

Imagine Better Leadership.

Creating Accountability with Empathy: How Executive Leaders Empower Others to Deliver Results

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The Accountability Paradox



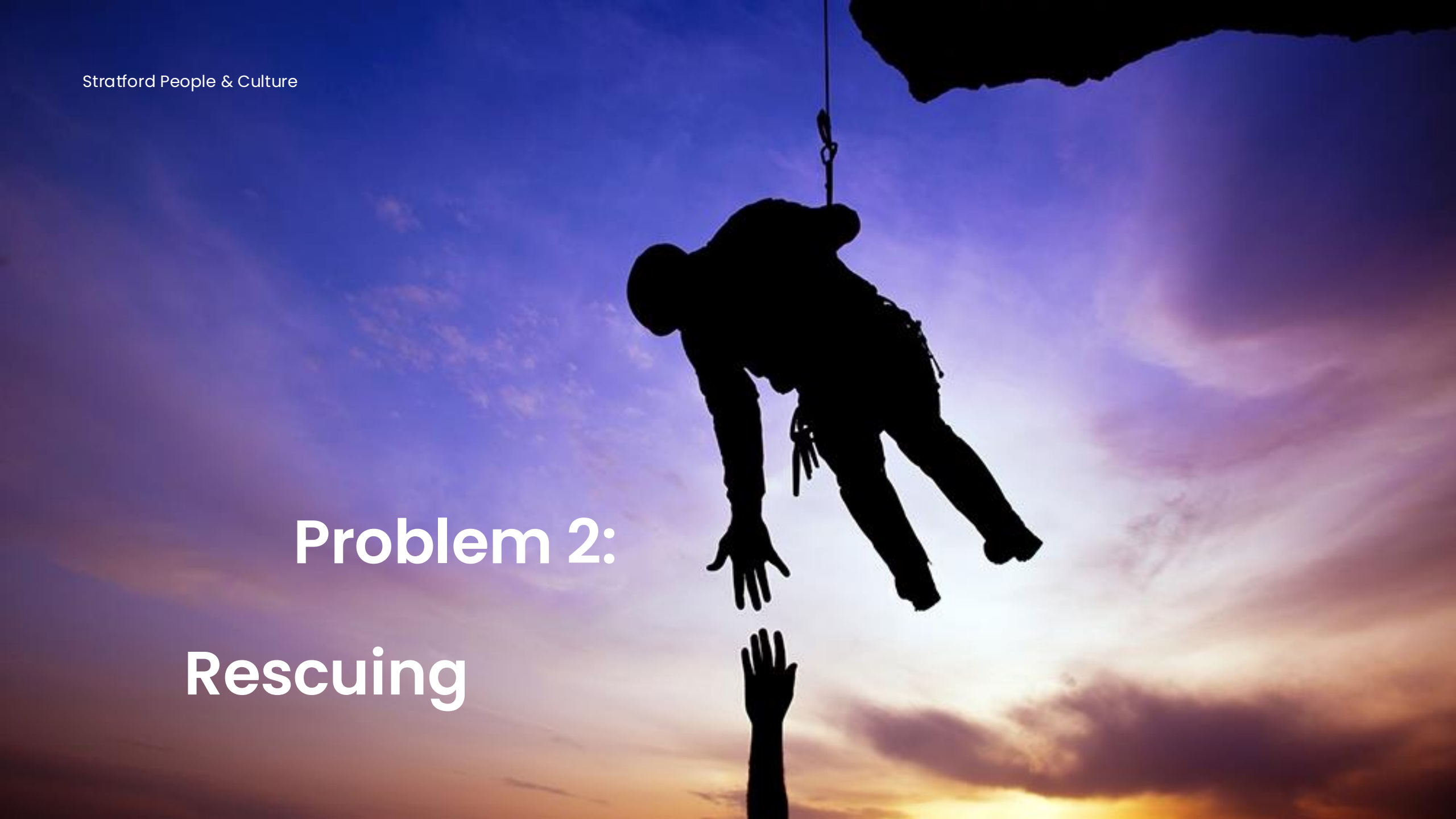
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Problem 1:

Forcing Accountability





Problem 2:

Rescuing

Two Leadership Traps

FORCING

“I need to make sure this get done.”

What it looks like

More control, closer monitoring, pressure and threats of consequences

What it can create

Compliance, defensiveness and reduced initiative

RESCUING

“I’ll step in and get us back on track?

What it looks like

Taking back decisions, solving problems, absorbing work and removing consequences

What it can create

Dependency, reduced ownership and executive overload

Different behaviours. Same unintended result.

The executive becomes increasingly responsible for driving the work

From Holding to Creating Accountability

The Leadership Shift

FROM

Holding people accountable

"How do I make sure they deliver?"

Monitor, direct, intervene, enforce

TO

Creating conditions for accountability

"How do I enable them to own the result?"

Clarify, support, empower, follow through

Accountability is not something we can feel on behalf of someone else.

Our job is to create the conditions in which people choose to take ownership

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Chapter 1



The Decision That Keeps Coming Back

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The Situation



- You are an executive in a federal government department responsible for a significant service modernization initiative.
- Six months into implementation:
  - Several important milestones have been missed.
  - Stakeholders are becoming frustrated.
  - Senior leadership is pressing for greater confidence in delivery.
  - Your experienced implementation manager and team appear capable, but decisions are taking too long and issues are increasingly escalated.
  - You are under pressure to demonstrate progress without becoming the person who makes every decision.



The Decision That Keeps Coming Back

- Your implementation manager proposes reallocating resources to recover a missed milestone.
- The manager has authority over operational decisions within the initiative, but the proposed change could affect another branch.
- Your own executive leadership has emphasized the need to accelerate delivery and expects you to exercise your delegated authority.
  - The manager says: “I think this is the right approach, but given the implications for the other branch, I'd prefer that you make the decision."

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Your Leadership Decision

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What Are We Optimizing For?

A
Decide yourself

Speed and immediate delivery

B
Return to manager

Ownership and decision quality

C
Engage other executive

Cross-branch alignment

D
Proceed within boundaries

Delegation and managed risk



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Every Decision Has Consequences

A

The resource change is approved quickly, and the team can move forward.

The manager becomes more likely to bring other difficult decisions to you, particularly when another branch is involved.

B

The manager develops a stronger recommendation and takes greater ownership of the issue.

Without clearer authority or support, the manager struggles to secure agreement from the other branch, delaying the decision further.

C

The two branches reach agreement and establish a coordinated approach.

Both managers begin to assume that cross-branch resource decisions require executive-level resolution.

D

The manager moves forward, with confidence that you support the delegated decision.

The other branch challenges the decision, exposing ambiguity about the manager's authority and the agreed escalation thresholds.

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There’s Something Else You Should Know

- Two months earlier, your implementation manager made a similar resource allocation decision.
- Another branch executive complained that the decision had been made without sufficient consultation.
- To preserve the working relationship and prevent further delays, you reversed your manager's decision.
- You explained that cross-branch decisions needed greater coordination in the future.
- Since then, your manager has increasingly brought decisions involving other branches to you.

The Decision Clarity Check

The Decision Clarity Check

Four questions that enable ownership without abandoning oversight

01

OUTCOME

What result are we trying to achieve?

Define success, not just the activity

02

AUTHORITY

Who can make which decision?

Clarify ownership and decision rights

03

BOUNDARIES

What constraints or risks must be respected?

Set the guardrails for independent action

04

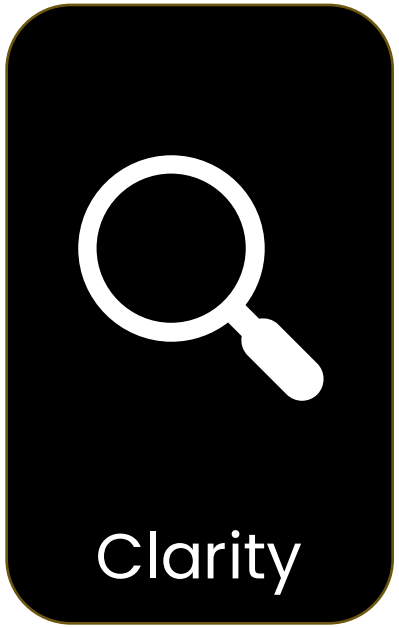
ESCALATION

When should I be involved?

Specify triggers for consultation or intervention

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What Enables Accountability?



People need to understand the outcome, their authority and the boundaries within which they can act.



Leaders help people prioritize what matters most, particularly when resources and demands are competing.



People need to be able to exercise judgement, raise concerns and learn without fearing that every imperfect decision will result in authority being taken away

Chapter 2



The Performance Conversation You've Been Avoiding

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The Delayed Transformation Initiative — Eight weeks later

- Following your earlier conversation, decision authority and escalation expectations have become clearer.
- Your implementation manager has taken greater ownership of operational decisions, and cross-branch coordination has improved.
- However, the initiative continues to fall behind.
- Two additional milestones have been missed.
- Progress reporting has been overly optimistic.
- Stakeholders are questioning whether the initiative can deliver its promised benefits.
- Your own executive leadership wants a credible recovery plan.
- Your manager remains highly respected, knowledgeable and committed. You know they have been working long hours and managing significant competing demands.
- You have raised performance concerns informally several times, but little has changed.

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How Would You Approach the Conversation?

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What Does Each Approach Emphasize?

A
Remove barriers first

Empathy and support

B
Reset expectations

Clarity and delivery discipline

C
Coach the manager

Ownership and problem-solving

D
Explain the consequences

Transparency and responsibility



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The Consequences of our Approach

A	The manager feels supported and becomes more open about workload pressures and cross-branch obstacles.	Without an explicit performance reset, the manager may assume that the circumstances sufficiently explain the missed commitments.
B	Expectations become clearer, progress is more visible and the manager understands the urgency.	The manager becomes focused on meeting reporting requirements and may hesitate to disclose emerging risks or question unrealistic commitments.
C	The manager develops ideas for improving delivery and feels ownership of the recovery approach.	Coaching encourages ownership, but sometimes leaders must first provide direct feedback and clear expectations.
D	The manager recognizes the seriousness of the situation and the need for measurable improvement.	If consequences are introduced before exploring legitimate constraints, the manager may become defensive or reluctant to disclose problems.

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There’s More to the Story

- During the conversation, your manager reveals something you hadn't fully appreciated.
- Three weeks earlier, they identified that a critical milestone was unlikely to be achieved.
- They considered escalating the concern but decided to continue working with the team to recover the schedule.
- The manager explains: "I knew you were under pressure to show progress. I didn't want to bring you another problem without a solution. I thought we could recover the time.”
- They also acknowledge that the team has been working on several competing priorities, and that they have been reluctant to push back on requests from other branches.
- You now realize that the problem involves more than missed milestones. There is also a pattern of delayed escalation, competing priorities and overly optimistic reporting.

Empathy and Accountability in the Same Conversation

The Empathetic Accountability Conversation

Understand the circumstances. Address the gap. Restore ownership.

01

ACKNOWLEDGE

What pressures or circumstances need to be understood?

Listen and recognize legitimate challenges without assuming they excuse the outcome

02

CLARIFY

What expectations was not met, and why does it matter?

Use specific observations to explain the gap between expectations and results

03

COMMIT

What will change, and who will own it?

Agree on actions, support, decision authority and measurable commitments

04

FOLLOW THROUGH

How will we review progress and respond to results?

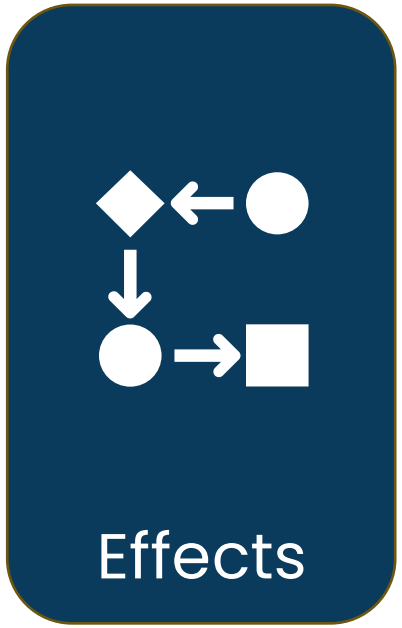
Establish checkpoints and appropriate, proportionate consequences


What is one question you would ask this manager to help restore ownership of the recovery plan?

Accountability Requires Support and Effects



Leaders should distinguish when to coach, advise, direct or evaluate, rather than relying on one type of conversation for every situation.



Effective consequences are timely, connected to the situation and proportionate. They reinforce the relationship between choices and outcomes without creating unnecessary fear or humiliation.

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Chapter 3



The Improvement You Didn't Ask For

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The Delayed Transformation Initiative — Four weeks later

- Following your performance conversation, the implementation manager has taken greater ownership of the recovery plan.
- Reporting is more transparent, priorities have been clarified, and the team is making progress.
- Then something unexpected happens.
- Members of the implementation team propose a different approach to delivering one component of the modernization initiative.
- Their proposal could:
  - Accelerate delivery of a key service improvement.
  - Reduce administrative effort for employees and service users.
  - Eliminate several unnecessary approval steps.
  - Create an opportunity to test a more efficient approach before expanding it.
  - However , the proposal challenges established processes and introduces manageable operational risks.
  - Your manager supports the idea but wants your endorsement before proceeding.
  - Meanwhile, your own executive leadership has requested tighter oversight of the initiative following the earlier delays.

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How Would You Respond?

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What Are We Optimizing For?

A
Endorse and proceed

Trust and momentum

B
Require assessment

Risk management and decision quality

C
Authorize a limited pilot

Learning and controlled experimentation

D
Escalate for direction

Executive alignment and oversight



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Every Choice Sends a Message

A	The team feels trusted and moves quickly. Their confidence and motivation increase, and early results are promising.	An unanticipated operational issue emerges. Although manageable, it exposes a gap in the safeguards and raises questions about how the decision was approved.
B	The team identifies important dependencies, improves the proposal and develops a more credible implementation plan.	The assessment takes longer than expected. Momentum declines, and team members begin to question whether proposing improvements is worth the additional work.
C	The team tests the idea, gathers evidence and identifies adjustments before considering broader implementation.	The pilot creates additional work and some confusion among stakeholders. Without clear criteria for evaluating results, it could become another initiative that never reaches a decision.
D	You seek direction from executive leadership	The proposal becomes caught in additional discussions and approvals. The manager concludes that meaningful innovation requires executive sponsorship before it can proceed.

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The Pressure To Take Back Control

- Later that day, your own executive leader asks for an update.
- After hearing about the team's proposal, they respond: "We've already missed several milestones. I'm not sure this is the time to experiment. I need confidence that we're going to deliver what we committed to. I want to review any significant changes before they proceed."
- You also learn that the proposed improvement would affect a service used by another branch, although the initial pilot could be contained within your existing operational authority.
- Your implementation manager asks: "Do you still want us to move forward, or should we wait until you've discussed this with your leadership?"

Empowerment with Guardrails

The Empowerment Guardrails

Give people room to act, with clear expectations for risk and results

01

PURPOSE

What outcome are we trying to improve?

Clarify the value of the proposed change and how success will be measured

02

BOUNDARIES

What authority and risks define the limits?

Establish decision rights, non-negotiable requirements and acceptable exposure

03

LEARNING

How can we test and adapt safely?

Use proportionate experimentation, feedback and evidence to guide decisions

04

OVERSIGHT

What must be reported, reviewed or escalated?

Agree on checkpoints, escalation triggers and decisions about next steps

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Five Conditions Work Together for Greater Accountability



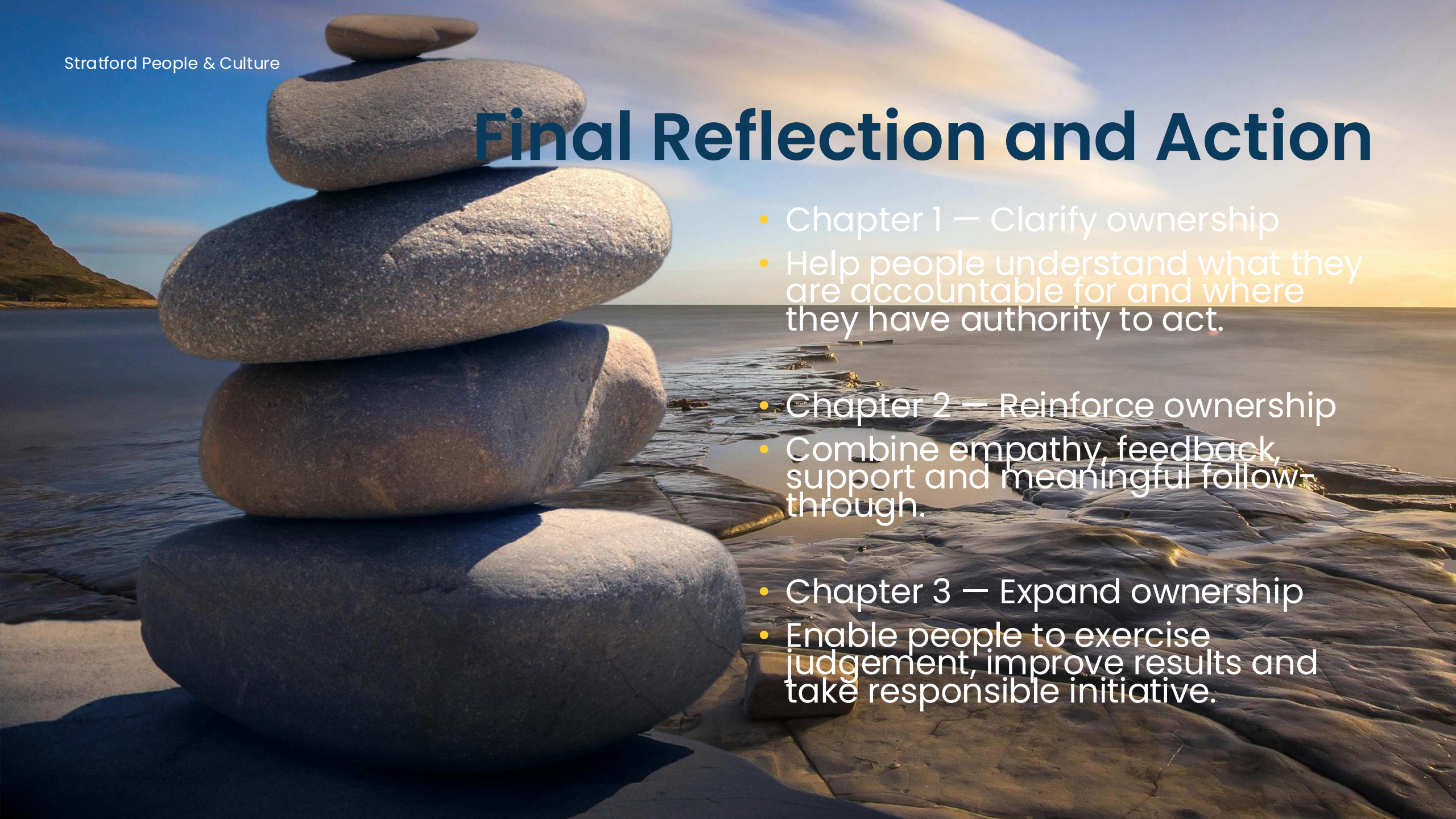
Clarity	Focus	Safety	Support	Effects
Know the outcome and authority	Prioritize what matters	Make it safe to struggle	Coach and provide feedback	Connect choices to consequences

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How Does This End?

- The executive and manager agree on a proportionate approach to evaluating the proposed improvement, with clear decision authority, safeguards and oversight.
- The outcome of the improvement is not yet known.
- However, something important has changed.
- The manager is now bringing forward recommendations rather than simply escalating problems. The team is identifying opportunities for improvement rather than waiting for direction. And the executive is spending less time making operational decisions and more time enabling the conditions for effective delivery.

Final Reflection and Action



- Chapter 1 — Clarify ownership
- Help people understand what they are accountable for and where they have authority to act.

- Chapter 2 — Reinforce ownership
- Combine empathy, feedback, support and meaningful follow-through.

- Chapter 3 — Expand ownership
- Enable people to exercise judgement, improve results and take responsible initiative.

As executives, our job is not to own every decision or solve every problem. It is to create the conditions where others can take ownership and succeed.

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Develop these capabilities in your team!

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High-Performance Leadership

https://telfer.uottawa.ca/en/executive-programs/our-programs/for-individuals/High-Performance-Leadership/

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Contact: Dean Fulford
Email: dean.fulford@stratford.group

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