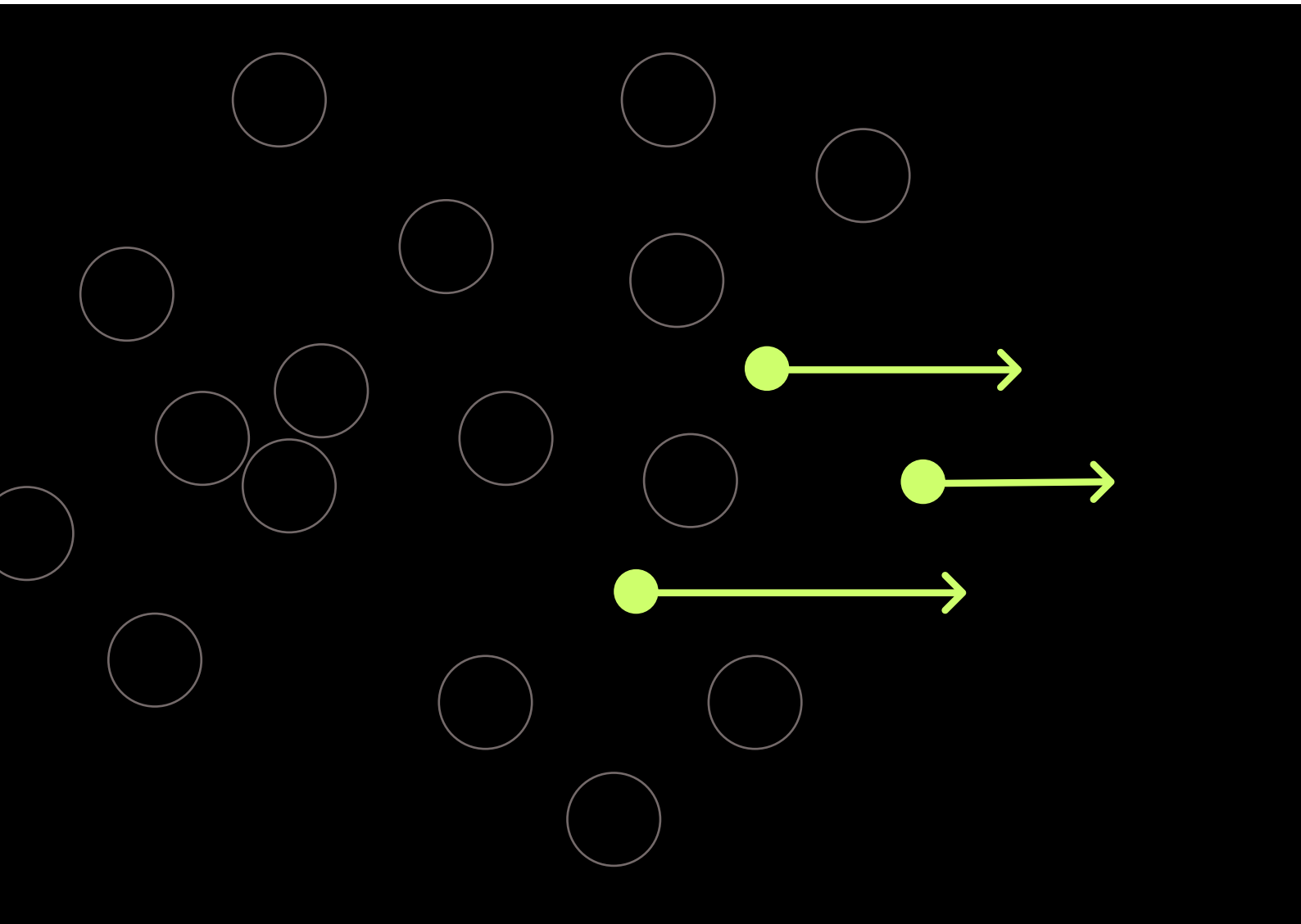
Matthias Kolbusa

SECRETS OF EXECUTION®

The Longing for More Follow-Through

A Path to More Commitment and Productivity



Contents

1 Executive Summary 03

2 The Longing for More Follow-Through 04

3 Follow-Through as a Success Factor 06

4 The Sweet Temptation of Inconsistency 07

5 The Roots of Inconsistency 11

6 The Path to a Follow-Through Culture 14

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1. Executive Summary

Follow-through has an image problem. The German word for it, *Konsequenz,* also means "consequences", and it instantly brings to mind discipline, obedience, punishment or threats. On the other hand, we are annoyed often enough by inconsistent behaviour, things left unfinished or unreliability – whether in ourselves or in working with others. We long for more follow-through. But what do we mean by follow-through, and what really lies behind our longing for it? A look behind the scenes makes it clear that we don't long for follow-through in the sense of punishment, threats and fear but, with success in mind, for commitment and reliability. To be successful, we depend on others. We need to be able to rely on others in order to achieve our own success and that of organisations.

A follow-through culture is therefore characterised by high productivity, built on a high degree of commitment and reliability.

Organisations often show a high degree of inconsistency, and therefore insufficient productivity, not because they don't consider a follow-through culture worth striving for, but because they are constantly at risk of having their clarity, focus and productivity overwhelmed by the roots of inconsistency growing relentlessly all around them.

A deep understanding of the roots of inconsistency is needed to bring about a follow-through culture, and constant care to maintain it. The roots of inconsistency are:

1. An immature understanding of values
2. Inconsistent behaviour
3. The wrong will to succeed
4. Cowardice
5. An inability to prioritise.

Based on an understanding of these roots and how they are connected, a follow-through culture can be developed in three steps:

- Step 1: Clarity on core values
- Step 2: Follow-through mechanics and rules
- Step 3: Discipline.

2. The Longing for More Follow-Through

The same conversation, again and again, whether with executive board members, managing directors or heads of division: “We’re not making progress.” “People just don’t stick to agreements!” “There’s always a reason why something can’t be done!” And so on. My sense is that remarks and conversations like these are on the rise. And not only that: they are getting sharper in tone and message.

Only recently I witnessed a managing director telling the assembled level below him: “I no longer trust anything or anyone here!” A sign of failure? Unprofessional? Or simply an act of desperation, born of sheer existential fear about shrinking productivity, the decline of once highly prized customer satisfaction and, with them, the loss of competitiveness? In a conversation afterwards, the managing director naturally confirmed the latter. Despite – or precisely because of – the good market situation and growth in both revenue and headcount, the company was finding it harder and harder to cope with its success. Customer requests and demands for product variety and new products were increasing. The existing structures and processes weren’t designed for this load. But that wasn’t even the problem, because my client had recognised these things in good time and addressed them with appropriate concepts. On top of the rising operational demands, a whole host of change initiatives was therefore coming at the organisation: here a change in the depth of production, there a new CRM system, elsewhere a redesign of production towards more variety in the product lines, and so on. The effect: the load on the organisation increased, both in day-to-day business and in the work “on the system”, that is, the necessary changes to processes and structures. So it was by no means unclear what needed to be addressed and done! There were no problems of insight, “only” problems of execution.

Whether, as in this example, a whole host of things come together to make life difficult for a manager and the organisation, or whether the task is to get a central project over the finish line – finally consolidating IT, say, or making cross-group collaboration, which looks so wonderful on paper, a reality – in most cases things are neither unclear nor badly planned. They are simply managed without follow-through!

More and more often I encounter situations in which people can’t rely on one another, in which tomorrow’s agreements are just yesterday’s idle talk, and in which, as a result, a toxic mix of pressure, mistrust and control pours down through every level of the hierarchy in a vicious spiral. A sorry state of affairs that none of those involved wanted, and in which managers at every level voice a wish for more commitment, more reliability and, consequently, more follow-through.

Let’s take a closer look at one fundamental connection: why is the longing for more commitment and more reliability ultimately a longing for more follow-through? What is the longing for more follow-through – or for more “consequences” – supposed to mean? Does it mean a child longing to be punished after eating too many sweets, so as not to get a stomach ache next time? That is not only unrealistic but paradoxical. And yet this is precisely a common understanding of follow-through in a management context: sanctions for misconduct or poor performance. Preferably with some show effect, or at least enough satisfaction for the sanctioner, the enforcer, to

What does a culture of inconsistency mean?

In a culture of inconsistency, you experience, with a sense of powerlessness, that today’s agreements are nothing but idle talk by tomorrow.

make it clear to everyone that this won't do. And managers and employees are supposed to long for that? Hardly.

In my understanding, the longing refers to a different notion of follow-through: it is the longing to be able to do good work that earns recognition and appreciation – the only true motivators. Because organisations are complex structures with complex processes that only follow one another in a clear, orderly way in idealised process charts, I need to be able to rely on others in this functioning chaos: on their commitments and on the agreements I have made with them. Especially in phases when new demands are flooding into the organisation and established day-to-day business is being shaken up. As an employee, I want to be able to rely on agreements being kept and followed through, whether with superiors, colleagues or employees. Because only then can I do my own work and, in turn, keep my own agreements. Only then do I have a chance of being successful in the end and receiving praise and recognition (see Fig. 1).

I want to work out with you how the phenomena of inconsistency can be avoided and competitiveness increased.

The Longing for More Follow-Through

Our longing for more follow-through is not about follow-through in the form of sanctions for misconduct and poor performance. Rather, it is the longing to be able to do good work that earns recognition and appreciation – the only true motivators.

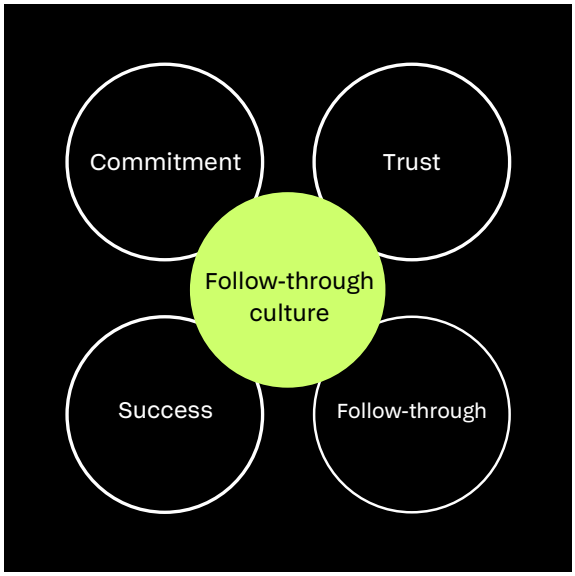


Fig. 1: The magic square of the follow-through culture

3. Follow-Through as a Success Factor

In a follow-through culture, people work together with a high degree of commitment and reliability, so that everyone can consistently achieve the result they are aiming for and thus be successful. If you succeed in establishing such a culture – and it really takes little more than a measure of courage – in my experience it pays off as follows (see Fig. 2):

- **Productivity.** The basis of a follow-through culture is robust agreements. Compared with loose arrangements or unclarified expectations, agreements like these focus on results (the "what") rather than activities (the "how"). This leads to greater effectiveness, not to mention the efficiency gains from avoiding unnecessary waiting and idle time caused by agreements that are neither robust nor binding.

- **Speed.** The standard and hallmark of a follow-through culture is the quality of its agreements in terms of 1) commitment, 2) reliability and 3) clarity, in the sense of a shared understanding among those involved. If you live up to this standard, the number of agreements automatically falls, because you cannot maintain it for all the one-sided "directives" and demands or the loose, non-binding arrangements that may currently shape your environment. The effect: focusing on less brings more speed. The organisation works on fewer things in parallel and becomes faster overall! A seeming paradox that is quickly explained.

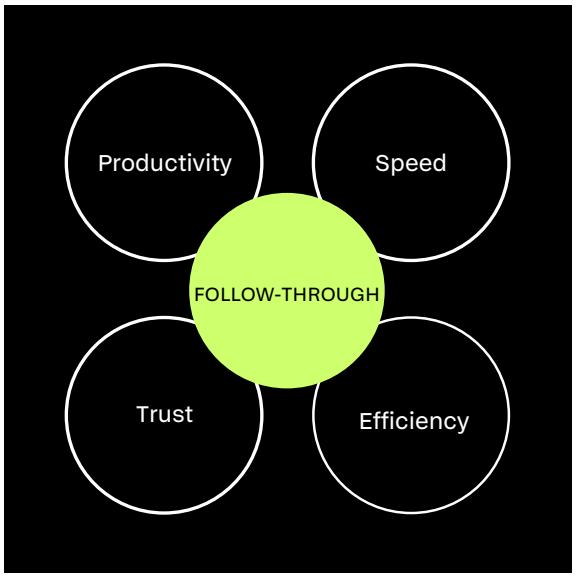


Fig. 2: Success factors of the follow-through culture

- **Efficiency.** The efficiency of your organisation, which I also like to call RoEx® (Return on Execution®), rises significantly in a follow-through culture. High-performance organisations have a RoEx® of around 90 per cent: 90 per cent of all activities create value, and only 10 per cent are spent on "internal politics", covering yourself, hunting for culprits, frustration and "failure work" – things that have nothing to do with actual value creation, with the results you are really aiming for.

- **Trust.** An environment increasingly shaped by commitment and reliability shows a higher level of trust over time. Trust, in turn, is one of the most decisive levers for mastering complexity. Because the more that has to be controlled, monitored and checked, the higher the degree of unnecessary internal complexity, which in turn leads to falling productivity.

4. The Sweet Temptation of Inconsistency

What characterises a follow-through culture?

A follow-through culture is a way of working together shaped by a high degree of commitment and reliability, so that everyone involved can achieve the result they are aiming for productively.

A follow-through culture – one in which people work together with a high degree of commitment and reliability, so that everyone involved can achieve the result they are aiming for productively – hangs by a thread. It is the curse of supposed necessities, of good additional ideas and opportunities that constantly run through all our heads.

In every meeting, every workshop, thoughts constantly shoot through our heads about what else might help and what else needs doing so that things succeed more comprehensively, better, faster and more safely. On the one hand, that's wonderful, because it expresses creativity, experience and passion. On the other, it is a curse!

Take a look at my thoughts during a status meeting on strategy execution while those responsible present the status of their initiatives: *"... Sales should also analyse the adjacent markets right away – there's bound to be cross-selling potential there?! ... Why doesn't the COO tackle automating the service processes straight away? ... Marketing had better do the same for France and Italy right away, otherwise localising it later will just be unnecessarily hard. ... If we're renewing the billing system anyway, we can check the CRM system too – otherwise it'll just get unnecessarily expensive later! ... And while we're at it, the whole architecture has to be reviewed, or we'll never get time-to-market to the level we need! ..."* and so on.

I'm sure it's no different for you or for any reasonably passionate manager. The sweet temptation of inconsistency lies in giving in to these supposed necessities: voicing expectations and making demands that are anything but binding, because their sheer number makes reliability impossible – neither a clean agreement nor reliable delivery. And yet it happens to me every day, just as it does to you! The worst part: the higher up the hierarchy we are, the more chain reactions we trigger with every additional idea or demand that we believe the success of the whole venture depends on. Because further down the cascade, one demand quickly turns into hundreds, all of them important because, after all, the boss wanted it. I once had a client where, at some point, it became customary at every level to say: "I need this because Dr Willmeier needs it." Dr Willmeier was the CEO.

Inconsistency is a phenomenon of overload – overload in two respects. We are overloaded because we no longer know what is really relevant and what may need to be corrected or reprioritised. And the organisation is overloaded because it has lost track of everything that has been agreed, demanded or discussed, and certainly has no idea any more of what is really important and in what order it should be tackled.

It's good to set high goals and strive for them; we just have to make sure that we work through things one after another, by priority, and so create the general sense of moving forward rather than marking time. All too quickly, we can't get rid of the spirits we have summoned. All too quickly, we

If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority!

start demanding more and more, because all sorts of ideas and supposed necessities shoot through our heads, with which we first overburden and then overload ourselves and our organisations. Like the desperate managing director mentioned at the beginning, who, on top of the rising operational load, had launched a multitude of tactical and strategic initiatives. They were the right initiatives and projects, but all at once, with something new constantly being added. The core problem here is the inability to truly prioritise. Of course, none of us would admit that. In a conversation, we would all name our priorities precisely and testify that we pursue them with follow-through. The fact is that most managers then act according to the motto "more helps more". I'm always amused by the ubiquitous priority lists that often feature 20, 30 or even a hundred topics. Ridiculous!

The sweet temptation of inconsistency lies in the belief that success will come more surely and more quickly if only everything that seems helpful is got under way fast. That the opposite is true, and that this lack of discipline and follow-through creates more chaos than benefit, is clear to everyone – just not at the moment it matters: when we once again think we have to throw supposedly necessary aspects into the ring, expand the scope or carry out a rather arbitrary reprioritisation.

The Sweet Temptation

The sweet temptation of inconsistency lies in the belief that success will come more surely and more quickly if only everything that seems helpful is got under way fast.

The ability to set priorities that people can then act on with follow-through requires clear and binding agreements – whether with yourself (self-discipline) or with others.

What makes a good agreement? What is an agreement in the first place? After all, it seems to be the basis on which we all judge whether someone is reliable or not, and so it forms the basic building block of consistent, priority-driven behaviour.

The first deficit of most agreements is that they are made with activities rather than results in mind – they are more "how"- than "what"-oriented. In other words, the agreement focuses on a task instead of a change in state. For example, "Please go through the marketing concept with the head of sales" (a "directive" in the sense of Fig. 3) instead of "Please make sure that sales and we share the same understanding of the marketing concept" (an "expectation" in the sense of Fig. 3).

The second deficit, which a directive shares with an expectation, is the insufficient clarification of what is needed for successful – and therefore reliable – fulfilment. A genuine agreement, one you can assume will be kept, that is binding and will later be fulfilled – in other words, one that proves reliable in hindsight – is out of the question.

So two things need to be ensured to arrive at a genuine agreement (see Fig. 4):

First, the agreement must be moved from a directive at least towards an expectation – from the

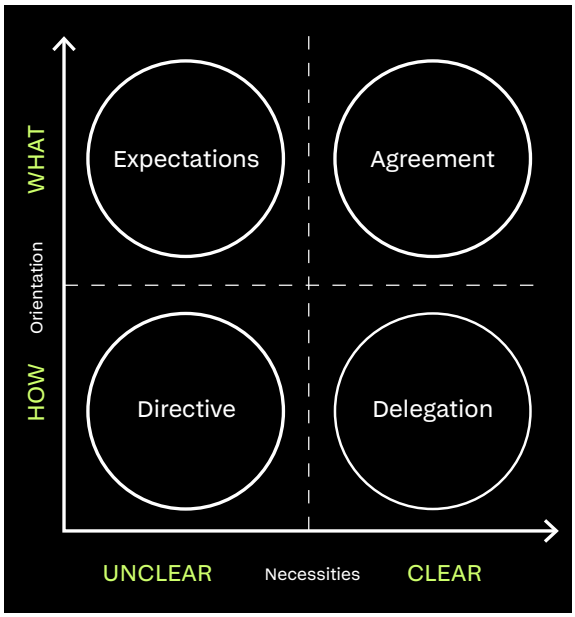


Fig. 3: Characteristics of an agreement

"how" to the "what". Second, two things must be ensured regarding the necessary conditions:

1. Clarity
   The recipient of the expectation must be able to clarify for themselves a) what the situation is with the resources (time and means) and skills they need to meet the expectation, and b) what agreements they already have running and to what extent they are able to accept the expectation under the given conditions, or whether a reprioritisation is needed – that is, renegotiating other agreements.

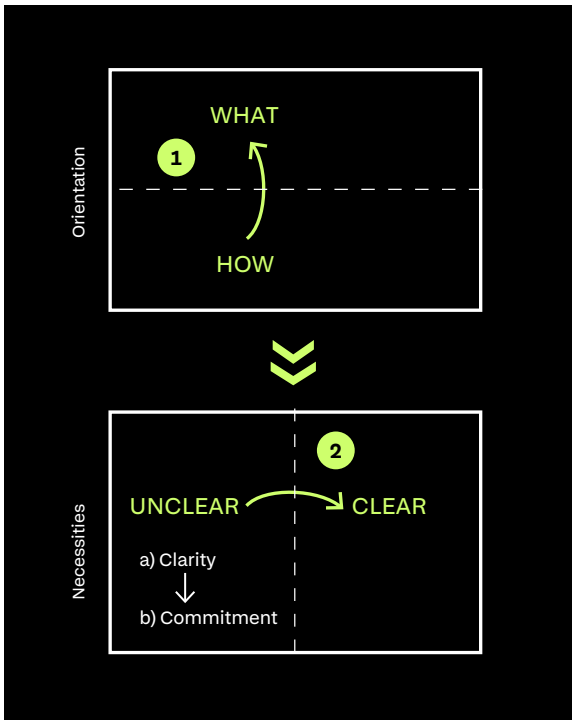


Fig. 4: The two steps to a good, genuine agreement

   If I tell my daughter that I expect her room to be tidy by tomorrow (at least I'm stating a change in state and not giving a directive), we are still a long way from an agreement! In this first step, my daughter must a) be clear about whether, given the prevailing chaos, she has the resources – time, in this case – and the skills to meet this expectation. So she must be capable of entering into a binding agreement at all. As a good father or a good manager, I should question this: can she remove the scribbles on the wall by herself? Probably not. Equally, at work it makes no sense to voice an expectation that the employee is in no position to meet. Obviously, everyone will say. Practice shows that this is often not the case! Usually it's neither ignorance nor malice but the hustle of day-to-day business and the complexity of the task. We have to make this effort if we want to enjoy more commitment, follow-through and the productivity that results.

2. Commitment
   Even if my daughter has the skills needed to clear up the chaos by tomorrow and meet my expectation, the question is whether she can readily enter into a binding agreement. What might stand in the way? She has a number of other binding agreements she has to honour. I voice my expectation on Friday morning; she is about to leave for school and will be back at 3 pm. After that she has a piano lesson, at 5 pm she's invited to a birthday party, and on Saturday morning her mother has arranged to go shopping with her before the volleyball tournament she has signed up for in the afternoon. So even if she has the necessary capabilities (resources, time, skills), she cannot meet my expectation without reprioritising – and therefore renegotiating other commitments!

In this example, of course, I'll quickly agree with my wife that tomorrow's shopping trip won't happen, and swiftly enable my daughter by "renegotiating" the existing agreements that stand in the way of meeting my expectation. One possible way.

In our day-to-day management, things are more complex. The directives and expectations collected in all sorts of status meetings and one-to-ones, plus delegations from superiors and the odd genuine agreement with colleagues, keep piling up. Very few people still have a conscious overview of this collection of directives, delegations, expectations and genuine agreements.

This is what drives managers to despair in everyday life! Like my managing director from the opening example. With "I no longer trust anything or anyone here", he took away the most central of all productivity levers from the organisation: trust. Why did he say it? It was an act of desperation; he no longer experienced any reliability. Nobody kept their commitments, projects were delayed, operational issues were made worse by attempts to improve them. The system, the organisation, collapsed. That he and his fellow managers had caused this collapse – and the loss of trust that came with it – themselves was, of course, not clear to him at that moment. In hindsight, perhaps, but certainly not during a process in which he had only rained directives and expectations down on the next management level and no genuine agreements had come about. What manager sets out to thoroughly ruin the culture of trust? It just happens. It is the sweet temptation of inconsistency, and managers' lack of discipline in ensuring genuine agreements.

If we want a high-performance culture shaped by commitment and reliability, and consequently a culture of trust, managers' primary task is to ensure that genuine agreements come about. To

To experience a follow-through culture, we have to say goodbye to directives, expectations and delegations.

do this, we need to say goodbye to directives, expectations and delegations and make sure that a system of a few rules is in place that encourages and demands genuine agreements.

Top managers give the next level directives and delegations, and have expectations (see Fig. 5). The manager on the next level also has obligations towards colleagues and project managers responsible for cross-cutting issues, enters into further agreements, receives further expectations and directives and, as a result, loses track. Unlike my daughter in the example above, he is no longer in a position to enter into binding agreements on the basis of sufficient clarity. As a result, in step three he simply fails to meet certain expectations and inevitably creates a perception that he is unreliable. This in turn results in mistrust towards him and leads to increasing control and micromanagement, and to the typical phenomena that characterise low-performance organisations: hunting for culprits, unreliability, badmouthing each other, forming camps and so on. You move from a follow-through culture to a low-performance organisation.

A culture of trust or mistrust is the result of a series of reliable or broken agreements!

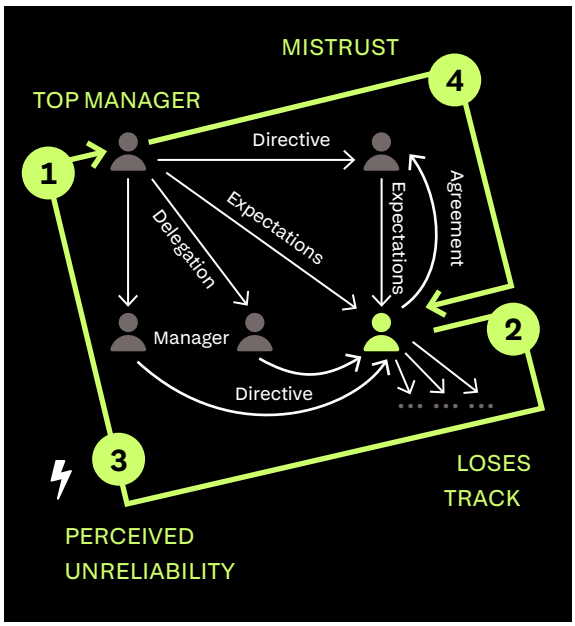


Fig. 5: The vicious circle of low-performance organisations

5. The Roots of Inconsistency

Even though some roots of inconsistency have already been mentioned, it helps to spell out what I see as the central roots, because without understanding these connections, the path to a follow-through culture is hard to tread.

1. Immaturity
   The main cause of unproductive cultures of inconsistency lies in the immaturity of management – immaturity in the sense of one's own lack of clarity and uncertainty about core values. If I ask a manager, "What does reliability mean to you?", a common answer is: "Someone is reliable if they stick to the agreements they've made." So far, so good. If I then say: "OK, the two of us agree that I'll bring this concept on Friday at 2 pm, and I turn up on Friday without it. Am I unreliable?", the other person's value system often starts to wobble: "That depends on how important the concept was and whether it's the first time." I see?! The manager has no clear understanding of what he means by commitment and reliability or unreliability – let alone any clarity about the conditions under which he lets which consequences take effect, regardless of likes, moods or other circumstances. So the task is to bring about maturity by getting watertight clarity on the meaning of core values such as commitment, reliability, trust, agreement or even success. This is the only way to develop the maturity that consistent behaviour and follow-through require.

2. Inconsistency
   How often do we hear, before someone is asked about a particular topic or decision: "I'll have to wait and see what mood he's in." What a sign of failure! Not for the person saying it, but for the one provoking it. If I have a clear understanding of values and of priorities, I am predictable as a manager. And predictability is crucial, because only then does my organisation know how to work productively with me. It mustn't depend on how "the shop" is doing at the moment, which side of the bed I got out of this morning, whether I'm looking forward to the weekend or whether I find the other person likeable and attractive. When a decision or a need for clarification is brought to me, I have to be predictable as a manager. That is an expression of maturity and professionalism.

3. Cowardice
   We lack the courage to set clear rules about the maximum number of things that may be in focus – and therefore worked on in parallel – at any one time. What does that have to do with courage, you ask? We are simply too cowardly to say no to the 734 other ideas, "necessities", supposed requirements and so on! Instead, we constantly overload the system, that is, the employees and the organisation. The lack of focus inevitably leads to lower productivity and speed. And when work is going on at every front at once and nothing is brought to a truly successful conclusion, motivation inevitably drops.

   Only if we ourselves act with follow-through can we demand the same of our employees. Otherwise we often have no choice but to tolerate other people's inconsistent behaviour. That's how I experience meetings in which top managers don't muster the courage described above and consequently enter into far too many, far too vague agreements themselves that they cannot keep. All too quickly, people promise to take care of these resources and that customer escalation, without asking themselves under what conditions these agreements could be kept and whether they can be fulfilled at all.

   Another facet of cowardice is that, to achieve a follow-through culture, we have to set a few very clear rules on agreements and priorities (see next chapter), which a) we have to stick to ourselves and b) we have to ensure are kept. Ensuring these rules are kept means working

with sanctions in cases where agreements are not kept, whether due to inability, overload or unwillingness. These don't have to be harsh! It's about follow-through, not harshness. Even so, many managers shy away from this hard work because they don't understand the importance of this connection – and so they create a low-performer culture themselves.

It isn't enough just to think with follow-through and work on meaning. If we want to be successful, we have to act with follow-through. Too many managers talk to the level below them about how important it is that people can rely on one another and that priorities are crucial. In my experience, all this achieves little: people listen with interest, have a sincere exchange and then fall back into the old routine. Hence the rule: "Stop talking. Start doing!" We talk far too much about things instead of simply setting ourselves clear rules, sticking to them and modelling them consistently, which automatically changes other people's behaviour. Of course, this only works if my own composure (see point 1 above) is high and I can act from a very clear understanding of values. That is the only way I can change habits and therefore the culture of my organisation! Talking about it and working out the meaning can be fun and will certainly make the penny drop for some, but in my experience it achieves little as long as I don't simply do it. That's why most change management projects that work exclusively through meaning and "taking people along" are often a pure waste of time and money.

4. Inability

Priorities are usually set rather intuitively. Once I have set myself clear rules on how many topics my organisation may work on in parallel at any one time – and perhaps also how many initiatives per topic may run in parallel at most – a central step has been taken. Because only a certain number of things can be done at once, a conscious choice has to be made in dedicated prioritisation rounds, renegotiating agreements where necessary. What gets tackled, and which of the proverbial 298 other ideas, approaches, initiatives and necessities don't?

Stop talking. Start doing!

But then the issue of priorities begins: how do you decide what's crucial? What matters is not trying to say in absolute and more or less vague terms how important each individual point is – which, incidentally, is the typical way priorities are set. It leads nowhere! Priorities can only ever be set by comparing the potential items with one another: is A more relevant than B? Is B more relevant than C? In other words, the items have to be put in order. With my clients, I often implement the following system: for each item, you record 1) how urgent it is, 2) what its contribution – its impact – is, and 3) how quickly its urgency will increase over time (growth). However your prioritisation system and that of each of your managers may look: there has to be one, and it has to be the same! If priorities are set in different ways, this makes coordination and mutual understanding harder when agreements need to be renegotiated.

So one thing should be very clear by now: acting with follow-through requires clarity and commitment regarding the agreements made.

Understanding priorities

The common question “How important is this point?” is absurd! Priorities never exist in absolute terms, only ever in comparison.

Clarity also in the sense of transparency. Everyone involved must know and manage precisely for themselves: what open agreements do I have? What are my loose ends? At the lowest management level, my experience is that if more than eight to ten agreements with a horizon of one to two weeks are allowed, it becomes difficult to achieve a follow-through culture. Especially in the situation described at the beginning, with the desperate managing director, managers find it hard to stay courageous and say “no”, or to bite their lip and be patient until the topics are discussed in a prioritisation meeting.

6. The Path to a Follow-Through Culture

Absurd as it may sound, the path to a follow-through culture – one shaped by commitment and reliability and, as a result, by trust and high productivity – is easier than is commonly believed.

After deliberately creating clarity on core values (step 1), the task is to set up a few simple rules around these values (step 2) and then to keep to these rules with discipline and follow-through (step 3). The last step is the hardest! Yet it is neither complex nor hard to understand, nor does it involve a complicated decision-making process. It is solely a question of the individual manager's discipline. Of your discipline – no more and no less.

The chart below shows the path to a high-performance follow-through culture.

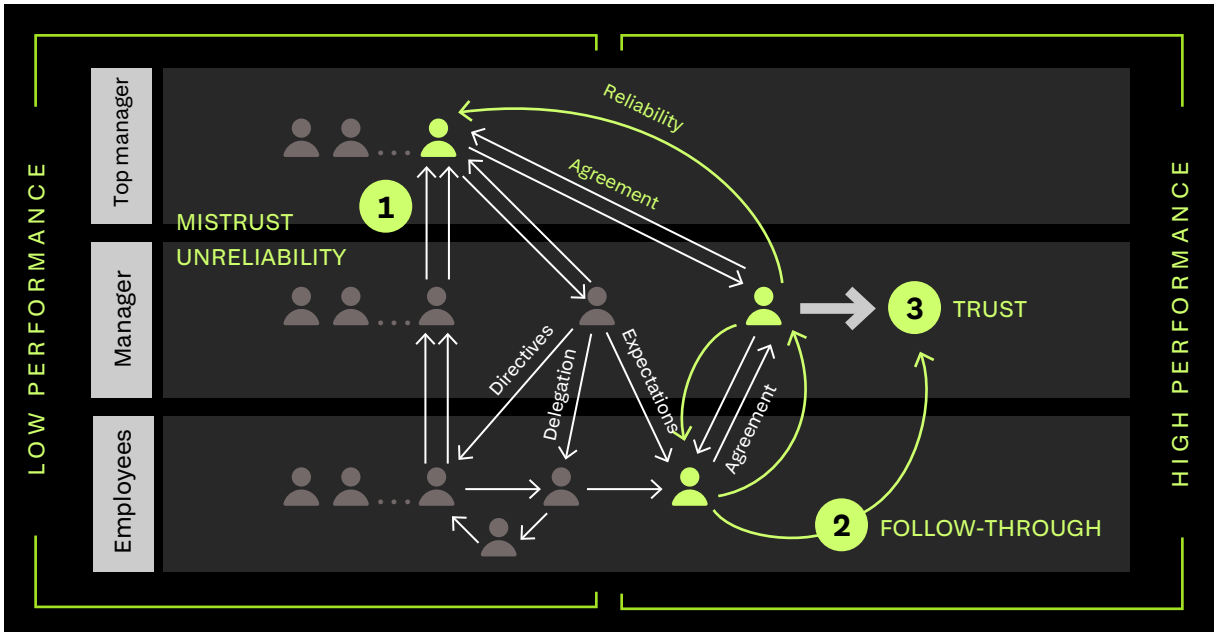


Fig. 6: The path to a high-performance follow-through culture

To explain the key connections: a culture of inconsistency arises when top managers and managers, through directives, delegations and expectations, give neither themselves nor others the chance of genuine agreements marked by commitment and reliability. They lay the foundation for unreliability on the next levels that isn't those people's fault, which they then perceive themselves and, as it becomes more frequent, express as mistrust towards the organisation.

In a follow-through culture, people work top-down with genuine agreements that are reliably kept and so create growing mutual trust. If agreements are not kept, action is taken with follow-through according to firmly defined values and rules.

The three key success factors for establishing such a culture are:

1. Managers' discipline to enter only into agreements
2. Enabling prioritisation
3. Follow-through on unreliability.

1. Key success factor: managers' discipline to enter only into agreements

The first key success factor is hard to stick to, but after the explanations in the first chapters it needs no further elaboration. The second, enabling prioritisation, and the third, follow-through on unreliability, need a closer look.

- a. Everyone in the organisation has an overview (transparency) of the agreements they have running or have made.
- b. There is a clear understanding of how managers and employees set priorities, so that, if in doubt, they can renegotiate or even drop existing agreements in favour of a new expectation from superiors or colleagues – that is, reprioritise. As mentioned, ideally everyone in the whole organisation prioritises according to the same system, so that mutual understanding in reprioritisation situations is high and things stay uncomplicated.

2. Key success factor: enabling prioritisation

By enabling prioritisation, I mean that you must ensure that everyone – really everyone – in the organisation is able to set priorities. Why? Only if I can set priorities am I able to commit and enter into robust agreements that lead to reliability, then to trust and so to productivity, because there is less waiting and set-up time and less redundant and wasted work. What are the prerequisites for this?

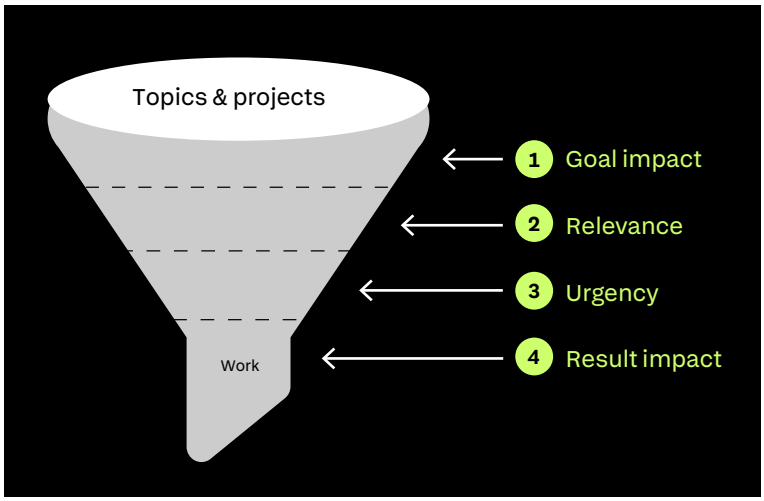


Fig. 7: Criteria for prioritisation

You enable every manager and employee to prioritise by setting up and keeping a few clear rules.

3. Key success factor: follow-through on unreliability

The third key success factor for establishing a follow-through culture is follow-through on unreliability. In a low-performance culture, people constantly perceive unreliability, which then turns into mistrust, frustration and correspondingly low productivity. Usually this unreliability is not self-inflicted or something the employees are truly responsible for, because it stems from failing to meet directives, expectations or delegations. Its basis is not genuine agreements in the sense developed here.

Most managers have no explicit understanding of follow-through; depending on their mood or on whom they like, they act with more or less follow-through.

If, however, unreliability occurs because genuine agreements are not kept, you need a clear understanding of follow-through for yourself, your colleagues and your employees: how do you deal with broken agreements? How tolerant are you? How often may an agreement be broken before you call

someone unreliable? What reasons might lead to a broken agreement that you would still accept? There is no right or wrong here. The only question is: what is a useful understanding of these values – and therefore of follow-through – for you in your organisation?

Having specified these three key success factors, the path to a follow-through culture leads through clarity on core values, follow-through being one of them (step 1), setting up a few rules around these values (step 2) and keeping to these rules with discipline (step 3). Below, I look at these three steps in more detail and back them up with examples of the values and the necessary rules.

Step 1: Clarity on core values

Perhaps not overnight, but you can achieve a follow-through culture much faster than is commonly believed. This first step is the hardest intellectual work: you have to start with yourself and, as a manager, create clarity for yourself on a few core values in the context of a follow-through culture. It never ceases to amaze me how carelessly terms such as reliability, agreement, responsibility, trust or even priority are used in discussions and meetings.

Once you have gained real clarity and confidence here – which contributes not only to greater composure but also to developing your personality – the next task is to bring about a shared understanding of these values in an in-depth dialogue with colleagues and the levels below you. It's pointless if you have adopted the principles of a follow-through culture and clarified the core terms for yourself, but then constantly experience unreliability and remain mistrustful because your colleagues and employees take this attitude to agreements: "Why should I care what I said yesterday?"

Once you have clarity on your values and can put them in a nutshell, you must under no circumstances be dogmatic when aligning that understanding with your organisation! Nothing is worse than people who try to proclaim their understanding of values as the "truth" and force it on others! Watch out for yourself and others here. Time and again, I see managers who think they know what is right or wrong. It's not about whether your own understanding of trust or follow-through is right or wrong. It's about what is useful for your organisation's productivity! So make sure that you and your colleagues are suitably flexible when aligning your understanding of values, and ask yourselves: "What helps us achieve a high level of commitment and reliability in our organisation, so that we increase productivity rather than just getting our own way?"

With that said, let's start sharpening your understanding of the core values that are essential for a highly productive follow-through culture, so that you can then align and adapt them flexibly (!) with colleagues and employees. To avoid staying superficial, you'll need to invest around 30 minutes per value – it's the most mentally demanding step! The core values to clarify are: success, agreement, commitment, reliability, trust and follow-through. You could add delegation, discipline and priority – helpful but not necessary. You'll see how these terms interlock by referring to one another. That's why you and your colleagues are well advised to define them iteratively: one quick pass, then several rounds of aligning and sharpening.

Prerequisites of a follow-through culture

On clarity of values, there is no right or wrong – only useful!

Success

In your eyes, when is someone in your organisation successful in working with others? When am I a successful manager or employee in your eyes?

Kolbusa's definition:

Success is achieving a previously specified result while meeting previously clarified conditions such as time, effort and other necessary factors.

Your definition:

Agreement

In your view, what makes a good agreement? How many people play a role in an agreement?

Kolbusa's definition:

An agreement is an understanding between two people relating to one person's expectation and the necessary conditions that, from the other person's point of view, must be met in order to fulfil that expectation.

Your definition:

Commitment

In your view, when is someone committed?

Kolbusa's definition:

Commitment exists when, during the process of an agreement (see above), the person from whom something is expected is certain about what is needed to meet the expectation and is aware of all other agreements they have made elsewhere, so that, on this basis, I have the trust (see below) that I can rely on that person and on what they have said.

Your definition:

Reliability

To arrive at a good, clear definition, it helps to define this term negatively for yourself: when do you call someone unreliable? And so, when does reliability exist?

Kolbusa's definition:

Reliability is keeping an agreement (see above) made with commitment (see above), renegotiating it in good time, or not keeping it because of exceptional circumstances. In good time means at least one fifth of the total duration before the agreement is due. Exceptional circumstances are circumstances of force majeure that none of the people involved in the agreement could foresee and that made renegotiating in good time impossible.

(This example shows how hard it is to define reliability really precisely. But only if you have a clear understanding here can you define for yourself when you will call someone unreliable and what the consequences will be.)

Your definition:

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Trust

What does it mean when you trust someone? Trust is one of the biggest productivity levers, because it avoids complexity and creates motivation. Trust rules out control, because then it is no longer trust. When does trust turn into naivety? Where is the line?

Kolbusa's definition:

Trust is consciously taking the risk of being hurt or disappointed.

Your definition:

Follow-through

What characterises behaviour with follow-through? How does it relate to agreements that are kept or broken?

Kolbusa's definition:

Follow-through is actively and appropriately appreciating an agreement that has been kept or sanctioning one that has been broken. In the positive case, appropriate ranges from acknowledgement to exceptional recognition; in the negative case, from acknowledgement to dismissal of the employee concerned. For colleagues of equal rank in the hierarchy, this means ... For superiors ... .

(You can see how much work it is to think through your own understanding of values in every relevant dimension and put it in a nutshell, so that you are no longer afraid of the consequences of follow-through. Once the whole thing has been thought through properly, you no longer act out of uncertainty, because as a mature person you have a clear understanding of values and of follow-through that gives you orientation and leaves no room for doubt. That way, follow-through is never confused with harshness.)

Your definition:

Only once you yourself are reasonably clear about what you, as the incubator, consider appropriate and fitting for a follow-through culture can you start aligning this understanding of values with your colleagues and employees. You'll find that this process is worth its weight in gold, because very different world views will already emerge here. Whether you give your employees your completed worksheet as a basis for discussion or first ask them for their own definitions is up to you. What matters is that in the end you arrive at a shared understanding of values.

Step 2: Follow-through mechanics and rules

Once you have a clear understanding of these core terms, both for yourself and aligned with your colleagues and employees, your next task is to set up a few rules around these values and the establishment of a follow-through culture.

Some of these rules emerge almost automatically from the process of aligning the values – especially that of follow-through (see above). Beyond that, a few further rules should be defined that force you and the organisation – or make it easier for you – to behave consistently with the understanding of values you have worked out.

In my experience, alongside day-to-day business you are well advised to work on no more than four topics at a time, with no more than three initiatives running per topic, none of which should ever take longer than two to four weeks. In addition, no more than three initiatives per person should be in focus (prioritisation!). No more! Only when there is room in this system again for a new focus topic or initiative can another initiative be agreed, following a structured prioritisation mechanism that obeys very firm rules – in the sense of a good agreement! Until then: be brave and bite your tongue when it comes to delegating further topics. The world won't end if you throw the topic into the ring a little later than expected. It's hard for managers to resist this temptation, but it's a real path to success, because it brings calm, focus and therefore productivity, speed and motivation into the system.

Step 3: Discipline

Now comes the hardest step, because now it's about behaving constantly and consistently in line with the values and rules you have worked out, and enforcing this behaviour with discipline in yourself and others. The temptation is too great to voice directives and expectations, to make no real agreements, to feed this and that into the system, overloading it again and making it unproductive – until the longing for more follow-through returns.

The Relevance of Consistency

Managers must be constantly consistent, i.e. predictable! Only then does a culture emerge that is characterised by repeated, predictable behaviour. Because a culture is shaped by the sum of its habits.

It also takes courage to draw consequences when necessary. Everyone should be clear about what is meant by commitment and good agreements, and what a good agreement is. To this end, it's important to think in advance about what the consequences – and their escalation – look like. How do you react if something isn't delivered? Or only partly delivered? Or repeatedly not delivered? Get clear on your personal stance on consequences, because it must depend neither on your mood on the day nor on whom you like. So clarify for yourself exactly when and how you will react in which case.

A helpful tool for clarifying with your employees when they are actually successful, what is needed for this and what mutual rights and obligations arise from aligning these factors – so as to ensure mutual success – is the ERPN sheet shown below (expected results, rights, personal obligations, necessary conditions; see Fig. 8).

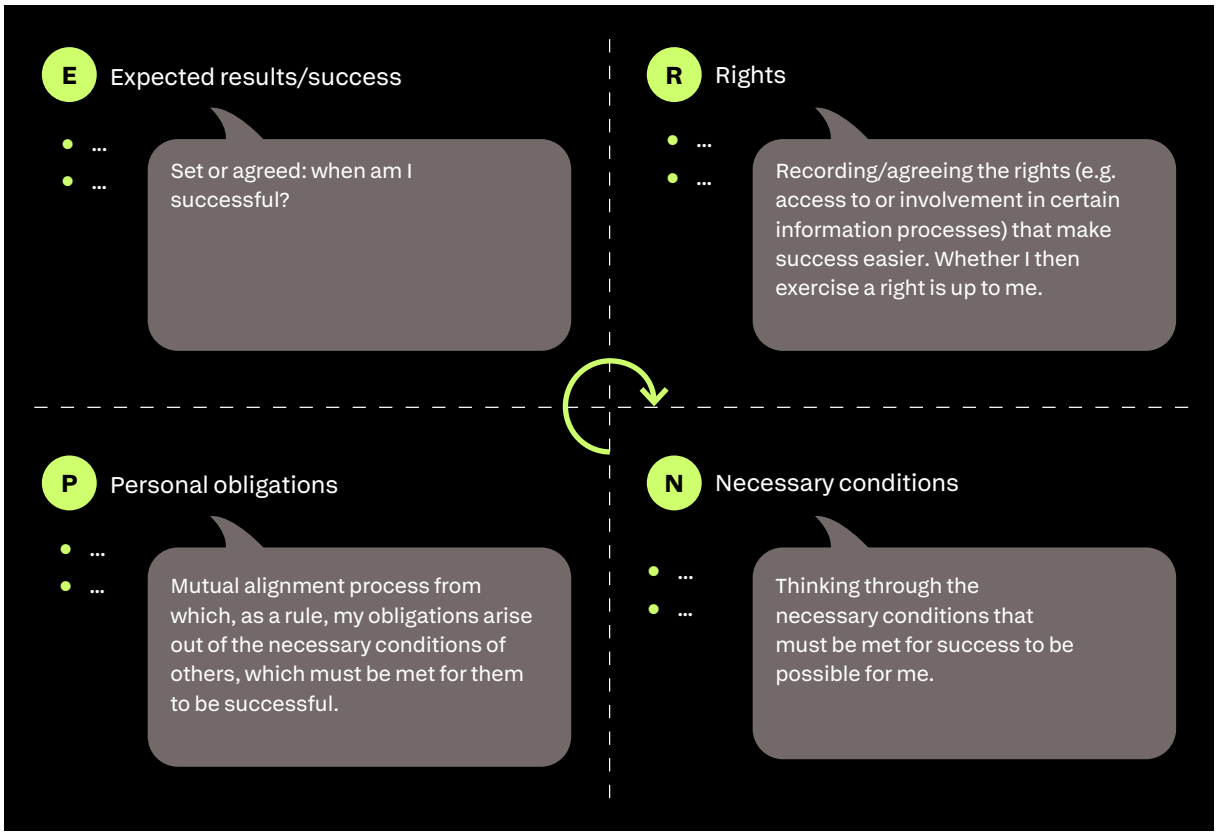
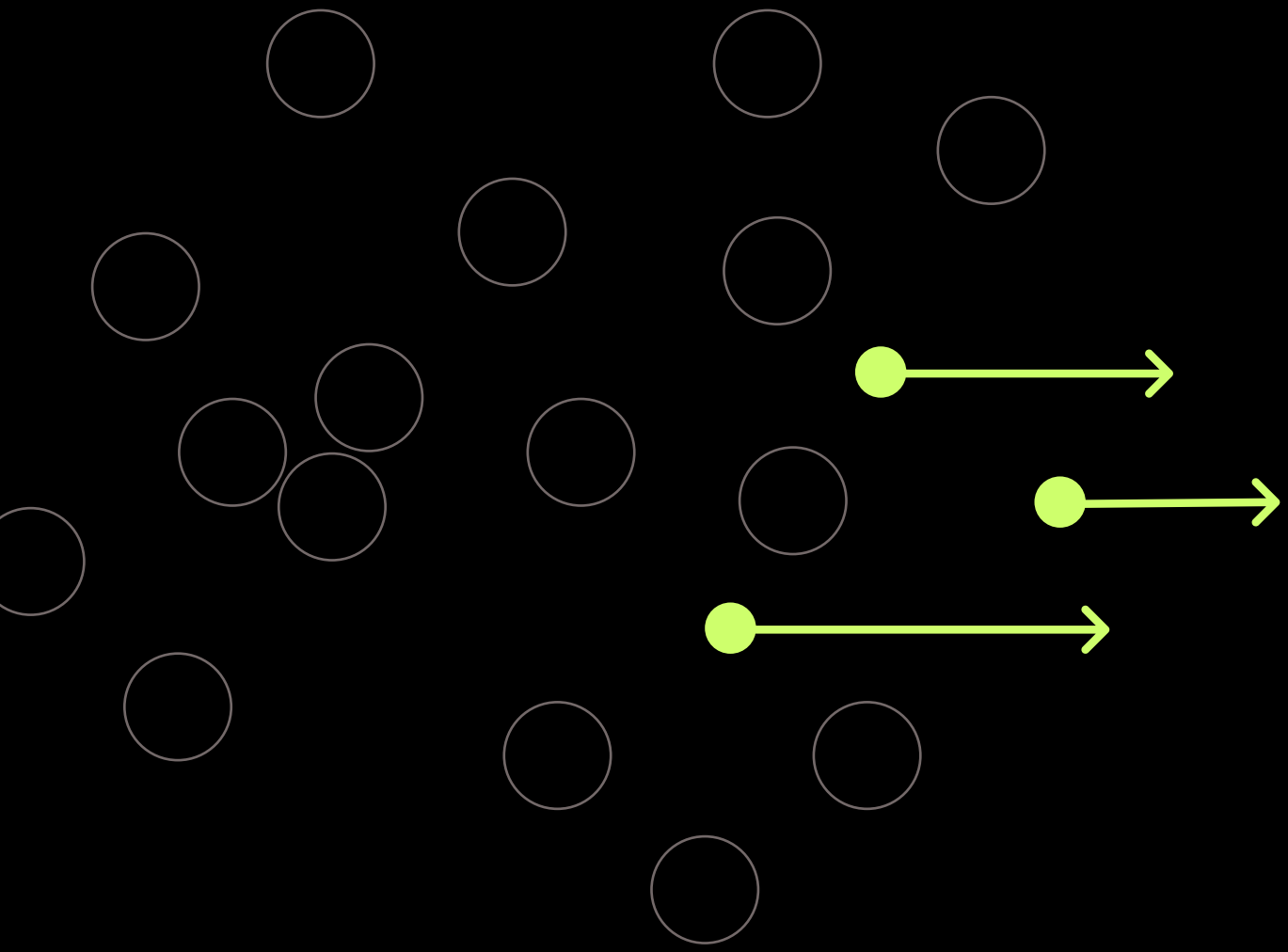


Fig. 8: The ERPN scheme



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