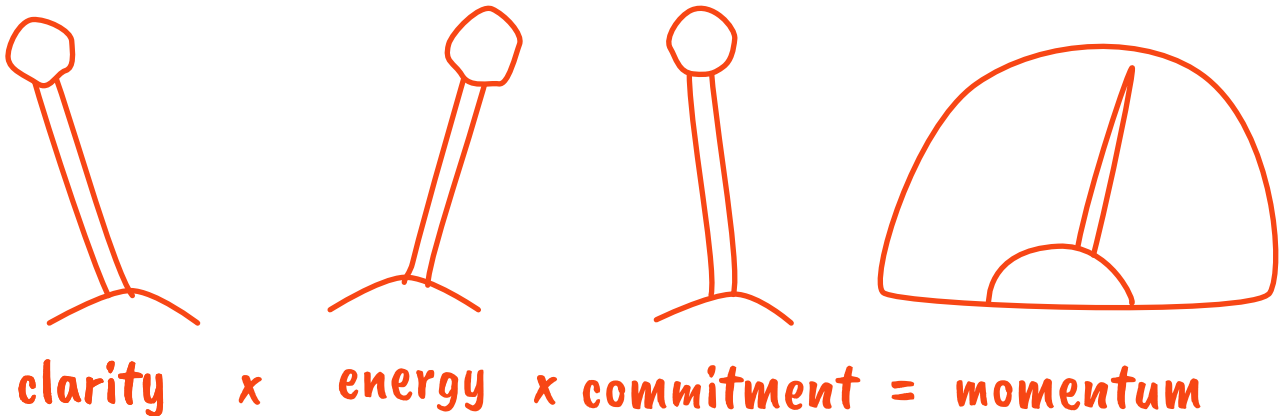


THE UNSTUCKIFIER

For leaders who know exactly what to do. And aren't doing it.



*a practical guide for getting unstuck
by Richard Russell*



*if you find this guide useful,
think of someone else who might benefit too,
and share it with them*

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Version 1.1 — March 2026

The Unstuckifier is written by Richard Russell and published by Russell and Company SARL-S, in Luxembourg.

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WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR *it's you (and it's me)*

This guide is for leaders who know what they're trying to do and want to do it, but keep getting stuck executing. If that's you, read on.

If the goal itself feels unclear, or the motivation has gone, that's a different problem. This guide won't fix it, but the last section will point you in the right direction.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are three parts:

Part One explains why you're stuck. *Read it once.*

Part Two gives you the toolkit to get unstuck. *Read it whenever you need it.*

Part Three shows you how to keep moving. *Read it whenever you need it.*

The **Cheat Sheet** is a separate page you can use any time you get stuck.

↑
*get it from richardrussell.co/unstuck
and print it out*

STUCK RIGHT NOW?

Can't get moving?

I don't know where to start → **Clarity** Tools 1–4, page 9

I know what to do but I can't face it → **Energy** Tools 5–8, page 14

I keep finding reasons to wait → **Commitment** Tools 9–12, page 19

Can't keep moving?

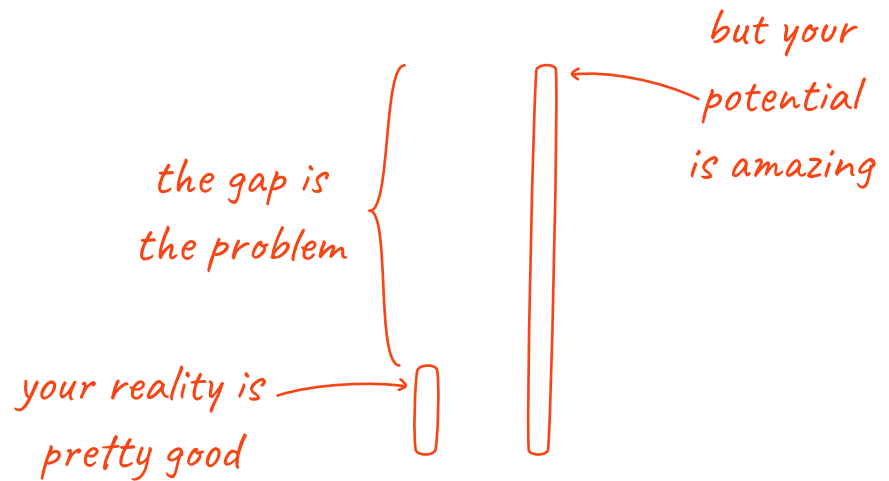
I started but I keep stopping → **Momentum** Tools 13–16, page 24

First time here?

Start at page 5.

1

WHY YOU'RE STUCK



You already know how to do this

That's what makes it so maddening.

You've shipped harder things than this. You've led bigger rooms, solved messier problems, closed more complex deals. And yet right now you cannot write this email. You cannot start this deck. You cannot make this decision.

You're just... sitting there.

This isn't laziness. It isn't imposter syndrome. It isn't a sign you've finally hit your ceiling.

That gap is the problem. Not your ability. Not your discipline. The distance between what you can do and what you're actually doing. It has a cause. Which means it has a fix.

and that's what this guide is about

EXECUTIVE STUCK IS DIFFERENT

Early in your career, you could get unstuck with effort. More hours, more hustle, more output. It worked.

At the executive level, this stops working. The ambiguity increases faster than effort can compensate. Decisions get less defined, stakes get higher, feedback loops get slower, and the coping strategies that used to carry you no longer scale. And if you're still relying on heroics to push through, that works until it breaks — and it always breaks.

Nobody's coming to help.

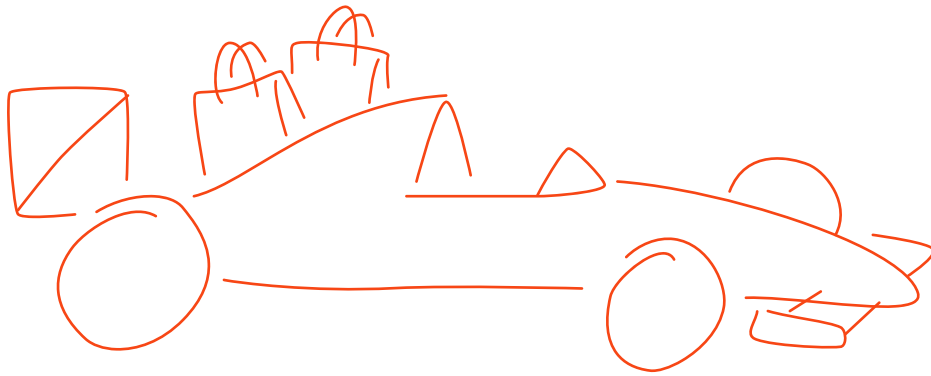
When a leader gets stuck, the organisation fragments. Debates fill the vacuum, teams hedge, strategy blurs, and a culture of action is replaced by one of hesitation. What feels private isn't. Silence signals uncertainty. Delay becomes direction. And the deeper cost is internal: every unfinished task erodes trust in yourself, making the next step harder to start. The cost compounds. *← is it on your dashboard?*

Getting unstuck isn't just a personal issue. It's a leadership responsibility.



YOU'RE NOT BROKEN

A Formula 1 car isn't broken because it struggles in city traffic. It's built for the track: speed, preparation, and a support team. Take it to a supermarket for the weekly shop and it's miserable to drive.



Your performance is context-dependent. When the work fits, you move fast and think clearly. When it doesn't, you feel stuck. This is a signal that something needs to change.

And yet you've been told all your life to try harder. To hustle. To grind.

But willpower spent fighting your brain is wasted.

If trying harder was the answer, you'd already be done.

**TRYING
HARDER
DOESN'T
WORK**

SO WHAT'S GOING ON?

Your job isn't to grind harder. It's to design the work so you can run at speed. And to do that, you need to understand what's actually stopping you.

Every time you get stuck, one of three things has dropped to zero.

Clarity. The task is shapeless, with no visible first step and no clear definition of done. Your brain won't start what it can't see the beginning of.

Energy. The tank is empty, or the task is draining it before you start. The will is there. The fuel isn't.

Commitment. Everything in you is arguing for one more check, one more conversation, one more day. It feels like diligence. It works like avoidance.

These three multiply together to form The Momentum Equation.

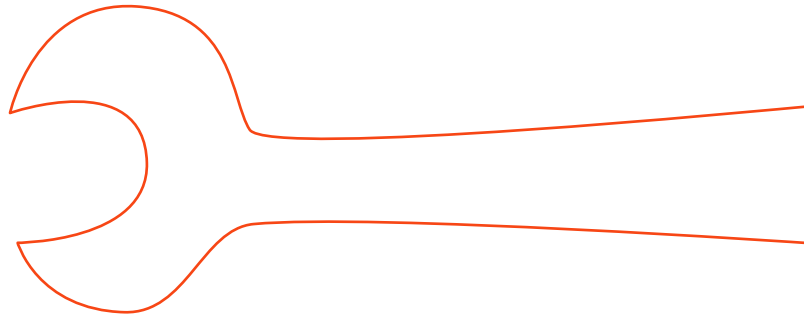
$$\text{Clarity} \times \text{Energy} \times \text{Commitment} \\ = \text{Momentum}$$

(zero kills everything)

That multiplication matters. If any one drops to zero, the others can't compensate. You don't need all three to be perfect. You need none of them to be absent.

Name which one you're dealing with. That's the only diagnosis you need.

2 THE TOOLKIT



Next time you get stuck, here's what to do.

First, notice what just happened.

You realised you were stuck. You didn't push through on fumes, spiral into busywork, or let the week disappear. You stopped, named it, and went looking for a way forward.

you interrupted the pattern

This is the inflection point. Most people never pause here. They grind on willpower until it runs out, or they avoid it until the deadline forces their hand.

Before you reach for a fix, spend two minutes getting honest about what the block actually is. Fixing the wrong problem wastes time. Sometimes just naming it reduces the noise enough to move.

You know the three variables. Which one's at zero right now? Go to that section and apply one of the tools.

Not sure which one? Ask yourself:

- Do I know exactly what to do? (**Clarity**)
- Do I have the energy to do it right now? (**Energy**)
- Do I keep finding reasons not to start? (**Commitment**)

If you're not sure, or it feels like more than one, start with Clarity.

CLARITY

When Clarity is low, the task feels enormous and shapeless. Vague enormity creates paralysis. Don't try to solve the whole thing at once. Create enough clarity to get moving.



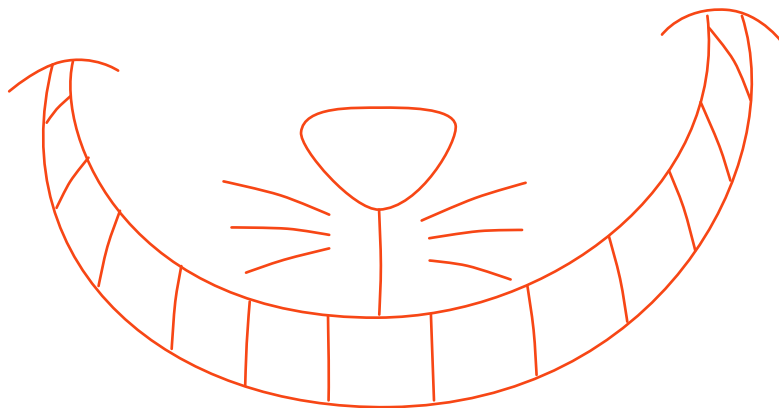
TOOL 1: NAME THE OUTCOME

Before you start, ask yourself:

What does done look like?

If you can't answer that in one sentence, the task is shapeless.

Name the outcome first. Then design the work.



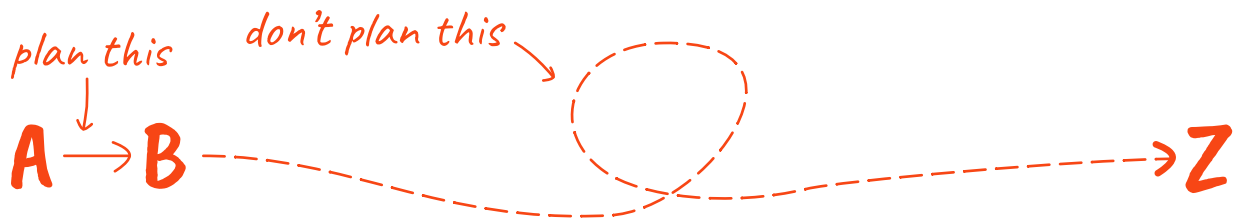
*if you don't know where you want to go,
then it doesn't matter which path you take*

TOOL 2: IMMEDIATE NEXT ACTION

You've been planning this for days. Still haven't started.

Comprehensive plans are seductive. They're also why you haven't started.

You need what James Clear calls an ABZ plan:



A: Where are you right now? What do you actually have? What exists today?

Z: Where are you trying to go? If you've already named the outcome, you have this.

If not, a rough destination is enough: "A sent email." "A decision." "A one-page summary my team can act on." It doesn't need detail. It just needs to exist so you're not working into a void.

B: What is the very next action? The single thing you will do in the next 20 minutes.

Everything between B and Z is noise until B is done.

Don't overplan. Action creates clarity, so get moving, then figure the rest out as you go.

TOOL 3: WRITE IT BADLY

Staring at an empty document, an empty slide, an empty reply? The blank page is its own kind of stuck.

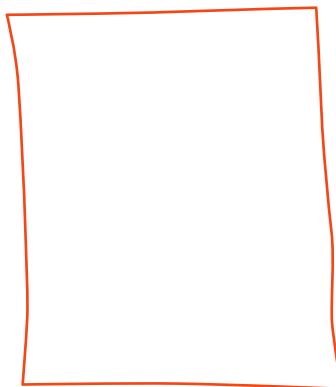
The fix is always the same: get something on the page. Anything. Don't aim for a finished product. Aim for a rough draft to be pulled apart. Then start editing.

"This is wrong, here's what it should say" is much easier than "where do I even begin?"

improving is easier than inventing

Four ways to make one:

1. **Give yourself permission to write a bad first draft.** Set a 15-minute timer. Write whatever comes. Stop when it ends.
2. **Use dictation to speak a draft.** It's often easier to talk than write, and new tools make this easy.
3. **Use AI as a thinking partner.** Give it your brief and ask for a rough draft, or ask it to interview you first. Don't outsource your thinking, use the dialogue to get your own thinking going.
4. **Delegate the first draft.** Ask a junior team member. They get exposure to higher-level work, you get something to react to, and your blank page problem disappears in one move. Even better, keep the delegation going, and step into a coaching and reviewing role fully.



*I was stuck writing this guide for months
then I used 1, 2, and 3, and got moving*

TOOL 4: BREAK IT DOWN

Some tasks don't have a blank page problem. They have a different problem: the task on your list isn't actually a task. "Write the strategy doc" is a project dressed up as a task. Your brain knows this, even if you don't.

The fix is to stop treating it as one thing. Make a map before you start moving.

This isn't procrastination. Your brain needs to do the executive work before you can do the execution work.

What are the actual component tasks?

What do you need that you don't have yet?

Roughly how long does this take?

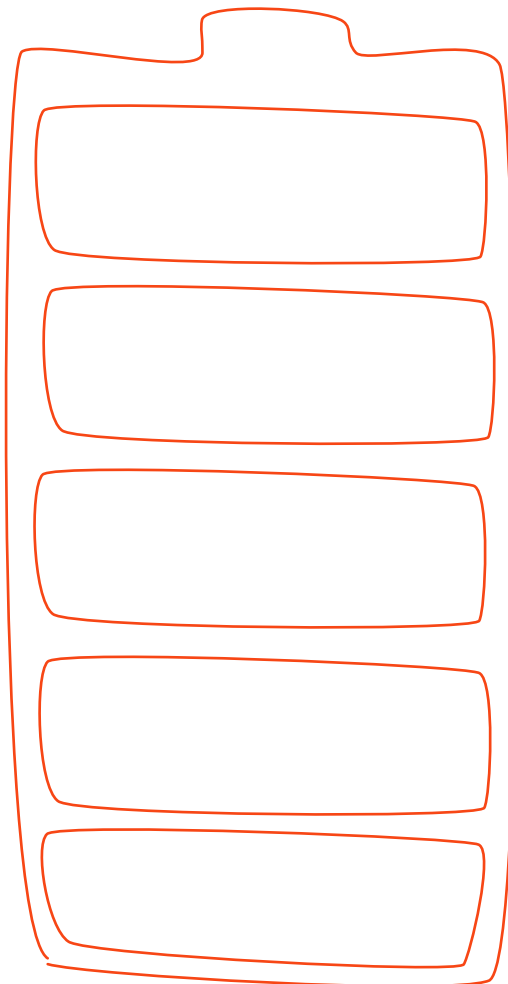
What's likely to get in the way?

This is the work that makes the work possible. Ten minutes now beats an hour of false starts.



ENERGY

When Energy is low, you feel tired just looking at the task. Raise your state to meet the task, or lower the cost of the task to meet your state.



TOOL 5: GET A QUICK WIN

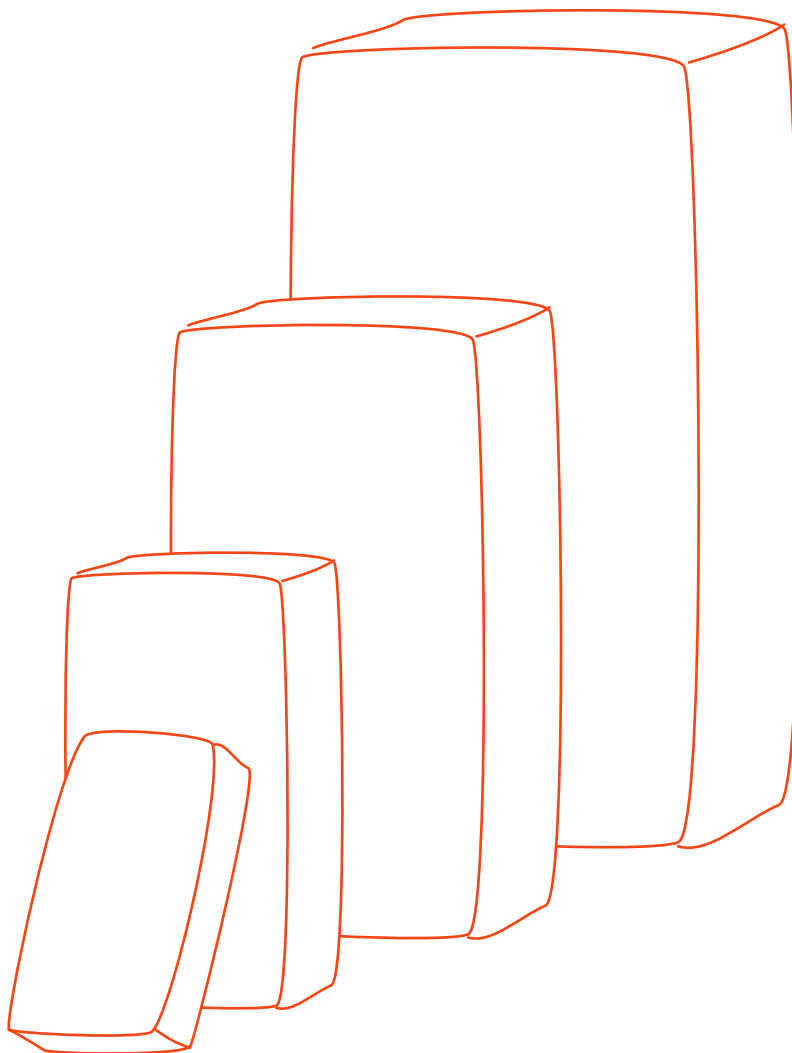
Some tasks are just harder to get started than others. You need a running start.

Forget eating the frog first. Eat the cake, then eat the frog.

Start with a small task that you can do easily. Complete it. Feel the boost that comes from finishing something, then use that feeling to tackle the harder task.

What the first task is matters less than its completion. It doesn't have to be important. It has to be done. That's enough to get you moving.

eat the cake so you can eat the frog



TOOL 6: MOVE YOUR BODY

Two minutes can be enough. A brisk walk, ten pushups, a set of stairs.

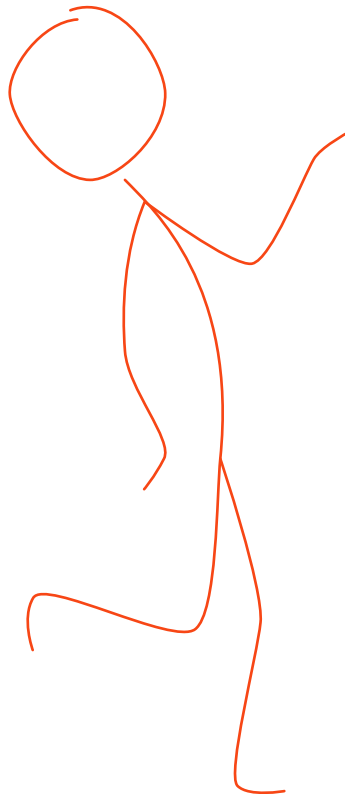
The point isn't the workout. It's to raise your physiological state and return to the task with an energised mind.

Your brain isn't a computer. When you move your body, your mind gets going too.

like Churchill

If you're running on empty, movement won't help. Stop. Take a break, even a nap. Recovery is part of the work, not a break from it. The hard part for most leaders is giving themselves permission to stop.

When you're behind and the pressure is on, pausing feels like losing ground, even when you're so depleted that continuing is pointless. That feeling is wrong. A break isn't lost time. It's the price of getting the next hour back. Schedule it, and the return to work, like you'd schedule any other work.



TOOL 7: CHANGE THE SCENE

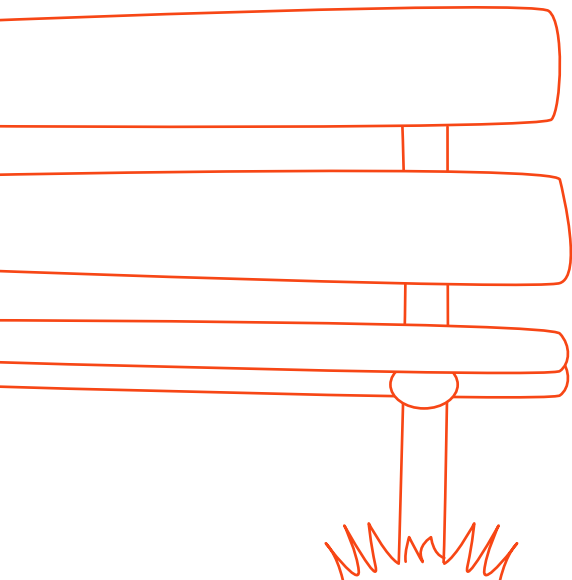
If you've been sat at the same desk for 20 minutes or more, the environment has become part of the problem. Your brain has decided that this space equals stuck.

Move. Literally.

Take your laptop to a cafe with a bit of buzz around. Go to a library where you're surrounded by students deep in their textbooks. Sit in the park on a picnic table.

If you can't go that far, move somewhere different in your office or home. Stand up, change your posture, or get away from the screen and write with a pen and paper for five minutes.

You're not looking for the perfect working environment. You're breaking the association between the current space and the current state. Often that's all it takes.



TOOL 8: MAKE IT FUN

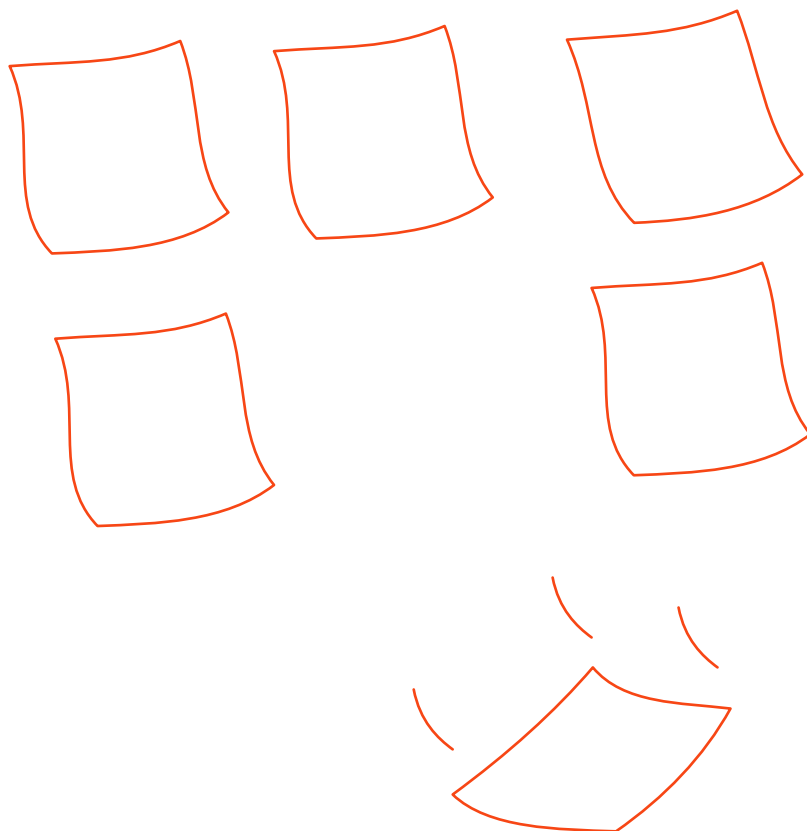
Some tasks are easy but boring. And when you're stuck on those kinds of tasks, what your brain needs is interest to keep it going.

Here are five ways to create interest in a boring task.

1. **Add novelty:** use a new tool or approach.
2. **Add urgency:** set a 20-minute timer and race it.
3. **Add constraint:** 10 slides maximum. 200 words.
4. **Add sensory input:** music, colours, different lights.
5. **Add someone else:** work next to them, or pull them in to work on it together.

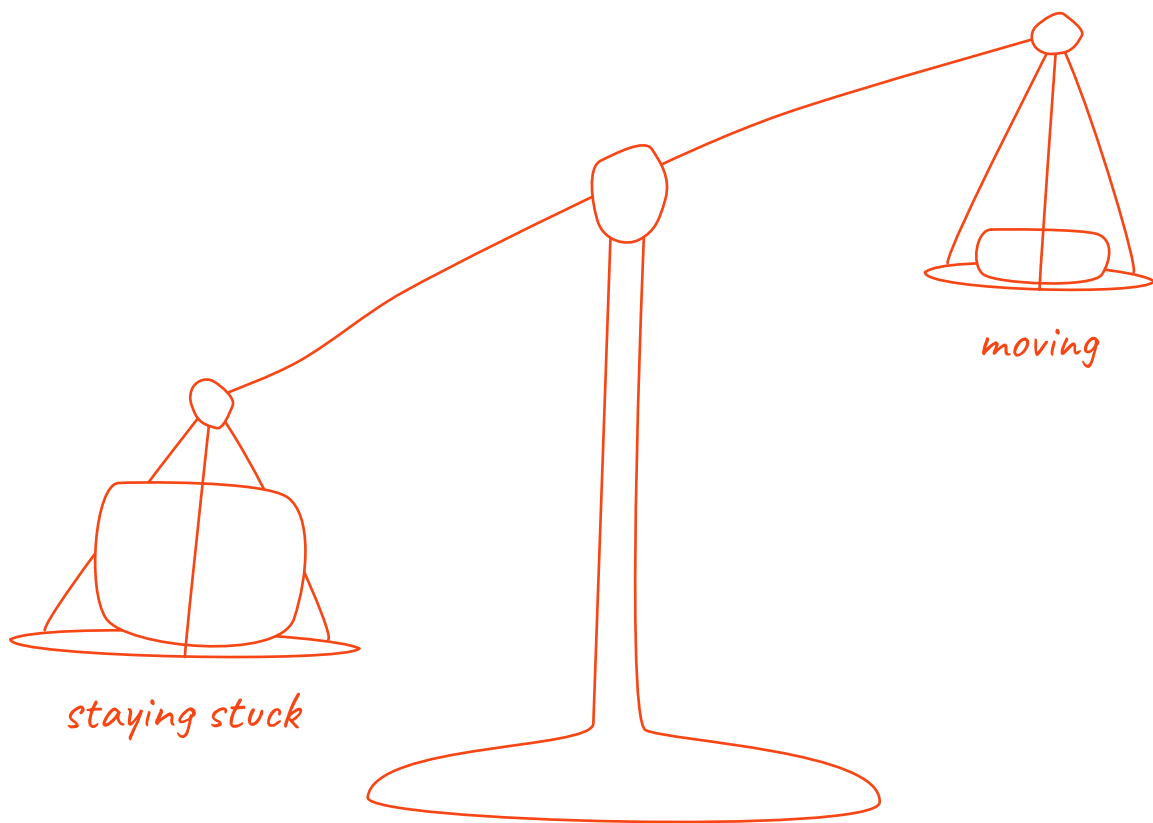
my brain, my rules

If your brain works better with post-it notes and hip hop music, give it what it needs.



COMMITMENT

When Commitment is low, it feels like diligence. You're not moving. Make the cost of moving lower than the cost of staying stuck.



TOOL 9: EMBRACE AMBIGUITY

You're waiting for more information.

Ask yourself:

what are you actually waiting for?

How much more information would change your decision?

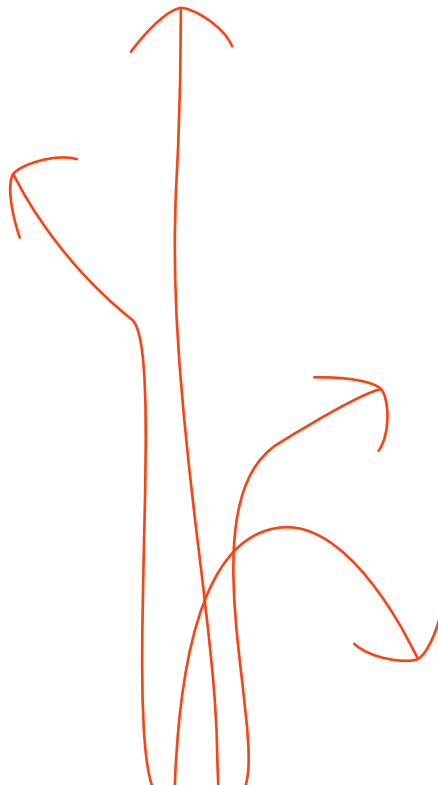
Do I not know it, or am I just not ready to own the answer I already have?

One of those is a real blocker. The other is avoidance.

Most executives, if they're honest, could make the call right now. The information they're waiting for shifts the needle by less than the delay costs. This isn't doing due diligence, it's risk aversion dressed as thoroughness.

If you genuinely do need more information, be precise about what would actually change your decision. Write down the one thing that matters most. Go and get that one thing. Then move, even if the picture isn't complete. You're not waiting for certainty. You're reducing uncertainty enough to act.

Speed is part of leadership because delay has costs that don't show up in the analysis.



TOOL 10: MAKE IT REVERSIBLE

Most decisions feel heavier than they are. Part of that weight comes from treating them as permanent when they aren't.

Jeff Bezos called these one-way and two-way doors. One-way doors are genuinely hard to reverse — an acquisition, a public commitment, a structural reorganisation. Most decisions aren't one-way doors. They just feel like it.

When you're stuck, ask: is this actually a one-way door?

A strategy direction can be course-corrected.

A hire can be structured as a trial.

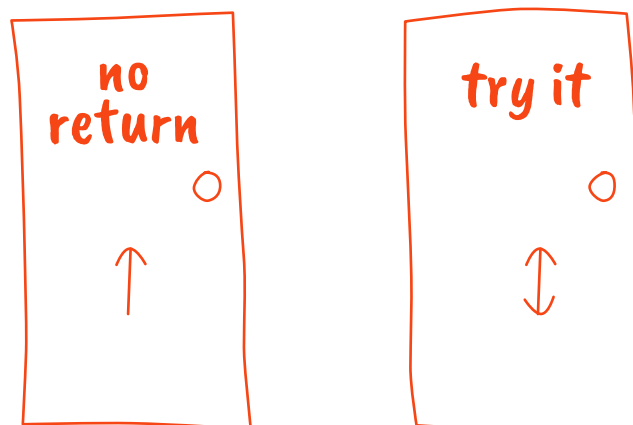
A product decision can be limited to one market before it scales.

smaller audience, smaller stakes

You can usually find a way to make it reversible. Limit the scope before you go all in — one market, one team, one quarter. Limit the audience before you go wide — share the direction with two or three people before it's visible to the organisation. Set a review date so you're making a time-bounded call, not a permanent one.

All three do the same thing: shrink the door until you can walk through it.

If it goes wrong, what's the recovery cost? Usually lower than the cost of staying stuck.



TOOL 11: DONE BEATS PERFECT

You've been editing this for an hour. It keeps getting longer. You can't find the place to stop.

This is the other side of perfectionism: not the blank page, but the inability to put the thing down.

Does this do the job? If yes: stop. Ship it.

what does done look like?

Three ways to do this:

1. **Lower the bar:** Define what the work needs to achieve, nothing more. Not “what does great look like” but “what does done look like.” One sentence.

This email needs to be clear and sendable, not brilliant.

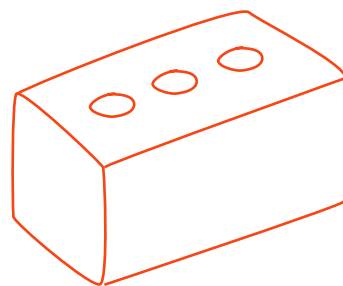
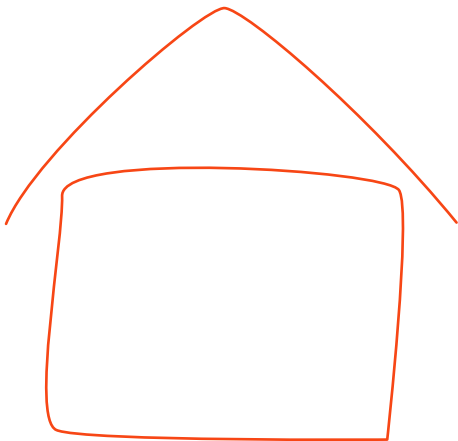
This draft needs to convey the main argument, not be final.

This decision needs to be reasonable and made, not perfect.

2. **Set the timebox:** Give it a fixed amount of time. When the timer ends, you send it, however good it is.

3. **Write the fix list:** Stop editing, and just mark everything that needs work. Go through each one. Stop when you're done.

Done. Next.



this brick is perfect!

TOOL 12: BURN THE BOATS

Sometimes you're resisting commitment. Once you've committed, the deliberation ends. The work begins.

thinking needs a deadline too

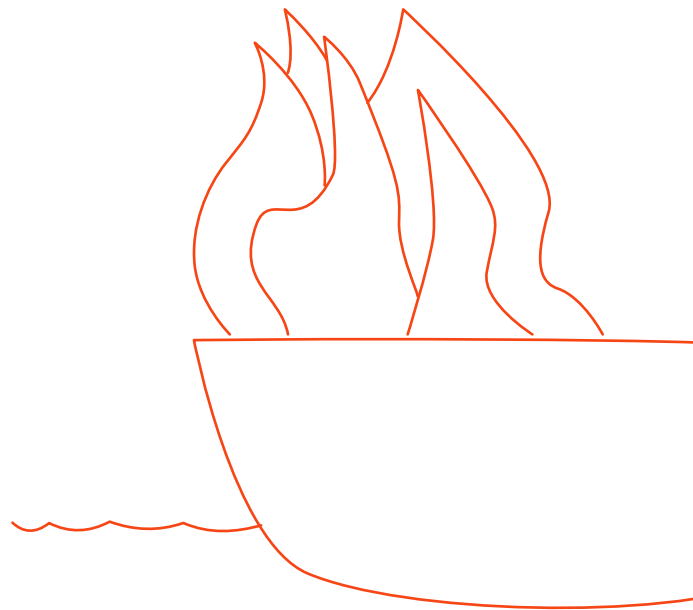
Sometimes the most direct route to get unstuck is to take the first exposed action immediately. Just the smallest action that makes the direction real and commits you.

Make the call.

Start the conversation.

Test your idea in the real world.

Deliberation expands to fill the time available. Burning the boats forces you to move.

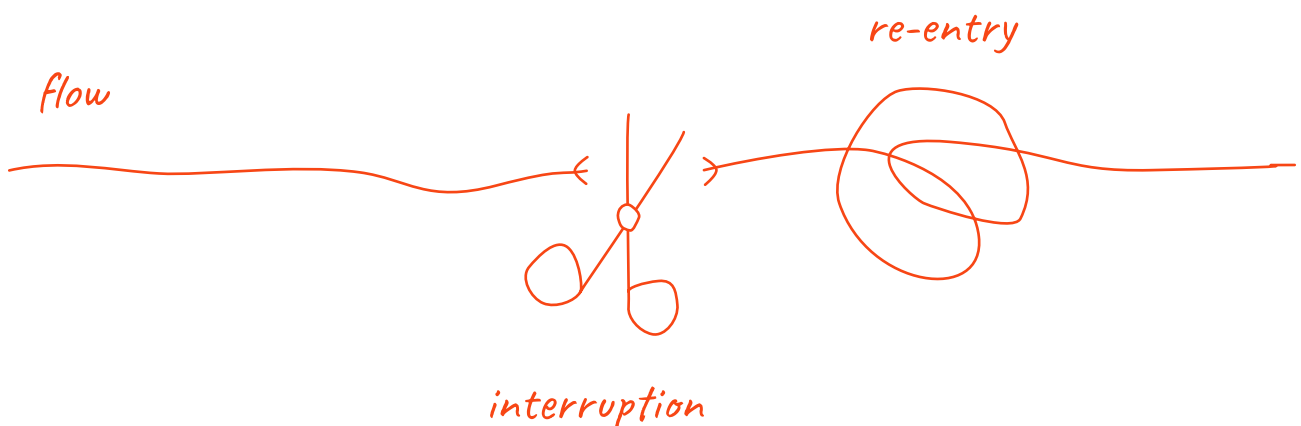


3

MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

(modulo breaks)

You got started, now you need to stay in motion. This matters more when you're senior because deep work is harder to re-enter than it looks. A two-minute interruption is rarely two minutes.



TOOL 13: REMOVE THE EXITS

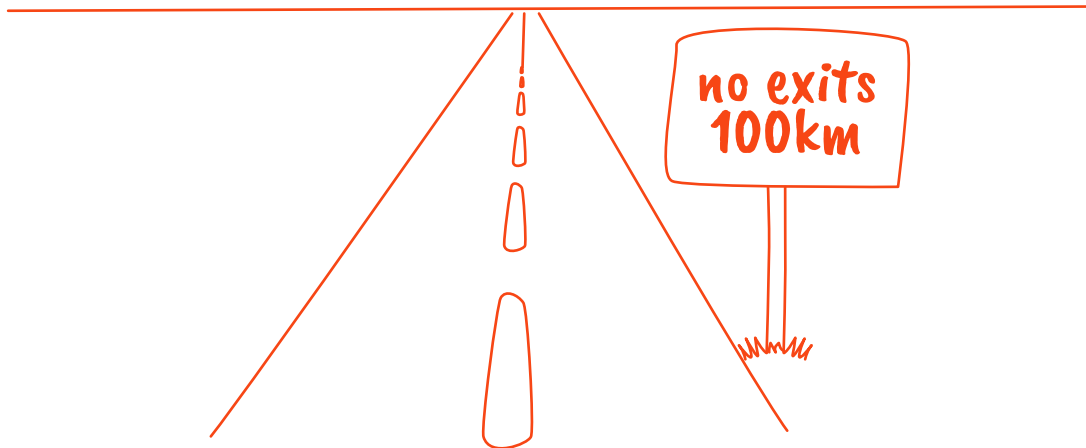
The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Don't rely on them to stay focused.

Close every tab and app that isn't the one thing you're working on. Turn off notifications. Move your phone to another room. Batch admin into a single scheduled slot so it stops bleeding across your day.

Every visible escape route drains your attention even when you're not using it.

The open inbox, the visible Slack, the browser tab two clicks away: they all register as available options, and your mind will consider them whenever it gets stuck. Closing them doesn't just remove temptation. It reduces the background noise your brain is carrying.

You're not trying to resist distraction through willpower. You're removing the opportunity entirely. Willpower runs out. Systems don't.



TOOL 14: WORK IN SPRINTS

Marathoners sustain effort over long distances. You're probably not built that way. Your energy comes in intense bursts.

That's not a flaw. It's a design spec. Stop trying to hold a steady pace and start building your work around how you actually run.

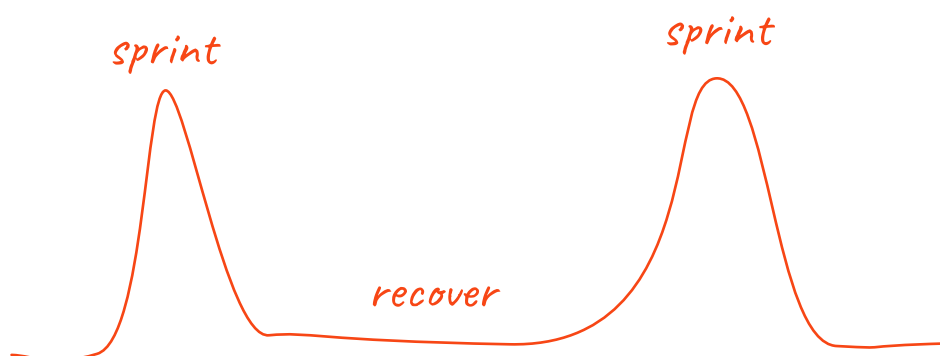
There are three levels to this:

Within a session: 25 minutes hard work, 5 minutes rest. The Pomodoro technique exists for a reason: it works with your attention span, not against it.

Within a week: build in thinking and recovery time. Not every hour should be constant execution. Some of it needs to be processing, reflecting, planning. Use the gaps.

Within a quarter: shorten your planning horizon. I work in 5 or 6 week sprints, then spend a week to assess, reorient, and plan the next one. A tight horizon concentrates effort in a way that an open runway doesn't.

Design the container, then run hard inside it.



TOOL 15: PROTECT THE RUN

You got moving. Then a message arrived. The thread snapped.

Don't deprioritise your own work to be helpful to others. Once you're moving, keep moving. Don't answer messages. Don't take a quick call. Protect your working time like it's your most important meeting.

When a thought surfaces that needs capturing — a follow-up, a different idea, a thing you've remembered — write it on paper and return to the real work immediately. Don't open a new window. Don't act on it. *the work is sacred*

Do Later

call Priya back (cashflow forecast?)

kill weekly status meeting

get milk

TOOL 16: BUILD A BRIDGE

Ernest Hemingway stopped writing each day mid-sentence. Not at a natural break, not at the end of a chapter. In the middle of a sentence, so that the next day, he always knew exactly where to begin.

The unfinished thought creates pull. Your brain wants to complete it. When you sit down the next day, you don't have to decide where to start. The sentence is already waiting.

Try this if you're working on writing, strategy docs, anything with continuous flow. Stop mid-paragraph. Mid-sentence if you can bear it. Leave the thought hanging.

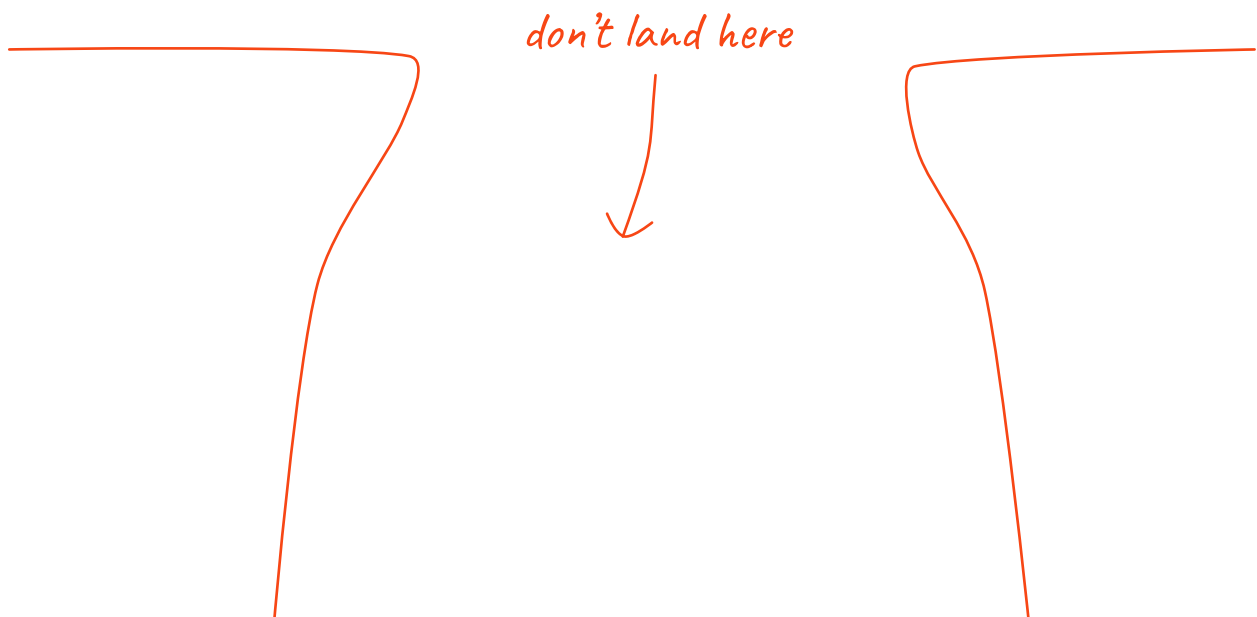
If stopping mid-thought feels too disruptive, do this instead:

Before you close the laptop, write down exactly where you are and what the very next step is.

Not "continue the deck" but "write the headline for the market slide on page 4."

Leave it somewhere visible: a Post-it on the screen, the document open on your desktop. The entry point should require no reconstruction.

Either way, the cost of starting is highest when you return cold. Both tactics eliminate that cost. You sit down and there is already a thread in your hand.



THE STORY YOU TELL YOURSELF MATTERS

You noticed you were stuck. That's the first win. Most people don't. They grind on fumes or avoid it until the deadline forces their hand. You stopped, named it, and went looking for a fix.

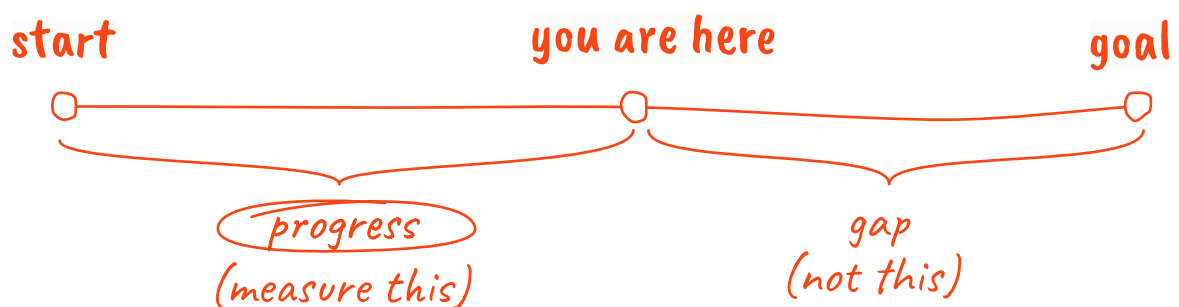
You got moving. That's the second win. You diagnosed the problem, chose a tool, and got moving. Then kept moving.

Now measure the progress. This is your third win. Focus on what's changed, not what remains. The gap between where you are and where you want to be is supposed to stay large — that's the point of an ambitious goal. What counts is what you did.

You hit a design problem, diagnosed it, and got moving again. Not "I got stuck." "I got moving." That's your story. Own it.

Next time you notice it happening, you're not someone who gets stuck. You're someone who knows what to do when they do.

*you know what to do...
now do it*



WHAT IF THIS ISN'T A ONE-OFF?

If this is a recurring pattern, it probably needs more than a guide.

There are three reasons a leader gets stuck. This guide addresses the first one: You know what to do and want to do it, but you're not doing it. That's an execution problem. The tools in this guide are built for exactly this.

The other two are harder. You're not sure where you're going, or you're missing the drive to get there. No execution tool fixes these.

If that's where you're struggling, I can help with that too. It takes longer, but it starts with the same conversation.

If the harder question is why you keep not noticing until it's too late, well, that's what coaching is for.

I coach founders, senior leaders, and executive teams who are stuck, whatever kind of stuck that is.

LET'S TALK

Email richard@richardrussell.co and tell me where you're stuck right now.

MORE FOR FAST BRAINS

[My ADHD page](#) has free tools like this one, and how I coach fast-brained leaders.

<https://richardrussell.co/adhd>

it's easier when you know how your brain works

ABOUT ME

I spent six years at Google and two at Amazon in senior product roles, then moved into coaching founders and senior leaders in VC-backed startups.

I kept seeing the same issue: leaders stalling on execution despite knowing exactly what needed to happen. It wasn't laziness or lack of discipline. It was variability. Bursts of speed followed by inexplicable stalls.

even while writing this guide

It wasn't abstract. I'd lived it too.

In my late forties, after a burnout, I was diagnosed with ADHD. In hindsight, it explained the pattern: speed under the right conditions, friction under the wrong ones, and an ability to make unconventional connections others often miss.

But this isn't an ADHD story. I've seen the same execution variability in founders, product leaders, and executives of every temperament. At senior levels, the work outgrows most people's default systems.



*Most execution problems are not about discipline.
They're about design.*

That's what I help people with.

Richard Russell

<https://richardrussell.co>

if this guide helped you out, pass it on!