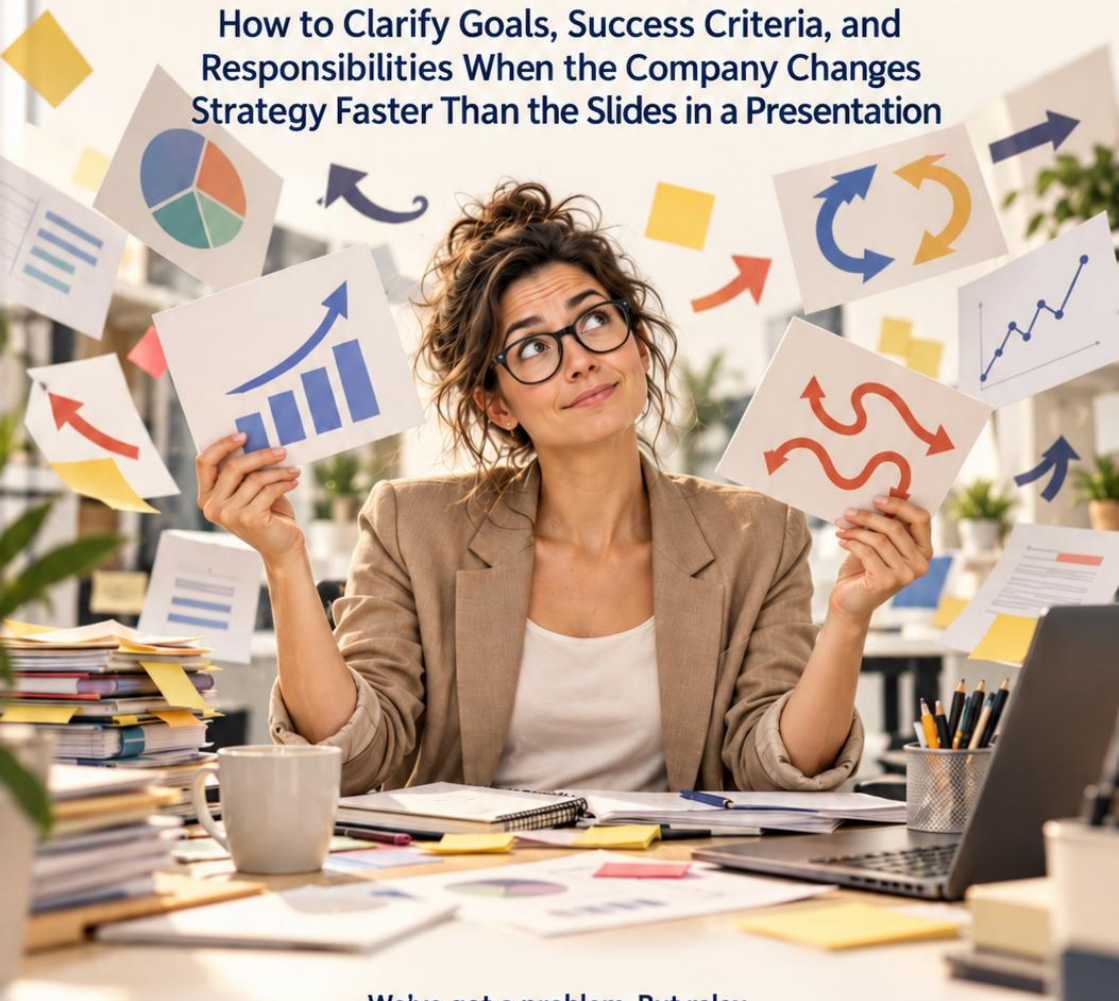
Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

No One Knows What "Good Work" Looks Like Right Now

How to Clarify Goals, Success Criteria, and Responsibilities When the Company Changes Strategy Faster Than the Slides in a Presentation



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

At 4:17 on a Wednesday afternoon, you receive an email congratulating your team on successfully completing a major project. At 4:23, another email arrives explaining that the project has failed to deliver the business impact leadership expected. Both messages come from the same department. You stare at your screen, wondering whether the organization has discovered a revolutionary new way of measuring performance or whether someone has accidentally scheduled the performance review before deciding what success meant. Your team delivered everything requested. The deadline was met, the budget remained under control, and the final presentation featured enough green checkmarks to qualify as a modest environmental initiative. Apparently, none of that was quite what the company wanted.

The following morning, your manager explains that leadership is now looking for a more strategic approach. This is an interesting development because the original assignment specifically emphasized practical execution rather than strategic exploration. You mention this distinction as diplomatically as possible. Your manager nods thoughtfully and explains that the business has evolved. Naturally. Businesses evolve, markets change, and yesterday's priorities do not necessarily survive contact with tomorrow's circumstances. The difficulty is that nobody informed your project that it was supposed to evolve too. It continued following the approved instructions, like a well-trained employee who missed the announcement that obedience was no longer considered a desirable professional characteristic.

If you've worked in a changing organization, you probably recognize some version of this experience. Perhaps you've spent weeks developing a solution that was suddenly declared too complicated, despite repeated requests for comprehensive detail. Perhaps two senior managers have praised and criticized the same decision for precisely opposite reasons. Maybe you've been told to take ownership of an outcome while being denied the authority to change anything that influences it. Or perhaps your annual objectives have survived three reorganizations, two budget reductions, and the departure of the executive who originally approved them. The company may have an entirely different strategy now, but your performance management system remains admirably loyal to the past.

The central problem is deceptively simple: people are expected to deliver good work without sharing a reliable definition of what good work actually means. That definition may be incomplete, contradictory, outdated, or scattered across conversations nobody remembers in quite the same way. Sometimes it changes for legitimate reasons. Sometimes expectations were never properly established in the first place. And occasionally, the definition seems to exist exclusively inside a senior executive's imagination, where it enjoys the considerable advantage of never having to withstand detailed examination.

This uncertainty has real consequences. People waste time perfecting deliverables that no longer matter. Teams compete for resources because nobody has resolved conflicting priorities. Managers commit to deadlines without knowing whether the work is feasible. Employees hesitate to make decisions because yesterday's independence may become tomorrow's unauthorized initiative. Eventually, even

experienced professionals begin second-guessing ordinary choices. Should you ask for clarification and risk appearing inexperienced? Should you make the decision yourself and risk criticism? Should you produce three alternatives, schedule another meeting, or simply hope that leadership's preferences become clearer after lunch? None of these questions necessarily reflects a lack of competence. They may reflect a workplace that has made competence unnecessarily difficult to demonstrate.

Of course, uncertainty cannot be eliminated from business. A company that never revises its priorities may be ignoring important information. Customers change their minds. Competitors introduce new products. Economic conditions shift. Projects reveal problems that nobody could reasonably have predicted. Good organizations need to respond. The trouble begins when leadership changes direction without updating the expectations attached to the work. A new priority is announced, but previous commitments remain untouched. Additional responsibilities appear, but decision-making authority stays exactly where it was. A performance target becomes irrelevant, yet employees are still measured against it. The organization changes its destination while continuing to judge everyone by the old travel itinerary.

When this happens, people often respond by working harder. They extend their hours, attend more meetings, prepare more detailed reports, and carefully document every instruction. These actions can be useful in the right circumstances, but effort alone cannot resolve contradictory expectations. A beautifully organized task list will not tell you which of two competing objectives leadership genuinely prefers. An elaborate dashboard cannot compensate for the

absence of meaningful success criteria. And no amount of enthusiasm can transform a deadline into a realistic commitment when the necessary resources simply do not exist. Motivation is valuable. Unfortunately, it is not a recognized substitute for staffing, authority, or basic arithmetic.

Another common response is to seek complete certainty before beginning anything. Every decision requires confirmation, every interpretation gets checked, and every email includes enough copied recipients to populate a respectable conference audience. This approach may reduce certain risks, but it creates others. Work slows down, managers become approval bottlenecks, and employees lose confidence in their own judgment. What began as sensible caution gradually becomes organizational paralysis. The solution isn't to ask permission for everything or to make every decision independently. It's to understand which questions genuinely require agreement, which decisions fall within your authority, and where uncertainty can be managed without bringing the entire company to a halt.

Three distinctions will make an enormous difference throughout this book. A goal describes the result you're trying to achieve. Success criteria establish how you'll recognize an acceptable result. Responsibility establishes who must act, who can decide, and who is accountable for particular commitments. These elements influence one another, but they are not interchangeable. You might know exactly what the company wants while lacking the authority to deliver it. You might complete an assigned task perfectly while discovering that the expected business outcome was never clearly defined. You might also be responsible for coordinating several teams whose individual priorities make

the shared result impossible. Understanding where the confusion originates is the first step toward dealing with it sensibly.

Consider a request to improve the company's customer experience. That sounds reasonable until you ask what actually needs improving. Is the problem slow response times, confusing information, repeated service failures, or customers having to contact three departments to resolve one issue? Different answers require different work. They also require different ways of measuring whether anything improved. A team could launch an impressive customer experience initiative, introduce sophisticated reporting, and organize workshops on customer-centric thinking while leaving the original frustration untouched. The result might look magnificent in the executive presentation. Customers, regrettably, have a habit of evaluating services by using them rather than admiring the associated slides.

This book will help you recognize such gaps before they become expensive misunderstandings. You'll learn to turn vague expectations into workable commitments, distinguish meaningful outcomes from attractive performance numbers, and identify the decisions that must be made before people can reasonably deliver results. We'll examine what happens when priorities conflict, responsibilities overlap, managers avoid making choices, and projects continue long after their original purpose has disappeared. Just as importantly, we'll look at situations where perfect clarity is impossible, cooperation is difficult, or you simply lack the authority to fix the underlying organizational problem. Useful advice must work in imperfect workplaces, because that is where most people actually have jobs.

You won't find a promise that every manager can be persuaded by one brilliant question, or that every organizational contradiction can be repaired with a cleverly designed template. Some companies have structural problems that individual employees cannot resolve. Some decisions involve unavoidable compromises. Sometimes the best professional response is to explain a limitation, recommend a reasonable course of action, and make sure the appropriate person understands the consequences. That may not produce instant applause, but it is considerably more valuable than confidently promising an outcome that nobody has established how to deliver.

For now, remember one thing: your job is not to become a mind reader with access to the secret thoughts of senior management. Your job is to understand the outcome you're working toward, make responsible decisions within your authority, and recognize when expectations need clarification or revision. Good work doesn't require knowing the future. It requires enough shared understanding to act intelligently in the present.

And if the company announces another strategic transformation next Thursday, you can approach it with reasonable curiosity rather than immediate panic. Before redesigning everything, find out what has actually changed. Before accepting another commitment, understand what it requires. Before celebrating success, make sure everyone is talking about the same result.

The slides may still change faster than anyone can follow.

At least you won't have to pretend the slides are a substitute for a strategy.

Chapter 1 - The Moving Target: When Yesterday's Excellent Work Becomes Today's Mistake

On Monday morning, Emma receives an assignment from her manager at a company selling home improvement products online. The business wants to improve its product information pages, and Emma has been asked to coordinate the project. The instructions seem straightforward: make the information more comprehensive, reduce customer confusion, and ensure that every product description meets the company's new quality standards. She organizes the work, assigns responsibilities, and spends the next three weeks checking technical specifications, improving descriptions, and resolving inconsistencies. On Friday afternoon, she presents the finished result. Her manager examines several examples, nods approvingly, and says the team has done an excellent job. Emma leaves the meeting feeling something dangerously close to professional satisfaction.

On Tuesday, the same manager explains that the new descriptions are too long. Customers apparently want simpler information, and senior leadership has decided that speed of publication matters more than comprehensive detail. Emma points out that the original instructions explicitly required additional information and stricter checks. Her manager agrees but explains that the business has moved on. The team will need to simplify everything and reconsider its approval process. Nobody mentions the three weeks of work that followed the previous instructions. Emma briefly considers putting the original requirements in a frame

and hanging them above her desk. At least then someone might acknowledge that they once existed.

The obvious reaction is frustration. Emma worked carefully, met the agreed deadline, and delivered what was requested. Yet the judgment of her performance has changed because the definition of a successful result has changed. What makes this particularly difficult is that the new expectation may be entirely reasonable. Customers might genuinely prefer shorter descriptions. The business might need to publish products more quickly. The mistake isn't necessarily the decision to change direction. It is the failure to distinguish the quality of work completed under one set of requirements from the desirability of a different result under new conditions. Once those two questions become confused, yesterday's competent employee can become today's disappointing performer without having done anything differently.

There is an important distinction between a difficult assignment and an ambiguous one. A difficult assignment demands effort, judgment, resources, and sometimes skills you have not fully developed. An ambiguous assignment demands something additional: the ability to guess what the person evaluating the work has in mind. You might have to solve a complex technical problem, but at least you know what a successful solution must accomplish. By contrast, being told to make a process "more strategic" offers surprisingly little guidance. You can spend months improving something that the person who issued the instruction never intended you to improve. The difficulty is no longer entirely within the task. It exists in the distance between two people's understanding of the task.

Business language can make that distance difficult to notice. Words such as efficient, innovative, premium, scalable, and customer-focused sound meaningful because they describe desirable qualities. Unfortunately, they rarely establish a complete working expectation on their own. Ask six people to create a premium service, and you may receive six incompatible interpretations. One adds personal assistance, another improves materials, a third raises the price to establish exclusivity, and somebody from finance suggests achieving premium positioning through an exceptionally economical operating model. Everyone might be acting intelligently. They're simply making different assumptions about the outcome. The vocabulary creates the appearance of agreement while leaving the most consequential choices unresolved.

When the assignment sounds clearer than it is

A particularly revealing question is whether you can describe what must be different when the work is finished. Consider an instruction to "improve internal communication." That might mean reducing duplicated announcements, ensuring managers receive information before their teams, making urgent operational messages easier to identify, or helping employees understand decisions that affect their jobs. Each objective calls for different actions. A beautifully designed newsletter may improve presentation without addressing the fact that employees learn about organizational changes from customers. A new communication platform might increase the number of messages while doing nothing to improve understanding. Until the underlying problem becomes visible, you can confidently choose a solution that solves the wrong thing.

The distinction between an activity and its intended effect matters here. Producing twenty revised product descriptions is an activity with a tangible output. Helping customers make more accurate purchasing decisions is a possible outcome. They are connected, but not identical. Emma's team might produce flawless descriptions according to the agreed specification while discovering that customers still cannot identify compatible accessories. That finding would be valuable information about the effectiveness of the solution. It would not automatically prove that the team had failed to perform its assigned work. An organization needs enough clarity to understand what its people were responsible for delivering and what business benefit their work was expected to support.

Sometimes the result is genuinely uncertain because nobody knows which solution will work. That is different from failing to define the assignment. A company experimenting with a new customer service channel may not know whether customers will use it. It can still agree on the purpose of the trial, the resources available, the information it wants to gather, and when it will decide whether to continue. Uncertainty about an outcome is compatible with clarity about the work. In fact, when results cannot be predicted confidently, clear expectations become especially useful. They allow the team to learn something meaningful rather than spending its time defending predictions that were never more than educated guesses.

One warning sign of ambiguity is that work repeatedly returns for revision without a clear explanation of which requirement remains unmet. Another is that approval depends heavily on who happens to review the result. A third is that nobody can explain what would justify stopping.

These situations deserve attention because they create work that expands in response to reactions rather than agreed needs. A manager asks for more detail, then complains about complexity. A document is approved, then reopened because someone has discovered an additional preference. A prototype moves through seven reviews, each involving different expectations. Eventually, the project develops its own weather system: conditions change unpredictably, and everyone checks the forecast before sending an email.

Such patterns are not proof that your manager is incompetent or deliberately unreasonable. The person assigning the work may be receiving incomplete instructions from someone else. Their department might be balancing conflicting pressures that have not yet been resolved. They may have difficulty expressing a requirement until they see a concrete example. Understanding these possibilities matters because your response should fit the cause. If someone cannot describe an aesthetic preference, showing two contrasting examples might help more than requesting a longer written specification. If the problem is an unresolved budget decision, producing additional design variations is unlikely to solve it. The first useful skill is recognizing what kind of uncertainty you're facing.

Finding the missing agreement

Start with a meaningful assignment you are currently working on. Before asking anyone for more information, describe the expected result in ordinary language. Imagine explaining it to a capable colleague unfamiliar with the project. What will exist or change when the work is complete? Who needs the result? What important requirement must it satisfy? You do not need a polished presentation. The purpose is to expose the assumptions

hiding inside familiar phrases. If you discover that your explanation depends on words such as better, improved, or optimized without specifying what they refer to, you have found a useful place to investigate.

Next, distinguish what has actually been agreed from what you have inferred. Perhaps your manager explicitly approved the deadline but never specified the level of detail. Maybe the budget is confirmed, while the expected number of deliverables is based on a conversation with a colleague. These pieces of information should not carry equal authority. An assumption can be sensible, and you may need to act on it temporarily, but it is still an assumption. Treating your interpretation as a confirmed requirement makes later disagreement harder to resolve. The other person may sincerely believe they never requested the approach you selected, while you sincerely believe it was obvious from the circumstances.

A useful clarification focuses on a choice rather than demanding a complete explanation of someone's thinking. Emma might have asked, "When comprehensive information conflicts with quick publication, which should take priority for this product category?" That question identifies a possible trade-off and makes the consequences visible. Compare it with "Can you clarify the strategy?" The second question is reasonable but broad enough to invite another speech about customers, efficiency, and future growth. By asking about a concrete decision, Emma gives her manager something manageable to answer. Even an imperfect answer can reveal the intended direction.

Clarity also requires an understanding of what the reviewer will examine. A result can meet every technical requirement and still fail to satisfy the person using it if the

original definition overlooked an important need. This is why early examples are valuable when expectations are difficult to articulate. Before revising hundreds of product pages, Emma could prepare a small selection representing different types of products. The reviewer can then react to actual choices concerning layout, detail, and readability. Such feedback is more useful when tied to the intended customer experience. "This compatibility information is too difficult to find" offers a direction for improvement. "It doesn't feel quite right" may begin a conversation, but it is not yet an actionable requirement.

There is a cost to excessive clarification, however. If every minor decision requires another meeting, the organization can become trapped in an elaborate approval process. The goal is not to eliminate every possible difference of interpretation. It is to settle the differences most likely to affect the result, the resources required, or the consequences of a mistake. For a routine, reversible task, making a reasonable choice may be more efficient than seeking another confirmation. For an expensive commitment involving suppliers, customer promises, or safety requirements, uncertainty deserves greater attention. Good judgment includes knowing when additional agreement is necessary and when acting within established boundaries is appropriate.

It is also important to ask whether the expected result has actually changed or whether new feedback concerns the execution of an existing requirement. Those are not the same situation. If Emma's descriptions contain incorrect product dimensions, the team should correct the error. If leadership now wants a shorter format that contradicts the approved standard, the organization has changed its

requirements. Both situations may demand additional work, but they imply different responsibilities and lessons. Treating every new request as evidence that the original work was inadequate makes it impossible to evaluate performance fairly. Treating every correction as an unauthorized change would be equally unreasonable.

Knowing when the target has moved

One practical habit is to recognize the moment an important assumption becomes invalid. Perhaps a customer requirement changes, a sponsor identifies a new constraint, or a test reveals that the chosen approach will not produce the intended benefit. When that happens, the next question concerns consequences: what must be reconsidered, and what can remain as it is? This is more productive than automatically starting over or pretending the original plan still fits. Some completed work may be reusable. Some commitments may need renegotiation. Certain decisions might remain valid despite the change. Recognizing these differences prevents every strategic adjustment from becoming a wholesale demolition exercise.

The person doing the work also deserves a clear understanding of their authority. You may be empowered to adjust the wording of a product description without seeking approval. You may not be authorized to remove legally required information or change commitments made to customers. Being responsible for delivery does not mean possessing unlimited discretion over what counts as acceptable. When an essential decision sits outside your authority, your contribution may be to present the available options and explain their implications. You can do that professionally without pretending that the final choice belongs to you.

There will be occasions when clarification fails. A manager may continue using general language, avoid choosing between competing requirements, or insist that everything is equally important. You can still make progress by proposing a specific interpretation and stating its consequences. "I'll prioritize accurate compatibility details and use a shorter format for general descriptions. That preserves the information customers need while reducing page length." The manager can accept the approach, request a modification, or identify a missing consideration. What you should not do is silently convert a major unapproved assumption into an irreversible commitment simply because nobody answered your question.

Over time, this way of thinking changes the experience of working in an unpredictable organization. Criticism becomes information to examine rather than automatic proof of personal failure. A change of direction becomes something whose consequences can be discussed. And an apparently simple assignment becomes an opportunity to establish enough shared understanding for responsible action. You will still encounter contradictory messages and unexpected revisions. You may still have to redo good work because circumstances have changed. But you will be better equipped to distinguish a legitimate adjustment from a preventable misunderstanding.

The definition of good work can change. Sometimes it should. What matters is whether the people expected to deliver it have a fair opportunity to understand the current definition. Before investing another week in perfecting a result, establish what would make it useful and acceptable now. Otherwise, you may complete an exceptionally

impressive journey toward a destination your organization quietly abandoned last Thursday.

Chapter 2 - Five Definitions of Success, One Project, and Nobody Holding the Map

Imagine a subscription company preparing to introduce a reusable delivery container for its customers. The idea is attractive: reduce disposable packaging, improve the customer experience, and strengthen the company's reputation. The project manager, Daniel, brings representatives from operations, finance, marketing, customer service, and sustainability into the same room. Everyone supports the initiative. Operations wants containers that are easy to collect and clean. Finance wants the lowest possible cost per delivery. Marketing wants something distinctive enough to feature in an advertising campaign. Customer service wants returns to require almost no effort. The sustainability specialist wants durable materials and evidence that the system will actually reduce waste. The meeting ends with enthusiastic agreement. Daniel leaves with five definitions of success and a budget capable of supporting approximately two and a half of them.

Nobody has behaved irrationally. Each department has identified a legitimate requirement based on its responsibilities. Finance cannot simply ignore cost, and operations cannot pretend that containers clean themselves. Marketing needs a proposition customers will notice, while customer service understands what happens when an elegant new concept requires people to follow complicated instructions. The sustainability specialist is right to question whether reusable packaging produces the intended benefit under realistic operating conditions. The problem is not

disagreement itself. The problem is that everyone has approved an initiative without deciding how competing requirements will be reconciled. Daniel has been handed a shared ambition, not yet a shared definition of a successful result.

This distinction matters because organizations frequently confuse general support with operational agreement. Most people can agree that a project should be affordable, attractive, efficient, reliable, and environmentally responsible. Those qualities become difficult to combine when somebody has to select a specific container, supplier, collection process, and launch date. A lightweight design might cost less to transport but wear out sooner. A particularly durable container might be expensive to manufacture. A convenient collection service might improve customer participation while increasing logistics costs. Abstract agreement survives comfortably until the consequences become concrete. At that moment, the project manager discovers whether the organization made decisions or merely exchanged compliments.

One reason these conflicts are difficult to resolve is that departments see different consequences of the same choice. Finance may measure the expense of purchasing containers and running the collection service. Operations sees the labor needed to sort, inspect, and clean them. Customer service anticipates questions, complaints, and missing returns. Marketing sees the potential value of increased customer loyalty. Sustainability looks at material use and the actual number of reuse cycles. None of these perspectives provides the complete picture, but each reveals something the others might overlook. A project becomes vulnerable when one department's measure of