

*the* **HERO**  
**LEADS**

YOUR HERO'S JOURNEY  
IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

TIM HAMPTON

**Copyright © 2025 Tim Hampton**

All rights reserved.

**For permissions or inquiries:**

tim@timhampton.ca

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations used in reviews or scholarly works.

### **First Edition**

Published by **System 2 Publishing**

Toronto, Canada

[timhampton.ca](http://timhampton.ca)

### **Disclaimer**

This book provides general information drawn from professional experience, observations, and research. It is not intended to serve as business, legal, financial, psychological, or organizational advice. Readers should evaluate their own circumstances and consult qualified professionals where appropriate.

All stories, examples, and scenarios are used for illustration. Any resemblance to real individuals or organizations is coincidental unless explicitly stated.

Quotations and referenced materials remain the property of their respective copyright holders.

## Advance Praise

“One of the most concise, on-point leadership manuals I’ve read. Keep it handy so you can go back to it.”

**Howard Green**, founding anchor at Canada’s Business News Network and bestselling author of “Railroader: The Unfiltered Genius and Controversy of Four-Time CEO Hunter Harrison”

“The Hero Leads’ inspired, confronted, and activated me. Tim Hampton effortlessly translates Joseph Campbell’s stages of the Hero’s Journey into relatable challenges for change makers in organizations. It taught me to identify self-sabotage where I should have taken responsibility when it was easier not to. It gave me a fresh and more positive view of the resistance within myself, my goals, and untapped potential. Moreover, the book felt like a guide to leading change in my own company.”

**Egbert Edelbroek**, PhD, CEO SpaceBorn United

“The corporate heroes I work with don’t see themselves as heroes—they’re just doing the work because they see a better way. They spend their days being brave, solving problems, testing solutions, and winning people over. They’re strategically positive and confident at every turn. But the weight of driving change from within is real. Tim’s book gives them what they need: a framework for the journey, an identity to match the impact they’re having, and permission to share struggles.”

**Erica Lee Garcia**, P.Eng. Founder and Managing Partner of Onward Business Mechanics, Founder of Engineers of Tomorrow

“Excellent! Great, easy read. So many good lessons. I loved the movie references and the clear connection between corporate innovation and the hero’s journey.”

**Dr. Georgette Zinaty**, MBA, MSc, Founder and CEO of Women Helping Empower Women

“The Hero Leads is set in a corporate context, but your takeaways will apply to any journey of change or improvement in your life. And it’s a joy to read! Tim Hampton does a masterful job of illustrating, characterizing, and bridging every stage of the hero’s journey with wisdom from exceptional leaders and thinkers and from pop culture.”

**Ethan Beute**, Wall Street Journal bestselling author of “Human-Centered Communication” and “Rehumanize Your Business”

“If you’re trying to lead change inside an established organization, this book is for you. Tim Hampton writes specifically for the “corporate hero”—the intrapreneur building within constraints rather than starting from scratch. He translates Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey into a practical roadmap for navigating organizational resistance, building allies, and sustaining change through all 12 stages of transformation. What makes it work is Hampton’s use of film scenes from *The Matrix*, *Moneyball*, and *The Shawshank Redemption* to bring each stage to life, paired with concrete guidance. More than once, I found myself thinking “that relates to me” as his descriptions of organizational resistance and the fear of change hit uncomfortably close to home. It’s rare to find a business book that’s both substantive and genuinely inspiring.”

**Natty Gur**, author of “Eco-Autonomous Organizations: Decentralized, Distributed and Autonomous Organizations”

“Tim Hampton makes the compelling suggestion that The Hero’s Journey has something surprising to say to leaders. If you want to lead, you must take the journey of becoming. Leaders are not heroes, but, rather, the path to leadership, and the practice the journey opens up to us, can be heroic.”

**Michael Dila**, director of Oslo for AI and founder of System 3 Coaching

“Tim Hampton has applied the ancient and timeless wisdom of the Hero’s Journey to the organizational setting in a compelling and accessible way. And it’s a good thing he has. We are deeply in need of the courage and the elixir that this journey takes us on. How you are is how you lead, and “The Hero Leads” takes us on a vital journey of reflection and growth.”

**Andrea Swanson**, MA, organizational consultant, coach and instructor

““The Hero Leads” is an engaging road map to success. With fun pop-culture references and a unique perspective around how to disrupt complacency and channel anger into action, Tim Hampton provides a motivating guide to leading with purpose.”

**Fotini Iconomopoulos**, MBA, author of “Say Less, Get More: Unconventional Negotiation Techniques to Get What You Want”

To my mother, Susan Edelsten, and my late father, Don Hampton, for modelling strength and kindness. To Carmela, my best adventure. To my son James, whose courage and conviction will make the world a better place.

# Contents

Introduction .....	8
Act 1: See the Change.....	12
Chapter 1: The Ordinary World .....	13
Chapter 2: The Call to Adventure.....	18
Chapter 3: The Refusal of the Call .....	25
Chapter 4: Meeting the Mentor .....	33
Chapter 5: Crossing the Threshold .....	38
Act 2: Make the Change .....	43
Chapter 6: Tests, Allies, and Enemies.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 7: Approach to the Inmost Cave .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 8: The Ordeal.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 9: The Reward .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Act 3: Exploit the Change .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 10: The Road Back .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 11: Resurrection.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 12: Return with the elixir .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
About the author .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>



# Introduction

## Be the hero

What if the next hero in your life isn't someone you meet, but someone you become?

You may hesitate to call yourself a hero. The word seems dramatic, meant for caped crusaders who face impossible odds. 'You're my hero' is rarely said without a wink or an eye roll.

Real heroism isn't about invincibility or ego. It's the desire for something more from yourself and for the world. It's taking responsibility for change instead of waiting for someone else to make it. It's a sincere, selfless contribution to the welfare of others.

To be a hero means taking responsibility when it would be easier not to. It's seeing a way forward, finding solutions where others see obstacles, and making things better, decision by decision.

Will you answer your call to heroism? Will you use your unique gifts to improve the world and lift those around you, or let fear keep you safe but forgotten? If you want to help others, create meaning, and one day recall a life well lived, you're on the path to being a hero.

When you connect to that part of yourself that longs to contribute, you tap into a source of vitality far greater than personal gain. By doing what is good for others, you can discover a power that sustains you through setbacks and makes your victories meaningful.

You can do well while doing good. In the long run, it is the only way. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "one of the most beautiful compensations of life is that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping themselves." Significance comes from being of service.

If you are doing something with the best of intentions and you are alert to what other people need, then you are playing the role of a hero. This mindset will give you the confidence to continue even when you face resistance.

This isn't a self-improvement book. It's a world-improvement book. The more people like you step up with courage and lead with purpose, the better the world will be.

When courage and conviction meet a commitment to the greater good, the world moves in a better direction. And that shift starts when you see a danger or an opportunity and act on it.

## The power of story

Throughout the ages, stories have served as both mirrors and guides. They reflect our deepest fears and highest aspirations, helping us navigate the complexities of life.

"Stories are the way we make sense of our lives," said psychotherapist and advice columnist Lori Gottlieb. "The way we narrate our lives shapes what they become." From ancient

campfires to modern cinema, stories have never been mere entertainment. They've been warnings, lessons, and moral touchstones. Drawing parallels between your own experiences and those of a hero, even a fictional one, can strengthen your determination. Tales of people and deeds we admire shape who we want to be and what we want to achieve.

With the help of scenes from movies, this book shows how the Hero's Journey unfolds and what it means for your own path. Movies awaken something inside us. The best ones make us feel like we could be the person on screen, saying the brave thing, making the bold choice, finding purpose in a moment of crisis. They give us aspirational models and emotional rehearsal.

We live inside narrative frameworks we've absorbed from books, films, and culture. When you face a setback and think, "This could be the beginning of my adventure," you're mapping your experience onto a familiar plotline. Rather than treating what happens to you as a series of disconnected events, you weave it into an adventure shaped by you.

This is agency: the ability and determination to shape events rather than merely be carried by them. Agency is a vital heroic attribute that you will need to begin your journey and to meet its many challenges.

Writer and filmmaker Nora Ephron used the phrase "everything is copy" to describe how every experience, whether joy, heartbreak, or embarrassment, can be turned into a story. Even the most bitter experience can become the anecdote that redeems it. Witnessing how people become heroes reveals patterns of courage and persistence you can apply to your own journey.

Billy Beane in *Moneyball* (2011) and Erin Brockovich in *Erin Brockovich* (2000) both identified problems and dared to challenge them. Their stories endure because they show how conviction and persistence can move entire systems.

Psychologists have examined what happens when people are encouraged to view their lives as a hero's journey. In a large, multi-study research project published in 2023, people who framed their experiences as a journey with challenges, allies, setbacks, and transformation reported a stronger sense that their lives mattered. When participants were guided to retell their own stories this way, their sense of meaning increased, and they became more resilient in the face of difficulty. In other words, the structure didn't just describe meaningful lives, it created meaning.

British author Neil Gaiman wrote, "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten." Stories remind us that when we face real-world challenges, we can prevail.

To change your future, change the story you tell yourself about who you are and what you're capable of. Stories are more persuasive than pure logic. Just as you can tell yourself stories that hold you back, you can rewrite your narrative to pull you forward.

## The Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey is a narrative structure that describes how a protagonist leaves their familiar world, encounters challenges that force inner change, and returns transformed.

The Hero's Journey begins with you in familiar surroundings, going through your usual routines, but something feels off. You know there's more you could be doing. Either a crisis or an opportunity becomes evident, but you find yourself wrestling with fear and uncertainty. Many would-be heroes find themselves trapped at this early stage.

If you find the courage to step into your adventure, you will need to experiment, find your allies, and fend off your foes. Navigating this unfamiliar territory, you will devise your strategy, execute it, and protect your gains.

After your adventure and change, come decisions on how to use what you've gained. It's more than personal success; it's about leaving a legacy and helping others follow your path.

## The ballad of the corporate hero

Poet Clarissa Pinkola Estés wrote, "Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach." For many of us, the part of the world within our reach is our workplace. This book is written for the change-makers inside organizations—the corporate heroes.

Entrepreneurs build something new, but changing an organization requires a different kind of courage. When you introduce a change within an organization, you don't start with a blank page. Instead, you undertake a painstaking editing process, working within structures, cultures, and habits that resist change. That's the work of an intrapreneur. You act with creative intent inside inherited limits. You build while bound.

That's why the corporate hero is so vital. You see a better way and persist, even when it's easier to conform.

To succeed, you must inspire action, gather allies, and sustain momentum despite resistance. Heroes do this by building a shared vision that makes others feel part of something larger than themselves. Story is your most powerful tool for helping others see new possibilities and join you in pursuing them.

## The hero leads

This book is the hero's guide to leading change in their organization.

The Hero's Journey is not just a storytelling tool. It's a framework for understanding the cycles of challenge and growth in your own life, both personally and professionally. Knowing where you are in that arc helps you see what the moment demands.

In your Hero's Journey, you will encounter many forms of resistance. This book guides you through each stage of the journey, equipping you with the confidence and skills to overcome.

Joseph Campbell first introduced the concept of the Hero's Journey in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). In *The Writer's Journey* (1992), Christopher Vogler adapted Campbell's ideas for storytellers and filmmakers.

This book is structured around Vogler's model of the Hero's Journey. His interpretation consists of twelve stages, divided into three acts. The corporate hero's journey follows this pattern, with each act having its own outcomes, challenges, and demands on your skill and perseverance.

In Act 1, you move from vague unease to clarity. If you feel stuck or restless but can't define why, this act will help you name what needs to change and shape it into a vision worth pursuing.

In Act 2, you turn that vision into a meaningful change that reshapes your organization. If you're already leading change and struggling with resistance, this act shows how to test your ideas, build alliances, and deliver credible results.

In Act 3, you make success last. This act demonstrates how to strike a solid balance between leveraging what works and exploring what comes next.

Each one of the twelve stages demands a different set of skills and responses. These acts create a complete cycle of leading change from the first spark of aspiration to lasting impact. Their sequence is a reminder to resist the urge to stagnate in any one stage, despite the novel challenge posed by the next.

This book aims to show you the forces that shape every transformation. You'll see your work not as a series of isolated steps, but as part of a larger journey that develops both you and your organization.

Your dragon can be slain.

*The Hero Leads* by stepping forward and taking responsibility. You lead by being the first to act, the first to learn, and the first to show what courage looks like.

You are in these pages. The world needs the hero you can be. Don't wait for someone else to arrive. They're waiting for you.

## Next

If you are about to embark on your hero's journey, you have a lot to look forward to. Along the way, you will experience challenge and excitement, form meaningful connections, and see the world differently.

The first step in your Hero's Journey is to recognize the limitations of your current circumstances.

The next chapter is about the status quo. Vogler calls this stage The Ordinary World.

## Act 1: See the Change

Act 1 is about the resistance within yourself. It is just as hard to change your mind as it is to change your world. It's a journey from the first flicker of desire to the point of action.

You begin in an Ordinary World that feels comfortable and predictable, but insufficient. That tension is aspiration, a sense that the contributions you and your organization make to the world could be greater.

The next stage is the Call to Adventure, in which you discover a challenge that sharpens your aspiration into purpose. The challenge may be an opportunity that shows you how to change the world for the better, or it may come as a crisis that calls you to defend the status quo.

This is followed by internal resistance or rationalization in the Refusal of the Call stage. Here, you face the fear that stands between purpose and action. All action comes with risk, but inaction is also risky. Will you let the challenge intimidate you?

In Meeting the Mentor, you gain the knowledge and confidence to pursue your goal, either through direct mentors, inspirational figures, or by building it yourself using resources such as books and online materials.

Finally, when Crossing the Threshold, you commit to bringing your vision to life. The inner impulse turns outward. Act 1 ends when you stop wondering and start moving.

# Chapter 1: The Ordinary World

## The splinter in your mind

In *The Matrix* (1999), Neo's ordinary world is a monotonous office job by day and lonely computer hacking by night. Outwardly, his life is steady. Inwardly, he feels the same restless discontent that precedes every journey. Morpheus names it: "You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad."

That splinter in Neo's mind has a name: aspiration.

## The status quo

"In a world where..." is how many movie trailers begin. "In a world where robots control everything..." "In a world where love is illegal..." "In a world where no one tells the truth..." That phrase sets the rules of a story's setting, revealing the ordinary world. For us in the audience, it sets the stage.

The ordinary world is how things are, not how they should be. It is your status quo.

Your ordinary world is the equilibrium between you and your surroundings. You do what you do; the world does what it does; the two mesh.

Before change, before courage, there is the uncomfortable sense that the way things are no longer fit who you are. C. S. Lewis wrote, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

The ordinary world is not just where your story starts; it's the pattern you must first learn to see before you can ever hope to change it.

## Ordinary, pleasant, and temporary

Italian entrepreneur Ilaria Bertinelli said, "Tradition is the result of innovation that was successful." All the things we treasure were novelties at some point.

The calm predictability of the ordinary world is often the hard-won result of an earlier adventure. You fought to make things work, to bring order out of chaos. Now the systems run smoothly, the calendar behaves, and the risks that once kept you up at night have been tamed. That sense of control feels good, and you deserve it.

After a long effort, it's natural to want a pause. Rest is not weakness; it's repair. A healthy system needs recovery as much as motion. But if the pause stretches too long, comfort turns into routine, and routine turns into stagnation.

Being in the ordinary world is not a failure. But staying too long can make it so familiar that you stop examining it or even noticing it. The question is whether you are stuck in a rut or settled into a groove.

A rut is usually formed by repeated past behavior. It is the track left by previous traffic—habits, choices, and defaults that once made sense but were never re-examined. You did not plan the rut. You fell into it by repeating the same action repeatedly.

A groove, by contrast, may also involve repetition, but it is chosen. It is a track you decide to follow because it supports where you are trying to go. A groove is maintained with awareness. You know why you are in it, and you can leave it if it no longer serves you.

The difference is not movement versus stillness. You can be very busy in a rut. The difference is intention. A rut is inherited from the past. A groove is aligned with the direction you have chosen.

On the surface, nothing is catastrophic. The paycheck arrives. You are familiar with the rules and comply with them. You know your role and perform it. You begin to notice the same discussions recurring in meetings, initiatives that circle without progress, and a faint unease that appears when work feels easy but empty.

## How's the water?

The ordinary world becomes invisible through familiarity.

American author David Foster Wallace captured this blindness in his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech, imagining one fish asking two younger fish, 'How's the water?' The younger fish swim on, puzzled. One finally asks the other, 'What the hell is water?'

One reason you don't notice your ordinary world is that it keeps you so busy. Emails, meetings, deadlines, and last-minute requests dominate your day. You respond quickly and feel productive.

You meet deadlines, mark milestones, set resolutions, and celebrate holidays. These cycles often create an illusion of progress, reassuring you that next week, next quarter, or next year will be different. However, your long-term progress is lacking.

Most people spend their careers within systems they didn't design, following routines and expectations that formed long before they arrived. What's worse is that we tend to follow these patterns unconsciously. They are simply the water we swim in.

This is a mental model trap. Within your company, you and others may not be aware of the assumptions that shape your system.

## Routine

We may not see how institutional our habits have become. As a prisoner says in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), "These walls are funny. First, you hate them, then you get

used to them. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them.” The comfort of predictability can become a cell of our own making.

The ordinary world may feel limited, but it is dependable. You know its patterns. Routine brings stability and frees you from constant decision-making.

This familiar order helps you act with confidence, yet it can also keep you from exploring anything new. You may even start to see your identity in the role itself. Competence carries the pride of doing something well and being relied on by others. Why walk away from what works, only to face the uncertainty of being a novice again?

This is personal mastery at risk of hardening. You get awards. Bonuses. New accolades. But the thrill is gone. You feel like you’re just adding them to a pile. The skills recognized today can quietly block tomorrow’s growth.

## Fenced in

The ordinary world restrains. From a young age, you are taught to accept what you don’t want: eat your veggies, brush your teeth, sit still in the car seat. These lessons are designed to keep you healthy and safe, but they also train you to conform to the expectations of those around you. In school, success comes from absorbing and complying more than from questioning or creating.

By the time you enter the workplace, this conditioning feels natural. Rules and expectations make staying inside the lines easier and safer. It feels more natural to adapt to systems than to challenge them. Job descriptions, policies, and performance metrics reinforce the same patterns. Corporate life normalizes discipline, routines, and even surveillance until they become so commonplace that they become invisible.

Career paths are laid out by organizations, creating well-marked routes where each next step is obvious. You put in the effort and receive praise, stability, and a sense of progress.

In most organizations, the best way to stand out is to fit in. Colleagues and managers encourage you to stay on the well-trodden path because your compliance sustains their ordinary world, too.

## This is fine

Dissatisfaction creates tension between the current reality and a possible future. This tension can fuel growth if you don’t ignore it.

The expression that the grass is always greener on the other side warns against ingratitude. The cheery mindset that every cloud has a silver lining is adaptive. It reminds you to look for something to be grateful for in hard times. But this kind of thinking can lull you into accepting your fate rather than challenging it. This can suppress the motivation to change what is within your power to alter.

A popular internet meme depicts a cartoon dog saying, “This is fine”, even while sitting in a room engulfed in flames. At least the dog is seated comfortably with a cup of coffee. This cartoon is often used to illustrate glum acceptance of huge problems.

Just because you’ve learned to tolerate a bad situation doesn’t mean it’s the best you can do. Sometimes, the grass really is greener somewhere else. Seeing the merits of the status quo makes you a positive person. Wanting to improve the status quo is even more positive.

If you surrender to your circumstances, you will remain trapped in fires you could escape.

## The red pill

At the end of this stage, you are thinking critically and seeing beyond the constraints of your current circumstances. With that awareness comes the understanding that the systems that make up your ordinary world are constructed and, therefore, can be reconstructed. The systems not only affect you. You can affect them.

You begin to observe recurring patterns within your organization. You notice incentives, delays, and feedback loops. You pay attention to how decisions in one place have consequences elsewhere. When you do this, you stop treating the current state as fixed.

You transcend the ordinary world when you develop a desire to improve it. You no longer see the world around you as fixed. You see it as mutable. What you gain in the ordinary world is a heightened awareness, known as aspiration. Your desire for something greater is awakened.

The ordinary world offers comfort, predictability, and rewards that we use to justify remaining in place. Under the surface, though, poet David Whyte described a tremendous longing in corporate life for something “more satisfying, more real, and, above all, more alive.” That splinter manifests as restlessness, frustration, or a nagging sense that something is missing. You notice the gap between what you have and what you want. Predictability and safety are no longer enough.

Aspiration is the desire for something beyond your reach, presenting a goal that may be unclear for now but still feels real enough to pursue. That tension plants the seeds of growth and change. It alerts you to hints and opportunities you might otherwise miss. Your curiosity begins to point the way forward.

You may confuse aspiration with boredom, frustration, or ambition, but it’s deeper than all three. It’s awareness. Each moment of that awareness creates space for possibility.

In *The Matrix* (1999), Morpheus offers Neo two pills. The blue pill will return him to the comfort of his familiar life. The red pill will reveal the truth: that his world is an illusion designed to keep him complacent. Morpheus says, “You take the red pill, and you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.”

It's a moment of decision between safety and awareness, between continuing to live within the system or accepting the burden of seeing its limits. If you take the red pill, you put yourself on a path that will feel uncomfortable.

The Ordinary World stage is complete when you sense misalignment between your daily work and deeper purpose. You see how the patterns around you serve or sedate you. Now you decide if you want things to stay the same, or if you are prepared to pursue meaningful change.

You can continue operating within your ordinary world, but now see it more critically.

## Next

The next stage, the Call to Adventure, will reveal your purpose: direction anchored in meaning.

## Chapter 2: The Call to Adventure

### Captain Ramius' Call to Adventure

In *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), Captain Ramius commands a new Soviet submarine equipped with a secret engine that makes it nearly silent. In theory, a vessel like this could approach an enemy coastline undetected and launch several nuclear warheads. The existence of such a weapon would undermine the cold logic of mutual assured destruction that had kept an uneasy peace between the superpowers.

Ramius reflects on the reasons he and his officers have for defecting, delivering the Red October to the United States, saying his reasons “began the day I was handed the blueprints for this ship, a ship which had but one use.”

He understood that this system removed the last restraint of deterrence, making the world more dangerous for all humanity. That insight set in motion the Red October's perilous dash across the Atlantic while it was pursued by both the Soviet and American navies. Before all that, there was a moment of clarity when Ramius saw that there was something he must do.

That realization was his call to adventure. His purpose was to prevent Armageddon.

### Finding direction

The Call to Adventure is the turning point where dissatisfaction with your ordinary world becomes direction, offering a glimpse of what matters enough to act.

For you, the corporate leader or intrapreneur, this sharpening of purpose often appears as a business challenge, an opportunity to lead change or close a gap that demands action. It might be a call to fix a broken process, create a new product, or take ownership of a neglected part of the business. It's the high-quality problem you can't ignore: the broken process everyone tolerates, the team that's lost its spark, the missed chance to do something better.

The call may arrive through fate, when a challenge or opportunity pushes you into uncharted territory. Alternatively, it may arise through agency, an inner desire to discover a way to improve your organization.

The call rarely announces itself with a clear plan. It starts as a faint signal, then becomes insistent. It may sound like an opportunity, or like trouble. Either way, it's trying to get your attention.

The call can be a sudden challenge or a slow awakening, but it always brings the sense that something could be better, and you are the one to make it so.

## The fate-driven call

The fate-driven call finds you, whether you're ready or not. Fate can act upon you even in moments of numbness, distraction, or contentment. You weren't seeking change. Yet change arrived anyway.

The fate-driven call can take the form of a sudden opportunity, such as a promotion, a high-stakes project, or the chance to lead a larger team. It can also arrive as a crisis, such as a PR disaster, a major client failure, or a supply chain breakdown.

If you've been feeling a sense of aspiration without a way to channel it, a crisis can be an opportunity. Many careers have been built on decisive action in times of turmoil. When others freeze, the hero moves. This could be your moment to step forward, turn uncertainty into momentum, and demonstrate your leadership.

## Be a player

The term "NPC," or non-player character, comes from role-playing games. NPCs don't direct their own actions. They follow a script, repeat set lines, and serve a purpose defined by someone else. They exist in the world but don't shape it.

Don't be an NPC in your own life. Be a player. Player characters act with agency. They make choices, take risks, and advance the story. They engage with their environment and create change, building their own path.

Motivational speaker Jim Rohn said, "If you don't design your own life plan, chances are you'll fall into someone else's plan." Don't wait for opportunity to knock. Be the one who knocks. Your chance to lead may arrive suddenly, but it is better to seek it with intention.

Socrates warned that the unexamined life isn't worth living. Looking within puts you in charge. Start by understanding what drives you. Notice where your energy naturally flows. What work makes time pass quickly? What moments leave you sharper or more alive? These signals point to your internal drivers.

Imagine describing your career today to your younger self, the one who once dreamed of making a real impact. Notice what still aligns with that intent and what has faded. Reflect on what you lost along the way and what it might take to reclaim it.

Allow yourself to imagine the difference you want to make. Accept whatever ideas surface. Don't judge them. This open posture helps you explore parts of yourself that you may have hidden in order to fit into the culture around you.

You may not feel a dramatic pull toward your purpose. It may come as quiet curiosity, subtle restlessness, or a moment of interest that takes you off your usual track. Purpose often begins in stillness. Steven Spielberg said, "Sometimes a dream almost whispers."

Your call may take a while to reveal itself. It's like birdwatching: no matter how intently you search, birds appear on their own schedule, not by your will. On the other hand, you won't see them at all if you don't set the intention to notice them.

## Connect to your organization's goals

Herminia Ibarra wrote, "If you don't create new opportunities within the confines of your day job, they may never come your way."

Start with your job description. Most are a grab bag of duties that don't reflect your day-to-day activities. Which of the unexplored parts of your job intrigue you? What could give you an opportunity to grow and contribute more?

Stay alert to the organization's problems. Review whatever strategy memos your company shares. When you read your boss's vision deck and spot where execution is stalling, that is an open invitation.

Ask honest questions about your work and the world around it. What problems have been avoided because they feel too tangled or political? When you pause between meetings and tune out the noise, what thoughts keep returning?

Your role in the company may let you see a looming crisis before anyone else. When disruption is on the horizon, don't just brace for impact. Your foresight can be of tremendous value to your organization. Working to prevent an impending crisis can be your call.

## Step outside your bubble

You know the old joke. A man searches for his keys under a streetlight, not because that's where he is likely to have lost them, but because that's where the light is better. We tend to look for answers in the most convenient places rather than where the real solutions or truths might lie.

Old habits do not yield new experiences. If your routine hasn't inspired you, consider changing it.

Discovering what you're interested in can be unpredictable and might involve some trial and error. You can't know for sure what will capture your attention until you try it. Parents enroll their children in multiple sports and extracurricular activities. They encourage them to take a wide variety of school courses. How many parents wish their horizons were as wide as their kids'? We can recapture that feeling for ourselves.

Actively seek out new experiences, especially those that push you out of your comfort zone. This could be traveling to unfamiliar places, trying new activities, or learning new skills. Volunteer to participate in a new project or workgroup. Each new experience has the potential to spark an adventure.

Steve Jobs' 2005 Stanford commencement address highlighted the value of "connecting the dots" in life, where past experiences, even those that seemed insignificant at the time, can

later prove valuable. Jobs credited a calligraphy class he took purely out of interest as instrumental in the design of the first Macintosh computer. Jobs insisted it include multiple fonts and proportionally spaced text, creating a feature no personal computer had offered before.

You don't have to leave the confines of your organization for new experiences. Participating in innovation challenges or internal hackathons can spark creativity, build new connections, and shift your career trajectory, especially if your ideas gain traction or recognition.

In both everyday life and corporate settings, the principle remains the same: step outside your comfort zone.

## Find the bright spots

Ray Kroc's call to adventure wasn't coming up with an idea from scratch. His call came when he saw what the McDonald brothers had already figured out. Their "Speedee Service System" was a working example of how to serve high-quality food quickly and predictably. Kroc's insight was not to build his own system, but to recognize the potential in theirs and scale it.

The world is already running experiments for you. Look for examples of innovations in other departments within your organization and beyond. It's easy to focus only on what's failing, but in nearly every organization, somewhere, something is working better than expected. Finding bright spots means noticing where those experiments have succeeded.

Think of it like panning for gold. You don't sift the whole river; you go where the current has already gathered something valuable. A bright spot is the natural concentration of success, and it can be where you find your call.

## Harness anger

Arnold Schwarzenegger, in *Be Useful: Seven Tools for Life* (2023), writes, "I have a rule: no complaining about a situation unless you're prepared to do something to make it better."

When examined rather than buried, anger can be a powerful signal. It's often not about other people at all. It's about your own stalled growth, your untapped potential, and the frustration of knowing you're capable of more but haven't yet broken through.

As psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison observed, "Some of the most important changes I have made, changes crucial to my career and personal happiness, occurred when I was most depressed." Discomfort is data. It tells you where growth is waiting.

Don't ignore that feeling. Ask yourself what it is about the situation that makes you angry, scared, or disappointed. Let that point to what you're ready to take responsibility for changing. It becomes the first surge of energy that says, 'This ends now.'

## Test yourself

While you search for your call, your aspiration can gnaw at you. “The greatest tragedy in life is not death, but a life without a purpose,” wrote Bahamian minister and professor Myles Munroe. This rings true, but what if your purpose doesn’t appear?

Sometimes there’s nothing sharp enough to stir your anger, no injustice or inefficiency that feels worth fighting. If you are impatiently waiting for your call, count yourself lucky. The worse your ordinary world, the quicker you find something to inspire action.

Instead of waiting, invent a call solely to test yourself. Take on challenges not for their outcomes, but for the proof they provide that you can do hard things.

Confidence is self-reinforcing. The more you tackle, the less intimidating things feel. Mountain climbing and endurance runs won’t clarify your goals, but they build confidence in your ability to face fear and doubt. Many cultures have rites of passage that challenge individuals to push beyond their perceived limits. One is *misogi*, a Japanese Shinto ritual done in freezing water to purify body and spirit. It aims to instill confidence through discomfort.

Building resilience through chosen discomfort is one way to prepare for the call. Action is a powerful way to break monotony and routine, reinforcing your self-belief. “Self-belief is immensely powerful,” wrote OpenAI CEO Sam Altman. “The most successful people I know believe in themselves almost to the point of delusion.”

*Misogi* and other tests remind you to trust your abilities, not your circumstances. You’re stronger than you think. Knowing you have that strength will help you see your purpose even in difficult circumstances.

## Be the first follower

You can lead by following your conviction, or by following someone whose conviction resonates with you. When you see someone act from a place of clarity or courage, following them becomes a way of following *that same quality* within yourself. You’re not copying their path; you’re responding to what their conviction awakens in you. It’s a rehearsal for your own call.

By being the first follower, you learn what it feels like to commit and take part in turning intention into reality. Leadership isn’t only about championing your own ideas. Advance the right ones, wherever they originate.

Eventually, you’ll uncover your own call, but for now, following someone who shares your goals is a form of leadership, as your support turns their individual effort into a collective one.

## Choose your call

The optimistic viewpoint is that if you put your mind to it, you can do *anything*. But even if that's true, you can't do *everything*. You will need to choose what call to pursue.

Your search for a call may have uncovered many candidates. Sometimes, when faced with multiple paths, people fear making the wrong choice and choose nothing. Beware of the nirvana fallacy, where good options are rejected because they aren't flawless. Every adventure comes with trade-offs. Rejecting them all ensures you stay still.

If you are lucky, a call will hit you like a bolt of lightning. Your call to adventure will feel like it won't leave you alone. You are reminded of it in meetings, in hallway conversations, and in your thoughts after work. It points to something broken that matters. A good call scares you a little and matters to you a lot. What problem would be worth your reputation, your time, your energy? You'll sense that it is meant for you alone, with a feeling of destiny.

If that exhilaration is lacking, you can still take on a challenge and treat it like an at-work *misogi*. Sometimes the best choice is simply the one that gets you moving. Pick the action that best represents change. Movement breaks paralysis and turns indecision into momentum.

Economist Steven Levitt studied over 20,000 individuals facing life choices, including career decisions, romantic relationships, and significant life transitions. When participants let a coin toss decide for them, those who made a change were 25% more likely to be happier six months later. His advice: if you're stuck, choose change.

You'll never be certain that a path is right until you walk it. The only way to test a possibility is to begin. Choice is freedom. With freedom comes the agency to recover, adjust, and choose again.

## Vision

In the Call to Adventure stage, the skill you develop is the ability to spot opportunities. You connect a specific pain point to a future improvement. You see what is wrong and what the world will be like when you fix it.

The call takes you from a vague dissatisfaction to recognizing a specific challenge or opportunity that could move you and your organization out of the current state into something better.

This vision provides a target to aim for.

## Next

The next stage, the Refusal of the Call, is where you resolve the tension between knowing what matters and fearing what pursuing it will cost.



## Chapter 3: The Refusal of the Call

### Will you do it?

In *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), CIA analyst Jack Ryan briefs National Security Advisor Jeffrey Pelt and other senior military and intelligence officials. During the briefing, as new facts emerge, Ryan suddenly realizes that Captain Ramius' real intention is to defect with his submarine rather than attack.

In a private moment after the briefing, Pelt challenges Ryan. "Let's assume for a minute that you're right and this Russian intends to defect. What do you suggest we do about it?"

Ryan lays out a plan to help Ramius and "grab the boat."

Pelt responds, "Okay, when do you leave?"

Ryan laughs, caught off guard. "I'm not field personnel. I'm only an analyst."

That's the refusal of the call. Ryan knows exactly how dangerous this mission is and how costly a mistake would be.

Corporate heroes face the same test. You see a better way, a critical flaw, a coming crisis, and instinctively try to pass it upward, hoping someone else will take it on. But soon it becomes evident that no one else can or will. Your conviction makes you the one best positioned to act.

Pelt drives the point home by referring to the others who were present at the briefing. "You're perfect. I can't ask any of these characters to go. One, they don't believe in it. Two, they'd never stake their reputation on a hunch."

*I don't have the authority for that. This isn't my department. It's above my pay grade.* Beneath these rationalizations lie fears of exposure, of being wrong, and of being alone.

There is a humble temptation to drop ideas into a system without owning the cost of making them real, saying "we should do this," and then disappearing. No plan. No resourcing. No follow-through. Just a suggestion dumped into someone else's workload.

Pelt didn't let Jack Ryan get away with this. When Jack proposed preparations for helping Captain Raimius to defect, Pelt did not argue. He did not analyze. He put the responsibility back on Jack.

The scene ends with Pelt asking, "Will you do it?"

Jack Ryan's courage begins with the decision to stop being "just an analyst." For the corporate hero, that's the same threshold, moving from observer to actor, from expertise to ownership.

## Despite fear and doubt

James Baldwin observed, “It is easier to accept the familiar, even if it is oppressive, than to step into the unknown.” The refusal of the call is when you weigh the value and the risks of taking that step.

All change, even beautiful, much-anticipated change, means leaving something behind. Every transition starts with an ending. By decision or circumstance, part of our old life is swept away. When you’ve invested in credibility, systems, and relationships, it’s tempting to protect them, even when they are no longer ideal. The more capital invested in the current state, the harder it is to relinquish.

What if all your effort, sacrifice, and risk end in not triumph but humiliation, disappointment, or loss? Oscar Wilde wrote, “Misfortunes one can endure—they come from outside, they are accidents. But to suffer for one’s own faults—ah!—there is the sting of life.” If we don’t act, we avoid the risk of blame.

At this stage, you are of two minds. You want to champion a new initiative aligned with your values, but also feel the need to protect your stability, reputation, and team. You weigh the costs and risks against the potential for real impact.

When you decide not to pitch your idea, back out of a speaking event, or turn down an assignment, you’re avoiding challenges. Hiding feels safe, but it reinforces fear, making it harder to face the next challenge. The relief you feel is real, but it’s temporary. Each time you dodge something hard and feel rewarded for it, you teach yourself to keep avoiding.

Fear and doubt are universal. Stepping forward anyway is heroic. Every leadership act starts with an internal reckoning of what you risk before you answer the call.

## Put your fear on trial

Each project declined, conversation avoided, or opportunity passed seems reasonable in isolation. Yet, repeated, these refusals add up to a pattern of inaction, turning safety into regret. You condition yourself to live behind an invisible fence. Each automatic *no* strengthens the habit of refusal. Each retreat makes the call fainter until you barely hear it. And if you wait too long, life closes the door for you. The job is filled. The offer is withdrawn. The person moves on. You said no, and the offers stopped coming.

To overcome the automatic *no*, insert a pause between reflex and decision. Ask yourself if you are turning away from genuine danger or mere discomfort. Each time you interrupt the reflex to say no, you weaken fear’s grip.

The philosopher Socrates recommended putting your fear on trial. Picture a courtroom: the prosecution challenges the defendant, while the defense mounts a vigorous counterargument. Both sides reveal flaws in each other’s case, exposing the truth. Asking probing questions encourages you to challenge your assumptions and uncover deeper truths.

“I think it’s generally human nature to overestimate risk and underestimate opportunity,” said Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. “The risks are probably not as big as you perceive, and the opportunities may be bigger than you perceive.” The worst-case scenario is usually temporary, while the upside can be life-changing. The goal isn’t to eliminate fear, but to weigh the cost of action versus inaction.

With vivid imaginations, we dwell on what could go wrong. Fear triggers survival mode, shutting down our ability to reflect, plan, and problem-solve. Being clever isn’t enough. Foresight can trap you in rehearsals for disasters that never happen.

Weigh your fear against the discomfort of not taking action. As John Greenleaf Whittier wrote in his 1856 poem “Maud Muller”, “For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’”

Challenges are first met in your mind. If you shy away from the mere thoughts, you’ve already lost. Recognize that some things are dangerous, while some only feel dangerous. The Socratic method moves you beyond self-deception by demanding honest self-examination. This renewed clarity offers hope and fuels your motivation to act, even in the face of fear.

If you are avoiding new risks, consider whether you are doing so out of a false sense of security. Real security comes from facing uncertainty with courage, not by avoiding risk. Avoiding all risk is illusory; growth and safety depend on courageous action.

## Embrace your significance

Caution is contagious. Rationalizing inaction in corporate life is easy: lack of budget, unclear sponsorship, or bad timing. When everyone waits for someone else to go first, the organization stalls.

The person to break that logjam could be you. It’s natural to hesitate, assuming the problem belongs to someone higher up the org chart. Yet organizations change only when individuals decide the time has come to act.

By acting on your call, you live boldly and contribute in ways only *you* can.

When you act, your story doesn’t just happen *to* you; it happens *because* of you. That’s main character energy. It means seeing yourself as the protagonist of your life, not a supporting character in someone else’s. That mindset gives you the drive to set goals and pursue them. You don’t have to feel extraordinary to begin. Begin with the belief that your life is worth shaping.

Humility can prevent you from getting in over your head, but at the cost of excessive hesitation. The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias where people with low ability tend to overestimate their competence. What’s less often discussed is the reverse of that effect: people with high ability tend to doubt themselves more, precisely because they see how much they *don’t* know. While others charge ahead with confidence, you hang back, analyzing from the sidelines, waiting to feel 100% ready.

This is your adventure. Do you think others are better qualified? Steve Jobs urged us not to let that limit us, saying, “Life can be much broader, once you discover one simple fact, and that is, everything around you that you call life was made up by people that were no smarter than you.”

The sentiment *I gotta be me* often comes wrapped in bravado, but it’s a defense mechanism designed to protect us from potential failure, discomfort, or change.

“Argue for your limitations,” wrote author and aviator Richard Bach, “and, sure enough, they’re yours.” Focusing on your limits is a common way to talk yourself out of change. It is accompanied by a perverse kind of exceptionalism that says you are uniquely unable to take on challenges that those around you can.

Don’t accept life within your limitations. Test, adapt, and find the boundaries that you can move. That’s how change starts from within.

## Be unreasonable

Your organization likely rewards caution more than courage. You see the value of a change, but you have internalized the organization’s preference for safety.

Impulse control stops us from doing what we want when we want. It’s the reason we don’t overreact when we’re cut off in traffic or when someone says something absurd at a meeting. We rely on impulse control to save us from actions that would result in ostracism, termination, or even incarceration.

When overactive, impulse control becomes maladaptive, keeping us from answering the call. The invitation comes, the idea strikes, the door opens, and before you’ve even thought it through, your reflex says no. Not now. Not me. Too busy. Too risky. Too soon. The automatic no is a survival mechanism meant to keep you safe, but it also keeps you small.

What holds us back is not just the fear of failure, but also the fear of the effort and sacrifice that success demands: setbacks, late nights, rejection, and the strain on relationships.

We are social creatures, and a fear of judgment and isolation can prevent us from acting. Being reasonable means prioritizing harmony and smooth interactions over challenging the status quo and those who guard it. While reasonableness is a strength, overemphasizing it may prevent you from surpassing your current circumstances. It can hinder your ability to seize opportunities, embrace risks, innovate, form deep emotional connections, adapt to change, and engage in healthy conflicts.

Are you adapting to your ordinary world at the cost of leaving it unchanged? In his play *Man and Superman*, George Bernard Shaw wrote, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

In corporate settings, reasonableness becomes procedure. It's the governance model that demands consensus and punishes dissent. To be unreasonable is to break the rhythm that keeps everyone comfortably stuck.

Thinking independently will push you outside the safety of the herd. Let go of common wisdom and best practices, even if that leaves you open to criticism or exclusion. Some of the people who once offered comfort when you shared their struggles may now mock you or pull away.

Don't let the mere thought of how people will react hold you back. As you prepare to challenge those who oppose your goals, you may fear what others think about you. Writer and speaker Peter Crone points out that what matters is our own views on what we are doing. "It's not that you're worried about what other people think about you. You're worried about what you think about you. And then you're using other people as the excuse."

Perhaps, but leaving social norms behind isn't easy. As Paolo Coelho observed, "If someone isn't what others want them to be, the others become angry."

It takes real courage to speak out when the majority disagrees, especially when that puts your social standing at risk. But that same courage can spark honesty in others. If you're willing to question assumptions and look at the facts, you bring needed diversity of thought. Respectful disagreement helps surface problems and solutions that would otherwise stay hidden.

"The most courageous act," fashion icon Coco Chanel said, "is still to think for yourself. Aloud."

## Be optimistic

"Optimism is invaluable for the meaningful life," wrote psychologist Martin Seligman. "With a firm belief in a positive future, you can endure great hardships and accomplish great deeds." Research suggests that optimism is linked to enhanced physical and mental well-being. It's not about denying reality, but rather about choosing to focus on possibilities and strengths. A common concern is that optimism sets us up for disappointment, but genuine optimism is a realistic and hopeful outlook.

Victim mentality is a feeling of powerlessness and the belief that you are always the target of hostile actions by others or fate. This mindset can lead you to refuse the call, seeing yourself as perpetually disadvantaged and unable to influence your circumstances. This creates a sense that your misfortune is inevitable and only to be endured. When this happens, you may spend more time complaining and licking your wounds than acting. This forms a dangerous feedback loop. If you believe 'they' are holding you back, you may despair and do nothing, holding yourself back.

Comedian and talk show host Stephen Colbert remarked during his 2006 commencement address at Knox College, "Cynics always say 'no.' But saying 'yes' begins things. Saying 'yes' is how things grow." If the fix is really in, then nothing can be changed. And yet things change

all the time. The world yields to the brave and optimistic. Optimists can set aside understandable but limiting beliefs. Things might be bad here and now, but they can be improved.

You might spend an entire day not saying a word to anyone, and yet your inner voice talks to you a thousand times. If you notice that voice dismissing hope and opportunity, consciously remind yourself that cultivating them leads to a better life. Optimism is more than just hoping for the best, it is the foundation for perseverance and adaptability.

## Trust your wings

“Leap and the net will appear” is a rallying cry for mavericks. This advice owes some of its popularity to survivor bias. We hear about the famous CEOs and entrepreneurs who succeeded after taking bold risks, while those who fail go unmentioned.

Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, described starting a company as “jumping off a cliff and assembling a plane on the way down.” It’s an unnerving analogy, but one that emphasizes self-determination rather than fatalism.

British motivational speaker Charlie Wardle wrote, “A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch but on its own wings.” Your safety lies not in external circumstances, but in your own abilities.

What’s the worst thing that could really happen? What are the actual consequences of speaking up, showing up, or trying something new? You’ll usually find that you have succumbed to catastrophic thinking and that your fears are exaggerated.

Jessey McGuire, an educator and mindset coach, shared his hopes and dreams with his life coach. He wanted to leave his job to return to university, build a business, and have more freedom to travel. Exploring what was holding him back, his life coach asked him to consider the worst-case scenario if he pursued his desires. Jessey realized that if he did heed the call and failed, he could always return to his life as it was before. His coach asked, “Well, how does it feel then to be living a worst-case scenario?” Jessey was clinging to a branch for safety without realizing he could fly back if he had to.

## Worse, then better

The inconvenience of potholes is temporarily replaced with the greater inconvenience of road work. This illustrates an unavoidable truth: when you take action to improve things in the long run, it invariably has the opposite effect in the short run. Worse, then better.

The ordinary world is full of temptations to do what makes us feel better in the short term but worse in the long run. You enjoy relief today, but at a cost that shows up later. Payday loans, junk food, quick fixes, and any ‘free lunch’ that isn’t truly free all fall into this pattern. You trade long-term results for a moment of ease. The gain is now; the pain is later. This is addiction, the opposite of agency.

In corporate life, addiction to short-term comfort shows up as choices that feel smart or easy now but create bigger problems later. Companies cut research and development to boost their quarterly results. Teams fight fires instead of fixing root causes. Leaders avoid tough personnel decisions to keep the day calm. Managers skip training, delay maintenance, rely on star performers, or agree to unrealistic timelines because it provides short-term relief. Each move appears logical, while weakening the system and pushing real costs into the future. This is the organizational version of instant gratification: short-term comfort traded for long-term drag.

The costs are immediate and certain; the value is delayed, conditional, and often disputed. That imbalance creates resistance to change. The hard but ultimately heroic approach to life is to push forward despite this resistance.

If you stay in place for the immediate benefits of the ordinary world, you are taking the “better, then worse” path. If you take action to make the world around you better, things will be worse when you start, and only better after you traverse the many trials of the hero’s journey.

## Risk calibration

The Refusal of the Call stage is about risk calibration. There is risk to every action and to inaction.

Buddhists call suffering and sorrow *dukkha*, which they describe as the true nature of existence. They believe that efforts to suppress suffering paradoxically create more suffering. If life is suffering, then agency is the ability to choose what to suffer for

The question is not whether you will suffer, but what you will suffer for. To step forward is to accept chosen pain in the service of your purpose. When facing a difficult decision, use what entrepreneur Jeff Bezos called “regret minimization.” Project yourself into the future and ask which choice you’ll be least likely to regret. Visualize in detail what your future will look like if you continue to ignore your call.

Pain and regret are unavoidable companions on the hero’s path. The only question is whether you’ll suffer for staying the same or for becoming something more. Courage begins with awareness, grows with action, and becomes a habit through repetition.

In the movie *Wonder Woman (2017)*, Diana is grappling with the tension between staying in the safety of Themyscira, where she knows she is loved and protected, and stepping into the unknown, dangerous world beyond. Her mother, Queen Hippolyta, warns her of the risks ahead and tries to dissuade her from leaving. Diana, however, feeling the weight of her responsibility and the consequences of ignoring it, asks, “Who will I be if I stay?”

If she stays, she knows she will live a life of safety, but one that betrays her sense of purpose and identity as a warrior and protector.

The measure of novelty is the likelihood of failure.

Imagine a game with no uncertainty. You'd soon lose interest. Uncertainty always accompanies adventure.

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing,” wrote disability rights advocate Helen Keller. If you make decisions that create a novel outcome, you are creating and courting uncertainty.

Don't refuse your daring adventure. This stage is complete when you have faced your fears and doubts and decided they will not hold the final word. You are now resolved to continue your journey, not because you have set aside uncertainty, but because you have accepted it.

## Next

The hero who accepts the call must still discover how to answer it.

The next stage, Meeting the Mentor, is when you gather the wisdom of others, develop a vision for the change you will make, and chart your course forward.

## Chapter 4: Meeting the Mentor

### I'm going to kill the bear

In *The Edge* (1997), Charles Morse is stranded in the wilderness after a plane crash with two other men. One of those men is attacked and killed by a bear. Soon, Morse and Bob Green, the remaining survivor, realize the bear is stalking them. Morse concludes that he and Green can survive only by killing the bear.

Morse takes inspiration from an illustration of a Native American using a spear to kill a bear as it leaps toward him. Morse resolves not to run or wait for rescue. His vision is clear. "I'm going to kill the bear."

To galvanize Green's resolve, Charles repeats a simple mantra: "What one man can do, another can do."

Mentorship doesn't always come from a person. Sometimes it's a precedent.

### Guidance and insight

In the Meeting the Mentor stage, you recognize a gap in your knowledge or experience and seek others' expertise.

Decision and action are separate. In this vulnerable moment, you want to move forward but can't yet see the path. Every mentor, in person or print, offers a path you can follow.

If you go without a mentor, you'll rely on your own experience and learn through trial and error. Each win and loss shapes your path and provides practical knowledge. This approach is valid but can be costly. You don't know what you don't know. You are determined but naive, and may underestimate the obstacles ahead.

A mentor challenges your worldview, presenting new ways to pursue your goal. Through their guidance, you gain knowledge, training, and insight essential to progressing on your path.

### Nurture mentorship

Even when mentorship is offered, we may hesitate out of pride, stubbornness, or cynicism. Sometimes we resist because accepting guidance makes us feel vulnerable or indebted.

Accepting a mentor is a pivotal moment when you acknowledge the need for guidance. Humility opens you to insight. Without it, you risk clinging to old beliefs and slowing your growth.

To accept mentorship is to choose growth over pride, collaboration over ego. It's the hero's first step toward partnership in a world that confuses self-reliance with strength.

Accepting guidance doesn't make you dependent. It accelerates your independence. When you let someone else's experience shorten your learning curve, you conserve energy for the

battles that truly matter. The relationship becomes a feedback loop: your mentor's insight fuels your progress, and your progress reaffirms their investment.

Those who accept mentorship advance further, faster, and with greater resilience than those who go alone. Across industries, mentees report higher performance, stronger career satisfaction, and greater confidence in navigating uncertainty. Mentored professionals are more likely to be promoted, to remain in their organizations longer, and to feel a stronger sense of belonging.

Mentors also benefit from these connections in similar ways. Your would-be mentor was likely mentored themselves and may be happy to pay it forward.

To nurture the relationship, show the impact of the advice you receive. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, heeding advice is the sincerest form of admiration. However, don't follow their advice blindly. Instead, create moments to share an idea you're working on, to ask a specific question, or let them know what you're thinking about. Reflect on their input and decide whether a different path suits you better. A good mentor knows they are sharing ideas, not giving orders.

Don't ask them to solve your problems for you. As comedian Steve Harvey put it, "Most people that I know that are successful don't have a problem with teaching you how to fish. Now, if you're over there looking for a fish sandwich, you've got a problem."

Mentorship is a two-way street. Offer value whenever you can: an article, a thoughtful comment, or a connection. Even people more experienced than you appreciate being seen and supported. Offer value in return with your own skills, help with their projects, or provide a fresh perspective.

## Find your mentorship

It's been said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears, opening the way to new opportunities and adventures. But sometimes, mentorship doesn't appear as an all-knowing guide. While chance meetings with mentors are great for storytelling, you don't need to wait passively.

Sheryl Sandberg, American technology executive, has called hoping for a mentor the professional equivalent of waiting for Prince Charming. Sandberg wrote, "Don't wait for a mentor to choose you. Actively seek out advice, show initiative, and do the work that attracts mentors to you."

If your organization has a formal program to facilitate mentor matches, consider joining it.

Your mentor may sit across from you at your weekly check-in. Some bosses will see their responsibility as managing your performance, not shaping your destiny, but if your call aligns with their priorities, your boss is uniquely positioned to help. Your boss can support your call by giving you time to pursue it and helping you navigate your organization's structure.

Herminia Ibarra advises that we seek mentorship but not necessarily a mentor. “Instead of searching for a single perfect mentor, successful people cultivate a constellation of developmental relationships.” Be open to learning from many people, not just one. Assemble an advisory board of multiple sources of mentorship.

Surround yourself with trusted people whose insight, feedback, and experience guide your decisions. It’s less about hierarchy, more about finding partners for growth.

Look for people whose judgment you respect. They might be colleagues, former supervisors, peers in adjacent fields, or people you admire from afar. What matters is that they offer different strengths and perspectives. One may be a visionary, another may be grounded in operations, and another may be skilled at challenging assumptions. Diversity of input reduces blind spots.

Don’t overlook the wisdom of people who may not consider themselves mentors but can still offer valuable insights for your journey. Support can also come from peers or your wider community. This collective wisdom can illuminate new paths and foster growth through shared experience.

Create a small circle of peers who meet regularly to help each other solve problems, reach goals, and stay accountable. Unlike one-way mentorship, these mastermind groups offer mutual support. Members contribute and benefit equally. The goal is growth through shared insight, accountability, and problem-solving.

Reach out to experienced individuals in your field. Attend conferences, workshops, and networking events. Join professional organizations or online communities to connect with others who share your interests.

Finally, don’t overlook the value of the supporters in your life, your friends, family, and colleagues who may not have domain expertise, but who cheer for you, listen when you’re discouraged, and remind you why you started.

Sometimes their role isn’t to solve your problem at all, but simply to listen while you talk it through. In programming, this is called “rubber ducking”, where you explain a problem out loud, even to an inanimate object, often discovering a new insight in the process.

## Find your inspiration

If you still find that the mentorship you need is absent, that doesn’t mean you’re stuck. It means you must mentor yourself. This isn’t a consolation prize. It’s an act of authorship. Instead of waiting for wisdom to arrive in human form, build a patchwork of mentorship out of podcasts, blog posts, case studies, and courses.

We live in a world overflowing with advice in books and online. “Most people who decide to grow personally find their first mentors in the pages of books,” wrote leadership expert John C. Maxwell.

The simplest form of mentorship is seeing that someone else has already done what feels impossible to us. Their precedent becomes our proof. Observing someone else's success and growth can motivate you to evaluate your own life and aspirations. Identify people whose careers or life paths you admire. Study their work, follow them on social media, read their books, and attend their public speaking events to gain insight into their journey and approach.

Your source of inspiration can even be fictional. You can also look to historical figures or contemporary role models. By studying their lives and actions, you can draw inspiration for your own journey.

When someone *does* appear to guide you later, you'll be ready, not as an empty vessel, but as an active collaborator.

## Hire a coach

Like a mentor, a coach will give you individual attention in a way that a book or a course can't. A good coach listens, challenges, and adapts to you in real time. They hold up a mirror to your habits and assumptions, helping you see what's invisible to you. Coaches offer feedback, accountability, and momentum. A good coach will not only show you what is possible but also demonstrate how to do it in a structured, digestible, and time-efficient way.

Whereas a mentor may limit their advice to what benefits them and you, a coach has unconflicted motivations. Most coaches specialize in addressing a particular challenge, seeing it addressed in various ways and settings. A mentor within your organization, however, may rely too heavily on their own experience for insights. Scott Adams has joked that taking advice from a successful person is like asking a lottery winner for the numbers.

With a coach, you pay for a professional relationship that focuses on your growth. It is one-on-one, shaped around your needs, but it comes with a fee. Paying for your coaching means you have a vested interest. It comes with someone tracking your progress, expecting results, and requiring active participation. Coaches serve as soundboards, helping you plan your journey and identify skills or behaviors that may hold you back.

Paying for mentorship has its downsides. The cost can make quality mentorship inaccessible to many who would benefit from it the most. A paid coach may also lack the depth, investment, and long-term perspective that a true mentor offers.

But if your Obi-Wan does not appear, this is a viable and readily available option. The right advice can completely transform your future.

## Inspiration

The Meeting the Mentor stage is complete when you synthesize the lessons from your sources of mentorship. The result is inspiration. You now see the first steps to take to bring your vision to life.

To gather the wisdom you need for inspiration, you exercised humility and started combining new ideas with your old ones. You have learned to ask, “How can I use the wisdom and knowledge available to me to clarify my opportunity into a clear vision of the change I desire?”

You’ve gained insights from those who understand the challenges ahead, and this wisdom has given you a newfound sense of confidence and clarity.

## Next

The next stage, Crossing the Threshold, is where your vision turns into action.

## Chapter 5: Crossing the Threshold

### Moana sets sail

In the animated Disney movie *Moana* (2016), Moana stands on the shore of her island, staring at the horizon she's been forbidden to cross. Her father's rule is clear: no one sails beyond the reef. The reef marks the boundary between safety and possibility.

Moana's island has become blighted. The fish vanish and the crops wither. Her call to adventure comes when she learns that the solution to her island's collapse lies beyond the reef.

No one but her will leave the safety of the island. She pushes her catamaran into the surf, the waves hammering at her resolve. The island recedes behind her as she crosses the reef into the unknown.

In that instant, she crosses more than water; she crosses from *knowing* what must be done to *doing* what must be done.

### Commit today

"All things are created twice," wrote American writer and teacher Stephen Covey. They are created first mentally, then physically.

Crossing the threshold marks the moment when you start your journey. As Vogler writes, "This is the moment that the balloon goes up, the ship sails, the romance begins, the wagon gets rolling."

You've decided to make a change, have wrestled with the risks and losses that come with it, and have found the confidence and knowledge to move forward. You said yes to adventure but haven't started it.

There's always a gap between purpose and action. Reflection alone can't bridge it. Eventually, you must leap. Otherwise, you remain trapped, knowing the truth about your condition yet refusing to act.

Reflecting on what you could achieve can be painful. It exposes the time you have wasted through inaction or by failing to build the skills, reputation, and resources you need. You realize that you are starting from behind. The pain is a sign of urgency. It tells you that waiting longer will only make the gap harder to close.

Break the cycle of inaction and take that first step. To discover new lands, you must first lose sight of the shore. As a corporate hero, you must cross this threshold to make the change you seek.

## Decision means ‘to cut off’

The word decision comes from the Latin *decidere*, which is made up of *de-* meaning “off” and *caedere* meaning “to cut.” So, a decision was literally a cutting off of alternatives. When you decide, you choose one path by removing the others.

In season 4 of the TV show *Mad Men* (2007–2015), Don Draper publicly denounces the tobacco industry with a full-page ad in *The New York Times* titled “Why I’m Quitting Tobacco.” In it, he announces that his advertising firm will no longer accept tobacco accounts.

The risk is obvious. Tobacco money was a significant source of revenue for advertising agencies in the 1960s, and giving it up threatens the agency’s survival. The ad also risks making the firm look unstable or self-righteous in an industry that values profit over principle. Just as importantly, it unsettles potential clients who may wonder whether they could be publicly rejected next. Don is not just closing a door. He is slamming it shut in front of everyone.

And yet the move creates its own momentum. The ad draws attention. It signals confidence. It reframes the agency as bold rather than desperate. By stepping away from tobacco, Don creates space for clients who want distance from a product that is becoming increasingly difficult to defend. The agency gains a reputation for standing for something, which in a crowded market becomes a form of differentiation.

Don crosses the threshold in a way that leaves him no way back.

## Start before you are ready

People don’t go on adventures because they are brave. They become brave by going on adventures. “Doubts,” wrote Winston Churchill, can “be swept away only by deeds.”

The belief that you must wait until you feel fully ready is a trap. It tells you that more preparation will lead to certainty, but that day never comes. Motivational speaker Les Brown said, “You don’t have to be great to get started, but you have to get started to be great.”

“Pay extra attention to the things you resist doing,” Canadian Olympian Silken Laumann wrote. “They are usually the things we most need to do in order to break down important barriers.”

Procrastination might ease stress in the moment, but it erodes self-esteem and builds a cycle of avoidance. It rewards you with comfort, not progress. Each delay strengthens hesitation and weakens confidence. The longer you stall, the more power the imagined difficulty has. But once you cross the threshold between thinking and doing, you gain access to energy that wasn’t available before.

Begin before the mind talks you out of it. Jeff Bezos recommends tackling problems with a first step right away to reduce stress. “Stress primarily comes from not taking action over something that you can have some control over.” When he identifies something that is

bothering him, he endeavors to act right away. He may make a call or send an email, something to get the problem closer to a solution. Small actions shrink large fears.

One of the most seductive traps is believing you'll act later, when things calm down, when the money is right, when you've prepared enough. Conditions will never be perfect. There is no ideal time to pursue your dreams. Only now.

Talking about a future goal can feel satisfying, even though you haven't taken any steps to achieve it. The comfort of planning often takes priority over the discomfort of starting.

Time is irretrievable. Time is the only resource you truly possess, yet it's also the easiest to squander. Knowing time is running out, do you want your finite tomorrows to look just like today? Or is it time to act?

## Act before crisis strikes

The word 'reactionary' has two common meanings. The older, political sense describes someone who resists change and clings to the past. They judge new ideas against an idealized version of a bygone time.

In its more casual, modern sense, the word reactionary refers to responding to events rather than anticipating them. A reactionary, in this sense, is not opposed to change in principle, but they still wait until circumstances force their hand.

Although the two meanings of 'reactionary' describe different postures, the result is the same. Being reactionary leaves leaders or organizations unprepared when change becomes unavoidable. They lose agency over the pace and direction of events.

Your organization's ordinary world might have its merits, but equilibrium never lasts. The status quo, however hard-won, is always unstable. Every industry has companies that delayed change until it was too late.

If you allow the reactionary tendencies of your organization to prevent action, a crisis or opportunity will eventually tip the balance, causing the system to shift around you. The choice is whether you will respond with intention, shaping the change, or let it carry you along.

Disaster movies are compelling because they dramatize the fantasy that, if everything were to collapse, we would rise to the occasion. But you don't need to wait for the collapse. Ignoring early signs and remaining passive is like watching snow pile up on a ridge, forming an avalanche waiting to happen.

It takes more agency to act on a risk than on a crisis. When the problem is distant, nothing is forcing you to move. But acting early, while the signs are still small, is far better than waiting until you are left with no choice.

Act before the crisis hits. This is a "controlled detonation," where you intentionally set off the snowslide before an avalanche buries you.

## Embrace vulnerability

Progress requires a shift from private sense-making to public action. Once you act, the work becomes visible. Other people can see what you are trying to do. They can question it, resist it, misunderstand it, or judge it. The protection of internal analysis disappears.

This is where the idea of vulnerability matters. As Brené Brown wrote, “Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it’s understanding the necessity of both.” Vulnerability is not about disclosure or emotion for its own sake. It is about choosing to act without control over the response. It is stepping forward without knowing whether the outcome will validate you or expose you.

No amount of additional thinking can remove this risk. Analysis can improve judgment, but it cannot guarantee acceptance. At some point, action is the only way to find out what is real. Speaking up, making a commitment, or taking the first visible step is what turns possibility into something others must now respond to.

This is not recklessness. It is the acceptance that leadership begins when intention becomes visible. Change does not fail because people think poorly. It stalls because people wait for a level of certainty that only action can provide.

Being seen trying is the price of moving forward.

## Initiative

The Crossing the Threshold stage is distinct from those before it because it is not research or reflection, but an indelible action. This is when you ante up and take the first real action that commits you socially or professionally. Crossing the threshold is not just an action; it’s a loss of optionality.

Picture yourself at the edge of a diving board, looking down at the water far below. What remains is the dive. Even now, those same doubts resurface, whispering that maybe you should wait a little longer.

“Take the first step in faith,” wrote Martin Luther King Jr. “You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” Like Moana and Don Draper, you take a step that demonstrates to yourself and the world that you have put skin in the game. What you start can only end in success or failure.

Once the threshold is crossed, retreating carries a cost. Before this stage, the idea lived only in your head. Now, your idea and your intentions are exposed.

Crossing the threshold is your first step into unfamiliar territory, where you begin testing your abilities and assumptions about the change you seek to make.

Your path across the threshold may not be as irrevocable as those taken by Don Draper or Moana, but nothing can be completed until it is begun. Take a step, submit a proposal, pick up the phone, arrange a pitch meeting, do something that declares the start of your effort.

## Next

In the next stage, Tests, Allies, and Enemies, you'll take your first experimental steps to put your vision into action. To make meaningful change, you will rally others to your cause, while fending off those who oppose it.

## Act 2: Make the Change

The end of Act 1 is when you take that first public, costly action. As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill put it, “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

Act 2 begins once you have crossed the threshold from the Ordinary World into the Special World, a place of tests, pressure, and change.

In the Tests, Allies, and Enemies stage, your vision is challenged and refined until it becomes one that you and others in your organization share.

Next comes the Approach to the Inmost Cave, where you turn that vision into a concrete project, backed by plans, resources, and commitment.

The Ordeal is the phase in which the project operates under real conditions, exposing every weakness and proving every strength. This is the most demanding phase during which your plans are tested, and pivots may be necessary.

Then comes The Reward, where you spotlight the value of what was achieved and learned, even if the win was partial.

Act 2 is about external resistance and internal resolve. It’s a test of endurance, focus, and adaptability. This is where your ideas meet the world, and your credibility is built or broken.

