directed team

A self-directed team needs a compass. Without SLAs, it cannot reliably know whether it is delivering the client outcome, where it is drifting, or what needs improvement.

An SLA makes three things clear:



A small, visible test can protect a much larger promise.

Question	What the SLA provides
What are we promising?	The defined client outcome.
By when?	A visible clock.
How will we know?	A measurable service standard.

This protects the team from spending its day only on whatever feels most urgent. It helps the team focus on what has been promised and what creates value for the client.

An awareness gap

In a recent client engagement, I asked five service-team members to define a service-level agreement. Four could not.

That experience is not an accusation against those people. It reveals an organizational design gap. Companies invest heavily in winning clients, negotiating contracts, and documenting commitments. Then they file the agreements and the people responsible for delivering them never see a system that makes the commitment visible in daily work.

If the people delivering the service do not know what has been promised, they cannot own the promise.

The mistake: measuring activity instead of performance

Teams can hit internal measures—calls handled, tickets closed, hours logged—and still fail their clients. That happens when measures are not connected to the promises made through SLAs.

A KPI that does not connect to an SLA may measure activity. It does not necessarily measure performance.

Performance is visible when it is measured against a commitment.

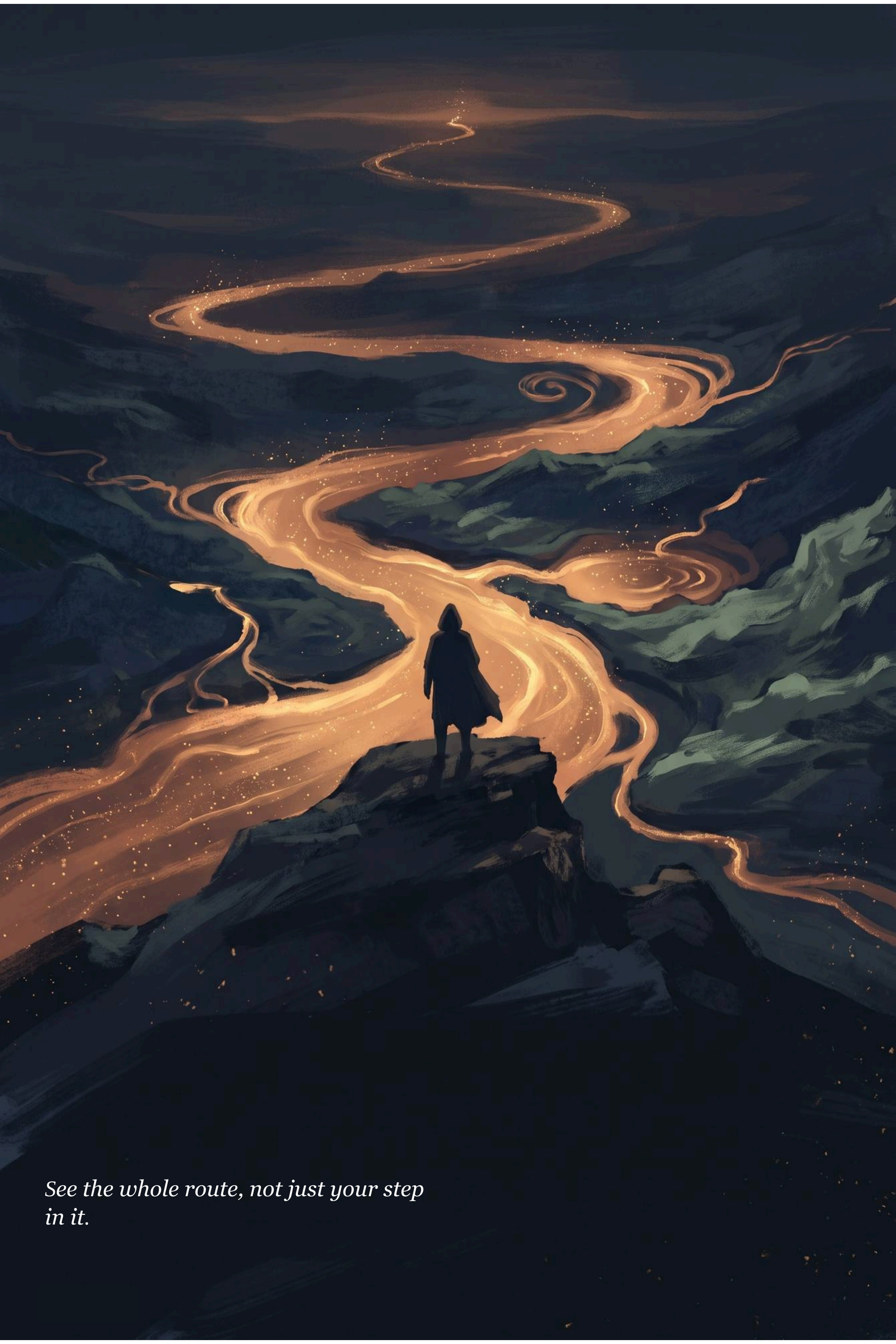
The purpose of measurement is not to create more reporting. It is to help the team protect the client outcome and improve the system when the outcome is at risk.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Choose one commitment you make to an internal client, customer, or external client. In My Own the Work Record, document:

1. The promise you are making.
2. The client's expected outcome.
3. The clock attached to the promise.
4. The evidence that shows whether the promise was kept.
5. The first signal that would warn you the commitment is at risk.

You are beginning to build your own brown M&M test.



See the whole route, not just your step in it.

Value-Stream Ownership

Many people know their task but cannot see the full flow their task belongs to.

They receive a request, complete their part, and pass the work forward. If the client is delayed later, they may not know where the delay occurred, what caused it, or how their own work affected the outcome.

That is task execution.

Value-stream ownership is different. It means understanding the complete sequence that turns a request into the outcome the client receives—and accepting responsibility for improving the flow, not only completing your individual step.

See the whole route

A value stream includes every activity, handoff, decision, material movement, and information flow required to deliver a product or service from request to outcome. The value stream belongs to the team, not to one manager or one function.

Think of a value-stream map as the team's flight path and radar screen. Each person sees a segment of the work. The team needs to see the complete route from the client's request to the outcome the client receives.

Tool	What it makes visible
Value-stream map	The 30,000-foot view: the complete end-to-end flow across functions, including material and information flow.

Process map	The close view of one component: its steps, decisions, handoffs, rework, and standards.

The first tool tells the team where to look. The second tells the team what to improve.

A value-stream map diagrams every step in the material and information flows required to take a product or service from order to delivery. You start with a current-state map—the actual condition, not the process people assume exists—then move to a future-state map showing how work should flow.

Value-stream and process mapping make the invisible, visible.

A water-slide lesson

When I moved from UPS management into lean manufacturing, two practices changed how I understood work: Kaizen and the disciplined use of value-stream and process mapping.

One project involved mapping the production flow for water slides at a world-leading water-park producer. The current-state map revealed a single design condition that had been treated as normal. Once a water-slide component entered the production value stream, it could leave the flow, sit and wait elsewhere, and later re-enter. The system was creating its own delays.

The team changed the governing standard. Once a component entered the production value stream, it had to move through to completion rather than being removed, stored, and reintroduced later.

The result was not marginal.

A water-slide component that once spent more than three weeks moving through production—21.2 days—could now move from entry to completion in less than half a day: 11.3 hours.

The team did not ask people to work harder. It removed the waiting and detours designed into the value stream.

The mathematics had always been available. The insight appeared only when the team could see the flow.

From task distribution to flow ownership

When a team can see the full value stream, it does not wait passively for a manager to distribute the next piece of work. It can see where flow has slowed, understand the decision rights available to it, respond where help is needed, and protect the client outcome.

This does not mean people abandon their roles. It means roles become connected to a shared outcome.

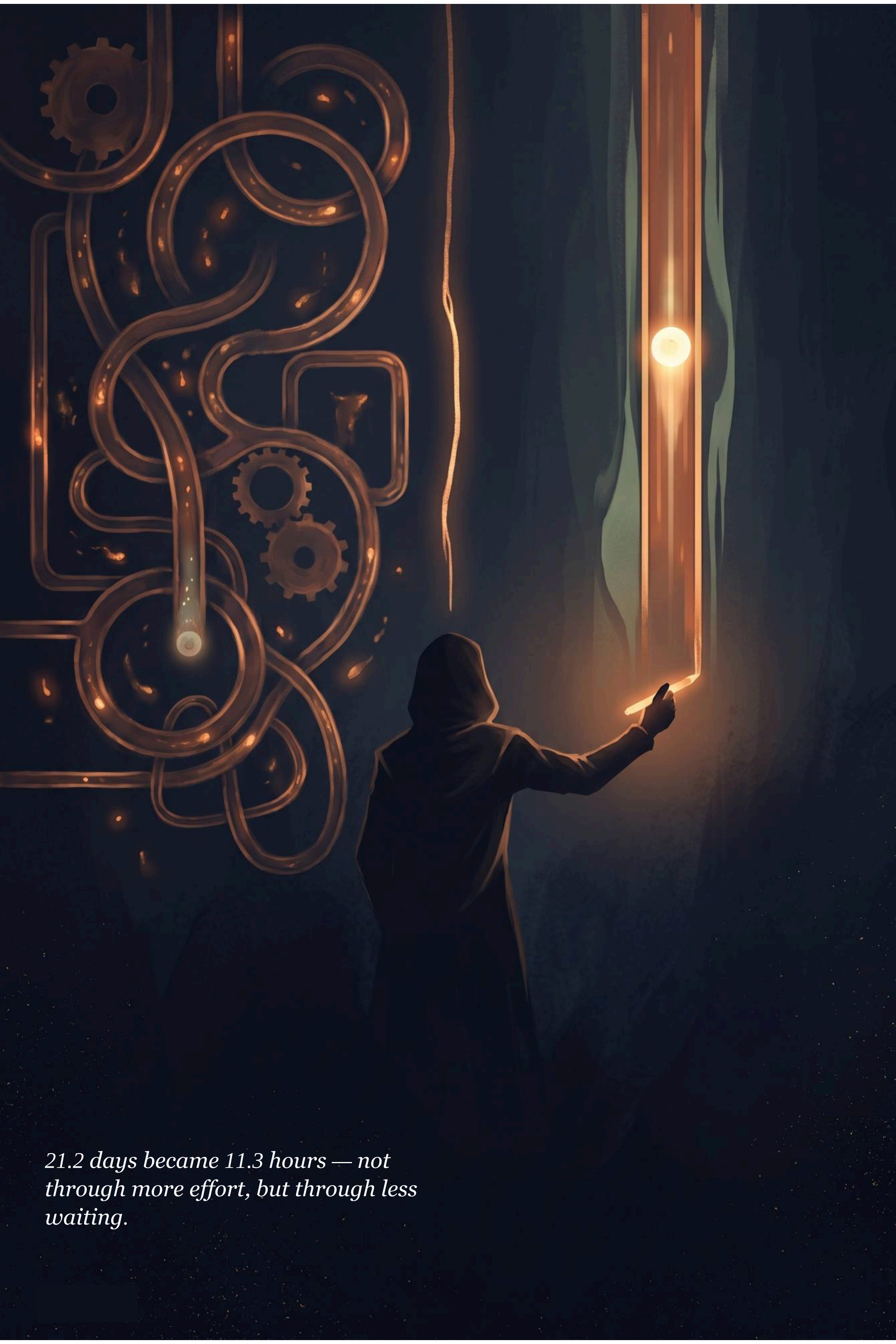
A task is complete when you finish your piece. A value stream is complete when the client has what they need.

That is the shift from task execution to value-stream ownership.

Map before you change

People unfamiliar with mapping often assume it is more complicated than it is. That assumption can cause them to rush into changes before they have the information required to make a sound decision.

They change one part of a process, improve something locally, and create a problem elsewhere in the flow.



21.2 days became 11.3 hours — not through more effort, but through less waiting.

The discipline is simple:

1. Map the current condition.
2. Identify what was previously hidden: the waits, rework, and detours.
3. Gather evidence about the source of delay, rework, or friction.
4. Identify the component requiring change.
5. Test and standardize the improvement.

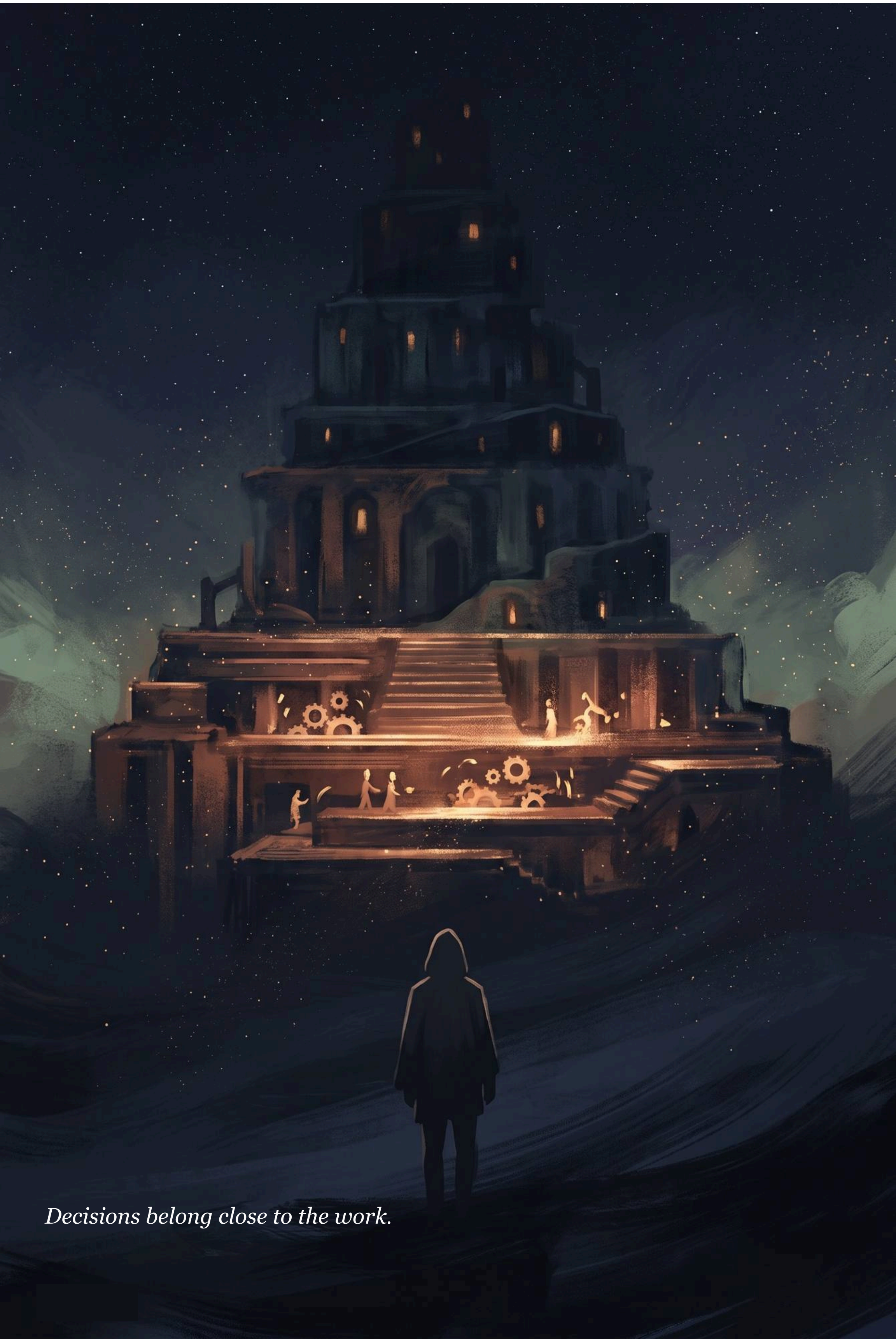
Rushing ahead without clarity is not initiative. It is rework waiting to happen.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Choose one request you regularly receive from an internal client, customer, or external client. In My Own the Work Record, map its path in plain language:

1. Where does the request begi
2. What steps, handoffs, decisions, and waits occur befo completion?
3. Where does the client experience delay, confusion, rework?
4. What part of the flow adds no value from the client perspective?

Do not change the process yet. First, make the invisible, visible.



Decisions belong close to the work.

Decision Rights

A self-directed team cannot operate effectively if every decision must move upward for approval.

When people do not know who can decide, they wait. When they wait, clients wait. When clients wait, teams create workarounds. Before long, the organization calls the result a performance problem when the real issue is decision-right ambiguity.

Decision rights make self-direction safe.

Put decisions at the lowest responsible level

The principle is straightforward:

Decisions should sit as close as possible to the client and the work, with guardrails appropriate to their consequence.

This does not mean every person has unlimited authority. It means that low-consequence, routine decisions should not travel through unnecessary layers, while decisions of consequence should follow an explicit process.

Decision type	Example	Required discipline
Autonomous	A defined service-recovery credit within a set limit.	Decide, record, and learn from the outcome.

Consultation	A change affecting another function's work.	Gather input, align, then decide within the agreed boundary.
Escalation	A decision with material financial, legal, regulatory, reputational, or strategic implications.	Provide evidence and use the defined escalation path.

The point is not to escalate by default. It is to know what can be owned, what requires consultation, and what requires executive involvement.

A service-system failure I experienced

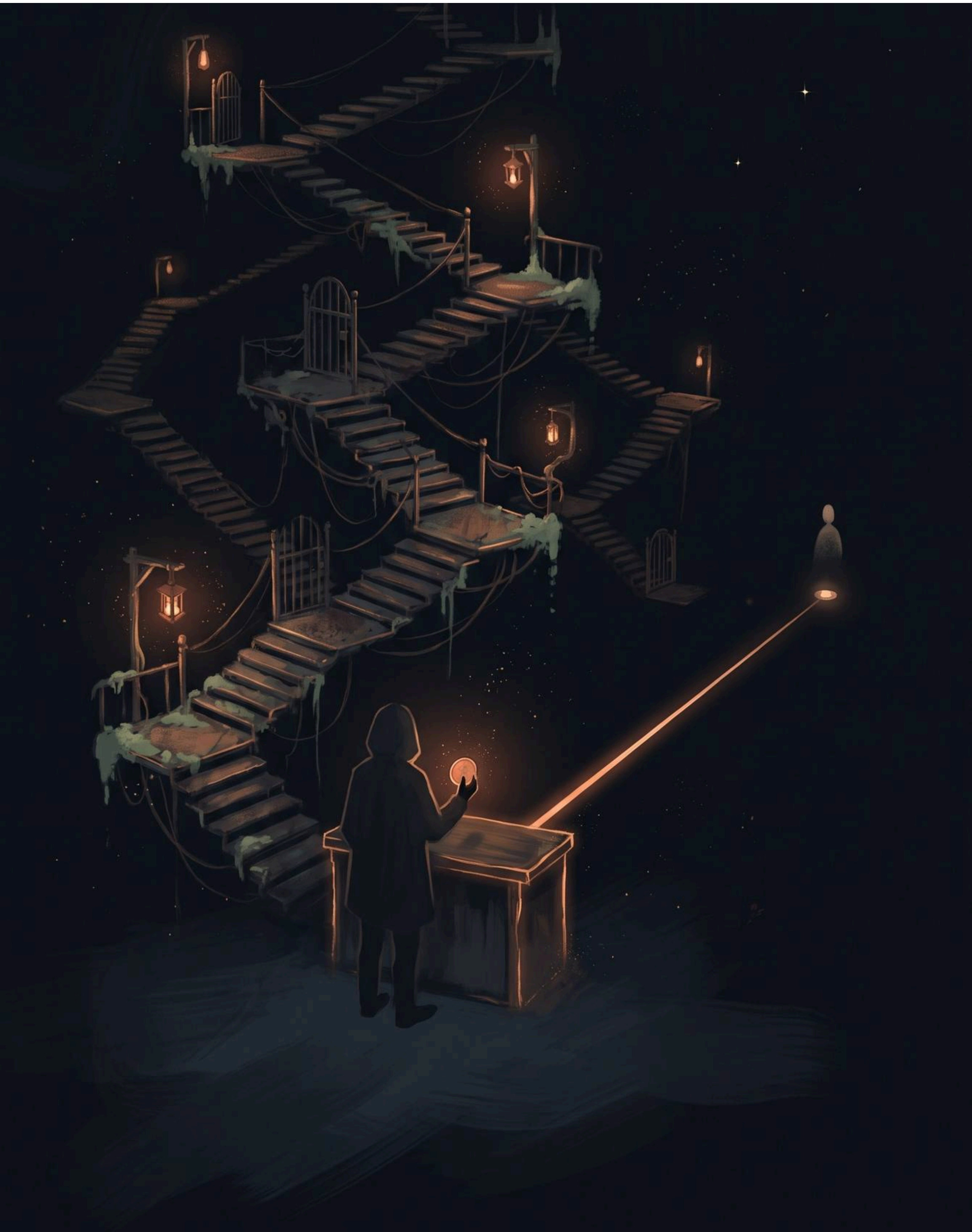
I managed a UPS call centre responsible for 80 representatives taking= approximately 7,000 calls each day. Yet I did not have authority to issue= even a $50 or $100 credit to resolve a client-service issue.

If I believed compensation was appropriate, I had to move through an= approval process before the client could be looked after.

When you consider the value of my time and the time of everyone= involved, the organization often spent more internal time obtaining= approval than it would have taken to resolve the client’s problem.

That is not how to run a service department.

The problem was not a lack of controls. The problem was that the= decision right sat too far from the client and the work.



The decision was never far from the client. The approval path was.

Decision rights create a learning loop

Imagine a service professional authorized to issue a $50 or $100 client credit within a defined boundary. The decision is not invisible. It is recorded in the CRM: amount, reason, client context, and related service issue.

That creates a four-step learning loop.

Step	What happens	What the team gains
Act	The client-facing person resolves the issue within the agreed limit.	Immediate client response.
Record	The system captures the reason and context.	Visibility into the decision.
Review	The team examines patterns in credits and service failures.	Evidence of recurring friction.
Improve	The team changes the process, standard, handoff, tool, or capability creating the issue.	Fewer future credits and stronger service.

Decision rights create speed at the client level. The data created by those decisions becomes intelligence for system improvement.

Do not confuse visibility with loss of control

Organizations sometimes grant a limited decision right, see an increase in service credits, and become concerned. They remove the decision right because they see the number but do not investigate the system behind it.

That is the wrong response.

An increase in credits may signal uncontrolled spending. It may also signal an underlying service failure that was previously hidden from leadership and absorbed by clients. The evidence needs to be examined.

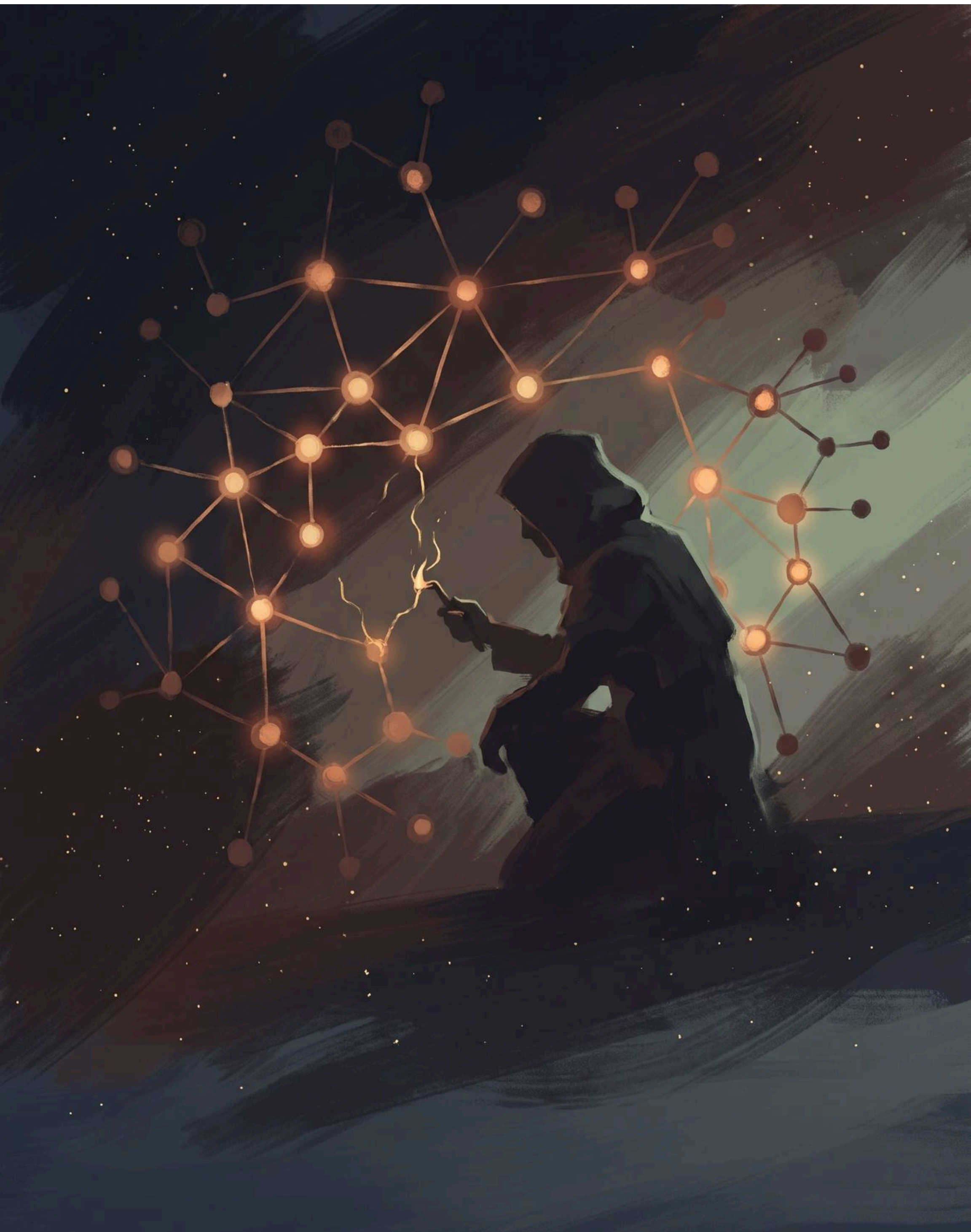
A functioning decision-right system requires standards, defined limits, tools for recording decisions, routines for reviewing patterns, and a process for investigating service failures. Without that architecture, delegation can feel like a loss of control. With it, the organization gains faster service, stronger learning, and better control through visibility.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Identify one routine decision that currently takes longer than it should because approval is unclear or distant from the client. In My Own the Work Record, define:

1. The decision and the client impact of delay.
2. Whether it is autonomous, consultation, or escalation.
3. The guardrail that would make it safe to decide closer to the work.
4. What data should be recorded so the team can learn from the decision.

Use this as the beginning of a decision-rights conversation.



The people closest to the work see what leadership cannot.

CHAPTER NINE

The Team Drives Systems Improvement

The people doing the work see conditions that leadership cannot fully see from a distance.

They experience the client questions, delays, handoffs, workarounds, information gaps, system constraints, and recurring points of friction every day. This is not a failure of senior leadership. It is a structural reality. C-level leaders set direction, allocate resources, and govern decisions of consequence. They do not stand at every point where the system meets the client.

That is why a self-directed team must own system improvement.

Your observations matter

Lean practice recognizes that leadership's role is to create the conditions in which people closest to the work can identify abnormal conditions, improve their processes, and receive the right support. Research on frontline idea systems has likewise found that high-performing systems can surface improvement opportunities that managers are less likely to identify directly.

Your observations matter. They are operational evidence that leadership needs but cannot gather from a distance.

A self-directed team does not wait for leadership to tell it where the system is failing. It identifies waste and system friction, gathers evidence, proposes improvements, acts within its decision rights, and codifies what works.

Waste is the improvement signal

Waste is anything that adds no value from the internal or external client's perspective.

It can appear as unnecessary activity, a handoff, delay, rework, approval, movement, or information flow. It may look normal because it has become familiar. That does not make it valuable.

The improvement question is not, "Who made the mistake?" It is:

What in the system adds no value for the client, and how do we remove it?

Making waste visible is an act of personal responsibility and professional contribution. It allows a team to improve the system before the client pays the price.

What Kaizen taught me

Throughout the Kaizen events I led with organizations across Canada, I saw the same pattern repeatedly. The people doing the work were the race-car drivers, the pit crew members, the doctors, and the nurses. They were in the thick of the work every day.

They understood the client needs, delays, handoffs, workarounds, and constraints that leadership could not fully see from outside the process.

There was never a Kaizen event in which the team did not surprise me with the solutions it developed. When people were brought together around a clearly defined problem, given time to examine the current condition, and equipped to make the invisible, visible, they developed practical solutions senior leadership had not considered

This is not because senior leaders lack intelligence or commitment. It is because the people closest to the work hold operational knowledge that must be invited into the improvement process.

Support is a reciprocal responsibility

A team can identify waste perfectly and still be unable to remove it alone. The barrier may sit in another function, a system configuration, a resource requirement, specialist capability, or a decision outside the team’s authority.

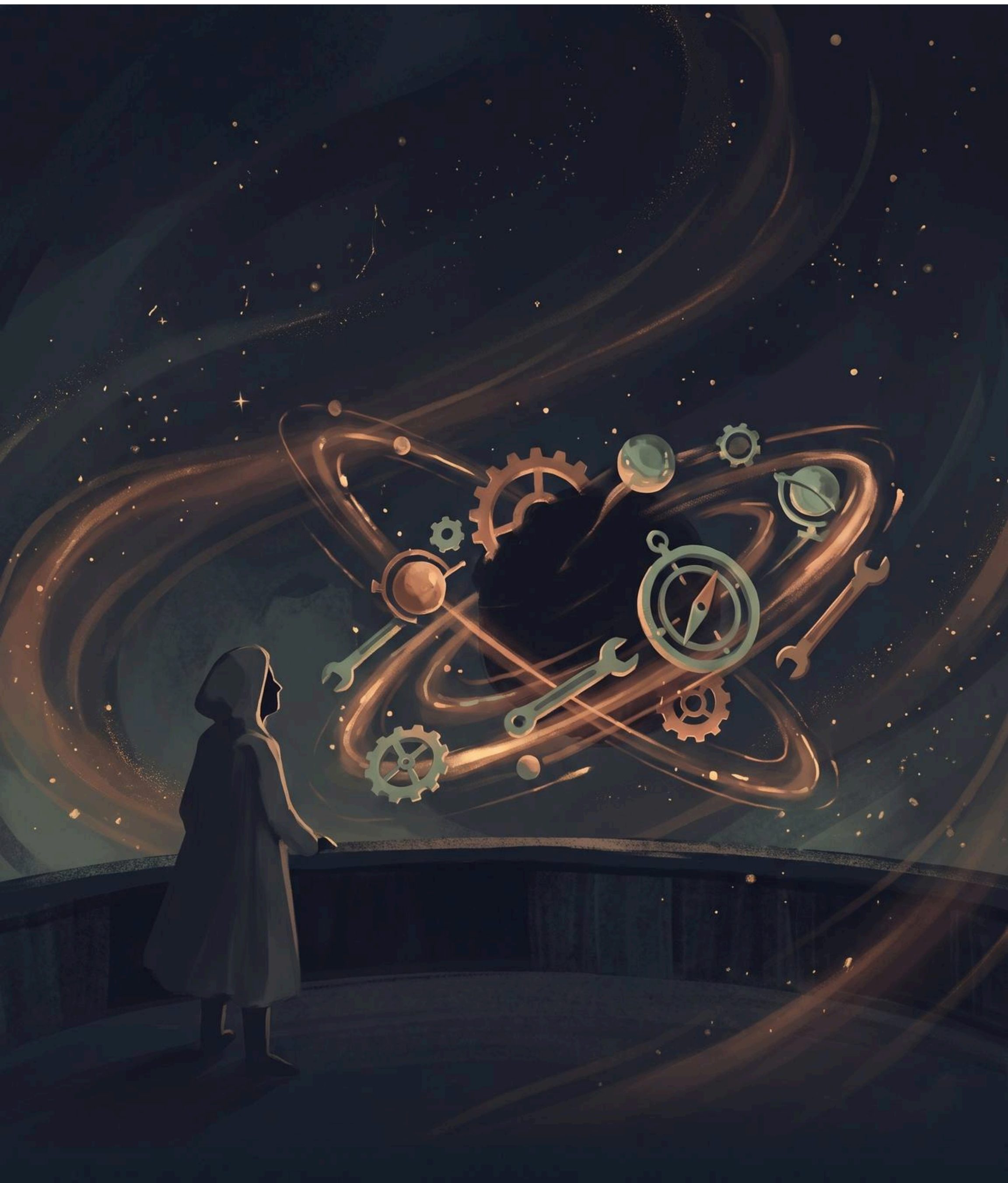
This is where many self-directed team efforts fail. The organization asks the team to identify and solve problems but does not provide a formal support structure to remove barriers beyond the team's decision rights.

The team should not need to escalate ordinary improvement barriers to the C-level team. When it does, the organization has shifted supervision upward and slowed the system.

The MEACT Specialist provides the required support architecture. This role mentors, educates, advises, coaches, and trains. It helps teams develop capability, coordinate cross-functional support, and remove barriers that the team cannot remove alone.

Self-directed teams own their work. The organization owns the reciprocal responsibility to provide the support system that makes self-direction sustainable.

Without that architecture, self-direction becomes abandonment disguised as empowerment.



The people closest to the work always know more than the room realizes.

Improve and codify

An improvement is not complete when someone has a good idea. It is complete when the idea has been tested, the result is visible, and the new practice is built into the system.

For an improvement to become durable, the team should:

1. Define the waste or friction with evidence.

2. Confirm the client impact.

3. Propose and test a change within its decision rights.

4. Seek MEACT support when the barrier is beyond its control.

5. Codify the approved improvement in the relevant standard, SOP, tool, or system.

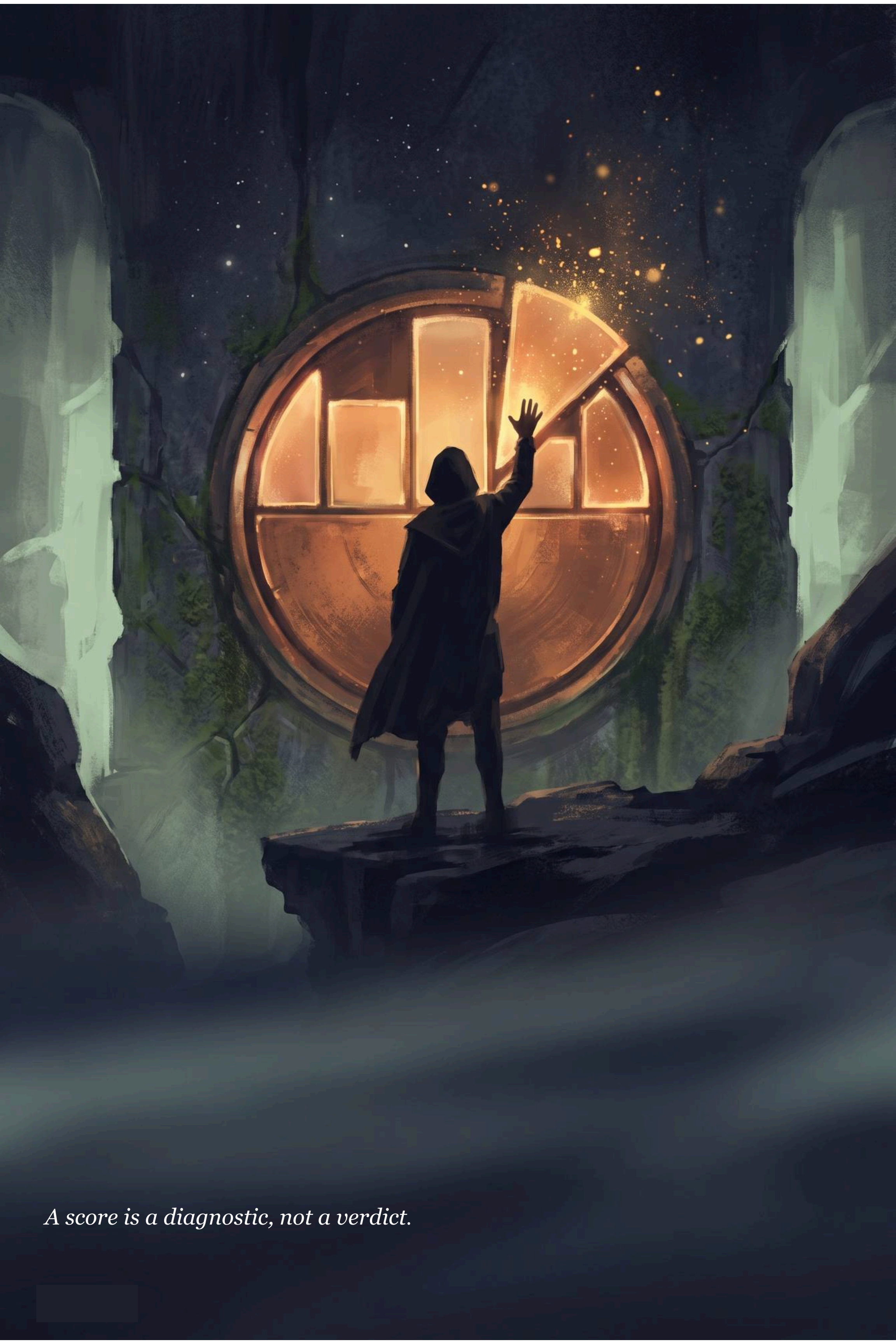
That is how an insight becomes an organizational capability.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Identify one point of waste you see regularly. In My Own the Work Record, document:

1. The activity, handoff, delay, rework, approval, movement, or information flow that adds no value.
2. The internal or external client affected.
3. The evidence that the waste exists.
4. What the team can change within its own decision rights.
5. What support is required beyond the team's decision rights.

Do not hide the waste. Make it visible.



A score is a diagnostic, not a verdict.

CHAPTER TEN

Self-Assessment and Personal Action Plan

Today may be the end of a training course. It is the beginning of your journey as someone capable of contributing to a self-directed team.

That opportunity is not ordinary. In more than two decades of teaching lean practices to over 4,000 employees and executives, I did not encounter a fully self-directed team. That does not make those people less capable. It reveals how few organizations have deliberately built the systems, decision rights, standards, tools, and support mechanisms required for self-direction to work.

Your opportunity is to use this experience as a career advantage.

Career success does not begin with waiting for recognition. It begins with understanding and improving the value you create for the clients you serve—whether they are internal clients, customers, or external clients.

Your career value stream

Your career is a value stream.

Personal responsibility and capability and initiative lead to better work and stronger decisions, which create greater value for internal and external clients, producing evidence in quality, SLA performance, time, cost, trust, and improvement—and ultimately career value: stronger personal brand, greater trust, opportunity, and compensation dialogue.

The self-assessment is not a scorecard. It is not a verdict on who you are. It is a diagnostic. It shows you where your career value stream is constrained so you can make an informed decision about what to develop next.

Assess yourself on evidence

Rate yourself using evidence from the last nine weeks—not how you feel today.

The assessment that follows is 50 statements across five dimensions. It is rigorous by design. Complete it in one focused sitting with evidence in mind rather than skimming for a general impression. The precision of your answers determines the usefulness of your action plan.

Use this scale for each statement:

Score	Meaning
1	I have little or no evidence that I consistently demonstrate this.
2	I demonstrate this occasionally, but it is not yet reliable.
3	I demonstrate this consistently in normal conditions.
4	I demonstrate this consistently and help others strengthen it.
5	I demonstrate this consistently, use evidence to improve it, and make it part of how the team operates.

The assessment spans five dimensions: Personal Responsibility, Initiative, Performance, Collaboration and Contribution, and Cooperation and Support—ten statements each, rated using the scale above and recorded in My Own the Work Record.

Build your personal action plan

Review the evidence. Identify the dimension with the lowest average or the dimension most likely to constrain the value you want to create next.

Then complete this plan in My Own the Work Record: priority dimension, evidence behind the rating, specific behaviour you will practise, the client, team, or system value you expect to create, the measure or evidence you will track, your first action date, and your weekly review date and time.

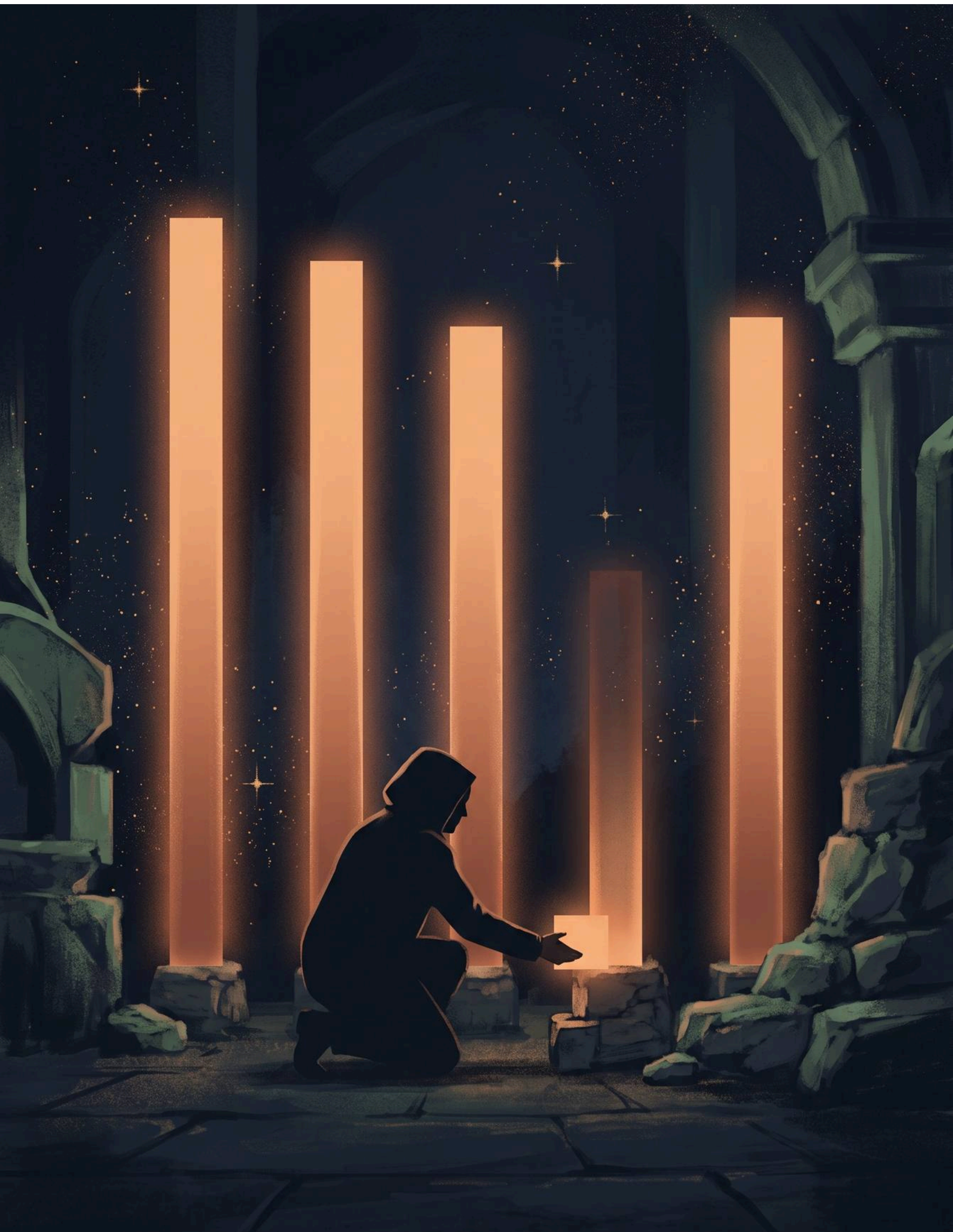
A self-assessment changed my direction

Early in 2026, I completed the Become a Key Person of Influence self-assessment. My overall score was 48%. The assessment measured Pitching, Publishing, Products, Profile, and Partnerships. I scored an 8 in Pitching and a 7 in Products. But I scored a 2 in Publishing and a 3 in Profile.

I treated those results as evidence, not judgment.

The Publishing score of 2 did not tell me what I was incapable of doing. It showed me a constraint in the value I wanted to create and communicate. I built a plan. Today, I publish content seven days a week, almost without fail. I have a deliberate plan for each category and a clear aim: to become a Person of Influence by January 2027.

That is the power of a self-assessment. It tells you where to focus. It gives you a starting point for deliberate practice, visible progress, and a personal action plan.



A score is not a verdict. It's a starting point.

The choice is yours

This guide closes with possibility, not with a warning about mistakes. You now have an opportunity to decide what kind of career you will build. The choice is yours because the responsibility is yours.

No leader, employer, economic condition, or colleague can remove your ability to choose how you respond, what you learn, what you improve, and where you direct your next effort.

Two fundamentals have profoundly improved my career and life.

First: never blame others for your challenges. The moment we blame someone else, we give that person power over our future. That does not mean every circumstance is fair or every organization is the right place for us. It means we retain responsibility for our response. We can learn, improve, have an evidence-based conversation, help redesign a system, or pursue an opportunity that better fits the future we intend to create.

Second: keep looking for how to improve the process. My career and life have become better because I consistently ask how the work, system, or decision could be improved. Challenge is not something to avoid. When we choose it deliberately, it makes work more engaging, improves the value we deliver, and expands what becomes possible.

If we fail to plan, we allow circumstance to plan for us. A personal action plan is not an administrative exercise. It is a declaration of personal responsibility: this is what I will develop, this is how I will measure it, and this is the value I intend to create.

The final truth is simple.

You can choose a career of controlled discomfort or accept a career of uncontrolled pain.

Controlled discomfort is chosen. It is honest self-assessment, deliberate learning, direct feedback, disciplined practice, and system improvement that strengthen your capability before circumstances force change.

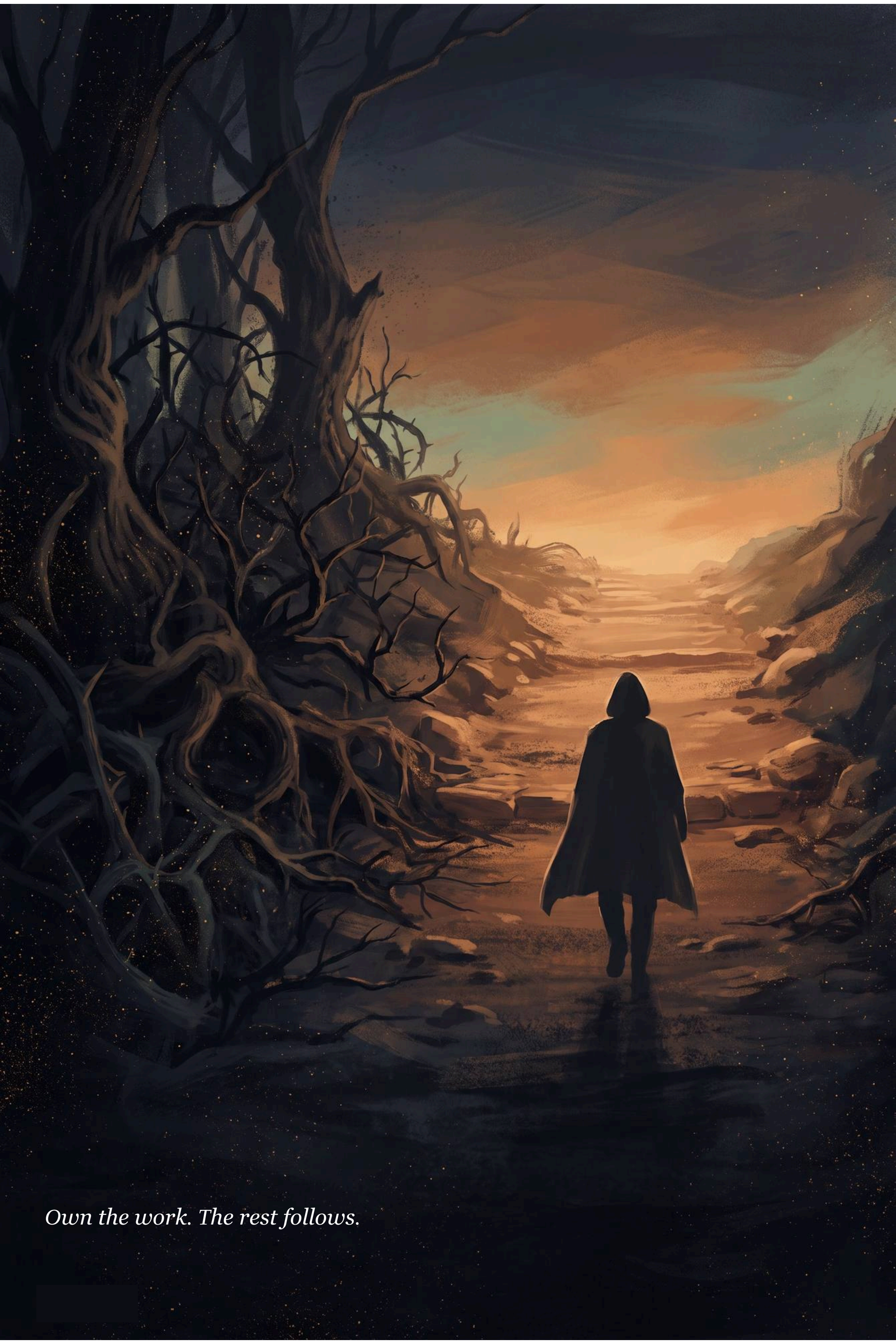
Uncontrolled pain arrives later. It is stagnation, declining relevance, missed opportunity, client failures, or a change imposed before you are ready.

Choose controlled discomfort.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Complete the self-assessment. Select one priority dimension. Build your personal action plan. Create your recurring weekly review.

Then begin.



Own the work. The rest follows.

CHAPTER CLOSING

A Final Word: Own the Work

If you came to this guide searching for a more successful career, I hope you now see the path differently.

Career success is not a mystery. It is not reserved for the person with the most impressive title, the loudest personal brand, or the strongest connection to power. Those things may create opportunity. They do not create enduring value on their own.

Enduring career success is built through a visible pattern of personal responsibility, initiative, performance, and improvement.

It begins when you stop waiting for someone else to make your career work for you.

That does not mean you must accept every circumstance. It does not mean every employer will be able to offer what you need. It does not mean your goals must look like anyone else's.

It means you understand your reality. You gather evidence. You create and document value. You improve the systems you touch. You have honest, informed conversations. And when your current environment cannot support the future you are building, you make a decision rather than a complaint.

This is the freedom of personal responsibility.

You will face two broad paths throughout your career.

The first is controlled discomfort: the deliberate choice to assess yourself honestly, learn a new capability, ask for feedback, make a difficult conversation visible, improve a process, and practise before you feel fully ready.

The second is uncontrolled pain: stagnation, declining relevance, missed opportunity, client failures, or a change imposed before you are ready for it.

You do not control every outcome. You do control which path you practise today.

Choose the discomfort that strengthens you.

Choose the work that creates value.

Choose the responsibility that gives you your power back.

Own the work. The rest follows.

Paul Poirier, Co-Founder | Performance Architect.
TAG — Own the work

Research Notes

The guide uses research to support factual claims and clearly identifies author observations, personal stories, and client-work examples as such. Readers are encouraged to examine the following sources directly and apply the evidence to their own reality.

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9. Heath, Chip, and Karla Starr. Making Numbers Count: The Art and Science of Communicating Numbers. Applied as an editorial principle in translating quantitative results into human-scale meaning.

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11. Deloitte. "AI ROI: The Paradox of Rising Investment and Elusive Returns". Survey evidence on AI value realization, adoption, and the organizational changes required to scale impact.

Author Observations and Client-Work Examples

The following examples are explicitly presented as Paul Poirier's personal observation, leadership experience, or client-work experience: the UPS call-centre story; the Toyota plant visit; Kaizen events across Canada; the water-slide production value-stream result; the service-team SLA awareness example; and the Key Person of Influence self-assessment. They are included as lived illustrations of the guide's frameworks, not as universal statistical claims.