

The Protected Ground

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Notice the quiet queue that forms outside an executive door on an ordinary Tuesday. Capable, well-compensated directors stop by just to run something past you, holding recommendations that are already sound and complete. They pause at the threshold, waiting for an informal nod before putting work into motion. Most leadership teams misinterpret this hesitation as a lack of confidence or an absence of ownership, responding with speeches about boldness and encouragement to trust their instincts. Yet the queue remains, because reassurance does not fix the perimeter.

When experienced professionals repeatedly ask for sign-off on work they already understand, they are behaving with quiet rationality. They have calculated the operational landscape and recognized that while the rhetoric promises autonomy, the architecture guarantees accountability without defense. If an unsanctioned choice succeeds, it goes unnoticed; if it meets friction, the contributor faces the sudden question of why they did not loop leadership in sooner. Seeking casual permission is simply the insurance policy a prudent performer buys against retroactive blame.

This hesitation extracts an unacknowledged price from both sides of the desk. The executive calendar becomes cluttered with low-stakes clearance requests, generating the false sensation of indispensability while draining deep strategic attention. Meanwhile, the capable contributor learns to temper their momentum, spending valuable hours packaging simple decisions into polite, consensus-seeking presentations. The organization trades decisive velocity for collective comfort, mistaking administrative caution for thorough alignment.

The architectural correction is an explicit decision right. A decision right does not tell a capable person what to choose; it establishes the protected ground where their judgment is authorized to stand without asking for permission to exist. Once that boundary is marked, the executive ceases to operate as an accidental clearance desk, and the contributor stops spending cognitive energy calibrating political safety. Both recover the quiet focus required to do the work they were hired to perform.

When capable leaders pause at your door to ask for approval, they are diagnosing your architecture, not their confidence.

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