A WORKING GUIDE

The Four Drivers of Better Business Results

Find what keeps getting in the way.
Choose what to change first.

People • Leaders • Systems • Execution

Bring one recurring business problem. Leave with a clearer explanation of what is happening, a change worth testing, and a way to see whether it helped.

For business owners and leaders who would like to stop having the same conversation about the same problem.

A useful next step beats another familiar fix.
Worked example • Investigation questions • Reusable worksheets

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Use this on one real problem

You probably have a problem in mind already. Work keeps coming back to you. A handoff breaks every week. A new system is in place, but the spreadsheet beside it is still doing most of the work. People are busy and the result is stubbornly unchanged.

Pick one of those problems. Keep a recent example beside you as you use this guide. A specific customer request, project, shift or hiring decision will tell you more than a discussion about what "always" happens.

Your route through the guide

Start with…	Then use…
A clear result and a wider view	Pages 3–4: describe the problem and understand the drivers.
A worked investigation	Pages 5–8: follow Maya and Ben through a recurring delivery problem.
Evidence from your own work	Pages 9–16: investigate each driver and record what you find.
Clearer ownership	Pages 17–18: connect a role to the result and decisions it supports.
A small, reviewable change	Pages 19–21: choose a test and decide what its results mean.
A conversation you can repeat	Pages 22–23: lead a working session and keep a one-page record.

Use it with the people closest to the work

You can begin on your own. If other people do the work, include them before you settle on an explanation. Ask them to show you a recent example. Their workarounds may reveal something your dashboard cannot.

The worksheets can be typed into in Word or printed. Use extra space when the work calls for it. You do not have to fill every box to earn permission to make a useful change.

Keep three things separate
What we know. What we suspect. What we still need to check. A confident explanation is still a guess until you have evidence for it.

What keeps happening?

“Our managers need to take ownership” gives you a judgment and very little to investigate. “In three recent customer issues, the next step waited for the owner even though the supervisor had the information” gives you somewhere to look.

Describe what happened, who was affected and what it cost in time, quality, customer experience or missed work. Then name the result you wanted instead. Do this before choosing a course, a new hire or another tool.

The recurring problem, in observable terms:

One recent example: what happened, and when?

What consequence makes this worth addressing?

What would a better result look like for the person relying on this work?

Example
Instead of “Ben needs accountability,” try: “Client reports reach final review on Thursday evening, leaving little time to correct errors before Friday delivery. We want a dependable delivery date without routine evening rescues.”

Be honest about the starting point. If you do not know how often the problem occurs, record a few examples before calling it a pattern.

Four ways to examine the work

At Peoplyst, we use People, Leaders, Systems and Execution to understand the conditions behind business performance. They help us investigate before recommending a fix. A problem may touch all four. You do not need to squeeze it into one box.

Driver	What to examine	A useful question
PEOPLE	Skills, available capacity, role clarity and the support needed to do the work.	Can the people doing this work realistically produce the result?
LEADERS	Priorities, decisions, expectations, coaching and what leaders reinforce in practice.	What choices are leaders making, delaying or leaving people to guess?
SYSTEMS	Processes, tools, policies, information and the way work moves between people.	Where does the work wait, repeat or become harder than it needs to be?
EXECUTION	Ownership, follow-through, evidence of progress and adjustment when results fall short.	How will we know the change is being used and helping?

Why look through all four?

A missed deadline can involve too much work, a leader adding a priority, incomplete information and a checkpoint that comes too late. Hiring another person might help. It might also give the same broken process one more person to frustrate.

We call the unnecessary effort around useful work business drag. You can often see it in repeated explanations, avoidable waiting, rework and preventable escalation. Some checks and approvals are necessary. Investigate what a step protects before removing it.

The drivers give you a common language for comparing these conditions. The useful answer is a better understanding of the work and a sensible next move, not a winning driver or a score.

The Thursday rescue

A purely fictional illustration: Maya, Ben, their company and every conversation below are invented. Bryan Howard appears as himself in an imagined advisory role. This is not a client case or a disclosure of confidential conversations.

Maya owns a small professional services firm. Ben leads client projects. The work is good enough that clients keep referring people. That should be good news. Lately, it has also meant another Thursday evening at the office.

“Where are we on the report?” Maya asks.

“I’m waiting on a few things,” Ben says.

“It’s due tomorrow.”

“I know.”

They finish it together. The client receives it on Friday. From the outside, the firm has kept its promise. From the inside, Maya has canceled her evening and Ben is behind on the next project.

After several weeks, Maya asks Bryan Howard of Peoplyst for help. “I need people who take ownership. I can’t keep finishing everybody’s work.”

“Show me the last report,” Bryan says. “What happened between accepting the work and Thursday afternoon?”

First, check the capacity behind the promise

“Does Ben know how to do this work?”

“Absolutely. His work is excellent when he has time.”

“How much time did he have?”

Maya starts with how busy the firm has been. Bryan brings her back to the calendar. After client calls and other responsibilities, Ben had about 30 hours for project delivery. His assigned projects needed roughly 40.

“Where were the extra ten hours supposed to come from?”

Maya looks at the calendar. “Some of them came from my evening.”

“And the rest?”

“Ben worked late too.”

What the People view reveals
The firm is making commitments against capacity it does not actually have. Because the reports still arrive, the evening work has become an invisible part of the plan.

Follow the promise upstream

“Who agrees to the delivery date?” Bryan asks.

“I do,” Maya says. “Most clients come through me.”

“What do you check first?”

“I usually have a pretty good feel for it.”

Ben mentions a rush job added on Tuesday. Maya had sent a quick message: “Can we squeeze this in?”

“What did you expect Ben to move?”

“I thought he would work that out.”

Ben looks at her. “I thought you meant everything still had to be done on time.”

The new promise had a decision attached to it. Nobody had made that decision. Ben could work later or disappoint someone, but he did not know which commitment Maya wanted him to change.

Then check what was actually ready

“Show me what you were waiting for on Thursday.”

Ben opens the original client email. A correction came later in a text to Maya. Someone else received a revised attachment. He had most of the information, but could not tell which version to use.

“When did anyone check that you had what you needed?”

“When I started putting the report together.”

“So the date was promised before you knew when the work could start?”

Maya nods. “We probably need better software.”

“What would you want it to do?”

“Show us what’s missing before we promise the date.”

Now they have a specific requirement. They can try a readiness check before deciding whether they need a new tool.

Two more conditions to address
Leaders: a new priority arrives without a tradeoff. Systems: a fixed delivery promise sits on top of information that may not be ready. Neither condition is solved by telling Ben to care more.

Make a change they can review

“Suppose you check capacity and information before promising a date,” Bryan says. “How will you know whether the work is on track?”

“I ask people,” Maya says.

“When?”

“When I start getting nervous.”

Ben smiles. “Thursday.”

By then, there are very few choices left. Ben proposes a Tuesday draft for Friday reports. It will not be finished, but it will show whether the analysis and source information are coming together.

“If something threatens Friday, I’ll bring you the issue that day,” he says. “I’ll include what’s missing and what I think we should do.”

“That would help,” Maya says. “I hear ‘I’m working on it’ and assume we’re fine.”

They do not launch four improvement projects

They have found several things to change. Maya wants to fix all of them. Bryan asks which change they can use on the next client request.

“Before I give a date, Ben and I check the time already committed and the delivery time available,” Maya says. “If something urgent moves ahead, I’ll decide what changes.”

That becomes the first test. Ben keeps a simple record of the checks and any exceptions. They keep the readiness check and Tuesday draft as possible next changes. For this first test, they will inspect the commitments made and the work delivered.

They choose two weeks as the first review window because requests arrive frequently. If only one eligible request comes through, they will need more evidence before drawing a conclusion.

Their test statement
For new report requests, Maya and Ben will review existing commitments and available delivery time before confirming the date. They will record exceptions and review whether accepted work arrives on time, meets the agreed requirements and avoids unplanned evening rescue.

They are testing a specific change in a limited part of the business. They are not promising to eliminate every delivery problem in two weeks.

What the first review teaches them

Two weeks later, Maya brings the commitments and delivered reports to the review. Ben brings the intake notes. They resist the temptation to begin with whether the new checklist felt useful.

Illustrative observation	What it does and does not tell them
Six new requests arrived. The check was used for five.	The change was not used consistently. Ask what happened on the sixth.
One request was given a later date because the original date exceeded available capacity.	The check affected a decision. Confirm that the new date was agreed with the client.
Of the six requests, four were delivered on their agreed dates and met the agreed requirements. Three avoided evening rescue. Two were not yet due.	Promising early evidence, not a complete result. Keep the two pending reports in the review and consider differences in complexity.
The unchecked request required late work after a client revision.	A useful case to examine. It does not prove the missed check caused every delay.

“So we keep the checklist?” Maya asks.

“Which part helped?” Bryan asks.

“Seeing the existing commitments before I said yes,” she says. “I changed one promise rather than silently changing Ben’s evening.”

“And the exception?”

“It was a client I know well. I skipped the check because I thought it would be quick.”

Ben adds, “Then the scope changed. We need a way to revisit the date when the work changes.”

Their next decision

They keep the intake check for this work and add a brief recheck when scope changes. They continue collecting examples, including quality problems and client responses. They do not expand the process across every service yet.

The first test has changed the conversation. Maya can discuss a decision she made, information they did not have and a rule that needs adjusting. “Ben needs ownership” no longer has to explain everything.

Use the example carefully
The company, Maya, Ben and all conversations with Bryan are purely fictional and illustrative. They are not confidential client material or predicted results.

Can people realistically deliver?

Start with the work required and the conditions available to do it. A capable person can be overloaded. A new person can be unclear about the standard. Someone who appears reluctant may be protecting a customer from a process that keeps failing.

Ask the person to walk you through a recent example. Compare what the role is expected to produce with the time, information, practice and support available.

Questions worth asking

- What does good work look like here? Can you show me a recent example?
- Which parts can you do confidently, and where do you need help or judgment from someone else?
- What else competes for the same time? What gets interrupted or pushed into evenings?
- When the work goes wrong, what is usually missing?
- What happens differently when this work goes well?

Check the work, not just the explanation

Look at the actual workload and available time. Include meetings, customer contact and work that is necessary but rarely counted. Treat initial effort estimates as estimates. Compare them with a few completed examples before using them to make staffing decisions.

When skills may be involved, look for a demonstration or work sample. Attendance at training does not tell you whether someone can perform the task under real conditions. Check whether the standard is clear and the tools support it.

Before you decide someone “won’t”
Check whether they can do the work, know what is expected, have the authority and time, and see the same priorities you do. If a performance concern remains, address the specific behavior fairly. A label is not an investigation.

A premature fix to avoid

Do not assign training simply because the problem involves an employee. If Ben has 40 hours of work and 30 hours available, a time-management course may become the forty-first hour.

Compare demand with support

Choose the role or team most directly involved in your example. Include the person doing the work in this review. Use a normal work period, not an exceptional week chosen to prove a point.

The result this role or team needs to produce:

Check	What is available now?	Gap or evidence to gather
Clarity: standard, priorities and examples		
Capability: knowledge, practice and judgment		
Capacity: time, coverage and workload		
Support: information, tools and help		

Which demand is missing from our current workload estimate?

What could explain the gap besides individual effort?

What will we check with the person doing the work?

Keep the arithmetic honest
Available work time = the time actually available after other necessary commitments. Do not quietly count routine overtime as spare capacity. Record uncertain estimates instead of presenting them as measured facts.

Where are people left to guess?

Leadership becomes visible in ordinary decisions. Which client goes first? Who can approve the exception? What happens when two commitments cannot both be met? What does a manager reinforce after the meeting is over?

Ask for the last decision that stalled or created rework. Trace what people were told, what they understood and what they did. You may find a communication problem. You may also find a choice nobody wanted to make.

Questions worth asking

- When priorities conflict, who decides what changes?
- Which decisions can this role make without approval? Where is that boundary written or demonstrated?
- What did the leader say was most important? What did their later actions reward?
- What information must accompany an escalation so a useful decision can be made?
- When someone raises a problem early, do they get help, blame or another task?

Watch for the cost of a helpful rescue

An owner who repeatedly takes work back may keep a customer happy today. The team may also learn that decisions are temporary until the owner has checked them. Ask what the rescue teaches people to do next time.

If you want decisions made closer to the work, make the boundaries explicit. Explain what people can decide, what they should consult on and what must be escalated. Include risk and customer commitments. Do not ask for independence and then reverse every decision because you would have done it differently.

A useful tradeoff question
“If this becomes the priority, what are we moving, reducing or stopping?” Make the answer visible to the people whose commitments change.

A premature fix to avoid

“Be more accountable” will not resolve two conflicting instructions from senior leaders. First decide which result matters, what constraint must be protected and who can make the tradeoff.

Make one decision easier

Choose a recurring decision tied to the problem. This page is an agreement to discuss with the people affected, not a unilateral change to anyone's authority.

The decision that keeps waiting, escalating or being reversed:

Decision boundary	Agreed approach
Who can decide?	
What can they decide without approval?	
When must they consult or escalate?	
What information must accompany the decision?	
Who needs to know the outcome?	

What existing commitment changes when this decision is made?

What will the leader do differently to support the boundary?

Example from Maya and Ben
Maya confirms client dates after checking capacity with Ben. Ben flags missing inputs and recommends a workable date. If a rush request displaces accepted work, Maya resolves the client tradeoff rather than leaving Ben to infer it.

Review exceptions. If nearly every case requires escalation, the boundary may be too narrow, the work may carry more risk than expected, or the role may need more support.

Watch how the work really moves

A process diagram shows how the work is supposed to move. A recent piece of work shows what people actually had to do. Start there.

Follow a request from arrival to completion. Notice where it waits, where information changes hands and where someone has to repair an earlier step. Ask about the spreadsheet, message thread or personal memory that keeps the official process working.

Questions worth asking

- What must be ready before the next person can begin?
- Where does the work wait, and what is it waiting for?
- Which information is copied, checked again or requested twice?
- Where do different versions of the same information live?
- What does this approval or check protect? Is that protection still needed?
- What workaround do people use when the normal route fails?

Separate working time from waiting time

A task may take twenty minutes to perform and three days to pass through approvals. Those are different problems. Collect both when you can. If timing records do not exist, observe a few examples and label estimates clearly.

Look beyond the department that owns the process. A change that saves one team a few minutes may create more work for the next team or the customer. Include the people who receive the output in the review.

Be curious about the workaround
Ask “What does this workaround let you do?” before telling people to stop. It may be compensating for a missing function, unclear rule or inaccessible information. Check privacy, quality and risk as well as convenience.

A premature fix to avoid

Buying software before defining the required flow can make the same confusion faster and more expensive. Write down what must be ready, who accepts it and how exceptions are handled before evaluating a tool.

Follow one piece of work

Map a real example in five steps or fewer to start. Add detail only where it helps explain waiting, rework or a broken handoff. Use a separate sheet for a longer process.

Example / start point / completed result:

Step and owner	Ready to begin when…	Output / next person	Wait or rework
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Which handoff created the most trouble in this example?

What must the sender provide, and how will the receiver accept it?

What should happen when that information is incomplete?

Try a plain-language handoff agreement
“Before I send this to you, it will include ____. You will know it is ready when ____. If something is missing, we will ____.” Confirm it with both sides.

Can you see progress early enough?

A plan can be clear and still fail in use. Work changes. A dependency arrives late. A manager quietly returns to the old approach. The question is how you will notice and what you will do next.

Look for an owner who can explain the intended result, the next decision and the evidence of progress. A person who updates the project tracker may not have authority over the result. Make that distinction explicit.

Questions worth asking

- Who owns the result, and what decisions can they actually make?
- What will people do differently in the work?
- What could we inspect before the final deadline?
- How will someone raise a risk, and who will respond?
- What will tell us whether the new approach is being used?
- When will we review the result and decide whether to continue, adjust or stop?

Choose a checkpoint that shows the work

“I’m working on it” may be true without telling you much. A draft, a sample of completed cases, an observed handoff or a record of decisions gives you something to inspect. Pick evidence that fits the work and can change the next decision.

A checkpoint should leave time to act. A Thursday status meeting is a poor safeguard for a Friday delivery if the work needs two days of correction. Equally, a daily meeting may add drag to a task that needs uninterrupted work and a single midweek review.

Completion is only part of the picture
A checklist can be published without being used. It can be used without changing decisions. Better decisions can still take time to affect the business result. Follow the chain far enough to learn what is happening.

A premature fix to avoid

Adding more reporting can make progress look visible while leaving decisions stuck. Before adding a measure or meeting, name the decision it will support and who will act on it.

Choose evidence you will use

Start with the result from page 3. Choose a small number of measures that help you decide what to do. Include a quality or risk check so a faster result does not hide a new problem.

Evidence	Question	Your measure or example
Activity	Did we prepare and introduce the change?	
Adoption	Are people using it in the intended situations?	
Outcome	Is the result improving?	
Value	Is that improvement helping the business or customer?	

Starting point: what evidence do we have now, and from when?

Early checkpoint: what will we inspect, who will inspect it, and when?

Quality / risk check: what must not get worse?

When should the outcome reasonably become visible?

Maya and Ben's example
Activity: agree the intake check. Adoption: check eligible requests before dates are promised. Outcome: dependable delivery with less unplanned rescue. Value: more sustainable capacity and fewer disruptions to other client work. Each needs evidence; one does not automatically prove the next.

A practical Role Results Map

A job title tells you where someone sits. A task list tells you what they do. A Role Results Map helps explain what their work needs to make true and what support makes that possible.

Use a short map for the role closest to your chosen result. Build it with the person in the role and the people who depend on its output. It supplements existing role documentation; it does not quietly replace agreed responsibilities or authority.

Ben's project-lead role	Illustrative map
Result supported	Reports meet agreed client requirements and dates without routine last-minute rescue.
Contribution	Make delivery readiness and risk visible; coordinate the work through review and completion.
Decisions and boundaries	Recommend delivery dates and work sequence within agreed commitments. Escalate client priority or scope tradeoffs to Maya.
Dependencies	Ben needs confirmed commitments, client inputs and timely reviews. Clients depend on his usable reports; Maya depends on early risk information and options.
Drag to reduce	Late discovery of missing inputs, repeated status chasing and avoidable evening rework.
Evidence	Capacity checked before commitment; risks raised with options; exceptions logged; delivered quality and rescue work reviewed.
Support needed	Visibility into commitments, clear intake requirements, access to reviewers and Maya's timely decisions.

Keep it usable

If the map becomes a long inventory of everything the person might ever do, narrow it. Start with the result you are trying to improve. Add detail where a decision or dependency is unclear, not because there is room on the page.

Make the role’s contribution clear

Role / person or team completing this map / date:

Business result this role supports:

What must this role make true for others to succeed?

Decisions it can make; decisions it must consult or escalate:

Who depends on this role, and what does it need from others?

What drag should this role help reduce?

What evidence will show its contribution?

What support, information, time or development is needed?

Review the map with the person doing the work. A clearer expectation without the authority or support to meet it can become a clearer burden.

Pick a change worth testing

You may now have several plausible explanations. Resist the urge to turn each one into a project. Choose a change that addresses a meaningful condition, has enough evidence behind it and is small enough to learn from.

If the evidence is thin, your first move may be a short observation or a review of recent examples. That is useful progress. It is cheaper than confidently fixing the wrong thing.

Candidate change	Why it may help	Evidence / uncertainty	Effort, authority or risk
Option A			
Option B			
Option C			

Discuss these questions before choosing

- Does it address a condition we actually observed?
- What result should it affect, and how?
- Who must agree or change their work for the test to be fair?
- Can we try it in a contained area and reverse or adjust it?
- What might get worse for another person, customer or team?

Our first change, or evidence-gathering action:

Why this is the best starting point now:

Do not create false precision
You can compare options without inventing a diagnostic score. If reasonable people disagree, name the assumption behind the disagreement and decide how to check it.

Try it on a manageable piece of work

Two weeks can be a useful first review window when the work happens often. Choose a longer window when outcomes need time. Use the review to learn, not to manufacture a success story.

The result we want to improve:

The change we will test and why we expect it to help:

Scope: which work is included, and what is outside this test?

Owner / people involved / approvals or support needed:

How people will learn the new approach and raise problems:

Start date / early checkpoint / outcome review date:

Starting evidence and the evidence we will collect:

Quality or risk boundary; when we would pause or stop:

Say it in one sentence
"For ____, we will try ____ because ____. ____ owns the test. On ____, we will review ____ and decide what to do next."

What happened after the change?

Bring the actual work, including exceptions. Begin with what happened rather than whether people liked the idea. Record conditions that could affect the result, such as demand, complexity, staffing or a different customer mix.

Review question	Evidence and interpretation
Was the change used where intended?	
What changed in the result?	
What happened to quality, risk or workload elsewhere?	
Which examples challenge our explanation?	
What remains uncertain?	

Choose the next decision

- Continue when the test is useful but needs more time or examples.
- Adjust when the underlying idea is useful but the way it works needs changing.
- Expand when evidence supports it and the next area has the conditions to use it.
- Stop when the cost, risk or lack of benefit makes continuing unwise.

Our decision and the evidence behind it:

Next action / owner / review date:

A useful result can be “we were wrong”
If people used the change and the outcome did not improve, revisit the explanation. If the change was not used, investigate what prevented it. Those are different next steps.

Run a focused working conversation

Invite the people who understand the work and can make the relevant decisions. A suggested first session is 45 minutes. Adjust it to the problem; the purpose is a shared starting point, not completing a workshop agenda.

Time	Work to do	Leave with
5 minutes	Describe one recent example and the result needed.	A specific problem, not a debate about personalities.
10 minutes	Walk through what happened. Ask the person doing the work to show it.	A sequence and a few pieces of evidence.
15 minutes	Look through all four drivers. Separate observations from assumptions.	The most plausible conditions and unanswered questions.
10 minutes	Choose one change or evidence-gathering step.	An owner, scope and support needed.
5 minutes	Agree the checkpoint and outcome review.	A date, evidence and decision to make.

A few prompts that keep the conversation useful

“Can you show us the last time that happened?”

“What did you know at that point?”

“What else were you expected to do?”

“Who had the information or authority to change the outcome?”

“What would we need to see to change our minds?”

When the conversation gets personal
Return to the observable work and the conditions around it. Do not use the group to investigate a confidential individual performance matter. Handle that separately through the appropriate process.

Keep the next step visible

Use this after the investigation to keep a short record. Attach the examples or worksheets that matter. Revisit it at the agreed review rather than filing it away.

Problem and intended business result:

Driver	Most relevant finding or question
People	
Leaders	
Systems	
Execution	

First change or evidence-gathering action:

Owner / decision boundary / support required:

Starting evidence / success evidence / quality or risk check:

Checkpoint and review date:

Review decision and what happens next:

A better question for the next problem

The next time the same problem comes back, you do not have to start with a new initiative. Start with the work.

What result did we need? What happened? What made that outcome more likely? What could we change, and how would we know whether it helped?

The Four Drivers give you a way to keep looking when the first explanation sounds familiar. People need enough clarity, capability and capacity to contribute. Leaders need to make the choices that direct the work. Systems need to help the work move. Execution needs to connect action to evidence and adjustment.

You will not always have a complete answer at the first review. You can still leave with a useful next step and a reason for taking it.

Still not sure where to start? Answer 12 simple questions and let the Alignment Check help you choose a starting point.

Take the Alignment Check

Want a second set of eyes?

Bring one recurring business problem to a free 15-minute review with Bryan Howard. Talk through a recent example and explore a practical next step. You do not need a finished diagnosis to have a useful conversation.

Book a free 15-minute review

calendly.com/bryan-howard-mpg/free-15-minute-review

About Bryan and Peoplyst

Bryan Howard is the founder and CEO of Peoplyst. His experience leading both people and operations work shapes a practical approach to business performance: understand the work, identify what is getting in the way and help people make changes that hold up in use.

Peoplyst helps business leaders examine problems across People, Leaders, Systems and Execution. Learn more at peoplyst.com or contact bryan.howard@peoplyst.com.

The book comes next

Bryan’s forthcoming book, planned for early 2027, explores the Four Drivers and the work behind better business results in greater depth. This guide gives you one complete place to begin: a problem that matters, a change to test and evidence for your next decision.

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The company, Maya, Ben and every conversation with Bryan are purely fictional and illustrative, not confidential client material. Worksheets are practical discussion tools, not a validated assessment.