M-01 · MANUAL

No Big Speeches

A practical guide to leading people, not impressing them.

A leadership manual about what a leader owes their team. Fifteen parts of short sayings you can recall in the moment, each with what it means and what it looks like in practice.

signal by Travis Loudin

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How to use this manual

Accountability is one part of leadership, and it only works when it sits on top of trust, clarity and support. This manual collects the sayings and principles that keep that bigger picture in view.

Structure. Part 1 lays the foundation. Parts 2 through 6 cover the roles a leader plays for the team. Parts 7 through 14 cover specific skills and situations. Part 15 lists traps to avoid.

Lesson format. Each lesson follows the same pattern: the saying, with its source where one is well established; what it means, in a sentence or two; and what it looks like in practice.

Parts

01 **Foundations**
02 **The Lightning Rod** · Owning outcomes
03 **The Shield** · Protecting focus
04 **The Cheerleader** · Making wins visible
05 **The Faith Builder** · Trust in you, each other and the mission
06 **In the Trenches** · No job beneath you
07 **Accountability Done Right**
08 **Hard Conversations and Feedback**
09 **Growing People**
10 **Leading Through Change**
11 **Decisions and Priorities**
12 **Leading Up and Across**
13 **Leading Tech Teams**
14 **Leading Yourself**
15 **Traps and Anti-Patterns**
++ **Reading list and sources**

01 Foundations

Everything else in this manual rests on one idea: people follow leaders they trust, and they hold themselves accountable to teams they believe in.

FN-001

Accountability is built on trust.

Paraphrased from Patrick Lencioni. The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, 2002.

WHAT IT MEANS

Lencioni stacks five dysfunctions as a pyramid. Absence of trust sits at the base, then fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results at the top. Each level depends on the ones below it.

IN PRACTICE

When accountability is failing, diagnose lower in the pyramid first. Do people trust each other enough to disagree openly? Did they truly commit, or just stay quiet?

⚠ NOTE

Lencioni's ideal is peer accountability, where teammates hold each other to the standard. A leader who is the only source of accountability has a bottleneck, not a culture.

Read from the base up: each dysfunction blocks the one above it, so fixing accountability usually starts lower down.

FN-002

Trust = (Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy) ÷ Self-Orientation

David Maister, Charles Green and Robert Galford. The Trust Equation, from The Trusted Advisor, 2000.

WHAT IT MEANS

The same equation the communication manual is built on applies to leaders. Self-orientation is the divisor, so it can wipe out everything above it.

IN PRACTICE

Before a decision, ask whether it serves the team and the mission or mainly your own image. People can tell the difference.

FN-003

“Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.”

Simon Sinek. Posted on his own X (Twitter) account, 2016 and 2021.

WHAT IT MEANS

Authority is a tool for serving the team, not a reward for reaching the role. The hierarchy flips: you work for them.

IN PRACTICE

Ask "What's in your way, and how can I help?" often, and act on the answer. Measure your week by what you unblocked for others, not by what you personally shipped.

02 The Lightning Rod

Owning outcomes

When something goes wrong, the leader absorbs the strike so the team doesn't get burned. Ownership upward, problem-solving downward.

FN-004

“Take the blame and share the credit.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Wins belong to the team by name. Misses belong to you. You can delegate the work but never the responsibility.

IN PRACTICE

In leadership meetings, use "we missed" and "[Name] delivered." Never the reverse. When unsure who deserves credit, name more people, not fewer.

FN-005

“There are no bad teams, only bad leaders.”

Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. Extreme Ownership, 2015.

WHAT IT MEANS

If the team failed, look first at what you gave them: clarity, priorities, time, tools and cover.

IN PRACTICE

After a miss, write down what you would do differently before asking anyone else the same question.

FN-006

“Fix the problem, not the blame.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Blame looks backward and protects egos. Fixes look forward and protect customers. People who fear blame hide information.

IN PRACTICE

In an incident, the first question is "What do we need right now?" The "why" comes later, in a blameless review that asks what let it happen, not who did it. Use a standard template: timeline, contributing causes and fixes, and never a name in the root cause.

03 The Shield

Protecting focus

Deep technical work needs long, quiet stretches. The leader's job is to absorb noise, churn and shifting priorities so the team can build.

FN-007

“Be an umbrella, not a funnel.”

Common in tech circles. Usually with a saltier word.

WHAT IT MEANS

Pressure from above should stop with you. Pass on the context and the reasons, translated into clear priorities. Hold back the noise, not the information.

IN PRACTICE

Before forwarding an escalation, rewrite it as a calm request with a clear ask and a realistic date.

FN-008

“Maker's schedule, manager's schedule.”

Paul Graham. Essay of the same name, 2009.

WHAT IT MEANS

Managers work in one-hour blocks. Makers need half days. One meeting in the middle of an afternoon can wreck a builder's whole block.

IN PRACTICE

Cluster meetings at the start or end of the day. Protect no-meeting blocks and defend them when others try to book over them.

FN-009

“Every yes is a no to something else.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Capacity is fixed. Accepting new work silently takes it from existing commitments. Sequencing competing requests is the leader's job, not the individual's.

IN PRACTICE

Answer new requests with "Yes, and here's what moves" rather than a bare yes. Make the tradeoff visible to whoever asked.

FN-010

Triage rotation

Common practice in support and engineering teams. Also called an interrupt shield or on-call.

WHAT IT MEANS

Interruptions need one front door. When a request can reach anyone at any time, nobody gets to concentrate. One person catching them for a set period lets everyone else go deep.

IN PRACTICE

Decide where requests come in and tell the people who send them. A weekly rotation is the usual form: the person on it acknowledges fast and routes well, and doesn't have to solve everything.

⚠ A CAUTION

Shield from noise, not from context. Protecting the team never means hiding why decisions are made. People who understand the bigger picture make better calls (see Context, not control in Part 5).

Clearing the path

FN-011

“The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them.”

Colin Powell. My American Journey, 1995, written with Joseph E. Persico.

WHAT IT MEANS

Problems landing on your desk are a sign that people think you can help and will. When they stop arriving, the problems are still there. People have decided that telling you is not worth the trouble.

IN PRACTICE

When someone brings a problem, do something about it that they can see, and tell them how it ended. If the team has gone quiet, go and ask what they have stopped mentioning.

FN-012

Pride of workmanship

W. Edwards Deming. Point 12 of his 14 Points for Management, in Out of the Crisis, 1982.

WHAT IT MEANS

Most people want to do work they can be proud of. What stops them is usually built into the job, such as poor tools, unclear standards and targets that reward speed over quality. Deming made removing those barriers management's work.

IN PRACTICE

Ask each person what keeps them from doing work they are proud of. Pick one answer you can do something about, fix it, and tell them when it is done.

FN-013

“What do I do that wastes your time without contributing to your effectiveness?”

Peter Drucker. The Effective Executive, 1967, in the chapter "Know Thy Time".

WHAT IT MEANS

Some of what is in the team's way was put there by the leader. The report nobody reads, the approval that adds a day and the meeting that could have been a note all cost the team time and give nothing back.

IN PRACTICE

Ask it in one-on-ones and wait for a real answer. Then drop one thing they name, and tell the team it is gone.

FN-014

Remove impediments

Scrum. The Scrum Guide, by Ken Schwaber and Jeff Sutherland, makes this part of the Scrum Master's job.

WHAT IT MEANS

Asking what is in the way is the easy half. The job is to see that it gets cleared. A leader who can't clear it personally still owns finding who can and staying on it.

IN PRACTICE

Keep a short list of what is blocking the team, where the team can see it, with a name and a next step on each item. When the answer is no, say so and say what was tried.

FN-015

The three-email rule

Common usage. Often credited to Phil Simon, who made the case for it in Message Not Received, 2015. Older versions of the rule exist, some with a different number.

WHAT IT MEANS

Writing is slow at settling anything unclear. Every relay loses detail and every reply adds a day. Ten minutes of conversation between the people who hold the problem usually ends it.

IN PRACTICE

When a thread reaches its third round without an answer, or a question is travelling second-hand, stop typing. Get the person with the problem and the person who can fix it talking today, then write down what was decided. If it is your team that is stuck, don't wait to be asked: set up the call.

04 The Cheerleader

Making wins visible

Good work that nobody notices feels a lot like work that doesn't matter. Recognition is fuel, and the leader controls the supply.

FN-016

“Praise in public, correct in private.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Recognition in front of peers and leadership carries more weight than a private thank-you. Correction in public carries more sting than it needs to.

IN PRACTICE

Thank people by name in team channels and leadership updates. Save course corrections for one-on-ones.

FN-017

“Catch people doing something right.”

Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson. The One Minute Manager, 1982.

WHAT IT MEANS

Most managers only notice work when it goes wrong. Flip the default.

IN PRACTICE

Aim to give at least one specific piece of positive recognition every week, and note it so you can see who you're missing.

FN-018

“What gets recognized gets repeated.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Recognition is how you teach the culture. People learn what matters by watching what you celebrate.

IN PRACTICE

Praise the behaviors you want more of, like early escalation, clear documentation and helping a teammate, not just big launches.

FN-019

The progress principle

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer. The Progress Principle, 2011.

WHAT IT MEANS

Their research found that making progress in meaningful work is a powerful driver of motivation, and small wins count.

IN PRACTICE

Mark milestones, not just finish lines. A short "phase one is live" post keeps energy up on long projects.

FN-020

Praise the effort and the approach, not just the talent.

Drawn from Carol Dweck's research. Mindset, 2006.

WHAT IT MEANS

Praising smarts encourages people to avoid risk. Praising effort and strategy encourages them to take on hard problems.

IN PRACTICE

Say "The way you broke that migration into stages was smart" rather than "You're a genius."

FN-021

Specific beats generic

Common feedback practice

WHAT IT MEANS

"Great job" fades in a minute. Naming what they did and why it mattered sticks.

IN PRACTICE

Use a simple pattern: what you did, the impact it had, thank you.

05 The Faith Builder

Trust in you, each other and the mission

A team performs when people believe three things: their leader has their back, their teammates will come through, and the work is worth doing.

Faith in you

FN-022

“Say what you'll do, then do what you say.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Reliability is the cheapest trust to build and the easiest to lose.

IN PRACTICE

Track every promise you make to your team, even small ones like "I'll ask about that." Close the loop every time.

FN-023

“Trust is built in drops and lost in buckets.”

Widely attributed to Kevin Plank

WHAT IT MEANS

Consistency over months earns trust. One broken confidence or unfair call can drain it.

IN PRACTICE

Before acting under pressure, when you're angry, or when nobody would find out, ask whether you'd do the same with the team watching.

Faith in each other

FN-024

Psychological safety

Amy Edmondson. The Fearless Organization, 2018.

WHAT IT MEANS

A shared belief that it's safe to speak up, ask questions and admit mistakes. Google's Project Aristotle found it was the strongest predictor of team effectiveness among the factors it studied.

IN PRACTICE

Respond to bad news with "Thanks for telling me" before anything else. How you react the first time decides whether you hear it the second time.

FN-025

“No brilliant jerks.”

Netflix. Culture deck, 2009.

WHAT IT MEANS

Talent doesn't excuse behavior that makes everyone else worse. One person can erode the whole team's trust.

IN PRACTICE

Address disrespect early and privately, no matter how strong the person's output is.

FN-026

“Assume positive intent.”

Common usage. Indra Nooyi named it the best advice she ever got, crediting her father (Fortune, 2008).

WHAT IT MEANS

Most friction comes from missing context, not malice.

IN PRACTICE

When a teammate or another department frustrates you, ask a clarifying question before reacting.

Faith in the mission

FN-027

“Start with why.”

Simon Sinek. Start With Why, 2009.

WHAT IT MEANS

People commit to purpose more than to tasks.

IN PRACTICE

Kick off every project by naming who it helps and how. For an internal tech team, that's usually time saved or errors prevented for a specific group.

FN-028

“Context, not control.”

Netflix. Culture deck, 2009.

WHAT IT MEANS

Present your experts with the problem, not your solution. Share the goal, the constraints and the reasoning, then let skilled people decide how. Expertise you don't use is expertise you're paying for twice: once in salary, and again in lost ideas.

IN PRACTICE

Hand over the problem, not the fix. Advise, or work on it together, but don't dictate the answer: that leaves a team's strengths unused and its autonomy unbuilt. If you catch yourself specifying the steps, stop and state the outcome instead.

FN-029

Commander's intent

Military doctrine. A principle of mission command in US Army doctrine (ADP 6-0).

WHAT IT MEANS

State the goal and the reason clearly enough that people can adapt when the plan breaks.

IN PRACTICE

End assignments with "If this goes sideways, what matters most is ___."

FN-030

“Disagree and commit.”

Amazon leadership principle. Have Backbone; Disagree and Commit. The phrase is older, in use at Sun Microsystems and Intel before Amazon adopted it.

WHAT IT MEANS

Argue hard in the room, then carry the decision out fully once it is made. Committing doesn't mean pretending you agreed, or withholding the why.

IN PRACTICE

Model it yourself when leadership overrules you. Give the team the reasons as you understand them, then back the decision in what you do. Your team watches how you carry decisions you didn't like.

06 In the Trenches

No job beneath you

Credibility comes from showing up for the hard, boring and unpopular work, not just the decisions. It also means knowing when your hands in the work start getting in the way.

FN-031

“Never ask your team to do something you wouldn't do yourself.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Your willingness sets the ceiling on theirs.

IN PRACTICE

Take an occasional shift on the least glamorous work: the ticket queue, the holiday on-call, the documentation nobody wants to write.

FN-032

“Leaders eat last.”

Simon Sinek. Book of the same name, 2014, drawn from a Marine Corps custom.

WHAT IT MEANS

The leader's comfort comes after the team's.

IN PRACTICE

When there's a late night or a crunch, be there. When there's a perk, it goes to the team first.

FN-033

“Lead from the front.”

Common military usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Model the behavior you expect, visibly and first.

IN PRACTICE

If you want fast acknowledgments and early escalation, do both yourself where the team can see it.

FN-034

Go and see

Toyota. Genchi genbutsu, from the Toyota Way 2001, the company's statement of its values. Principle 12 in Jeffrey Liker's book The Toyota Way, 2004.

WHAT IT MEANS

Go to where the work happens instead of relying on reports about it.

IN PRACTICE

Sit with a stakeholder while they use your team's tools. Pair with an engineer on a gnarly bug for an hour.

FN-035

“Eat your own dog food.”

Common software industry usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Use what your team builds. You'll feel the friction your users feel.

IN PRACTICE

Run your own requests through the same ticket process everyone else uses.

The player-coach balance

FN-036

A manager's output is the output of the organization under them.

Andy Grove. Paraphrased from High Output Management, 1983.

WHAT IT MEANS

Your personal output matters far less than what your team produces. Hands-on leaders are valuable, but the trap is real.

IN PRACTICE

Being in the trenches means sharing the hard parts, not claiming the fun parts. Before picking up a technical task, ask whether it would grow someone on the team instead.

⚠ WARNING SIGNS

You become the bottleneck on reviews or decisions. You take the most interesting work for yourself. Your team waits for you instead of acting.

Not the chief expert

A tech leader’s job is not to be the best engineer, analyst or admin on the team. It’s to build a team where each person is better than you in their own specialty, then point all that expertise in the same direction.

What the job actually is:

- See the big picture and connect the moving pieces across teams.
- Set priorities and sequence the work.
- Shield the team from noise and remove blockers.
- Grow people, play to their strengths and help them work through weaknesses.
- Make the call when experts disagree or when the tradeoff is a business decision, not a technical one.

FN-037

“If each of us hires people who are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants.”

David Ogilvy. Ogilvy on Advertising, 1983.

WHAT IT MEANS

Ogilvy reportedly gave new office heads a set of Russian nesting dolls with this message in the smallest one. Leaders who hire to stay on top shrink the organization. A leader's job is to build a team that outperforms any individual, including the leader, and to get it pulling the same direction.

IN PRACTICE

When hiring, look for the person who will outperform you in their lane. Treat being out-expertised by your team as a sign of success, not a threat.

FN-038

Multipliers and diminishers

Liz Wiseman. Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter, written with Greg McKeown, 2010.

WHAT IT MEANS

Diminishers need to be the smartest person present and end up shutting others down. Multipliers draw out the intelligence of everyone around them.

IN PRACTICE

In discussions, ask questions first and share your opinion last. Ask "What do you think we should do?" and mean it, then build on the answer rather than replacing it.

FN-039

“The conductor doesn't make a sound.”

Benjamin Zander. Shortened from a line in his 2008 TED talk. The idea also runs through The Art of Possibility, written with Rosamund Stone Zander, 2000.

WHAT IT MEANS

A conductor's power comes from making the musicians powerful. Nobody expects the conductor to be the best violinist.

IN PRACTICE

Judge your week by how well the orchestra played, not by how many notes you played yourself.

FN-040

“What got you here won't get you there.”

Marshall Goldsmith. Book of the same name, written with Mark Reiter, 2007.

WHAT IT MEANS

Technical excellence often earns the promotion into leadership. Leaning on it after the promotion becomes a liability.

IN PRACTICE

When you feel the pull to solve it yourself, ask whether that's the best use of the team's leader.

FN-041

Build on strengths.

Peter Drucker. A theme of The Effective Executive, 1967, not a direct quotation.

WHAT IT MEANS

Drucker argued that the leader's task is to align people's strengths so the team's weaknesses stop mattering. Nobody needs to be good at everything.

IN PRACTICE

Assign work by strengths. Cover gaps with pairing and complementary roles instead of forcing everyone to be well-rounded.

Warning signs you're competing with your own team:

- You're the tiebreaker on every technical debate.
- Discussion stops once you share an opinion.
- You review or rewrite most of the work before it ships.
- You feel uneasy when someone knows more than you about something.
- People bring you answers to approve instead of problems to solve.

Stay technical, for the right reason. Keep enough depth to ask sharp questions, spot risk and earn credibility with the team. Use that depth for judgment, not to compete with the experts you hired.

07 Accountability Done Right

Most accountability failures start as expectation failures. Get the expectations right and accountability becomes a conversation, not a confrontation.

FN-042

“Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.”

Brené Brown. Dare to Lead, 2018.

WHAT IT MEANS

Vague expectations set people up to fail, then make the correction feel unfair.

IN PRACTICE

Write down what done looks like, by when, and how it will be judged. Ask the person to play it back in their own words.

FN-043

“Who does what by when.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Every commitment needs one owner and one date. The same goes for a project or a decision: exactly one person on the hook, even when many contribute. Shared ownership usually means no ownership.

IN PRACTICE

End every meeting by reading back each action item with its owner and due date. If you can't name the owner of something, assign one before moving on.

FN-044

“Inspect what you expect.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

If you never follow up, people learn the expectation wasn't real.

IN PRACTICE

Put check-ins on the calendar when you assign the work, not when you start to worry.

FN-045

“Trust, but verify.”

Russian proverb. Popularized by Ronald Reagan.

WHAT IT MEANS

Extend trust by default, and keep enough visibility to catch problems early.

IN PRACTICE

Prefer lightweight visibility, like a shared board or a short weekly note, over status meetings.

FN-046

“The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.”

Lt. Gen. David Morrison, Australian Army. From his June 2013 video message as Chief of Army. Morrison has credited the phrase to General David Hurley.

WHAT IT MEANS

Ignoring a problem once tells everyone it's acceptable. Consistency matters more than intensity.

IN PRACTICE

Address small slips early and lightly. A quick, kind word now prevents a hard conversation later. Apply the same standard to your strongest performer as to everyone else.

FN-047

“No surprises.”

Common usage. A common management principle, here applied to performance reviews.

WHAT IT MEANS

Nothing in a performance review should be news to the person receiving it.

IN PRACTICE

Give feedback when it happens. A review should summarize conversations you have already had.

FN-048

Hold yourself accountable first

Travis Loudin. The manual's own lesson, not a quotation.

WHAT IT MEANS

People accept accountability from a leader who visibly owns their own misses.

IN PRACTICE

When you drop a ball, say so plainly to the team before anyone else points it out.

08 Hard Conversations and Feedback

Support without honesty slowly turns into enabling. Caring about someone includes telling them what they need to hear, early and kindly.

FN-049

Ruinous empathy

Kim Scott. Radical Candor, 2017.

WHAT IT MEANS

Being so focused on being nice that you never tell someone the truth. It feels supportive but robs them of the chance to improve.

IN PRACTICE

If you've noticed the same issue three times and haven't said anything, you're overdue.

FN-050

“Bad news doesn't get better with age.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Delayed feedback lands harder and feels like an ambush.

IN PRACTICE

Give corrective feedback within a few days of the moment, while the details are fresh for both of you.

FN-051

Situation, Behavior, Impact (SBI)

Center for Creative Leadership. CCL's feedback model, which it writes as Situation-Behavior-Impact.

WHAT IT MEANS

Describe when and where, what the person actually did, and the effect it had. It keeps feedback factual instead of personal.

IN PRACTICE

"In Tuesday's standup (situation), you cut off Sam twice (behavior), and he stopped sharing his update (impact)."

FN-052

“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

Stephen Covey. Habit 5 in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, 1989.

WHAT IT MEANS

There's usually context you don't have. Hear it before you conclude.

IN PRACTICE

Open with a question: "Walk me through what happened on this one."

FN-053

Crucial conversations

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler. Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High, 2002.

WHAT IT MEANS

Conversations where stakes are high, opinions differ and emotions run strong. The skill is keeping it safe enough for both people to stay honest.

IN PRACTICE

When someone gets defensive, step back and restate your shared goal before continuing.

FN-054

“Feedback is a gift.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Applies in both directions. Leaders who welcome feedback get more of it and better.

IN PRACTICE

Ask your team regularly, "What's one thing I could do differently that would help you?" Then act on at least some of it visibly.

FN-055

Don't let a clear mismatch linger.

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Start with your side: were the expectations clear, and did the person get real support and time? Once a mismatch is clear to everyone and coaching hasn't fixed it, don't let it drag on, for the person's sake and the team's. Tolerating it quietly taxes your strongest people, who pick up the slack.

IN PRACTICE

Write down the expectations and the support given, then address it with a clear plan. If what happens next isn't your call, take that record to the person whose call it is. Fairness and speed are not in conflict when the groundwork is done.

09 Growing People

The long-term measure of a leader is how many people grew under them. Coaching, stretching and adapting to each person is the work.

Coaching and one-on-ones

FN-056

The one-on-one is their meeting, not yours.

Andy Grove. Paraphrased from High Output Management, 1983.

WHAT IT MEANS

One-on-ones exist for the report's concerns, not your status updates.

IN PRACTICE

Let them set the agenda. If the conversation is slow to start, "What's in your way, and how can I help?" opens it without taking it over. Keep a shared running doc so topics carry over and nothing gets lost.

FN-057

“Stay curious a little longer.”

Michael Bungay Stanier. The Coaching Habit, 2016.

WHAT IT MEANS

Leaders rush to give advice. Asking one more question often helps the person find a better answer themselves. People own solutions they come up with and merely follow the ones you hand them.

IN PRACTICE

When someone brings a problem, ask "What options do you see?" before offering yours. Then try Bungay Stanier's go-to follow-up: "And what else?"

Meeting people where they are

FN-058

Task-relevant maturity

Andy Grove. High Output Management, 1983.

WHAT IT MEANS

There is no single right style. How closely you manage depends on someone's experience with that specific task, not their seniority overall. New or unsure people need direction, and capable, confident people need autonomy.

IN PRACTICE

Ask yourself "How many times has this person done this exact thing?" before deciding how much to check in. A senior engineer on unfamiliar ground may need more structure than usual.

FN-059

Autonomy, mastery and purpose

Daniel Pink. Drive, 2009.

WHAT IT MEANS

For creative and knowledge work, intrinsic motivators outperform carrots and sticks.

IN PRACTICE

Ask each person which of the three they are short on: room to choose their approach, a chance to get better at something, or a reason the work matters. Then change one thing about their work to give them more of it.

Building careers

FN-060

“People leave managers, not companies.”

Common usage. Supported in spirit by Gallup's research on managers and engagement.

WHAT IT MEANS

Your relationship with each person is the biggest factor in whether they stay and thrive.

IN PRACTICE

Ask about career goals at least quarterly, and connect current work to where they want to go.

FN-061

“Not everyone wants to be a manager.”

Common usage. Common in tech, often handled through a dual career ladder.

WHAT IT MEANS

Strong individual contributors deserve a growth path that doesn't force them into people management.

IN PRACTICE

Ask each person which path they want, and don't assume it is management. Then argue for it. A senior role that doesn't mean managing people is worth pushing for, even when it isn't yours to create.

FN-062

“Delegate outcomes, not tasks.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Handing off a goal builds judgment. Handing off steps only builds compliance.

IN PRACTICE

Give stretch assignments with clear goals and a safety net, then resist the urge to take them back.

FN-063

“Work yourself out of a job.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Develop people until the team runs well without you. It also reduces the bus factor.

IN PRACTICE

For every critical system or relationship you own, name a backup and train them.

10 Leading Through Change

Reorganizations, acquisitions, new systems and new leadership all create uncertainty. During change, the team watches the leader more closely than at any other time.

FN-064

“In the absence of information, people assume the worst.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Silence doesn't stay empty. It fills with rumor and anxiety.

IN PRACTICE

Communicate even when there's little news. "Nothing has changed since last week" is still worth saying.

FN-065

“Say what you know, what you don't know, and when you'll know more.”

Common usage. Common crisis communication practice.

WHAT IT MEANS

Honesty about uncertainty builds more trust than false confidence.

IN PRACTICE

Use this structure in every update during a period of change.

FN-066

Undercommunicating the vision

John Kotter. Leading Change, 1996, expanded from his 1995 Harvard Business Review article.

WHAT IT MEANS

Kotter names this as one of the most common reasons change efforts fail. Leaders say it once and assume it landed.

IN PRACTICE

Repeat the core message across channels and meetings far more often than feels necessary. By the time you're sick of saying it, people are just starting to hear it.

FN-067

Change is external. Transition is internal.

William Bridges. Paraphrased from Managing Transitions, 1991.

WHAT IT MEANS

Bridges describes transition as endings, then an uncomfortable in-between he calls the neutral zone, then new beginnings. People have to let go before they can move forward.

IN PRACTICE

Acknowledge what people are losing, such as a familiar tool, process or team, before selling what they're gaining.

FN-068

“Be a thermostat, not a thermometer.”

Common usage. The thermometer and thermostat image is best known from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963.

WHAT IT MEANS

A thermometer reflects the room. A thermostat sets it. Your team takes its emotional cues from you.

IN PRACTICE

Process your own frustration with peers or your manager, not in front of your team.

FN-069

“Nothing about me without me.”

Patient and disability advocacy. Adopted as a guiding principle at the 1998 Salzburg Seminar on patient involvement. The disability rights movement's form is "Nothing about us without us".

WHAT IT MEANS

People accept changes more readily when they had a hand in shaping them.

IN PRACTICE

Involve the people affected early, even if it's just asking what worries them about the change.

11 Decisions and Priorities

A slow decision blocks a whole team. Good leaders match the speed of a decision to how reversible it is, and push decisions down to the people closest to the work.

FN-070

One-way doors and two-way doors

Jeff Bezos, Amazon. 2015 letter to Amazon shareholders, published April 2016.

WHAT IT MEANS

Most decisions are reversible. Make those quickly. Save careful deliberation for the few you can't undo.

IN PRACTICE

Before a debate drags on, ask "If we're wrong, how hard is it to reverse?"

FN-071

“A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan next week.”

George S. Patton. War As I Knew It, 1947.

WHAT IT MEANS

Speed and commitment often matter more than marginal improvements to the plan.

IN PRACTICE

Set a decision deadline when a discussion starts, not when it stalls. If the perfect plan isn't ready by then, ask "What's the smallest version that delivers value?" and start with that.

FN-072

“Not deciding is a decision.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Delay has consequences too. They're just less visible.

IN PRACTICE

When you're stuck, name what waiting costs and who pays for it.

FN-073

Escalate misalignment early

Jeff Bezos, Amazon. 2016 letter to Amazon shareholders, published April 2017.

WHAT IT MEANS

Some disagreements are not misunderstandings. Two teams want different things, and more discussion will not change that. Left alone, the side with more stamina wins, which is no way to decide anything.

IN PRACTICE

When two honest attempts haven't moved a disagreement between teams, stop the thread. Take it, together with the other side, to the person who can make the call. Lay out both positions fairly and ask for a decision.

FN-074

Decentralized command

Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. Extreme Ownership, 2015. One of the book's four Laws of Combat.

WHAT IT MEANS

Push decisions to the lowest level that has the information to make them. The leader sets intent and boundaries.

IN PRACTICE

Tell people which decisions are theirs to make without asking. Most will be relieved, not overwhelmed.

FN-075

“What is important is seldom urgent, and what is urgent is seldom important.”

Widely attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower. The basis of the Eisenhower Matrix. In a 1954 speech Eisenhower credited a similar remark to an unnamed former college president.

WHAT IT MEANS

Urgent work crowds out important work unless you defend it.

IN PRACTICE

Block time each week for important but not urgent work, such as documentation, planning and developing people.

FN-076

“Strong opinions, weakly held.”

Paul Saffo. His forecasting motto. It titles a 1998 Educom Review interview and his 2008 essay "Strong Opinions weakly held".

WHAT IT MEANS

Commit to a clear position, and change it quickly when the evidence changes.

IN PRACTICE

Say out loud what evidence would change your mind.

FN-077

The pre-mortem

Gary Klein. "Performing a Project Premortem", Harvard Business Review, September 2007.

WHAT IT MEANS

Imagine the project has already failed, then ask why. It surfaces risks people are reluctant to raise.

IN PRACTICE

Run a 15-minute pre-mortem at the kickoff of any significant project.

FN-078

“Hope is not a strategy.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Plans that depend on everything going right will fail.

IN PRACTICE

For every critical date, ask what the fallback is if it slips.

12 Leading Up and Across

A lot of what a team experiences as "good leadership" happens in rooms they're not in. Advocacy, translation and relationships with peers decide what resources and reputation the team gets.

FN-079

“Advocate for your people when they're not in the room.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Raises, promotions, headcount, tools and reputation are won in leadership conversations. Your team relies on you to speak up there.

IN PRACTICE

Keep a running list of each person's wins so you have specifics ready when opportunities come up.

FN-080

Sponsor, don't just mentor

Sylvia Ann Hewlett. Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor, 2013, and The Sponsor Effect, 2019.

WHAT IT MEANS

A mentor gives advice. A sponsor puts their own name behind someone by recommending them for the role, handing them the visible project and vouching for them to the people who decide. Advice is the cheaper of the two.

IN PRACTICE

Pick one person who is ready for more. Name them for a specific opportunity, to the person who decides it, and let them present their own work in that room.

FN-081

“The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”

Proverb. American. In print since at least 1903.

WHAT IT MEANS

The proverb describes how raises and promotions tend to get handed out. For a leader it is a warning. If pay and opportunity follow whoever asks loudest, the people who quietly do good work fall behind, and the leader let it happen.

IN PRACTICE

Before each pay or promotion cycle, go through the whole team by name, not only the people who have raised it. Make the case for anyone who has fallen behind, and tell them it was made, whatever the answer.

FN-082

Amplification

Women on President Obama's White House staff. Reported by Juliet Eilperin in The Washington Post, 2016.

WHAT IT MEANS

When someone makes a good point and the room moves past it, repeat it and say whose it was. The idea stays alive and the credit stays with the person who had it. Coming from the leader, it carries extra weight.

IN PRACTICE

In meetings, listen for points that get skipped or come back later under someone else's name. Say "I want to go back to [Name]'s point" and hand the floor back to them.

FN-083

“Nobody cares how the sausage is made.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Executives want the outcome and the impact, not the technical journey. Excellent work that isn't understood doesn't earn the team resources, credit or trust.

IN PRACTICE

Translate every technical win into a business result before it goes up the chain. Report the team's outcomes regularly in terms leadership cares about: time saved, risk avoided, revenue enabled.

FN-084

Your first team is your peer team.

Patrick Lencioni. The "first team" idea, from The Advantage (2012). The wording here is a paraphrase.

WHAT IT MEANS

The leaders beside you are a team you belong to as well. When that team works, problems between departments get settled between peers before they become escalations.

IN PRACTICE

Solve cross-department problems with peers directly before escalating. It builds goodwill your team benefits from later.

FN-085

“No surprises.”

Common usage. A common management principle, here applied to keeping your manager informed.

WHAT IT MEANS

Your manager should never learn about a problem from someone else first.

IN PRACTICE

Escalate risks early, ideally with options and a recommendation. Early warning is a favor, not an admission.

FN-086

“Dig your well before you're thirsty.”

Harvey Mackay. Book of the same name, 1997.

WHAT IT MEANS

Relationships built in calm times are what carry you through crises.

IN PRACTICE

Have regular informal check-ins with peer leaders, especially those whose teams depend on yours.

FN-087

Glue work

Tanya Reilly. Being Glue, a talk and essay, 2019.

WHAT IT MEANS

Glue work is the onboarding, the chasing, the note-taking and the unblocking that keep a team working. It rarely counts at promotion time, and it tends to land on the same willing people again and again.

IN PRACTICE

List who does this work. Credit it by name in reviews and promotion cases, and share out the chores so they stop falling to the same person. If the promotion process will not count it, tell the person before they spend another year on it.

FN-088

Defend the invisible work

Common challenge for technical teams

WHAT IT MEANS

Maintenance, security, technical debt and learning time don't show up in a demo. Leadership won't protect them unless you do.

IN PRACTICE

Reserve a visible share of capacity for this work and explain its value in terms of risk and future speed.

13 Leading Tech Teams

Software and IT have their own well-known laws. Each one carries a leadership lesson that non-technical leaders often miss.

Principle	Source	Leadership lesson
Brooks's law: Adding people to a late software project makes it later.	Fred Brooks, The Mythical Man-Month	New people need ramp-up time from your experts. Cut scope or move the date before adding headcount to a late project.
Conway's law: Organizations build systems that mirror their own communication structure.	Melvin Conway	If two teams don't talk, their systems won't integrate well. Fix the communication, not just the code.
Goodhart's law: When a measure becomes a target, it stops being a good measure.	Charles Goodhart, popular phrasing by Marilyn Strathern	Ticket counts and closed tasks get gamed once they're targets. Pair metrics with judgment and conversation.
Hofstadter's law: It always takes longer than you expect, even when you account for Hofstadter's law.	Douglas Hofstadter, Gödel, Escher, Bach	Build buffers into commitments. Under promise, over deliver.
The ninety-ninety rule: The first 90% of the work takes 90% of the time. The last 10% takes the other 90%.	Tom Cargill, Bell Labs	"Almost done" is a warning sign. Ask what's left, not how far along it is.
Parkinson's law: Work expands to fill the time available.	C. Northcote Parkinson	Set clear, reasonable deadlines. Open-ended work drifts.

Principle	Source	Leadership lesson
Chesterton’s fence: Don’t remove a fence until you know why it was put up.	G. K. Chesterton	Understand why a legacy process or system exists before tearing it out. New leaders are especially prone to this.
The Boy Scout rule: Leave the code cleaner than you found it.	Robert C. Martin, Clean Code	Encourage small, continuous improvements so technical debt never needs a heroic cleanup.
“Make it work, make it right, make it fast.”	Widely attributed to Kent Beck	Sequence matters. Don’t let polish or optimization block a working first version.
The bus factor: How many people could disappear before a project stalls.	Common software usage	A bus factor of one is a risk to the business and a burden on that person. Cross-train deliberately.
Two-pizza teams: Teams small enough to feed with two pizzas.	Amazon	Small teams communicate faster and own more. Split before a team gets unwieldy.
The Peter principle: People rise to their level of incompetence.	Laurence J. Peter	Your best engineer won’t automatically be a great manager. Offer technical growth paths and train new managers.
Hanlon’s razor: Never attribute to malice what is adequately explained by a mistake.	Robert J. Hanlon; the original says stupidity	Most outages and missed handoffs are process gaps, not bad actors. Look for the gap.

14 Leading Yourself

A team can't be steadier than its leader. Your energy, humility and habits set the ceiling for everyone else's.

FN-089

Sustainable pace

Extreme Programming, and the Principles behind the Agile Manifesto. The name of an Extreme Programming practice, first called the 40-hour week. The eighth principle behind the Agile Manifesto (2001) states the same idea.

WHAT IT MEANS

Teams should be able to keep their pace indefinitely. Heroics are a symptom of a planning problem, not a culture to celebrate.

IN PRACTICE

When a late night was needed, follow it with recovery time and a look at what caused it.

FN-090

“Your habits become their expectations.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

If you send messages at midnight, people assume they should answer at midnight, whatever you say.

IN PRACTICE

Use scheduled send. Take your PTO and actually unplug. It gives everyone else permission.

FN-091

“You can't pour from an empty cup.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

Burned-out leaders make worse decisions and have less patience for their people.

IN PRACTICE

Protect sleep, exercise and time away the same way you'd protect a critical deadline.

FN-092

"I don't know" and "I was wrong."

Patrick Lencioni. Lencioni calls this vulnerability-based trust; see The Five Dysfunctions of a Team (2002).

WHAT IT MEANS

When the leader admits gaps and mistakes, everyone else can too. Pretending to have every answer teaches the team to hide theirs.

IN PRACTICE

Say "I don't know, let's find out" at least once in front of the team when it's true.

FN-093

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.”

Popularized by Rick Warren. The Purpose Driven Life, 2002. Often misattributed to C. S. Lewis; close versions were in print in the 1990s.

WHAT IT MEANS

Humility isn't self-deprecation. It's keeping attention on the team and the mission instead of on yourself.

IN PRACTICE

In conversations, notice how often you steer back to your own experience. Try to steer to theirs instead.

FN-094

“Respond, don't react.”

Common usage

WHAT IT MEANS

The pause between a trigger and your response is where leadership happens.

IN PRACTICE

When a message makes you angry, draft the reply and wait before sending it.

FN-095

Find your own support

Common practice

WHAT IT MEANS

Leaders need coaching and honest feedback too, and their team can't fully provide it.

IN PRACTICE

Keep a peer leader, mentor or outside group you can think out loud with.

15 Traps and Anti-Patterns

Most leadership failures come from good intentions applied badly. These are the common ones, with what to do instead.

Trap	What it looks like	Instead
“Don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions.”	People sit on problems until they’ve solved them, often too late to fix cheaply.	“Bring me problems early. Bring ideas if you have them.”
Shooting the messenger	Reacting badly to bad news, so people stop bringing it.	Thank the person first, then solve.
Watermelon reporting	Status looks green on the outside but is red inside.	Reward honest yellow and red statuses. Ask “What would make this go red?”
Micromanagement	Checking every step, redoing work, approving trivial decisions.	Match oversight to task-relevant maturity (Part 9). Delegate outcomes.
Seagull management	Swooping in only when something breaks, making noise, then leaving.	Stay steadily present so you’re not a surprise visitor.
Mushroom management	Keeping the team in the dark and feeding them only what they need.	Context, not control (Part 5). Share the why.
Rewarding firefighters, ignoring fire preventers	Celebrating the late-night rescue, not the engineer whose work meant nothing broke.	Recognize prevention, documentation and quiet reliability.
Hero culture	One person always saves the day, becoming a single point of failure and burning out.	Spread knowledge, reduce the bus factor and respect sustainable pace.

Trap	What it looks like	Instead
Ruinous empathy	Avoiding hard feedback to keep things pleasant.	Say the hard thing, kindly and directly. See Ruinous empathy (Part 8).
The player-coach bottleneck	The leader keeps the interesting technical work and becomes the blocker.	Ask whether a task would grow someone else before taking it (Part 6).
Favoritism	Uneven standards, opportunities or access across the team.	Apply the same standard to everyone. Rotate visible opportunities deliberately.
“I” for wins, “they” for losses	Language that claims success and distances from failure.	Take the blame and share the credit (Part 2).
Hiding bad news upward	Hoping a slip resolves before anyone notices.	No surprises (Part 12). Tell your manager early, while there is still time to act.

++ Reading list and sources

The books behind most of the lessons in this manual, roughly in the order they're most useful for a technical leader.

- *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni. The trust-to-accountability pyramid. A short fable, quick to read.
- *High Output Management*, Andy Grove. One-on-ones, task-relevant maturity and the manager's real output. A classic for tech leaders.
- *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott. Feedback that is both caring and direct.
- *Extreme Ownership*, Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. Ownership, decentralized command and leading from the front.
- *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson. Psychological safety and how to build it.
- *The Coaching Habit*, Michael Bungay Stanier. Seven questions that make you a better coach in less time.
- *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown. Courage, vulnerability and "clear is kind."
- *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek. Why safety and trust drive team performance.
- *Drive*, Daniel Pink. What motivates knowledge workers.
- *Crucial Conversations*, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler. Staying honest when stakes and emotions run high.
- *Leading Change*, John Kotter. The common reasons change efforts fail.
- *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges. The human side of change.
- *The Mythical Man-Month*, Fred Brooks. The original book on why software projects slip.
- *The Advantage*, Patrick Lencioni. Leadership team health and the "first team" idea.
- *The Progress Principle*, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer. Why small wins fuel motivation.
- *The One Minute Manager*, Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson. A fast read on goals, praise and redirection.
- *The Trusted Advisor*, David Maister, Charles Green and Robert Galford. The source of the Trust Equation.

Thanks

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