THE PLAYBOOK

The Commitment

An accountability rhythm for a small team, without micromanaging anyone. What gets recorded, what gets read aloud, and what happens when something has been open for three weeks.

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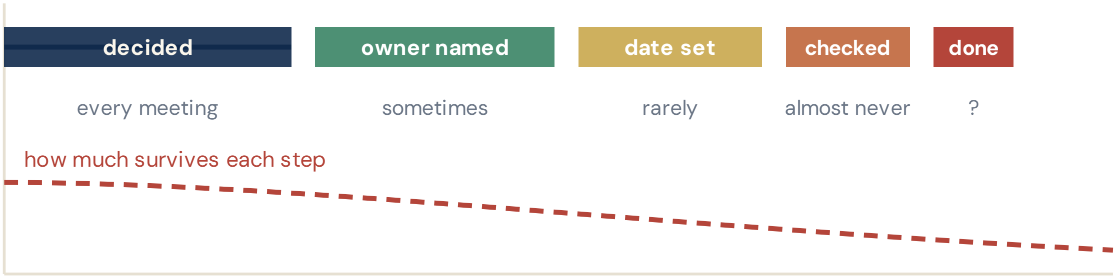
OPENING

Nobody is chasing anyone

In a small business, things get decided and then quietly do not happen. Not through negligence. Everyone is busy, the decision was made in a meeting, nobody wrote down who owned it, and six weeks later the same conversation runs again with slightly different attendees.

The instinct is to describe this as an accountability problem, which sounds like a problem with people. It is almost never a problem with people.

WHERE ACCOUNTABILITY LEAKS IN A SMALL TEAM



Nothing here is a discipline problem. Each stage simply has nobody assigned to it.
The narrow end is where small businesses lose the work they already decided to do.

Figure: decisions do not fail at the moment of deciding. They fail at owner, date and check.

Decisions do not fail at the moment of deciding. They fail at three specific points afterwards, and each of those points is a job nobody was given.

This playbook describes a weekly rhythm that closes those three gaps. It takes about fifteen minutes a week, it needs no software, and the whole thing rests on one artefact that is on the last page of this document.

WHAT THIS IS NOT

It is not a productivity system and it does not track tasks. Task trackers already exist and they are not the problem. This tracks a much smaller number of things: what people said they would do, in front of other people.

CHAPTER 1

Why work slips in small teams

Three causes, and it is worth separating them because they need different responses.

Nobody owns it. A decision that belongs to the team belongs to nobody. This is the largest category by some distance and the easiest to fix, because it only requires a name being said out loud at the moment of deciding.

There is no date. An owner without a date has a preference rather than a commitment. Not because they are casual about it, but because work with no date loses every week to work that has one, and that is rational behaviour rather than a failing.

Nobody looks again. The quietest of the three. Owner and date exist, and nothing ever prompts anyone to check. In a small business this is usually because checking feels like distrust, so the person who would naturally check decides not to.

> **A decision without an owner is a preference. A decision without a date is a wish. A decision nobody looks at again is a conversation.**

Notice that none of the three is a motivation problem, and none is solved by talking to anyone about their attitude. All three are solved by a rhythm and a piece of paper.

CHAPTER 2

Commitments, not tasks

The distinction that makes this work, and the one people skip.

A task is something on a list. There are hundreds, they belong in whatever tracker you already use, and putting them here makes this unusable within a fortnight.

A commitment is something a person said, in front of others, that they would do by a date. There are two or three per person per week, and they are the ones where the business depends on the answer.

The test I use: **would it be strange for this to still be undone in a fortnight without anybody mentioning it?** If yes, it is a commitment. If no, it is a task and it belongs elsewhere.

> TWO OR THREE PER PERSON, HARD LIMIT
>
> A ledger with eleven items per person is a task list and will be abandoned. The scarcity is what gives each line weight, and the discipline of choosing which two matter is itself useful.

One consequence worth being ready for: the first few weeks will feel thin. Three people, seven lines, fifteen minutes. That is correct. The value is not in volume, it is in the fact that those seven things now have owners, dates and a witness.

CHAPTER 3

The weekly ledger

One page, one meeting, fifteen minutes, at the same time every week.

LAST WEEK, READ ALOUD IN NINETY SECONDS

WHO	SAID THEY WOULD	BY	DID THEY	WEEKS OPEN
Ana	send the revised scope to Acme	Wed	✓	–
Sam	confirm the vendor renewal date	Fri	!	2
Priya	rebuild the weekly report query	Thu	✓	–
Sam	draft the pricing note	Mon	✗	**3**

The last column is the whole mechanism. Three weeks open is a conversation, not a nudge.

Figure: a register of what people said they would do, with the age of anything unfinished visible to everyone.

Read it aloud, in order, and keep it fast. The format is deliberately monotonous: name, what they said, by when, did it happen. No discussion during the read. Anything needing discussion is noted and picked up after the list is finished, which stops one item consuming the whole slot.

The last column is the mechanism. Not a status, an age. How many weeks this has been open. A single missed week is a normal week. The same line reading three weeks running is a signal, and it is visible to everyone without anyone having to raise it.

Then set the coming week: two or three commitments per person, stated by them rather than assigned by you. **Stated by them** matters. A commitment somebody made is different from a task somebody received, and the difference shows up precisely in the weeks when it is inconvenient.

CHAPTER 4

Making it safe to say no

Here is where this either becomes useful or becomes theatre, and it turns on one thing: whether people can decline.

If the only acceptable answer is yes, people will commit to everything and quietly miss half of it. You will then have a ledger full of red marks and a team that has learned the ledger is a compliance exercise. That is worse than not running it, because you have added a ritual and reduced the honesty.

So make three responses equally acceptable, out loud, in the first session.

01 **Yes, by Thursday**

The normal case.

02 **Not this week, because of X**

Legitimate, and useful information about capacity that you would not otherwise have.

03 **Yes if Y moves**

The most valuable answer and the one people are most reluctant to give. It surfaces a trade-off while it is still a choice rather than after something has slipped.

The first time somebody declines and nothing bad happens, the ledger becomes real. Until then it is a list of things people felt obliged to agree to.

The manager's job in that moment is not to negotiate. It is to say that is fine, write down what moved instead, and move on visibly quickly.

CHAPTER 5

The three-week signal

The age column exists to produce one specific conversation at one specific moment, and to prevent that conversation happening earlier than it should.

One week open is nothing. Weeks go badly. No comment, no note, move on.

Two weeks open is a question, asked privately. Not in the meeting. A short message: this has been open a fortnight, is something in the way of it? The answer is usually informative and rarely about effort.

Three weeks open is a decision, and it is usually not the one people expect. The item is either genuinely important, in which case something else has to move to make room for it, or it is not, in which case it should be dropped and removed from the ledger.

That second outcome is the one small businesses find hardest. A commitment that has survived three weeks of not being done is usually telling you it was never a priority, and letting it sit is how a ledger fills with items everyone has silently agreed to ignore.

DROPPING THINGS IS A SUCCESS

Say so explicitly the first time it happens. If dropping an item feels like failing, nobody will propose it, and the ledger will accumulate dead weight until people stop reading it.

CHAPTER 6

What the owner has to hold

Three behaviours from whoever leads, and all three are harder than they look.

Put your own commitments on the ledger. Same format, same age column, read aloud with everyone else's. A leader whose items are not on the list has built a monitoring system, and everyone can see that is what it is.

Report your own misses first and plainly. The first time your line reads two weeks open, how you respond sets the tone permanently. Acknowledge it, give a new date, move on. If you explain it away, everybody learns that explanations are acceptable and the ledger becomes decorative within a month.

Do not use it in performance conversations. This is the one that decides whether the whole thing survives. The moment the ledger is evidence in a review, people commit defensively: fewer items, safer items, and quiet renegotiation outside the meeting. You will have destroyed the information you built it to get.

> **The ledger is a coordination tool. Use it as a performance record once and it stops being either.**

What you get in return is worth the restraint. Within about two months you will know, without asking anyone, which parts of the business reliably close and which do not, and that is a considerably more useful thing to know than who is busy.

CHAPTER 7

When someone keeps missing

Occasionally the ledger surfaces a genuine pattern: one person, repeatedly, across weeks. This is what it is for, and the response should be a conversation rather than a system.

Assume a cause other than effort first, because it usually is. In rough order of frequency: they are overloaded and cannot say so, they are blocked by somebody who does not report to them, the commitments are larger than they appear from the outside, or they do not have the authority the work needs.

Ask what would have to be true for this to close this week. A better question than why it did not, because it produces a plan rather than a defence.

Watch for the pattern where someone commits to too much. Some people say yes reflexively, and the ledger will show it clearly. That is a coaching conversation about capacity, not a performance issue, and handling it as the latter usually makes it worse.

And if it is genuinely a performance problem, the ledger has given you something valuable: specific, dated, uncontested examples. Have that conversation separately, properly, and not in the weekly meeting.

Visible beats enforced

Nothing in this playbook enforces anything. There is no consequence written into it, no escalation path and no scoring.

What it does is make commitments visible, aged, and read aloud in front of the people they affect. That turns out to be sufficient in most small teams, because the reason work slips is almost never that people do not care. It is that nobody could see what was outstanding, including the person who owned it.

Fifteen minutes, one page, same time each week. Two or three commitments per person, stated by them. An age column. And a leader whose own items are on the list and whose own misses are read out first.

Start with the next weekly meeting you already have rather than adding one. The page overleaf is the ledger; it is deliberately narrow so that filling it takes a minute and reading it takes ninety seconds.

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THE TOOL

Weekly commitment ledger

One page · read aloud · v1

Who	Said they would	By	Done?	Weeks open

Rules. Two or three lines per person, no more. Commitments, not tasks: would it be strange for this to still be undone in a fortnight without anyone mentioning it? Stated by the person, not assigned. The leader's own items go on the list and are read first.

One week open is nothing. Two weeks is a private question. Three weeks is a decision: make room for it, or drop it and say so.