

# The Groundhog Day Trap



*Hi, Raghav here.*

*These are 5 dispatches on why every previous attempt to change how your organisation operates has reverted and what's actually at the root.*

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Let's go!

The pattern is familiar: something breaks, you fix it, things improve for a while, then slowly the old problems come back. A new system gets abandoned. A new process gets bypassed. A consultant hands over a document and three months later you're back where you started.

This isn't bad luck and it's not your team's fault. It's a specific, diagnosable pattern and it has almost nothing to do with the quality of the fix.

Five dispatches on what's actually preventing change from sticking in social impact organisations - told from inside the problem, not from a consulting deck. (Names, dates and identifiers changed to maintain anonymity)

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# Email 1: How Beliefs Can Derail The Best Of Systems

My client Sarah had built the perfect system. It worked flawlessly for two years.

Then the people running it decided they didn't want to follow it anymore.

Sarah had joined a company that was hemorrhaging money. The CEO and finance lead had developed habits that were killing the business - reactive spending, poor cash flow management and no financial discipline.

She didn't just create Band-Aid solutions. She built comprehensive systems: clear financial protocols, spending approval processes, cash flow monitoring and regular review cycles.

By the time she transitioned out of her operational role these systems had completely turned the company around.

Profitable with growing reserves and reducing debt.

The systems were still there when she moved to a different position.

But within 10 months, the company was back in crisis.

Not because the systems failed. Because leadership stopped using them. The CEO went back to reactive spending. The finance lead went back to short term financial planning. The monitoring? Ignored. The reviews? Skipped.

Every safeguard Sarah had built was still in place. They just chose not to follow them.

Then came the moment that revealed everything.

When questioned about why he didn't share the company's dire financial struggles with his team - people who could have helped solve them - the CEO's response was telling:

"This is how I have always done it. I handle finances alone."

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He was defending the very approach that had brought back the dire financial situation.

Later, he would write a post taking "full 100% responsibility" for the financial crisis. But then he concluded with: "I am fully responsible for this and I will handle this given your trust."

Even while acknowledging that the problem was caused by handling things alone, his solution was... to handle this alone.

He could see the pattern clearly enough to take responsibility for it, but not clearly enough to stop repeating it.

This isn't just one leader's blind spot. It's a pattern that shows up everywhere when we mistake taking responsibility for the problem with taking responsibility for changing our approach.

### **Today's Permission Slip:**

You have permission to accept that you can't change people who don't want to change - no matter how good your systems are.

This is the hardest leadership lesson because we want to believe that the right process can overcome the wrong mindset. We tell ourselves that if we just document it clearly enough, make the system foolproof enough or create enough accountability then people will follow it.

But here's what Sarah's experience teaches us:

People might change temporarily under the effect of an external intervention BUT when removed, they can easily go back to the old habits that created the problems in the first place.

The CEO didn't internalise that his secretive financial management was the root cause of the crisis. To him, the systems Sarah built were temporary measures for an emergency situation. Once things improved, he felt safe returning to his "normal" way of operating - the very approach that had created the problems.

When you create change through external pressure without changing someone's underlying beliefs about what works, the change feels temporary to them. They're just waiting for things to get "back to normal."

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When you create change through external pressure without helping people internalise why the change matters, they'll see it as a temporary adjustment rather than a permanent improvement.

**This Week's Practice:**

Before implementing your next system, ask yourself: "Are people following this because I'm watching, or because they genuinely believe it's better?"

If it's the former, don't just focus on compliance. Focus on helping them understand the connection between their old habits and the problems those habits created.

Sometimes the most important work isn't building better systems - it's helping people see why their current approach isn't working, even when it feels familiar and comfortable.

**This Week's Question:**

What system are you perfecting that people simply choose not to follow?

Here's to leading differently,  
Raghav

## Email 2: The Dangers Of That Cool New Playbook

A few weeks ago I was doing something uncomfortable.

I was mapping how fundraising actually happens at a child health organisation. Not how it's supposed to happen. How it actually happens.

The difference matters more than you'd think.

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Mid-way through the work, the founder asked to see what we had so far. I showed her - rough linear flows, messy swimlanes, half-finished diagrams with questions still unanswered.

She looked at it, then pulled up a document a previous consultant had created. A beautiful fundraising playbook. Neat stages. Clean arrows. Colour-coded steps from first donor outreach all the way to signed contract.

"I want your work to look like that," she said.

I understood the impulse completely.

The playbook looked like competence. It looked like an organisation that had its act together. It looked like the kind of thing you could show a board member and feel proud of.

But here's what the playbook couldn't show:

That donor engagement in this organisation has no real process. Outreach happens when someone remembers to do it.

Follow-ups depend on whoever has bandwidth that week.

Donor scoring - who gets prioritised, who gets a call, who gets a meeting - is based entirely on gut feel and half-remembered conversations.

Nobody had written that down. Because it didn't look good written down.

The playbook didn't fix any of that. It just put a tidy cover over it.

### **Today's Permission Slip:**

You have permission to not have a playbook yet, and to sit with the mess long enough to actually understand it.

This is harder than it sounds because the playbook feels like progress. It's tangible. You can share it. It signals that you're on top of things.

But a playbook built before you understand reality doesn't fix your fundraising. It just makes the dysfunction harder to see. Now you have a document that says the

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process works - even while donors are slipping through gaps nobody has mapped yet.

And this isn't just a fundraising problem.

I see the same pattern everywhere.

Founders who bring in an HR consultant and get a performance management framework before anyone has mapped why good people keep leaving.

Founders who implement a project management tool before anyone has understood why projects keep missing deadlines.

Founders who write SOPs before anyone has watched how the work actually gets done.

The framework arrives.  
Everyone feels productive.

The underlying problem continues now with better documentation on top of it.

The uncomfortable truth is this: you cannot fix a process you don't yet understand and the eagerness to skip straight to the framework is usually a sign of how uncomfortable the reality is.

Looking at the mess - really looking at it - requires admitting that things aren't working.

That the previous consultant's playbook didn't stick.

That the tool you implemented last year didn't solve it.

That the gap between how things are supposed to work and how they actually work is wider than you'd like to believe.

That admission is hard. The playbook is easier.

But the playbook is a map of where you want to go. What you need first is an honest map of where you actually are.

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### **The Practice:**

Pick one process in your organisation that feels chaotic despite previous attempts to fix it.

Before you look for a framework, spend one week just watching how it actually happens. Not how it should happen. What actually happens.

Who does what, and why? What triggers action or makes things get forgotten? Where do things quietly fall apart?

Write it down. All of it. Including the parts that don't look good on a diagram.

That messy picture is not the problem. That messy picture is the map. And you cannot fix what you haven't honestly seen.

### **This Week's Question:**

Which process in your organisation has a playbook that looks good on paper but doesn't survive contact with reality?

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## **Email 3: Your Async Culture Is A Lie (And Everyone Knows It)**

Shubham closed his laptop at 8 PM, exhausted.

He'd spent the day:

Updating Jira tickets (because someone would ask if he didn't)

Writing detailed Slack updates (so the team stayed "aligned")

Documenting decisions in Notion (for the async record)

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And then attending four meetings to discuss all of it anyway  
His company proudly calls itself "async-first."

The leadership team talks about trust, flexibility, and deep work time.

But here's what Shubham actually experiences:

Slack messages that expect responses within minutes.  
Project management tools that need constant nudging to stay current.  
"Async discussions" that always end with "let's hop on a quick call to sort this out."  
Documentation that nobody reads before meetings.

He's doing all the overhead of async work - the writing, the updating, the tool maintenance.

And still doing all the synchronous work - the meetings, the calls, the immediate responses.

### **Today's Permission Slip:**

You have permission to admit your async setup isn't working - and either commit to real async or stop pretending.

Why this feels impossible to say out loud:

Because your company invested in all the async tools.  
Because leadership keeps talking about "trust" and "flexibility."  
Because admitting it's not working feels like admitting you can't handle modern work culture.

But here's what nobody's saying: Half-assing async is worse than not doing it at all.

### The Old Way: Traditional Office Culture

At least the expectations were clear:

Be in office 9-5

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Meetings happen in conference rooms  
Questions get asked at desks  
Work happens in real-time  
You knew what "responsive" meant. You knew what "available" looked like.

It wasn't perfect, but it was honest about what it was.

### The Shift: Async Theater

Then organisations discovered async tools and made a fatal assumption:

Adopting async tools = having an async culture

So they:

Replaced email with Slack (but kept the expectation of instant response)  
Adopted project management tools (but still needed meetings to make decisions)  
Created documentation systems (but nobody had time to actually read them)  
Announced "flexibility" (but penalised people who actually used it)  
The result? People get the worst of both worlds:

All the discipline of async (writing everything down, keeping tools updated, documenting decisions).

None of the benefits (actual flexibility, protected deep work time, reduced meetings).

### What Real Async Actually Requires:

Here's what most organisations miss:

Async isn't about tools. It's about discipline, trust, and systems.

Real async means:

Questions don't need immediate answers - and that's okay.

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Updates happen on schedule, not on demand.

Decisions get made in writing, with clear deadlines for input.

Meetings are rare, optional, and recorded.

"I'll respond tomorrow" is a complete sentence.

Real async requires:

Leaders who don't check message timestamps.

Teams trained to give complete context in writing.

Decisions that can wait for thoughtful input.

Documentation that people actually read and trust.

Consequences for people who bypass the system with "quick calls."

Most importantly, real async requires letting go of control over when work happens.

If you're checking whether someone responded within an hour, you're not doing async.

If you're nudging people to update tools, you're not doing async.

If "let's just hop on a call" is your solution to every complex discussion, you're not doing async.

### **The Practice:**

Pick one area where you're doing async theater:

Is it Slack? Set actual response time expectations (like: 24 hours is normal).

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Is it project management? Define exactly when updates are due, and stop asking between those times.

Is it meetings? Cancel one recurring meeting and handle it truly async - in writing, with clear deadlines.

Then watch what happens.

Either your team will discover they can actually work async (and love it).

Or you'll discover you can't (and can stop pretending).

Both outcomes are better than the exhausting middle ground you're in now.

**This Week's Question:**

What async overhead are you creating that nobody's actually using?

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P.S. I've watched this pattern at multiple organisations - including ones that proudly marketed their "async culture" to recruits. The people who burned out fastest? The ones who actually tried to do the async work while everyone else just kept scheduling calls. What's your experience been? Hit reply - I read every response.

## Email 4: Is Your Next Big Initiative Doomed Even Before You Announce It?

"We're planning to roll out this new initiative across all our regions," the Global People Operations Director of a leading non-profit told me during our brainstorming call last Thursday.

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“We’ve developed a solid plan and are about to run campaigns in all our offices across Asia and Africa to popularise it.

We want to make sure everyone adopts it quickly. Do you have any thoughts on how to roll it out successfully?”

I asked her a question that stopped her in her tracks:

“How much do these regions trust your team right now? On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being no trust at all and 10 being high trust.”

After a moment of silence, she replied, “That’s an interesting question. No one has asked me that before, nor did we think of it.”

Her teammate then chimed in: “You’re right! The Southern Africa office would be a 9 on the trust scale right now while India would be at a 5.”

“There you go,” I explained.

“When you roll out this initiative, in the Southern Africa office, it will come in at a 9 trust level... giving it a greater chance for acceptance. While in India, it has already almost failed because it will come in at a trust level of 5.”

It wasn’t about the quality of the plan.

It wasn’t about the campaigns they were planning.

It wasn’t even about the initiative itself.

It was about the trust level her initiatives would inherit the moment they were announced.

This pattern plays out daily in organisations everywhere:

The manager who can’t understand why her team resists a new productivity system (that would genuinely help them).

The team lead whose process improvements get implemented enthusiastically by some team members and ignored by others.

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The department head whose reorganisation makes perfect sense on paper but faces stubborn resistance in practice.

In each case, the initiative itself wasn't the problem.

The initiatives were already destined to succeed or fail before they were even announced – based on the trust level they would inherit.

### **Today's Permission Slip:**

You have permission to address trust levels first, before launching your next initiative.

Here's why this feels uncomfortable:

“But shouldn't the merits of the idea speak for themselves?”

“Doesn't this slow everything down?”

“What if people think I'm playing politics instead of focusing on results?”

Here's what I've learned:

Trust isn't just a nice-to-have. It's the foundation that determines whether your initiatives will fly or die.

When trust is high, your initiatives inherit a presumption of good intent.

People start with the assumption that your ideas will benefit them and are worth engaging with.

When trust is low, even your best ideas inherit skepticism.

People start with the assumption that your initiatives will create more work, serve hidden agendas or ultimately fail – so why invest?

### **This Week's Practice:**

Before your next rollout, try this:

Map the trust landscape – honestly assess which teams or individuals currently have high or low trust in your leadership (a simple 1-10 scale works).

For high-trust areas (7+): Share and seek feedback from them early. Use their input to refine your approach and their momentum to build successful examples.

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For low-trust areas (5 or below): Have trust-building conversations first. Understand their concerns and work to bring that trust level up before going about announcing any new initiatives. Otherwise, you run the risk of your new initiatives being dead on arrival.

Remember, this isn't about manipulating people into accepting your ideas. It's about recognising that trust is the soil in which your initiatives either grow or wither.

**This Week's Question:**

Which upcoming initiative might benefit from a trust assessment before you launch it?

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## Email 5: Almost Fired! When My First Big Role Nearly Ended In Disaster

The whispers weren't meant for me to hear.

But as I walked past the meeting room that June afternoon 10 years ago, the words stopped me cold: "Raghav can't do it. This study is too important. We'll need to find someone else to handle this role."

My boss was talking to the head of HR – about replacing me.

Just two months earlier, I'd been given my first opportunity to lead a large project – the implementation arm of a newborn health randomized controlled trial.

I'd gone from managing one person to leading a team of over 100 overnight.

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I wasn't ready.

At least, that's what everyone thought after my team performed poorly during a crucial World Health Organization visit in May – a visit I missed because of a wedding of a close friend.

The public rollicking from my boss after I returned, still stung.

But that overheard conversation? It hit differently.

Here I was, nearly fired before I'd even really started.

Most leadership stories skip this part.

They jump straight to the triumph, the innovation, the brilliant strategy that saved the day.

But real leadership journeys include these moments - when you question everything, when others question you, when it all feels like it might collapse around you.

What happened next wasn't dramatic.

I didn't give an inspiring speech or unveil a revolutionary approach.

I simply kept my head down and focused on the systems we'd begun putting in place since April.

Systems that needed time to show results. Time I almost didn't get.

Day by day, our performance improved.

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Small wins accumulated. Team members grew more confident.

Processes became smoother.

By November - just five months after nearly being replaced - our team's performance was being publicly lauded.

I was given additional responsibilities, including quality assurance for a critical data exercise.

The near-disaster had transformed into a success story.

### **Today's Permission Slip:**

You have permission to trust the systems you're building, even when immediate results don't validate them.

This feels risky because:

- What if the improvement never comes?
- What if you really aren't the right person for the role?
- What if your approach is fundamentally flawed?
- What if there simply isn't enough time?

But consider this: The most valuable leadership work often happens in the gap between implementation and results.

In that uncomfortable space between starting something new and seeing it succeed.

In the daily improvements that seem insignificant until, suddenly, they're not.

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**This Week's Practice:**

Instead of trying to fix everything at once, focus on just one thing this week:

Choose your team's most persistent problem – the one that keeps coming back no matter how many times you address it.

Then ask yourself: "What system could prevent this from happening again?"

Not a quick fix or a new policy – a genuine system that addresses the root cause.

Spend 60 minutes designing this one system. Keep it simple. Test it with a small part of your team before rolling it out.

And here's the critical part - when you communicate this change to stakeholders, be explicit about:

- What early indicators will show it's working.
- When to expect visible outcomes.

Remember, what looks like leadership failure is often just the gap between implementing a system and seeing its results.

The leaders who thrive are those who maintain conviction during this gap.

**This Week's Question:**

What system are you building right now that needs time to show results? How can you stay committed to it despite pressure for immediate outcomes?

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