A WORKBOOK FOR LEADERS · FROM DSTNY

Stay strong, become different

On resilience, reinvention and leading in the age of AI



Daan De Wever, CEO Dstny · 2027
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ABOUT DSTNY AND ABOUT SHARING

Dstny is a European provider of business communications, through telecom operators and partners: more than 1,000 employees in 8 countries, around €275 million in revenue, more than 5 million users and more than 200 service provider partners (June 2026). Many in Europe know the name of the Lotto Dstny cycling team (2023–2024). In this booklet "we" means Dstny. Read your own organisation in its place. You may share this booklet, with attribution, not commercially and not altered (Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0). Reactions are welcome, also when you disagree.

Stay strong, become different · Dstny, 2027
Text: Daan De Wever · Illustrations in linocut style, two printing colours

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On resilience, reinvention and leading in the age of AI

Read it in an hour.
Discuss it with your team.
Start with yourself.

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Why this booklet, and why now

Dear reader,

I am writing this at a moment when we face big challenges. We come from software as a service, and that model is under pressure. Our market is changing faster than we are, and I notice that we are getting used to it. That last part is what I find most dangerous. Not the challenge, but the habit.

Look beyond your own company for a moment. Since covid the world has not settled down: war on the edge of Europe, a climate that is tipping, and a technology that changes not only our product but work itself. At the end of 2022 we all discovered ChatGPT. Since then it has only gone faster. Nobody knows what AI will do to work, to jobs, to the role of people. Neither do I. What I do know: it is coming at us faster than we think. We have always had crises. Now several are running at once, and there are some we do not see yet. My worry is not that we cannot handle it. It is that we do not realise what kind of time we are living in.

Yet I am not gloomy. I believe in the world. If I did not do this job, I would probably have become a history teacher, and history teaches me one thing: people have always corrected themselves. Often with a lot of pain, but they managed. Take Denmark in 1973: more than ninety percent of its energy was imported oil. When the price tripled, Sundays became car-free.[1] The country did not wait for the oil to come back. It started building wind turbines, and today it is a world leader in wind energy.[2] People are resilient by nature. But it does not happen by itself. Only those who move succeed. Not by bouncing back to what we were, but by coming out of the blow better.

And us? As a company we have weathered plenty of storms. We can be proud of that. But those who survive often grow attached to the way they survived. I see it with the telecom operators, our most important partners. And if I am honest, I see it with us too. We are strong on reliability. We are not fast enough. We work too much in silos. That is not down to our people. It is down to our behaviour, and so to mine as well.

For me everything in this booklet comes down to one sentence: **stay strong, become different and become faster.**

This is not a strategy note and not an alarm. I am writing it from a company that is doing well, and that is exactly when the temptation to wait is greatest. It does not happen by itself. Nor is it a vision for 2035. It is about today, in plain language, because I want everyone to understand it.

I wrote it for everyone who leads at Dstny: a team, a project, a customer. It was not meant to go outside. Yet I am sharing it, because every leader I have spoken to in recent months is wrestling with the same things: less trust, less pushback, and a technology that moves faster than we do. Do not read it as a lesson. What is in it, we are trying ourselves. Some of it works, some of it not yet. It is what I think, together with what I have read and what I have lived through in almost twenty years at Dstny. You will meet Nelson Mandela a few times, my great example. And EPIC, our internal leadership framework: Energy, Positive, Impact and Capabilities. EPIC says *what* we ask of each other at Dstny. This booklet is about *why*. Replace our name with that of your organisation and the questions stay the same.

Read it with a pen in your hand. Disagree where you disagree, preferably out loud, with your own people. And take one thing from it that you will do differently tomorrow.

What I am changing myself is on p. 50: being more critical, and making it easier to contradict me. I am curious what you will choose.

Daan

How this booklet works

This booklet moves from outside to inside and from small to large. It is built to be discussed, not just read.

You will find three kinds of boxes:

THE FRAMEWORK
the research or model behind the idea, explained briefly.

THINK
questions for yourself. Take five minutes.

FOR YOUR ORGANISATION
questions for your management team and your own team.

Chapters 1 to 3 explain why this matters now, with AI as the big tipping point (2). Then we go from small to large: yourself (4), the team (5 and 6), the organisation (7) and our role as leaders (8).

EPIC, our internal leadership framework, runs through the booklet as a common thread. The four letters stand for Energy, Positive, Impact and Capabilities: make it happen, solve rather than blame, do rather than just talk, attitude before knowledge. Read it as an example: your yardstick may have a different name. Chapter 6 works it out in full (p. 29).

At the back you will find the whole booklet on one page (p. 42), and how strong the evidence behind each idea is. Then the work begins: a self-scan, a half-day with your management team, five conversations and a page for your own commitment, next to mine. That is the point.

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CHAPTER ONE

1 The world is not coming back

Three times I saw our market tip. The fourth time is under way.

I have been in telecom for almost twenty years. In that time I saw our market tip three times. Every time, the strongest players thought they had time.

First fixed telephony went mobile. Then phone systems went to the cloud, and that is what Destiny was built on, as Dstny was called back then. Now communication is going to AI: to assistants and agents that call, write and handle things for us. Three waves, and each time the same lesson. The world before did not come back.

Where I come from

In 2008 my brother Samuel and I started Destiny: in an attic, by taking over a small bankrupt telecom operator. It was the middle of the financial crisis, and in that first year we were virtually bankrupt. Then we grew. First customer by customer, later also through acquisitions across Europe, with private equity on board. Today I am still CEO. For a founder, that is not the norm after several rounds of private equity. I also know it is not only down to me. I tell it because it says where this booklet comes from: not from theory, but from lessons I learned at Dstny. Often the hard way.

What I heard in California

At the end of September I spent three days with telecom operators, investors and the big platforms. On the direction everyone agreed: interaction is moving from apps to intent. You say what you want, and an agent takes care of it. On the economics nobody was sure. And one sentence stuck: the threat does not come from beside us, but from above us. Whoever owns the assistant on the device stands between us and the customer.

> *Leading is seeing the current without being swept away by it.*

Being big today does not mean you are relevant tomorrow. Numbers tell you something about the past, not about the future. People rarely change out of comfort. Usually they do it because they have to. Those who lead do not wait until the water reaches their lips.

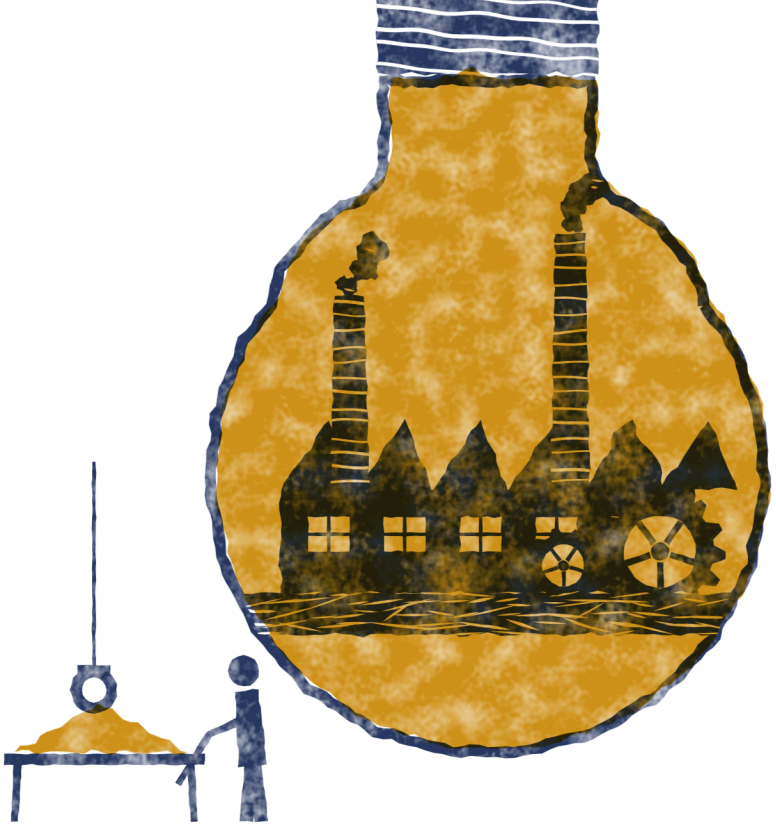
Our tipping point

For Dstny that tipping point is very concrete. We are going from a traditional UCaaS company to an AI-native platform company. We are bringing our platforms together into one. We are bringing AI agents that answer and handle conversations to our customers. Partnerships with telecom operators such as Telia and Odido change how we go to market. From product to platform, from service to system.

Each of those steps creates friction: between countries and teams, with customers and partners, and in how each of us works. That friction is not the problem. How we handle it is. And the biggest tipping point of all is called AI. That is what the next chapter is about.

THINK

- ? Which change in our market am I still treating as a temporary disruption? When will I admit that it is permanent?
- ? When did I last change something in the way I work without having to?
- ? Which decision of the past six months was truly forward-looking? And which one should I have taken a year earlier?



CHAPTER TWO

2 Light bulb or factory

AI is not a new tool. It is a new way to build an organisation.

AI may be the biggest upheaval humanity has experienced. It touches everything at once: how we work, learn, decide and live together. For us this is not an IT project. It is the question of what kind of organisation we want to be.

The light bulb and the factory

Think of electricity. Some craftsmen hung a light bulb above their workbench and could work longer. Others looked at the dynamo and thought: we can run a machine on that. That machine became a factory. The craftsman became a machine operator. Not only the working hours changed, the work itself changed.

THE FRAMEWORK · THE DYNAMO PARADOX

The economic historian Paul David showed that electricity delivered hardly any productivity for decades. Factories replaced their steam engine with an electric motor but kept the same shafts, belts and layout. The leap came only in the 1920s, when they redesigned the factory around electricity. Almost forty years after the first power stations. And the work itself was organised differently.[3] The lesson: technology only pays off when you redesign the organisation around it.

With AI we are at the same point. Many companies are hanging up a light bulb today: a chatbot here, an assistant there. That helps, but it does not change the factory. We cannot keep working with AI as a light bulb either. Our organisational model is going to change.

I felt for myself how fast this goes. I made an investment in an AI company. The day we sat at the notary, it had in fact already been overtaken by an upgrade of a large model.

What changes

- **From rules to goals.** The logic of "if this, then that" no longer works when systems reason for themselves. We steer on goals and boundaries, not on every step.
- **Hierarchy comes under pressure.** When knowledge is available on demand, teams form around goals, not around functions.[4] I call it: from pyramid to diamond. Fewer layers, more people directing agents.
- **People become conductors.** They build, direct and check digital colleagues. That becomes a core skill, at every level.[4]
- **Jobs change or disappear.** We have to say that honestly.

What do we already see? In America I spoke to an entrepreneur who took his company from 500 to 300 people, with more than fifty digital colleagues added: agents that do part of the work. He is convinced, and he is going all in. It is still early, but you can already see it happening today. The companies that are really working on the full AI transformation are not hanging up a light bulb. They are rebuilding the factory. And we are, in fact, only just getting started.

Honest about jobs

For us this is no longer theory. Our first-line support already runs largely on AI agents, with a human stepping in when the agent gets stuck. In the Netherlands we earned more from new AI applications in recent months than from our core telephony. And a helpdesk that used to need fifty people does it with ten.

Some jobs will disappear, others will be filled differently. Those who keep quiet about it lose trust. Those who say it honestly and help people change with it, win it. And let us be honest about this too: a new factory with new machines, and next to it someone carrying on by hand in the old way, does not work. We make no compromises on that. Those who do not want to come along probably no longer have a place with us. We would rather say that early than late. More on that in chapter 6.

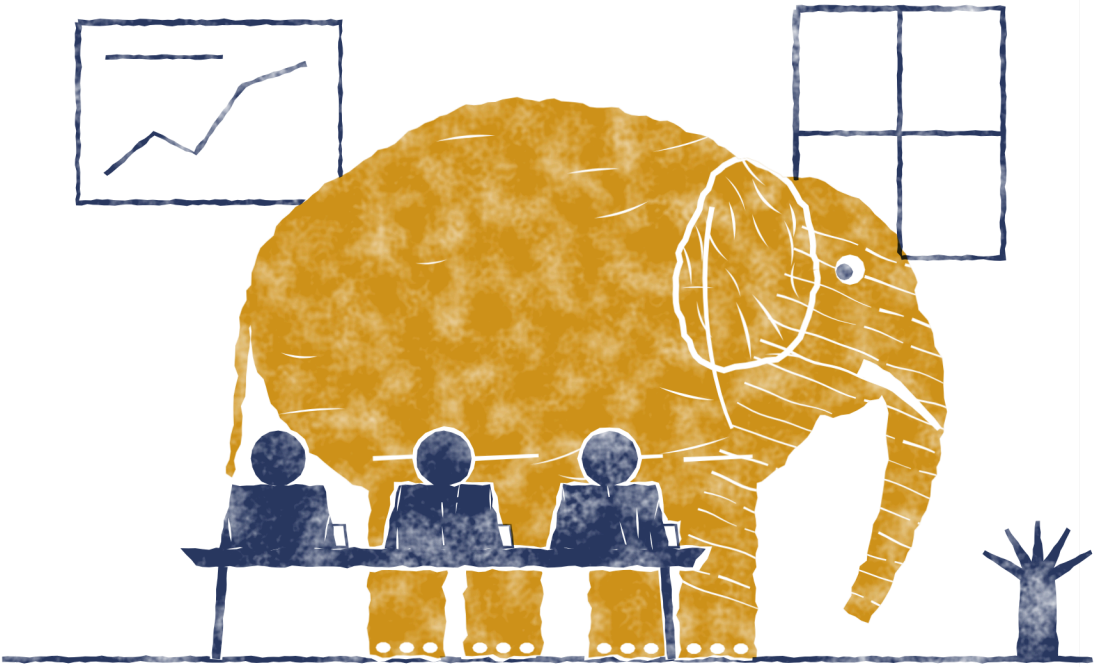
Where we start

In the end we are a software company that brings innovation to customers. Our core process is how we make software, from idea to something that runs at the customer. That is where we start. Not to make a developer thirty percent faster, but to deliver ten times more with the same team, with shorter loops between building, testing and learning from the customer. In another company that core process sits in customer service, in sales or in overhead. Choose the process that makes money at the end of the day. Otherwise it was a light bulb after all.

The technology is the easy part: data, rules and guardrails. The hard part is us. How keen is a team on AI? Is the leader open to it? A good leader who is not open to it is a problem today. And we no longer learn through a training course: by the time it is ready, it is out of date. Look at the past twelve months; it only gets faster. An organisation learns fast when people share. So we build on those who lead the way and like to pass it on: the glue of the company, often our greatest talents. We recruit for that too.

FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

- Which core processes carry our company? If we redesign one of them around AI, does that really make money, or are we hanging up a light bulb?
- Which roles will change in the next two years? Have we discussed that honestly with the people concerned?
- Who in my team already shows the adaptability we will soon ask of everyone?
- How much of my own work could an agent do today? What do I do with that time?



CHAPTER THREE

3 Strong in the wrong way

What saved us yesterday can slow us down tomorrow.

The telecom operators had everything. I saw them lose almost all of it. Now they are getting a second chance, and that story is ours too.

What I saw the telecom operators do

When we started Destiny, the telecom operators were the boss. They had the network, the number, the invoice and the customer. We were a small player selling telephony to SMEs. I looked up to them.

Then came WhatsApp, Skype and later Teams. Calling and messaging, the core product of the telecom operators, became free. On top of their own network, which they had paid for themselves. I watched them react the way strong companies react: doing even better what they already did best. Building networks. Billions in 4G, then in 5G. Meanwhile I saw the value move to the apps that ran over those networks. Nobody at those telecom operators made a stupid decision. They simply stayed strong in the way that had always worked. That is the armour.

Their second chance is called AI. What they still have, no platform can copy: the number, the invoice, years of trust. Those who turn that trust into a product become the layer that matters again, and that is what we help them with.

But I am not telling this story for their sake. I am telling it for ours. We live off the telecom operators, and we run the same risk. Nokia, BlackBerry and Kodak did not fail for lack of money or talent. They failed because they stayed strong in a way that no longer fitted.

Resilience without reinvention becomes armour. Reinvention without resilience becomes fireworks.[5]

Armour protects you, but you cannot move in it. Fireworks are beautiful, but after three seconds they are gone. An organisation only flourishes when it combines both.

	LITTLE REINVENTION	MUCH REINVENTION
Much resilience	**The armour.** We survive every storm, but we get stiffer and stiffer. Strong in the past.	**Flourishing.** A solid base that leaves room to experiment and to choose.
Little resilience	**Decline.** No buffer, no direction.	**Fireworks.** Lots of ideas and energy, but everything falls over at the first headwind.

The elephant in our room

I have to be honest here, otherwise this chapter is only about others. We are strong in what made us big: reliability, quality, a service that does not go down. Our customers count on that, and rightly so. But next to the fastest players in our market, we do not have the speed. New things take too long with us. That is the elephant in our room.

We have good people, in every country and in every team. The problem is in how we work together. We still work far too much in silos: per country, per team, per function. Each part does its job well, and yet the whole comes out slowly. Nothing goes live before it is perfect. Ownership is cut into pieces. We talk too little with customers. Those are not process errors. That is culture: how we are used to acting when nobody is watching.

You do not solve a culture problem with a reorganisation or a new process. It only changes when our behaviour changes. Mine first, and that of everyone who leads with us. But let us be honest: people also do what they are measured on. A KPI per team, a budget that stops at the team boundary, a decision that sits three layers up. We built those silos ourselves, so we take them down ourselves. If we keep defending them, we keep our armour on. Then we are no longer building. Then we are taking things apart, slowly, without anyone ever having decided to.

And yet we can do it. When we were looking for a new name, we first wanted to hire consultants. Our Swedish colleagues asked if they could help think. A week later they had secured Dstny and 120 domain names. For Dstny.fr our country

director for France drove himself to beyond Marseille, to a lady with a webshop who thought our emails were a scam. Seven countries, one team, a fraction of the cost. That is the Dstny I want to see more often: fast, across the borders of countries and teams, just doing it.

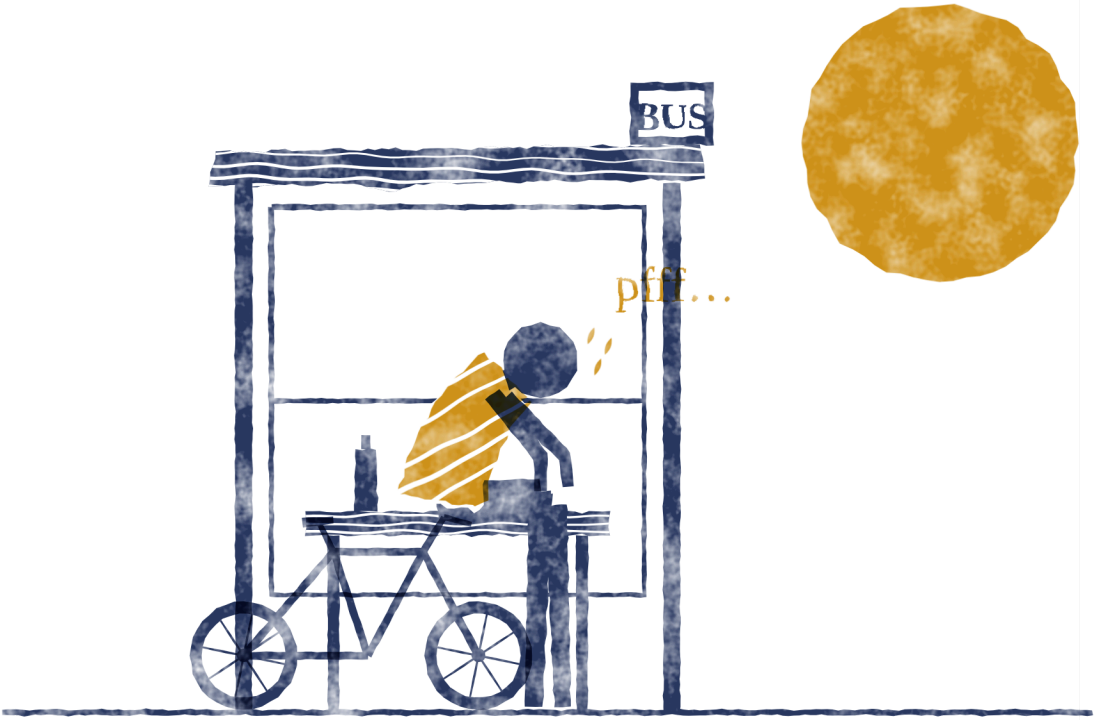
Renew during growth

Winners jump to a new curve while the old one is still rising. That is hard, because that is when the ego says everything is fine. Anyone who wants to reinvent themselves has to put their ego in second place.

I know how hard that is. For a long time my dream was One Dstny: everything standardised from the group. But I saw local entrepreneurship disappear, and innovation with it. We gave the countries more room again, and growth came back. That was not a defeat. That was learning. I do not like extremes. I like just a little different. Standard where we can, so there is room where we must. Staying strong and becoming different is not the same as throwing everything out.

FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

- Which silo do I defend myself? And which KPI or budget of mine keeps it in place?
- Which new product cost us quarters where someone else needed weeks? What held us back?
- What would a new competitor starting today do differently from us?



CHAPTER FOUR

4 Yourself first

If you want to carry others, you first have to stay standing yourself.

AI changes in months. People change in years. So the biggest challenge is not the technology, but our ability to adapt. And that starts with yourself.

In everyday language a resilient person is someone who is strong. That is only half right. Resilience is not the blow itself, but how you deal with it and recover from it. Psychologists call it adaptation, not toughness.[6] Under pressure we often do the opposite: we see less and fall back on what we know.[7] A leader has to go against that reflex. And tension is not always a problem that has to go away immediately. Often it is fuel. Nassim Taleb has a word for it: antifragile. Not bouncing back, but growing stronger from the blow.[8]

Four things I learned myself

1. Keep opening doors. In our first years money was leaking out of the company on all sides. I drove around industrial estates and knocked unannounced on the doors of SMEs. The door was often shut in my face. A few doors every day, that kept us upright. Panic stops you. Small decisions give you grip back, step by step, even without full information. Progress counts more than perfection, and the next kilometre more than the finish line.

2. Listen to your body. After a ride with the cycling club I saw a photo of myself, panting on a bench in a bus shelter. I started to move, to measure how I slept and recovered, and I thought more clearly. **Working deep into the night feels like commitment. In reality you give up the very clarity you need.** Managers snap at their people more often after a bad night, and their team is less engaged that day.[9] And when I get up in a meeting to walk a lap, that is not disinterest. That is looking for focus.

3. Make discipline a system. Every day I get up at half past five. Between a quarter to six and seven I listen to the news and a podcast, and I do a workout or a run. That no longer takes willpower. It is routine. If it does not happen for two days, I miss it. Those under pressure need structure, not good intentions. In prison Nelson Mandela kept up his boxing training, four mornings a

week, in a cell of a few square metres. He wrote that he worked better and thought more clearly when he was in shape. Training became "one of the inflexible disciplines of my life".[10]

4. Choose what you take in, and work on what you can influence. That hour in the morning is also my filter: no endless feed. Writing helps me to sort out what is on my mind; this booklet is an example of that. And fighting what you cannot change only costs energy. Acknowledging what is beyond your control frees your hands for what is within it.

From surviving to reinventing

Resilience gets you through the storm. Reinventing starts after that. Start from what is true, not from "that is how we always do it". Dare to ask the stupid question, also outside your field. Look again like a curious child: what if we tried this? And use scarcity as a filter: innovation rarely arises in comfort, and it is rarely spectacular at the moment itself. Usually it is trying, failing and trying again.

EPIC

Energy in EPIC is consciously choosing where your energy goes. **Capabilities** are not on a CV: it is how you deal with pressure and failure, and how you lift others up. In an AI world knowledge ages faster than ever. The will to learn remains.

THINK

- ? How well did I sleep in the past two weeks? What does that say about my decisions and my tone?
- ? Which routine keeps me upright when it gets busy? Which one is missing?
- ? What did I ask a stupid question about this quarter? And who did I share my last what-if idea with?



CHAPTER FIVE

5 Rivals at the table

Friction gives shine.

Between the individual and the organisation sits the level where most of the work happens: the team. That is where resilience becomes contagious, or not.

A team of rivals

When Nelson Mandela became president in 1994, he took F.W. de Klerk, the last president of the apartheid regime, into his government as deputy president.[11] Deliberately, to reconcile.

That was nothing new. On Robben Island his circle of advisers always included people he did not like and did not blindly trust. Rivals, he felt, were more dangerous outside his circle than inside it.[12]

Those who only hear yes lose touch with reality. Real pushback is the most valuable thing a leader has, especially when things are going well. I have been saying it for years: followers are of no use to me. I need people who want to fight for this company. Friction gives shine. I mean that literally: a team without friction goes dull. That is why I deliberately seek it out. Not for the conflict, but for the better decision.

It started early. When Destiny was a year old, we brought in an external CEO with thirty years of telecom experience. We did not yet know how to go about it. He became my mentor. Since then I give everyone the same tip: bring in people from outside regularly. They bring energy and see what we no longer see.

Speak the other person's language

In prison Mandela learned Afrikaans, the language of his guards. He studied their history and even rugby, their beloved sport. He knew he would one day have to negotiate with them.[12,13] "If you talk to a man in his language, that goes to his heart", he said.[14] For us the question is: do we really understand the colleague, the partner or the customer who pushes back against us? Or do we just wait until they have finished talking?

Kolkata, day three

In November 2026 I went to Kolkata with our leadership team, together with StreetwiZe and Mobile School, to design a game for children in the slums with street workers. My small group had two colleagues and three street workers, the people who really knew the context. I was full of ideas and wanted to lead the group somewhere. We got stuck a few times. For me as a leader that was sobering: I wanted to lead, when I should have been listening. It only moved forward once I let go of my ideas. On the last day the street workers brought two home-made crowns: something we would never have thought of. At Dstny too, the people who know the context are sitting right next to us: in support, at the partner, at the customer. The question is whether we keep quiet in time.

From loss to responsibility

After 27 years in prison, Mandela did not choose retribution but the future. In 1995 he walked into the Rugby World Cup final wearing the Springbok jersey, for many black South Africans a symbol of apartheid, with the number of captain François Pienaar. He gave that jersey a new meaning, for everyone.[15,16] From past to future, from loss to responsibility. That applies in a team too. Those who keep settling scores after a hard conflict make friction dull. Those who take responsibility for what comes next make it productive.

Friction has an end

Pushback is gold, until a decision has to be made. After that it turns to poison. Three agreements that help:

- It is clear beforehand who decides. Not the loudest, and not by definition the highest in rank, but the owner of the subject.[17]
- Disagree in the room, one line outside it. Whoever lost the argument carries out the decision as if it had been their own idea. At Amazon they call it *disagree and commit*.[18] It applies most of all to the leader.
- Pushback is about the issue, not the person.

And then there is friction for the wrong reason. You recognise it by four signals: the argument keeps changing, there is never an alternative, every round mainly produces delay, and after the decision the fight goes underground. That is no longer pushback. That is resistance, and you do not resolve it with yet another debate. You deal with it in an honest conversation (chapter 6): what are you actually trying to protect? If nothing changes after that, it becomes a question of the right seat.

THE FRAMEWORK · SAFETY AND A HIGH BAR

Amy Edmondson (Harvard) studied why some teams learn and others do not. Psychological safety is the feeling that you can speak up without being punished. Teams with high safety learn more.[19] But safety alone is not enough. Safety with a low bar is a comfort zone. A high bar without safety is fear. Only the combination is a learning zone.

Friction needs contact

Everything above is about pushback and honest talk. But friction only gives shine when the surfaces actually touch. I had given that too little thought myself. A transformation drives wedges between people. Not with a bang, but in silence: a meeting that disappears, a colleague you now only see in a dashboard, a team you have not visited in months. You lose each other a little, and nobody notices.

Without a bond, pushback becomes an attack and feedback a reckoning. With a bond, it is a conversation between two people who want the same thing. So every honest message comes with this question too: when did I last really talk to this person, human to human?

The glass is half full when I am in the room

Something else I underestimated for a long time. When I am in the room, the glass turns half full by itself. Not out of cowardice, but out of politeness, and because I am the boss. People tell me what is working, and far less what is stuck. If I want to hear about the half-empty part, I have to ask for it, in every one-to-one and in every team. Five questions that work:

- What do you think I do not like to hear, but need to know?
- What would you honestly say about this at your kitchen table, to your partner or your best friend?
- What am I not seeing enough of?
- What do I not seem to understand about your situation that I really should?
- What really worries you?

And then I keep quiet. An honest conversation is balanced: everyone at the table brings something, an observation, a worry, feedback. No exceptions, not the quietest person, and not me.

THINK

? Who in my team contradicts me the most? When did I last reward that?

? Whom would I, like Mandela, deliberately bring into my circle precisely because they think differently?

? Which decision from the past month is still being fought over? By whom, and have I named it yet?

? Is my team in the comfort zone, the fear zone or the learning zone? Honestly?

? Who in my team have I lost touch with a little in recent months? When will I talk to them, about something other than work?



CHAPTER SIX

6 Honest and direct

Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.

We are good at being kind. We are less good at being honest.

We need leaders who are direct. Who say what they see, in the room and not in the corridor. Who speak to someone when things are not going well, and not only in a review. Who are honest when someone is not in the right place, or when AI changes their job.

Often we stay silent because we think we are sparing someone. Brené Brown writes that we are then mostly sparing ourselves. Half-truths, expectations you never voice but do hold people to, talking about someone instead of with them: it is all unkind. Clear is kind.[20]

> *Leaving someone in the wrong place is not kind. Not to them, and not to the team that picks up the slack.*

THE FRAMEWORK · RADICAL CANDOR

Kim Scott, a former executive at Google, describes good feedback along two axes: **caring personally** and **challenging directly**. Only when you do both at once do you really help someone.[21] Those who care about people but do not challenge them fall into ruinous empathy: you stay silent to spare the other. Those who challenge without caring are simply obnoxious. Those who do neither flatter you to your face and complain behind your back.

The first one I see a lot in our company: staying silent to spare someone. The friction is there, afterwards and at the coffee machine, but it gives no shine. **Friction without shine, I call it.**

Our yardstick: EPIC

Being honest requires a shared yardstick, otherwise feedback becomes a matter of taste. At Dstny we have that yardstick: EPIC. Not an HR exercise, but a compass. Yours may have a different name, as long as you have one.

THE FRAMEWORK · EPIC IN FOUR LETTERS

	IN ONE SENTENCE	WHAT IT MEANS
Energy	Make it happen	You are the battery of your team, not the firefighter. You bring energy, especially when it gets hard.
Positive	Solve, don't blame	First "how do we solve this?", only then "who caused this?" Feedback is fuel, not a weapon.
Impact	Do, don't just talk	Results, not intentions. You close the gap between strategy and execution.
Capabilities	Attitude before knowledge	Skills can be learned, attitude is a choice. We are not looking for perfect people, but for people who want to grow.

What EPIC is not

EPIC is not a request to always be cheerful, and not an excuse to avoid difficult conversations. Positive means: naming problems and moving straight to a solution. That takes courage.

> ***Honest feedback is not an exception to EPIC. It is EPIC in practice.***

EPIC BEHAVIOUR	NOT EPIC BEHAVIOUR
Raises problems themselves, with a proposal	Waits, or complains without a solution
Asks for help when something is stuck	Lets problems drag on for fear of losing face
Takes ownership of mistakes, learns and adjusts	Shifts the blame to others or to circumstances
Gives direct feedback, even when it is uncomfortable	Avoids the difficult conversation, or talks about people instead of with them

How you say it

Honest is not the same as blunt. Blunt is about the person. Honest is about the work and about what it costs us. Feedback aimed at the person often makes performance worse.[22] My rules are simple.

- **Say it quickly.** Within the week, not in a review six months later.
- **Say it in the room.** Not in the corridor, not in an email to others.
- **Say what you saw.** Not what you suspect, not who someone is.
- **Say what it costs.** A customer, credibility, the team's time.
- **Ask what the other person was trying to achieve.** That is where the conversation starts, and the verdict stops.

Those who work this way do not have to choose between kind and honest. But it must not depend on a few brave people. Feedback has to be built into the system: into how we close projects and how we run meetings, regardless of hierarchy. Pixar built a fixed forum for it, the Braintrust: honest feedback is the goal there, and the maker decides what to do with it.[23] It has to become so normal with us that it is in the walls.

The right person in the right place

First the right people in the right seat, only then the direction in detail. If you cannot predict the future, a team that adapts is your best strategy.

Sometimes it is not the wrong person, but the wrong seat. And not everyone who leads wants to. That is okay. It only becomes dishonest when we pretend. This grid does not sort people. It is a mirror for the conversation we keep postponing:

	RIGHT SEAT	WRONG SEAT
Shows EPIC	**Let them grow.** Challenge, let them carry more.	**Another seat.** The person fits, the role does not.
Does not show EPIC	**Honest conversation about behaviour.** With a deadline.	**Respectful goodbye.** Waiting helps no one.

A sentence I carry with me comes from Martin Luther King, written in a prison cell: the time is always ripe to do right.[24] Also for the conversation you are postponing.

THINK

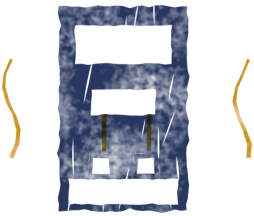
? Which honest conversation have I been postponing for too long? Why, actually?

? Does everyone in my team know where they stand? And do I judge people on the place they have earned, or on what they can do tomorrow?

? On which letter of EPIC do I score weakest myself, and who is allowed to call me on it?

FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

- Do we call each other on our yardstick, or only in the corridors?
- How does that yardstick show up in hiring, reviews and promotion? Or is it mainly a word?
- Are there people in key positions with whom we have been postponing the honest conversation about their seat for too long?





CHAPTER SEVEN

7 Choose and cut

A plan is what we say. A pattern is what we do.

For me strategy is three questions: who are we, where do we want to go, and what do we give up to get there? The biggest risk is not a wrong choice. It is no choice.

We made our biggest choice in the middle of the pandemic. Suddenly everyone was working from home, and that was our moment. We did two large acquisitions in Sweden, negotiated almost entirely virtually. That choice made us a European player. Not because we had certainty, but because we chose.

Plan and pattern

A plan is what we say. A pattern is what we do: where the money, the time and the best people go. You read a company's real strategy in its calendar and its budget, not in its slides.

When I look honestly at our own pattern, I see three things today: perfection over speed, roles over ownership, and thinking from the inside out instead of from the customer. I do not think that is the strategy we would choose if we decided on it together, consciously. That is not a reproach, but it is the reason I am writing this down.



EPIC

Impact in EPIC is about results, not activity. The question we ask ourselves as leaders: what did we really change this week?

What do we stop?

The new also needs protection. An operation runs on certainty and repetition, innovation on uncertainty and learning. Put those two in the same process and the operation almost always wins[25]: every idea has to have a full business case straight away, and so it dies before it gets a chance.

With us I see it in the hesitation to put a first customer live, while a competitor is meanwhile learning with an imperfect version at a real customer. With limited scope and a safety net, that one customer teaches us more than three months of building.

Know your customer

My first bankruptcy was a party. As a young guy I organised parties. One night we had top DJs from Fuse and beers at two euros. A few villages away there was a scouts party with folk music and beers at one euro. Everyone went there. My loss: a hundred thousand Belgian francs, and one lesson I still use every week. Know your customer. Start from their problem, not from our technology.

Two tools

THE FRAMEWORK · THREE HORIZONS

McKinsey described how companies sustain growth by managing three horizons at the same time.[26] If you only do the first, you become efficient in a world that is disappearing. If you only do the last, you lose your base.

HORIZON	WHAT	WHY
1. Core	Small improvements that make the base stronger	That is where we get our oxygen
2. Emerging	Initiatives that unlock new value in the medium term	That is where our next growth is
3. Radical	Experiments for a world we do not yet see	That is where we prepare for a different logic

THE FRAMEWORK · EIGHT QUESTIONS FOR EVERY NEW IDEA

George Heilmeier, former director of DARPA, the research agency of the US Department of Defense, asked these eight questions of every proposal that landed on his desk. A filter against vagueness and wishful thinking.[27]

- What are we trying to do, in one sentence, without jargon?
- How is it done today, and what are the limits?
- What is new about our approach, and why do we think it will work?
- Who benefits? If it succeeds, what changes?
- What are the risks?
- What does it cost?
- How long does it take?
- What are the interim and final tests?

FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

- What are the two or three uncertainties that could overturn our strategy? Think of AI, the role of your most important partners and how customers change.
- If we look at where our money and our best people went in the past six months: what is our real strategy then?
- Which three things do we stop, or design from scratch with AI agents?
- Which first customer do we put live this quarter under clear conditions, instead of waiting for perfect?



CHAPTER EIGHT

8 It starts with us

Our people don't look at our slides. They look at us.

The culture of an organisation is what we allow and what we encourage. Not what hangs on the wall. That is why culture is the first thing we have to design, not the last.

A leader does not need to have the best ideas. He has to make the space in which others dare to think and act: giving direction without controlling everything, asking hard questions without becoming cynical. People want to steer themselves. Not total freedom, but guardrails.

The office I had never seen

A few years ago we moved to a new office. I stayed out of the interior design. I did not see the plans and never spoke to the architect, although he tried more than once. A team had it completely in their hands. My brief was one sentence: I hope it feels like Dstny. Two days before the opening, my assistant asked whether I would come and check that we actually had an office. I walked in, and it felt like Dstny. That is what I mean by guardrails: one clear expectation, and then really letting go. Not halfway, not looking over their shoulder. Trust you give comes back as ownership.

THE FRAMEWORK · ENABLING LEADERSHIP

Mary Uhl-Bien and Michael Arena spent ten years following how large organisations stay agile. Every company has two systems: the **operational** (order, repetition, results) and the **entrepreneurial** (new ideas, experiment). Under pressure, order almost always wins. Agile organisations have a third role: leaders who create **adaptive space**. Temporary places where people from different teams and silos meet, clash and connect. Not a new structure, but space. With two ingredients: enough friction to challenge the status quo, and enough cohesion not to fall into chaos. Friction with shine, in other words.[25,28] The half-day and the five conversations at the back are such a space.

Mandela learned that as a boy with the regent Jongintaba: everyone speaks first, the leader speaks last. "Do not enter the debate too early."[12] A leader, he said, is like a shepherd who stays behind the flock and lets the quickest go out ahead.[10] I recognise that. As a twenty-year-old in the slums I learned that you do not lead people from behind a desk: you go and find them where they are. My mother once gave me his book *Conversations with Myself*. Later I ordered ten copies for my team.

Mandela served one term as president and stepped aside. That too is leadership. The same honesty I ask of my people applies to me, including about my own role.

Lead by example, not by reading out

Take the elephant from chapter 3. Silos do not disappear with a new org chart. They disappear when we as leaders let go of our own piece and talk about the whole. Our teams do what they see us do.

That is why we agreed at Dstny, for every leader:

- We name tensions openly, even when it is uncomfortable.
- We give each other direct feedback, to get better.
- We bring energy, even in the middle of a heavy transformation.
- We put impact above activity. What did we change this week?
- We invest in the capabilities of our teams.
- We use EPIC in reviews and promotions, and twice a year we check how we live up to it ourselves.

Why do we exist?

Managers solve today and tomorrow. Leaders guard why we will still be here the day after. Without that answer, renewal becomes running blind in the dark. AI does not come over us like the weather. We decide what we build with it, for whom and why. I am not going to write that answer down on my own. I want to hear it from every one of our teams, in one sentence.

What we leave behind

One answer I will give already, because it drives me: what I want us to leave behind as Dstny. We only hold a small piece of the world in our hands. That piece we do control. What do we do with it?

It starts with honesty. A company that says honestly what it stands for, where it is going and what you are good at, sets people in motion. Our people may take that with them, even if they ever leave.

And it is about AI. We sell digital colleagues. That gives our customers something back that nobody can manufacture: time. At a dinner recently someone asked me: "If AI replaces so many jobs, what will those people do?" A fair question, and I do not have a complete answer. Mandela said it at Walter Sisulu's ninetieth birthday: what counts is not that we have lived, but what difference we have made to the lives of others.[29] The difference we make for customers, for colleagues and for the people whose jobs change: that is our legacy.

I keep believing in the power of people. Not despite AI, but precisely because of it. Machines give answers. People ask the questions, carry responsibility and build trust.

> ***AI must make people bigger, not smaller. That is our task as leaders.***

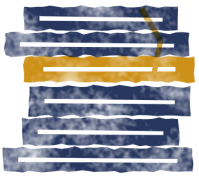
THINK

? Which behaviour of mine do my people see every day? And what do they learn from it about how things work here?

? What do I tolerate in my team that I actually do not want? What do I encourage without realising it?

FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

- Can we say in one sentence why our organisation exists, apart from what we sell? Do we all say the same thing?
- What do we really reward here: the result of someone's own piece, or what someone did for the whole?
- Who are our fast runners? And who last gave them something bigger to carry?
- What do we want customers, colleagues and the people whose jobs change to say about us in ten years?



EPIC



Energy
Make it happen.

Positive
Solve, don't blame.

Impact
Do, don't just talk.

Capabilities
Attitude before knowledge.

Not an HR exercise, but a compass. Honest feedback is not an exception to EPIC. It is EPIC in practice.

AT A GLANCE

The booklet in brief

	CORE IDEA	WHAT I DO
1	Our market has already tipped three times. The world before is not coming back.	Treat change as permanent
2	AI is not a light bulb. Redesign the factory.	Redesign processes, be honest about jobs
3	What saved us yesterday is our armour today: silos, perfection over speed.	Break silos, starting with my behaviour and my KPIs
4	Resilience is adaptation, not toughness.	Keep body and mind in shape: sleep, routine, small steps
5	Friction gives shine. Those who only hear yes hear nothing new.	Seek friction deliberately, guard the bond, keep the bar high, decide in time
6	Clear is kind. A shared yardstick, for us EPIC.	Have the postponed conversation, make feedback routine
7	Strategy is choosing. The pattern is the real strategy. Say what you stop.	Let calendar and budget follow, first customer live
8	Culture is what we allow. Our legacy is the difference we make for people.	Lead by example, not by reading out

What does this rest on?

Not every idea in this booklet stands equally firm. That is not a problem, as long as we know which is which.

TYPE	WHAT IN THIS BOOKLET
Strong research	Repeated, tested research in journals: resilience as adaptation, what pressure does to our thinking, sleep and leadership, psychological safety, the effect of feedback.
Solid theory	Recognised models from management research, less often tested directly: the dynamo paradox (David), plan versus pattern, the tension between operation and innovation (Uhl-Bien and Arena), a good fight in management teams (Eisenhardt), and antifragility (Taleb).
Small or mixed evidence	Writing as a way to order your thoughts (mixed results). Useful, no guarantee.
Practice models	Widely used, rarely rigorously tested: Radical Candor, disagree and commit, the three horizons, the Heilmeier questions, Microsoft's Frontier Firm report.
Stories	Mandela, the telecom operators, Nokia and Kodak, Denmark after the oil crisis, Pixar's Braintrust and my own stories. They make an idea recognisable, but they do not prove it.
Our own choices	EPIC, the armour-and-fireworks grid and the EPIC-and-right-seat grid. We test those in practice, together.

My advice: take the strong research as your starting point, use the practice models as tools, and read the stories as inspiration.



GETTING TO WORK

Getting to work

Reading is the start. What counts is what you do with it on Monday. At Dstny we go about it like this: first the executive committee, a half-day and five conversations. Then every leader with their own team. Not because this is the only way, but because a booklet alone changes nothing. Conversations do. What follows is a proposal, not a prescription: adapt it to your organisation. Just do not skip the conversation itself.

The self-scan

Give yourself a score from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). Be honest, nobody sees this. Bring it to the first conversation.

LEVEL	STATEMENT	CIRCLE
ME	I sleep and recover enough to decide clearly.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
ME	I take small decisions without complete information.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
ME	I know what I can influence, and act accordingly.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
ME	I deliberately make time to read, write and learn.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
WE	People in my team contradict me, also in a group.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
WE	My team combines openness with a high bar.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
WE	I seek out criticism, even when things are going well.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
WE	I speak to someone directly within the week when something is not going well.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
WE	Every team member knows how I assess their attitude and place.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
WE	I know what really occupies the people in my team, also outside work.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
COMPANY	I can say in one sentence where my company is going and what we give up.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
COMPANY	My calendar and budget reflect our chosen strategy.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
COMPANY	I protect room for experiments against the pressure of the operation.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
COMPANY	I am in love with the customer's problem, not with the solution.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
COMPANY	I am working today on something that keeps us relevant in three years.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
COMPANY	I use AI to organise my work differently, not just faster.	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5

Where you score lowest is probably where your biggest lever is.

Five conversations

Start with a half-day. First with each other, not with the text: what has really occupied each of us in recent months, at work and outside it? Then through the booklet together: what is unclear, how does it land, where is the energy and where the resistance? Then five half-hour conversations, fixed on your management team's agenda. First learn to talk honestly, only then strategy and portfolio.

Each half-hour: 2 minutes the question, 20 minutes going round and digging in, 8 minutes the agreement: what, who, by when. Everyone brings something, including whoever leads. They speak last.

CONVERSATION 1 · PUSHBACK

See chapter 5

- **Beforehand:** write down in one sentence why our most important decision of this quarter could have failed a year from now.
- **Conversation:** everyone reads out their sentence, without discussion. Then: which risk are we not taking seriously enough?
- **Agreement:** who defends the opposite on that decision from now on?

CONVERSATION 2 · OUR YARDSTICK IN OURSELVES

See chapter 6

- **Beforehand:** note your strongest and weakest point on your yardstick for behaviour, with an example from the past month. No yardstick? Note the three behaviours you expect from every leader.
- **Conversation:** everyone shares it in two minutes. The others give honest feedback: do they see the same?
- **Agreement:** everyone picks one behaviour to change, and says who may hold them to it.

CONVERSATION 3 · THE POSTPONED CONVERSATION

See chapter 6

- **Beforehand:** place your direct reports for yourself in the grid of chapter 6. That stays with you.
- **Conversation:** everyone names one honest conversation they have been postponing for too long, without names if not needed. What is holding you back?
- **Agreement:** every conversation happens within thirty days. At the next half-hour we say briefly whether it happened.

CONVERSATION 4 · PLAN VERSUS PATTERN

See chapter 7

- **Beforehand:** look at your calendar of the past month. How much time went to our three biggest priorities?
- **Conversation:** everyone shares their percentage. Where is the gap between what we say and what we do?
- **Agreement:** everyone cuts or delegates one recurring meeting.

CONVERSATION 5 · WHAT WE NO LONGER DO

See chapters 2 and 7

- **Beforehand:** think of one thing your organisation should stop: a product, a process, a meeting or a KPI. Or a place where we use AI as a light bulb.
- **Conversation:** everyone presents their proposal. The owner of the topic speaks last, as Mandela learned.
- **Agreement:** we stop at least one thing, with a date. The portfolio across the three horizons gets an owner who prepares it later.

Passing it on

This booklet is meant for every leader. A few simple ways to bring it to life in your own team:

- Pick one chapter a month and discuss it for half an hour in your team meeting. Use the questions under **Think**.
- Ask at least one of the five questions from p. 26 in every one-to-one. And listen until the other person has finished.
- Run every new idea in your team through the eight questions of chapter 7 (p. 35), even the small ones.
- Put one thing in front of a real customer this quarter, small and with a safety net, instead of waiting for perfect.
- Close every big project with a one-hour debrief in which feedback is the goal, not the by-product.
- Share one lesson from your team with another team every quarter. And collect one in return.
- Start every quarterly meeting with the question: what has changed in our market that we are not yet taking seriously?
- Say quickly what you saw and what it costs, and ask what the other person was trying to achieve. Positive or critical. Name good behaviour when you see it, and also when you miss it.

I will start myself

At the front I promised to be more critical and easier to contradict. Here it is in black and white, so my people can hold me to it.

I stop dropping ideas. I am the man of the next, and the next after next. I see a lot and throw it into the group too quickly, without context. That gives energy, but also noise. From now on my ideas go to two people I trust first. What remains comes to the executive committee as a fixed agenda item, with a label: inspiration, explore or decide. Only the last two get an owner and a date. The rest we leave.

I start listening more at the edges. Eighteen months ago I began check-ins in every team: hearing what is going on. I will keep that up. New: every month one customer conversation about working with us.

I protect two things in our culture, and I vouch for them. One: pace, because my worry is that we are too slow. The window is now. New functionality goes live with a real customer, even if it is not perfect yet, with a safety net. The course we chose, we execute and we prove every quarter. And we do not hide behind 'too few people'. For me that is not an end point but the start of a conversation: what stops, so that this can happen? I will help make that choice. Two: humility. Dstny is a humble company. That stays. We may be chaotic, never arrogant. Arrogance kills. No 'we already have that customer anyway': every customer we earn again every day.

Who reins me in. I need people who dare to say: Daan, focus, this now. Not everyone has to be my sounding board; too many ideas at once paralyse a team. Those two hear my ideas first, and they may rein me in. Also when I, direct as I am, still avoid a conflict. And I do not wait: in every one-to-one and team meeting I ask at least one of the five questions from p. 26, and then I keep quiet.

In thirty days I will ask my people how I am doing. Ask yours too.

My commitment

Fill this in and share it in the first conversation.

One thing I stop:

One thing I start:

One habit I protect:

What I will do this quarter to make my team stronger and more agile:

The honest conversation I will have, and by when:

The person who gives me honest feedback on this:

Who I have lost touch with a little, and when I will talk to them:

In thirty days we look back together.

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NOTES

THE ONE THING I AM GOING TO DO DIFFERENTLY

NOTES



Stay strong, become different

A workbook for leaders, from Dstny

A team without friction goes dull. Those who only hear yes lose touch with reality.

Eight short chapters on resilience, reinvention and AI, with questions for yourself, your management team and your team. Written for the leaders of Dstny, shared with everyone who leads.

It all comes down to one sentence: stay strong, become different and become faster.

Read it in an hour. Discuss it with your team. Start with yourself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daan De Wever founded Dstny in 2008 with his brother Samuel. The company grew organically and through acquisitions into a European provider of business communications with more than 1,000 employees in eight countries and around €275 million in revenue. Many know the name from the Lotto Dstny cycling team. After several rounds of private equity, he still leads it today, as CEO.

Daan De Wever, CEO Dstny · 2027
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