

Asking Powerful Questions

Asking the Right Questions to Accelerate Performance and Insight

Why Should Leaders Ask Questions?

What do you find most challenging about leadership?

Did you get the memo?

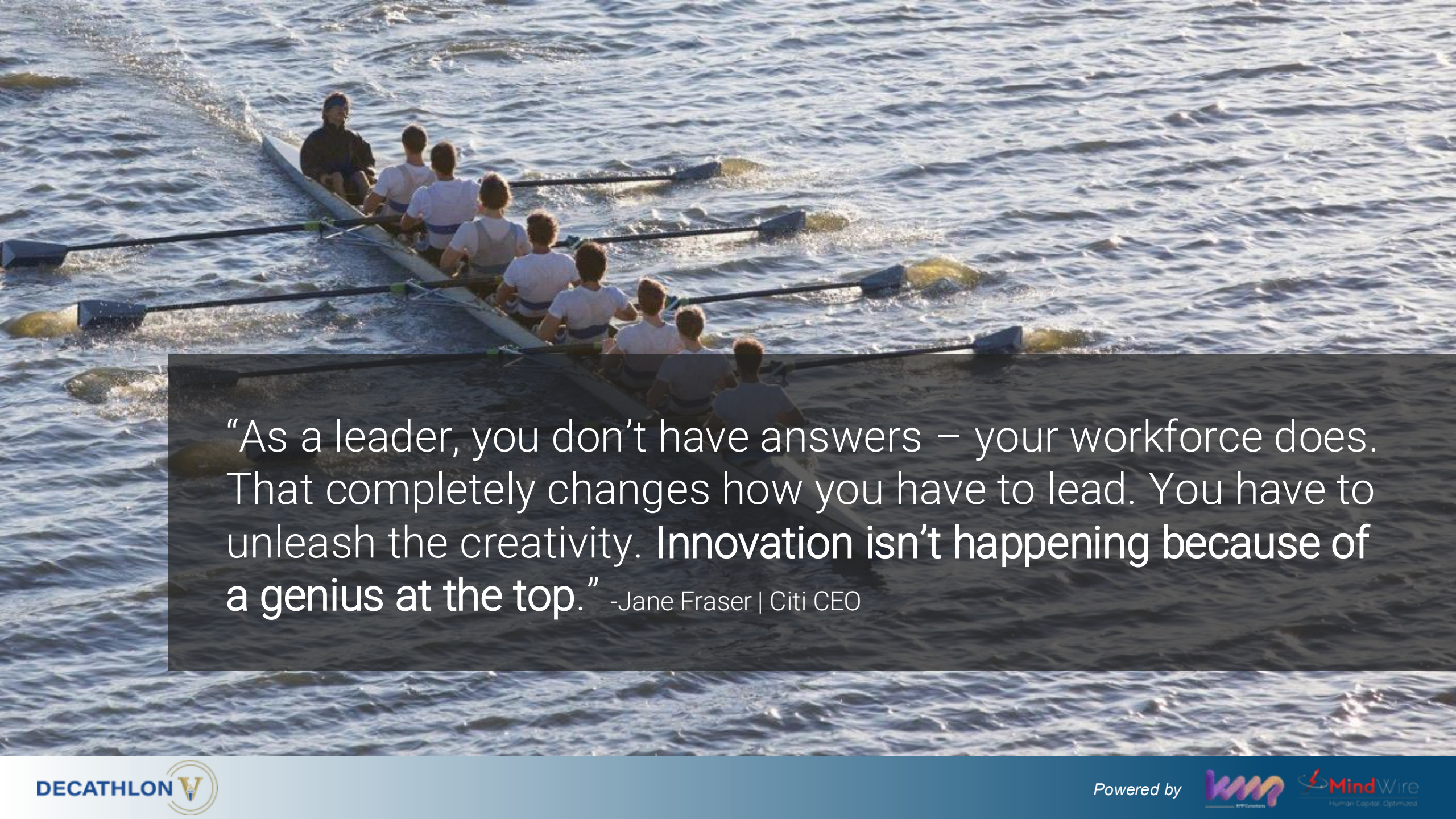
A silhouette of a person rappelling down a rope against a bright orange and yellow sunset sky. The person is wearing a helmet and a harness, and is positioned on the left side of the frame, looking upwards.

“We do not rise to the level
of our expectations. We fall
to the level of our training.”
-Archilochus

Who Did it Best?

Think about a time when a person asked you *really good* questions.

- What did they do (or not do) that made them effective?
- What was the impact on you?
- What about a time when a person did not ask questions well?

A photograph of a rowing team in a boat on water. The team consists of several rowers in white shirts and a coxswain in a dark jacket at the front. They are all rowing in unison, with their oars dipping into the water. The water is dark blue with white splashes from the oars. The background is a bright, hazy sky.

“As a leader, you don’t have answers – your workforce does. That completely changes how you have to lead. You have to unleash the creativity. **Innovation** isn’t happening because of **a genius at the top.**” -Jane Fraser | Citi CEO

Benefits of Asking Questions

Describe the benefits of asking questions.

- Builds confidence
- Enhances communication, trust
- Promotes openness
- Builds psychological safety
- Strengthens relationships
- Encourages engagement
- Offers ownership, accountability
- Provides space to share
- Empowers employee's own ideas
- Sparks innovation and problem solving
- Uncovers diverse perspectives
- Encourages critical thinking

- Cultivates creativity
- Improves decision-making
- Allows informed choices
- Identifies blind spots
- Avoids groupthink
- Supports learning/development
- Models curiosity
- Reinforces coaching culture
- Reveals development needs
- Aligns understanding
- Surfaces barriers
- Improves adaptability

Trust is a two-way street.

“Trust is the stacking and layering of small moments and reciprocal vulnerability over time.” -Brené Brown

What it comes down to:

- *Should I trust you?*
- *How much do you trust me?*



Brene Brown, Dare to Lead

Mindset Matters

“Your beliefs shape your questions, and your questions shape your reality.” -Marilee Adams, PhD

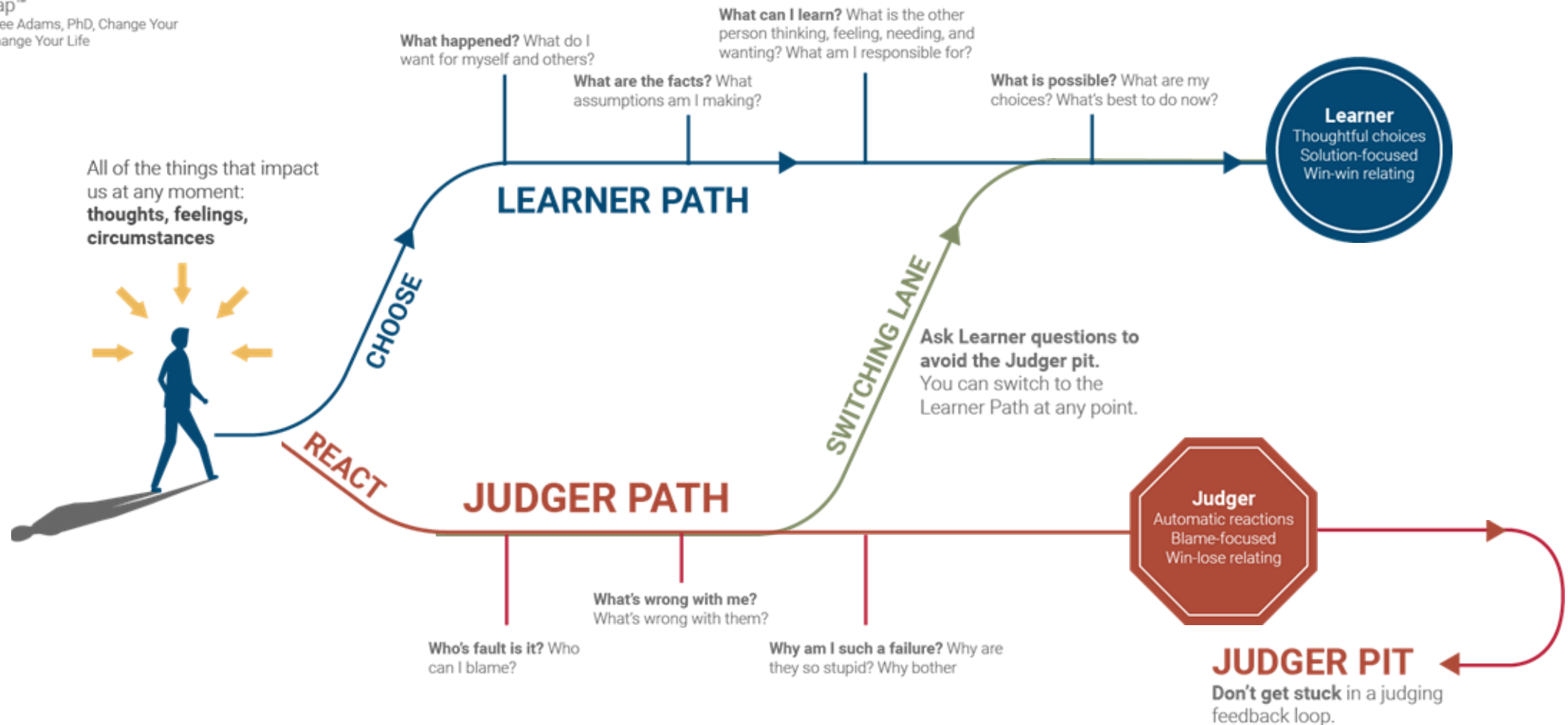


Learner vs. Judger

It's YOUR **CHOICE!**

Choice Map™

© 2022, Marilee Adams, PhD, Change Your Questions, Change Your Life



Addressing your mindset



Judger



- Close-minded, pessimistic
- Certain, critical, inflexible
- Dismissive or defensive
- Problem-focused
- Focuses on areas of disagreement
- Critical, blaming, guilting

Learner



- Open-minded, optimistic
- Curious, creative, flexible
- Collaborative, connective
- Possibility-focused
- Finds areas of agreement
- Understanding of others' perspectives
- Self-awareness of own impact

Marilee Adams, PhD, [Change Your Questions, Change Your Life](#)

Change Your Questions, **Change Your Life**

Judger



- What's wrong with me/you?
- Whose fault is this?
- Why are they so stupid?
- How can I prove that I'm right?
- How many times do we need to do this?
- Why even bother?

Learner



- What's the goal?
- What is working?
- What are the facts/what can I learn?
- What role did I play in this?
- What are the options?
- What's possible?

Marilee Adams, PhD, [Change Your Questions, Change Your Life](#)



Getting back to the Learner path

Awareness – Am I a being a Judger or Learner right now? Is that what I want to feel or do?

Breathe – Do I need to take a step back, pause, and look at this situation more objectively?

Curiosity – Do I have all the facts? How else can I think about this? Am I open to hearing other perspectives or ideas?

Judger vs. Learner Mode

Think about a recent experience when you were in Judger mode.

- With the benefit of hindsight, how did that go? What was the result?

And in Learner mode?

- What was different?



What Gets in the Way of Asking Questions?

What makes it difficult to ask questions?
What gets in the way or is stopping you?

Are Your Behaviors Getting in the Way?

LOWEST

FACTOR

HIGHEST

May shy away from challenging/difficult questions.

A
Dominance

Desire to decide, provide direction, give answers, take over.

May not ask enough questions about emotional/feeling items.

B
Extraversion

Desire to talk with not enough listening. May be overly focused on emotions.

Situational listening. May not be patient to ask enough questions.

C
Patience

May not push and challenge person with their questions.

Too high-level, not thorough enough with questions.

D
Formality

Ask too many questions to create personal comfort/pin down every detail.

Behaviors - Reflection

Reflect on the way your behaviors
impact how you ask questions.
Pick one area you want to focus on
going forward.



Always start here:

*What is your goal for
this conversation?*



Let's Practice: Role Plays!

10 minutes

Pair up with a partner. Choose your role and read the the practice scenario.

Leader: Focus on asking questions to find a solution together.

Play out the role play for seven minutes.

When finished, share feedback.

We will instruct you when to stop so you can switch roles for round two!

Types of Questions



Investigative



Speculative



Interpretive



Productive



Subjective

Source: Harvard Business Review: [The Art of Asking Great Questions](#), 2024
[The Surprising Power of Questions](#), 2018

Investigative and Speculative

DECATHLON



Investigative

Reveals what is most important to a person that would get them to take action.

- Starts with Describe, Tell, Share, Explain, Help me understand
- Short, broad, wide-open
 - Describe what's most important to you.
 - (Not: What's most important about your career?)



Speculative

“What if” questions that cause people to slow down, consider other options, and overcome limiting assumptions/mindsets

- I wonder how you might...?

Source: Harvard Business Review: [The Art of Asking Great Questions, 2024](#)
[The Surprising Power of Questions, 2018](#)

Productive, Interpretive, Subjective

DECATHLON



Productive

Cuts to the “Now what?” of an issue. Helps a person think through process, where to start, resources needed, their capabilities, etc.

- Describe, how can you get started?



Interpretive

Gets at the “So what?” Pushes people to redefine the real issue and go beneath the surface.

- Tell me, what happens if this continues?



Subjective

Targets what is unsaid. Reveals emotions, personal feelings, frustrations, confidence, tensions, and buy-in.

- Share how you really feel about _____?

Source: Harvard Business Review: [The Art of Asking Great Questions, 2024](#)
[The Surprising Power of Questions, 2018](#)

Let's Practice: Round 2

Pair up with a partner. Choose your role and read the the practice scenario.

Leader: Focus on asking questions to find a solution together.

Play out the role play for seven minutes.

When finished, share feedback.

We will instruct you when to stop so you can switch roles for round two!

Demonstrating Authentic Curiosity

“Leaders who don’t listen
will eventually be
surrounded by people who
have nothing to say.”
-Andy Stanley



Asking Powerful Questions Also Requires Powerful Listening

Factors that impact effective listening:

- Private planning/rehearsing response
- Prejudging
- Premature dismissing
- Selective listening





Powerful Listening

Tips:

- Take notes – only keywords
- Pause for five seconds after a question (let the silence do its work)
- “Interesting, tell me more.”



Body Language Matters

Positive body language

- Open posture (lean in)
- Facial expressions
- Eye contact

Be present

- Put away distractions
- Pause before responding
- Focus on the speaker



Body Language Matters



Validate what they're saying

Summarize back to them

Acknowledge the emotion

Show empathy, encouragement

Seek to understand

Curiosity & vulnerability

Show interest in learning

Only offer advice when someone asks for it!



The Verbal Summary

“So, what I heard you say was...

What I think that means is...

Did I get that right?

Is there anything else?”



Let's Practice: Round 3

10 minutes

Pair up with a partner. Choose your role and read the the practice scenario.

Leader, write out questions you plan to ask. Play out the role play for five minutes. If you're the leader, use the Verbal Summary.

When finished, share feedback.

We will instruct you when to stop so you can switch roles for round two!

Focus Areas



Who?

Your direct reports

Your most important peers

Your boss

What?

Things that are most important...

...most frequent

...most significant

Your Action Plan

Think of a situation where you will be asking questions.

Use your action planner to prepare your questions and goals for the conversation.

The screenshot shows a form titled "M ACTION PLANNER" with a sub-header "Asking Powerful Questions". The form is divided into several sections:

- Situation in which you'll be asking questions:** A list of checkboxes for different scenarios: 1:1 Meeting, Development Conversation, Direct Report Coaching, Performance Management Conversation, Feedback Conversation, Team Meeting, and Upper Management Meeting. There is also an "Other:" field with a text input box.
- Who will be involved?** A large empty rectangular box for notes.
- Describe the situation – what goal are you trying to achieve?** A large empty rectangular box for notes.
- Questions to ask: (refer to your Questions Library)** A list of 10 numbered blanks for writing questions.

KEYSTONE HABIT

Why Keystone Habits Matter for Leaders

Individual Impact

- Create automatic success patterns
- Reduce decision fatigue
- Build consistency under pressure

Organizational Impact

- Establish cultural norms
- Drive systematic improvement
- Create competitive advantages
- Build resilient, adaptive teams



"Keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything"

Charles Duhigg, *"The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business"*

It's a foundational behavior that, once established, naturally leads to improvements in other areas of your life without requiring direct effort on those other habits

What is a Keystone Habit?

Key Characteristics:

- A single habit that triggers widespread positive change
- Creates momentum for other beneficial behaviors
- Establishes cultures of excellence
- Generates compound returns on investment

Key Takeaways:

- Singular behavior
- Catalyst to transform the culture of an organization
- Serves to drive ripple effects toward desired outcome



R: Result

T: Transformation

Impact of Keystone Habits

Daily Gemba Walks

- R: Encourages empirical problem-solving and voicing of concerns proactively
- T: Reinforces respect for people and frontline expertise
- T: Active engagement of leadership

Standardized Work Reviews

- R: Drives performance, quality improvements, safer workflows, cost reductions
- T: Empowers people to suggest improvements and adhere to standards

Kaizen Events

- R: Triggers incremental performance gains
- T: Creates proactive mindset and idea-sharing
- T: Fosters mutual trust and shared commitment to waste elimination

Building Keystone Habits

1. Discuss what Operation Excellence Keystone Habit(s) are most impactful for your group.
2. Identify the result and the transformational behaviors it creates.
3. Be prepared to share!



Group Work Plan

- Current state
- Future state
- Keystone Habit
- Actions and Scorecard
- Ripple Effects: Impact on OTS performance and culture
- Present to the group

Alcoa



Pre-O'Neill

Business Conditions

- Strong technical expertise
- Siloed operations
- Overcapacity and outdated facilities
- Lacking in adaptive leadership
- Poor operational discipline
- Intense global competition
- Distrustful management-labor relations
- Stagnant stock price
- One of the most dangerous industries in America

Cultural Norms

- General complacency and lack of ownership
- Bureaucratic and resistant to change
- Accepted injuries and the “cost of doing business”
- Workers took pride in handling dangerous situations
 - “Danger is like a rite of passage.”
 - “Burns, cuts, smashed fingers just come with the territory”
- Split standard:
 - “Safety procedures I follow vs. those I think aren’t important”

IFS Conditions & Norms

In your groups:

Describe the current conditions and cultural norms around IFS utilization.

Capture on flipchart paper.





Leadership Impact

O'Neill's Bold Step

Aggressive cost-cutting
Divestitures
Profit-focused initiatives



SAFETY
KEYSTONE HABIT



IMMEDIATE market sell-off
Business community scorn
Internal skepticism

Street's
Expectation

Street's
Reaction



O'Neill's Bold Step

Existing Cultural Norms:

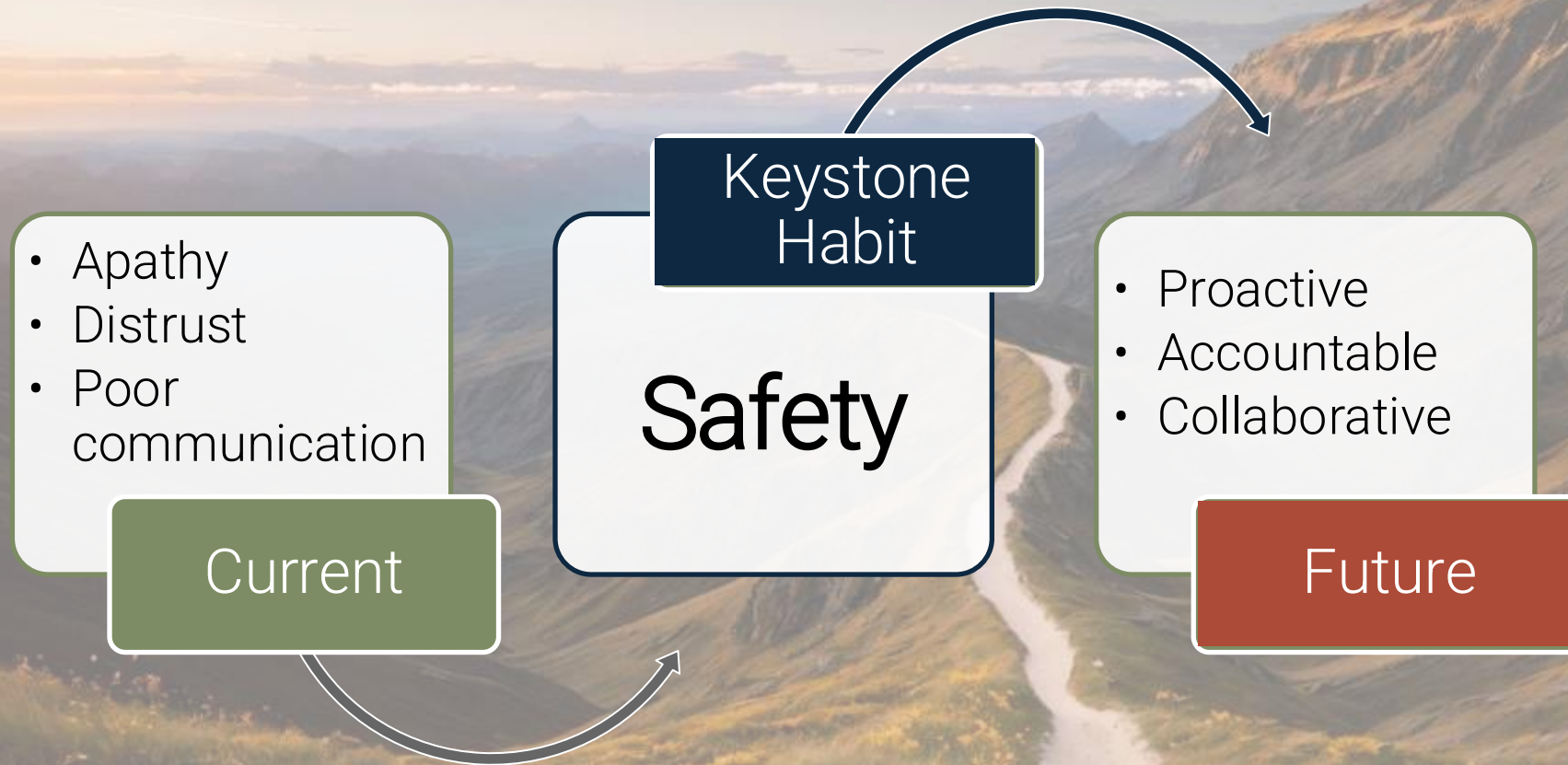
- Productivity necessitated danger
- Accidents and injuries were the price people had to pay for attaining certain goals

The Goal: Zero Injuries

Safety as a Driver of Operation Excellence

- Requires a comprehensive understanding of manufacturing processes
- Better process understanding would lead to more productive plants

Alcoa's Path





O'Neill's Desired Future State

Safety results in efficiencies, improved quality, and innovation

Leadership are held accountable for safe, productive teams

Coordination and communication between departments is standard operating procedure

Workers volunteer ideas for improvement and report issues without fear

Everyone looks out for their own safety and those they work with

Every worker expects to go home in the same condition they left

Incidents and fatalities are viewed as names, not numbers

If we need to "be careful," it means there is a safety issue to be solved

Future State & Cultural Norms

DELIVERING THE BEST **TO THE BEST**®

In your groups:

Describe the desired future state and cultural norms to achieve 100% IFS utilization.

Capture on flipchart paper.



O'Neill's Challenge

Attitudes

- Pride in the dangerous nature of the work
- Lack of confidence in managers and workers
- Already best in aluminum industry

Behaviors

- Productivity was king
- Employees fearful to voice concerns

Processes

- Quick fix vs. lasting solutions

Accountability

- Tying Keystone Habit safety to business metrics

Challenges & Transformation

In your groups:

Identify the challenges you face
and the transformation required:

Attitudes

Behaviors

Processes

Language, and
Accountability

Capture on flipchart paper



Select Your Keystone Habit

Thought Model



Power of O'Neill's Keystone Habit

To truly **improve safety**, an organization must:

- **Understand every process:** *Deep analysis reveals efficiency opportunities.*
- **Improve communication** *Realtime information flow enhances all operations.*
- **Build accountability:** *Clear responsibility improves execution everywhere.*
- **Focus on prevention:** *Proactive thinking becomes embedded.*
- **Engage everyone:** *Safety is personally relevant to all employees.*

Keystone Habit Implementation

Attitudes:

Numbers of injuries represent people with families and their livelihood

Take pride in doing safe not dangerous work

Behaviors:

*Discourage acceptance of risk
– generational influence*

*“learn to live with hazards...”
“tough work required tough people”*

Processes:

Immediate escalation of safety issues

Focused on accident prevention vs. cause analysis

Language:

*“Just be careful.”
Ask, “why?”*

Accountability:

Performance and participation goals

Violation consequences



Alcoa's Scoreboard

Attitude:

- Public declaration of Safety as top priority

Behavior:

- Employee hotline direct to CEO
- Prioritizing task safety over speed

Process:

- 24-hour incident reporting rule
- Integration of Safety Tools & Tracking
- Regular safety evaluations (Kaisen events)
- Integration of Safety Tools & Tracking

Accountability:

- Zero-Injury Performance Goal
- Post-Incident Leadership Accountability Sessions



Alcoa's Keystone Habit: Safety

Safety was Alcoa's lever for holistic change:

- Addressed immediate risks
- Unlocked productivity, profitability and ethical culture

Alcoa became a safer, more agile and competitive company by focusing on its people

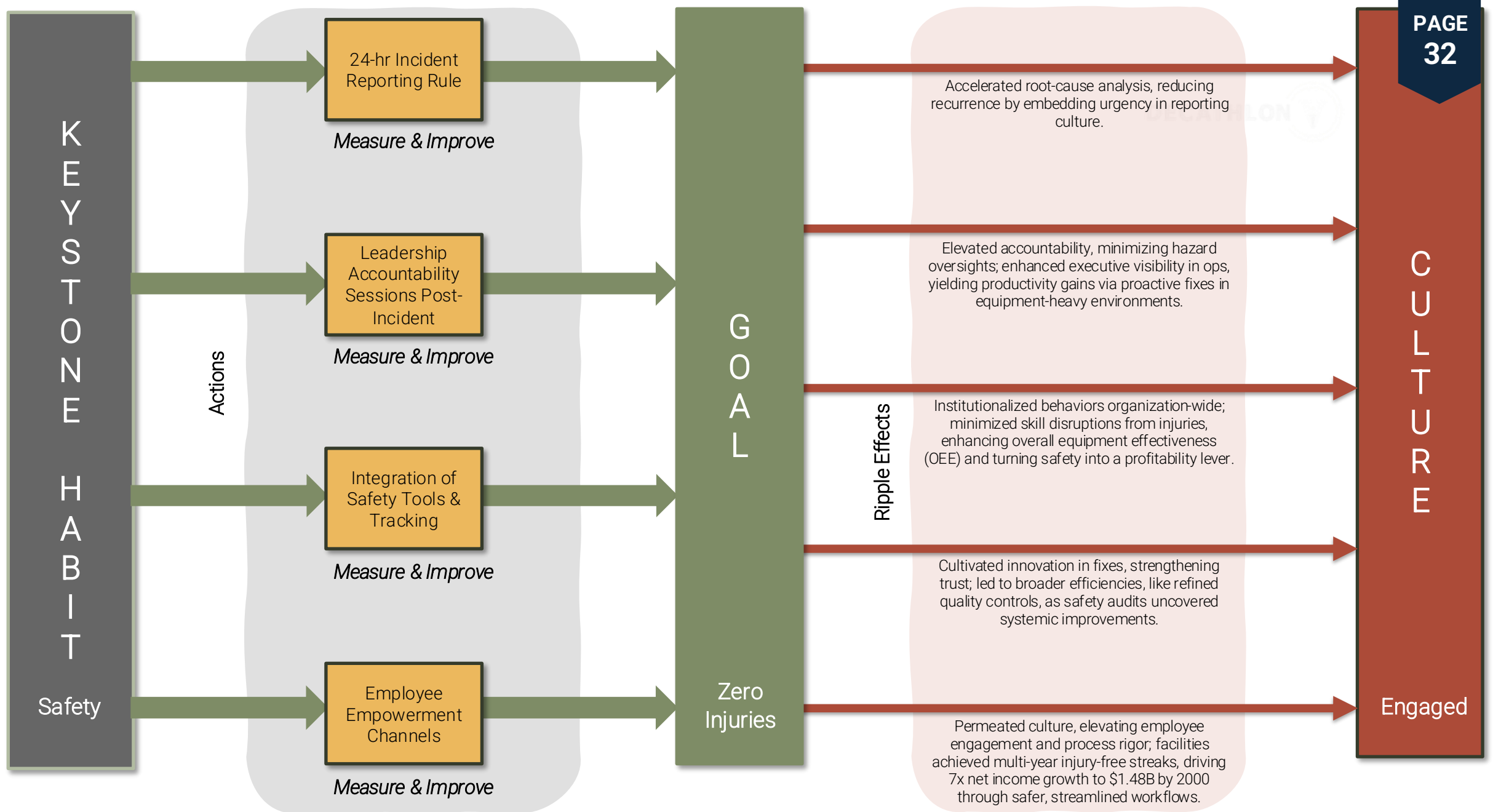
Building Keystone Habits

In your groups:

What keystone habit will help you drive the adoption of IFS and what is your scoreboard (actions & metrics)?

Capture on flipchart paper.





Outcomes & Ripple Effects

- List expected outcomes and ripple effects of your Keystone Habit and capture on flipchart paper.
- Prepare to share your work today with the group.

Messaging

- Frames perception
- Focuses on positive outcomes and impact
- Visionary
- Addresses audience challenges
- Integral part of every decision
- Consistently repeated





Formulate Your Message

What does success look like:

“I intend to make Alcoa the safest company in America”

- **Customer:** How does success benefit the customer
- **Business:** What does success mean to the business
- **Organization:** What does the organization realize with success
- **Team:** How does it impact your team expectations & success
- **Individual:** What will the individual gain, and at what cost

“Every year, numerous Alcoa workers are injured so badly that they miss a day of work. Our workers should expect to return home in the same condition they left”

PI Design for Project Teams

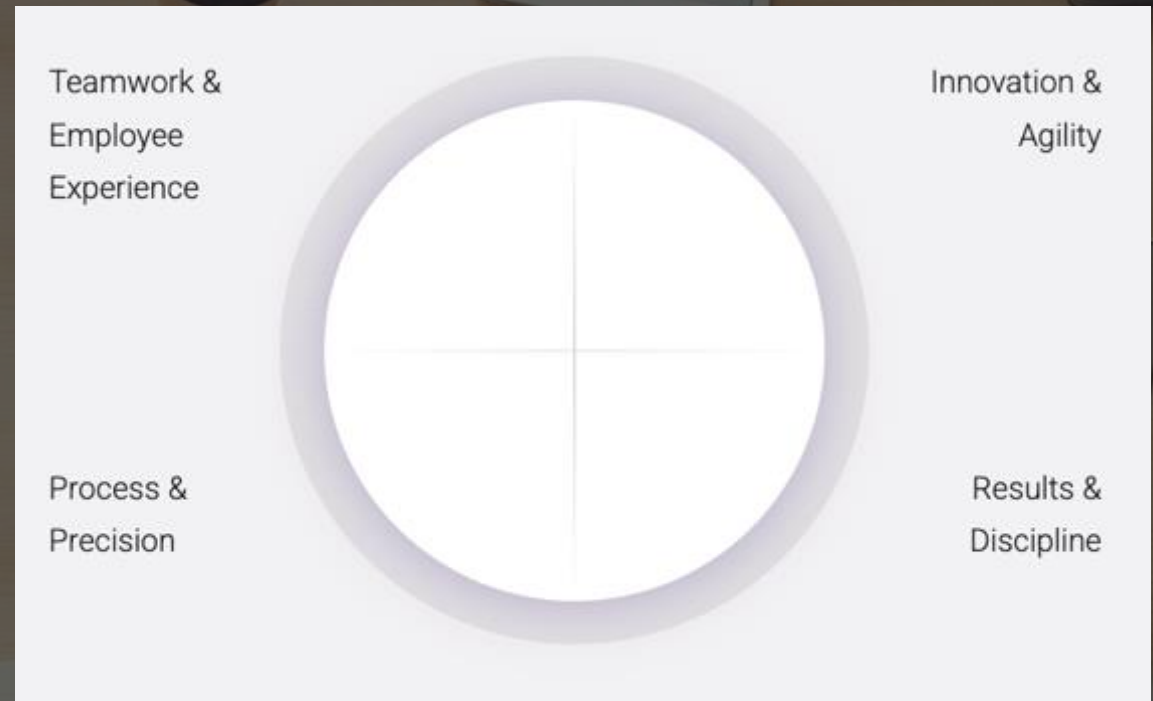
Maximizing Strengths and Opportunities

Mapping Your Project Teams



Go to PI Software

1. Log in to the PI Software.
2. Create your project team in Design.
3. Review your strengths and caution areas of your team type.
4. Identify 1-2 that resonate most.



Your Team Type

1. Review the Recommendations and Action Planner.
2. Brainstorm your action plan. *Your action plan is the SINGLE item/area that would have the biggest impact on the effectiveness of this team working together.*
 1. What action you will take
 2. *Who, what, when, where, how*
 3. Timeline
 4. How you will hold yourself accountable
 5. Success is _____.
3. Prepare to report out and share your recommended action **and all details** with the larger group.



Design for Strategic Action



In your groups:

Discuss the 3-4 activities you need to do to achieve success on your project team.

Select the correlating objectives in the Design software.

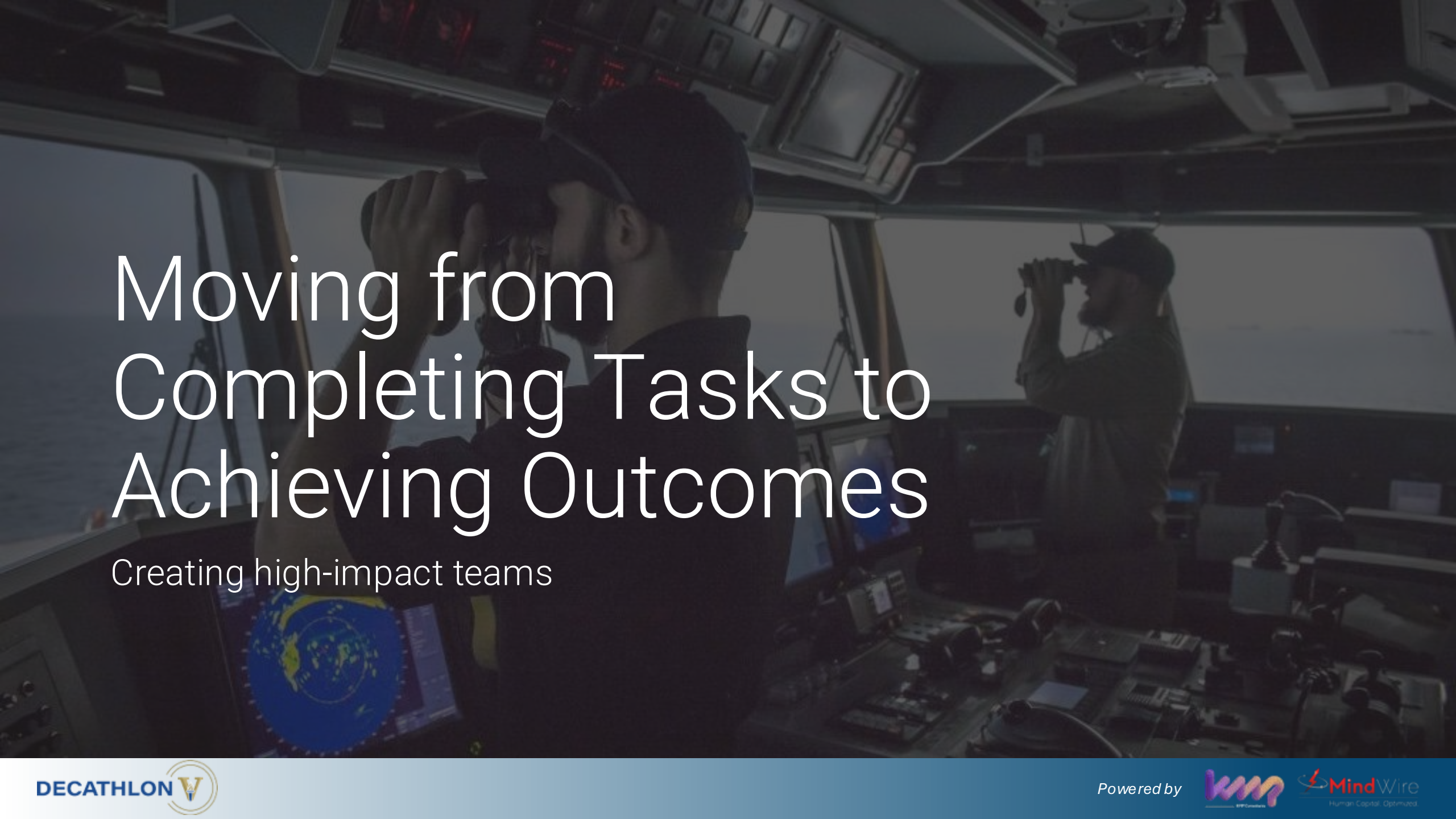
Review your Strategy Type.



Action Planning



1. Review the strengths and challenges presented in the software.
2. Review the Recommendations and Action Planner.
3. Brainstorm your action plan. *Your action plan is the SINGLE item/area that would have the biggest impact on the effectiveness of this team working together.*
 - a. What action you will take
 - b. Who, what, when, where, how
 - c. Timeline
 - d. How you will hold yourself accountable
 - e. Success is _____.
4. Prepare to report out and share your recommended action **and all details** with the larger group.



Moving from Completing Tasks to Achieving Outcomes

Creating high-impact teams

A close-up photograph of a black marble ball resting on a light-colored wooden board game. The board features blue lines and several circular holes. Several wooden blocks are scattered around the board, some of which are partially in the holes. The lighting is warm, creating soft shadows.

**The path to success
is never as clear as
the goal**



Objective

Learning

The power of Outcome-Based Responsibilities (OBRs)

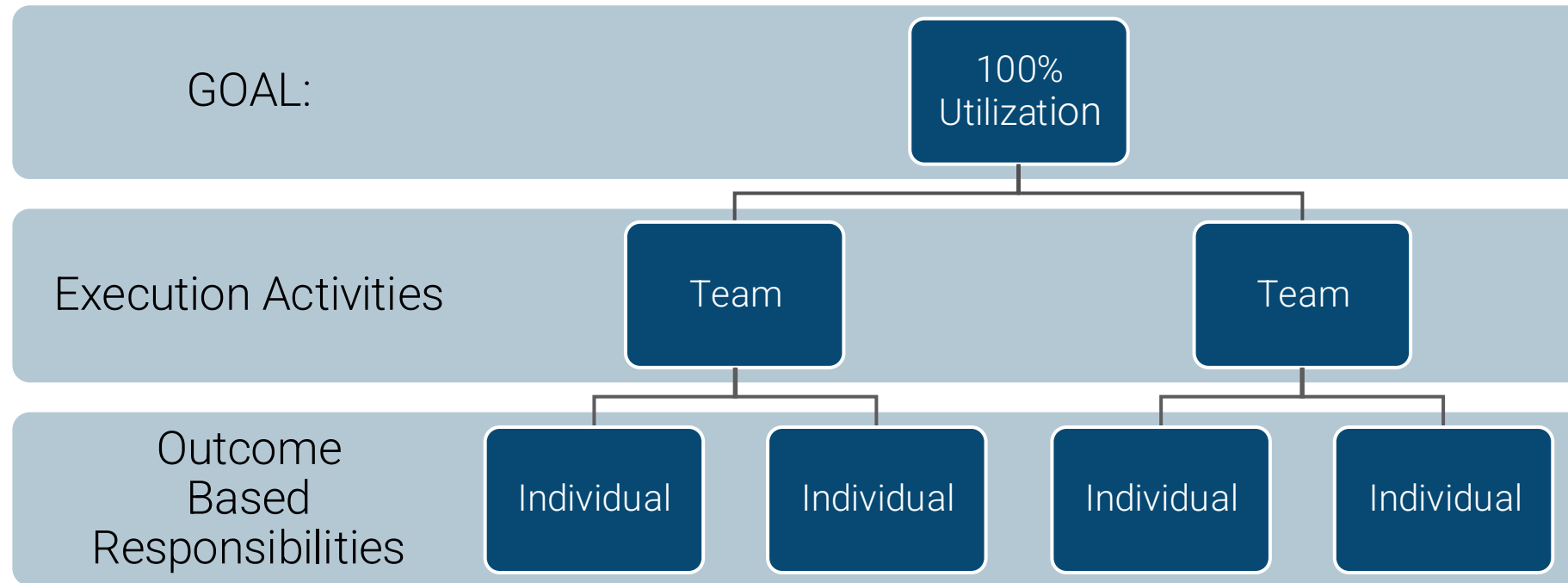
Application

Individual teams' preparation for the March ELT presentation

Goal

Create focused, aligned, high-performing teams

IFS Project





High Performance Criteria



Clarity



Expectation



Behavior



What are Outcome-Based Responsibilities?

Traditional Role Definition:

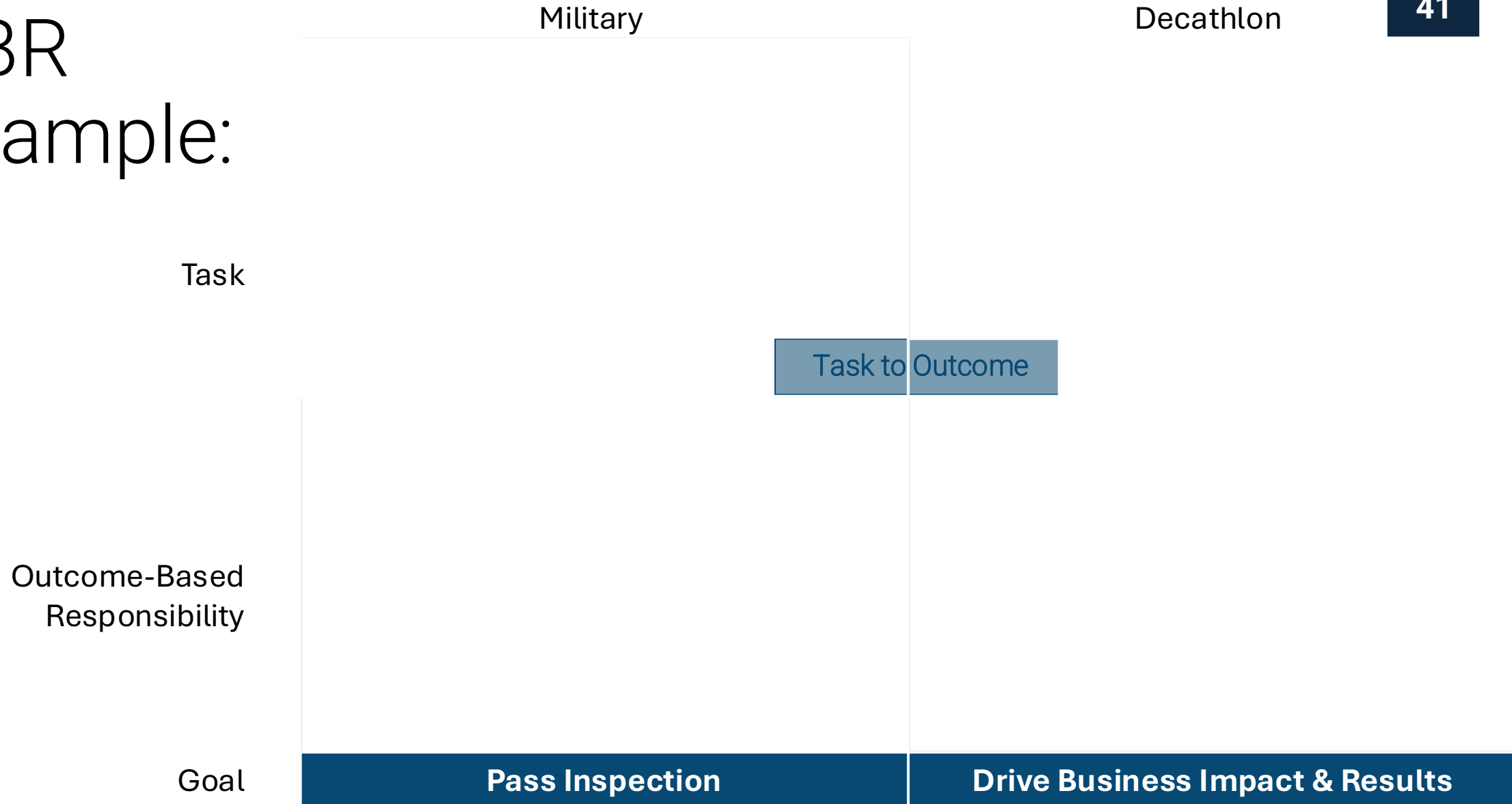
- Job title + list of tasks
- “What you do” focus
- Activity-based accountability

Outcome-Based Responsibility

- Clear deliverable & measurable success
- “What you achieve” focus
- Results-based accountability

People own outcomes, not activities

OBR Example:





The 4 Core Framework Questions

Every role must answer:

WHAT: The Outcome

WHY: Connection to team goal

HOW: Success criteria

WHO: Role fit



DELIVERING THE BEST **TO THE BEST**®

Identify Drivers

Drivers are the categories of work that concentrate team efforts to achieve the goal



Identifying Drivers

What's the ultimate deliverable that demonstrates success?

A compelling proposal presentation

What must that presentation accomplish?

Inform, persuade, address risk, implementation roadmap

What building blocks must exist before we can present?

Current/Future State, stakeholder needs analysis, change management plan, risk analysis, communication strategy, implementation timeline, etc.

What support functions keep the team on track?

Project coordination, communication, documentation, quality control



Driver Discovery

Categories	Core Question	Key Outcome Types
Strategic	What direction must we set?	Vision, strategy, stakeholder alignment
Technical	What must be designed/built?	Requirements, specifications, solutions
Analytical	What must we understand/prove?	Data analysis, ROI, risk assessment
Operational	How do we execute day-to-day?	Plans, processes, coordination
Communication	What must stakeholders know?	Messages, presentations, documentation
Quality	How do we ensure excellence?	Reviews, standards, compliance
Change Management	How do we enable adoption?	Training, support, transition plans

For IFS Project

Identify your Drivers, and
their Key Outcome

Critical result required to achieve the
team's overall goal

10 minutes

Be prepared to share!

Driver

Change Management &
Training Strategy

Outcome

Comprehensive adoption plan
ensuring user readiness and
proficiency



Defining the OBRs

Outcome-Based Responsibilities

- ✓ Related to adding value vs. tasks
- ✓ Assure success of the outcome
- ✓ Measure objective results
- ✓ Typically 2-4 for each Driver

OBRs should be defined in such a way that it is obvious that someone is delivering on them

Create OBRs for each Driver which are
critical to achieving its Key Outcome

(10 minutes)

Be prepared to share



Values -> Cultural Behaviors

Pride in Work

"Give your best everyday"

"We hold each other to high standards and support quality work"

Accountability

"Do what you say you will with a personal commitment to the end result"

"We take full responsibility for our outcomes without blame or excuses"

Innovation

"Strive for a better way every day"

Collaboration/Communication

"Fully engaged and participating with the team communicating expectations clearly"

Cultural Standards



TRUST

HONESTY

ALIGNMENT

TRANSPARENCY



What do these values look like lived out?

Describe behaviors that illustrate what:
TRUST

HONESTY

ALIGNMENT

TRANSPARENCY

look like lived out for your team

(10 minutes)

Be prepared to share



Three-Factor Fit Assessment

Best role fit requires examining:	Weighting
Behavioral Strengths (PI Assessment)	40%
Experience & Skill Set (Track record)	40%
Development Opportunity (Growth goals)	20%



PI Factor Mapping

Drivers	Primary Factor	Secondary Factor	Rationale
Stakeholder Analysis	Moderate B (Extraversion)	Moderate D (Formality)	Requires relationship-building and social comfort, plus structured documentation
Technical Requirements	High D (Formality)	Moderate C (Patience)	Demands precision, analytical rigor, and thoroughness
Business Case/ROI	High D (Formality)	Moderate A (Dominance)	Requires analytical precision and confidence in presenting data
Implementation Roadmap	Balanced C-D	Moderate A (Dominance)	Needs methodical planning with attention to detail and results focus
Change Management	High B (Extraversion)	Moderate C (Patience)	Requires people engagement and sensitivity to adoption pace
Proposal Development	High A (Dominance)	High B (Extraversion)	Needs assertive messaging and persuasive communication
Project Coordination	Balanced C-D	Low A (Dominance)	Requires process consistency without being domineering

Identify the Primary &
Secondary factors
for each Driver

(10 minutes)

Be prepared to share



Role Fit Self-Assessment

Driver	PI Behavioral Fit	Experience/Skills	Interest/Growth	Total Score
	For each category, rate yourself from 1-5 where “5” is a great fit for the role			



Complete your self-assessment,
then share with your group and
assign leads for each Driver

(10 minutes)

Be prepared to share

Wrapping up

Write in your workbook and be ready to share with the group:

1. What ONE most important action/commitment will you will take? Include WHEN you will take it and how you'll know you've been successful.
2. Choose an accountability partner.
3. Share your commitment with them and describe what would keep you accountable.