

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 137 · WORKSHEET

EPISODE 137

Let Them Hear You Think

Does your team bring you every decision because you are the only one who knows how you decide? Fred, a team lead, decides in his head and announces the call — and his team waits on him for everything. This episode shows you how to make your thinking legible: narrate one decision, label the mode, ask your team to narrate back, and fade — so your thinking starts showing up in rooms you are not in.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. The Bottleneck Is Invisible Thinking

Fred runs a team of nine and decides fast. A vendor missed a deadline, the timeline was fixed, and Fred made the call in his head in about forty seconds: cut the reporting module, keep the date. He announced it. The team nodded. Then nothing happened for two days. Not resistance, just waiting — waiting for him to decide the next thing, and the thing after that. The decision was fine. The thinking was invisible.

2. Cognitive Apprenticeship

Three researchers, Allan Collins, John Seely Brown, and Ann Holum, call it cognitive apprenticeship: thinking has to be made visible. The teacher's thinking must be made visible to the students, and the student's thinking must be made visible to the teacher. They were writing about classrooms, not boardrooms, but the problem is the same. Fred's team could see his decisions, but not his reasoning — so every new decision had to come from him.

3. Musing Is Not Narration

Episode 119 said do not think out loud, and the distinction is the whole point. Musing before a decision, spoken out loud, is heard as direction because of your weight in the room. Narration after the decision is the lesson. The call is already made; the reasoning is the teaching. The bridge between the two is labeling the mode: thinking out loud, not a decision, is one thing; here is the call I made, and here is why, is another. Say which one you are doing, every time.

4. The Cockpit Got Safer

Crew resource management, the training that grew out of a NASA workshop in 1979 after the Tenerife disaster in 1977, is built on exactly this: pilots verbalize their decisions, their briefings, and their concerns, out loud, so the other pilot can follow the reasoning and catch what they missed. The captain keeps final authority. Nobody thinks the captain is weaker for saying the thinking out loud. The Navy does the mirror image: a sailor does not ask permission, they say, I intend to, and they give the reasoning with it.

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5. Fading Is the Point

You gradually remove the supports until they are on their own. Hand them the next decision, a real one, and let them make it without you — then compare the reasoning, not just the result. Two weeks after Fred started narrating, one of his team leads faced the same kind of call — a vendor slipping, a date that would not move. She made it herself, and walked Fred through the reasoning out loud, in Fred's own shape. Fred heard his own thinking coming back to him, from someone else's mouth.

The picture: Fred, a team lead with nine reports, makes a call in his head in forty seconds and announces it. The team nods — then nothing happens for two days. Not resistance, just waiting. Two weeks after he starts narrating, one of his team leads makes the same kind of call herself, and walks Fred through it in Fred's own shape.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — narrate one decision this week.** Pick a real call, and say it in three sentences. The call, the why, and what you ruled out. Not a speech. Three sentences, out loud, where your team can hear them.

The decision:

The three sentences:

- [ ] **Step two — label the mode every time.** Before you start, say which one it is. Thinking out loud, not a decision. Or, here is the call I made, and here is why. Your team cannot learn your reasoning if they cannot tell deciding from wondering.

How I will label it:

- [ ] **Step three — ask one report to narrate back.** Ask one report to narrate their reasoning back to you. Not their recommendation, their reasoning. What did they notice, what did they rule out, and why this call. Listen for the thinking, not the answer, and say back what you heard them do well.

The report:

What I heard them do well:

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- [ ] **Step four — fade.** Hand them the next decision, a real one, and let them make it without you. Then compare the reasoning together. Not did it work, but did you weigh what I would have weighed. That comparison is the teaching. And every time you fade, your team gets a little less dependent on you being in the room.

The decision I will hand over:

What we compared:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

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