Business audiobook scripts

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The Empty Chair Rule

Meetings, attendance · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

Before your next meeting, count the chairs. Then ask one question about each person in them. If this person left right now, would the decision change?

If the answer is no, let them go. Not as a punishment. As a gift. Send them the notes, and give them an hour of their afternoon back.

I ran a twelve-person meeting every Monday for three years. It turned out to be a four-person meeting with eight polite witnesses.

Hire the Question

Hiring, interviews · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

I have interviewed a few hundred people, and I remember almost none of their answers. I remember their questions.

Dana Okafor asked me why our last two shop managers had quit. Nobody had ever asked that. I did not have a good answer, and she watched me not have one.

I hired her that afternoon. Anyone can prepare for what you will ask. Very few people prepare to find out the truth.

The First No

Negotiation, silence · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 30 seconds

The first no is rarely a no. It is a pause wearing a no's coat.

When a supplier tells you the price is fixed, do not argue and do not apologise. Say, quite pleasantly, that you understand. Then stop talking.

Count to five in your head. It will feel like a fortnight. Most people cannot bear a quiet room, and they will fill it. Quite often, they fill it with a better offer.

What the Till Told Me

Money, small shop · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 30 seconds

My daddy ran a hardware store for thirty-one years, and he never once looked at a report. He looked at the till.

Every night he counted it by hand. I thought that was old-fashioned. Then I opened my own place, with software and a dashboard, and I went four months without noticing we were losing money on every delivery.

He would have caught it in a week. He touched his numbers. I only looked at mine.

The Apology Memo

Mistakes, owning it · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

The worst email I ever sent went to four hundred customers at six in the morning. It promised a discount we could not afford, on a product we had stopped making.

My first instinct was to blame the software. My second was to blame Trevor, who had built the list. I am not proud of either one.

What I actually did, around nine, was write a second email. It had three sentences. We made a mistake. Here is what we will honor. Here is my direct phone number.

Eleven people called. Nine of them just wanted to see if I would pick up. I did, and most of them are still customers today.

Your Second Customer

Starting out, first sales · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

Your first customer does not count. I am sorry, but it is true. Your first customer is your aunt, or your old boss, or a friend who feels bad for you. They are buying you, not the thing you make.

Your second customer is the one to watch. A stranger. Somebody who owes you nothing and found you anyway.

When that person shows up, stop everything and ask them one question. Why did you pick us? Then be quiet and write down exactly what they say, in their words, not yours.

That sentence is worth more than your business plan. It is your business plan.

Fifty Lines

Career, asking for a raise · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

Nobody is going to notice how hard you work and reward you for it. I wish that were how it went. I waited six years at Halloran Freight for someone to notice.

So here is what I want you to do. Keep a plain list. Every Friday, write down one thing you did that week that saved time, saved money, or kept a customer. One line. No adjectives.

In a year you will have fifty lines. Walk into that room with the list, not with a feeling. A feeling can be argued with. A list just sits there on the table, being true, until somebody has to answer it.

The Day the Chairs Went Out

Meetings, decisions · Adult (40-55) · Midwestern US · 45 seconds

At Brandt and Sons Tool, in a town of nine thousand people, the Tuesday production meeting used to run ninety minutes. Everyone sat. Everyone brought coffee. Somebody always brought a problem from 2009.

Then Marlene Brandt took over from her father, and on her first Tuesday she had the chairs carried out.

Nobody complained to her face. They stood around the table like people waiting for a bus. The meeting took nineteen minutes.

By the third week, the foreman had stopped bringing up 2009. It turns out a grudge is heavy, and hard to hold up for long when your feet hurt.

The Worst Tuesday

Hiring, job ads · Adult (30-45) · Australian · 45 seconds

Have a look at your last job ad. Go on. I will bet it asks for a self-starter who thrives in a fast-paced environment and has excellent communication skills.

So does every other ad on the page. You have described nobody, which means you will attract everybody.

Try this instead. Write down the worst Tuesday that job has ever had. The delivery that went missing, the customer who rang four times, the system that fell over at lunch. Then write, honestly, we need someone who would quite enjoy sorting that out.

Fewer people will apply. That is the whole idea. The right ones will read it and think, finally, somebody is telling the truth.

Cheap Is a Decision

Money, pricing · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

For my first two years I was the cheapest sign painter in the county, and I was proud of it. I thought low prices were a kindness.

Then a woman named Opal Reyes, who owned the bakery on Fourth Street, paid my invoice and added a note. It said, you are too good to charge this little, and it makes me nervous.

Nervous. I had never thought of that. My price was telling people something about my work before they ever saw it, and what it said was, do not expect much.

I raised my rates that spring. I lost three customers. I did not miss a single one.

The Tape Gun

Leadership, first hire · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

I hired my first employee on a Wednesday and spent Thursday redoing everything she had done.

Her name was Priya Venkat, and there was nothing wrong with her work. She just did not do it the way I did it, and for two years the way I did it had been the only way the company existed.

On Friday she found me repacking a box at seven in the morning. She did not get angry. She asked, do you want help, or do you want a second pair of your own hands? Because I can only be one of those.

I have thought about that question for fifteen years. Most new managers never hear it said out loud. They just keep repacking boxes until the good people leave, and then they tell everyone how hard it is to find help.

I put the tape gun down. It was the first real decision I made as a boss.

The Silence Is a Bill

Leadership, feedback · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

If nobody on your team has disagreed with you this month, I have bad news. It is not because you are right.

People stop arguing with a boss for one of two reasons. Either they have decided it is not safe, or they have decided it is not worth it. Both of those are your doing, and neither one shows up on a report.

Here is a small test. In your next meeting, propose something slightly wrong. Not a disaster. A deadline that is a week too tight, say. Then watch.

If someone speaks up, thank them, right there, in front of everyone. If nobody does, you have learned something far more useful than the deadline.

You cannot order people to be honest with you. You can only make it cheap for them, over and over, until they believe it. The silence in that room is not respect. It is a bill, and it is addressed to you.

The Wrong Side of the Street

Starting out, first shop · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 1 minute

Ruthanne Pickett signed the lease on her flower shop in March, and by April she understood that she had rented the wrong side of the street.

The morning sun hit the other sidewalk. People walked there. On her side, in the shade, there was a parking meter and a bench nobody sat on.

A consultant would have told her to move. She could not afford a consultant, or the move. What she could afford was a bucket.

Every morning she carried one bucket of whatever was cheapest across the road and set it by the crosswalk, with a hand-lettered card. Two dollars a stem. Pay across the street.

People had to cross traffic to hand her two dollars. But once they were through her door, holding one tulip and feeling a little silly, most of them bought a second thing.

She never did move. She just taught the street where she was.

Eleven Months Too Long

Mistakes, letting someone go · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

I kept Gus Lindqvist on for eleven months longer than I should have, and I told myself it was kindness.

He was a decent man in the wrong job. He ran our warehouse, and he hated lists, and a warehouse is nothing but lists. The rest of the crew covered for him, quietly, and got more tired every week.

I thought I was protecting Gus. I was really protecting myself from one hard conversation, and I was paying for it with six other people's evenings.

When I sat down with him, I had a speech ready. I got two sentences in. He looked at the table and said, I have been waiting for you to say it since last summer.

He was relieved. That is the part I still turn over. He works for a landscaper now, and he sends me a card every December.

Waiting was not the kind thing. It only felt that way to me.

Say the Number

Negotiation, first number · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

There is an old piece of advice that says never name the first number. I followed it for years. I would like those years back.

Here is what actually happens when you wait. The other person says a figure, and from that second on, the whole conversation lives in the neighborhood of that figure. You can push it up a little. You cannot move it across town.

So do your homework, and then go first. Name a number you can explain in one calm sentence. A number with a reason attached.

Then comes the hard part. Do not laugh. Do not add, but I am flexible. Do not fill the quiet with a discount nobody asked for.

A client of mine, a caterer named Joelle Abara, used to cut her own quote before the customer had finished reading it. She was negotiating against herself, and she was winning.

Say the number. Then let it be somebody else's turn.

Facing the Book

Money, cash habits · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

My mother kept the accounts for our family's shoe repair shop in a green cloth ledger, and every Tuesday evening she did what she called facing the book.

It was not complicated. Money in, money out, what was owed, and to whom. It took her perhaps twenty minutes, and she did it with a cup of tea going cold beside her.

When I took over the shop I thought I was far too modern for the ledger. I had an accountant. I looked at the figures once a quarter, when the accountant made me, and each time it felt like opening a letter from a solicitor.

It took one frightening winter to send me back to Tuesdays.

I shan't tell you what to do with your own money. I will only say this. The numbers were never the frightening part. Not knowing them was. Twenty minutes a week, and I have not dreaded the post since.

The Parking Lot Meeting

Meetings, honesty · Adult (30–45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Everyone at Corvane Packaging knew that the real meeting happened in the parking lot.

Inside, in the conference room, people nodded. The plan sounded fine. Were there any concerns? There were never any concerns.

Then the doors opened, and eleven people walked out to their cars and stood between them for forty minutes, saying everything they actually thought.

The new operations director, Hal Dempsey, noticed it in his second week. He did not send a memo about transparency. He did not hire a trainer. On the third Thursday he picked up his coffee, walked out, and stood in the parking lot with them.

It was awkward for about a minute. Then a forklift driver named Bettina Shaw said, well, since you are here, that schedule is never going to work, and she told him why.

He moved the Thursday meeting outdoors for the rest of the summer. Some truths need fresh air and a car to lean on.

Catching Up to Wendell

Leadership, promotion · Mature (55+) · Midwestern US · 1 minute

When a supervisor job opens up, you are going to think of a name right away. It will be the person who talks the most in meetings. I would like you to wait a day.

Loud is easy to see. That is all it is.

Go and ask your crew a different question. Not who should be the boss. Ask them, when you are stuck, who do you go to?

You will hear a name you did not expect. Somebody who has been training the new folks without being asked. Somebody who fixes the schedule when it breaks and never mentions it.

At a feed mill I worked with, that name was Wendell Aho. Nineteen years on the floor, and nobody upstairs could have picked him out of a lineup.

He already had the job. He just did not have the title, or the pay. You are not promoting that person. You are catching up.

Five Words on a Sign

Starting out, focus · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 1 minute

I opened my bike repair shop with a list of eleven services and no sign, because I could not decide what to call it.

I fixed bikes. I also sold coffee, rented helmets, and, for one confusing month, sharpened kitchen knives.

A regular named Mr. Tibbets set me straight. He was about eighty, and he came in every Saturday to have his chain looked at, whether it needed it or not.

One morning he watched me make a latte, badly, for a man who was holding a flat tire. Then he said, son, what is this place?

I started to list everything. He held up his hand.

No, he said. If I had to tell my neighbor in five words.

I could not do it. That afternoon I sold the espresso machine. The next week I hung a sign. It says Flats Fixed While You Wait, and those were five words I could finally live with.

Call for the Instructions

Hiring, references · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Most reference calls are a waste of a phone. You ask if the candidate was reliable, a stranger says yes, and you both hang up having learned nothing.

That is not their fault. You asked a yes question.

Next time, try this one. If I hire her, what is the one thing I should do to get her best work? And then, what should I absolutely not do?

Now the person on the other end has to think. You will hear things like, give her the whole problem, not just the task. Or, do not check in every hour, she will shut down.

Listen for how quickly they answer, too. A manager who really worked with someone has those answers ready. A manager who is being polite will stall.

You are not calling to find out if the person is good. You are calling for the instructions. Good people come with them, and almost nobody asks.

The Call-Back Log

Mistakes, losing a client · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

We lost the Hartwell account on a Friday, and by Monday I had a list of nine reasons why it was not our fault.

Their new buyer was difficult. Their budget had been cut. All of it was true, and I recited it to my partner, Simone, like a man reading his own alibi.

She let me finish. Then she slid one sheet of paper across the desk. It was a log of every time someone from Hartwell had called us in the last six months, and how long it took us to call back.

The first month, same day. The second month, the next morning. By the end, the average was four days.

Nobody had decided to ignore our biggest client. We had just gotten comfortable. We had stopped being a little bit afraid of losing them.

I threw my list away. Hers was shorter, and it had the advantage of being something we could fix.

Say It Plain

Money, quoting a price · Mature (55+) · Southern US · 1 minute

Honey, I am going to ask you to do something ridiculous. Go stand in front of the bathroom mirror and say your price out loud.

Out loud, like you are telling somebody the time.

Most folks who work for themselves can do the job fine. Where they fall apart is the sentence with the dollar sign in it. Their voice climbs. They say, it is usually around, or, I could probably do it for. They apologize with their whole face.

And the customer hears all of that. Not the number. The wobble.

I cleaned houses for nine years before I learned this. I would quote a kitchen and then talk myself down ten dollars before the lady had opened her mouth.

So practice. Say it ten times, until it is as dull as your own address. A price is not a confession. It is just a fact about your work, and you are allowed to say it plain.

The Napkin

Leadership, delegating · Adult (30–45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

In the spring of his company's sixth year, Desmond Achebe drew his organization on a paper napkin, and did not like what he saw.

There was a box for sales, a box for the kitchen, a box for deliveries. And every single line ran through one small circle in the middle, marked with a D.

He owned four sandwich shops by then. He approved every schedule, every bread order, every refund over five dollars. His managers had learned to wait for him.

His sister looked at the napkin. She said, that is not a company, Des. That is you, with a lot of people watching.

It stung because it was accurate.

He started with the refunds. Any manager, any amount, no call required. He lay awake the first week, expecting ruin.

Refunds went up by a few dollars. The complaints dropped off. And for the first time in six years, his phone was quiet through an entire lunch rush.

Somewhere Else to Go

Negotiation, walking away · Adult (40-55) · Australian · 1 minute

I bought my first delivery van from a bloke called Russ, in a yard behind a tyre shop, and I paid too much for it. I knew I was paying too much. I did it anyway.

Here is why. I had no other van. I had been to one yard, looked at one vehicle, and I needed it on the road by Monday. Russ did not have to be clever. He only had to wait.

It took me years to understand that the deal was lost before I arrived. Not in the haggling. In the week before, when I did not bother finding a second option.

These days I never walk into a negotiation until I have somewhere else I could go. A second supplier. A second quote.

You do not have to mention it. People can hear it in your voice when you are able to leave.

Russ heard that I could not. Fair play to him.

What You Scheduled

Career, priorities · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Tell me what matters most to you at work. Go ahead, say it. Your team. The big project. Learning something new.

Now open your calendar for last week, and let us see if it agrees.

I do this with every manager I coach, and it is a quiet few minutes. A woman named Carol Brandvold told me her top priority was developing her people. Her calendar showed thirty-one hours of status meetings and one canceled lunch with her newest hire.

She was not lying to me. She believed it. Most of us do. We carry around a flattering picture of how we spend our days, and the calendar is the only thing in the office rude enough to disagree.

So do not write a mission statement. Pick the one thing you said mattered, and put two hours of it on next week before anyone else can get there.

Your priorities are not what you say. They are what you scheduled.

Ask Us What We Think

Mistakes, customers · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

There is a sign in a lot of shops that says the customer is always right. I took mine down after Mrs. Fenwick.

She came into my framing shop with a watercolor her late husband had painted, and she wanted it in a heavy gold frame, the kind you would put around a duke. It was a small, soft painting of a rowboat. That frame would have flattened it.

So I started to write up the order.

Then I stopped. I said, may I show you something first? And I laid a plain oak frame beside the gold one, and I did not say another word.

She looked for a long time. Then she said, quietly, oh. He would have liked that one.

The customer was not right. She also was not a fool to be corrected. She was a person who needed me to know my trade.

The new sign just says, ask us what we think.

Good Morning, Nobody

Starting out, opening day · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

On the morning I opened my bookstore, I unlocked the door at nine o'clock, turned the sign around, and stood behind the counter in a new shirt.

Nobody came.

I had expected a slow start. I had not expected nothing. At ten I straightened the shelves. At eleven I straightened them again. Around noon a man came in, and my heart jumped, and he asked if I had a restroom.

I want to tell you about that day because nobody told me. Every story I had read about starting a business skipped from the big idea to the line out the door. There was never a chapter about a Tuesday in an empty room, listening to the refrigerator in the back hum.

At four o'clock a girl of about ten came in with her grandmother. She walked straight to the shelf of horse books, sat down on the floor, and started reading. Her grandmother looked at me and said, I am sorry, we probably will not buy anything.

I said that was fine. I meant it. I would have paid them to stay.

They were there for an hour. On the way out, the girl bought one paperback with a handful of quarters, and counted them onto the counter one at a time.

I still have the first quarter. I keep it in the register, in the last slot, where I can see it every time I make change.

The Offer I Almost Took

Negotiation, selling the company · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

Eight years in, a larger company offered to buy my print shop. It was more money than my father earned in his life, and I said yes in my head before the man had finished his sentence.

His name was Clifton Marsh. He was pleasant, he was patient, and he had done this many times. I had done it never. That is not a fair fight, and I knew it, so I asked for two weeks.

In those two weeks I did three things. I paid a lawyer who did not know either of us to read every page. I called two owners who had sold to the same company, and I asked each of them one question. What do you wish you had asked?

And I spent a full day in my own shop, just watching. Nineteen people. A pressman named Ollie Vance, who had been with me since the first week and still ate lunch standing up.

Both owners told me the same thing. The price was honest. The promises about keeping the staff were not in writing.

I went back to Clifton and asked for them in writing. He smiled, and said that would be difficult.

So I had my answer. It was not about the money at all. I had nearly sold nineteen people for a handshake, and I had needed two weeks to notice.

Praise Is Not Wrapping Paper

Leadership, hard conversations · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

Somewhere along the way, somebody taught you to deliver bad news between two compliments. You say something nice, you slip in the problem, and you finish with something nice. It is supposed to be gentle.

I would like you to notice what it actually teaches people. It teaches them that every time you say something kind, a brick is coming.

I managed a design team for a long time, and I had a talented illustrator named Marcus Oyelaran. One afternoon I told him that his cover was the best thing we had made all year. He did not smile. He folded his arms and said, okay. And?

There was no and. I had ruined my own praise. For two years I had only ever used it as wrapping paper.

So here is what I am asking you to try. Keep them apart. When the work is good, say so, say exactly why, and then stop and walk away. Let it be a whole thing.

When there is a problem, say that plainly too. This is what happened. This is what it cost. What do you think we should do? No cushion, and no cruelty either. Just two adults and a fact.

It will feel abrupt at first. Do it anyway. In time, people stop flinching when you open your mouth. And the next time you tell someone their work is wonderful, they will get to simply believe you.

Forty Years at One Counter

Career, staying put · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

Every business book has a chapter on the founder. Very few have a chapter on Lorraine Dubicki.

Lorraine worked the parts counter at Abel Brothers Auto Supply for forty years. She never owned it. She never managed it. When the brothers offered her the manager's office, she turned them down, because the office did not have a window onto the counter.

What she had instead was a card file. Not customers' accounts. Their cars. She knew that the Peterson boy's truck ate alternators, and that old Mr. Haddad would never buy the cheap brake pads, so there was no use offering them. Mechanics from three towns over would ask for her by name before they asked for a part.

When a chain store opened, with lower prices and a bigger lot, the brothers braced for the worst. They lost some business. Not much. It turned out the chain had every part in stock and nobody who knew which one you needed.

Lorraine retired on a Friday. The brothers closed early, which they had never done, and a line of people came through to shake her hand, grease and all.

We are taught that a career is a ladder, and that standing still is failing. I am not so sure. Some people climb. Some people go deep. By the end, Lorraine was the most valuable thing in that building, and nobody could have promoted her to it.

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