

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 136 · WORKSHEET

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Steal the Thinking

Have you ever copied a senior leader's move exactly and watched it fall flat? Nadia, a director, copies her VP's project kill and the room goes cold — because she copied the move and left the thinking behind. This episode shows you how to steal the thinking instead: four questions to ask, a guardrail for when intuition is worth stealing, and four steps to make a senior leader's thinking your own.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Surface or Deep Structure

Chi, Feltovich, and Glaser asked eight physics PhD students and eight undergraduates to sort the same twenty-four problems by how similar they were. The undergraduates grouped them by surface features, levers and pulleys and slopes, the things you can see. The PhD students grouped them by the deep principle needed to solve them, the structure underneath. Same problems, completely different sorting. Nadia sorted by the surface: she saw the kill. The VP sorted by the deep structure: she saw that the economics had changed.

2. How Experts Really Decide

Gary Klein, in his book Sources of Power, found that experts almost never sit down and compare a list of options. They recognise the situation as a familiar type, they generate one plausible course of action, and they run it forward in their heads to see where it breaks. If the simulation holds, they act. If it does not, they adjust and try the next one. One at a time, never side by side. Recognition delivers four things at once: what they noticed, what they expected to happen, what they were trying to achieve, and the action they pictured.

3. The Four Questions

If you want the thinking, ask for those four things. What did you notice that I did not? What did you expect to happen next? What were you actually trying to achieve? And when you ran it forward in your head, where did it break? Ask a senior leader to talk a decision through out loud, and listen for the principles, not the moves.

4. The Guardrail: Is It Worth Stealing?

Writing with Daniel Kahneman, Klein warned that intuition is only reliable when two things are true. The environment has to be regular enough for real patterns to exist, and the expert must have learned those patterns through fast, clear feedback. So the check before you steal anything is simple. Did this person's thinking get tested, over and over, with feedback they could not ignore? If yes, steal it. If not, you are copying a lucky guess.

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5. Buffett Stole the Thinking

Warren Buffett learned investing from Benjamin Graham, and he is the perfect example because he stole the thinking and then changed the moves. Graham gave him three ideas, from his book The Intelligent Investor, chapters eight and twenty. Look at a stock as part-ownership of a business. Treat the market like a moody partner who offers you a price every day, and make him serve you, not guide you. And demand a margin of safety, buy well below what something is worth. Buffett kept those three ideas for his whole career. But the approach changed completely. He started out buying cigar-butt bargains, then moved to wonderful businesses at fair prices.

The picture: Nadia, a director two levels below her VP, watches the VP kill a beloved project in ninety seconds — no drama, just the number that had changed. The next month Nadia kills a project the same way, and the room goes cold. Her boss asks her why, and she has no answer beyond the move itself.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — pick one senior leader and one decision.** Pick one senior leader and one decision, not their whole career. The decision is a call you watched recently, one where the move surprised you. Make that the one you study. A career is too big to steal. A decision fits in your pocket.

The leader:

The decision:

- [ ] **Step two — ask the four questions.** Ask the four questions, but not all at once, and not as an interrogation. One question, at the right moment, when the two of you can actually talk. What did you notice? What did you expect to happen? What were you trying to achieve? And when you ran it forward, where did it break? Most senior leaders have never been asked, and they love being asked.

What I will ask first:

- [ ] **Step three — name the principle in one sentence.** Name the principle in one sentence. Not the move, the principle. If you cannot say it in one sentence, you have not stolen it. You have just collected a story.

The principle, in one sentence:

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☐ **Step four — test it small before you adopt it.** Take the principle to one low-stakes decision of your own and run it. See whether it holds up with your facts, your team, and your constraints. If it survives the small test, it earns a place in how you think. If it does not, you have learned something cheap instead of something expensive. A failed small test costs you a week. A failed big adoption costs you a quarter.

My small test:

What happened:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

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