2.

In the fall of 2021, I went to Chick-fil-A to fetch dinner for my family, and unexpectedly, I came home with a book idea. (Also, more expectedly, some fries and nuggets.) I was so awestruck by the efficiency of the drive-thru—you'll hear all about it in chapter 4—that I started researching the question: How do you make things run better?

Eventually, though, I realized that the idea of "better" didn't really capture what I was after. "Better" could be any performance improvement: say, an Olympic swimmer shaving a hundredth of a second off their already stellar race time. Rather, I found myself gravitating toward situations where people were bogged down. These were not "crisis" situations. They were more like bad equilibria: situations that were unsatisfactory and self-sustaining. Kind of like the hospital receiving area.

Surely we're all familiar with situations like this. All of us get stuck sometimes, and it's easy to see why. We're stifled by the gravity of the way we've always done things (*inertia*). We consider so many potential possibilities for change that it freezes us (*decision paralysis*). We spend so much time fighting with colleagues about what we *should* do that we never actually accomplish anything (*politics*). And we exhaust ourselves chasing today's problems, which always seem to crowd out tomorrow's opportunities (*firefighting*).

The question is: How do we reset things? How do we change what's not working?

For about two and a half years, I chased answers to those questions. The principles ahead are drawn from: 240 interviews from people in countless different industries. An exploration of relevant findings from psychology and other disciplines. And a deep dive on certain methodologies that shine at helping people overcome

inertia and make progress within short timeframes: agile and scrum, solutions-focused therapy, the incident command system, kaizen events, design sprints, business turnarounds, rapid results projects, and more.

Let's start at the beginning.

When you're stuck, it's like your path is blocked by a boulder. It needs moving, but how could you possibly move it? It's too big. "We need to deliver all the packages we receive within a day." *Well, sure, that would be lovely, but we have NEVER DONE THAT, so what makes you think that is possible?* It feels overwhelming.
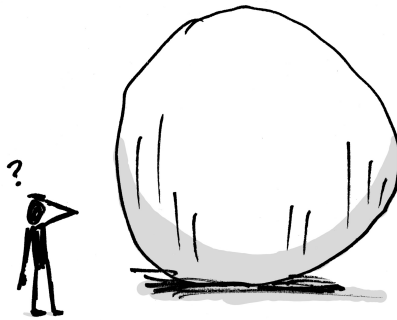

Often, we make the mistake of thinking that we're mired down because of a lack of effort. Notice that a lack of effort wasn't the problem in the receiving area—it probably took *more* effort to sustain the bad system, because of all those calls to the red phone.

In other words, you can't just hurl yourself at the boulder. "Shoving harder" is not a viable plan (unless your plan is to slip a disc).

To move the boulder, you need to be smart and strategic. Because of the complexity you face, you can't change everything. You can't change *most* things. You can't even change a respectable fraction of things! But, with a bit of prodding and catalyzing, you can change *something*. A well-chosen something. We'll call that "well-chosen something" a Leverage Point (a term popularized by the systems theorist Donella Meadows).
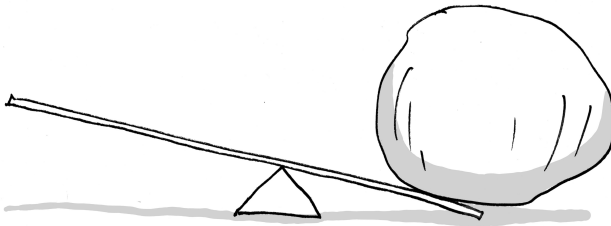

Leverage Points are interventions where a little bit of effort yields disproportionate returns. Of the universe of things you *could* do to improve a situation, the Leverage Points are the things you *should* do. In the hospital receiving area, for instance, one of the key Leverage Points was moving away from batch processes.

Without a Leverage Point, you'll never transform how you work. In the picture above, the Leverage Point is the fulcrum that supports the lever.* But it's not *sufficient* to move the boulder. The boulder hasn't moved yet. To actually move it, you need to apply some resources to the other end of that lever.

Where do you get those resources? Well, right now, you and your team have a wealth of resources—time, money, enthusiasm, processes, etc.—that are being used in various ways.

The trick is to align all of those assets so that they push in the same direction. You need to Restack Resources on the Leverage Point.

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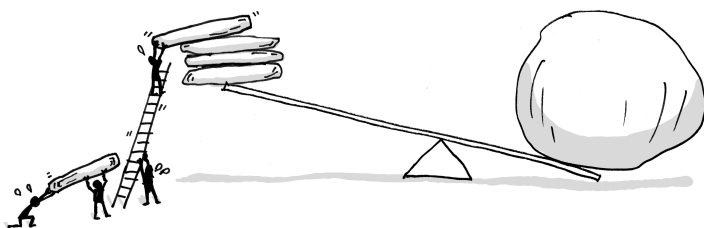
*Probably the less literal we make this analogy, the better. I'm no physicist. Just roll with me here.

And that's the core framework we'll unpack in this book: To make things happen, you should Find Leverage Points and Restack Resources to push on those points.

Simple, eh? Just do those two things and—POOF—change will flourish!

Well, yes, it can be that simple—but first comes some legwork. To start, you'll be searching for points of intervention where small investments yield big returns. How do you spot those magical Leverage Points, exactly? If they were easy to find, you likely would have found them already. (For years, it didn't occur to the hospital receiving area to move away from batch processing.)

We'll spend the first section of the book on the essential detective work of Finding Leverage Points, covering five methods for locating them:

→ Go and see the work (*in chapter 1*): Observe up close the reality of your work.

→ Consider the goal of the goal (*in chapter 2*): Identify alternate pathways to your ultimate destination.

→ Study the bright spots (*in chapter 3*): Analyze and replicate your own best work.

→ Target the constraint (*in chapter 4*): Assess the #1 force that is holding you back.

→ Map the system (*in chapter 5*): Rise above the silos to spot promising targets for action.

Then, in the second section, we'll turn our attention to Restacking Resources, a quest that comes with its own challenges. The chief obstacle is that you almost certainly don't have a bunch of unused assets that you can mobilize to support your change. You have what you have. And that means if you want to press harder on

a Leverage Point, then you need to draw resources from *something else you're doing.*

To spark change, we shouldn't think AND, we should think IN-STEAD OF. Less of this, more of that.

And those trade-offs are painful. Probably no one on your team, today, believes that what they're doing is pointless and therefore their energies can be repurposed in a new direction. So where do you find resources to pile up on Leverage Points when all of those resources are presently committed to something else?

We'll explore six strategies for marshalling resources while minimizing the sting of the trade-offs involved. Here's how you can Restack Resources:

→ Start with a burst (*in chapter 6*): Begin with an intense and focused period of work.

→ Recycle waste (*in chapter 7*): Discontinue efforts that don't serve the mission.

→ Do less AND more (*in chapter 8*): Shift resources from lower-value work to higher-value.

→ Tap motivation (*in chapter 9*): Prioritize the work that's required *and* desired.

→ Let people drive (*in chapter 10*): Give your team the autonomy to lead the change efforts.

→ Accelerate learning (*in chapter 11*): Get better, faster feedback to guide your work.

As you apply this framework, you'll likely encounter powerful obstacles: tradition and resistance and bureaucracy and indifference. But if you can manage to move the boulder—even by just a few inches—you'll find there's a powerful force in your favor. And it's one you might not expect.

Consider a study conducted by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer. They were interested in employees' "inner work life," meaning their "thoughts, feelings, and drives triggered by the events of the workday." To trace these everyday emotions, Amabile and Kramer asked employees to keep daily diaries reflecting on their work. Eventually, 238 employees across 7 companies submitted over 12,000 diary reports.

What emerged from these diaries was a crystal-clear finding that the researchers called the *progress principle*: "Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work." According to the employee diaries, 76% of people's best days involved progress; only 13% of their best days involved setbacks.

Progress energized people and made them happy. Setbacks did the opposite. No other work dynamics had as dramatic an effect on employees' inner life.

What's particularly striking about the research, as Amabile and Kramer chronicle in their book *The Progress Principle*, is that most bosses were oblivious to the value of progress as a motivator. "When we surveyed managers around the world and asked them to rank employee motivators in terms of importance, only 5% chose progress as #1," said Amabile in a speech. "Progress came in dead last."

It's a stunning oversight: The biggest motivator of employees is nowhere on the radar of the average boss.

But you can overcome that mistake. Progress will be your secret weapon, the way it was for Paul Suett at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. He showed his team how to make things better: *You don't have to pick up the box five times. You don't have to batch the packages. Let the river flow.*

And they responded! It was their work and their enthusiasm that

ultimately transformed the department, not his. Frank Marasso was a leader in the group. He spent most of his career—42 years and counting—in the receiving area. He said, "The minute we actually got our FedEx and UPS packages—all 600 pieces—worked up and delivered, and that room's empty at the end of the day? I was like, 'Yeah, this is cool.'" He admitted he was skeptical of Suett's ideas at first. But the results made him a believer: "An empty room is a beautiful thing, man."

This transformation did not require a huge infusion of new people or new assets. It was the same staff in the same space with the same goal they'd always had: to process and deliver packages for a hospital. But after carefully reimagining their work, they went from "pariahs" to superstars.

In the chapters ahead, we'll explore how other groups faced down their own daunting obstacles: A library on the cusp of collapse. A public company losing a dangerous number of clients. A marriage fraying at the seams. A hospital with burned-out and disengaged staffers.

All of them, as you'll see, moved the boulder.

We'll encounter cases involving military planes, music apps, radiology clinics, church services, car dealerships, and archery competitions. We'll investigate mysteries: Why the middle is the roughest part of a change effort. Why *inefficiency* can sometimes accelerate progress. Why "getting buy-in" is the wrong way to think about change. Why people may think they understand the systems they depend on better than they actually do. (Spoiler on that last one: Realizing this can be shocking to the people involved—see the next chapter for more.)

You'll also learn how five million cats' lives were saved, and perhaps most dramatically of all, how one father got his kids to clean their room. With enthusiasm.

Ultimately, the payoffs for our exploration ahead are simple but powerful: The relief of shaking off bad habits. The pleasure of experiencing movement where stasis had prevailed. The sudden snap of agency that comes from reminding yourself: *I'm capable of changing this situation.*

Yesterday, we were spinning our wheels. Today, we reset and start rolling forward.*

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*A huge thank-you to my friend and fellow business author Jake Knapp, who came up with the idea for the boulder/lever/fulcrum artwork and contributed the drawings. I love what they add to the book and I'm grateful!