You Must Design the Struggle

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Most leaders believe their job is to remove obstacles. When they see conflict, they smooth it over. When they sense discomfort on the team, they treat it as evidence of poor management. They have been trained by HR departments, by engagement surveys, by a consulting industry built on friction reduction to believe that struggle is a problem to be solved.

It isn't. Struggle is a resource you can leverage. And if you don't design it, it will design you.

Why the Lie Economy Needs Comfort

The Lie Economy, the default operating system of most organizations, runs on comfort. When the work isn't important enough to matter, when the stakes aren't high enough to demand honesty, The Will takes over. The Will is the part of us that does whatever it takes to survive, including telling the truth selectively, taking the path of least resistance, and protecting ourselves from difficulty.

Comfort is The Will's best friend. In a comfortable organization, lying is cheap. No one's going to call you out. No one's going to be affected. The work isn't important enough to care about deeply, so a little dishonesty just slides by.

This is the trap. And most leaders are actively building it every time they run interference for their people.

The Formula That Changes Everything

My research and experience point to a simple but profound equation: Important + Difficult = Satisfaction & Pride

This is the Courage Economy quadrant. This is where trust forms, where lies become too expensive, where courage becomes the rational choice.

The other three quadrants don't get you there: Important + Easy creates complacency. Unimportant + Difficult creates burnout. Unimportant + Easy is the Comfort Economy.

The moment work is both important and difficult, something shifts. Lies become too costly. The truth starts to surface. People show up differently.

The question isn't whether your people can handle difficult work. It's whether you're designing the conditions for it.

What Designed Struggle Actually Looks Like

When a Level 1 trauma patient arrives at a major hospital emergency department, a precisely designed system activates. Every person in the room has a pre-assigned role. The most senior surgeon doesn't automatically run the procedure — the person with the most relevant competence does. A third-year resident can direct a department chief if the situation calls for it.

There is no politics in that room. No credit games. No performance theater. The patient is either stabilized or they're not, and everyone can see it as it happens.

Someone designed that. A trauma activation is not a crisis being managed. It is a crisis being executed.

Real stakes. Work without consequence is definitionally not important work.

Named tension. A Courage Economy names the tension rather than managing it.

Friction by design. Designed productive struggle creates barriers to the lie.

Scheduled struggle. Organizations that operate with sustained courage don’t wait for a crisis. They schedule the difficult things.

A Word About Comfort

The leaders who prioritize comfort genuinely believe they are being kind. But when they soften the edges or run interference, what they are actually doing is depriving their people of the experiences that build competence.

The comfort is the lie. And like every lie, it accumulates Management Debt that will have to be paid later.

Properly designed struggle is its own form of care. If you want teamwork, give the team work.

You must design the struggle, or the struggle will design you.