



THE PLAYBOOK

The Follow-Through

Working with an executive who is disorganised, unresponsive, or both. How to make things happen when you cannot make anyone do anything.

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The reply that never came

You sent it on Tuesday. It needed an answer by Friday. It is now the following Wednesday, three people are waiting on it, and the person who has to decide has read the message and not replied.

You cannot escalate, because they are the escalation. You cannot decide it, because it is above your line. You cannot chase again without becoming the person who chases, which is a reputation that quietly costs you more than the delay.

Almost every executive assistant, chief of staff and operations manager knows this specific feeling, and most of the advice about it is useless because it assumes you can change the other person.

You cannot. That is the premise of this playbook, not a failure within it.

The executive will keep being disorganised, or slow, or prone to deciding things in corridors and forgetting to tell anyone. What you can change is the system around them, and a surprising amount of what looks like a personality problem turns out to be a design problem with a fixable shape.

This is written for the person doing the managing up. If you are the executive and you recognise yourself here, chapter eight is yours, and it is short.

Your executive is not going to change

Start here, because the alternative wastes years. The senior person you support has succeeded so far while being exactly as they are. The behaviour you find difficult has, from their side, been survivable and often rewarded.

So the goal is not to fix them. The goal is to build something that produces good outcomes anyway, which is a different and far more achievable project.

The reframe that makes this work is to stop treating their responsiveness as a variable you influence and start treating it as a constraint you design around. **An executive who answers reliably within two days is a system with a two-day latency.** That is workable, once you stop expecting two hours and building plans that assume it.

Design for the executive you have, not the one their calendar implies they intend to be.

This has a practical consequence. If a decision genuinely needs to be made by Friday, and their observed latency is five days, then the request has to leave on Monday, and a Monday request is a planning act rather than a reminder. Most chasing is a symptom of having asked too late for the latency you actually face.

Measure it honestly for a month. How long does an answer really take, and does it vary by channel, by topic, or by day. You will find patterns, and the patterns are the whole strategy.

The three failure patterns

Almost all difficulty supporting a senior person falls into three shapes. They need different responses, and treating one as another is why so much of this feels futile.

01 The overloaded executive

They want to answer and cannot keep up. Nothing is being ignored; everything is queued. The fix is reducing what needs them and making what remains answerable in seconds.

02 The avoidant executive

Certain categories of decision never get answered, usually the ones involving money, conflict, or telling somebody no. Everything else moves fine. The fix is making the decision smaller and the default explicit.

03 The corridor decider

They decide constantly, quickly, and verbally, then move on. Nothing is slow; it is simply unrecorded, so the same thing gets decided three different ways. The fix is capture, not chasing.

Diagnose before you intervene. An overloaded executive treated as avoidant will experience your pressure as unfair. An avoidant one treated as overloaded will receive more streamlining and still not answer, because volume was never the problem.

The tell is simple. **Look at what does get answered.** If everything is slow, they are overloaded. If most things move and a specific category stalls, they are avoiding. If everything moves and nothing is written down, you have a corridor decider and your job is a decision log rather than a reminder.

Chasing without nagging

The reason chasing damages relationships is that it repeats the same request in the same form, so each instance carries an unspoken message that they failed to act on the last one. The fix is that each contact must add something.

01 The first ask carries a deadline and a default

"I need a decision by Thursday. If I do not hear back I will proceed with option A." Now silence is a decision rather than a gap, which removes most follow-ups entirely.

02 The second contact is information, not a reminder

"Two of the three quotes came back lower than expected, so this is now simpler than it looked." You are giving them a reason to open it, not asking why they did not.

03 The third contact narrows the ask

Reduce it to a single yes or no. "Shall I book the Tuesday slot, yes or no." Most stalls are cognitive load, and shrinking the decision usually releases it.

04 The fourth changes channel and states the cost

Say it aloud, briefly, with the consequence attached. "If this does not land today we lose the rate." Not a complaint. A fact they did not have.

The default in step one is the single highest-value habit in this chapter, and it is underused because it feels presumptuous. It is the opposite. **You are removing an obligation from a busy person and taking responsibility for a sensible outcome**, which is what they hired you to do.

Keep defaults proportionate. Reversible things get an assumed yes. Expensive or public things always wait, and you say so.

Writing so a busy person can answer

A great deal of what reads as unresponsiveness is really unanswerability. The message arrived and could not be dealt with in the thirty seconds available, so it was postponed, and postponed things accumulate.

Put the ask in the first line. Not the background. The decision needed, the deadline, and the default. Everything else goes underneath for the reader who wants it, and most of the time nobody does.

Make the reply one word if possible. Options labelled A, B and C, with your recommendation marked, is answerable from a phone in a lift. A paragraph asking what they think about a complex situation is not, and will wait for a calm moment that never arrives.

One decision per message. Bundling three asks means the whole thing waits for the hardest one. Send three messages; they are each answerable and they clear independently.

Say what happens if they do nothing. This converts an open loop into a closed one and it is the difference between a message that nags and a message that reassures.

THE TEST BEFORE SENDING

Read it back and ask: could this be answered correctly in fifteen seconds by someone walking between meetings? If not, it will not be answered today, and you have chosen a delay you could have avoided.

This is a skill, not a personality trait, and it is the most portable one in this playbook. It works on unresponsive clients, slow vendors and busy colleagues equally well.

Making the decision easy to make

Some things stall not because of volume or avoidance but because the decision as presented is genuinely hard to make from the information given. That is fixable by you, before you send anything.

Do the work of narrowing. Arriving with a question is a request for effort. Arriving with two options, the trade-off named, and a recommendation is a request for a signature. Same decision, a tenth of the cost to the person making it.

Name what you would do and why, in one line. This feels like overstepping and it is the fastest route to being trusted with more. A recommendation that turns out well builds authority; one that is overruled teaches you how they think, which is equally useful.

Attach the consequence of each path, not just the features. "Option A costs more and we keep the Friday launch. Option B saves nine hundred and moves launch to the following week." Executives decide on consequences and are slowed by specifications.

Separate the reversible from the permanent. Say which this is. People are appropriately slower on doors that only open one way, and telling them a decision is easily undone often releases it immediately.

Every question you send upward should already have most of the thinking done. That is not presumption; it is the job.

Disagreeing upward

Support instincts run toward smoothing, so the hardest part of this work is saying the unwelcome thing. It is also where the difference between an assistant and an operator becomes visible.

Disagree early, on the plan, not late, on the outcome. Raising a concern before something starts is contribution. Raising it afterwards is criticism, and it lands entirely differently even when the content is identical.

Lead with the shared goal, then the obstacle. "You want this live before the conference. The dependency on the vendor makes that unlikely, and here is what would make it possible." You are not opposing them; you are protecting the thing they said they wanted.

Bring the evidence, not the feeling. "I think this is a bad idea" invites a contest of judgment you will lose. "The last three times we did this it slipped by two weeks" is a fact they now have to account for.

Then commit fully once decided. Say your piece once, properly, and if the answer is still no, execute as though it were your idea. **An operator who relitigates a settled decision stops being asked for an opinion,** which costs you the influence you were trying to use.

Choose the channel deliberately. Disagreement in writing looks like a position; disagreement spoken looks like thinking together. Where tone matters, say it aloud and confirm in writing afterwards.

When it is not you

Everything in this playbook assumes a difficult but workable situation. Some are not, and it matters to know the difference so you do not spend two years assuming better technique will fix something structural.

It is workable when the difficulty is inconsistent responsiveness, disorganisation, or a habit of deciding without recording. Those are constraints and this book is about designing around them.

It is not workable when the pattern includes blame for outcomes you had no authority over, decisions reversed after the fact and denied, or requests that require you to be dishonest with other people. No system fixes those, and enduring them well is not a professional achievement.

The honest signal is your own record. If you cannot point to anything that has improved in a year despite good work, and the constraints are the same ones you identified at the start, the environment is the variable rather than your approach.

BEFORE YOU CONCLUDE THAT

Give the design six months of genuine effort first. Defaults in every request, one decision per message, a written record of what was decided. Most situations that feel impossible are untried rather than hopeless, and the difference is only visible after you have actually tried.

But hold the line honestly. Managing up is a skill, not an obligation to make any arrangement work at any cost to yourself.

If you are the executive

Short, and it is the chapter with the highest return.

Answer with one word when one word will do. Your assistant is not waiting for a considered paragraph. Yes, no, or "ask me Thursday" unblocks people instantly and costs you four seconds.

Accept the defaults you are offered. When someone writes "I will proceed with A unless you say otherwise," that is a gift. Silence becomes a decision and you have delegated something without any effort at all.

Tell them what you are avoiding. If a category of decision keeps stalling, name it. "I am putting off the pricing conversation" lets them help. Silence just makes them assume it is lost in a queue and chase you about it.

Route decisions through the record. If you decide something in a corridor, say it out loud to the person who keeps the log. Corridor decisions that are never captured get re-decided differently and cost far more than the meeting you avoided.

And notice who is chasing you well. A person who consistently arrives with the thinking done and a sensible default is doing something skilled, and the correct response is to give them more authority so they need to ask less often.

Steady is the whole job

Nothing in this playbook makes a disorganised executive organised. That was never available.

What it does is remove most of the situations where their disorganisation becomes your emergency. Defaults so silence resolves. Messages answerable in fifteen seconds. Decisions narrowed to a signature. Disagreement raised early and dropped once settled. And an honest read on which of the three patterns you are actually dealing with.

Do that consistently and something quietly changes. You stop experiencing the relationship as a series of things you are waiting for, and start experiencing it as a system with a known latency that you plan around.

That is a better job, and it is also what gets you trusted with more, because the person who never seems to be stuck is the person you hand the harder thing to.

Pick one habit this week. Put a default in every request you send upward. Just that, for a fortnight, and see how much less chasing you do.

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