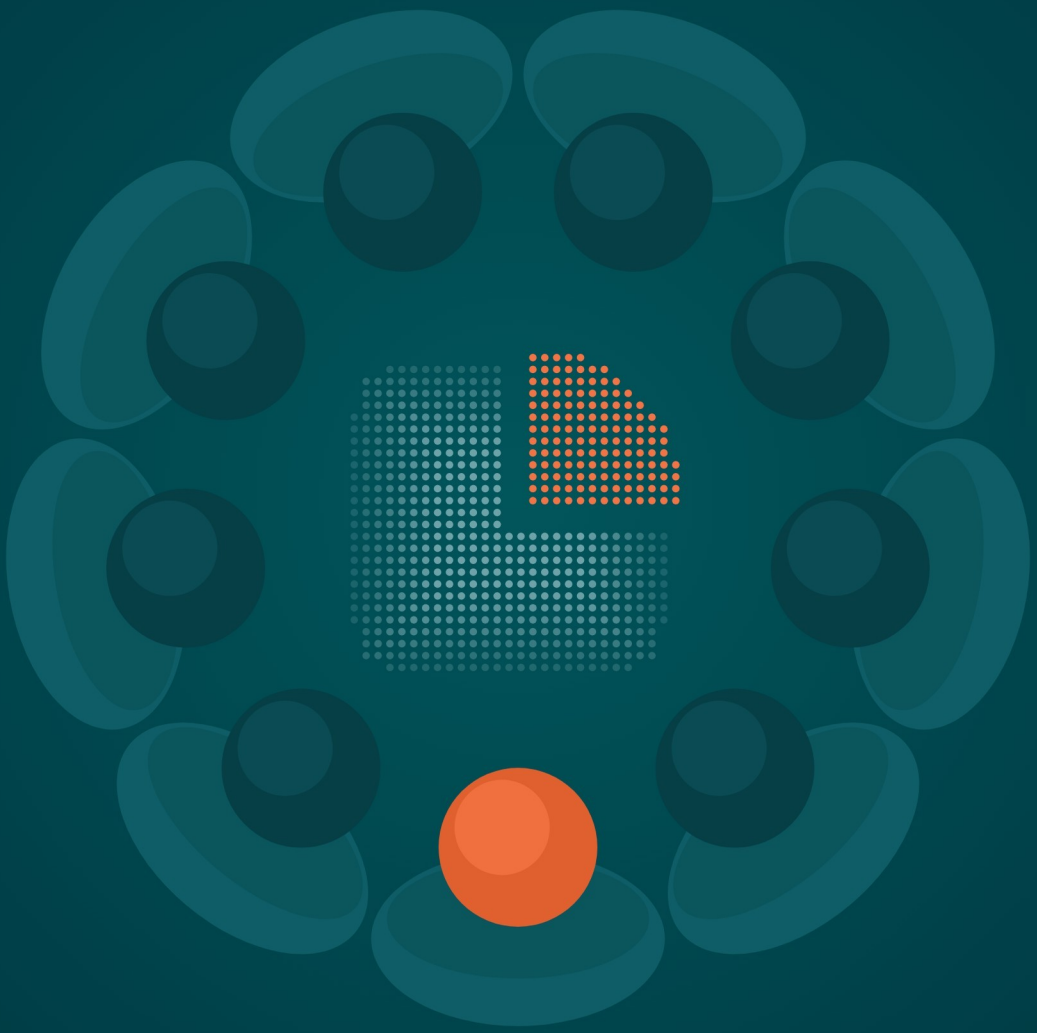
Never Trained to Lead.



The management playbook for owners and the managers they appoint

OSHI KIRK

Never Trained to Lead

The management playbook for owners and the managers they appoint

"Ineffective management does not show up as a line on your P&L. Finding it takes investigation, because the cost is rarely easy to tie to one manager or a specific reaction to their actions or lack thereof. Your sales are on track, but your staff retention is not. What cost is associated with that?

A lack of sound leadership and management can be very expensive, but sadly it is not always easy to recognise."

Oshi Kirk

Business Consult Group

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This book offers general management guidance. It is not legal, employment, tax, financial or accounting advice. For decisions about employment law, workplace safety, tax or finance, speak with a qualified adviser.

The management models discussed in this book belong to their original authors and are credited where they appear.

Contents

Copyright....3
About the Author....5
How to Use This Book....7
Introduction: The Business That Looked Fine....8

Part One: The Cost....12
Chapter 1: The Price of Drift....13
Chapter 2: The Revolving Door....16
Chapter 3: When Processes Become Suggestions....20
Chapter 4: Customers Notice Last, Then Leave....24
Chapter 5: The Promotion Trap and the Burnt Out Owner....28

Part Two: The Fixes....34
Chapter 6: Know Yourself as a Manager....35
Chapter 7: Delegation....38
Chapter 8: Feedback That Lands....41
Chapter 9: Team Meetings That Earn Their Time....45
Chapter 10: Motivation....48
Chapter 11: Difficult Conversations....51
Chapter 12: Mentoring and Development....54
Chapter 13: Building Your Team....56
Chapter 14: Self Management and Management Routines....59
Chapter 15: Managing Up....62
Chapter 16: Choosing the Right Managers....65
Chapter 17: Managing Your Managers....69
Chapter 18: Action Plans and Decision Making....73
Chapter 19: Clear Communication....77

Part Three: Making It Stick....83
Chapter 20: Your First 90 Days....84
Conclusion: From Drift to Direction....87
About the BCG Manager's Toolkit....89
Working with Business Consult Group....91
Acknowledgements....92

About the Author



Oshi Kirk is the owner of Business Consult Group, an Australian business consulting and coaching firm. Oshi started her first business in 2003, with a complex structure from day one: importing and exporting, currency hedging and trading in multiple currencies, along with cash flow, marketing, building a partner network, hiring, firing and every kind of people problem in between. Oshi ran the business for around twelve years before selling it.

Running that business was rewarding, and it was also a very lonely place to be. In those early years there was no budget for a coach or mentor, and very little practical support for an owner who was great at the work but had never been taught how to lead a team. Business Consult Group was born from that gap.

Since then, Oshi has spent more than twenty years helping startups and established businesses grow, including businesses that arrived stuck, exhausted or close to the edge. Oshi has coached hundreds of owners, managers and team members across many industries, from trades in construction to equipment suppliers, health clinics, hospitality, technology and international startups.

The same pattern appears again and again. The technical work is good. The product is good. What is missing is leadership: clear roles, real feedback, simple routines, and an owner who has the time and the skills to work on the business, not just in it.

Business Consult Group does not offer cookie cutter coaching. Every engagement starts by learning the DNA of the business and its industry, then building practical tools the team will actually use.

What clients say

“What stood out most throughout the entire process was Oshi’s honesty and communication. She took the time to genuinely understand our business, and I believe you get the most value from working with her when you allow her to embed herself in the day to day operations. This gave her a real understanding of where we were, where we wanted to go, and what needed to change to get us there”.

John Saliba, Director
ECG Victoria

“What stood out the most was how Oshi immersed herself in understanding our business values, goals, and mission. Her approach wasn't just about providing a service; it felt like she became a part of our team, genuinely invested in our success. Her insights and guidance have been invaluable, and we are incredibly grateful for all the support she provided”

Mark Cooray, Director
Linking Integrating

“From the very first meeting we just clicked. I knew that we needed Oshi to assist us within our business. We have worked with others in the past and Business Consult Group is by far the best.
They take a different approach to the standard coaching methods that others have to offer.
In a short amount of time we have gained so much. Not only in our business but on a personal level as well”.

Corrina Rickard, Owner
Titan Engineering

“Oshi and her teams' genuine business understanding and care and no bs approach has been invaluable to myself and our business. She showed a clear understanding of our business quickly and was able to offer solutions and direction that had real impact in a short period with genuine ongoing support and buy in to our success. Highly recommend Business Consult Group to any large or small business looking for business coaching or assistance with marketing, systems and governance”

Jim Teasdale, Director
Ausidore

How to Use This Book

This book has three parts.

Part One, The Cost, looks honestly at what happens to a business when nobody is really managing it: staff who leave, processes that drift, customers who walk away, and owners who burn out carrying everything themselves. If you only read one part, read this one.

Part Two, The Fixes, walks through the core skills every owner and manager needs. Each chapter opens with what goes wrong in a real business, explains why it happens, and gives you a practical method you can use this week. Each chapter ends with a short self check and one action to take.

Part Three, Making It Stick, gives you a ninety day plan to put it all into practice.

You do not need to read Part Two in order. Start with the chapter that matches your biggest headache. If your team keeps leaving, start with Feedback and Motivation. If you are drowning, start with Delegation and Self Management. If you have partners, investors or a board who never seem to hear you, start with Managing Up. If you are an owner with managers reporting to you, or you are about to appoint your first, read Choosing the Right Managers and Managing Your Managers.

The examples in this book come from real businesses: electrical and solar contractors, commercial equipment suppliers, health and aesthetics clinics, manufacturers and startups. You will recognise your own business in many of them, whatever your industry.

Introduction: The Business That Looked Fine

On paper, *Calder Commercial was doing well. Three years earlier it was one of the fastest growing suppliers and installers in its region. The order book was full. The owner, Mark, was a brilliant technician and an even better salesperson. Customers loved dealing with him, and most of the big jobs came through his personal relationships.

Then, slowly, things began to change.

Revenue came off its peak, but the costs did not come down with it. Two experienced technicians left within six months, each for a slightly better offer. A new business development manager was hired, given a list of several hundred leads and a phone and left to work it out. He lasted four months. Quotes went out late, or not at all. Variations on jobs were made on a handshake and never invoiced. The office manager spent her days chasing paperwork that should have been done on site.

None of it was dramatic. There was no single crisis. There was just a slow, steady leak of energy, money and goodwill.

When Mark finally sat down to work out what was going wrong, he expected to find a pricing problem, or a marketing problem, or a market problem. Some of that was true. But underneath all of it he found a management problem.

Nobody had been managing the business. Everybody, Mark, most of all, had been working in it.

A note on privacy: Calder Commercial is not a real business, and Mark is not a real person. The story is a composite drawn from several businesses I have worked with, with names, industries, figures and details changed to protect them. The same applies to every business and person described in this book.

The problem nobody trains you for

Most business owners are excellent at something. The electrician who started a contracting business was the best on the crew. The founder of the equipment company knew every product inside out and could sell it to anyone. The clinic owner was the most skilled practitioner in the room. That excellence is why business exists.

Almost none of them were taught how to manage.

Being great at work and being a great manager are vastly different in character. Your trade, your craft or your profession trained you to be the best: to master technical knowledge, to be the person everyone turns to with the hardest job. Success was measured by what you could do yourself.

A manager succeeds in the opposite way. The goal is to make everyone around you better than you, or at least as good. Only then can the business run without you on every job, in every meeting and on every phone call. Only then do you have the freedom to work on your business rather than in it.

The same pattern shows up in every field. Specialist surgeons are trained to be the very best and to operate in the top hospitals in the country. Many are brilliant at what they do, yet they are not always known for empathy or for building strong teams. It is common for

such a surgeon to keep one trusted assistant for years, rather than developing a whole team of capable people around them. Their training rewards individual excellence, not leadership. Business owners and promoted managers in every industry face the same gap, and nobody points it out to them.

The result is that many small and medium businesses are run by excellent operators who are improvising as managers. They work long hours. They care deeply. And they are often exhausted, because the business depends on them for everything.

No one feels this more than the owner. The moment they start a business or buy one, they are expected to be a leader, an employer, a finance manager, a marketer and the best technician on the team, all at once. Many end up working impossible hours, carrying the emotional and financial weight of the whole business, and quietly paying for it with their own health and relationships.

And a burnt out owner creates a burnt out business. Decisions are rushed or avoided, problems are left to grow, and the financial and technological solutions that could ease the load are never put in place, because nobody has the time or energy to look up from the daily grind. Chapter 5 looks at this in depth. If you own a business, it may be the most important chapter in this book.

Why this book focuses on the cost

Most management books start with the skills. This one starts with the cost.

That is deliberate. Busy people do not change how they work because a book tells them a technique is useful. They change when they see clearly what the current way is costing them.

So Part One asks a blunt question: what actually happens to a business when it is not well managed? The answer is not abstract. It shows up in staff who leave, in processes that drift until they are optional, in customers who quietly take their business elsewhere, in profits that are never realised, and in owners who burn out carrying everything themselves.

Once you see those costs clearly, the skills in Part Two stop looking like extras. They start looking like the cheapest insurance your business can buy.

Who this book is for

This book is written for the people who hold small and medium businesses together:

- **Owners and founders** who built something good and now feel the business running them, rather than the other way round.
- **General managers and operations managers** who are responsible for people, schedules, systems and budgets, often without the authority or the support to match.
- **Supervisors, foremen and team leaders** who were promoted because they were great at the work, sometimes over their friends, into a role nobody explained.
- **Sales managers and business development leads** who need results from people, not just from themselves.
- **Marketing managers** who are responsible for putting the business out there. Even if you hire an external agency to run your campaigns, someone inside the business

still has to manage that agency, brief it and hold it to account. An agency will rarely take the time to learn your brand, your customers and your business as deeply as you do, so the person who knows them best has to lead.

If you are responsible for other people's work, this book is for you.

What you will not find here

You will not find theory for its own sake. The management models in this book are well established and they are credited properly, but each one earns its place only if it helps you on a busy Tuesday afternoon.

You will not find examples from global corporations with large HR departments. Every example comes from the kind of business most people actually work in: a contractor with a dozen staff, a supplier with a small sales team, a clinic with a handful of practitioners, a manufacturer that grew faster than its systems.

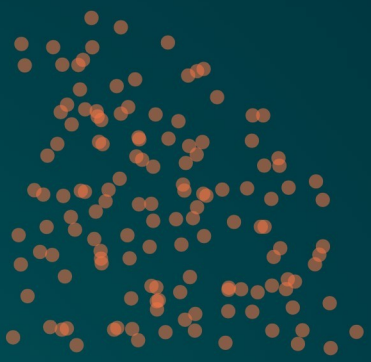
And you will not find a promise that management is easy. It is not. But it is learnable, and the payoff is real: a team that stays, systems that hold, customers who come back, profit that stays in the business, and an owner who goes home at a reasonable hour.

Let us start by looking at what happens when nobody is managing.

PART ONE

The cost.

Seeing clearly what poor management is really costing your business.





1 The Price of Drift

2 The Revolving Door

3 When Processes Become Suggestions

4 Customers Notice Last, Then Leave

5 The Promotion Trap and the Burnt Out Owner

Part One: The Cost

Before you can fix a problem, you have to see it clearly. That is harder than it sounds, because the cost of poor management rarely arrives as one dramatic event. It arrives slowly: one resignation, one skipped step, one quote that never went out, one customer who quietly does not come back.

Part One brings those hidden costs into the light. Chapter 1 describes drift, the slow slide from managing a business to simply surviving it. Chapter 2 counts the real cost of the people who leave. Chapter 3 looks at what happens when processes become optional. Chapter 4 follows the line from a struggling team to the customers who feel it. Chapter 5 turns to the people who carry the heaviest load: the owners and promoted managers who were great at the work, but never trained to lead.

Some of this may be uncomfortable to read. That is the point. Every cost described here is a cost that good management can reduce, and the rest of this book shows you how.

Chapter 1: The Price of Drift

Most small businesses do not fail because the owner is bad at the work. They fail, or more often they quietly underperform for years, because of poor management.

The pattern is so common it deserves a name. Call it drift.

Drift is what happens when a business runs on habit, goodwill and the energy of a few key people, rather than on clear roles, agreed standards and regular routines. Nobody decides to let things drift. It happens because everyone is busy, the phone is ringing, a job is running late, a customer is waiting, and management feels like something you will get to later.

Later never comes.

What drift looks like from the inside

If you work in a drifting business, you will recognise some of these signs:

- The same problems come up at every team meeting, if there are team meetings at all.
- People say "that's not my job" or, worse, assume someone else has done it.
- The owner is the answer to every question, so they can never take a real holiday.
- New staff learn the job by watching whoever is around, so each person learns a slightly different version.
- Procedures exist in a folder somewhere, but nobody can remember when they were last read.
- Feedback happens only when something goes badly wrong, and then it happens all at once.
- Good people leave, and the exit conversation never quite explains why.
- Everyone is busy all the time, but the important projects never move.
- New technology and equipment the business has paid for sit unused or half used. Software features are never switched on, and machines end up in a corner of the warehouse. Getting real value from any new investment needs leadership: a clear plan, a person to own it, training for the team and follow up until it becomes part of the routine. Without that, the money is spent but the benefit never arrives.

None of these signs is a disaster on its own. Together they describe a business that is spending most of its energy just keeping up. Profits go untapped, because most things are not used to their full potential, and the business may be missing out on gains it does not even exist. Drift also creates a workplace that people are not excited to come to each day, and that feeling does not stay behind the scenes. Customers notice it in every interaction, even when the owner, who is too close to it every day, may not see it. The result is yet another pressure point for the owner: knowing the bucket is leaking somewhere but not knowing where the leaks are coming from. One more thing to worry about, on top of everything else.

Reactive versus proactive management

One of the clearest ways to understand drift is to look at how the owner or manager spends their day.

A **reactive** manager responds to whatever lands in front of them. The phone rings, they answer it. A technician has a question, they answer it. A customer is unhappy; they deal

with it. A supplier calls; they take the call. By the end of the day, they had been busy for ten hours and have done nothing they planned to do.

A **proactive** manager still handles urgent things. Every business has urgent things. But they also protect time for the work that prevents tomorrow's emergencies: training, planning the schedule ahead, checking that procedures are being followed, reviewing the numbers, having the conversation with the team member who has seemed flat for a month.

Reactive management feels productive. It is exhausting, and it guarantees that the same problems keep coming back. Proactive management feels slower at first. It is the only way the problems actually get smaller.

The four shifts from doing to managing

When someone moves from being great at the work into a management role, four things have to change. When they do not change, drift follows.

From doing the work to getting the work done through others. As a technician or salesperson, your value was in your own hands. As a manager, your value is in what the team achieves. A manager who keeps doing all the hands on work becomes a bottleneck and leaves nobody else room to grow. In businesses run by their founders, micromanagement is common, and it is completely understandable. The founder built the business by making sure every job was done right, so watching over every detail feels like doing the job properly. Teaching others what you do best, then agreeing to manage rather than micromanage, is one of the hardest changes an owner can make.

From being liked to being respected. As a team member, you were one of the group. As a manager, you sometimes have to make decisions people do not like. A manager who needs everyone to be happy all the time will avoid the conversations that matter. For many owners this is the toughest pill to swallow. It asks the same winning ego that built the business, the drive to be the best, to take a back seat so that others can shine.

From short term to longer term thinking. As a team member, you focused on today's job. As a manager, you are responsible for next month's schedule, next quarter's cash flow and next year's team. If nobody is thinking ahead, the business is always reacting. This is especially hard when you spend every day working in the business rather than on it. Buried in today's jobs and quotes, it is difficult to see how much careful planning and thorough follow through would change the business's future, so the planning keeps getting pushed back.

From your own standards to shared standards. As a team member, you did things your way and did them well. As a manager, your job is to make sure everyone does things to an agreed standard, even when they would do it differently. That means writing standards down, teaching them and checking them.

Each of these shifts is uncomfortable. Each is learnable. Chapter 6 comes back to them in detail.

The hidden iceberg

The reason drift goes unnoticed for so long is that most of its cost is hidden.

Above the waterline, you can see a few things: the resignation letter, the angry customer, the job that went over budget. These feel like isolated events.

Below the waterline sits the real cost:

- Hours spent recruiting and training replacements.

- Overtime and subcontractor costs to cover gaps.
- Lost productivity while new staff get up to speed.
- Revenue from customers who leave without complaining.
- Mistakes, rework and callbacks from inconsistent processes.
- Variations, materials and extra hours that were never invoiced.
- Quotes that went out late or never went out at all.
- The owner's time spent firefighting instead of growing the business.
- The slow erosion of morale among the people who stay
- The full realised profit or loss on each project and lessons taken

The chapters that follow look at the biggest of these costs one by one. The aim is not to make you feel bad. It is to give you a clear, honest picture of what is at stake, so that the time you invest in management feels like what it is: an investment with a return.

A business example: when revenue falls and costs do not

One contracting business I worked with had grown quickly during a boom in its sector. When demand cooled, revenue fell sharply from its peak. The cost base did not follow. Wages, vehicles, software subscriptions and consulting fees all stayed where they had been at the top of the market, and within two years the business moved from a healthy profit to a loss.

None of this was hidden in the accounts. It was simply that nobody had a routine for looking. There was no monthly review of the numbers, no agreed process for pricing variations, no standard quoting template, and no plan for cross training staff so the business could run with fewer people. Each of those gaps was a management gap. When we put a few simple routines in place, the owner could finally see where the money was going and make deliberate decisions, rather than hoping next month would be better.

Self check

Answer honestly. Score each statement from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true).

1. I spend most of my day responding to whatever comes up.
2. If I took two weeks off, things would start to go wrong.
3. We discuss the same problems over and over without fixing them.
4. I am not sure every team member follows our key procedures the same way.
5. I have lost a good team member in the past year and I am not completely sure why.

If you scored 15 or more, your business is drifting. That is not a judgement. It is the normal state of a business where talented people are managing without training or tools. The rest of this book is about changing it.

One action this week: for three working days, jot down every interruption you deal with and who brought it to you. At the end, circle the ones that someone else could have handled with the right information or authority. Keep the list. You will use it in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2: The Revolving Door

Every business loses people. Some move interstate, some go back to study, some change careers. Some turnover is healthy and unavoidable.

The problem is the turnover that did not need to happen: the good technician who left because he felt invisible, the office manager who left because the workload never eased, the new salesperson who left because nobody had time to train him. That turnover is a management cost, and in most small businesses it is one of the biggest.

What one resignation really costs

Most owners underestimate the cost of losing a team member because they only count the obvious part: the job advertisement.

The real cost is much larger. The figures below are an illustration only, using round numbers for a skilled tradesperson or technician on a salary of about $80,000. Replace them with your own figures. The point is the shape of the cost, not the exact total.

Cost item	How to estimate it	Example
Advertising and recruitment fees	Actual spending, including any agency	$1,500
Owner or manager time recruiting	Hours spent writing ads, screening, interviewing, checking references, times your hourly cost	20 hours, $1,500
Covering the vacancy	Overtime, subcontractors or labour while the role is empty	6 weeks, $5,000
Onboarding and training	Trainer time plus reduced output while the new person learns	3 months at half output, $10,000
Errors, rework and callbacks while learning	Repeated work, wasted materials, return visits	$1,500
Lost or delayed work	Jobs declined or pushed back because the team was short	$3,000
Total for one resignation		**About $22,500**

In this illustration, one resignation costs more than a quarter of the person's annual salary. For a senior technician, a project manager or a salesperson who holds key customer relationships, the figure is usually far higher.

Now multiply. If a business of fifteen people loses three people a year who did not need to leave, the cost is well over $60,000 a year, every year. That money never shows up on a single line of the profit and loss statement. It hides inside wages, overtime, subcontractor bills and revenue that was never earned.

The costs you cannot put in a spreadsheet

Knowledge walks out the door. The technician who leaves knows which customers need extra care, which suppliers deliver on time, which sites have tricky access and how the old equipment needs to be coaxed. Much of this was never written down.

The people who stay carry the load. Every vacancy means extra hours, rushed jobs and more pressure on the remaining team. Tired people make more mistakes and are more likely to leave themselves. This is how one resignation becomes three.

Customers notice. Customers build relationships with the people who look after them. When the familiar faces keep changing, trust erodes. Some customers will say nothing and simply move to a competitor.

Culture weakens. A team that is constantly onboarding never quite becomes a team. Shared standards are hard to keep when half the people are new.

Why do people really leave

When a team member resigns, the stated reason is often pay, hours or a move. Sometimes that is true. But in most cases the decision to leave was made months earlier, and the stated reason is simply the most comfortable one to give.

The real reasons usually sit in a small number of themes:

- **I do not feel valued.** Good work goes unnoticed. Feedback only comes when something goes wrong.
- **I do not know where I stand.** Expectations are unclear. Performance is never discussed until there is a problem.
- **It is not fair.** Some people seem to get better jobs, the training or the leniency, and others carry the load.
- **I am not growing.** Nobody has talked about what I want to learn or where my career could go.
- **I am exhausted.** The workload never eases, schedules change at short notice, and the pressure is never acknowledged.
- **I do not trust my manager.** Promises are not kept, conversations are avoided, decisions seem random.

There is one more reason that deserves its own mention: **the job was not what I was promised.** When we recruit, we sell the business. We describe our vision: training, the career path, the new contracts coming, the supportive culture. Often, we mean every word. Then the new team member starts, and reality hits. Training never quite happens, the new structure never arrives, and the vision stays a vision, because nobody had the time to put it into action. The gap between what was promised and what was delivered is rarely discussed, but the new person feels it keenly, and it is often the moment they start looking elsewhere.

Look carefully at that list. Almost every item is about management, not money. A small business cannot always pay more than the large competitor down the road. It can almost always be managed better.

A business example: the new salesperson who was set up to fail

A commercial equipment supplier decided it needed a business development manager to take some of the selling load off the owner. It was a good decision. The job description was clear, the commission structure was attractive and the candidate was keen.

On his first day, he was given a laptop, a phone and a list of several hundred leads, and told to start calling. Product training happened when the owner had a spare hour, which was rare. Nobody sat in on his calls. Nobody reviewed his pipeline each week. When the sales did not come quickly, the owner grew frustrated and the new hire grew anxious.

The second time the business hired the role, it did things differently. The new person spent the first two weeks on structured product knowledge sessions with the owner. A sales coach worked with him on his calls and his written outreach, rewriting messages together and role playing objections. The lead list was sorted so he started with the warmest prospects. A short weekly pipeline meeting gave him a place to ask questions and get feedback. The cost of all this was a few hours a week. The difference in confidence, and in results, was enormous.

The first hire did not fail because he was the wrong person. He failed because nobody managed him.

The manager is the job

There is a well known saying that people join organisations but leave managers. In a small business, where the manager is often the owner and presents every day, this is even more true.

For most team members, the manager decides the schedule, approves leave, allocates the work, notices or ignores good work, handles conflict, and decides whether they get training. In practice, the manager is the job.

That is uncomfortable for many owners to hear. But it is also good news. It means the most powerful retention tool in your business is not a pay rise. It is you.

Stay conversations, not just exit interviews

Most businesses, if they ask at all, ask why people are leaving after they have already resigned. By then it is too late, and the answer is usually polite rather than honest.

A far more useful habit is the stay conversation. Once or twice a year, sit down one to one with each team member and ask a few simple questions:

1. What do you enjoy most about working here?
2. What frustrates you most in a typical week?
3. What would make you think about leaving?
4. What would you like to learn or do more of in the next year?
5. What could I do differently as your manager?

Then act on at least one thing they tell you and tell them you have done so. Chapters 8, 10 and 12 give you the tools to make these conversations natural rather than awkward.

Self check

1. How many people have left your business in the past twelve months? How many of those departures were avoidable?
2. For each person who left, can you name the real reason, not the polite one?
3. Did your last new hire get the training and support you described when you recruited them?
4. When did you last ask each team member what would make them stay?

One action this week: use the table above to estimate the cost of the last resignation in your business. Use real numbers. Then decide whether one hour a month spent on each team member would be a better investment.

Try the free cost of resignation example →

Chapter 3: When Processes Become Suggestions

Every business has processes. There is a way to quote a job, a way to record a variation, a way to complete safety paperwork, a way to hand a job over from sales to operations, a way to invoice, a way to follow up an enquiry.

The question is not whether the processes exist. It is whether everyone follows them, the same way, every time.

In a drifting business, the honest answer is no.

How processes quietly fall apart

Processes rarely collapse in one go. They erode, one reasonable shortcut at a time.

It starts on a busy day. A technician skips writing up a small variation because the customer is standing there and it only took twenty minutes. Nothing goes wrong. The next busy day, he skips it again. An apprentice watches him and learns that small variations are just done. Six months later, nobody writes them up, and nobody remembers that they were ever supposed to.

This is how a written standard becomes an unwritten habit, and how an unwritten habit becomes "the way we do it here". Each shortcut felt sensible at the time. Nobody decided to lower the standard. It simply drifted, because nobody was checking.

The five reasons processes are not followed

When a process is not being followed, the cause is almost always one of five things:

1. **It was never clearly defined.** The process lives in someone's head, or in a document so long that nobody reads it. Ask three people how a job should be handed in from sales to operations and you may get three different answers, each delivered with confidence. When the standard is not written down in a short, clear form that people actually use, everyone fills the gaps with their own version. A process that cannot be explained in a page, or shown as a simple checklist, is usually not really a process at all.
2. **It was never properly taught.** New staff learned by watching, so they learned whatever version the person beside them happened to use. Induction is often a quick tour and a week of shadowing, and any shortcuts the experienced person has developed are passed on as if they were the rule. Long serving team members are rarely retrained when a process changes, so old habits survive alongside new ones.
3. **It is never checked.** Nobody looks at whether it is happening, so there is no signal when it stops. Most businesses only discover a process has lapsed when something goes wrong: a complaint, a missed invoice, a safety incident, an audit. By then the shortcut has often been in place for months. Without a light, regular check built into someone's week, the business is relying on hope rather than evidence.
4. **Nothing happens either way.** People who follow the process carefully get no recognition. People who skip it face no conversation. Over time the team learns that the standard does not really matter, because doing it properly and cutting corners lead to exactly the same result. Often the manager has noticed the problem but

avoided raising it, because the conversation felt awkward or the person was a friend (Chapter 11).

5. **It was never made on our own.** Many processes came with the business when it was bought, were copied from a previous employer, or arrived ready made by a software provider or industry template. They were written once and never revisited or adjusted to fit how this business works and what this team is trying to achieve. A process nobody has shaped is a process nobody feels ownership of. Processes need regular review and, at times, real change.

Notice that none of these is about the team being careless or lazy. All five are management gaps. The process is only as strong as the management routine that sits behind it.

What does it cost?

Safety and quality risk. Missed checks, incomplete safety documentation, jobs signed off without testing, equipment not maintained. Most of the time nothing happens. Occasionally something serious does, and when it does, the gap in the process is usually obvious in hindsight.

Compliance risk. Licensing conditions, safe work method statements, payroll and superannuation obligations, tax reporting and record keeping are not optional. Gaps here can expose the business and its directors to penalties far more expensive than the time it would have taken to keep things in order.

Revenue leakage. This is the cost most businesses never see. Variations were done but never invoiced. Materials used but not charged. Quotes that sit in someone's inbox for a week while the customer signs with a competitor. Follow ups that never happen. Each gap is small. Across a year they add up to a significant amount of lost revenue, and in many businesses, nobody has ever measured it.

Resentment. When the conscientious team members see others skipping steps without consequence, they face a choice: keep carrying the extra load and feel resentful or lower their own standards to match. Either way, the business loses.

There is a fifth cost, and it is easy to overlook. **When you introduce or change a process** without consulting the people who must carry it out, they feel undervalued and unheard. Few will say so openly. Instead, the resentment shows up quietly: the process is followed when someone is watching and skipped when nobody is or followed to the letter but without any care for why it exists. Asking for their input does not mean handing over the decision. Even a short conversation, "here is what we are thinking, what would make this work on a busy day?", tells people their experience matters. Teams follow processes they helped shape far more faithfully than processes handed down to them.

A business example: the variations that never got invoiced

An electrical contractor I worked with had a healthy order book but thin margins. When we looked at a sample of finished jobs, a pattern appeared. Customers regularly asked for small extras on site: an extra power point, a relocated light, a longer cable run. The team did the work because they wanted the customers to be happy. But there was no agreed way to record it, price it and get it approved, so much of it never reached the invoice.

The fix was not complicated. The team helped design a one page variation form that could be filled in on a phone in two minutes. The office manager owned the process and checked every completed job against the form before invoicing. For the first month, the owner reviewed a sample each Friday. Within a quarter, invoiced variations had risen noticeably, and customers were happier too, because they knew exactly what they were paying for before the work was done.

The process loop

A process that holds up under pressure needs five things. Think of them as a loop that never stops turning.

Consult. Start with the people who will deliver the process. Ask them what works now, what gets in the way on a busy day and what they would change. Across many years of working with teams in many industries, one pattern holds true: people stand behind a document that carries their name. When team members help build a process, and sign off on it, they take pride in it, defend it and keep improving it. Appointing a process champion from the team is one of the best ways to make this happen. The champion helps write it, teaches it to others and becomes the first person colleagues turn to with questions.

Define. Write down the process in plain language, in two versions. The full version explains each step, why it matters, who is responsible and what to do when something goes wrong. It is the reference document, used for training and reviewed every six months. The short version is a tick box checklist that fits on one page or one screen, used on the job every time the task is done. The full version keeps the thinking alive; the checklist makes it happen on a busy day.

Teach. Train every relevant team member on it, including the people who have been there for years. Do not assume people know the current version. Show it, explain why it matters, and let them practise.

Check. Build a regular, light check into someone's routine. A weekly sample of five job files. A monthly look at the variation log. A quick review of safety paperwork from last week's jobs. Checking is not about catching people out. It is the only way to know the process is alive.

Reinforce. When people follow the process well, say so. When they do not, have the conversation early, privately and calmly. Chapter 8 shows you how.

Then go round again. The full version of each process should be reviewed every six months, because businesses are changing, equipment changes and the best version of a process today may not be the best version next year. Wherever possible, bring back the same people who built it. They are best placed to show what needs tweaking, and to be accountable for why steps are being skipped. Go into that meeting with an open ear and one simple question: how can we make sure this is followed every time? That question, asked honestly, goes a long way.

Who owns the process?

The single most effective change most businesses can make is to give every key process a named owner. Not a committee. One person.

The owner does not have to take every step. Their job is to keep the process current, make sure new people are trained in it, and run the regular check. In a small business one person may own several processes. That is fine, as long as everyone knows who owns what.

When everyone owns a process, nobody does.

Self check

List the five processes in your business that matter most for safety, compliance and revenue. For each one, answer:

1. Is it written down in a form people actually use?
2. Did the people who deliver it help shape it?
3. Was every current team member trained on it?
4. When was it last checked?
5. Who owns it?

Any blank answer is a gap. Any process without an owner is drifting.

One action this week: pick the one process you are most worried about. Name an owner, sit down with the people who deliver it, agree a simple weekly check, and put the first check in the diary.

Chapter 4: Customers Notice Last, Then Leave

Your customers do not see your roster, your lunchroom or your team meeting. They see the result.

They see whether the phone is answered warmly. Whether the quote arrives when it was promised. Whether the team turns up on time and leaves the site clean. Whether someone calls back about the fault they reported. Whether the invoice matches the quote. Whether the faces they deal with are familiar or new every time.

Every one of those moments is shaped by management. And when management drifts, customers feel it, even if they cannot name it.

Loud complaints and silent exits

Some customers are not shy about complaining. When a job runs late, a machine breaks down in the middle of a busy service, or the invoice is higher than expected, some will say so loudly: on the phone, in an email to the owner, or in an online review. Many of those complaints come back to management: quotes that were not explained, variations that were never agreed, staff who were not trained to handle a difficult conversation, and no agreed way to deal with an unhappy customer.

But for every customer who complains, there are others who are unhappy and never say a word. They simply call a competitor next time.

This quiet group is what makes customer loss so dangerous. The business gets no warning and no chance to fix it. The pipeline looks busy, because new enquiries keep coming in, so nobody notices that longstanding customers are quietly disappearing.

What a customer is really worth

Think about a typical commercial customer: a café, a restaurant group, a builder, a facilities manager. Over several years, that customer might buy equipment, service contracts, spare parts, maintenance, upgrades and repeat work on new sites. A builder who trusts your electrical team may bring you onto every project they run for the next decade. A happy café owner tells the three other café owners in the street.

As an illustration only: if a commercial customer spends $15,000 a year with you and stays for eight years, they are worth $120,000 in revenue. If they refer to two others who do the same, the true value is several times higher. Please note that these figures are deliberately conservative. Many customers spend far more, especially those with multiple sites, growing businesses or ongoing service needs, so the real value of a loyal customer is likely to be considerably higher. Use your own figures to work out the number for your business.

Now think about what loses that customer. It is rarely one dramatic error. It is a callback that did not happen. A quote that took two weeks. A technician who seemed impatient. A sense that "they're not as good as they used to be". Small things, each of them rooted in how the business is managed.

How poor management reaches the customer

Let me share a personal example. It comes from our family's regular medical clinic, not one of my clients, but the lesson applies to every business.

When I call, there is one receptionist, Alice, who is wonderful. Even when there is really nothing she can do to help, she gives me a **yes** and a can do feel on the phone. If what I need is difficult to provide, she makes me feel she will go above and beyond to make it happen. She is the reason I have stayed with that clinic at times when I was losing my patience with it.

Most of the other receptionists start the conversation with a **no** and think about it later. More than once, that has made me seriously consider moving our whole family to another clinic.

Customers want a **yes** attitude, and they want warmth in their voice. One person who gets this right can hold on to a customer for years. A team that gets it wrong can lose them in a single phone call. Whether your frontline sounds like Alice or like the others is not luck. It comes down to who you hire, how you train them, what you model, and what you recognise and reward.

It helps to trace the line from inside the business to the customer's experience.

Turnover becomes unfamiliarity. When staff keep changing, customers lose the relationships that made them loyal. A customer who has dealt with four different account managers in a year has no reason to stay.

Unclear roles become dropped balls. When nobody knows who is responsible for following up a quote or a service request, the follow up does not happen. Each person assumes someone else made the call.

Inconsistent processes become inconsistent experiences. If each salesperson quotes differently and each technician finishes a job differently, customers get a different business every time.

Tired teams become short tempered teams. People who are stretched and underappreciated struggle to stay patient with a demanding customer, especially at the end of a long day.

Poor internal communication becomes poor customer communication. If the team does not hear about a change to pricing, lead times or warranty terms, they cannot explain it to customers. The customer hears three different answers and trusts none of them.

In every case, customer experience is a mirror of team experience. You cannot reliably deliver excellent service with a team that is confused, exhausted or undervalued.

Moments that matter

Some customer moments carry more weight than others. In most small businesses, these include:

- The first phone call or enquiry from a new customer.
- The quote: how fast it arrives and how clearly it is explained.
- The first day on site, or the delivery and installation.

- The moment something goes wrong, such as a fault, a delay or a breakdown.
- The handover at the end of the job.
- The invoice, where trust is either confirmed or broken.
- The after sales follow up, which most businesses forget entirely.

A well managed business knows these moments, has agreed standards for each one, trains the team on them and checks that they happen. A drifting business leaves them with whoever happens to pick up the phone.

A business example: the fault report that went nowhere

A commercial equipment supplier received a call from a restaurant customer whose refrigeration unit was running warm. The person who took the call promised a technician would ring back that afternoon. Nobody did. The customer called again the next morning, spoke to someone else, and was told nobody could find a record of the first call.

When the owner looked into it, the cause was simple. There was no agreed process for logging service calls, no single person responsible for allocating them, and no end of day check that every promised callback had been made.

Losing the customer was only part of the cost. When a fault report is not passed on, action that should happen straight away may not happen at all. A unit running warm can mean spoiled stock, a failed food safety inspection or a restaurant forced to close for a night. The delay exposed the supplier to real reputational risk, and possibly to a claim. A missed phone call is never just a service problem. Sometimes it is a business continuity problem for your customer.

The owner introduced a simple service log, a named person to allocate every call within an hour, and a 4pm check of every open callback. Complaints about response times stopped. The business will never know how many customers have already left over the same issue without saying a word.

Listening to the signals

Because many customers leave quietly, businesses need to go looking for the signals. Some practical sources:

- Your accounting or CRM can usually show how many active customers have not bought in twelve or eighteen months. Track the number over time.
- Watch your quote conversion rate. A falling rate can signal slow quoting, unclear pricing or a team that no longer follows up.
- Read every review, good and bad, and share them with the team. Then respond to everyone. Thank people warmly for good reviews. Reply to bad reviews politely and calmly, acknowledge the customer's experience, and offer to talk it through offline. Acknowledgement matters more than most businesses realise: it shows the reviewer, and everyone reading, that someone in the business is listening.
- Ask a sample of longstanding customers, once a year, what you could do better.
- Ask your frontline team. They hear the comments, the sighs and the "we used to deal with Steve" remarks that never reach the owner or the allocated manager.

Go one step further and map the customer life cycle. Just as you would look at staff retention, look at customer retention over time: how many new customers come back for a second order, a third, a fifth? At what point do they drop away? If you find, for example, that a large share of new customers never returns after their first job, that is a signal worth investigating.

When you see a pattern like this, resist the temptation to say, "we don't want customers like that anyway". That response is comfortable, and it stops the business from learning anything. Instead, find out why those customers never came back. Was it the first phone call, the quote, the lead time, the person they dealt with, or the follow up that never happened? Call a few of them and ask. The answers are often uncomfortable, and they are almost always useful.

Finally, try a mystery caller. In many industries, this simple practice has been used for years: someone the team does not know calls the business a brand new customer, and reports back on what the experience was really like. One business that tried it uncovered something nobody expected: a high percentage of calls were going to the third party answering service the business paid for, at times when there were enough staff in the office to answer them. Nobody had noticed, and every one of those calls was a missed chance to welcome a new customer. You do not really know until you check for yourself.

Self check

1. Do you know how many active customers your business lost in the past year?
2. Where do new customers drop away? What share comes back for a second order, a third, a fifth? Do you know why the others did not return?
3. How long does it take, on average, to send a quote? How is it explained, and is every team member confident doing it?
4. Have you used a mystery caller to hear how your business sounds to a brand new customer? Do they hear a yes and warmth in the voice, or a no first? And are calls being answered by your team?
5. For each of the moments that matter listed above, does your business have an agreed standard?
6. Who in your team is responsible for making sure every promised callback happens, and that urgent customer issues lead to action straight away?
7. Does someone respond to every online review, thanking people for the good ones and replying politely to the bad ones?

One action this week: choose one moment that matters and watch it happen three times. Note what the customer experiences. Then decide on one change that would make it consistently better, and who will own it. Next, pull a list of customers from the past year who bought only once, and call three of them to ask, warmly and without defensiveness, what would have brought them back.

Chapter 5: The Promotion Trap and the Burnt Out Owner

In most small businesses, managers are made, not hired. The best electrician becomes the technical adviser or Project manager. The most reliable office administrator becomes the operations manager. The top salesperson becomes sales manager. And the person who was best at the work starts a business, and becomes, overnight, an employer with payroll, compliance, cash flow and a team of people with their own needs and moods.

It makes sense. These people know the work and have earned respect. But it creates a trap that catches almost everyone.

The trap

The trap is this: the skills that you have got here are not the skills you now need.

A great technician is fast, precise and calm under pressure. A great operation manager needs to be good at planning, teaching, delegating, giving feedback and handling conflicts. These are different skills. Being brilliant at the first set tells you nothing about whether someone has the second.

So, the newly promoted manager does what feels natural. They keep doing the hands on work they are good at and squeeze the management work into gaps. They solve problems themselves rather than teaching others to solve them. They avoid hard conversations because they never learned how to have them. They work longer and longer hours, and the team becomes more dependent on them, not less.

The business loses a great technician and gains a struggling manager. Neither the person nor the business planned it that way.

Great at work, never trained to lead

Of everyone in the business, the owner usually pays the highest price for poor management.

Think about how most owners got here. Years mastering a trade, a profession or a product. Thousands of hours on the tools, on the road selling, or in the workshop getting it right. Almost no time learning to lead a team, reading a profit and loss statement properly, set prices, manage cash flow, negotiate with suppliers, build systems or choose technology.

Then they start or buy a business. Overnight they become an employer, a manager of people and, in many cases, the person who has personally guaranteed a loan or a lease. Nobody hands them a manual. They are expected to learn it on the job, while still doing a full day of the work.

Most do their best. They are intelligent, hardworking people who care deeply about their customers and their team. But they are trying to do two demanding jobs at once, and they were only ever trained for one of them.

The cost to the owner's health

The result, for many owners, is a slow slide into exhaustion.

The days are long: on site or with customers all day, then quotes, invoices, emails, payroll and staff issues at night. Weekends are interrupted by phone calls. Holidays are short, rare or spent checking messages. Every resignation feels personal, and every complaint lands on their desk.

On top of the workload sits a heavy emotional load: whether there is enough money for payroll this month, whether the big customer will pay on time, whether the bank will extend the facility, whether the business will survive. Owners are often the least likely to ask for help, because they feel responsible for everyone else and believe they should be able to cope.

I know this feeling personally. When I ran my own business for twelve years, there were long stretches when it felt like the loneliest job in the world. There was very little practical support for an owner who needed someone to think the problems with. That experience is a large part of why Business Consult Group exists.

The warning signs are worth naming:

- Dreading going to work in a business you once loved.
- Feeling irritable or short with the team, your family and your customers.
- Being unable to switch off, even at home or on holiday.
- Poor sleep, constant tiredness and relying on caffeine or alcohol to get through.
- Losing the satisfaction the work used to give you.
- Feeling trapped: unable to step back, unable to sell, unable to keep going as you are.

If you recognised yourself here, please take it seriously. Talk to your GP, a psychologist or someone you trust. In Australia, Lifeline is available on 13 11 14 at any time. Looking after your own health is not a luxury or a weakness. Your family, your team and your customers all depend on it.

A burnt out owner creates a burnt out business

Burnout does not stay with the owner. It spreads through the whole business.

An exhausted owner makes decisions in a rush or avoids them altogether. They do not have the energy for the conversations that matter, so problems are left to grow. They hold onto every task because handing over feels like more work. They react to each crisis instead of planning ahead. The team picks up on the stress, the mood darkens, and good people start to leave, which adds yet more pressure to the owner.

Over time, the business itself starts to look like its owner: tired, reactive and running empty. It keeps going, but it stops growing.

Leaving money and technology on the table

One of the least visible costs of a burnt out owner is everything the business is not doing, because nobody has the time or headspace to look up from the daily grind.

Financial solutions that go untapped. Many owners do not have a clear, regular view of their own numbers. They may not know their true margin per job or product line, the real cost of staff turnover, how their prices compare with competitors, or how much revenue leaks through unbilled variations and slow quoting (Chapter 3). They may never have reviewed their pricing properly, set a budget, tracked a handful of key measures each month, checked that the cost base has kept pace with a change in revenue, or sat down with an accountant to plan rather than just lodging returns. Payroll tax, superannuation and contractor obligations change regularly, and falling behind can be expensive. None of these tasks are complicated. But they require time and attention, and a burnt out owner has neither.

Technology that goes unused. Most businesses already pay for software with features nobody has switched on: job management, online booking, automated reminders, quoting templates, reporting dashboards, stock control, customer relationship management. Beyond that, there is a growing range of tools that can take load off a stretched team. Each could save hours or add revenue. But choosing, setting up and training the team on new tools is management work, so in a burnt out business it never happens.

Equipment that collects dust. The same pattern shows up with equipment. A familiar scenario: the owner visits a trade show, sees an impressive new machine or tool and decides it is worth buying. The team was never consulted about whether they need it, how it would fit into their day or who would use it. Sometimes the supplier offers little or no after sales support. The equipment arrives, a quick demonstration is given, and within months it sits in a corner of the workshop. The business has paid for it, but it earns nothing.

The lesson is that buying equipment or technology is a management decision, not just a purchasing decision. Before you buy, involve the people who will use it, agree who will champion it, work out how it will earn its return, and make sure the supplier will support your team long after the sale. When I help businesses introduce a new product, service or piece of equipment, we follow a simple roadmap is it needed, who will own it, how will the team be trained, how will we measure the return, and when will we review it. Making sure an investment never collects dust should be a top priority for any owner.

The irony is painful. The very solutions that could ease the owner's load are the ones the owner is too exhausted to put in place. Breaking that cycle starts with management: freeing up enough of the owner's time and energy to step back, look at the business and make deliberate choices.

The managerial tension

In the classroom version of the management program this book is based on, new managers worked through role plays drawn from real situations. Three come up again and again.

You were promoted to a colleague who also wanted the job. Sam and Josh were both senior electricians. Sam got the technical adviser role. Josh is polite but cool, does exactly what he is asked for and nothing more, and has started making comments on site. What does Sam do?

The trap is to ignore it and hope it passes, or to overcompensate by giving Josh the best jobs. Neither works. Sam needs a private, direct conversation that acknowledges

disappointment, values Josh's skill, and is clear about how they will work together from now on.

A friend asks for a favour. Priya has worked alongside Leah in the office for five years and they are good friends outside work. Now Priya manages the office. Leah asks for Friday off at short notice, at the end of the month when invoicing is due. Saying yes protects friendship. Saying no protects fairness for everyone else.

The trap is to make an exception for a friend and hope nobody notices. Somebody always notices. The fair answer is to apply the same rule to Leah that would apply to anyone, and to explain it kindly. The friendship that survives this is a stronger one.

A friend lets the team down. Ben, a technician and a close friend of the operations manager, has turned up late to site twice this fortnight, leaving the rest of the crew waiting. The team is frustrated and watching to see what happens.

The trap is to let it slide because of friendship. When that happens, the manager loses the respect of the whole team, not just Ben. The manager needs to have the same conversation they would have with anyone, in private, focused on the behaviour and its impact, with a clear expectation going forward.

Each of these moments is a test of whether the manager can hold the role with warmth and fairness at the same time. Chapters 8 and 11 give you the tools.

Role tensions you need to accept

Management comes with built in tensions. You will feel pulled between:

- Being close to the team and being responsible for judging their performance.
- Representing the team to the owner and representing the owner to the team.
- Getting today's work done and investing in tomorrow's improvements.
- Do it yourself because it is faster and delegating because it builds the team.
- Being consistent and being flexible for individual circumstances.

These tensions do not go away. Good managers do not resolve them once and for all. They learn to notice them, make conscious choices and explain those choices to their team.

The way out

The owner does not need to become an accountant, a software expert or a full time manager. They need three things:

1. **Good managers around them,** trained and trusted to run the day to day, so the owner is no longer the answer to every question (Chapters 7 and 15).
2. **A few simple routines,** such as a weekly planning hour and a monthly look at the numbers, that keep the business side on track without taking over their life (Chapters 14 and 18).
3. **Permission to step back,** from the tools, from the inbox and from the belief that they must carry everything alone.

When owners make this shift, the change is often dramatic. They rediscover why they started the business. Their team grows into the space they leave. And the business finally has an owner with the time and clarity to make it stronger.

Self check

1. How were the managers in your business, including you, prepared for their role?
2. Which of the three moments above have you faced? How did you handle it?
3. What percentage of your working week is spent on management, as opposed to doing the work?
4. When did you last review your numbers in detail, with time to think?
5. What have you paid for in the past two years, software, equipment or training, that is not being fully used?

One action this week: write down the three management tasks you most often put off. Keep the list handy as you read Part Two.

Put it into practice: explore the BCG Manager's Toolkit →

PART TWO

The fixes.

The practical skills that stop the drift and bring your team back on track.



6 Know Yourself as a Manager

7 Delegation

8 Feedback That Lands

9 Team Meetings That Earn Their Time

10 Motivation

11 Difficult Conversations

12 Mentoring and Development

13 Building Your Team

14 Self Management and Management Routines

15 Managing Up

16 Choosing the Right Managers

17 Managing Your Managers

18 Action Plans and Decision Making

19 Clear Communication

Part Two: The Fixes

Part One described what poor management costs a business. Part Two sets out the skills that prevent those costs. Each chapter follows the same pattern: what goes wrong, why it happens, a practical method, and a self check with one action.

None of these skills require you to become a different person. They require you to add a few practical habits to the strengths you already have. If you are good at your trade or profession, you already know how to observe, diagnose, plan and follow through. Management uses those same muscles, pointed at people and systems instead of jobs and products.

You do not need to read these chapters in order. Start with the one that matches your biggest headache today and come back to the others when you are ready.

Chapter 6: Know Yourself as a Manager

Every manager brings a natural style to the job. Some people love getting things done fast. Some love order and detail. Some are full of new ideas. Some care most about how people feel and whether the team is pulling together.

None of these styles is wrong. But every style has blind spots, and in a small business those blind spots turn directly into the costs described in Part One. The first management skill, before any technique, is knowing your own style well enough to see what you naturally miss.

Four management styles

A useful way to think about management style comes from the PAEI model developed by Dr Ichak Adizes. It describes four roles that every organisation needs. Most people are strong in one or two and weaker in the others.

P: Producer. The Producer gets results. They focus on what needs doing today and they do it. In a small business, this is the owner who personally finishes the job when the crew falls behind, or the salesperson who closes the deal at 9pm. Their blind spot: they can be so focused on today's work that planning, training and people issues get pushed aside. Teams can feel driven rather than led.

A: Administrator. The Administrator builds order. They create systems, procedures, templates and schedules, and make sure things are done properly. They keep the compliance paperwork perfect and the invoices accurate. Their blind spot: they can become rigid, resist change and focus on how things are done rather than whether they are worth doing.

E: Entrepreneur. The Entrepreneur sees possibilities. They spot new products, new markets and opportunities others miss. They are the owner who comes back from a trade show with three new ideas. Their blind spot: they can start more than they finish, change direction often and leave the team feeling unsettled.

I: Integrator. The Integrator builds the team. They notice how people feel, smooth conflict, build trust and help people work together. Their blind spot: they can avoid hard decisions and difficult conversations in order to keep the peace.

What does your style cost the business

Look back at the costs in Part One and you can see how each style, unchecked, contributes:

Dominant style	What the business gets	What it risks
Producer	A lot of work done, fast	Burnout, no training, people feel unheard, high turnover
Administrator	Consistent systems and compliance	Rigidity, slow change, frustrated innovators
Entrepreneur	New ideas and growth	Unfinished projects, unclear

Dominant style	What the business gets	What it risks
		priorities, change fatigue
Integrator	A warm, supportive team	Avoided conversations, unfairness, processes that drift

The goal is not to change your natural style. It is to know your blind spots, build habits that cover them, and work with people whose strengths complement yours.

A business run by two Producers will get a lot done and burn through staff. A business run by an entrepreneur founder and an Integrator manager will feel friendly and full of ideas but may struggle to finish anything or hold anyone accountable. Many of the founders I work with are strong Producers and Entrepreneurs, which is exactly why they built the business, and exactly why the systems and the people side lag behind. Knowing this helps owners hire and divide the work sensibly.

Where your authority comes from

New managers often assume their authority comes from their title. In practice, people follow you for several reasons, and the title is the weakest of them. Think about five sources of authority:

1. **Position.** You have been given the role. This gets you compliance, not commitment.
2. **Expertise.** You know the work well. In a trade or technical business this matters a lot, but it can trap you into doing everything yourself.
3. **Relationships.** People trust you and know you care about them.
4. **Example.** You do what you ask others to do. You are on time, you follow the procedures, you keep your word.
5. **Fairness.** You treat everyone by the same rules and explain your decisions.

Managers who rely only on position struggle, because people do the minimum. Managers who build all five find that people follow them willingly, even when the decision is unpopular.

There is a deeper problem with leaning on the title. A manager who relies on their title alone often broadcasts weaknesses rather than strength. It can look as though the title is masking a lack of confidence or self belief. This is especially common when a manager senses that people around them doubt they deserve the role. The instinct is to become more authoritarian, to insist on the title, rather than to show the substance of leadership. The team sees through it quickly. The title is nothing; the actions are everything.

Your personal SWOT

A simple exercise helps you put this together. Take a page and divide it into four:

- **Strengths:** what you do well as a manager and what people come to you for.
- **Weaknesses:** what you avoid, put off or find draining.
- **Opportunities:** skills you could build, people who could support you, changes in the business that would help.

- **Threats:** situations that bring out your worst habits, such as busy weeks, cash flow pressure, certain personalities or pressure from partners.

Be honest. Then ask one trusted colleague to look at it and tell you what you missed.

Working with me card

One of the most practical tools a manager can create is a short card that explains to the team how they work best. It might include:

- How I like to receive questions (in person, by message, saved for our weekly catch up).
- What I need from you when something goes wrong.
- What I value most in a team member.
- My blind spots, and how you can help me with them.
- How can you tell when I am under pressure.

Sharing a card like these feels exposing at first. In practice, teams appreciate it enormously. It removes guesswork and shows that the manager is human.

Self check

1. Which of the four styles feels most natural to you? Which feels least natural?
2. Looking at the table above, which risk do you recognise in your own business?
3. Which of the five sources of authority do you rely on most? Which could you build?

One action this week: write your own work with a **me card** and share it with one person in your team. Ask them what they would add.

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Chapter 7: Delegation

If there is one skill that separates exhausted owners from effective ones, it is delegation.

Most owners know they should delegate more. Most of them do not. They say things like "it's quicker if I do it", "nobody else does it properly" or "they're already too busy". Each of these feels true on the day. Together they create an owner who is the bottleneck for everything, and a team that never grows.

What happens when you do not delegate

- **The owner/manager burns out.** Every task, question and decision flow through one person.
- **The team stays dependent.** People learn to bring problems rather than solve them, because the owner always takes them.
- **Good people leave.** Capable people who want more responsibility do not get it, so they find it elsewhere.
- **The business cannot grow.** There is a ceiling on what one person can do, and the business hits it.
- **Nothing important gets done.** The owner is so busy with tasks others could do that the planning, pricing and improvement work never happens.

Delegation is not about offloading work you do not want. It is about putting each task with the right person, so that the business runs well and people grow.

What to delegate: the A, B, C sort

Take the interruption list from Chapter 1 and add the regular tasks you do each week. Sort every item into one of three groups:

A tasks: only I should do this. These genuinely need your role, authority or expertise. Examples: final decisions on hiring, performance conversations with your direct reports, approving the budget, negotiating with the bank or a major customer.

B tasks: Someone else could do this with preparation. These need training, a clear process or some practice before you hand them over. Examples: quoting standard jobs, building the weekly schedule, ordering stock, running the team toolbox meeting, training new starters.

C tasks: someone else should already be doing this. These do not need you at all. Examples: answering routine customer questions, chasing supplier deliveries, filing, booking vehicle services.

Most owners find that a surprising share of their week is C tasks. Those can be handed over almost immediately. B tasks become your development plan for the team.

How to delegate well: prepare, agree, support

Delegation fails when it is done in a rush: "Can you sort out the stock order? Thanks." The person does not know the standard, the budget, the deadline or who to ask, so they either

do it badly or keep coming back with questions. The owner concludes that delegation does not work.

Good delegation has three stages.

1. Prepare. Before you hand anything over, be clear in your own mind:

- What exactly is the task, and what does a good result look like?
- Who is the right person, given their skills, workload and interests?
- What authority will they have? Can they decide, or do they recommend and you decide?
- What resources, information or training do they need?

2. Agree. Sit down with the person, not in the car park, and agree:

- The outcome and the standard.
- The deadline and any checkpoints.
- The level of authority they have.
- How and when will they update you.
- Why did you choose them. People take on more willingly when they see it as recognition, not dumping.

Ask them to explain the task back to you in their own words. This takes two minutes and prevents most misunderstandings.

3. Support. Stay available without taking over. Check in at the agreed points. When they bring you a problem, ask "what do you suggest?" before you offer your answer. When it goes well, say so, specifically. When it does not, treat it as learning, not failure.

Levels of authority

One of the most common delegation mistakes is not being clear about how much authority the person has. Try thinking about it as levels:

1. Look into it and report back. I will decide.
2. Recommend what we should do. I will decide.
3. Decide, but check with me before you act.
4. Decide and act, then tell me what you did.
5. Decide and act. You do not need to tell me.

A new task might start at level 2 and move up to level 4 over a few months. Being explicit about the level prevents both overstepping and endless checking back.

A level of authority only works if it comes with a matching level of clarity. Before you walk away, check that you have full feedback from the person that they understand four things:

1. **The task.** What exactly needs to be done, and what a good result looks like. Ask them to explain it back in their own words.
2. **The timeline.** When it is needed by, and any steps that must be done sooner.
3. **The touch points.** When you will check in along the way to make sure it is going well. Do not wait until the end to check, if your door was not open during the work. By then it is too late to help, and the check feels like an inspection rather than support.

4. **The review.** When and how you will look back together at the actions taken and the outcome achieved, so both of you learn from it.

If any of these four is unclear, the delegation is not finished yet.

A business example: letting go of quoting

The owner of a commercial equipment business was personally writing every quote. Customers loved dealing with him, but quotes often took a week to go out, and some never went out at all. He knew it was costing him sales.

We started small. Together with his sales coordinator, he built a pricing guide and a quote template for the most common equipment packages. For the first month, she prepared the quotes and he approved each one before it was sent (level 3). They met for fifteen minutes every Monday to review the week's quotes and talk through anything unusual. By the third month she was sending standard quotes herself and telling him afterwards (level 4), and only custom or very large jobs came to him.

Quote turnaround dropped from about a week to a day or two. The coordinator grew in confidence and felt trusted. And the owner got back several hours a week to spend on the large accounts and on planning the business. This is delegation done properly: a clear standard, a gradual increase in authority, and a regular touch point.

Why owners resist delegating

If you know all this and still find it hard, you are not alone. The usual reasons are:

- **It is quicker to do it myself.** True today. False over the next six months.
- **They will not do it as well as I do.** Possibly, at first. Your job is to teach until they do, or to accept a different but acceptable standard.
- **I do not want to overload them.** Then take something else off their list. Delegation is about the right work in the right place, not more work.
- **I like doing it.** Honest, and common. But if it is a C task, the business is paying an owner's rate for it.
- **If I give it away, what am I for?** Your value as an owner is in the results of your team and the direction of the business, not in the tasks you hold onto.

Self check

1. What percentage of your week is spent on C tasks?
2. Which B task, if delegated, would free the most time for you in the next three months?
3. Who in your team is ready for more responsibility and would welcome it?

One action this week: choose one C task and one B task. Hand over the C task immediately. Use prepare, agree, support to start handing over the B task.

Chapter 8: Feedback That Lands

In most small businesses, feedback happens in two ways. Either it does not happen at all, or it happens all at once, after months of silence, when the owner finally runs out of patience.

Both are expensive. Silence lets small problems become habits and leaves good people feeling invisible. The sudden outburst damages trust, puts people on the defensive and rarely changes behaviour. Chapter 2 showed that "I don't know where I stand" and "I don't feel valued" are among the main reasons people leave. Both are feedback failures.

Two goals at once

Good feedback has to achieve two things at the same time. Think of them as truth and peace.

Truth means the person clearly understands what you saw and why it matters. Vague hints, jokes and sandwiched messages do not achieve this.

Peace means the relationship survives the conversation and ideally gets stronger. Harsh, public or personal criticism does not achieve this.

Most managers lean naturally towards one. Producers tend to deliver truth without peace. Integrators tend to protect the peace and water down the truth. The skill is holding both.

A simple structure: situation, behaviour, impact

One of the most widely used structures for feedback is the Situation, Behaviour, Impact model developed by the Center for Creative Leadership. It works because it keeps feedback specifically and factually.

- **Situation:** when and where did it happen?
- **Behaviour:** what exactly did the person do or say? Describe it as a camera would, without judgement.
- **Impact:** what was the effect on the customer, the team, the job or the business?

Then stop and listen.

Compare these two versions:

Vague: "You need to be more careful on site."

Specific: "On Tuesday at the café fit out, you left the switchboard cover off when you went to lunch, with the owner's staff walking past. If someone had touched it, they could have been seriously hurt, and we could have lost the builder's trust and future work."

The second version is longer, but it is far easier to hear. It is about a specific event, not a character flaw. And it makes the next step obvious.

There is a deeper reason the specific version works. The vague version will almost always be heard as emotional rather than factual: it sounds like your opinion or your frustration. And people can always argue with emotions, even if only in their own heads. They may nod politely while quietly disagreeing and walk away unchanged. The specific version is built on facts: what happened, when, and with what result. Facts are much harder to argue with,

and they are far less likely to be taken personally. The conversation stays at the event, not on how you feel about the person.

The same structure works just as well for positive feedback, which most managers give far too rarely and far too vaguely. "Good job today" is pleasant. "This morning, when the customer's main unit failed in the middle of their lunch service, you had the loan unit on the van and installed within an hour. That saved their day, and they rang me to say so" is memorable, and it tells the person exactly what to keep doing. It also builds the person up. Hearing specifically what they did well increases their confidence and their sense of value to the team, and that is how positive reinforcement gets the best out of people.

Lead with what is going right

I first wrote about this idea for a client whose crew works on site under real time pressure, and it applies to every business where leadership style directly affects safety, morale and output.

In many workplaces, the default feedback tool is a negative one. Something goes wrong, and the instinct is to correct, criticise or snap. Negative feedback may get immediate compliance, but it rarely builds confidence. Over time it chips away at initiative and self belief, two things no business can run well without.

The confidence killer. When someone only ever hears what is wrong, they stop trusting their own judgement. They wait to be told what to do. They avoid taking initiative. They make fewer decisions, even when time matters. Eventually they stop engaging beyond the bare minimum. Not because they are lazy, but because they are afraid of getting it wrong. That fear is not a motivator. It is a muzzle.

Positive reinforcement is not softness. It does not mean coddling people or ignoring mistakes. It means noticing what is working and saying so. When someone spots a hazard and handles it without being told, solves a customer's problem on their own initiative, or keeps a job running smoothly on a chaotic day: tell them. Specifically, promptly and out loud. When people know what they are doing right, they do more of it, they trust themselves more, and they feel part of the team rather than bodies filling a roster.

The ripple effect. Recognition spreads. Others notice what gets praised, and it sets the tone. The culture shifts from "don't get it wrong" to "how can I get it right?" In that kind of business, apprentices and new starters grow faster, mistakes are spotted and raised before they escalate, and the team becomes more accountable, because people feel trusted to act.

Three habits make the difference:

- **Be specific.** "Good job" means little. "Smart move spotting that scaffold issue before it became a problem" means a great deal.
- **Be consistent.** Do not only speak up when something goes wrong. Speak up when it goes right.
- **Be real.** Genuine praise goes a long way. Forced or exaggerated praise backfires.

None of this replaces honest correction when it is needed; the rest of this chapter covers how to give it well. But if correction is the only feedback your team ever hears, you are building hesitant people who wait for instructions, not confident ones who think on their feet. Negative feedback might fix a moment. Positive reinforcement builds a team.

Eight practical rules

1. **Give it soon.** Feedback loses value fast. Within a day or two is ideal.
2. **Give it privately.** Especially when it is corrective. Never in front of customers, and rarely in front of colleagues.
3. **Choose the right platform and the right moment.** This is one of the most important decisions you will make. Should this be face to face, a phone call or an email? Corrective or sensitive feedback almost always belongs face to face, where tone and body language can do their work. A phone call is the next best option when you cannot be together. Email and text are fine for confirming what was agreed, or for a quick note of thanks, but they strip out tone and are easily misread. Timing matters just as much: not in the middle of a job, not as someone is walking out the door after a long day, and not when either of you is upset.
4. **Be specific.** Describe what you saw, not what you assume.
5. **Talk about behaviour, not personality.** "You did not complete the test sheet before leaving site" is fixable. "You are careless" is an attack.
6. **Explain the impact.** People change when they understand why it matters.
7. **Ask for their view.** There may be context you do not know. "Talk me through what happened" is a powerful question.
8. **Agree what happens next.** End with a clear, shared next step.

Blind spots: what others see that we do not

The Johari window, developed by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, is a simple way to understand why feedback matters. It describes four areas of what we know about ourselves:

- **Open:** things I know about myself and others know too.
- **Blind:** things others see in me that I do not see.
- **Hidden:** things I know about myself but keep from others.
- **Unknown:** things nobody has discovered yet.

Feedback is how the blind area gets smaller. Everyone in your business, including you, has habits, others notice that they do not. Without feedback, those habits never change. This applies to owners too: asking your team for feedback on how you manage is one of the fastest ways to improve.

When people push back

Even well delivered feedback can meet resistance. The person might deny it, blame someone else, get upset or go quiet.

Do:

- Stay calm and keep your voice level.
- Acknowledge feelings: "I can see this is frustrating to hear."
- Go back to the facts: what happened and its impact.
- Ask questions to understand their side.
- Give them time if they need it and agree when you will talk again.

Do not:

- Argue or raise your voice.
- Pile on extra examples to win the point.
- Bring up unrelated past issues.
- Apologies for raising it or withdrawing the feedback.
- Threaten consequences in the heat of the moment.

From feedback to coaching

When an issue keeps recurring, a simple coaching structure can help the person find their own solution. The GROW model, associated with Sir John Whitmore, uses four stages:

- **Goal:** what do we want to be true?
- **Reality:** what is happening now?
- **Options:** what could you do differently?
- **Way forward:** what will you do, and by when?

For example, with a salesperson whose written outreach to prospects gets very few replies: the goal is more first meetings; the reality is that messages are long, generic and all about the product; the options include shorter messages, a specific reason for reaching out and a clear question; the way forward is that she will rewrite her three templates with her coach by Friday and test them for two weeks. When I coach sales teams, this is exactly how we work: we look at real messages together, rewrite them, and measure what changes.

People commit far more to solutions they helped create.

Self check

1. When did you last give specific positive feedback? To whom?
2. Is there a piece of corrective feedback you have been putting off? How long has it been waiting?
3. When did you last ask your team for feedback on how you manage?
4. Does your team make confident decisions on a busy day, or do they wait to be told? What does that say about the feedback they usually hear from you?

One action this week: give three pieces of specific positive feedback using situation, behaviour and impact. Then plan the corrective conversation you have been avoiding and schedule it.

Chapter 9: Team Meetings That Earn Their Time

Ask a small business team what they think of their meetings, and you will usually hear one of two answers. "We don't really have them." Or "they're a waste of time."

Both answers point to the same cost. Without good meetings, information travels by rumour, decisions are made in car parks and on phone calls, problems are raised but never resolved, and the team never quite feels like a team. Chapter 4 showed how poor internal communication becomes poor customer communication. Meetings are where most of that communication should happen.

Why meet at all?

In a business where every hour is billable, a meeting must earn its place. A good meeting produces two kinds of output.

Task outputs are the practical results: decisions made, problems solved, information shared, actions agreed with owners and dates.

Social outputs are about the team: people feel heard, understand the bigger picture, trust each other a little more and leave feeling part of something.

Poor meetings fail at both. They wander, nothing is decided, the same two people talk, and everyone leaves feeling their time was wasted. Over months, this teaches the team that raising issues is pointless, and the issues go underground.

The right meeting for the job

Most small businesses need only a few types of meeting, each with a clear purpose:

Meeting	How often	Length	Purpose
Daily start up or toolbox talk	Every morning	10 minutes	Today's jobs, safety, who is where, anything urgent
Weekly operations or pipeline meeting	Weekly	30 to 45 minutes	Jobs in progress, quotes outstanding, schedule, cash flow
Team meeting	Monthly	45 to 60 minutes	Updates, problems to solve, process changes, recognition
One to one	Monthly with each direct report	30 minutes	Their work, wellbeing, development and feedback both ways
Leadership or partners meeting	Weekly or fortnightly	45 minutes	Priorities, people issues, numbers, decisions

The daily start up alone can transform a business. Ten minutes at the start of the day, covering who is going where, what could go wrong, what materials are needed and which customers need special care, prevents a surprising number of problems before they start. In trades businesses it is also where safety culture is built or lost.

The manager's three jobs in a meeting

When you run a meeting, you are responsible for two things at once.

The content. What is being discussed, in what order, and what needs to be decided. This means preparing an agenda, keeping to time, summarising decisions and making sure every action has an owner and a date.

The dynamics. How people are participating. Who is dominating, who has gone quiet, whether disagreement is being voiced or swallowed, whether the mood is constructive or defensive.

The achievements. Did we cover the agenda? What are the outcomes

Many managers focus only on content and wonder why the team does not engage. Others focus only on dynamics and wonder why nothing gets decided. Watch both.

Before, during and after

Before the meeting:

- Decide the purpose. If you cannot say it in one sentence, you may not need a meeting.
- Send a short agenda a day or two ahead, with the decisions you need to make.
- Ask the team to add items.
- Invite only the people who need to be there.

During the meeting:

- Start on time, even if people are missing.
- Open with the purpose and the agenda.
- Begin with recognition: a customer compliment, a job done well, someone who went the extra mile.
- Take each item in turn and close it with a clear outcome.
- Invite quieter people by name, gently.
- Park topics that need more time and agree when they will be dealt with.
- Finish by reading back the actions: who, what, by when.

After the meeting:

- Send a short summary of decisions and actions within a day.
- Keep a running action log and review it at the start of the next meeting.
- Follow up on actions between meetings.

The action log is where most small business meetings fall down. If the same items appear meeting after meeting with no progress, the team learns that meetings change nothing.

Useful phrases

- "Let's make sure we hear from everyone on this. Dan, what's your view?"
- "That's important, but it's a bigger conversation. Can we park it and set a time to talk?"
- "I'm hearing two different views. Let's lay them both out before we decide."
- "So, to summaries, we've agreed that... Is that right?"
- "Who will own that, and when will it be done?"
- "We're running short of time. Which of the remaining items can wait until next week?"

A business example: from talking shop to decisions

The owner of a contracting business held a weekly meeting with his project manager and office manager. It usually ran for well over an hour, wandered from one complaint to the next, and ended without anything being decided. Everyone dreaded it.

We replaced it with a fixed agenda, sent the day before:

1. Wins from last week.
2. Project profitability: which jobs are on budget, which are not, and why.
3. Variations: what was done, what was approved, what is still to be invoiced.
4. Quotes outstanding and follow ups due.
5. Cross training: who is learning what, so the business is not dependent on one person.
6. Decisions needed and actions from last week.

Each item had a time limit and an owner. Within a month the meeting was down to forty five minutes. More importantly, it had become the place where real problems were found and fixed, rather than the place where they were discussed and forgotten.

Self check

1. Does your business have a short daily start up?
2. Do your meetings end with clear actions, owners and dates?
3. Are there items that have appeared at three or more meetings without being resolved?

One action this week: if you do not have a daily start up, begin one. Keep it to ten minutes and cover the same four points each day: who is where, what is planned, safety and risks, and anything a customer needs.

Chapter 10: Motivation

Almost everyone starts a new job motivated. They want to do well, learn, impress the boss and be part of something. Apprentices arrive keen. New salespeople arrive full of energy. Experienced tradespeople arrive with pride in their craft.

So when an owner says, "my team just isn't motivated", the real question is: what happened to the motivation they arrived with?

Usually, the answer is management. Not one dramatic failure, but a slow accumulation of small things: good work that goes unnoticed, unfair allocation of work, no growth, constant pressure and a sense that nobody is above them really cares or one of the most common I hear in my career coaching sessions “the job did not match the interview promised”. Motivation is rarely lost. It is worn away.

What the research tells us

Several well established ideas help explain what drives people at work. You do not need to memorise them. Each one gives you practical lens.

Needs come in layers. Abraham Maslow suggested that people's needs build on each other: basic needs such as pay and security first, then safety, belonging, recognition and finally the chance to grow and reach their potential. A technician who is worried his hours are about to be cut will not be motivated by a training course. Get the basics right first.

Some things prevent dissatisfaction, others create motivation. Frederick Herzberg distinguished between hygiene factors and motivators. Hygiene factors include pay, conditions, vehicles, tools, policies and relationships with the manager. When they are poor, people become unhappy. But fixing them does not create motivation; it only removes unhappiness. Motivators include achievement, recognition, responsibility, interesting work and growth. These are what actually lift people. Many owners spend all their energy on hygiene factors and wonder why nobody is inspired.

People are very sensitive to fairness. J. Stacy Adams showed that people compare what they put in and get out with what others put in and get out. If one technician always gets the easy local jobs, or one salesperson always gets the warm leads, or one person is never pulled up for lateness, others notice. Perceived unfairness is one of the fastest ways to destroy motivation in a small team.

Effort depends on belief. Victor Vroom’s idea suggests people put in effort when they believe three things: that effort will lead to good performance, that good performance will be noticed and rewarded, and that the reward is something they value. If any link is broken, effort drops. A salesperson who believes the commission structure is unachievable will stop trying to reach it.

Attention itself motivates. Studies at the Hawthorne factory last century are often cited for a simple finding: people tend to work better when they feel someone is paying attention to them. Simply showing genuine interest in someone's work is motivating.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivation comes from outside: pay, bonuses, commission, avoiding criticism. Intrinsic motivation comes from inside: the satisfaction of doing good work, mastering a craft, solving a problem and being trusted.

Most people who are good at practical, technical or customer facing work have a lot of intrinsic motivation. That is a gift, and a responsibility. The manager's job is to protect it, by removing the things that wear it down and providing conditions that let it flourish. Pay matters and must be fair, but in most small businesses the biggest gains come from the intrinsic side.

What wears motivation down

- Recognition that never comes or comes only as a generic "thanks team" message.
- Unfair allocation of jobs, overtime, leads or training.
- No conversation about career growth or new skills.
- Being given responsibility without authority.
- Constant short staffing, with no end in sight.
- Long days, long drives and physical fatigue that nobody acknowledges.
- Decisions made without explanation.
- Commission or bonus schemes that feel impossible to reach or keep changing.

What builds motivation

- **Specific recognition**, given soon and in person (Chapter 8).
- **Fair systems** for allocating work, leave, training and overtime, explained openly.
- **Growth**: new skills, licences, responsibilities, a path forward (Chapter 12).
- **Autonomy**: trusting people to make decisions within clear limits (Chapter 7).
- **Meaning**: connecting daily work to its impact on customers and the community.
- **Belonging**: a team where people look out for each other (Chapter 13).

Giving capable people ownership of something real is one of the most motivating changes an owner can make. When a senior technician is given responsibility for a group of service customers, or an office coordinator is trusted to run quoting for standard jobs, they gain autonomy, use more of their skills, build their own customer relationships and see the direct impact of their work.

A business example: the commission scheme nobody believed in

A supplier I worked with had a generous commission scheme for its sales team on paper. In practice, the targets had been set during a boom year and never adjusted, and the rules about which sales counted changed twice in a year. The sales team had quietly stopped believing they could reach it.

We sat down with the team and rebuilt the scheme together: realistic targets based on the current market, clear rules written on one page, and a monthly review of progress. The total cost to the business has barely changed. But because every link in Vroom's chain had been repaired, effort, and results, lifted within a quarter.

The motivation conversation

The most reliable way to understand what motivates someone is to ask them. Most managers never do. A simple conversation, perhaps as part of a monthly one to one, could cover:

1. What part of your work gives you the most satisfaction?
2. What drains your energy most?
3. When did you last feel really proud of something you did here?
4. What would you like more of in your role? Less of?
5. How do you like to be recognised? Publicly, privately, in writing?
6. Where would you like to be in two years?

People are different. One technician loves public recognition at team meetings; another would be mortified. One wants to become a supervisor; another wants to specialise and never manage anyone. The only way to know is to ask.

Self check

1. For each person in your team, can you name what motivates them most?
2. Is there anything in your business that your team would describe as unfair?
3. When did you last recognise someone specifically for good work?

One action this week: have a motivation conversation with one team member, using the questions above. Write down one thing you will change as a result and do it.

Chapter 11: Difficult Conversations

Every owner has a list of conversations they are avoiding. The technician who is consistently rough with customers. Two office staff members who no longer speak to each other. The salesperson who keeps overpromising lead times. The long serving team member who refuses to use the new job management system. The business partner who is not pulling their weight.

Each of these conversations feels risky. It might cause upset, damage a relationship, or lead to someone resigning. So the owner waits for a better moment, but it never comes.

Meanwhile, the cost grows. The rest of the team watches the problem continue and concludes that standards don't really matter, that some people get special treatment, and that the owner will not protect them. Avoided conversations are one of the quietest and most powerful drivers of turnover in any business.

Why do these conversations feel so hard?

Difficult conversations are hard for three reasons, and separating them helps.

The people. Emotions run high. We worry about hurting someone, being disliked or facing anger or tears. In a small business, where colleagues are often friends or even family, this is especially strong.

The content. The issue itself may be complicated, emotional, with facts in dispute and no obvious right answer.

The setting. Small businesses are busy and often lack private space. Conversations end up happening in the lunchroom, on site or in the corridor, which makes them worse.

When you prepare, think about all three: how people will feel, what the facts are, and where and when you will talk.

The stories we tell ourselves

Before any difficult conversation, most of us have already built a story about the other person. "He doesn't care about quality." "She thinks she's above the rules." "They're doing this to undermine me."

These stories feel like facts, but they are interpretations, interpretations that become barriers to conversation because when you interpret or presume, you stop listening; you're just hearing your own thoughts and perceptions. They shape how we walk into the conversation: defensive, accusatory, ready for a fight. I call it the gap in communication

A powerful habit is to separate what you assume and hear from the story you have built around it. Ask yourself:

- What are the facts? What do I want to achieve here?
- What story am I telling myself about why it happened?
- What other explanations could there be?
- What do I not know yet?

You may find your story is right. Often, you will find there is more to it. Either way, you will walk into the conversation calmer and more curious.

Positions and interests

In many conflicts, people dig into positions: what they say they want. Underneath sit interests: why they want it.

Two technicians are arguing about the after hours callout roster. One insists he will never do weekend callouts. The other says it is unfair that she always must. Those positions seem incompatible.

When the manager asks about interests, the picture changes. The first technician shares custody of his children every second weekend and cannot leave them. The second wants to know in advance which weekends she is on, so she can plan her life. Now there are options: a published roster set two months ahead, with his weekends swapped for extra weeknight callouts. The positions clashed. The interests did not.

Asking "what matters most to you about this?" is one of the most useful questions a manager can learn.

Trust in the room

People can only hear difficult messages if they trust the person giving them. In practice, people judge trust on a few things: whether you are competent, honest, reliable, and whether you genuinely care about their interests as well as your own.

If trust is low, start there. Acknowledge past problems, stay consistent, and show through your actions that you are on their side, as well as the business's.

A practical plan for the conversation

1. Prepare. Write down the facts, your story and its alternatives, what you want to achieve, and what you think the other person wants. Choose a private place and a time when neither of you is rushed.

2. Open clearly. State the purpose in a sentence or two, without a long warm up. "I want to talk about how the job handovers between sales and the install team have been going, because there have been some problems and I want us to sort them out together."

3. Share the facts and the impact. Use situation, behaviour and impact from Chapter 8.

4. Listen. Ask for their view and really listen. Reflect back what you hear. "I am really interested in your perspective on this issue". Empathy does not mean agreeing. It means understanding.

5. Explore interests and options. What matters to each of you? What could work?

6. Agree on the way forward. Be specific about what will change, who will do what, and when you will check in.

7. Follow up. Check in when you said you would. Acknowledge progress. If nothing changes, the next conversation is firmer and may need to become a formal performance

process, following your business's policies and employment obligations. Take advice before you go down that path.

Useful phrases for empathy

- "It sounds like this has been building for a while."
- "Help me understand what it's been like from your side."
- "I can see why that would be frustrating."
- "What would a good outcome look like for you?"
- "I want to get this right for both of us."

Difficult conversations with customers

The same principles apply outside the team. Two situations come up constantly in the businesses I work with.

The customer who has not paid. A solar and electrical installer I worked with had a growing number of customers who had received their systems and then stopped paying. The team hated chasing them and kept putting it off. The fix had two parts. First, clear terms and conditions on the website and the invoice, so expectations were set before the work started. Second, a calm, factual script for the follow up call: what was agreed, what is outstanding, what happens next and by when. Once the team had a structure, the calls stopped feeling personal, and more of the money came in.

The customer you lost. When a prospect chooses a competitor, most salespeople either say nothing or send a slightly wounded email. A better approach is a short, gracious reply that thanks them for the opportunity, wishes them well, asks one honest question about what tipped the decision, and leaves the door open. I have seen customers come back months later because of a reply like that.

When two team members are in conflict

When the conflict is between two people in your team, resist the urge either to ignore it or to decide who is right. Talk to each person separately first, to understand their side. Then, if appropriate, bring them together with a clear purpose: to agree how they will work together from here, not to rehash every past grievance. Focus on interests, agree specific behaviours, and follow up.

Self check

1. Which conversation have you been avoiding the longest?
2. What story are you telling yourself about that person? What else might be true?
3. What is the cost to the business of leaving it another month?

One action this week: prepare for the conversation you have been avoiding using the seven steps above, and book a time to have it.

Chapter 12: Mentoring and Development

Ask any tradesperson what made or broke their apprenticeship, and the answer is rarely the course content. It is whether the person they worked beside had the time and the patience to teach them. The same is true for the graduate in the office, the new salesperson and the junior project manager.

When nobody makes time to develop people, the costs are predictable. New starters lose confidence, make avoidable mistakes and quietly start looking elsewhere. Apprentices learn whatever version of the job the busiest person on site happens to show them. Capable office staff who want to move into management never get the chance, so they leave to find it.

Development is not a luxury for when the business is less busy. It is how the business builds the people it will need next year.

Two ways to get mentoring wrong

Choking. The mentor hovers, corrects every small thing, takes over at the first sign of difficulty and never lets the person own a task. The learner feels watched and never builds confidence. This is the leading hand who grabs the tools back the moment the apprentice hesitates.

Abandoning. The mentor assumes the person will figure it out, gives a quick explanation and disappears. The learner struggles alone, is too embarrassed to ask, and either makes mistakes or develops bad habits. This is the new salesperson handed a lead list on day one with "call me if you need anything".

Good mentoring sits between these two. It gives enough support to keep the person safe and enough space to let them grow, and it adjusts as their skill increases.

The mentoring loop

A simple loop works for almost any skill, technical or not:

1. **Explain.** Describe the task, why it matters and what good looks like.
2. **Show.** Do it while they watch, talking through your thinking.
3. **Try together.** Let them do it with you beside them, ready to help.
4. **Try alone.** Let them do it on their own, with you available.
5. **Review.** Talk through how it went: what worked, what to change.
6. **Repeat** until they are confident and consistent, then step back further.

The review step is the one most often skipped, and the one that does the most good. Five minutes in the van on the way back from a job, or at the end of a sales call, is enough.

Different kinds of mentoring

- **Skills mentoring:** teaching a specific technical skill, a product range or a piece of software.
- **Career mentoring:** helping someone think about where they want to go and how to get there.
- **Peer mentoring:** pairing a newer team member with an experienced peer, not their manager, for informal support.
- **Reverse mentoring:** younger team members helping more experienced colleagues with new technology, social media or online tools.

- **Product and customer mentoring:** the owner passing on the customer relationships and product knowledge that currently live only in their head.

A healthy business uses several of these. They do not all have to come from the owner.

The personal development plan

For every team member, a simple development plan turns good intentions into action. It should answer:

- **What do you want to gain?** One to three skills, licences, qualifications or experiences for the next twelve months.
- **Why does it matter?** For them, and for the business.
- **How will you get there?** Training, mentoring, projects, reading, shadowing.
- **Who will help?** A named mentor or support person.
- **What will you sustain?** The strengths and habits they already have that they need to keep up.
- **How will we know?** What will be different when they have achieved it.
- **When will we review it?** A date, usually every three to six months.

The "sustain" part matters. Development plans often focus only on gaps, which can feel like a list of weaknesses. Naming what someone already does well, and planning to keep it strong, makes the plan feel balanced and fair.

The best development plans also line up with where the business is going. When an electrical business I worked with wanted to offer a new service that required a competency beyond the standard licence, the owner didn't hire someone new. He asked his most ambitious senior electrician whether he would like to be the person who led it. The training went into his development plan, the business gained a new service line, and the electrician gained a reason to stay for years.

Making time for development

The most common objection is time. There is never a quiet week. The answer is to build development into routines rather than waiting for spare time:

- Ten minutes of job or customer discussion after the daily start up.
- A standing monthly one to one with each direct report that always includes a development question.
- One protected training session a month, rotated around the team.
- Development plans reviewed at fixed dates in the calendar.

Chapter 14 explains how to build routines like these into your week.

Self check

1. Does every team member have a written development plan?
2. When you mentor, do you lean towards choking or abandoning?
3. What knowledge lives only in your head that someone else in the business should be learning?
4. Who in your business is ready to mentor others, and has never been asked?

One action this week: sit down with one team member and draft a one page development plan together, including what they want to gain and what they need to sustain.

Chapter 13: Building Your Team

A group of skilled people working for the same business is not automatically a team. Many small businesses are really collections of individuals: salespeople who do their own thing, technicians who stick to their own jobs, an office that feels separate from the field. Everyone works hard. But the handovers are clumsy, information gets lost between groups, and small tensions build into silos.

The cost shows up in every chapter of Part One. Turnover is higher where people feel no loyalty to each other. Processes drift where nobody feels shared ownership. Customers notice when sales and operations are not on the same page.

What makes a team a team

A team is a small group of people who share a common goal, depend on each other to achieve it, and hold themselves jointly responsible for the result.

The key word is depend. The installer depends on the salesperson to quote the job accurately. The salesperson depends on the office to send the quote on time. The office depends on the installer to send back the job sheet so the invoice can go out. When these dependencies work, the business flows. When they do not, everyone blames everyone else.

Strong teams balance two things: the **mission**, the work they are there to do, and the **relationships**, the trust and goodwill that let them do it together. A team focused only on the mission becomes efficient but cold, and people burn out. A team focused only on relationships becomes friendly but ineffective, and standards slide.

Four building blocks: the GRPI model

The GRPI model, developed by Richard Beckhard, is a simple way to work out what is going wrong in a team. It names four building blocks, in order of importance.

G: Goals. Does everyone know what the team is trying to achieve, and agree on it? If the sales team is measured on revenue and the install team on finishing jobs fast, and nobody is measured on profit, conflict follows.

R: Roles. Does everyone know what they are responsible for, and what others are responsible for? Unclear roles cause dropped balls ("I thought you were ordering the parts") and turf wars ("that's my customer, not yours").

P: Processes. Are there agreed ways of working: how decisions are made, how information is shared, how jobs are handed over, how problems are raised? Chapter 3 showed the cost when processes drift.

I: Interpersonal relationships. Do people trust each other, communicate openly and handle disagreement well?

The insight in this model is the order. When teams have problems, the symptoms usually look interpersonal: people are irritated, gossiping, not speaking. Owners often respond with a team barbecue or a night out. But the root cause is frequently higher up the list. Two

people who clash may really be clashing over unclear roles. An install team that resents the salespeople may really be frustrated by a broken handover process.

Fix goals first, then roles, then processes. Many interpersonal problems ease on their own.

A business example: sales versus the install team

At one equipment supplier, the installation team complained constantly that the salespeople promised customers impossible lead times. The salespeople complained that the installers were slow and negative. The owner was preparing to sit them all down and "clear the air".

Using GRPI, we looked at goals, roles and processes first. Sales were paid on signed orders, with no link to whether the job was delivered on time or profitably. Nobody owned the decision about committing to a delivery date. And there was no handover from sales to installation beyond a forwarded email.

The owner made three changes. Part of the sales commission was linked to on time delivery. Delivery dates could only be committed after a quick check with the install coordinator. And every sale moved to installation with a one page handover sheet covering site access, power and plumbing requirements, and anything the customer had been promised. Within two months the complaints had largely stopped. It had never really been a personality problem.

Practical ways to build teamwork

- **Share the goals.** Talk regularly about what the business is trying to achieve and how each role contributes, including profit, not just revenue.
- **Map the roles.** Write down who is responsible for what, especially at the points where work passes between people.
- **Fix the handovers.** Enquiry to quote, sale to job, job to invoice: these are where teams most often fail each other.
- **Mix the groups.** Take salespeople out on installs and bring technicians into product meetings, so each side understands the other.
- **Celebrate shared wins.** Recognise team results, not just individual effort.
- **Debrief hard jobs together.** What went well, what went wrong, what we will do differently.
- **Address problems early.** Small tensions handled quickly never become big ones (Chapter 11).

Hiring for the team

Building a team also means choosing who joins it. Small businesses under pressure often hire the first available person with the right licence or experience. It is worth slowing down enough to do four things:

1. **Write a clear job description** that covers outcomes, not just tasks, and how success will be measured, including any commission structure.
2. **Be honest about the job.** Describe the business as it is today, not only as you hope it will be (Chapter 2).

3. **Test for fit as well as skill.** Does this person share your values? How will they work with the people beside them? A paid trial day with the team, followed by asking the team for their view, is one of the best hiring tools a small business has.
4. **Plan the first ninety days before they start:** who will train them, what they will learn each week, and when you will review progress.

Self check

Rate your team from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong) on each of the four GRPI blocks:

1. Goals: everyone knows and agrees what we are trying to achieve.
2. Roles: everyone knows who does what.
3. Processes: we have clear, agreed ways of working.
4. Interpersonal: we trust each other and handle disagreement well.

Start improving with the lowest score that sits highest in the list.

One action this week: pick the handover in your business that causes the most friction. Map exactly who does what at that point, agree with the people involved, and write it down.

Chapter 14: Self Management and Management Routines

You cannot manage a business well if you cannot manage your own week.

This is where many owners struggle most. They know what good management looks like. They intend to hold one to ones, review the numbers, plan the schedule ahead and develop their team. But every day is swallowed by the phone, the site visit, the urgent quote, the supplier problem, the breakdown and the question from the person at the door. The important work waits for a quiet week that never comes.

The cost is the reactive management described in Chapter 1. And the biggest casualty is often the owner: long hours, no breaks, work brought home and, eventually, burnout.

Your big rocks

There is a well known illustration about filling a jar. If you pour in sand and pebbles first, there is no room for the big rocks. If you put the big rocks in first, the pebbles and sand fit around them.

Your big rocks are the few things that matter most in your role, the ones that only you can do and that make the biggest difference to the business. For most owners, the list includes things like:

- Developing and supporting the key people.
- Reviewing the numbers and making financial decisions.
- Looking after the most important customer relationships.
- Planning work, people and cash flow ahead.
- Improving one thing about how the business runs.

The sand is everything else: emails, routine questions, small fixes, the endless stream of interruptions.

The discipline is to put the rocks in the diary first, every week, and protect them. Everything else fits around them.

The 80/20 rule

The Pareto principle, named after the economist Vilfredo Pareto, suggests that a small share of causes often produces most of the results. In most businesses, a small number of customers produce most of the revenue. A small number of products or job types produce most of the profit. A small number of your own activities produce most of your impact.

Ask yourself: which 20 per cent of my work produces 80 per cent of the value? Then make sure that 20 per cent gets your best time, not your leftover time.

The four Ds

When something lands on your desk, decide quickly what to do with it. There are only four options:

- **Do it** if it is important and only you can do it, or it takes less than a few minutes.

- **Delegate it** if someone else can do it (Chapter 7).
- **Delay it** if it matters but not now. Put it in the diary with a specific time, not on a vague list.
- **Delete it** if it does not really need doing at all. More things fall into this group than most owners admit.

Think in outcomes, not activities

Busy owners measure their day by activity: how many calls, emails and problems they handled. Effective owners measure it by outcome: what is different because of their work.

At the start of each week, write down the three outcomes you want by Friday. Not "work on pricing" but "new price list approved and sent to the sales team". Not "look at the variation process" but "variation form agreed and in use on every job". Outcomes are finishable. Activities are not.

Routines as anchors

The single most effective tool for an owner or manager is a set of fixed routines. Routines keep management happening on busy weeks, because they do not depend on remembering or finding time.

A typical set of management routines for a small business might look like this:

How often	Routine	Purpose
Daily	Start up or toolbox talk (10 minutes)	Today's plan, safety, risks and special customers
Daily	End of day check (10 minutes)	Callbacks made, tomorrow ready, issues logged
Weekly	Planning hour	Set three outcomes, protect the rocks, review the schedule
Weekly	Operations or pipeline meeting	Jobs, quotes, variations, cash flow
Weekly	Process spot check	Sample a key process, such as five job files or the variation log
Monthly	One to one with each direct report	Work, wellbeing, development, feedback
Monthly	Team meeting	Updates, problems, recognition, actions
Monthly	Financial review	Profit and loss, cash flow, debtors, margin by job type
Quarterly	Review of key numbers	Turnover, customer retention, revenue leakage,

How often	Routine	Purpose
		overtime
Quarterly	Development plan reviews	Progress on each person's plan
Every six months	Process review with the people who built it	Tweak what is not working, own why steps are skipped, agree how to make it stick
Yearly	Planning day	Review the year, set next year's goals and budget

Do not try to introduce all of these at once. Start with two or three, make them stick, then add more. A routine that happens reliably every week is worth far more than a perfect system that collapses after a month.

What to consider when you design routines

- **Put them in the diary as recurring appointments.** If it is not in the diary, it will not happen.
- **Choose times that suit the business.** The start up before the vans leave. The planning hour on the quietest morning.
- **Keep them short.** A ten minute routine that happens is better than an hour that gets cancelled.
- **Make them visible.** Tell the team what your routines are and why. They will help protect them.
- **Review them.** Every few months, ask whether each routine is still earning its time.

Looking after yourself

Self management also means managing your own energy. Running a business is demanding, and owners carry the weight of the team as well as their own. Take your breaks. Leave on time at least some days. Talk to someone outside the business about the hard parts: a mentor, a coach, a peer group, a trusted adviser. An owner running on empty cannot support anyone else, and a burnt out owner is the most expensive problem a small business can have.

Self check

1. What are your three big rocks? Are they in your diary this week?
2. Which management routines happen reliably in your business now?
3. When did you last do a monthly financial review, with time to think?
4. How many hours last week did you spend on tasks you could have delegated or deleted?

One action this week: book a one hour planning session in your diary for the same time every week for the next three months. Use the first one to set your three outcomes for the following week.

Chapter 15: Managing Up

Most management books focus on managing the people who report to you. But for general managers, operations managers, sales managers and supervisors, one of the most important relationships is with the person above: the owner, the directors, the board or the investors. And for owners, the equivalent is managing the relationship with business partners, co directors and the bank.

When these relationships work, the manager has the backing, the information and the authority to do the job. When they do not, everything in this book becomes harder.

What happens when managing up fails

Picture an operations manager who has carefully designed a new scheduling system with the install team. The owner, who was not consulted, hears a complaint from one longstanding customer and scraps it in a phone call. The team sees that the manager's decisions can be overturned at any time. Next time, they go straight to the owner.

Or picture a sales manager who has known for months that two of her best people are close to resigning over the commission structure. She has hinted at it to the owner, who is busy and did not pick it up. When the resignations arrive, the owner is shocked and asks why nobody told him.

These situations are common, and they are expensive:

- **Decisions stall** because the manager does not have clear authority or cannot get the owner's attention.
- **The manager's credibility erodes** when decisions are overturned or promises to the team cannot be kept.
- **Problems reach the owner too late**, when they are already crises.
- **The manager burns out**, caught between a team that expects them to fix things and an owner who will not give them the means.
- **Good managers leave**, taking their knowledge and relationships with them.

Managing up is not about flattering the boss or playing politics. It is about building a working relationship that lets you do your job well, for the benefit of the business.

Four principles

1. Understand their style. Your owner has a management style just as you do (Chapter 6). A Producer owner wants short updates, clear recommendations and quick decisions. An Administrator owner wants detail, data and a proper process. An Entrepreneur owner is energised by ideas but may lose interest in the follow through. An Integrator owner will want to know how the team feels. Adapt how you communicate to how they take in information.

2. Respect their authority, and clarify yours. The owner has the final say on many things; it is their business and their risk. At the same time, you need to know what you can decide on your own. Have an explicit conversation about it, using the levels of authority from Chapter 7. Which decisions are yours? Which do you recommend and they decide? Which must always go to them? Write it down and revisit it as trust grows.

3. Show empathy for their position. Owners carry pressures the team rarely sees: cash flow, personal guarantees, tax obligations, the bank, their own family, sometimes their own exhaustion. When you understand their worries, you can frame your requests in terms that matter to them. "Losing another technician would cost us more than $20,000 and six weeks of subcontractor bills" lands differently from "the guys are unhappy".

4. Bring a positive, constructive attitude. No owner wants a manager who only brings complaints. That does not mean hiding problems. It means bringing problems with options and a recommendation, and acknowledging what is going well as well as what is not.

Practical habits

Supply the goods. Do your job well and reliably. Credibility is the foundation of influence.

No surprises. Tell your owner about problems early, while they are still small, and before they hear about it from someone else.

Come with options. When you raise a problem, bring two or three possible solutions and your recommendation. This turns you from a messenger into a partner.

Use numbers. Owners respond to evidence: margin, overtime, debtors, quote conversion, customer retention. Part One of this book gives you ways to put numbers on management problems.

Protect the regular meeting. A fixed weekly or fortnightly meeting with the owner, with a short agenda, is worth more than a dozen phone calls. Send the agenda ahead. Keep a list of decisions needed. Confirm decisions in a short message afterwards.

Show loyalty in public, disagree in private. If you disagree with a decision, say so clearly and respectfully, in private. Once a decision is made, support it in front of the team, even if you argued against it.

Ask for feedback. Ask your owner regularly what they need from you and how you could make their job easier. Most owners are rarely asked.

A simple agenda for the owner meeting

1. Wins since we last met.
2. Key numbers: sales, margin, cash, overtime, anything off track.
3. Decisions I need from you, each with my recommendation.
4. Risks you should know about.
5. What I am working on next.
6. Anything you need from me.

Thirty minutes, every week or fortnight, using this structure, will change the relationship.

When there is more than one boss: partners and directors

Many small businesses are owned by two or three partners or directors, and this brings its own challenge. Each partner may have a different view of their role, their hours and their share of the decisions, and nobody has ever written it down.

I recently reviewed a growing service business owned by several directors. The business had real strengths, but one of the first questions I had to ask was simple: who is responsible for what? Who owns marketing? Who signs off on spending? What happens if the directors disagree? The answers were not clear, and the staff could feel it. They received different instructions from different directors and did not know whose priorities came first.

If you are in a partnership, three things help enormously:

- **A written agreement on roles and decision rights,** covering who leads which part of the business and which decisions need all partners to agree. Your shareholder agreement should support this; take legal advice to make sure it does.
- **A regular partners meeting** with an agenda, the numbers and a record of decisions, so disagreements are resolved between partners and not in front of the team.
- **One voice to the team.** Once the partners decide, they communicate it together, and staff know whose direction to follow on each area.

When the owner is the problem

Sometimes the hardest part of managing up is that the owner's own habits cause problems: overriding decisions, avoiding conversations, changing priorities weekly, or treating staff in ways that drive them away. This is delicate. The principles above still apply. Choose a private, calm moment. Use facts and impact, not judgement. Focus on the shared goal: a business that runs well and keeps good people. Offer a specific suggestion. And accept that change may take time.

If you are an owner reading this, it is worth asking yourself honestly: do my managers feel they can tell me the truth? If not, you are probably the last to hear about your business's biggest problems.

Self check

1. Do you have a regular, protected meeting with the person or people you report to?
2. Have you agreed in writing which decisions are yours to make?
3. If you have business partners, are your roles and decision rights written down?
4. Is there a problem your owner should know about that you have not yet raised clearly?

One action this week: request a standing meeting with your owner, board or partners, and propose the six point agenda above.

Chapter 16: Choosing the Right Managers

No owner can manage a growing business alone. Sooner or later you need managers around you: a foreman or operations manager, a sales manager, an office or finance manager, a marketing manager. These people are meant to carry part of the load, so that the business no longer depends on you for everything.

Choose well, and the right manager multiplies everything good in the business. Choose badly, and the wrong manager multiplies every problem in this book: the team stops trusting the structure, good people leave, processes drift faster, and the owner ends up doing the manager's job as well as their own.

This chapter is about choosing managers deliberately, and about making it crystal clear what you expect from them before they start.

How most managers get chosen

In most small businesses, managers are not chosen. They happen. The three most common routes are:

- **The best at the work.** The top technician becomes the foreman. The top salesperson becomes the sales manager. As Chapter 5 showed, being great at the work tells you nothing about whether someone can lead others doing it.
- **The longest serving.** The person who has been there the longest gets the role as a reward for loyalty. Loyalty matters, but it is not a management skill.
- **The trusted friend or family member.** The owner promotes the person they feel most comfortable with. That comfort can make it very hard to hold them to account later.

Each of these can work out. But when they do, it is usually by luck. A deliberate choice is far more reliable.

The attributes that matter

Technical skill and experience still count. But the attributes that separate good managers from struggling ones are mostly about character and behaviour. Look for someone who:

- **Has integrity.** They do what they say, tell the truth when it is uncomfortable and treat the business's money as if it were their own.
- **Takes ownership.** They see a problem and act, rather than waiting to be told or looking for someone to blame.
- **Communicates clearly.** They can explain what they want, listen properly and keep the owner informed without being chased.
- **Is fair.** They apply the same rules to everyone, including friends.
- **Wants others to succeed.** They get satisfaction from seeing their team do well, not only from doing the work themselves. This is the hardest attribute to find in a high performer, and the most important.
- **Is coachable.** They ask for feedback and act on it.
- **Stays calm under pressure.** The team takes its emotional cue from the manager on a bad day.

- **Understands the numbers,** or is willing to learn. A manager who does not understand margin, cash flow and cost cannot make good decisions for the business.
- **Shares your values.** Skills can be taught. Values rarely can.

No candidate will be perfect on every point. Decide in advance which attributes are essential for this role and which can be developed.

Be crystal clear: no hidden messages

The single biggest reason managers fail in small businesses is not lack of ability. It is lack of clarity. The owner has a picture in their head of what the manager should do, how they should do it and what success looks like, but that picture was never written down or said out loud. The manager is left to guess. When they guess wrong, the owner is disappointed, and the manager has no idea why.

These hidden messages are everywhere: "I assumed you would handle the difficult customers." "I expected you to be on site by seven." "I thought you knew you could approve purchases up to five thousand dollars." "I didn't think I needed to tell you that I want to see the numbers every Monday." Each one is reasonable. None of them was ever said.

Before anyone starts in a management role, whether promoted from within or hired from outside, write down and agree the following:

1. **The purpose of the role.** In one or two sentences, why does this role exist? What problem does it solve for the business?
2. **The outcomes.** What results is this person responsible for? Be specific: jobs delivered on time and on budget, sales targets, staff turnover, safety record, customer satisfaction.
3. **The measures.** How will you both know whether they are succeeding? Agree three to five measures you will review together regularly.
4. **Decision rights.** What can they decide alone? What do they recommend and you decide? What must always come to you? Use the levels of authority from Chapter 7, and include spending limits.
5. **Who reports to them,** and what they are responsible for in managing those people: one to ones, feedback, development, rosters, leave, performance conversations.
6. **How you will work together.** How often you will meet, how they should keep you informed, how you want to hear about problems and how they can reach you when it matters.
7. **What they should stop doing.** If they have been promoted from within, which parts of their old job will someone else now do? Without this, new managers keep doing their old job and add the new one on top.
8. **The non negotiables.** The values and standards that must never be compromised, such as safety, honesty with customers or how staff are treated.

Put this on two pages, talk it through, and ask the new manager to explain it back in their own words. Then both of you sign it. It may feel formal for a small business. It will save you months of frustration and, very often, the manager.

Be honest about the job

Chapter 2 described the gap between the job we sell and the job people actually get. This gap is even more damaging for managers. If you tell a new operations manager they will have full control of scheduling, and then keep overriding the schedule yourself, you have broken the promise in their first month. Describe the role as it really is today, including the hard parts, and only promise the authority you are genuinely ready to hand over.

A selection process that works

Whether you are promoting from within or hiring from outside, a simple, consistent process gives you far better decisions than a gut feel.

- **Start with the role description,** not the candidate. Decide what you need before you look at who is available.
- **Ask behavioural questions.** Instead of "How would you handle conflict?", ask "Tell me about a time two people in your team were in conflict. What did you do, and what happened?" Past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour.
- **Use real scenarios.** Give candidates a situation from your business and ask how they would handle it: a long serving team member who refuses to follow a new process, a key customer threatening to leave, a friend who is letting the team down. The three moments in Chapter 5 make excellent scenarios.
- **Look at how they talk about others.** Do they give credit to their team, or talk only about themselves? Do they blame previous employers for everything?
- **Check references properly.** Ask specific questions about how they managed people, not just whether they were reliable.
- **For internal candidates, give a trial responsibility first.** Before a formal promotion, let them lead a project, run the team meeting for a month or mentor a new starter. You will learn more in four weeks than in any interview.
- **Ask the team.** Not for a vote, but for their observations. They often know who people trust.

A business example: promoting the top salesperson

A supplier I worked with promoted its best salesperson to sales manager. He was brilliant with customers, and everyone assumed he would make the team brilliant too. Nobody wrote down what the role involved. He kept his own customer list, kept chasing his own commission, and managed the team only when something went wrong. Within six months two salespeople had left, his own sales had dropped because he was distracted, and the owner was quietly managing the team again.

When the role was filled the second time, the owner did it differently. He wrote a two page role agreement: the purpose of the role, the team outcomes it was responsible for, the decision rights, what the new manager would hand over from their own sales work, and a weekly one to one with the owner. The new manager was chosen partly because she had already mentored two new starters successfully. The commission structure was changed so she earned from the team's results, not just her own. A year later, the team was stable, sales were up, and the owner had stopped managing salespeople altogether.

The first manager was not a bad person or a poor salesperson. He was set up without clarity, and nobody had checked whether he wanted others to succeed as much as he wanted to succeed himself.

The first ninety days as a manager

The first three months shape how a new manager is seen by the team and how they see the role. Plan them:

- **Week one:** introduce the manager to the team yourself, explain their role and authority, and say clearly that you will back them.
- **First month:** weekly one to ones with the owner, focused on questions, early decisions and relationships with the team.
- **First ninety days:** agree two or three early wins the manager can deliver, a short training plan for any management skills they are missing, and a review at the end of the period against the role agreement.

Self check

1. How were the current managers in your business chosen: deliberately, or because they were the best at the work, the longest serving or the most trusted?
2. Does each of your managers have a written role agreement covering outcomes, measures and decision rights?
3. What are you expecting from your managers that you have never actually told them?
4. Which of the attributes above is weakest across your management team?

One action this week: for each of your managers, write down the three outcomes you expect from them and the decisions they are allowed to make on their own. Then sit down with each of them and compare it with what they believe. The gaps will tell you where the hidden messages are.

Chapter 17: Managing Your Managers

Choosing the right managers is only half the job. The other half is managing them so they work well for you, and for the business.

This is a different skill from managing a team of doers. When you manage technicians, salespeople or office staff, you are mostly managing tasks and standards. When you manage managers, you are managing judgement, authority and leadership. Your job is no longer to make sure the work gets done. It is to make sure your managers can get the work done through their people, without you stepping in.

Many owners find this the hardest shift of all, because it means letting go of the very thing that built the business: their personal control over the work.

How owners accidentally undermine their managers

Most owners would never deliberately undermine a manager they appointed. But in small businesses it happens every day, usually with the best intentions:

- **Going around them.** A technician rings the owner directly with a question, and the owner answers it, instead of sending them back to the foreman. The team quickly learns that the real decisions are made by the owner, and the foreman becomes a messenger.
- **Overriding decisions in front of the team.** The manager says no to a request, and the owner says yes. Even if the owner is right, the manager has lost authority in a single moment.
- **Giving responsibility without authority.** The manager is accountable for the schedule, but every change still needs the owner's approval. They carry the blame without the power.
- **Rescuing.** As soon as something goes wrong, the owner jumps in and fixes it personally. The manager never learns, and never gets the chance to show they can handle it.
- **Changing the goalposts.** Priorities shift every week depending on the owner's latest worry. The manager cannot build momentum on anything.
- **Silence.** The owner is unhappy with the manager's performance but says nothing, until it boils over (Chapter 11).

Every one of these sends the same message to the team: the manager does not really run things. And once the team believes that, the manager cannot lead them.

The owner's rules for managing managers

1. Back them in public, challenge them in private. If you disagree with a manager's decision, talk to them privately. In front of the team, support them. If a decision must be reversed, let the manager communicate the change wherever possible.

2. Send questions back down the line. When a team member comes to you about something their manager owns, redirect them: "That's one for Sam. Have you spoken to him?" Then tell Sam it happened. It feels slower at first. Within a few weeks, the team stops going around their manager.

3. Give real authority, in writing. Use the role agreement from Chapter 16. Spell out what each manager can decide, including spending limits, hiring, scheduling and customer concessions. Then honour it, even when you would have decided differently.

4. Manage outcomes, not methods. Agree what result you need and by when. Let the manager decide how. If you dictate every step, you have not delegated management; you have hired an expensive assistant.

5. Be consistent. Agree priorities for the quarter and stick to them. When something genuinely must change, explain why, and agree together what drops off the list.

6. Let them make mistakes, within limits. Agree in advance where the safety net is: what risks are too big to take, and what mistakes are an acceptable price of learning. Then let them learn.

The manager one to one

The most important routine in managing managers is a regular one to one: weekly for a new manager, fortnightly or monthly for an experienced one. Thirty to forty five minutes is enough. Protect it like a customer appointment.

A simple agenda keeps it focused:

1. **Results.** How are we tracking against the outcomes and measures in the role agreement?
2. **People.** How is the team? Anyone struggling, anyone ready for more?
3. **Decisions.** What decisions do you need from me? What decisions have you made that I should know about?
4. **Obstacles.** What is getting in your way, and how can I help?
5. **Development.** What are you working on as a manager? What skill would make the biggest difference?
6. **Feedback both ways.** One thing that is going well, one thing to improve, and one thing I could do differently to support you.

The last item matters. Asking your managers how you can support them better is one of the most powerful things an owner can do. It shows you see the relationship as a partnership, and it surfaces problems you would otherwise never hear about.

Build a management team, not a set of individuals

Once you have more than one manager, bring them together. A short weekly or fortnightly management meeting, with the owner and all managers, turns separate roles into a team. Use it to:

- Review the key numbers together, so every manager understands the whole business, not just their part.
- Sort out the handovers between areas, such as sales to operations or operations to accounts (Chapter 13).
- Agree priorities and resolve conflicts between areas before they reach the wider team.
- Make decisions that affect more than one area, with each manager's input.

The goal is a group of managers who support each other and hold each other to account, so that problems are solved at the management table rather than escalated to the owner one by one.

Develop them as leaders

Most managers in small businesses were promoted because they were good at the work, exactly like the owner. They need help to develop as leaders, and it is the owner's job to make sure they get it. That help can include:

- Working through this book together, one chapter a month, and discussing how it applies to your business.
- External training or coaching on specific skills, such as feedback, difficult conversations or financial management.
- Mentoring from the owner, using the mentoring loop in Chapter 12.
- Gradually widening their decision rights as their judgement proves itself.
- Including them in planning and budgeting, so they think like owners, not just supervisors.

An owner who develops strong managers is building the thing that gives a business real value: a team that can run it without the owner in the room every day.

When a manager is struggling

Sometimes, despite good choices and good intentions, a manager struggles. Before you conclude they are the wrong person, check three things in this order:

1. **Clarity.** Do they genuinely know what is expected of them? Revisit the role agreement together. Many "performance problems" turn out to be clarity problems.
2. **Authority and support.** Have they been given the authority, information, tools and training to succeed? Have you been undermining them without realising?
3. **Capability and fit.** If clarity and support are in place and things still are not improving, have an honest, private conversation using the approach in Chapter 11. Agree specific changes and a clear timeframe.

If it still does not work, it may be kinder to everyone, including the manager, to agree a different role. Many people who struggle as managers are excellent in a senior technical or specialist role, and are relieved to return to it. Handle this with care and respect, and take advice on your employment obligations.

A business example: the foreman who could not lead

An electrical contractor appointed a capable senior electrician as foreman. Three months later, the owner was frustrated that nothing had changed. The crew still rang the owner with every question, jobs still ran late, and the foreman seemed to be just another pair of hands on site.

When we looked closely, the cause was the owner. He was still answering every call from the crew, still changing the schedule himself, and still turning up on site and directing work without speaking to the foreman first. The foreman had the title but none of the authority.

The owner agreed three changes: every crew question about the day's work would be redirected to the foreman, schedule changes would go through the foreman, and the owner would meet the foreman for thirty minutes every Monday instead of visiting sites unannounced. Within two months the crew had stopped ringing the owner, and the foreman had grown visibly in confidence. He had been capable all along. He just needed his owner to step back.

Self check

1. In the past month, how many times have you answered a question or made a decision that belonged to one of your managers?
2. Do you have a regular, protected one to one with each manager?
3. Have you ever asked your managers how you could support them better?
4. Do your managers meet together as a team, or only with you individually?
5. What are you doing to develop each manager as a leader?

One action this week: tell your team, in front of their managers, that from now on questions about day to day work go to their manager first. Then, for the next two weeks, redirect every question that should have gone to a manager, and tell the manager each time it happens.

Chapter 18: Action Plans and Decision Making

Every business has a list of things that "we really need to do". Update the website. Fix the quoting process. Launch the new product range. Review the pricing. Get the new starter properly trained. The list is discussed, nodded at, and carried forward month after month.

At the same time, decisions pile up. Should we hire another technician or keep paying subcontractors? Should we take on that large contract with long payment terms? Should we buy the new machine now or next year? Without a clear way to decide, these questions either drag on or get settled on impulse.

Both problems have the same cost: a business that stands still while its people work harder and harder.

Why good intentions do not become action

Ideas stall for predictable reasons:

- Nobody owns them.
- They are too big to start, so nobody does.
- There is no deadline, so they are always next month.
- Nobody checks progress, so nobody notices they have stopped.
- They compete with daily work and always lose.

An action plan solves all five.

Building an action plan

A useful action plan moves from the big picture down to the specific. It answers seven questions:

1. **The rock.** What is the big priority this plan supports? For example: winning more of the work we quote for.
2. **The goal.** What specific result do we want, and by when? For example: every standard quote sent within two working days by the end of the quarter.
3. **The activities.** What steps will get us there? Break the goal into tasks small enough to start this week.
4. **The dates.** When will each step be done?
5. **The partners.** Who owns each step, and who needs to help?
6. **The routines.** Which regular routine will we use to check progress? For example: the weekly pipeline meeting.
7. **The measures.** How will we know it is working? For example: average quote turnaround and quote conversion rate.

Here is what that might look like:

Step	Owner	Due	Check
Pull a list of last quarter's quotes with dates requested and	Office manager	Week 1	List saved

Step	Owner	Due	Check
sent			
Identify the most common job types and where delays happen	Owner and sales coordinator	Week 2	Findings at pipeline meeting
Build a quote template and pricing guide for standard jobs	Sales coordinator	Week 4	Template tested on five quotes
Train the team on the new template	Sales coordinator	Week 5	Everyone trained
Add quote turnaround to the weekly pipeline meeting	Owner	Week 6	In the routine
Review turnaround and conversion	Owner	Month 3	Compared with before

One page. Clear owners. Real dates. A routine to check it. Most small business projects need nothing more complicated than this.

Fewer plans, finished

The most common mistake is having too many plans at once. A small business can realistically run two or three improvement projects at a time alongside daily work. More than that, and none of them finish.

Choose the projects that matter most, finish them, then start the next. Finished projects build momentum and confidence. A long list of half started projects builds cynicism.

Do the homework first: feasibility before commitment

In more than twenty years of working with startups and established businesses, including businesses that came to me stuck or close to the edge, I have seen one root cause again and again: a big decision made without a proper feasibility study. A new product line, a new location, a large contract or an expensive piece of equipment, committed to on enthusiasm rather than evidence.

A feasibility check does not have to be a large report. It needs to answer a few honest questions:

- **Is there real demand?** Who will buy it, how often, and at what price?
- **Who else is already there?** What do competitors offer, at what price, and how will we be different?
- **What will it really cost?** Including stock, training, marketing, extra staff and the owner's time.

- **When will it pay back?** And what happens to cash flow in the meantime?
- **Who will own it?** Who in the team will lead it, and what will they stop doing to make room?
- **What is our exit point?** At what result, by what date, will we stop or change course?

When an equipment supplier I worked with was considering adding a new category of specialist food equipment, we started by mapping the competitors already in that market: who they were, where they sat on price and quality, and which were local manufacturers versus importers. That one piece of work changed the decision. Instead of competing head on in a crowded segment, the business chose a narrower position it could genuinely win.

Making better decisions

Most owners make technical decisions all day using a structured process. Management decisions deserve the same discipline, but they rarely get it. They are made in a rush, in a car park, based on whoever spoke last.

A simple seven step approach helps:

1. **Name the decision.** What exactly are we deciding? Who should decide? By when?
2. **Get the facts.** What do we know? What do we need to find out? Who should we ask?
3. **List the options.** Always more than one. Include doing nothing.
4. **Weigh the options.** For each, consider the benefits, the risks, the likely consequences for customers, team and finances, and whether it is practical with the people, time and money we have.
5. **Choose.** Make the call. Waiting for perfect information is itself a decision, and usually a poor one.
6. **Communicate.** Tell the people affected what was decided, why, and what happens next.
7. **Review.** Set a date to check whether it worked, and adjust if needed.

Who decides?

Many decisions stall because nobody is sure who should make them. The owner assumes the manager will. The manager assumes the owner wants to. Meanwhile, nothing happens.

It helps to agree, in advance, who makes which kinds of decisions. Routine operational decisions, such as schedule changes, stock reorders and small purchases within a budget, should sit with the manager. Larger or riskier decisions go to the owner or the partners, ideally with a recommendation from the manager. Chapter 15 shows how to agree this.

Involving the team

People support decisions they helped shape. When a decision affects the team, such as a new scheduling system or a new way of quoting, involve them in steps 2 to 4. Ask for facts, options and concerns. You do not have to reach a consensus, and the final call may still be yours. But a team that was consulted accepts a decision far more readily than one that was surprised by it.

Self check

1. How many improvement projects is your business running right now? How many have an owner and a deadline?
2. Which decision has been waiting longest? Why?
3. When you last made a big investment decision, did you do a feasibility check first?
4. Are decision rights clear between you and the people above and below you?

One action this week: take the most important stalled project in your business and write a one page action plan for it, using the seven questions above.

Chapter 19: Clear Communication

Almost every problem described in this book has a communication failure somewhere inside it. The process that drifted because the change was never explained. The technician who left because nobody told him he was doing well. The customer who left because the callback never came. The owner who overturned a decision because nobody briefed him.

In a small business, communication is constant: job sheets, schedules, group chats, emails, phone calls, conversations in the yard and on site. Yet very few owners have ever thought carefully about how to communicate well. They say it once, in passing, and assume it landed.

Every conversation creates waste or value

Think about how much of your week is spent in conversations: meetings, phone calls, emails, group chats and quick words on site. Every one of them either creates value or creates waste. A conversation that ends with shared understanding and a clear next step creates value. One that ends in confusion, a bruised relationship or the same discussion again next week creates waste: of time, energy and goodwill.

Most workplaces make this harder than it needs to be. Messages arrive through half a dozen channels at once, everyone is interrupted, and few people read to the end. In that environment, getting a message through and turning it into action takes deliberate effort.

Why conversations fail

We form opinions very quickly, often within seconds, and we stop listening the moment we think we understand. Yet it usually takes far longer for the other person to explain what they really want and what worries them. That gap, between how fast we judge and how slowly we understand, is where most conversations go wrong.

Once we have an opinion, we start asking the worst question in any conversation: what proves I am right? We defend our side, look for agreement and treat our own beliefs as if they were facts. We assume there is only one truth, and that it happens to be ours. Or we avoid the conflict altogether and say nothing useful.

If the conversation does not change, behaviour will not change either. Two things usually stand in the way: we do not really listen, and we tell far more than we ask. The next two sections deal with each.

Listening comes first

Good communication starts with listening, and most of us listen far less well than we think. It helps to imagine listening as a ladder with several rungs:

1. **Ignoring:** not really listening at all, while doing something else.
2. **Pretending:** nodding and saying "mm" while thinking about your reply.
3. **Selective listening:** hearing only the parts that interest you or confirm what you already think.
4. **Attentive listening:** paying full attention to the words.

5. **Empathic listening:** paying attention to the words, the feelings behind them and what the person really needs.

In a busy business, owners spend a lot of time on the lower rungs. A team member raises a concern while you are checking your phone, and you hear half of it. Someone explains a problem with a customer, and you jump to the solution before they have finished.

Climbing the ladder takes discipline. Stop what you are doing. Look at the person. Let them finish. Reflect back what you heard before you respond. These habits take seconds, and they change how people feel about raising things with you.

Two simple habits help most. First, allow a few seconds of silence before you reply. The other person may not have finished, or may be about to say the most important thing. Second, stay engaged by asking questions, with the aim of understanding more rather than steering them towards your answer. Only then respond.

You do not need to listen at the top of the ladder to every passing comment. But in the conversations that matter, with a team member who is struggling, a frustrated customer or your own manager, that is where you need to be.

Where viewpoints meet

Every message passes between two people who see the world differently. The salesperson sees a signed order. The installer sees a difficult site with no parking. The customer sees a deadline and a bill. The owner sees cash flow.

Effective communication starts where your viewpoint and theirs overlap. Before an important message, ask yourself: what does this look like from their side? What do they already know? What are they worried about? Then build your message from that shared ground.

Listening on its own is not enough to find that shared ground. You also need to tell less and ask more. Most managers are quick to give advice, and the advice is rarely as good as they think, because it arrives before they understand the situation.

Three questions help you find where viewpoints meet:

- **Their goals:** what are they trying to achieve? What is in it for them?
- **Their concerns:** what are they worried about? What could they lose?
- **Their truth:** what are their facts? How does the situation look from where they stand?

Ask these questions directly where you can, and ask them of yourself before any important conversation. The answers show you where your goals and theirs overlap, and that is where agreement is built.

Three questions before you communicate

Before any important message, whether a team announcement, a change to a process, a customer email or a difficult message to a supplier, answer three questions:

1. **What do I want them to know?** The essential facts, in as few words as possible.

2. **What do I want them to feel?** Reassured, motivated, valued, clear about the urgency.
3. **What do I want them to do?** The specific action, and by when.

If you cannot answer the third question, your message may not need sending yet.

The four tests of a good message

These tests apply to everything you say and write, but they matter most in writing, where you cannot see the reader's reaction.

- **Clear:** set expectations at the start and be precise. Put the main point or request first, because the end of a long message is often never read. A good rule is that an email should fit on a phone screen without scrolling.
- **Relevant:** put yourself in the reader's shoes and answer the question they are silently asking: what is in it for me? An email that opens with "FYI" tells the reader they can skim it.
- **Impactful:** end with a clear request covering who, what and by when, not just "thanks in advance". Think carefully about who you copy in. Copying in a director can spark action, or it can create resentment and damage trust.
- **Reliable:** people act on messages from people they trust. If you keep your promises and follow through, your messages carry weight. If you do not, even a well written message will be ignored.

A business example: the message nobody acted on

An owner sent this to the whole team group chat:

"Hi all, few things. Please make sure vans are cleaned out properly on Fridays, been some issues. Also the new safety paperwork starts soon, more info to come. And can everyone get timesheets in on time please. Christmas party is on the 14th, let me know if you're coming. Cheers!"

The vans did not improve. Nobody knew when the new safety paperwork started. The people who were late with timesheets did not think it applied to them. Most people replied only about the party.

The problem was not the team. It was the message. Four topics of very different importance were mixed together, nothing was specific, and the most important item, a safety and compliance change, was vague.

A better approach would split it up. The safety paperwork change gets its own message, explained at the start up meeting and followed up in writing with the start date, what changes and who to ask. The vans get a simple Friday checklist and a named owner. Late timesheets are handled one to one with the people concerned. The party gets a cheerful separate note.

Writing to customers and prospects

The same principles apply to everything your business writes to the outside world: quotes, proposals, sales emails, promotional banners and social media posts. When I review sales

outreach with clients, the most common problem is a message that is all about the business and its products, and says nothing about the customer. The fix is usually the same: shorter, specific to the reader, one clear reason for writing, and one simple question or next step. Run every customer message through know, feel, do before you send it.

Review an important email before you send it

A useful exercise, on your own or with your managers, is to take a real email that carried an important message and pull it apart. Read the whole email, then ask:

- What is the main message?
- How urgent is it, and how would the reader prioritise it?
- Which parts would the reader relate to, and which would they skip?
- Is there a hidden agenda or an unspoken message?

Then count the sentences, the negative words and phrases, the positive words and phrases, the actual requests or questions, and the people on copy. The numbers are often revealing: long, negative, crowded with recipients and light on clear requests.

Finally, rewrite the email so it achieves what the sender really wanted, using the four tests. Doing this a few times with your managers builds a shared standard for how the business writes.

Choosing the right channel

Message	Best channel
Praise for an individual	In person, soon, then in writing if it is significant
Corrective feedback	In person, privately
A change to a process or safety requirement	Meeting, then written summary, then training
Urgent operational update	Start up meeting, phone call or group message
Schedules and leave	One reliable written place everyone checks
Sensitive news about the business	In person to the whole team at once, before rumours start

The rule of thumb: the more emotional or important the message, the more it needs to be said face to face. Written messages are good for confirming, not for persuading or comforting.

Say it more than once

Owners often feel they have communicated something because they said it once. For the team, hearing it once in a busy week is rarely enough. Important messages need repeating, in different forms: at the start up, in the team meeting, in writing, on the noticeboard. By the time you are sick of saying it, most of the team has probably just heard it.

Self check

1. Where on the listening ladder do you spend most of your day?
2. Think of the last important message you sent. Did it pass all four tests?
3. Does your team have one reliable place to find schedules, processes and updates?
4. When did you last stop listening because you thought you already understood?
5. Choose one recent email that carried a critical message. Reread it and rewrite it using the four tests. Would the new version have produced a better result?

One action this week: before your next important message, write down your answers to the three questions: know, feel, do. Then check it against the four tests before you send it.

Put it into practice: explore the BCG Manager's Toolkit →

PART THREE

Making it stick.

Turning everything in this book into habits that last.



Part Three: Making It Stick

Knowing what to do is the easy part. Doing it consistently, on busy weeks as well as quiet ones, is where most good intentions fall away.

Part Three is about turning everything in this book into habits that last. It gives you a simple ninety day plan, built in three stages: see clearly, fix the foundations, then build. It also shows you which numbers to watch, so you can tell whether your business is really moving from drift to direction.

You will not get it all right at once, and you do not need to. Start small, stay consistent, and let your team see that this time the changes are here to stay.

Chapter 20: Your First 90 Days

Reading about management changes nothing on its own. What changes a business is an owner or manager who does a few things differently, consistently, for long enough that they become habits and the team notices.

This chapter turns the book into a ninety day plan. It is deliberately modest. Trying to fix everything at once is how good intentions collapse.

Days 1 to 30: See clearly

The first month is about understanding where your business really stands, and starting two simple routines.

- **Know your style.** Work through Chapter 6. Identify your natural management style, your blind spots and your sources of authority. Write your working with me card.
- **Track your time.** For one week, log your interruptions and tasks (Chapter 1). Sort them into A, B and C (Chapter 7).
- **Count the cost.** Estimate the real cost of the last two resignations (Chapter 2). List your five most important processes and check who owns each one (Chapter 3). Look at a sample of recent jobs for unbilled work.
- **Start the daily start up.** Ten minutes, every morning, same four points (Chapter 9).
- **Start the regular meeting upwards.** Book a standing weekly or fortnightly meeting with your owner, partners or key manager, using the six point agenda (Chapter 15).

By day 30, you should have a clear, honest picture of your business's biggest management gaps, and two routines running.

Days 31 to 60: Fix the foundations

The second month is about the habits that stop the biggest leaks.

- **Delegate.** Hand over all your C tasks. Begin handing over one or two B tasks using prepare, agree, support (Chapter 7).
- **Name process owners.** Give every key process a named owner and a simple weekly check, built with the people who deliver it (Chapter 3).
- **Start one to ones.** Thirty minutes each month with each person who reports to you. Include a motivation question and a development question (Chapters 10 and 12).
- **Give feedback.** At least three pieces of specific positive feedback each week. Have the difficult conversation you have been avoiding (Chapters 8 and 11).
- **Protect your rocks.** Book a weekly planning hour and a monthly financial review (Chapter 14).
- **Clarify your managers' roles.** Write a role agreement with each manager covering outcomes, measures and decision rights, and remove the hidden messages (Chapter 16). Start a regular one to one with each manager, and send every question that belongs to a manager back to them (Chapter 17).

By day 60, you should feel the first signs of change: fewer interruptions, a few processes back on track, and team members who notice that they are being listened to.

Days 61 to 90: Build

The third month is about investing in the future of the team and the business.

- **Development plans.** Draft a one page plan with each direct report (Chapter 12).
- **Team review.** Rate your team on goals, roles, processes and relationships, and fix the weakest handover (Chapter 13).
- **One action plan.** Choose the most important stalled project and write a one page action plan with owners and dates (Chapter 18).
- **Check your customers.** Run a mystery call and call three customers who did not come back (Chapter 4).
- **Communicate the changes.** Tell the team what you have been working on and why, using know, feel, do (Chapter 19).
- **Review the numbers.** Look again at overtime, resignations, process checks, quote turnaround and customer retention. Share what you find with your partners or key managers.

What to expect

Change will not be smooth. Some routines will slip in a busy week. Some team members will be sceptical at first, especially if previous initiatives faded away. Keep going. Consistency is what builds trust. The team is watching to see whether this lasts.

Most owners who follow a plan like this notice three things within three months. They feel less overwhelmed, because work is better distributed. The team brings fewer problems and more solutions, because people have clearer roles and more authority. And they have a clearer view of the numbers, because there is finally a regular time to look at them.

The bigger gains, such as lower turnover, steadier processes, stronger customer loyalty and better margins, take longer to show in the numbers. They are built on exactly these habits.

Measuring progress

To know whether your management is improving, track a small number of measures every quarter:

Measure	Why it matters
Resignations in the past twelve months	The clearest signal of team health
Overtime and subcontractor costs	A sign of gaps and pressure
Process checks completed and passed	Whether standards are holding
Quote turnaround and conversion rate	Whether sales are being followed through
Unbilled work found in job reviews	Whether revenue is leaking
Active customers and repeat business	Whether customers are staying
One to ones held as planned	Whether management routines are happening

Measure	Why it matters
Your own hours and leave taken	Whether the owner is sustainable

Share these with your partners or key managers. Over a year, they tell the story of a business moving from drift to direction.

Self check

1. Which stage of the plan will be hardest for you? Why?
2. Who could support you through the ninety days: a partner, a mentor, a coach, a trusted manager?
3. What will you do in the first week?

One action today: put the first three items from days 1 to 30 in your diary, with dates.

Put it into practice: explore the BCG Manager's Toolkit →

Conclusion: From Drift to Direction

Remember Calder Commercial from the introduction: the busy, respected business whose revenue came off its peak while its costs stayed put, whose good people drifted away, and whose quotes and variations quietly fell through the cracks.

Mark did not fix it overnight. He started small. He began a daily start up and a weekly operations meeting with a fixed agenda. He handed standard quoting to his sales coordinator and the variation process to his office manager. He sat down with the numbers every month. He gave each key process an owner. He rebuilt the onboarding for his next salesperson, so the new hire had training, coaching and a weekly check in from day one. And he had two conversations he had been avoiding for a year, one with a long serving team member and one with his business partner.

A year later, the business had not lost a single key person. Quotes went out within two days. Unbilled variations had largely disappeared. The cost base had been brought back in line with revenue, and the business was profitable again. For the first time in years, Mark took a full two weeks off without his phone ringing.

None of what he did was complicated. All of it was management.

Knowing it is working

This book began with the cost of poor management. It never shows up as a line item on your P&L, yet it is one of the largest costs your business carries. So it is fitting to finish with the opposite question: how do you know that sound management is paying off?

Good management will not deliver massive profits overnight. It builds habits, and good habits build an ecosystem: clear roles, processes people can follow, managers who develop and mentor their teams, and a regular rhythm of meetings and reviews. The gains show up in the numbers, if you know where to look: revenue from your main services, time given back, leaks closed and good people who stay. They do not come from rushing people. They come from people who are supported to do their best work.

When a number does not move, it usually points to the part of the system that is missing: steps that are not being followed, strong people with no processes to support them, processes nobody was taught, or recruitment that brings in the wrong people.

That is why the BCG Manager's Toolkit finishes with a Conclusion module, Evaluate the Results of Sound Management, and an online Return on Management Calculator. Use them every quarter to see what your efforts are yielding and where to adjust.

The real lesson

The central message of this book is simple. In a small or medium business, poor management is not a minor inefficiency. It is one of the largest costs the business carries. It drives good people away, lets standards drift, loses customers and burns out the very people the business depends on most. It also leaves profit on the table: revenue that leaks through unbilled work and slow quotes, equipment and technology that were paid for but never fully used, and opportunities the business never had time to pursue. These unrealised profits rarely show up in the accounts, because they are money the business never earned

rather than money it spent. That makes them easy to overlook, and often larger than anyone expects.

Poor management can also leave the business legally exposed. A performance problem that was never raised, documented or handled fairly can turn into an unfair dismissal or general protections claim. Unclear rosters, missed award entitlements and poor records can lead to underpayment claims and back pay. Bullying that is left unchecked, unsafe work practices and fatigue are work health and safety risks, and the business, and sometimes its owners and directors, can be held responsible. Clear roles, written processes, documented one to ones and regular check ins are not just good management. They are the business's best protection.

And it takes a heavy personal toll on the owner. When every decision, problem and worry flows to one person, running a business becomes a very lonely place to be. The owner carries the work, the team's frustrations and the financial pressure, often without anyone to share them with. They cannot always confide in the team, and the people at home may not fully understand the strain. I know that place well from my own years running a business. Over time, that isolation wears down even the most capable and committed owner.

Unlike many of the pressures facing small businesses, such as interest rates, competition and changing markets, management is something you can change, starting this week, with little or no capital outlay.

You do not have to be a natural manager. Very few people are. You need a clear picture of what matters, a handful of practical tools, and the discipline to use them consistently. This book has given you the first two. The third is up to you.

If you are great at the work but were never trained to lead, you are in very good company. The skills can be learned. And the business, the team and the life you get back are worth it.

About the BCG Manager's Toolkit

This book is the companion to the BCG Manager's Toolkit, developed by Business Consult Group.

The Toolkit turns the ideas in this book into practical, self paced modules. Each module opens with a short video and has two parts:

- **An introduction** that explains why the skill matters, why managers struggle with it, the common traps, and a quick self check.
- **A tool** that you complete on a laptop, tablet or phone, building a real plan for your own business. Your notes save automatically, and you can copy or download them to share with your team.

The Toolkit includes twenty one modules and a Conclusion:

Module	Tool
00 Know Yourself as a Manager	Manager Profile
01 Delegation	Delegation Tool
02 Effective Feedback	Feedback Planner
03 Leading Team Meetings	Meeting Planner
04 Employee Motivation	Motivation Planner
05 Difficult Conversations	Conversation Planner
06 Mentoring and Development	Development Planner
07 Building Your Team	Team Builder
08 Self Management	Week Planner
09 Managing Up	Managing Up Planner
10 Management Routines	Routine Planner
11 Action Plans	Action Planner
12 Decision Making	Decision Planner
13 Clear Communication	Message Planner
14 Counting the Cost	Cost of Drift Calculator
15 Keeping Good People	Stay Conversation Planner
16 Processes That Stick	Process Owner Plan
17 Customers Notice	Moments That Matter Map
18 Choosing the Right Managers	Manager Selection Scorecard
19 Managing Your Managers	Manager One to One Planner
20 Your First 90 Days	90-Day Plan
Conclusion: Evaluate the Results of Sound	Return on Management Calculator (online)

Module	Tool
Management	

Module 14 also links to an online Cost of Drift Calculator that adds up the figures for you. Every chapter of this book is supported by at least one module.

The Conclusion module closes the program. Its online Return on Management Calculator turns the changes you have made into dollars, so you can see what sound management is yielding for your business and where to adjust.

Explore the BCG Manager's Toolkit →

Working with Business Consult Group

Business Consult Group helps owners and managers build businesses that run well without depending on one exhausted person.

We do not offer cookie cutter coaching. Every engagement starts by learning the DNA of your business and your industry: your people, your numbers, your customers and your processes. From there, we work with you on the areas in this book that matter most to you, with practical tools your team will actually use.

Our work includes:

- **Management and leadership development** for owners, managers, supervisors and team leaders, delivered four ways: a three month one to one program that alternates a theory session with a practical session on your real day to day situations; a group classroom program for up to eight people, run as one six hour day a week for three weeks, with a printed workbook and handouts to keep; the self paced online program built on the BCG Manager's Toolkit; and, by request, remote business consulting.
- **Sales coaching** for business development managers and sales teams, including outreach, follow up and pipeline management.
- **Business reviews** covering finance, overheads, pricing, marketing and operations, with clear recommendations.
- **Feasibility and growth planning** for new products, services, locations and investments.
- **Process and systems design**, from quoting and variations to onboarding and hiring.

To find out how Business Consult Group could help your business, contact Oshi Kirk at www.businessconsultgroup.com.au.

Acknowledgements

This book draws on more than twenty years of consulting, coaching and management training delivered by Business Consult Group, and on the experience of building and selling my own business. Most of all, it draws on the owners, managers and team members who trusted me with their businesses and were honest about their challenges. Thank you. Your stories, changed to protect you, are in every chapter.

Great at the work. Never trained to lead.

Promoted for your skill, or hired to lead and left to create the clarity you were promised? This book shows what poor management really costs, the practical skills that fix it, and how to make the changes stick.

Business Consult Group.

Oshi Kirk

1300 309 747

oshi@businessconsultgroup.com.au

businessconsultgroup.com.au

Put it into practice with the BCG Manager's Toolkit