THE PLAYBOOK

The Cadence

Installing an operating rhythm in your first ninety days. For the person building it, and the leader who has to keep it.

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Contents

OPENING

Reactive is a choice somebody made

Most advice about your first ninety days is about you. Build relationships, learn the culture, secure a quick win, do not change too much too fast. It is reasonable, it is everywhere, and it is written for an executive joining a company.

This is a different document. It assumes you are the person whose actual job is to make a business predictable, and that the ninety days are not about proving yourself. They are about installing something.

Here is the thing worth understanding before you start. A business that runs reactively is not doing so because it is busy. It runs reactively because nothing was ever scheduled to happen on purpose, so everything arrives as an interruption and is dealt with in the order it shouts.

That is fixable, and the fix is unglamorous. It is a small number of things that happen on the same day every week, whether or not anyone feels like it, producing artefacts that persist. That is a cadence, and installing one is the highest-leverage thing an operator can do in a first quarter.

The failure mode is equally predictable. Most new operators arrive with improvements in week two, before they have any standing, and spend the rest of the quarter wondering why nothing stuck.

> **You cannot install a rhythm into a business you do not yet understand. The first month is for watching.**

CHAPTER 1

What a cadence is, and what it is not

A cadence is not a meeting schedule. Plenty of businesses have a crowded calendar and no rhythm at all, which is usually worse than having neither.

A cadence is a small set of recurring moments, each with a defined purpose, a defined output, and a rule for what happens between them. The output is the part people skip, and it is the part that makes it real. A meeting that produces nothing durable is an expense.

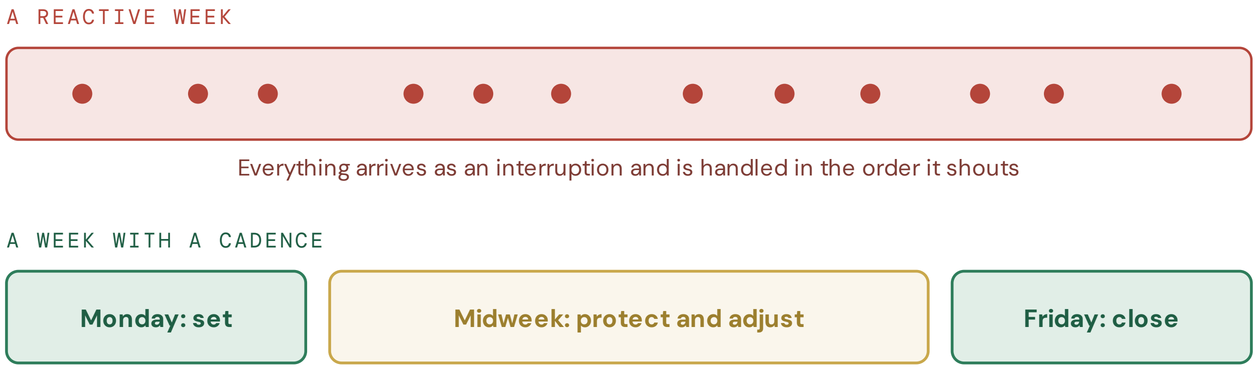

Figure: the same amount of work, arriving on purpose instead of at random

Three beats is enough for most small businesses, and adding more usually reduces adherence rather than increasing control. Monday sets the week and names what matters. The middle of the week is for protecting focus and absorbing whatever reality brings. Friday closes the loop so nothing carries over silently into a weekend.

Around that weekly spine sit two slower beats: a monthly look at whether the numbers match the intentions, and a quarterly reset that changes the priorities rather than merely reporting on them.

CHAPTER 2

Days 1 to 30: map before you move

The first month produces no improvements. It produces an accurate picture, which is the thing every subsequent decision depends on and the thing almost nobody has.

Ask everyone the same two questions. Meet every person the leader works with regularly and ask what should be happening that is not, and what wastes their time. Two questions, everyone, written down verbatim. The overlap between answers is your work list for the quarter, and it will be more accurate than anything you could have deduced alone.

Follow the actual week. Not the calendar, the week. Where does the leader's time truly go, what arrives unplanned, what gets dropped, and what recurring thing does somebody rebuild by hand every cycle. You are looking for the gap between the stated process and the real one, and there is always a gap.

Find the work that belongs to nobody. Every small company has it: the follow-up that never happens, the report assembled from four places, the onboarding that differs every time. It is not owned because it sits between functions, and it is the most available territory you have.

RESIST THIS SPECIFIC TEMPTATION

You will see something obviously broken in week one and want to fix it immediately. Write it down instead. Fixing it in week one buys a small win and costs the thing you need more: a month of people telling you the truth because you were still listening rather than already prescribing.

The one exception is anything actively on fire. Put it out, then return to watching. A month of listening does not mean a month of doing nothing visible; it means a month of not restructuring anything.

CHAPTER 3

The four artefacts

A cadence is made real by things that persist after the conversation ends. Four artefacts carry almost all of the value, and none of them requires software you do not already have.

01 The Monday brief

Short, written, sent before the week starts. The three priorities, the meetings that need preparation, and anything at risk or waiting on someone. It replaces the meeting most companies hold to find out what is happening.

02 The decision log

What was decided, who owns it, by when. One line each. This is the single highest-value artefact in operations work and chapter five is entirely about it.

03 The Friday close

What shipped, what slipped and why, what is teed up. Sent on the same day every week, including the weeks when the answer is unimpressive. Especially then.

04 The escalation rule

A written statement of what interrupts the leader immediately, what waits for Monday, and who decides in their absence. Without this, everything is an interruption by default.

Notice that three of the four are written and asynchronous. That is deliberate. A cadence built entirely from meetings collapses the first time somebody travels. One built from written artefacts survives illness, time zones and a bad week, which is the actual test.

Keep each one short enough that producing it takes minutes rather than an hour. An artefact that is expensive to produce is an artefact that stops being produced, usually around week six.

CHAPTER 4

Days 31 to 60: install it

Now you build, and the discipline is to build one thing at a time and let each become normal before adding the next. A cadence introduced all at once is experienced as bureaucracy and quietly rejected.

W 5 **Start with the Friday close**

Counterintuitive, and correct. It is the least intrusive, it demands nothing from anyone else, and within three weeks people start expecting it. You are establishing that something reliable now exists.

W 6 **Add the Monday brief**

Once the week has an ending, give it a beginning. Write it yourself from what you already know, and ask the leader to correct rather than compose it.

W 7 **Introduce the decision log**

Begin quietly, by capturing decisions in meetings you already attend and circulating them afterwards. Nobody has to agree to a decision log for it to start working.

W 8 **Write the escalation rule**

By now you have watched enough interruptions to draft it accurately. Propose it as a draft, get it corrected, then hold it.

Two rules make the difference between installing a cadence and merely proposing one.

Never miss one. Not once, not for a busy week, not while travelling. The value of a rhythm is entirely in its reliability, and it takes roughly four consistent weeks before people stop treating it as your initiative and start treating it as how things work.

Do it whether or not anyone responds. Early on, few people will. Send it anyway. Adoption of a written cadence looks like silence for a month and then someone asking where the Friday note is because it is ten past five.

CHAPTER 5

The decision log

If you only install one artefact, install this. Most small companies do not fail at deciding. They fail at remembering what was decided, so the same conversation runs again six weeks later with slightly different attendees and a slightly different outcome.

DATE	DECISION	OWNER	BY WHEN	STATUS
14 Mar	Move client reporting to monthly	Ana	28 Mar	**done**
14 Mar	Pause the second hire until Q3	Founder	immediate	**done**
21 Mar	Raise retainer on two accounts	Sam	4 Apr	**late**

Figure: five columns, one line per decision, and nothing else

The power is in the fourth and fifth columns. A decision without an owner is a preference, and a decision without a date is a wish. Recording both, in a place people can see, changes behaviour without anyone having to enforce anything.

Review it at the top of every weekly meeting, briefly. Read the open lines aloud, ask for status, and move on. That single habit does more for follow-through than any project tool, because the discomfort of reporting the same item as unfinished three weeks running is a far better motivator than a reminder.

One warning. Log decisions, not tasks. A decision log that fills with to-do items becomes a duplicate task list nobody maintains. If it would not have been worth discussing, it does not belong here.

CHAPTER 6

Days 61 to 90: make it survive you

By month three the rhythm exists. The final phase is about making sure it is a property of the business rather than a service you personally provide, which is a distinction most operators never get to and the one that determines whether any of this outlasts you.

Write down how each artefact is produced. Where the numbers come from, who is chased for what, what the template is. Short enough to follow, specific enough that a competent stranger could produce Friday's note without asking you anything.

Automate the assembly, not the judgment. If the Friday close requires opening four systems, schedule the export instead. The gathering should be mechanical; the interpretation stays with a person. This is also where most of the time saving actually lives.

Hand one beat to somebody else. Have another person run the Monday brief for two weeks while you review it. If it holds, the cadence belongs to the business. If it collapses, you have learned something important about how much of it was really you.

Then take a week off and watch what happens. The same test that applies to any handoff applies here. Whatever still runs is installed. Whatever stops was a service you were providing, and now you know which.

> THE MEASURE WORTH REPORTING AT NINETY DAYS
>
> Not how many meetings you run. How many decisions were logged, how many closed on time, and how many things reached the leader that should not have. Those three numbers describe an operating system. Meeting counts describe a calendar.

CHAPTER 7

Why cadences die in week six

Almost every abandoned operating rhythm dies at roughly the same point, and it is not because it stopped working. It is because it worked, the pressure eased, and something urgent arrived in a week when the rhythm felt optional.

Three specific causes, in order of frequency.

The leader skipped one and nothing bad happened. That single event teaches everyone that the cadence is discretionary. The fix is not discipline, it is design: the beat must still occur when the leader is absent. If Monday's brief goes out whether or not they read it, there is nothing to skip.

The artefact became too expensive. A Friday note that started at five lines grew into a report, and at forty minutes a week it lost to real work. Ruthlessly keep them short. Length is not thoroughness; it is decay.

It never produced a visible consequence. If nothing ever changes as a result of the Monday priorities or the decision log, people correctly conclude it is theatre. The cadence has to bite at least occasionally, which usually means someone being asked in public why an item is still open.

> **Design the rhythm so that skipping it is harder than keeping it. Willpower is not a mechanism.**

Expect the wobble around week six and plan for it. When it comes, do not add anything. Shorten what exists and keep sending.

CHAPTER 8

What the leader has to hold

An operator can build all of this and still watch it fail, because three parts of it can only be held by the person at the top. If you are the founder reading this, these are yours.

Attend the beat you agreed to attend. Not every week if that is unrealistic, but the ones you committed to. Every skipped instance costs more than the hour it saved, because it tells the organisation what is actually optional.

Let the decision log correct you in public. The first time an item shows as late and the owner is you, how you respond sets the tone permanently. Acknowledge it plainly and give a new date. If you explain it away, the log becomes decorative within a month.

Route things through the rhythm rather than around it. The fastest way to kill a cadence is to keep making decisions in corridors and direct messages, because then the meetings are ceremonial and everyone knows it. If it is genuinely urgent, decide it and log it afterwards.

What you get in exchange is worth the constraint. A business where the important things are scheduled stops generating the specific kind of exhaustion that comes from everything being a surprise. And you gain something more valuable than time: the ability to be absent without the business quietly stopping.

That is the real product of an operating cadence. Not tidiness. Optionality.

CLOSING

The deliverable is calm

Ninety days is long enough to install a rhythm and short enough that you cannot install five. So install one, properly.

Spend the first month watching and asking two questions of everybody. Spend the second building four small artefacts, one a week, and never missing one. Spend the third writing down how they are produced, handing one to somebody else, and then leaving for a week to find out what is real.

The work is not impressive to describe. A short note on Monday, a log of what was decided, a note on Friday, and a written rule about what counts as urgent. Nobody has ever been applauded for any of it.

But a business that runs on a rhythm feels entirely different from one that does not, and the difference is legible to everyone inside it. Fewer surprises. Fewer decisions relitigated. Fewer weeks that end with nobody quite sure what happened.

The output of good operations work is not a full calendar or a busy tool. It is a leadership team that is rarely surprised, and that is something you can build on purpose, in a quarter, starting with a five line note this Friday.

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