

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 127 · WORKSHEET

EPISODE 127

Lead the Messy Middle

Every change has a middle nobody wants to talk about. The old way is gone, the new way does not work yet, and everyone is pretending otherwise. Drawing on William Bridges' transitions, Maya and Marcus show why the dip is not failure but the zone itself — and how to hold the whole room through it.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Change vs. Transition

Change is the external event. Transition is the internal, psychological process people go through as they adjust to it. Transition has three phases: Endings, the Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings. Most leaders manage the announcement and the launch. Almost nobody manages the middle.

2. The Zone Is Not Failure

The old way is gone, the new way is not yet settled. People are confused, impatient, and carrying a heavier workload, because they are running the old way and the new way at the same time. Productivity often dips. It feels like failure. It is not failure. It is the zone.

3. Fake Adoption

Pushing through produces fake adoption. People perform the new way begrudgingly while still believing in the old way, and the moment pressure lifts, they go back.

4. Creativity Lives in the Zone

The old rules are suspended, so new solutions appear here that appear nowhere else. Rush the zone, and you rush past the best ideas in the whole change.

5. Diagnostic vs. Holding the Room

The ADKAR model diagnoses where one person is stuck. The messy middle is about the whole team in the in-between, and what the leader does with the space itself. One is a diagnostic. This is holding the room.

The picture: a team running the old way and the new way at the same time, confused, impatient, carrying a heavier workload. Productivity dips. It feels like failure. It is not failure. It is the zone.

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ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — name the zone.** Tell your team out loud that you are in the middle, the neutral zone, the old way gone, the new way not yet settled, and that the discomfort is normal, not failure. What you name, your team can work with. What you pretend away, they carry alone.

How I will name the zone to my team:

- [ ] **Step two — name what is not changing.** List three things that stay the same: the values, the priorities, the people. Anchors matter most when everything else is moving, and three solid anchors will hold a team steadier than ten vague reassurances.

Three things that stay the same:

- [ ] **Step three — give the zone one experiment.** One pilot, one trial, one question the team can explore while the new way settles. Do not let the middle become drift. Give it a job, and the job will turn confusion into discovery.

Our one experiment:

- [ ] **Step four — show the beginning taking shape.** Share one piece of purpose, picture, plan, or part this week, something concrete that proves the new beginning is real. People do not commit to a promise. They commit to evidence.

One piece of purpose, picture, plan, or part I will share:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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