



Clarity & Organizational Momentum

If you're leading a team that's busy but not moving, this is for you. If you keep generating and producing "work" but the organization still feels stuck in place, you're not dealing with a productivity problem. You're dealing with a clarity problem.

I've worked with enough mid-career leaders to trust this pattern: organizations rarely stall because they lack talent. They stall because the system is noisy. People can't tell what matters most, who owns what, or what "good" looks like. So, they hedge. They add meetings. They request more alignment. They "circle back." Activity becomes a substitute for commitment. Momentum doesn't die in one dramatic moment. It dies in a hundred small decisions that never get made.

Management research has used the term organizational momentum to describe sustained movement in a performance trajectory over time and how that movement shapes behavior, risk taking, and choices inside firms (Grewal, Chandrashekar, Johnson, & Mallapragada, 2013). Another stream of organizational theory argues that momentum can become a kind of inertia, where routines keep going even after the environment changes (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). You don't need the academic vocabulary to recognize it, though.

You can feel momentum in a team the way you can feel weather.

The scene: competent, full calendars, and strangely stuck

It's late morning. You're in a meeting with smart people. Everyone has a document open. Someone is "driving." Someone is "capturing notes." The group is polite in that slightly tense way that signals one thing: nobody wants to own the consequence.

A decision comes up that should take five minutes.

Instead, it gathers attachments.

“We should consider the edge cases.”

“Let’s get input from legal.”

“Can we confirm with finance?”

“We should socialize this with the broader group.”

The meeting ends with a new meeting.

On the way out, someone says the line I hear all the time:

“We’re aligned. We just need to execute.”

That’s like saying, “The car is perfect. It just won’t move.”

When you hear that sentence, your job is not to motivate. Your job is to diagnose what’s unclear.

Because alignment is not a feeling. Alignment is a set of standards the system can enforce.

Momentum is not speed. It’s reduced friction.

A lot of leaders chase momentum by trying to increase energy.

More urgency. More pressure. More dashboards. More accountability language.

Sometimes that works for a week. Then the same pattern returns, because the system didn’t change. You just yelled at it.

Here’s what I’ve seen repeatedly: real momentum comes from fewer decisions, cleaner decisions, and decisions that stick. Not because people are lazy, but because people are human.

When a system is unclear, humans compensate by protecting themselves:

- They delay decisions so they don’t get blamed.
- They create committees so accountability diffuses.
- They add process so uncertainty feels managed.

That isn’t incompetence. It’s adaptation to ambiguity. Role ambiguity has been studied for decades, and meta-analytic evidence consistently links role ambiguity to worse outcomes such as lower performance and higher strain (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Translation: if people

don't know what they own, they burn energy protecting themselves instead of moving the work. So, if you want momentum, start where friction lives: role clarity and decision clarity.

The hidden cost of the “unclear”: decision tax

Most teams aren't crushed by workload. They're crushed by decision tax.

Decision tax shows up when basic questions don't have stable answers:

- What are we optimizing for?
- Who owns the decision?
- What does “done” mean?
- What's the standard for quality?
- What happens if we miss?

When those are unclear, every project becomes a negotiation. Negotiation feels collaborative. It's also expensive.

Here's the mechanism:

Unclear standards lead to repeated negotiation. Repeated negotiation leads to delays. Delays lead to rework. Rework leads to fatigue. Fatigue is where momentum goes to die. This is why clarity is not soft. It's operational.

Goals help. Standards move the organization.

Leaders often try to solve momentum by setting bigger goals. That impulse isn't wrong. Goal setting has strong research behind it: specific, challenging goals tend to improve performance when people accept them and have the resources to pursue them (Locke & Latham, 2002).

But here's the second half leadership truth: in complex organizations, goals alone don't create momentum. Goals can even increase noise if standards are missing.

If the goal is “grow revenue,” what standard governs trade-offs? If the goal is “improve customer experience,” who decides what matters most? If the goal is “ship faster,” what's the quality threshold?

Without standards, goals become slogans. Slogans create activity. Standards create movement. This is why I keep coming back to the same line: standards over goals.

Not because goals are bad. Because standards are the missing step between intent and execution.

Psychological safety is not a buzzword. It's throughput.

Now let's talk about the part people either overhype or dismiss psychological safety.

I'm not interested in it as workplace therapy. I'm interested in it because teams that don't feel safe to speak up hide problems until they become expensive.

Psychological safety, as studied in organizations, is the shared belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. When its present, people are more willing to surface errors, questions, and dissent early (Edmondson, 1999). When its absent, truth goes underground. Plain language: if people don't speak early, the organization pays late.

You'll see low safety in the room:

- People nod, then disagree in private.
- Problems surface only after deadlines slip.
- Meetings feel calm, but execution is brittle.

The story inside those environments is: "Don't be the person who creates friction."

The problem is friction doesn't disappear. It moves downstream, where it costs more.

Story: the leader who became the momentum plug

Another CEO once told me, "We're a high-performing team. We just can't seem to keep momentum." That sentence always makes me curious, because "high performing" often means "heroic." In their case, their CEO was the hero.

Every decision flowed through him. He was smart, fast, and committed. He also didn't realize he had become the organizational bottleneck. His team had learned a rational behavior: wait. They weren't lazy. They adapted to his control. When the system trains people that speed requires permission, people stop moving without permission.

So we didn't start with motivation.

We started with clarity:

- What decisions must belong to him?
- What decisions must not be made?
- What's the standard for a good decision without him?

Then we built a decision system:

- A clear decision owner per category

- A time limit per decision type
- A quality standard
- A clean escalation path

The most interesting result wasn't only operational. It was emotional.

The CEO got quieter. Not because he cared less. Because he finally carried less. His calm became real instead of performative. The team sped up, yes. More importantly, the team stabilized. They stopped starting and stopping. That's momentum.

Momentum is a byproduct of decision hygiene

Here's a term I use with leaders who want adult language: decision hygiene.

Decision hygiene means reducing variability in how decisions are made. It means decisions don't depend on who's tired, who's loud, or who's anxious. They follow a process the system can trust.

This aligns with a broader concept in judgment and decision-making research: unwanted variability, or "noise," can distort decisions even when people have good intentions and strong expertise (Kahneman, Sibony, & Sunstein, 2021). When noise is high, the same issue gets different answers depending on the room. That destroys momentum because people stop trusting the system.

So what does decision hygiene look like in a real organization?

1) Name the standard before you debate the options

If the standard is unclear, debate is entertainment.

Examples:

- "We're optimizing for speed with acceptable quality."
- "We're optimizing for quality with acceptable speed."
- "We're optimizing for customer trust even if it costs margin."

A standard is a constraint. Constraints create movement.

2) Reduce role ambiguity aggressively

If you want a team to move, remove the "maybe it's mine" problem.

The research is consistent: role ambiguity is associated with worse performance and more strain (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Your job isn't to make everyone comfortable. Your job is to make ownership clear enough that work can move without emotional negotiation.

3) Protect speak-up behavior

Psychological safety changes what gets surfaced early (Edmondson, 1999).

Practical move: reward the person who names the issue at 10 percent instead of punishing them when it hits 80 percent.

4) Keep goals, but anchor them to standards

Goal-setting theory supports the power of clear, challenging goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). Your job is to give goals an operating definition:

- What does success look like?
- What does good enough look like?
- What is out of scope?

Most teams leak momentum because they chase goals without shared definitions.

The Brett version of the takeaway

Momentum is not a personality trait of the organization. Momentum is a system outcome. If you want organizational momentum, stop trying to pump people up. Start cleaning the system:

- clarify ownership
- clarify standards
- reduce noise in decisions
- build speak-up capacity

Clarity creates traction. Traction becomes momentum. Because clarity reduces negotiation, negotiation reduces delays, delays reduce rework, and rework stops draining your best people. That is leadership in the second half of life. This is what it means to use your Age to your Advantage. Less intensity. More precision.

A "start Monday" checklist

Pick one recurring decision that keeps stalling.

1. Assign one decision owner.

2. Write the standard in one sentence.
3. Define what “done” means.
4. Set a time limit for the decision.
5. Ask one question in the room: “What are we pretending is unclear?”

That question is uncomfortable, but it’s honest. Honest clears the system faster than politeness.

How Brett works

Brett’s work is standards-based and practical. He helps leaders remove noise, clarify ownership, and install decision rules that hold up under pressure. The goal isn’t more activity. The goal is cleaner traction that becomes sustainable momentum.

If you want to build momentum without burning your best people out, the right container is **Coaching**.

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