The Helpful Leader

Why the most dangerous leader in the room is the helpful one, and what the team can do about it



ASVPM · NOV 12, 2026 · BRIAN LINK · PRACTICAL AGILIST





THE BEST LEADERSHIP MOVE I'VE WATCHED

He told three hundred managers to stop pretending they know everything.

A new CIO. Three hundred middle managers. The guarded posture of a room that has learned competence is the safe play in front of leadership.

He said he would rather hear **"I don't know, let's figure it out."** The scramble before a meeting with an executive — predicting every question, having an answer ready — was over.

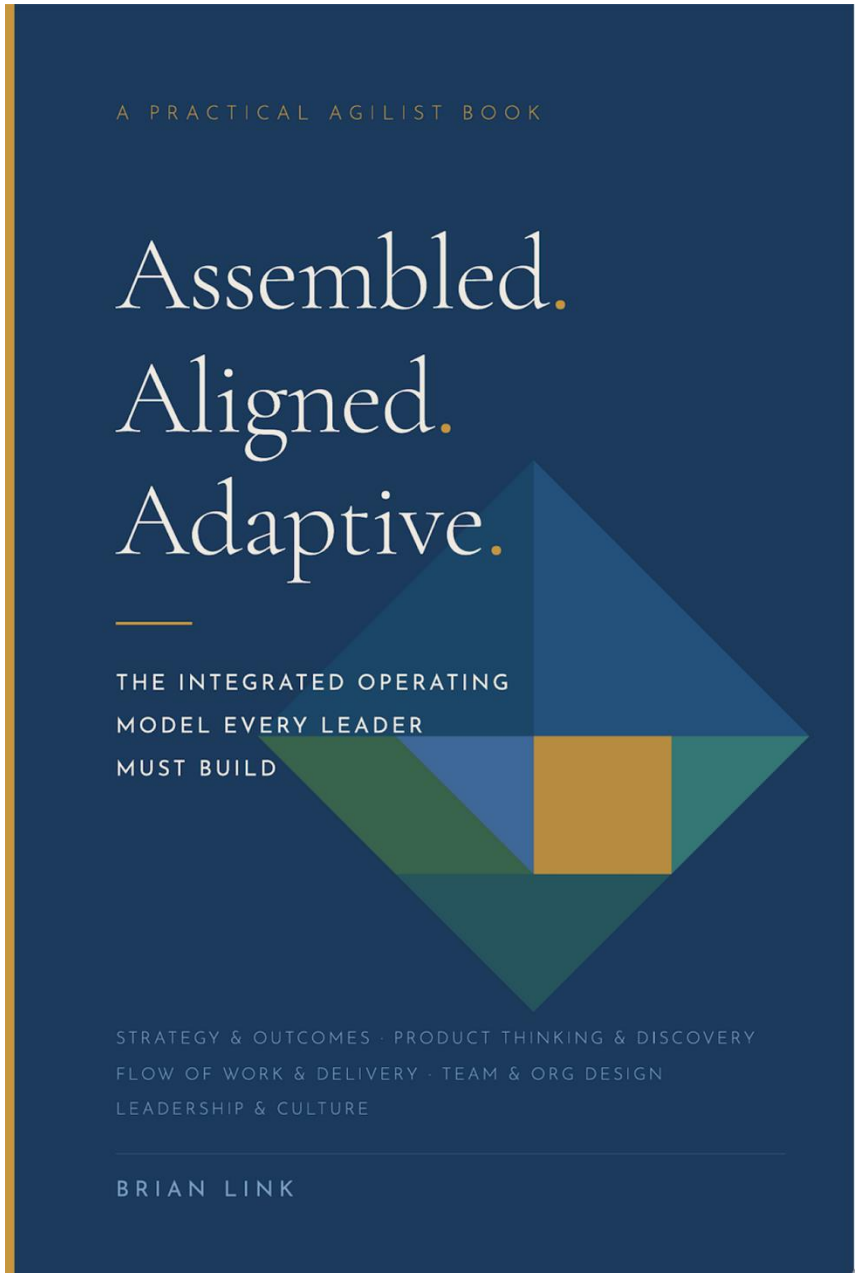
This is how you build trust. You offer it first. And the person with the most positional power is the one who needs to offer it first.

INTRODUCTION

Hi. I'm Brian Link.

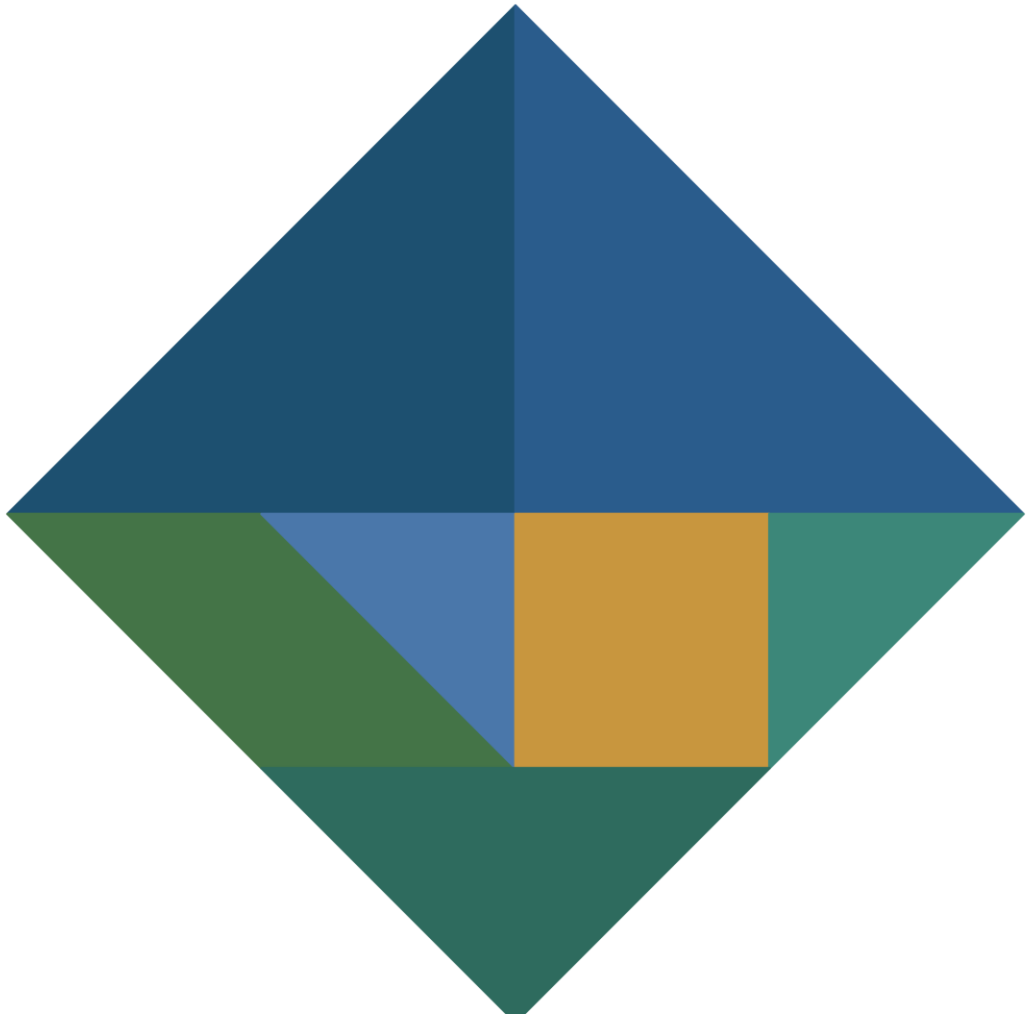
I'm an Enterprise Agile Coach at Huntington Bank, on a transformation of 300 teams and 22,000 people.

What that CIO said is the thing I spend most of my working life trying to get executives to say. Today is about why that is so hard. And why I wrote a whole book about it.



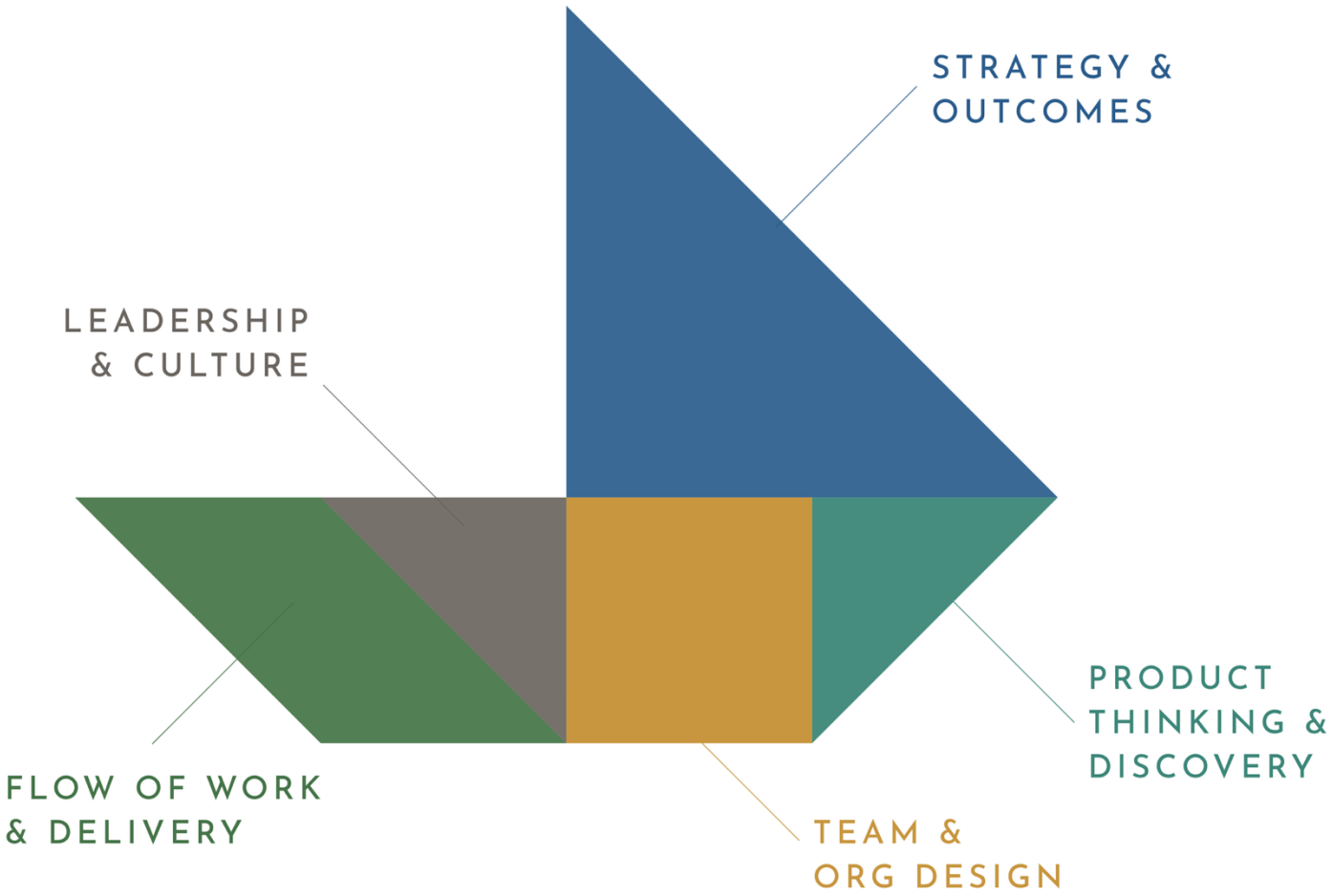
THE ADAPTIVE ORGANIZATION OPERATING MODEL

Five pieces. One system.



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Five pieces. One system.



PART 1: Strategy & Outcomes

Are we clear about what problems we're solving — and how we'll know we've solved them?
(Rumelt, Martin, Lafley)

PART 2: Product Thinking & Discovery

Are we solving the right problem, at the right time, for a real customer, in a meaningful way?
(Perri, Cagan, Gothelf)

PART 3: Flow of Work & Delivery

How much sooner can we turn learning into customer value?
(Kersten, Vacanti, Forsgren/Humble/Kim)

PART 4: Team & Org Design

Is our organization structured to enable flow and learning?
(Galbraith, Kates, Kesler)

PART 5: Leadership & Culture

Are leaders creating the conditions for ownership and learning to thrive?
(Edmondson, Kotter, Argyris, Senge)

TODAY · LAYER FIVE OF FIVE

Leadership & Culture



The layer that decides whether the other four survive. Fix strategy, discovery, flow and structure — and if leader behavior doesn’t change, all four revert inside a year.

THE ONE NOBODY NAMES

The most dangerous safety-killing behavior looks like helpfulness.

Every room names the tyrant — the micromanager, the blamer, the one who shouts. Almost nobody names the leader who is always available, always willing to weigh in, always ready with a suggestion.

Most of you aren't the boss. For each habit: what the leader can do differently, and what you can do from the team.

BEHAVIOR ONE · THE ACCIDENTAL INSTRUCTION

“Man, I wish we had an Android app.” “Just thinking out loud: do we use the same APIs for mobile checkout as the legacy app?”

One leader was steering, the other was wondering. The team can’t see intent, only who said it. When you hold the authority, even your curiosity can become a marching order.

IF YOU’RE THE LEADER

Say the quiet part out loud. “I’m really just asking, not giving an instruction. The team and the PO decide priorities.”

IF YOU’RE ON THE TEAM

Ask, right there in the room. “Is that just an idea, or are you asking us to shift priorities?” Or check with your PO afterward.

BEHAVIOR TWO · THE QUESTION YOU ANSWERED YOURSELF

“What does everyone think? …I’d probably start with the API.”

You asked a real question, then filled three seconds of silence with your own answer. The room nods, and learns your questions aren’t invitations. Nobody tells you they’ve stopped answering.

IF YOU’RE THE LEADER

Ask, then wait. Count to five in your head. If the silence holds, ask something narrower: “What’s the riskiest part of this?”

IF YOU’RE ON THE TEAM

Put your idea next to theirs. “Before we land on that, can I throw out one other option?” Or ask your Scrum Master to have everyone write first and the leader speak last.

BEHAVIOR THREE · THE INFORMAL APPROVAL STEP

“Let me know what you come up with before you get too far down the path.”

It sounds like saving the team rework, so nobody pushes back. It quietly adds a step that isn’t in anyone’s working agreements, and the team stops forming opinions it knows will be reviewed anyway.

IF YOU’RE THE LEADER

Let the team place the checkpoint. Ask where a review belongs in their process, if anywhere. Better: they tell you “I intend to…” and you answer “very well.”

IF YOU’RE ON THE TEAM

Make the hidden step visible. “Where do you want that review to fit in how we work?” Then take it to retro: “Do we want to keep this step?”

BEHAVIOR FOUR · THE THANK-YOU THAT CHANGED NOTHING

“This is so valuable. I really appreciate you saying that.”

Warm, sincere, and then nothing happens. The person who took the risk of speaking up finds out afterward that it cost them something and changed nothing, so next time they don’t bother.

IF YOU’RE THE LEADER

Thank them, then say what you’ll do. Even “nothing yet, and here’s why.” Later, close the loop: “You told me X. Here’s what changed.”

IF YOU’RE ON THE TEAM

Follow up once before you give up. “A few weeks ago I raised X. Is anything happening with it?” Or hand it to your Scrum Master to chase.

Your Scrum Master can have the conversation you can't.

Taking it to your Scrum Master or coach isn't going around anyone. It's part of why the role exists. Privately: "You know people sometimes take your ideas as marching orders?" Most leaders answer, "Oh no, I don't mean it that way."

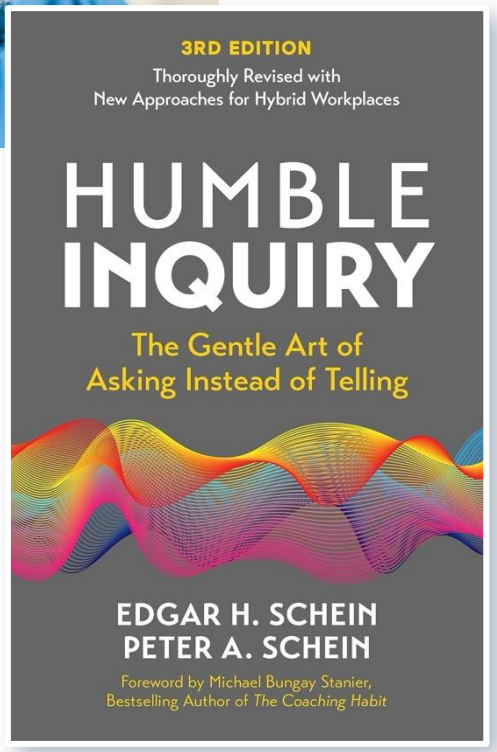
Coaches, this is about you too. "Have you thought about..." is something we say forty times a week.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM · ONE OF THREE

Edgar Schein

Society of Sloan Fellows professor of management emeritus · MIT Sloan





Asking a question is itself an act of vulnerability, because you are admitting a dependency out loud.

He separates general humility — which is easy to agree with from a safe distance — from here-and-now humility: needing what the person in front of you knows, right now, possibly someone twenty years your junior, while other people watch.

That discomfort is the vulnerability. It doesn't get easier because you read a book about it.

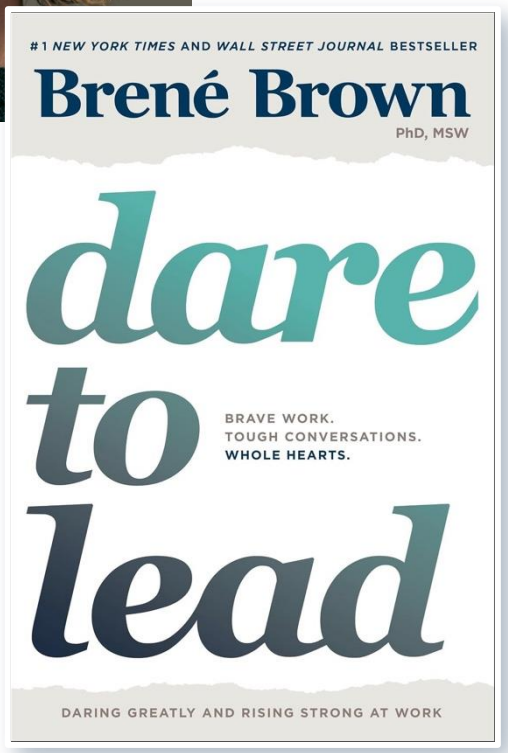
Humble Inquiry, 3rd edition · bkconnection.com

WHERE THIS COMES FROM · TWO OF THREE

Brené Brown

Research professor · University of Houston





Vulnerability is the precondition for trust rather than a sign of weakness.

Trust is not a reward that arrives after enough demonstrated competence for long enough. Somebody has to go first.

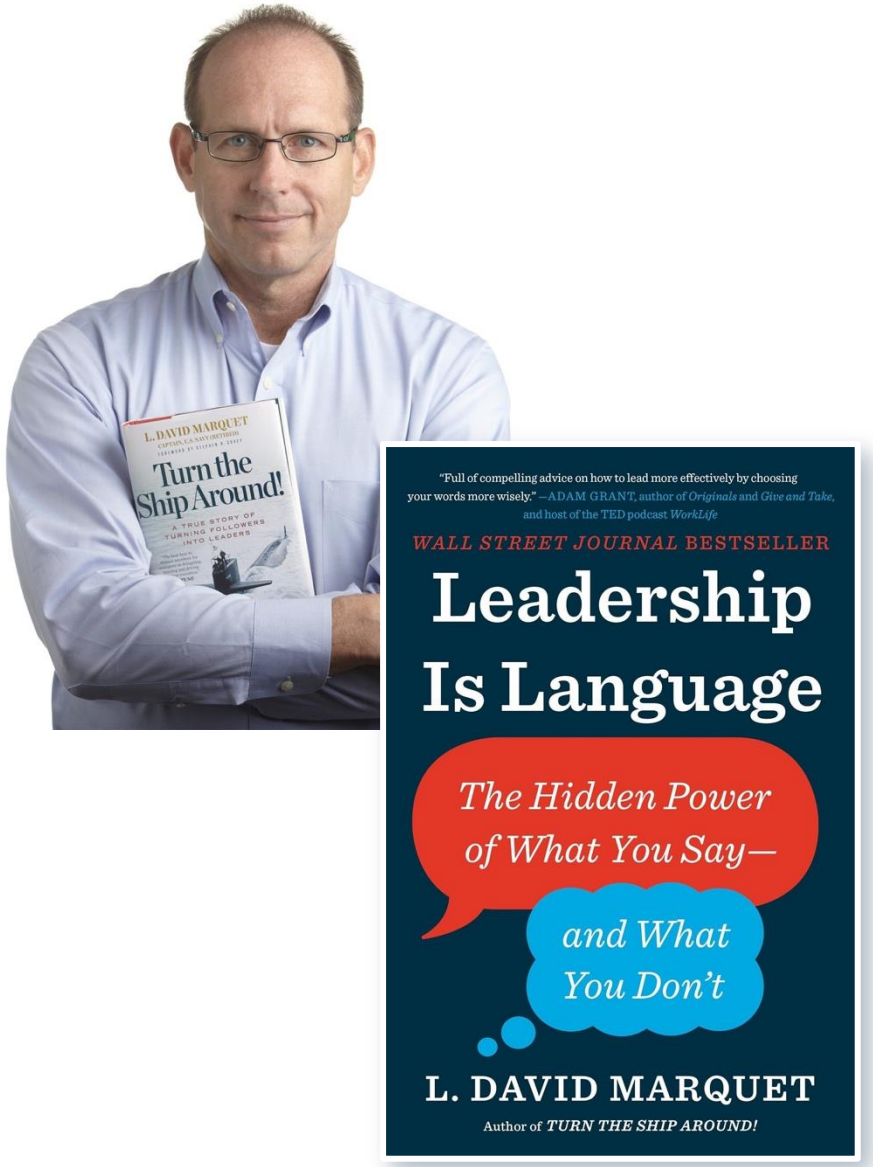
And the person with the most positional power in the room is the only one who can really afford to — which is what that CIO did, in his first weeks, in front of three hundred people.

Watch "The Power of Vulnerability" · ted.com

WHERE THIS COMES FROM · THREE OF THREE

David Marquet

Commander, USS Santa Fe · US Navy (retired)



"I intend to…" The team states what they're going to do, and your job is to say "very well" and mean it.

Push the decision to where the information already lives — which on most teams is not where the authority lives.

It's the structural answer to all four behaviors: if the decision was never yours to make, your weight has nothing to land on.

Turn the Ship Around! · davidmarquet.com

Exercise

6 minutes · three roles · simulate an interaction with a leader



HOW DO YOU LEAD · ADAPTED FROM DAVID VERBLE

What do you normally say as a leader?

1. **Problem Owner (direct report).** Think of a real problem you've experienced at work. Doesn't even need to be something that happened to you, just something real that might be expressed to a manager.

2. **Manager.** Your job is to act normal. Think about what you might normally say as a leader when someone brings you a problem. Have a real (fake lol) conversation for about five minutes.

3. **Observer.** Your job is to write down everything the Manager says. One thought per line, in as close to exact words as possible. Use the Word doc template or something you can easily email to the manager.

- Get the Word Doc Template
- Think of a problem
- Decide quickly who will be the manager and who will be the problem owner.
- Observer be ready to document the conversation. AND get the manager's email address if they are willing.

Optional: Share doc with manager

If the manager doesn't mind sharing their email, send it to them so we can do what's next. Otherwise, no problem, observer will do exercise.



YOUR TURN · ADAPTED FROM DAVID VERBLE

Code your own conversation

1. **Pick one real conversation** from the last two weeks where you were the most experienced voice. A one-on-one, a design discussion, a retro, a pairing session. Nothing staged.

2. **Write down five to eight things you said.** As close to verbatim as you can get. One per line. Your words only, not theirs.

3. **Code every line T, L or Q.** Then count them. (Bonus: **H**is or Hers perspective vs **M**y own thinking)

T TELL You delivered information or described a decision.

O / C OPEN OR CLOSED QUESTION Was it inviting feedback or more like a rhetorical question?

L LEADING QUESTION Was the question not really a question at all – more like a statement?

Awareness, not shame — you cannot change a habit you have never seen. And this is no argument against directing; it is about noticing when you direct out of habit.

What do you notice? What do you think?

1

- Are most of your items Asking or Telling?
- Were your questions Open, Closed, or Leading?
- Were your question based on what you were thinking, or what you wanted to learn about the other person knows and was thinking?

2

- Is one approach better than another?
- Why or why not?
- Is there anything you might want to change or be more deliberate in similar situations going forward?

THE OBJECTION YOU'LL HEAR

"Doesn't 'I don't know' make a leader look weak?"

Only if you stop there. "I don't know" on its own is a shrug — it hands the problem back without a plan and leaves the room less certain than it started. That is not what the CIO said, and it is not what any of this is asking for.

The whole sentence is **"I don't know, so let's figure it out, and let's go find data to back up the decision."** That is a method. It gives everyone in the room a job.

It moves the standard from who is most confident to what the evidence supports.

MONDAY

The moment an idea becomes a marching order.

On the team, in the room — “Is that just an idea, or are you asking us to shift priorities?” It’s a clarifying question, not a challenge.

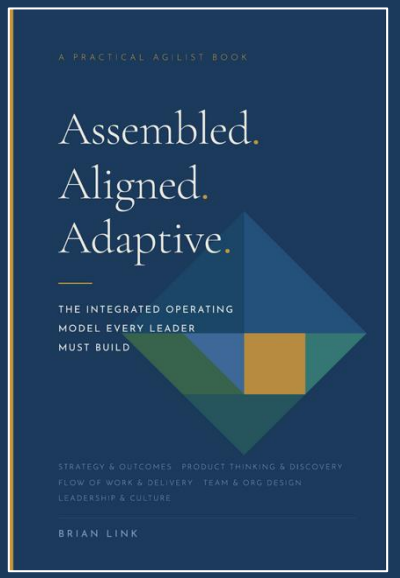
Afterward, through your PO or Scrum Master — “We heard this in the meeting. Is it changing the backlog?” Most leaders are surprised. Most are grateful.

If you’re the leader — say it before it happens, out loud, to the whole team.

“My ideas are no more important than yours. I like talking about this stuff — but I’m relying on you to solve the real problem.”

Assembled. Aligned. Adaptive.

The integrated operating model every leader must build.



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