

# Nobody Had Questions

The field cards · Francis C. Corrigan

One card per chapter. Each carries the idea in a line, the drill, what to watch for, and a check you can actually run — plus what it costs in time, and what to do when you have no authority over anyone.

They're built to be used one at a time. Print the one you're running this week and leave the rest. Nothing here needs the book open beside it.

**01** Purpose · Direction · Motivation

**02** Be, Know, Do

**03** Tell Them What, Not How

**04** Character

**05** Presence

**06** Intellect

**07** Build Trust

**08** Lead by Example

**09** Communicate Intent, Not Noise

**10** Set the Climate

**11** Grow People

**12** Get Results

**13** The Three Altitudes

**14** Building a Team That Outlasts You

**15** Taking Over

## Purpose • Direction • Motivation

**The idea (one line):** Leadership is giving people purpose, direction, and motivation — and direction is the *middle* one. Most managers deliver the middle and skip the ends.

**Do this:**

1. Before you assign anything, write **why it matters** — the specific consequence, this week.
2. Write **what done looks like** — an observable state two reasonable people couldn't argue about.
3. Say them in that order, *then* the steps.
4. Ask for it back: *"Tell me what done looks like, so I know I said it right."*

**Watch for:** the questions you get. *"Should I...?"* means you gave steps. *"I'm going to, unless..."* means you gave purpose.

**The check:** count the interruptions your assignment should have answered. One week now, one week after.

**Time:** two minutes per assignment. The check is a tally, not a project.

**Say this:** *"Here's why this matters: [the consequence, this week]. Done looks like [observable state]. Now tell me what done looks like, so I know I said it right."*

**In 60 seconds:** skip the week-long count. Just note the next three questions you get that your assignment should already have answered.

**No authority?** You still hand people things — a request to a peer, a brief to a contractor, an ask to another team. Run it on the next one. It works better without authority, not worse, because purpose is all you have.

## Be, Know, Do

**The idea (one line):** What you know is one of three parts of leading, and it's the part that transfers least — skill gets you the job, it isn't the job.

**Do this:** when someone struggles, work out which piece is broken.

1. **KNOW gap** — they lack information or skill. Cheap. Show them once.
2. **DO gap** — they know and can't execute it yet. Trainable. Coach and practice.
3. **BE gap** — judgment under pressure. Slow. Experience plus reflection, never a course.

Competencies are trained. Attributes are molded by experience over time. Putting a BE problem on a training plan buys a certificate and loses a year.

**Watch for:** your best day at work being a day you did your *old* job unusually well.

**The check:** for one week, log every hour someone spent waiting on you. That total is the price of your expertise being the bottleneck.

**Time:** the log is passive — about five minutes total across a week.

**Say this,** when you hand back a permission gap: *"I'm not going to be the person who decides this any more. Here's the rule. From now on it's yours, and I won't review it."*

**In 60 seconds:** don't log a week. List the three people who waited on you yesterday, and what for.

**No authority?** Works unchanged. Count the hours anyone spent waiting on you — peers included. Being a bottleneck doesn't require a title.

## Tell Them What, Not How

**The idea (one line):** Give the outcome and the boundaries; let them choose the method — a person who understands the point can adapt when the plan dies.

**Do this:** before anything that will outlive one conversation, write three sentences.

1. **What this is for** — the consequence in the world.
2. **What done looks like** — the observable end state.
3. **The walls** — two or three hard limits. Not more; a fence with forty rails is a runbook again.

Then say it out loud: *if conditions change, these three hold — the steps don't.*

**Underwrite the honest mistake.** Acting toward your intent, inside the walls, with the information available at the time: that cost lands on you. One clipped question in front of others and initiative is gone for good.

**Watch for:** intent with a method hidden inside it. If two competent people couldn't satisfy it by doing different things, it's a procedure wearing a purpose.

**The check:** ask someone two levels down to name **the walls** — what's off-limits on this piece of work. Purpose travels; boundaries almost never do, and boundaries are what stop initiative turning into damage. If they can't name one, the intent reached them and the fence didn't.

**Time:** five minutes to write the three sentences. Ten to test them.

**Say this,** after the instructions: *"If conditions change, those three still hold. The steps don't."*

**The override rule** — because "underwrite the honest mistake" needs a limit: **let it run unless it's irreversible, unsafe, or reaches a customer.** Inside that boundary, absorb the cost. Outside it, step in and say plainly why this one was different.

**No authority?** Ask the person who actually has to act, and one person adjacent to them. Two people who agree on the walls is the same test at smaller scale.

## Character

**The idea (one line):** Character is revealed through decisions and actions — and more than anything else you do, it decides what you get told.

Two things get merged that are worth splitting: your **character** is your true nature, guided by your conscience. Your **reputation** is what others view as your character. You have direct access to the first and none at all to the second — your team only ever sees your decisions, never your reasons.

### Watch for:

1. **Stated values doing the work of demonstrated ones.** A value you have never paid for is, from the other side of the desk, indistinguishable from one you don't hold.
2. **Being principled only when it's cheap.** Teams notice, and it retroactively voids every easy call you got right.
3. **Humility without competence.** The condition people skip: you must have competence and confidence first, or it's an absence of judgement wearing a virtue's clothes.
4. **Sympathy standing in for empathy.** Feeling badly *about* your people asks nothing of you. Understanding their situation usually arrives with an obligation attached.

**The cost is the point.** A commitment that has never been expensive carries no information. Everyone is honest when honesty is free — what your team is waiting for is the first occasion where doing the right thing costs you a client, a quarter, or your own standing.

**The check:** take a live decision you haven't announced. Write down what you'll do. Then ask someone who works for you what they think you'll do. The gap between those answers is your reputation. If they can't predict you at all, they're waiting — and you've probably been calling that a lack of initiative.

**Time:** ten minutes to write the register. One thirty-second question.

**Say this:** *"I haven't decided this yet — what do you reckon I'm going to do?"* Asked casually. Don't defend the answer; you're collecting a reading, not opening a debate.

**No authority?** Ask a peer who has watched you make a call before. Reputation forms sideways as readily as downward — and if you have no authority, sideways is the only place it forms at all.

## Presence

**The idea (one line):** You are transmitting whether you mean to or not — and the stated purpose of bearing is that it **reduces organizational ambiguity.**

**Do this:**

1. When your state is visible and has nothing to do with the room, **name it in one sentence and move on.** *Rough morning, nothing to do with any of you.*
2. When you don't know, say so in the same breath as what you do know: *here's what I know, here's what I don't, here's when I'll know more.*
3. Hold the manner steady. Being readable is what lets people bring you things early.

**Watch for:** the gap between what you say and how you look — that gap is what gets believed. Performed calm doesn't read as *things are fine*. It reads as *we are not being told*, and speculation has no floor.

**Also watch for:** endurance theatre. Your capacity isn't private. Running on fumes isn't a sacrifice you're making, it's a cost you're passing on — and a standard you're setting for everyone junior to you.

**The check:** ask two people, separately, what kind of week they think you've been having. Compare it with the week you actually had. If they can't say, that's the finding — unreadable is the problem.

**Time:** two questions, thirty seconds each. The habit is free.

**Say this,** when your state is visible and unrelated to the room: *"Rough morning. Nothing to do with any of you."* And to collect the reading: *"What kind of week would you say I've been having?"*

**No authority?** Works unchanged, and matters more. When you can't direct anyone, your manner *is* the instrument — see gate 44.

## Intellect

**The idea (one line):** Intellect isn't how well you think — it's whether you're thinking about the right thing, and whether the people who can see what you can't will still say so.

**Do this — before you commit money or people:**

1. **Write the assumption.** One sentence about the world, not the plan. *The customers leaving are leaving over money.*
2. **Name the disconfirmer.** What would you have to see to conclude it's false? Write it *before* you look — evidence chosen after you're invested is chosen to be survivable.
3. **Go to the raw material.** Not the dashboard. Dashboards only answer questions someone already thought to ask.

**Watch for:** solving the problem you're good at, well. Excellent analysis, real expertise, no movement in the number. Your expertise is a lens and a blind spot in the same piece of glass.

**Tact, the demanding version:** state it honestly, *and* diplomatically enough to be understood. Both halves. Being right in a way nobody can act on isn't honesty — and softening it until it can be agreed with and ignored isn't tact.

**The check:** when did you last change your mind because of something a junior person said? If you can't name one in six months, the problem isn't the people telling you things.

**Time:** ten minutes to write the assumption and the disconfirmer. The looking takes longer, and that's the part that pays.

**Say this,** when someone brings you a half-formed hunch: *"Let me not react to that yet. What would I need to see to believe it?"* Then answer it later, in writing, to them.

**No authority?** Works unchanged. This drill is about your own thinking, and the hunch rule applies to anything anyone tells you.

## Build Trust

**The idea (one line):** Trust is a prediction, not a feeling — that what you say will hold, and that you'll do what you said when it costs you.

**The three parts: reliance** (will what you said happen), **confidence** (can you actually do it), **consistency** (are you the same on Thursday as Monday).

**Do this:**

1. **Never claim an outcome you don't control.** Promise only what you do.
2. When asked something you don't own, say: *I don't control that. Here's who does, here's what I'm arguing for, here's when I'll know.*
3. **Come back on that date** — especially when the answer is still "I don't know." That's the repetition that does the work.

**Watch for:** the apology offered in place of a change. An apology addresses the past; what people are pricing is the future, and only a changed mechanism is evidence about that.

**Know the cost before you spend it:** restoring broken trust takes *significant effort on the part of all affected*. Repair isn't yours alone to perform — they have to be willing, and you can't compel it.

**The check:** how many times this quarter did you say you'd come back by a date, and come back by that date? That fraction is reliance, as a number.

**Time:** twenty minutes for the audit. The replacement sentence costs nothing forever after.

**Say this,** for anything you don't control: *"I don't control that. Here's who does, here's what I'm arguing for, and here's when I'll know."* Then come back on that date — including when the answer is still "I don't know."

**No authority?** Works unchanged, and it's the whole game. With no authority, reliance is the only influence you have — see Odile, who managed nobody and everyone routed through.



## Lead by Example

**The idea (one line):** You are the standard — not the one you announce, the one you were last seen keeping.

**Why it transmits:** *what leaders see others do forms their expectations for decisions and actions.* People infer the real rule from what's tolerated, not from what's published. The evidence is asymmetric — keeping the standard is weak evidence, breaking it is strong evidence, and compliance afterwards doesn't offset it.

**Watch for:**

1. **The exception you're entitled to.** Your reasoning is invisible; your behavior isn't. What transmits is the exception, stripped of its justification.
2. **Modelling what you never meant to.** The 11 p.m. email you don't expect a reply to is still data about what the job requires.
3. **Punishing whoever upheld the standard.** Treat the person who failed the batch as the problem, and everyone learns the standard is real until it's expensive.

**Moral courage in daily operations is as important as physical courage in combat.** It rarely comes with proof. You'll be uncertain and hold anyway — a specification applied only when convenient isn't a specification.

**The check:** for one week note everything you did that you'd correct in someone who works for you. Then ask of each: *who saw it?* An exception with a witness isn't a lapse. It's a policy change you made by accident.

**Time:** passive noticing across a week. No instrument.

**Say this,** if you need to repair one out loud: *"I did the thing I'd have pulled someone else up for. I'm not doing it again."* Once. Then keep the standard where you broke it.

**In 60 seconds:** skip the week. Name the one exception you made yesterday, and who saw it.

**No authority?** Works unchanged. Nobody needs a title to set a standard by keeping it — and juniors are watched more closely than they think.

## Communicate Intent, Not Noise

**The idea (one line):** Communication is measured at the far end — you've communicated when shared understanding exists over there, not when you've said it clearly.

The easy version does not hold: communication is **more than the simple transmission of information**, and **leaders are responsible for ensuring shared understanding**. "I was clear" isn't a defence. Clarity is a property of your sentence; understanding is a property of them.

### Do this:

1. **Put the exclusion in the message.** Name what you *don't* mean — that's what survives being retold three times. *It does not mean rebuilding things that already work.*
2. **Use examples, not adjectives.** "Higher standards" compresses into anything. A real decision keeps its edges.
3. **Go and check.** Ask three people, one of them two levels down: *what do you think this means you should do differently?*

**Listen on three channels:** content, **urgency**, **emotion**. Most people receive content only, and the other two carry the actionable part. *"It's probably fine"* from someone normally precise is a request for you to disagree with them.

**Watch for:** composing your reply before they've finished. Not rudeness — bandwidth. From that moment you've stopped receiving, and it happens first when you disagree, which is when the information is worth most.

**The check:** ask three people what your last important message means they should do differently. How many gave the same answer?

**Time:** five minutes to write the exclusion. Three two-minute conversations.

**Say this:** *"What do you think this means you should do differently?"* Never "did you understand" — that question has one socially available answer.

**No authority?** Ask whoever has to act on your message, whatever the org chart says. You're testing what arrived, and that doesn't require them to report to you.

## Set the Climate

**The idea (one line):** Culture is the institution and mostly isn't yours. Climate is how your team experiences this quarter — and that is entirely yours.

**The engine:** *leader behavior signals to every member what is and is not tolerated.* The strongest signal is what you let pass without comment. It's unrehearsed, so it's believed — while your stated intentions cost nothing and get discounted.

**Do this:**

1. **Observe for three weeks before changing anything.** Who spoke first, who never spoke, who got interrupted, whose ideas got built on and whose got acknowledged then dropped.
2. **Write one falsifiable sentence.** *Junior people don't contradict senior people in front of others.* Not "we could be more open."
3. **Intervene in the four seconds.** *"Hang on, I want to hear the rest of that."* Four or five times is the whole intervention — it works because it's an observed event.
4. **Check what you reward.** One promotion, explained out loud, moves a climate further than a year of encouragement.

**Watch for:** a nice climate mistaken for a safe one. Pleasantness and candour are different variables, and a team that likes each other can be one where nobody says the hard thing *because* the relationships are valued.

**The check:** how long since someone contradicted someone more senior in front of you? Measure it in weeks. Expect satisfaction scores to dip before they rise — if climate work makes everyone happier immediately, you've made it more pleasant, not more honest.

**Time:** one minute after each meeting for three weeks. The intervention is eight seconds.

**Say this,** in the four seconds after someone is cut off or dismissed: *"Hang on — I want to hear the rest of that."* Four or five times is the whole intervention.

**In 60 seconds:** skip the three weeks. In your next meeting, note one thing only — who never spoke.

**No authority?** The four-second intervention works in any meeting you're sitting in, including ones you don't run. It carries less weight from a junior seat, and it still lands, because the person who was cut off hears it.

## Grow People

**The idea (one line):** If the assessment is news, the development didn't happen.

**Two checkable standards, and both are uncomfortable:**

- **No evaluation — positive or negative — should be a surprise.** A pass/fail test on your whole year, and you can't argue your way out of it.
- **The program includes everyone**, not just those thought to have the most potential. Attention follows perceived potential, then manufactures the evidence that the perception was right.

**Do this:**

1. **Twenty minutes, every two weeks, per person.** The interval matters more than the duration — it decides whether a live example is still in reach.
2. **One specific item.** Name the email, the meeting, the moment. "Stakeholder communication" can't be practiced. "You led with the blocker" can.
3. **Two written lines**, kept by both of you, so the next conversation starts where the last one ended.
4. **Ask first:** *what's the thing you'd most want to be better at by the summer?* They are an **active participant** — if all the diagnosis comes from you, they're a subject, and subjects comply rather than develop.

**Watch for:** the oblique mention. Raised generally, gently, unnamed. It discharges your discomfort, transfers nothing — and you'll count it as a conversation you had.

**Mentorship is voluntary.** You can assign a mentor. You can't assign mentorship. The half you can be held to is checking on someone unprompted.

**The check:** for each report — if you rated them today, what would it be, and *do they know?* Name the date and the incident where you told them. No date means you haven't.

**Time:** twenty minutes per person, every two weeks, ongoing. For six people that's two hours two weeks — know that before you start, not after.

**Say this**, to make feedback usable: *"In [the specific thing], you [did X]. Do [Y] instead."* Compare: "stakeholder communication" can't be practiced, and *"you led with the blocker"* can. And to open: *"What's the thing you'd most want to be better at by the summer?"*

**No authority?** Two ways in. Do it for anyone you're informally senior to — a new starter, someone you trained. And run it upward on yourself: *"If you rated me today, what would it be?"* The answer is the same instrument pointed the other way.

## Get Results

**The idea (one line):** Results are mostly subtraction — your job is creating the conditions where the work can finish, which usually means removing things you added.

The standard is two-part: **on time *and* to standard**. Getting results requires the right **integration** of tasks, roles, resources, and priorities — a design job, not an exhortation.

### Do this:

1. **Count what you sent.** Eight weeks of your own messages — how many things did you call the priority? Count before you guess. Everyone guesses low.
2. **Publish two.** A third only arrives by displacing one, and the displacement is said out loud: *X comes off, Y goes on*. That's a bill you pay upward.
3. **Declare the contradiction.** Obligations are *at times contradictory* and tells you to make it **transparent**. Pass it down undeclared and every person resolves it privately, differently — and reads it as personal failure.
4. **Assess mid-flight, weekly.** Not "are we on track." *What's most likely to make this late, and what would we do about it today?* Week three costs an email. Week nine costs three weeks.

**Watch for:** adding without subtracting. If you can't name what came off the list, you didn't prioritize. You queued.

**Remember what a result includes.** *Maintaining an effective organization* sits inside mission accomplishment. A number you can only hit once, by spending the team, is a loan.

**The check:** ask one person to log a week honestly. How many uninterrupted hours reached the actual priority? Eleven out of thirty-eight is a different conversation from "we're stretched."

**Time:** thirty minutes to count. Holding the cap is the ongoing cost, and it's paid upward.

**Say this,** when a third priority arrives from above: *"Yes — and here's what stops if we do that."* Not no. Yes, with the displacement named.

**In 60 seconds:** don't audit eight weeks. Count the things you called urgent in the last two.

**No authority?** Publish your *own* two priorities and what came off, to whoever depends on you. And use the same sentence upward — it's the most useful line in this chapter for someone with no positional power.

## The Three Altitudes

**The idea (one line):** Every promotion is a different job — and the instinct that made you good one level down is what makes you bad at this one.

- **Direct:** face-to-face, day-to-day, close enough to spot and address problems. Proximity is the instrument. Know the mission two levels up, the tasks one level down.
- **Organizational:** you lead **through subordinate leaders**. Establish the climate that supports them. Intent two echelons down, understanding two echelons up. Your units don't depend on daily guidance.
- **Strategic: envisioning**, and being the **ultimate representative of the organization, its cause and purpose**. Nobody below you can do that one.

**Intent has a measurable purpose at altitude.** It exists partly to *decrease the number of decisions you must personally make*. If your decision count isn't falling, your intent isn't working.

**Go and look — then don't fix it.** Verify that reports match your own perceptions. But solving what you find teaches everyone that your visits are when problems get taken away, and they'll start saving them up. *On a visit I may ask, I may not answer.*

**Watch for:** the hours that felt best being the ones where you did your previous job well. Lower altitudes have **more certainty and less complexity** — so if you feel worse after a promotion, you didn't get worse. You moved somewhere with less certainty in it.

**The check:** for one week, list every decision you made and mark it **D** (level below), **A** (your altitude), or **U** (should have gone up). The D-fraction is your altitude, honestly stated.

**Time:** about thirty seconds a day for a week.

**Say this**, when you find a problem on a visit that isn't yours to fix: *"That's yours. What are you going to do?"* Then leave it — subject to the override rule in Card 03.

**In 60 seconds:** don't do a week. Do today.

**No authority?** Mark each decision *mine / someone else's that I took anyway / should have escalated*. The middle pile is the finding, and it exists at every level — taking work that isn't yours is not a management-only habit.

## Building a Team That Outlasts You

**The idea (one line):** The job is what's left — you're building an organization that produces output after you stop touching it.

Call it stewardship: providing for a strong team **both now and in the future**, and *preventing the loss of effectiveness as far into the future as possible*. Present tense. It's an obligation this quarter, not a farewell activity.

### Do this:

1. **List what breaks if you're gone three months.** Then sort each item: *documented but never practiced* · *a relationship I hold* · *judgement only I have*.
2. **Fix one per quarter.** Put someone else on the call. Try to explain the instinct out loud, badly. Have the unpracticed process run once, live, while it doesn't matter.
3. **Leave something undone on purpose** — and let it be done worse than you'd have done it. The hardest instruction in this book.

**Watch for:** being the best at everything you touch. Nobody objects, the numbers look good, and the organization hollows out one absorbed gap at a time. *Reception is a team responsibility, not just a leader's* — if you're always the one explaining how things work here, that's the finding.

**Know what you're trading.** Short-term output and stewardship genuinely conflict. *Now and in the future* is an instruction to hold both, not a claim they're the same. Indispensability is a choice made a hundred times in favor of this month.

**The check:** take a real week off. On return — *what waited for me, and what got decided without me?* The first list is dependency you built. The second is capability you have.

**Time:** thirty minutes to write the list. One quarter per item after that.

**Say this,** when handing over a relationship you hold: *"I'd like [name] to run this one. I'll be on the call and I won't speak."* Then don't speak.

**No authority?** Everyone holds something. The knowledge nobody wrote down, the relationship that answers because it's you, the process only you have run. Ask what breaks if you're gone three months — the answer doesn't require you to manage anybody.

**Override rule applies** (Card 03): let it be done worse unless it's irreversible, unsafe, or reaches a customer.

## Taking Over

**The idea (one line):** Learn the reason before you remove the thing.

**Two clocks run against each other.** *Credibility runs down* — roughly a quarter where change is attributed to the role rather than to you. *Comprehension runs up* — everything you inherited is the residue of a decision made for a reason, and the reason is usually gone.

So spend the early window on what's safe before you understand: **asking, observing, verifying, being consistent.** All of it builds credibility instead of spending it.

**Days 1–14 — receive.** Twenty minutes with each person, in their space. *What do you do? What's the most annoying part? What should I not break?* Change nothing structural.

**Days 15–30 — verify and orient.** Check three "facts" against raw material, not a dashboard. Expect one to be wrong. Set your view two levels up, one level down.

**Days 31–60 — first intent, first standard.** Publish two priorities and what came off the list. Write the three sentences. Take your first four-second moment — it'll feel too early, and early is what makes it count.

**Days 61–90 — the expensive one, then baselines.** Your first costly-to-do-right decision arrives in this window; it sets your reputation for two years.

**Watch for:** *"make your mark."* It rewards visible change over correct change — and the fastest visible change is always removing something, which is the category most likely to destroy a reason you haven't found yet.

**The check, at day ninety:** three numbers, none of them achievements. How many people can state what the team is *for*, in the same words? How many decisions did you personally make last week? How many of your people would be surprised by their rating today?

Not a score — a baseline. It's the only chance you get to measure the place before you're part of why it's like this.

**Time:** twenty minutes per person in the first two weeks. After that it's sequencing, not extra work.

**Say this,** in every one of those first conversations: *"What do you do? What's the most annoying part of it? And what should I not break?"* The third question is the one that pays.

**No authority?** All of it applies to taking over a project, a workstream, or a client you've inherited. The two clocks don't care whether anyone reports to you.