

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 142 · WORKSHEET

EPISODE 142

Drop Your Tools

Vera runs operations for a mid-size company, and one morning the payment system goes down. Customers cannot check out, the phones are lighting up, and her vice president wants a briefing — and she does not know the cause yet. This episode shows you how to make sense out loud: say the facts, say the gaps, say what it means, say what happens next.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. The Minute Before You Speak

Vera runs operations for a mid-size company — the kind where, when something breaks, everybody knows your name by lunch. One morning the payment system goes down. Customers cannot check out. The phones are lighting up, the outage is growing, and her vice president is already asking for a briefing. She does not know what caused it yet. She has to say something anyway. Marcus's question is the hinge: the minute before you speak, when you know less than everyone in the room thinks you do. Because saying what happened feels like admitting it is your fault. And the worst move in that minute is the one that feels safest: defend the process. Tell them about the monitoring, the protocols, the team working on it. Anything except what actually happened.

2. Drop Your Tools

A crew of sixteen smokejumpers drops into a Montana gulch to fight a fire they expect to have out by morning. The fire outruns them up the slope. Their foreman, Wagner Dodge, lights a second fire — an escape fire — burns a patch of ground the main fire cannot cross, and lies down in it. Two of the crew stay with him. They live. The rest run, still carrying their tools, and thirteen of them die. Karl Weick says the tools were not just tools. They were the crew's identity. Dropping them felt like dropping who they were. Weick calls it dropping your tools — and that phrase is his reading of Norman Maclean's account of the fire, not something a firefighter said. When the story you had breaks, the thing that made you good at the old story becomes the thing that kills you in the new one.

3. Sensemaking, Out Loud

Weick's point is not about fire. It is about sense — sensemaking, he calls it. Sensemaking is building a shared, plausible account of what is happening, so people can act together. When the story you had no longer fits what is happening, sensemaking collapses — and Weick says people do not just lose the ability to understand. They lose the ability to act together. That is the crisis. And the leader's job in that moment is not to have the answer. It is to build the account — out loud, in front of everyone — so the room can act together again. And the level above is watching what you reach for when the plan is gone — not your plan, your rule. Ask yourself: what is your rule? Because the crisis will ask, and it will not wait for you to write one.

Joe Dutkiewicz

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4. The Rule You Decided Before

Burke ran Johnson and Johnson when seven people died after taking capsules that had been poisoned after they left the factory. The first recalls were limited to specific lots. The company wrongly denied having the poison at its own facility — and Burke corrected that himself. The regulators first opposed a nationwide recall. So nothing about this was instant, and nothing about it was clean. But Burke had a rule, written decades before, in the company's credo: customers first, then employees, then communities, then shareholders. And when the argument came, he reached for it. He said the credo gave him the ammunition he needed to persuade the shareholders to spend a hundred million dollars pulling thirty-one million bottles off the shelves. Burke did not decide in the crisis. He decided before it — and then the crisis just asked him which rule he had already chosen.

5. Your First Sentence Is the Crisis

A passenger was dragged off a flight — David Dao — and the video was everywhere within hours. Oscar Munoz, the chief executive, opened with an apology for having to re-accommodate those customers. Re-accommodate. While the video showed a man being dragged down an aisle. The next day he reversed himself completely — called it truly horrific — and nobody believed the second sentence, because the first one had already told the truth about how he was thinking. Your first sentence tells the room the kind of leader you are, before you have said anything else. That is why the first sentence is not a message. It is sensemaking, out loud.

The picture: Vera's payment system goes down. Customers cannot check out, the phones are lighting up, and her vice president is already asking for a briefing. She does not know what caused it yet. She has to say something anyway — and what she says first is the crisis.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — say the facts.** What happened, in plain words, with no adjectives and no blame. "The payment system is down. Customers cannot check out. We do not know the cause yet." Facts are the floor the room stands on. If you skip them, the room builds its own floor — out of rumor.

The facts:

- [ ] **Step two — say the gaps.** What you do not know, and what you are doing to find out. "We do not know whether it is the payment provider or our own code. Two engineers are tracing it now, and I will update you in an hour." A gap you name is a gap you own. A gap you hide gets filled by someone else's guess.

What I do not know:



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☐ **Step three — say what it means.** This is the sensemaking step. What does this mean for the team, for the customers, for the next decision? "It means no new orders until it is fixed, and it means the launch call moves to tomorrow." Meaning is what turns facts into a story the room can act on.

What it means:

☐ **Step four — say what happens next.** The next move, and when you will be back with more. "I am calling the provider now. I will brief you again at noon, sooner if anything changes." Next is what keeps the room from freezing. People can live with bad news. They cannot act on silence.

The next move:

When I will be back:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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