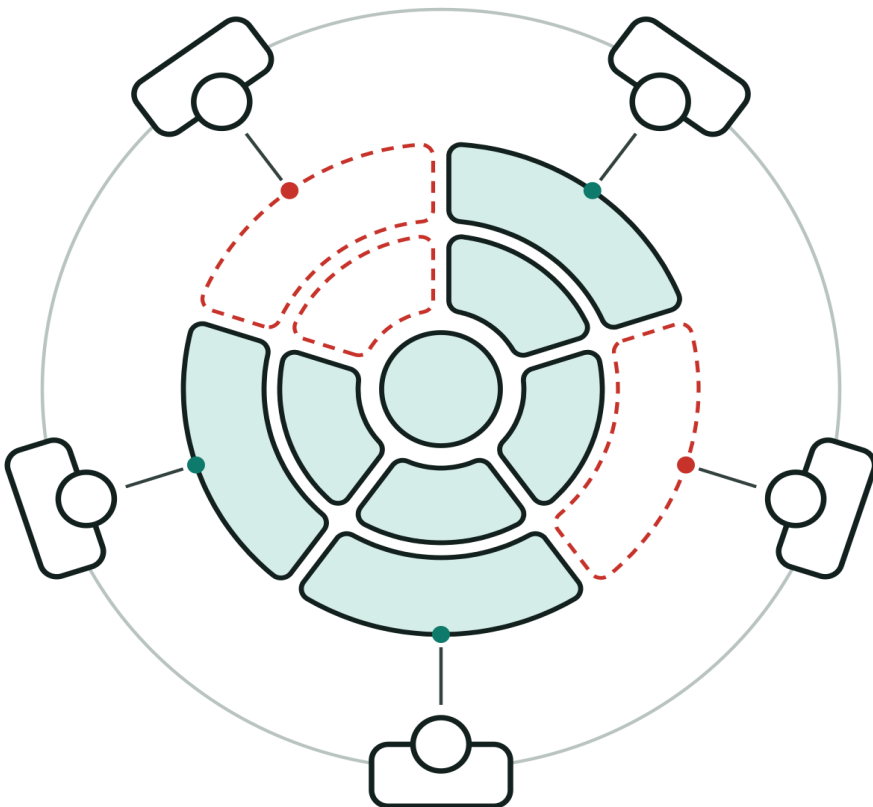


The Missing Ceremonies

Four rituals that help a team understand each other



Charles O'Donoghue

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The author generated this text in part with AI. Upon generating draft language, the author reviewed, edited, and revised the language to their own liking and takes ultimate responsibility for the content of this publication.

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Contents

Dedication	i
Preface	ii
Where it started	ii
What is missing	ii
What is in it	iii
How to use it	iii
An AI-forward book	iv
How this book was checked	v
 Part I: Ideas, the Emotional Architecture of Work	 1
Chapter 1: A Radical New Picture	2
One and Three	2
What One and Three Have	3
The Ceremony	6
Chapter Summary	7
 Chapter 2: Why Emotions Matter in Business	 8
The Productivity Engine	8
The Business Case	8
Emotions as Infrastructure	9
A Slot for Listening	9
Chapter Summary	9
 Chapter 3: System Dynamics: A Mental Model for Business	 11
Making It Dynamic	12
Feedback Loops	12
Mapping It to Business	14
People Are the Missing Piece	14

CONTENTS

Chapter Summary	15
Chapter 4: Self-Determination Theory and Psychological Needs . . .	16
The Three Basic Needs	16
Mapping the Needs to the Ceremonies	16
Why the Four Work Together	18
Autopoiesis: The Living Organisation	18
Chapter Summary	19
Chapter 5: What the Model Says	20
The smallest interesting thing	20
What the simulation does	21
Result one: timing beats content	21
Result two: the stock decides, not the event	23
Result three: the swallowing is what makes it recur	24
The uncomfortable result	24
What this changes about the ceremonies	25
Chapter Summary	26
 Part II: Practice, Meetings That Manage Emotion	 27
Chapter 6: Small Victories	28
How to run it	28
What goes wrong	29
How you know it is working	29
Why it works	29
Why this one goes first	29
Chapter Summary	29
Chapter 7: The Culture Box	30
How to run it	30
What goes wrong	31
How you know it is working	31
Why it works	31
Chapter Summary	31
Chapter 8: The Hot Wash-Up	32
How to run it	32
What goes wrong	33

CONTENTS

How you know it is working	33
Why it works	33
Chapter Summary	33
Chapter 9: The One-to-One	34
How to run it	34
What goes wrong	35
How you know it is working	35
Why it works	35
Chapter Summary	35
Chapter 10: The Inner Game of Feedback	36
Name It, Then Reprogram It	36
Being Told You Messed Up Is Good News	36
Camel, Lion, Child	36
Practising Being a Child	36
Chapter Summary	36
Conclusion: Emotion as a Strategic Asset	37
What We Have Built	37
The Backstory	37
A Word on Peace	37
An Invitation	37
Chapter Summary	37
Appendix A: The Model	38
What it tracks	38
What drives them	38
What it is not	38
References and Further Reading	39
Preface	39
Chapter 2: Why Emotions Matter in Business	39
Chapter 3: System Dynamics	39
Chapter 4: Self-Determination Theory	39
Chapter 5: What the Model Says	39
Chapter 6: Small Victories	39
Chapter 7: The Culture Box	40
Chapter 8: The Hot Wash-Up	40
Chapter 9: The One-to-One	40

Chapter 10: The Inner Game of Feedback 40

Conclusion 40

Dedication

For my colleagues, past and present.

No longer talk at all about the kind of man that a good man ought to be, but be such.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. George Long (1862)

Preface

Scrum gives a team ceremonies for the work. Nothing in the calendar looks after the people doing it. This book is the missing set.

Where it started

Right after COVID, Easee asked me to present on remote caretaking. “Care-taking” was Easee’s word for management: a manager’s job was to help people be the best versions of themselves. I’d built a team across Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and Norway, and the world was living through screens. Word was we were handling remote work well. Easee wanted to know why.

I was reading *Scrum* by Jeff and J.J. Sutherland (2014) at the time. They describe teams that bury themselves in plans, documents and charts, then build something huge and expensive and only test it at the end. Scrum baffled me. I read the first part twice. Then it hit me: it’s a routine, something people repeat. That changed what I thought management was.

Ask a cyclist how they stay upright and they’ll say the motion does it. Watch them and they’re reading the road, holding their speed and steering round obstacles. That’s management: taking a team, yourself or a company somewhere without crashing.

What is missing

Every time we talk, we lose some meaning. Tone, gesture and words that mean different things to different people open small holes in our understanding. Some heal. Most stay. Lean on a connection full of holes and it breaks. The English call it “falling out”.

The ceremonies in this book repair those holes. None of them is new. Have it out with someone you love, or reminisce with an old friend, and you’ve run a Hot Wash-Up or a Culture Box. I call them ceremonies because each is a set slot for something that isn’t normal work. They’re missing because, for all

the podcasts, most workplaces I've seen don't run them. We save them for a psychologist's office or a toddler's bedroom, while work creates the need for them every day.

What is in it

Part I is the argument, built from system dynamics and self-determination theory. It's there to earn your trust in Part II.

Its key idea is the **adapter**: the translation layer two people build so that what one means is what the other hears. Chapter 5 shows why it matters. Part II is how a team builds one.

Part II is the practice: four ceremonies, each with how to run it, what goes wrong and how you know it's working.

- **Small Victories:** ten minutes a week where people name their progress and someone responds.
- **The Culture Box:** a charter the team writes when it forms or gets a new lead, and reopens when something changes.
- **The Hot Wash-Up:** a debrief after a specific event.
- **The One-to-One:** feedback both ways between a manager and one person.

Two recur: Small Victories weekly and the One-to-One fortnightly. Two are triggered: the Culture Box when the team changes, the Hot Wash-Up when something happens. A closing chapter covers learning to hear feedback as a good thing.

I've run the Hot Wash-Up, the Culture Box and the One-to-One with real teams, though the research has since reshaped the first two (Chapters 7 and 8). Small Victories I derived from the evidence and haven't yet run with a team. Treat it as an experiment.

How to use it

Read Part I once. Keep Part II to hand: open a ceremony chapter on Monday and run it on Tuesday.

I write for software and product people because that's my background, but the ideas travel. Where I lean on a software idea, the references point you further.

The aim is to make people feel more human at work. When work meets people's needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, they tend to perform better and stay well (Deci, Olafsen and Ryan, 2017). Work doesn't have to be dehumanising.

An AI-forward book

I want to coin a term for what this book is: an AI-forward book. AI did some of the work on it, and you should know which part.

The practice is mine, and I learned it the slow way. I ran the Culture Box, the Hot Wash-Up and the One-to-One with real teams, at Easee and since, and got plenty of them wrong first. No automation did that learning for me, and none can do it for you. Small Victories is the exception: it came out of the research, and Chapter 6 says so.

I automated part of the writing and much of the research. Claude drafted and tightened many of the sentences, and I argued over them, checked them and rewrote them until they said what I meant. A writing skill I built, called crisp, strips out padding and holds every chapter to one plain voice. Claude and I built the simulation in Chapter 5 together. AI agents did most of the source reading: they opened each study and reported whether it said what the text claims.

I won't pretend any of that is a tool I wielded, the way I wield a screwdriver. The distinction is Rich Hickey's (2026): a tool is something you wield, with control and feedback, and using one teaches you; an LLM is automation, which acts on a request instead. I asked, and it produced. So I treated what it produced like a new colleague's work: fast, useful, and not to be trusted until checked.

In a film interview, Steve Jobs (1990) describes a study of the locomotive efficiency of various species. The condor came out top. Humans were unimpressive, until you put one on a bicycle: then the result blew the condor away. A computer, he said, is "the equivalent of a bicycle for our minds."

AI is not that bicycle. A bicycle only moves when you pedal, and the pedalling is what makes you fit. AI is closer to a taxi: you say where you want

to go, and it drives. Taxis are useful, and this book took a lot of them. But nobody gets fit in the back of a cab. The fitness in this book came from years of running these meetings with real people. The taxi got the words onto the page, and read the papers.

The judgement stayed with me. I chose the ceremonies, the stories, the order and the diagrams, and I decided what stayed and what went. The figures follow the same diagramming system as my first book: boxes are things, wires are what flows, and the colour of a wire says what it carries. Every figure was checked against the text it explains.

Why automate any of it? I'm a practitioner with a full-time job, not a psychologist or a full-time author. The evidence behind these meetings sits in psychology, system dynamics and management research, none of which I'm trained in. Automating the reading is how a practitioner could hold his practice up against that literature, and change it where the evidence said so.

That is what I mean by an AI-forward book: a practitioner's experience, written and checked with automation, and open about which part is which. You can judge whether it works.

How this book was checked

A book that asks you to change how your team meets should show its working, so here is how I checked this one.

The ceremonies came from practice; the evidence came after. In October 2026 I had AI agents sweep the research on each ceremony, and on how they fit self-determination theory. What they found changed the book. The Culture Box I had run every fortnight became a charter. A fourth ceremony came out of the evidence. Three of the links I had drawn between ceremonies and psychological needs turned out to be wrong, and Chapter 4 now says so.

Then every study the book cites was checked against its source: authors, year, journal and DOI against the publisher's records, and each claim against the paper itself. Two agents checked each part of the book independently, and a separate reviewer tried to knock down every correction before I accepted it. Nine claims did not match their sources, and the text changed to match.

The biggest was in Small Victories. I had written that a flat answer to good news leaves the sharer worse off than silence. For good news, Gable

and colleagues (2012) found the opposite; that result holds only for bad news. The ceremony survived, for a better reason, and the chapter now gives it. The epigraphs that open each chapter were checked word for word against the original texts. The References list every study, with a DOI or link where one exists.

Some things are deliberately not cited. My experience of running these meetings is testimony, not citation. The team of five in Chapter 1 is invented, and so are the examples. The simulation in Chapter 5 is a model of an idea, not a measurement of anyone: Appendix A shows what is in it, and the full model is research still under way. Where a chapter rests on thin or assembled evidence, it says so in a box marked as an admission, a limitation or a seam.

None of this makes the book error-free. Research moves on, and a study I lean on today may be overturned tomorrow. If you find a mistake, or a source that says something different, please tell me and I will fix it in the next update. That's the point of publishing on Leanpub: buy it once and every new edition is yours, free.

Charles O'Donoghue October 2026

Part I: Ideas, the Emotional Architecture of Work

Chapter 1: A Radical New Picture

I will tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel...

Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815)

This isn't a management textbook. I'm a sci-fi fan, so I'll start the sci-fi way: a world where people do things differently, explained as we go.

Picture a team of five. It's a tech team, because I'm a tech guy, but yours could be in any field. A business needed it and appointed a lead, who had to hire from scratch. Call them Leader. CV by CV, Leader hired four people: One, Two, Three and Four.

The team became something new. They're punctual, hard-working, joyful and kick-ass. They know their stuff, deliver fast and leave early. They can take being told something wasn't good enough.

Colleagues envied them and called them "too in touch with themselves" and "way too nice." Management barely noticed them: a team that delivers, doesn't complain and you can forget about. Like a swan, they looked serene, with KPIs that were banging. Nobody saw the paddling underneath.

How do they do it? They practise the missing ceremonies.

One and Three

One day a passer-by overheard the team talking round a table.

"You really could have done that better, Three. How come you left it like that?"

"Truth is I ran out of time, and I figured something was better than nothing."

One grimaced. "OK, that's fair, but next time can you give me a heads up?"

"No doubt, will do."

That was harsh, the passer-by thought. But Three took it, and the air stayed encouraging. How can being told your work was rubbish be uplifting?

They mulled it over for a week. One had told Three how they felt, and Three turned the criticism into energy, like a gift. The feedback helped them both. It cleared the air, and it drew a line in the sand they could both step forward from. The name for that is trust. One and Three were growing it like a shrub on a windowsill.

So the passer-by asked One, “You weren’t laying into Three the other day, were you? You were helping them?”

One looked up, friendly. “Well, yeah, obviously.”

The passer-by had cracked the riddle, and dreamt of joining that team.

What One and Three Have

One and Three didn’t get lucky. Between them sits an **adapter**: a translation layer that lets what One means arrive as what Three hears, and back again. It has five parts, and it stands on goodwill. Chapter 5 shows why it matters. Part II is how a team builds one.

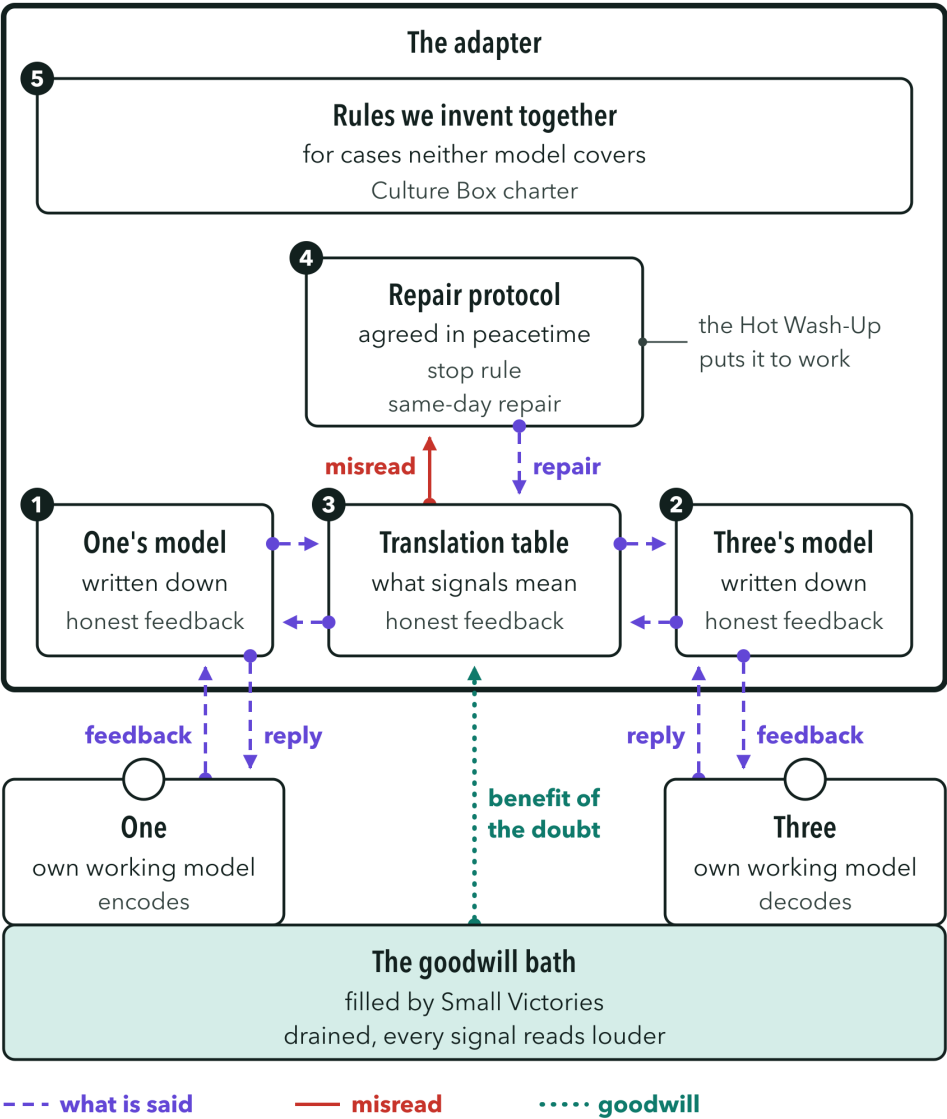


Figure 1. The adapter between One and Three. Feedback and reply pass through both written models and the translation table, a misread goes to the repair protocol, and all of it rests on goodwill.

Scale it up to the team of five and two things change. Every pair needs its own models and translation, and five people make ten pairs. The charter and the repair protocol are written once, for everyone, so no pair builds those alone. And all of it stands on one shared bath of goodwill.

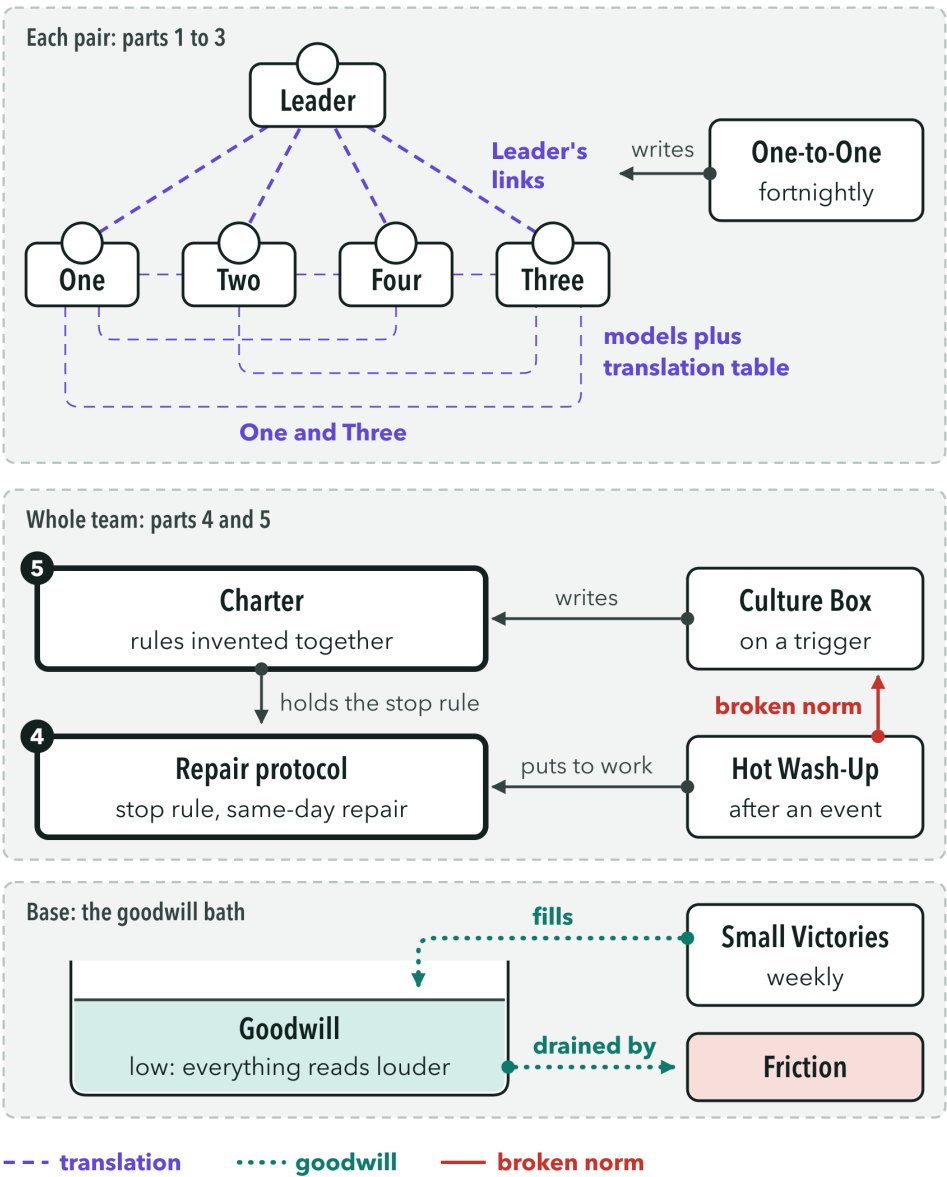


Figure 2. The adapter for a team of five. Each pair keeps its own models and translation table, the whole team shares one charter and one repair protocol, and goodwill sits underneath.

No team's adapter is ever finished. Some parts are built. Others are still outlines, and they change whenever someone joins or leaves. The ceremonies are how you keep building it.

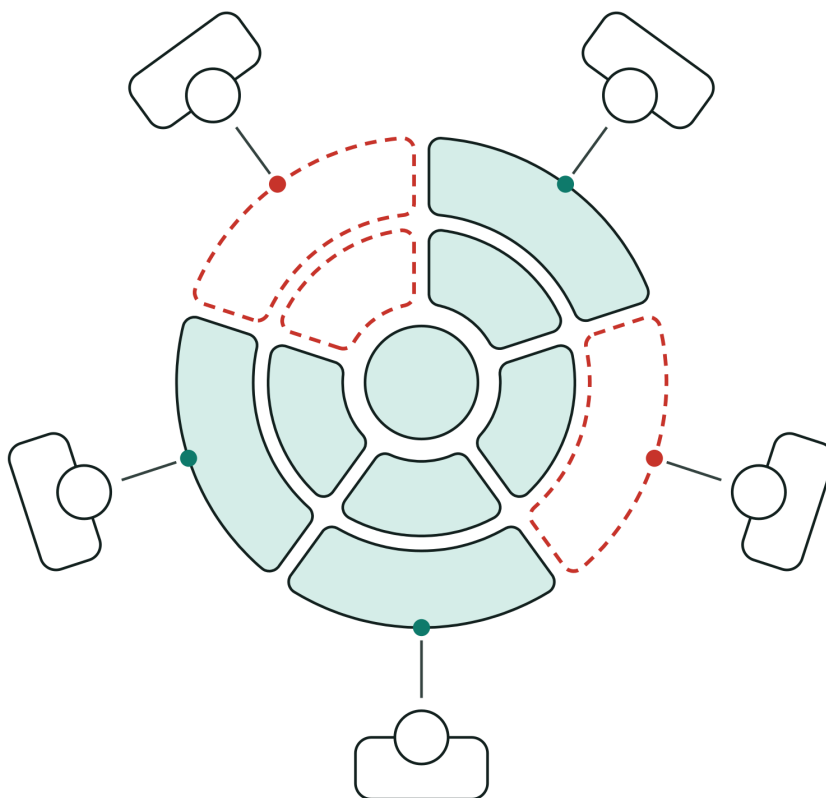


Figure 3. The team's adapter, which is also this book's cover: a shared core, and a part for each person. Built parts are solid green; parts still being built are dashed red outlines.

The Ceremony

What the passer-by saw was a skill, and you can train it. You have to do one thing: take feedback on the chin and own it. To learn to do that with grace, use a ceremony.

A ceremony can be whatever you want, but it must happen. That's the trick.

Skills come from repetition, so a ceremony repeats. Give it time to break you down and ooze through the cracks in your defences. You learn to expect it, then use it, then grow. Pound the brain enough times and it moulds, adapts and endures.

Turning up on time is easy: any bozo can click join at 9:59 and be on camera

at 10:00. Hearing “you could have done that better” and saying thank you is harder. That comes from a ceremony.

“They sound perfect. This isn’t real, Charlie.” Fair. A ceremony alone won’t do it. I’m no wizard and I’m not selling potions. You have to pitch up, try and keep an open mind. But 10% better beats not better at all.

* * *

If that story made you want more, you’re in the right place. If it seemed unlikely, read on. If you’re already in a team like that, be glad, and give this book to someone else.

Chapter Summary

- Picture the team you want: calm on the surface, paddling hard underneath.
- Train taking feedback like any skill: on the chin, and own it.
- A ceremony is a set slot that always happens when it should.
- Feedback given and taken well builds trust.

Chapter 2: Why Emotions Matter in Business

The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.

Henry David Thoreau, “Life Without Principle” (1863)

Emotional health is infrastructure, not a perk: invisible when it works, expensive when it breaks, and it needs maintenance like any system you run.

The Productivity Engine

I once presented in London to a change task force: executives moving the company from its early practices to new ways of working. I’d been running Culture Boxes and Hot Wash-Ups with my team, and thought I was only explaining how I’d handled some vague instructions. The room called it somewhat mind-blowing. Nobody else knew what to do. The company had a gaping hole where its culture should live, and I’d built a separate island of it with my team.

My idea: culture is fuel for a productivity engine.

Picture a flywheel. Pour culture in and it spins faster, and productivity comes out. Resistance wants it to stop. Work keeps it turning, and so does culture. (It’s a reinforcing loop, Chapter 3.)

So how do you make culture? Not with process, policy, a dress code or a better coffee machine. With ceremonies.

The Business Case

Acas (2021) puts the cost of workplace conflict to UK employers at about £28.5 billion a year. Fixing it early costs a fraction of fixing it late: Chapter 5 has the numbers.

Emotional fitness works like physical fitness. Fit people do more and weather storms better. It's also insurance. Less churn means less hiring, and less money spent raising salaries for roles that haven't changed. Nobody walks out with institutional knowledge, and you don't rebuild customer relationships. Look after it as seriously as profit, because it drives profit.

Emotions as Infrastructure

Most businesses treat emotional health as an afterthought: Pizza Fridays, wellness days, a meditation app nobody uses. You'd never ask IT to keep the servers running without monitoring, incident processes and maintenance windows. Yet we expect our people's emotional health to look after itself.

The ceremonies are that infrastructure, not perks. They're the monitoring and maintenance for the most complex and valuable system you run: your people.

A Slot for Listening

Most companies have values on the wall and no rituals that live them. Cynicism breeds in that gap. "We value transparency" means nothing without a forum for honesty. Without one, values are wallpaper.

In *Time to Think*, Nancy Kline (1999) argues that your attention sets the quality of other people's thinking. Most meetings are for talking. The ceremonies are for listening. The Culture Box asks what someone will do in a code review when they think the approach is wrong. The Hot Wash-Up asks how someone experienced an event you thought went fine. The One-to-One asks a manager to hear what an employee needs, not only what the business needs. People who feel heard tend to think better, and work better (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022).

"Just talk to each other" doesn't work. When there's a set slot for honest feedback, nobody has to hunt for the right moment. You don't tell an athlete to "be fit". You give them a programme, a schedule and a coach. The ceremonies are the training programme.

Chapter Summary

- Treat culture as fuel for productivity, and the ceremonies as how you make it.
- Make the case in money: conflict is cheap to fix early and expensive late.
- Build infrastructure for emotional health, not perks, and look after it like profit.
- Give every value a set slot where it gets used, built for listening, or it's wallpaper.

Chapter 3: System Dynamics: A Mental Model for Business

Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850)

In *Thinking in Systems*, Donella Meadows (2008) teaches the basics with a bath. The water is the thing we care about: it builds up, and it has value (at the right temperature). System dynamics calls it a **stock**. A stock is anything you can add to or take from: water, heat, a business's money.

Two things change a stock. The tap is the **inflow**: open it and water comes in. The plughole is the **outflow**: unplug it and water drains away. Stock, inflow, outflow. That's the whole anatomy.

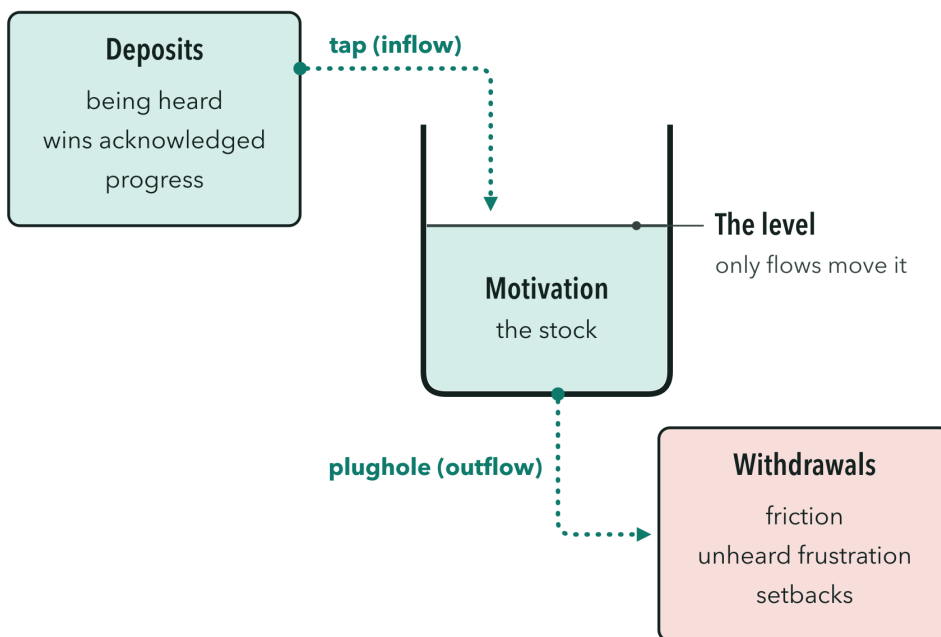


Figure 4. A team's motivation as a bath. Deposits fill it through the tap, withdrawals drain it through the plughole, and only the flows move the level.

Making It Dynamic

Open the tap a little and pull the plug right out. Water leaves faster than it arrives, and the bath runs empty. Turn it round: tap full on, plug badly sealed. Left alone, you flood the bathroom.

Match the inflow to the outflow and the level holds. You can also hold it the stop-start way: fill the bath with the plug in, turn off the tap, let it sit. That's the bath we know. The running one matters more here, because that's how a live thing behaves, and a business is a live thing.

A bank account is a running bath. Your pay cheque fills it and the month drains it. The stock grows, shrinks and changes with time. That's what makes a system dynamic.

Feedback Loops

Sales make money come in faster. Hiring staff, or buying superb office snacks, makes it go out faster. I don't have an MBA, so I can't give you one. I can give you a way of looking at a business, and it needs one more idea: the feedback loop. A **reinforcing loop** makes things grow, sometimes exponentially. A **balancing loop** evens things out.

The Reinforcing Loop

Compound interest is a reinforcing (positive feedback) loop. You leave money in the bank and it pays you a percentage. Next year it pays that percentage on a bigger number: your sum plus last year's interest. The money grows, and the growth grows. The output feeds back into the input and makes it bigger.

Trust in a team works the same way. A good conversation brings more openness, and openness brings better conversations. In business simulations, trust and cooperation fed each other in this way (Ferrin, Bligh and Kohles, 2008). Left alone, the loop speeds up. It also runs backwards, which is how toxic cultures spiral: distrust breeds avoidance, avoidance breeds misunderstanding, and misunderstanding breeds more distrust.

The Balancing Loop

A house's heating is a balancing (negative feedback) loop. You turn the thermostat up and the boiler or heat pump comes on. When the room reaches the set temperature, the thermostat turns the heating off. The cold outside starts to win and the room cools, until the thermostat sees it's too low and turns the heating back on. The stock, heat in the house, rises and falls around a target.

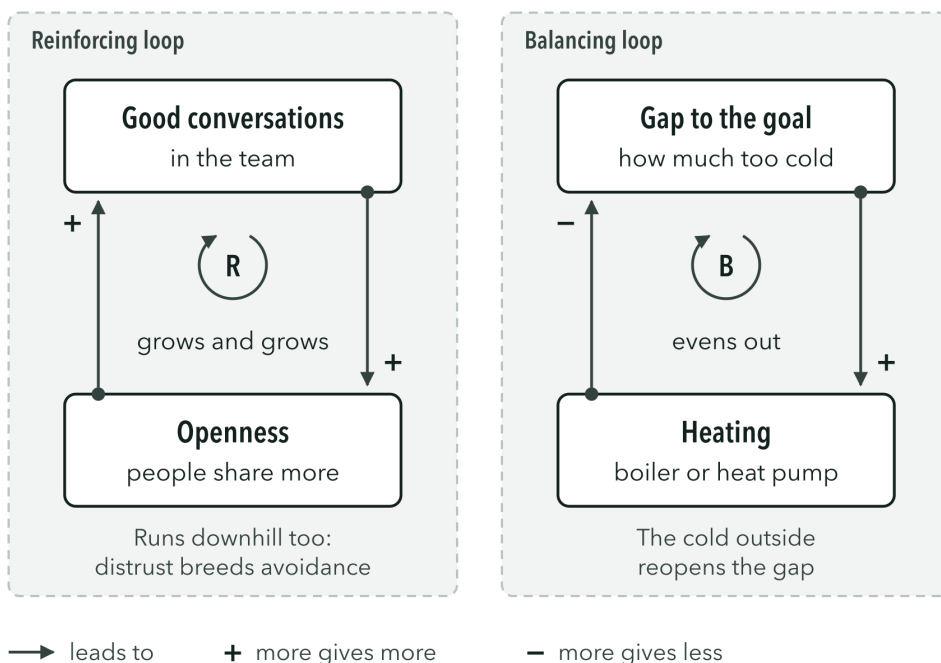


Figure 5. Two loops. In a reinforcing loop each turn feeds the next; in a balancing loop the gap to a goal drives the action that closes it.

Mapping It to Business

A business's stock could be reputation, or users on a system. Here it's money. The inflow is sales. The outflow is spending: rent, wages, running costs.

Both loops are a stock reaching back to its own tap. Interest is paid on the balance; the thermostat reads the room. A team's motivation does the same: a full bath makes the next good conversation easier, which fills it further.

People Are the Missing Piece

A business is a system. Its people are systems too, and the business is a sub-system of the economy.

A motivated person is likely to sell more than an unmotivated one. A meta-analysis of sales research found that engaged salespeople perform better (Verbeke, Dietz and Verwaal, 2011). So treat motivation as a stock. Ask what fills

it, what drains it, and which loops drive it over time. Then zoom out and follow the chain: more motivation, more sales, more money in the bank.

A person is a dynamic system, so motivation ebbs and flows. Sales follow how they feel, and the bank balance follows the sales. If you manage people, your job has three parts. Keep things going when they go well. Fix them when they don't. Lift them to the next level when the time comes.

Routine is how you do that, and it means a business has to understand psychology. Modern practices left the people out. That's why these are the *missing* ceremonies: the practices a business needs to make its people happy, so the business is happier too.

Chapter Summary

- Picture anything you care about at work as a stock: a bath with a tap filling it and a plughole draining it.
- Expect the level to move. A live system, like a team, is a running bath, not one you fill once and leave.
- Look for the loops. Reinforcing loops compound, for good (trust) or bad (distrust). Balancing loops hold things near a target.
- Treat your team's motivation as a stock. The ceremonies in Part II are the routine that looks after it.

Chapter 4: Self-Determination Theory and Psychological Needs

Man is the Only Animal that Blushes. Or needs to.

Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (1897)

Chapter 3 said motivation is a stock, a bath. This chapter says what fills it: three needs that share a core and gate each other, which is why the ceremonies only work as a set.

The Three Basic Needs

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan spent decades studying what motivates people, as opposed to what managers *think* does: bonuses, promotions, fear of the sack. Their Self-Determination Theory (SDT) names three innate needs (Deci, Olafsen and Ryan, 2017):

1. **Autonomy:** feeling that your actions come from your own values. It isn't being left alone.
2. **Competence:** feeling capable and getting better at your craft.
3. **Relatedness:** feeling you belong and matter to others.

Meet them and people work because the work means something. A need can go unmet (the tap is off) or be **frustrated** (something drains it: being controlled, made to feel useless, shut out). Frustration does more harm than absence: in Bartholomew and colleagues' (2011) studies of athletes, it predicted burnout and depression more consistently than low satisfaction did. Every ceremony can cause it if run badly. Each chapter's "What goes wrong" is that list. Pay people well, but pay alone won't meet these needs.

Mapping the Needs to the Ceremonies

Every ceremony loads on all three needs, with different weights and different risks.

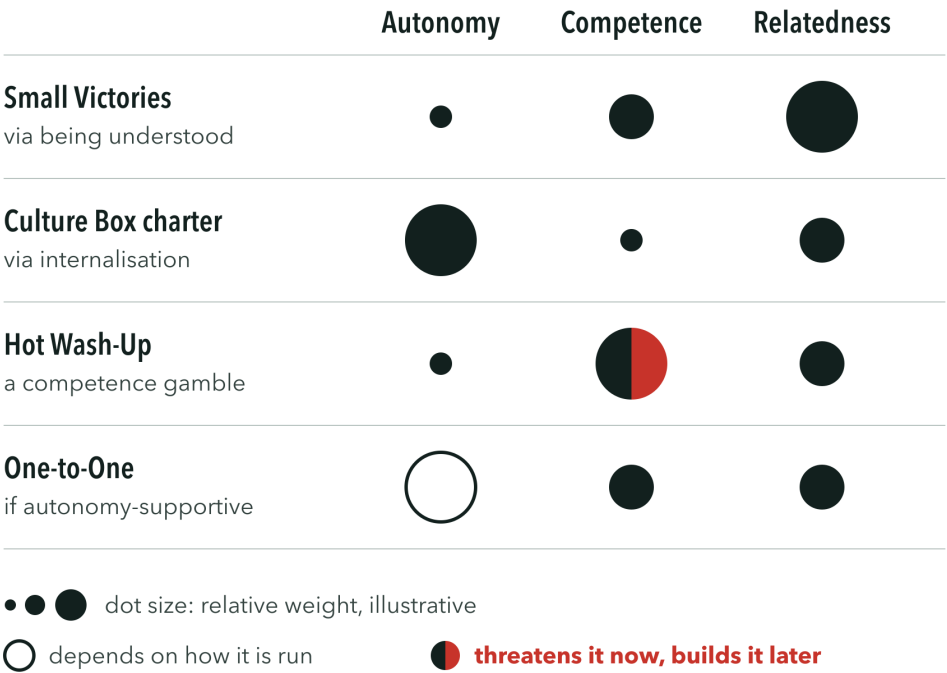


Figure 6. Each ceremony feeds all three needs, with different weights. The weights are illustrative, not measured.

Small Victories feeds relatedness through feeling understood (Chapter 6). The Hot Wash-Up builds competence over time while threatening it in the room, which is why it has rules (Chapter 8).

The Culture Box: internalisation

The charter is how the team will behave, agreed together. SDT calls taking a rule on board **internalisation**, and it comes in two grades:

- **Introjected:** “I review gently because I’d feel bad if I didn’t.” The rule is inside you but not yours, policed by guilt.
- **Integrated:** “I review gently because that’s how I want us to work.” The rule is yours.

In Deci and colleagues’ (1994) experiment, a context that supported self-determination tended to produce the second, and one that didn’t, the first. So values handed down get the first. Values the team builds get the second. That’s why the charter feeds autonomy, not only relatedness.

The One-to-One: autonomy, if you run it that way

In SDT, autonomy support is a managerial style, not a meeting type. It means taking the other person's perspective, giving reasons, acknowledging feelings and avoiding controlling language (Deci and colleagues, 1994; Slemp and colleagues, 2018). Scheduling a one-to-one guarantees none of that. Run it that way, with the employee owning the agenda, and it supports autonomy. Run it as a status check and it frustrates it.



An admission about this whole mapping

One ceremony per need is a teaching device, not a finding.

Practices don't partition by need. Slemp, Kern, Patrick and Ryan (2018) pooled 72 studies and nearly 33,000 people. A single managerial behaviour, autonomy support, correlated with autonomy at .57, competence at .42 and relatedness at .46. One behaviour, all three needs, different weights.

Why the Four Work Together

The needs aren't separate scores that add up. Gillet and colleagues (2020) took 523 employees' ratings apart and found a **general need-satisfaction factor beneath the three specific ones**. Dysvik, Kuvaas and Gagné (2013) found competence turns into motivation **only when autonomy is already high**. The needs share a core, and they gate each other.

So the ceremonies belong together. The charter, and a One-to-One run in an autonomy-supportive style, open the autonomy gate, so the competence the Hot Wash-Up builds can become motivation. Small Victories lifts relatedness and competence a little, every week, at almost no cost.

Psychological safety, in Amy Edmondson's (1999) definition, is a team's shared belief that it's safe to take interpersonal risks: to ask, admit a mistake or disagree without being punished. The loop behind the whole book is a reinforcing one:

Ceremonies meet the needs. Met needs build psychological safety. Safety improves the work. Better work justifies more and better ceremonies.

Autopoiesis: The Living Organisation

Maturana and Varela (1980) called living cells **autopoietic** (self-creating): they recreate themselves without outside instruction. A team running the ceremonies does the same. The Hot Wash-Up corrects it, the charter renews it, and One-to-One trust cuts management overhead.

Dying companies need consultants, restructures and mandates from above.
Living ones have ceremonies that keep them healthy.

Chapter Summary

- Feed three needs: autonomy, competence, relatedness. Pay alone won't.
- Treat every ceremony as loading on all three. One per need is a memory aid.
- Build the charter with the team, or you get introjection, not culture.
- Run the One-to-One in an autonomy-supportive style. The meeting alone guarantees nothing.
- Keep the Hot Wash-Up's rules. They're how you win the competence gamble.

Chapter 5: What the Model Says

All models are wrong, but some are useful.

George Box, *Robustness in Statistics* (1979)

Everything so far is an argument, and an argument that hangs together hasn't been tested. So I built the smallest piece with the interesting behaviour in it: two people trying to understand each other over time.

Four results change how you run the ceremonies. First, when you repair matters more than what you say. Second, how full the bath is decides the outcome. Third, swallowing things to keep the peace is what makes a row come back. And fourth, the teams that most need ceremonies can least afford them. That last one is uncomfortable, and I think it's the most important thing in this book.

The smallest interesting thing

Take two people, A and B. Each carries a model of how closeness works, built early and never chosen. John Bowlby (1969) called it an *internal working model*. It's a model, and it runs.

A and B don't share one. A says "I need some space," meaning "I'm overloaded and I'll come back." B decodes it through their own model and hears "I'm being abandoned." Neither is lying. The fault is the missing interface, not the people.

Over time a pair can build an **adapter**, a translation layer between the two models. It has five parts:

1. A specification of my own model. You can't expose an interface you've never written down.
2. A specification of theirs: what *they* mean by a behaviour, not what I would have meant.
3. A translation table. When she goes quiet it means overload, not contempt.
4. A repair protocol: what we do when translation fails, agreed in peacetime.
5. Rules we invent together for the cases neither model covers.

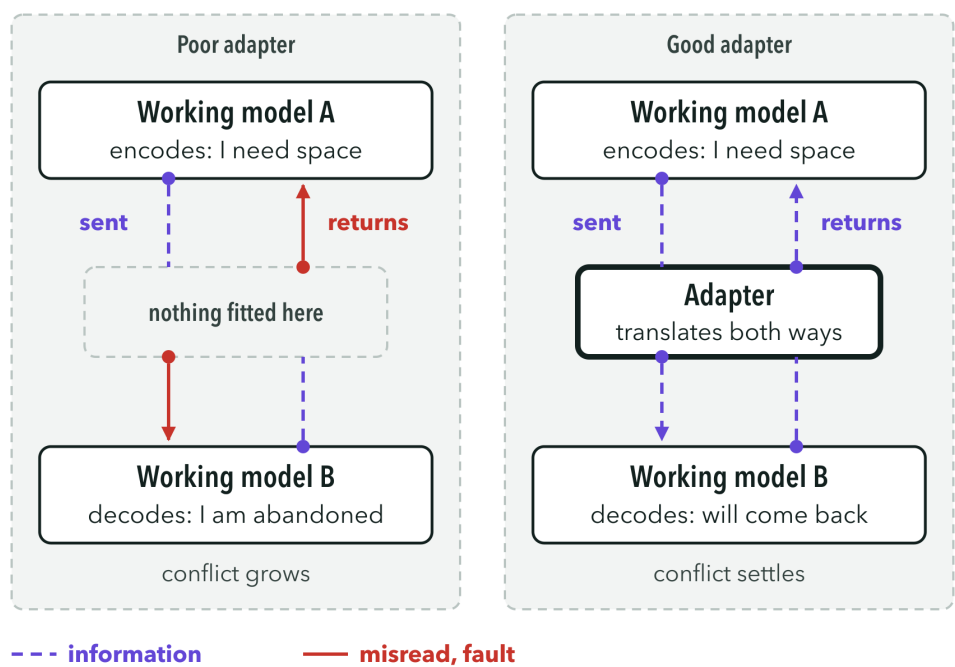


Figure 7. One signal, with and without an adapter. Without one, “I need space” arrives as abandonment, and the reply is misread on the way back.

The ceremonies build these parts. The One-to-One writes the first three between a manager and a report; between teammates, everyday honest feedback does. The stop rule and same-day repair are the fourth: the stop rule is written into the Culture Box charter, but its job is repair. The charter is the fifth. A team translates well when its members can predict how a remark will land. If the same remark keeps getting read two ways, yours doesn't.

What the simulation does

Six quantities change over time: how wound up each person is, the repair effort in flight, what each has swallowed to keep the peace, and the pair's goodwill. Goodwill is Chapter 3's bath seen between two people: the benefit of the doubt each extends the other. Deposits fill it; friction drains it. Add a time delay and that's the whole model.

Nothing is fitted to data, because the data doesn't exist. It's a model of an idea, not of your team. **Read the shapes, not the numbers.** [Appendix A](#) says what's inside it. The full model is research still under way.

Result one: timing beats content

I didn't expect this one. Hold everything fixed and change only how long before somebody reaches out.

- **Settles.** Repair is a balancing loop (Chapter 3). It closes the gap while the gap is small.
- **Rings.** Repair arrives late and overshoots, like a thermostat reading yesterday's temperature. What each person swallowed keeps restarting it (result three).
- **Never clears.** Wait longer still and the pair swings for good. Not "takes longer to resolve": never resolves.

Delay isn't the only way to get stuck. With a poor adapter, the same bad moment never comes down at all: the pair locks flat.

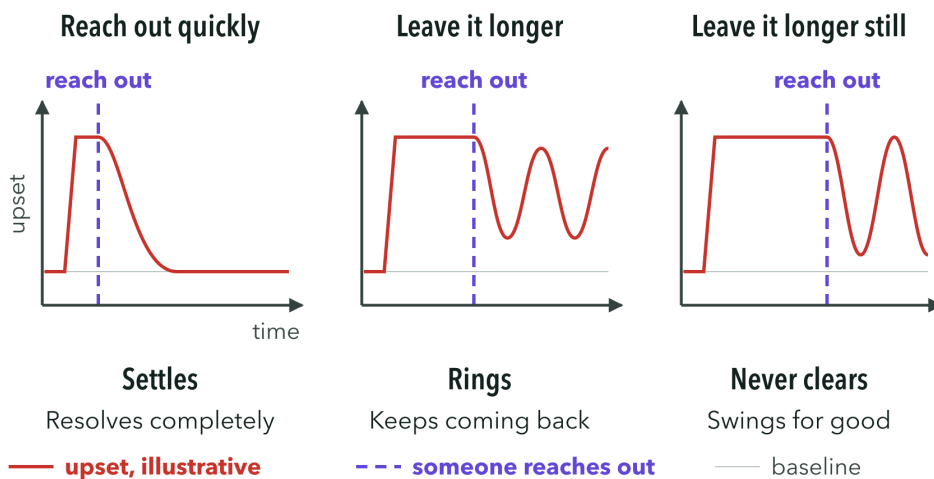


Figure 8. Same people, same argument, three waiting times.

Haesevoets and colleagues (2016) varied only how long a leader took to make a decision that turned out wrong: too hastily, on time, or too late. Followers saw a late wrong decision as more severe than a hasty or on-time one, and wanted an apology most when they expected it to work least.

An apology restored trust after a hasty or on-time mistake and **made no difference after a late one**. It isn't a test of when the apology came. But it

shows the same thing from the other side: once delay has done its damage, the right words don't undo it.

Acas (2021) priced the curve. In its worked example, an early informal discussion (two hours each for the manager, HR, a union rep and the two people concerned) costs about £189 in total. A formal grievance costs about £950, and formal procedures cost over three times as much as informal resolution. A resignation costs £30,614.

The correction I have to make

I first wrote: fix your cadence, because it caps how long a rupture (a moment that leaves one person hurt or angry with another) sits. That was sloppy, and the ceremonies make the same error.

Cadence and latency are different variables. A fortnightly meeting bounds repair delay at fourteen days. It doesn't minimise it. A rupture landing at random waits seven days on average, already on the wrong side of the curve.

A faster calendar isn't the fix. Casas-Arce and colleagues (2017) gave 800 professionals weekly or monthly feedback, more or less detailed. **Detailed monthly feedback won.** Weekly feedback did no better than the control group's plain monthly summary, because people over-weighted their latest week. The ceremony is for things that benefit from the dust settling. A rupture needs an **event trigger**: when something breaks, deal with it now.



The practical version

Protect the Small Victories and One-to-One slots. Then agree that whoever notices a rupture, the manager if nobody else, says that day: "That landed badly. Can we talk?" The slots handle the accumulated. The norm handles the urgent. Neither covers for the other.

Result two: the stock decides, not the event

Run the same argument twice and change only how full the bath is when it lands. The full bath recovers. The depleted one never settles: the same row keeps coming back. The same event is survivable on Tuesday and endless in November.

An empty bath also changes how everything reads. In the model, a drained stock multiplies how threatening the other person's behaviour looks. A tired team doesn't only lose patience with the same remark. It hears a different one.

Don't ask "was that reasonable to say?" Ask "how full is the bath, and should I say this now?"

Result three: the swallowing is what makes it recur

Delay alone gives one overshoot, not a recurrence.

Pushing yourself below your own baseline to keep the peace accumulates and comes back. **The driver is the delay plus the swallowing.** Someone goes quiet to be accommodating, everyone is relieved, and the cost is deferred, not paid.

That's what two-way feedback in the One-to-One is for, and the Hot Wash-Up for the team: making sure nothing gets swallowed and stored, because stored things come back with interest.

The uncomfortable result

A team needs some friction to learn each other, and the ceremonies partly exist to add it under control. But friction costs goodwill. The window has a floor and a ceiling. The floor is the smallest disagreement that teaches anything: it has to expose a misread. The ceiling is the biggest one the team survives, and it falls as translation worsens, because a misread row escalates further before anything damps it.

For a team that works well the window is wide. For a middling team it's narrow. For a team whose translation is poor, **it closes completely**. Every disagreement is too small to teach or big enough to empty the bath.

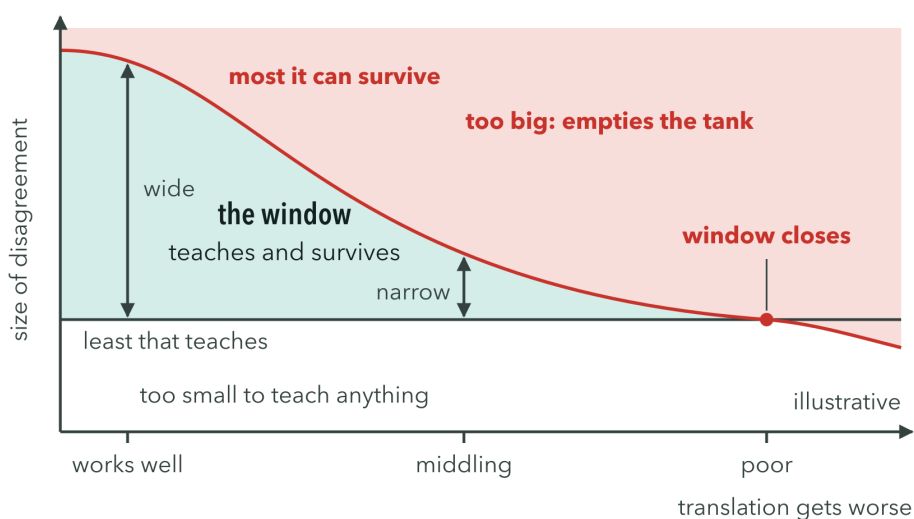


Figure 9. The window of useful disagreement: wide for a team that translates well, narrow for a middling one, closed for a team in trouble.

You need the friction to build the adapter, and the adapter to survive the friction. **The teams that most need these ceremonies can least afford to run them.**

Urganci, Chen and Williamson (2024) found the same shape in a randomised trial of relationship education with 1,595 low-income couples. At twelve months the only significant benefit was for the women in the happy, stable group. The distressed couples attended as often and gained nothing.

In Amy Edmondson's (1996) study of hospital units, the better-led units with better relationships *recorded more drug errors*. The likeliest reason is that people there felt able to report them, not that they made more. She later named that climate psychological safety (1999). A team that records no conflict may be a team that can't afford to record it.

What this changes about the ceremonies

When a team says "we can't spare the time," it usually means "we're too depleted." Don't argue harder for the meeting. Put something in the bath first, then make the first sessions small.

That's why Part II opens with Small Victories, the ceremony that deposits before the others withdraw. It's also why the Culture Box should start with

a behaviour nobody has feelings about. The point of that session isn't the content. It's to spend a little goodwill and find the room survived.



The honest limitation

The argument treats getting stuck as a trap you climb out of. I first thought the model only produced that trap after I added an assumption by hand: above a certain level of upset, people can't repair at all. Checking it more carefully showed I was half wrong. Without that assumption, a pair with a poor adapter can still lock, with goodwill run dry. When life is otherwise calm, calm stays on offer beside the lock, and which you get depends on what happened. Steady background stress drains the bath and takes calm away, so wherever a pair starts, it ends up in the same place. The hand-added assumption is what keeps two possible fates under ordinary stress, and a trap that's harder to leave than to enter.

That assumption rings true to me, but I had to put it in. I'd rather tell you than make the work sound tidier than it was.

Chapter Summary

- Protect the Small Victories and One-to-One slots and add a same-day norm for ruptures. The calendar bounds repair delay, it doesn't minimise it.
- Check the bath before the conversation. The same argument is survivable when it's full and endless when it's empty.
- Make sure nothing gets swallowed. What's stored to keep the peace comes back later.
- If a team says it can't afford the ceremonies, it may be right. Fill the bath first and make the first sessions small.

Part II: Practice, Meetings That Manage Emotion

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Chapter 6: Small Victories

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How to run it

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1. Book ten minutes a week

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2. Invite one win, never require one

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3. Answer every win

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4. Name the act and what it changed, never the person

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5. Write nothing down, and keep it away from pay

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6. Don't run it if you're ranked against each other

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Why this one goes first

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How to run it

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1. Book a calm time

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2. Say what gets written down

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3. Open with light chat

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4. Speak last

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5. Run the definition round on behaviours

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6. Ground each behaviour

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7. Check in as you go

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How to run it

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2. Keep it to twenty minutes

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3. Have somebody chair it

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4. Review successes as well as failures

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5. Bring something that isn't an opinion

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6. Keep everything at team level

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7. Agree a stop rule before you need one

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8. Write down what you'll do, not what was said

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2. Lead with the person

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3. Run it their way

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4. Make feedback go both ways

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5. Set OKRs once a year

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6. Check in on everything, every time

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