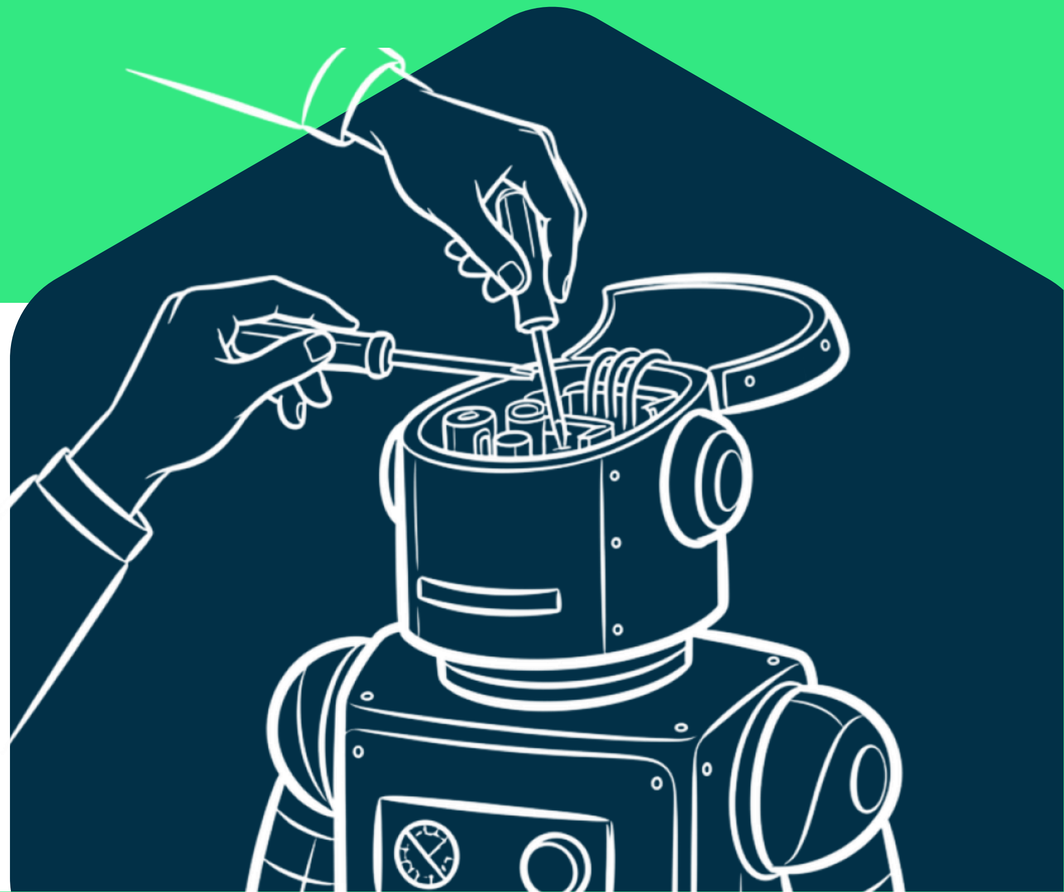
Building Better Products & Even Better Humans

A KEYNOTE BY

Kris Nicolaou

BRAIN BOX™ SAAS NORTH



Quick Disclaimer

THIS IS NOT A MOTIVATIONAL SPEECH.

OR a 20-minute lecture.

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WHY THIS MATTERS

- Product is hard–even for experienced teams.
- Even with great product system… **then humans show up.**
- **Why systems?** Systems are self sustaining, while processes break down.
- Today (will be quick): Provide you with just the tools, so come talk to me if you have questions.
- Again, not theoretical. Everything is tried and tested.
- And my hope is that you to take these new tools away and implement them, Monday.

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WHY ME?

“Who are you, and why should I listen?”

- Building product and product teams for 20+ years.
- Run a web agency called Brain Box that builds products for leading companies in Canada.
- 3 internal products with planned exits + 2 more on the way.
- We are known for solving the toughest problems when it matters most.

Don’t just talk–walk the walk.

- To better understand product, we ran a national survey of 500+ product decision makers.
- To be better for my team, I am a Co-Active coach, but I am on the path to becoming certified.

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STRUCTURE FOR TODAY

THE TWO PARTS OF GREAT PRODUCT

GREAT PRODUCT
=
STRONG SYSTEMS
+
GREAT PEOPLE

- Yes, sales and marketing matter, but they depend on product
- Real products solve real problems
- Systems and people are deeply connected
- Let's start with **Product Systems**

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PRODUCT SYSTEMS

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PRODUCT SYSTEMS

THE SYSTEM BEHIND THE PRODUCT

- **Sprint Structure:** The conveyer belt
- How to figure out **what to build**
- **Set the team up for success** with great scope writing
- **Check-in** with your team
- **Video walk-through** to validate it's "Done"
- Launch + fix (hotfixes) + learn (retros)

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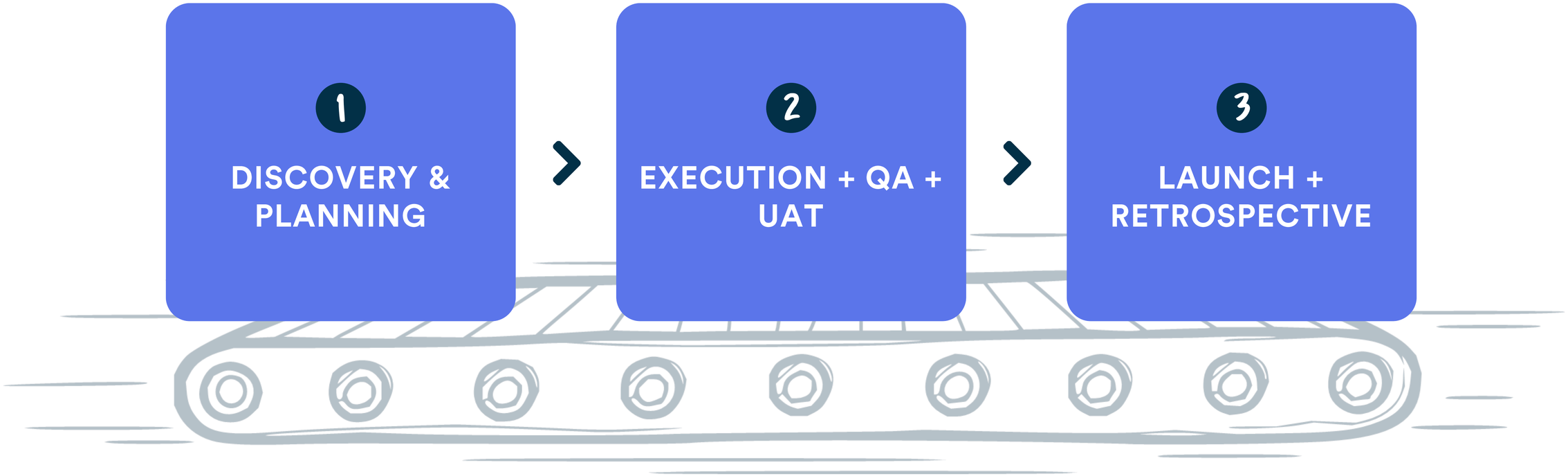
PRODUCT SYSTEMS

Sprint Structure: The Conveyor Belt



RINSE & REPEAT

PRODUCT SYSTEMS

Sprint Structure: The Conveyor Belt

PRODUCT SYSTEMS

56.3%

of burnout is caused by unrealistic timelines and unclear priorities, **i.e. poor planning.**

PRODUCT SYSTEMS

DISCOVERY & PLANNING

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Where good product actually starts...

- Build the right “stuff”
- Trust your gut, but validate it
- Minimum Viable... Everything.
- Principles of good scope writing
- Get good at estimating
- Sprint Anchor

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PRODUCT SYSTEMS

Discovery & Planning

Only

29.1%

Of teams use any kind of scoring or prioritization model–
they are still relying on their gut or the loudest voice.

PRODUCT SYSTEMS

Discovery & Planning

BUILD THE RIGHT THINGS

MaSoN Rating System

- A simple way to prioritize what to build first
- That doesn't solely rely on your gut or the loudest voice
- Why the term MaSoN? Similar to a brick mason, it lays the foundation to build on top of
- Inspired by MoSCoW, but again, made easier

M **MUST-HAVES**
Build the smallest thing first– must address the pain point.

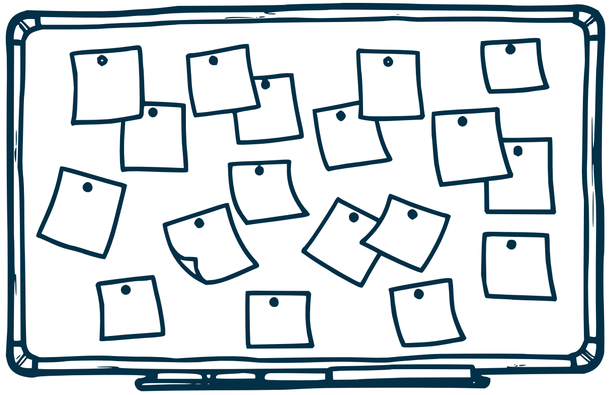
S **SHOULD-HAVES**
Not needed for Day 1. Wait for signals to validate building.

N **NICE-TO-HAVES**
Earn their way in, i.e. never pre-build for “someday.”

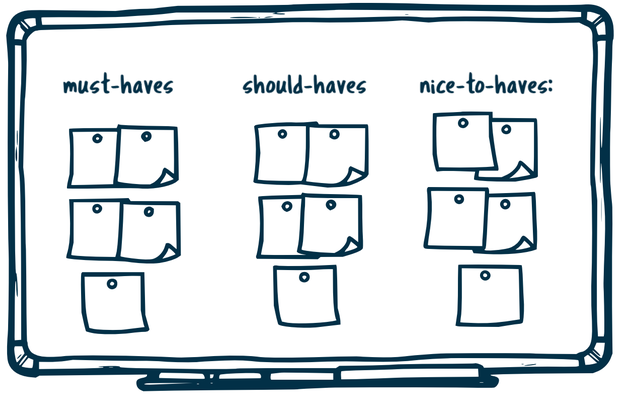
Discovery & Planning

MaSoN in Practice:

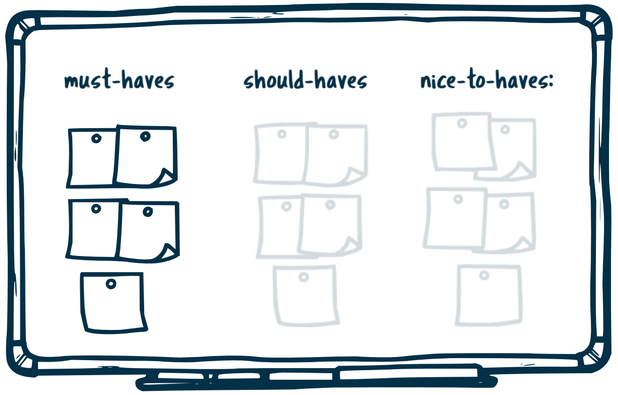
1. Core Features



2. Organize into MaSoN



3. Only focus on Must-haves



Discovery & Planning

How to prioritize (using MaSoN)

Ask yourself (or stakeholder) three questions:

1. Is this a must-have?
2. Is this feature needed on day one?
3. Will the product or initiative not function without it?

If the answer is "**yes**" to all three, then it's a **must-have.**

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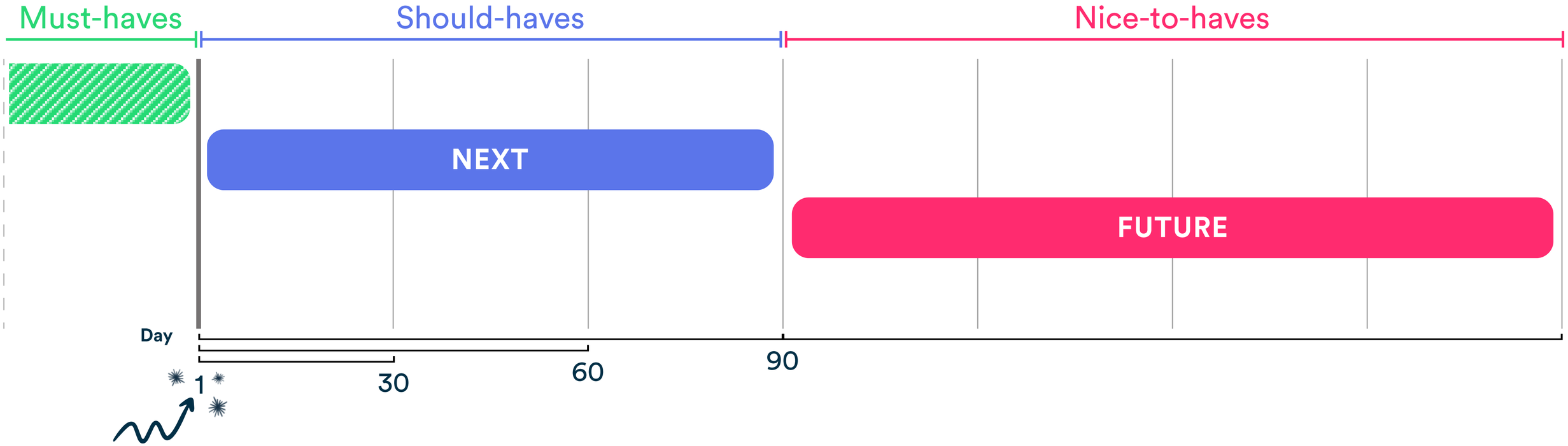
Discovery & Planning

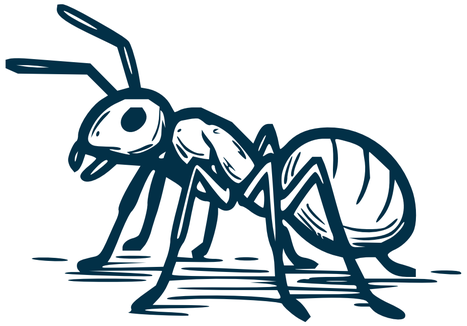
MaSoN Timeline



Discovery & Planning

Minimum Viable... Everything

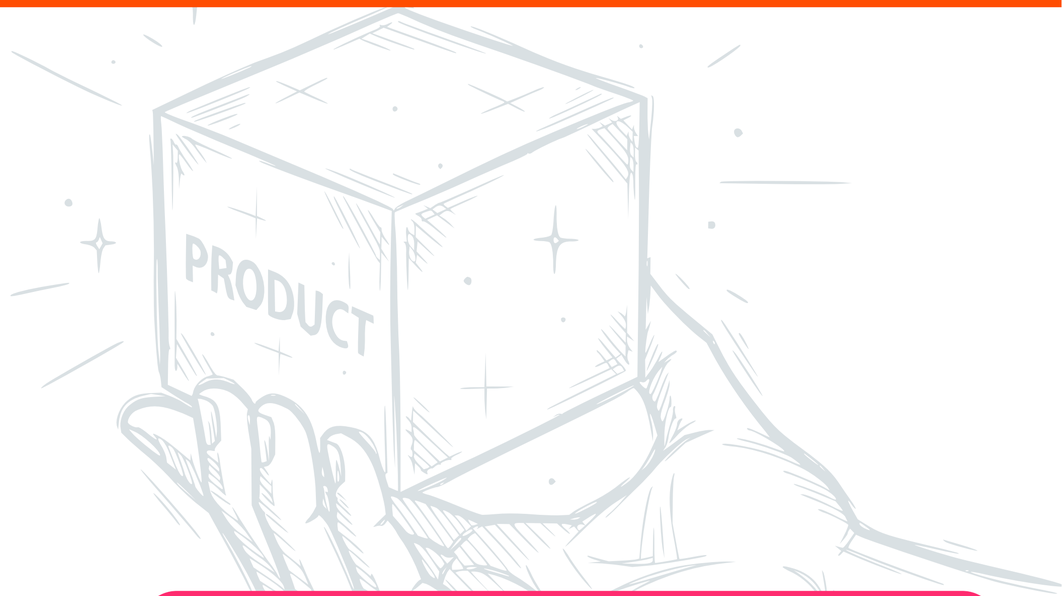
Build the **smallest thing** to validate it
solves the customer's pain point



PRODUCT SYSTEMS

Discovery & Planning

Minimum Viable... Everything



How you should think about...

Product: You should be embarrassed to show people.

Initiatives: Distill it down to only the must-haves–think skeletal.

Features: What solves the problem with the least amount of effort

Pro Tip
There should only be the functionality to solve the problem and nothing else. Design? None. Use a component library. And no, don't use a theme. You'll spend too much "designing" it rather than focusing on delivering value.

STORY TIME

Minimum Viable Feature

Discovery & Planning

Minimum Viable Feature

What solves the problem with the least amount of effort

A good friend of mine owns an SEO platform that sells links well knows sites, e.g. New York Times, to boost your ranking in Google.

When in his office one day, he pulled me into a conversation with his designer. There was a customer pain point they were trying to solve:

Customers cannot easily share link opportunities with other people.

? So what did **they build?**

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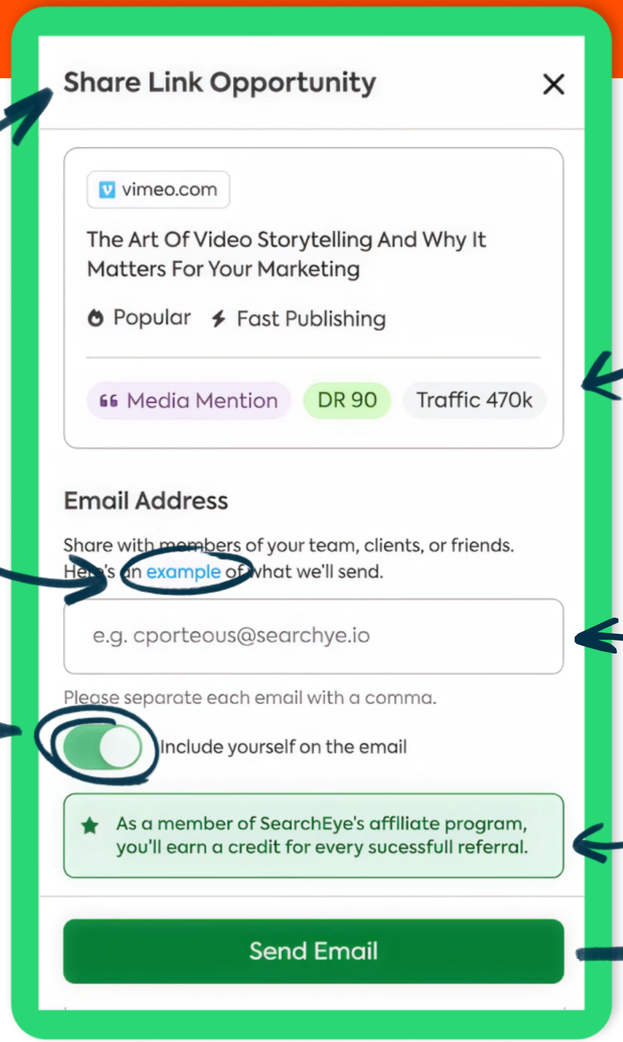
PRODUCT SYSTEMS

Discovery & Planning



Modal

Duplicate from listing

Email preview

Email Field

CC Yourself

Referral program

Sends beautiful email

PRODUCT SYSTEMS

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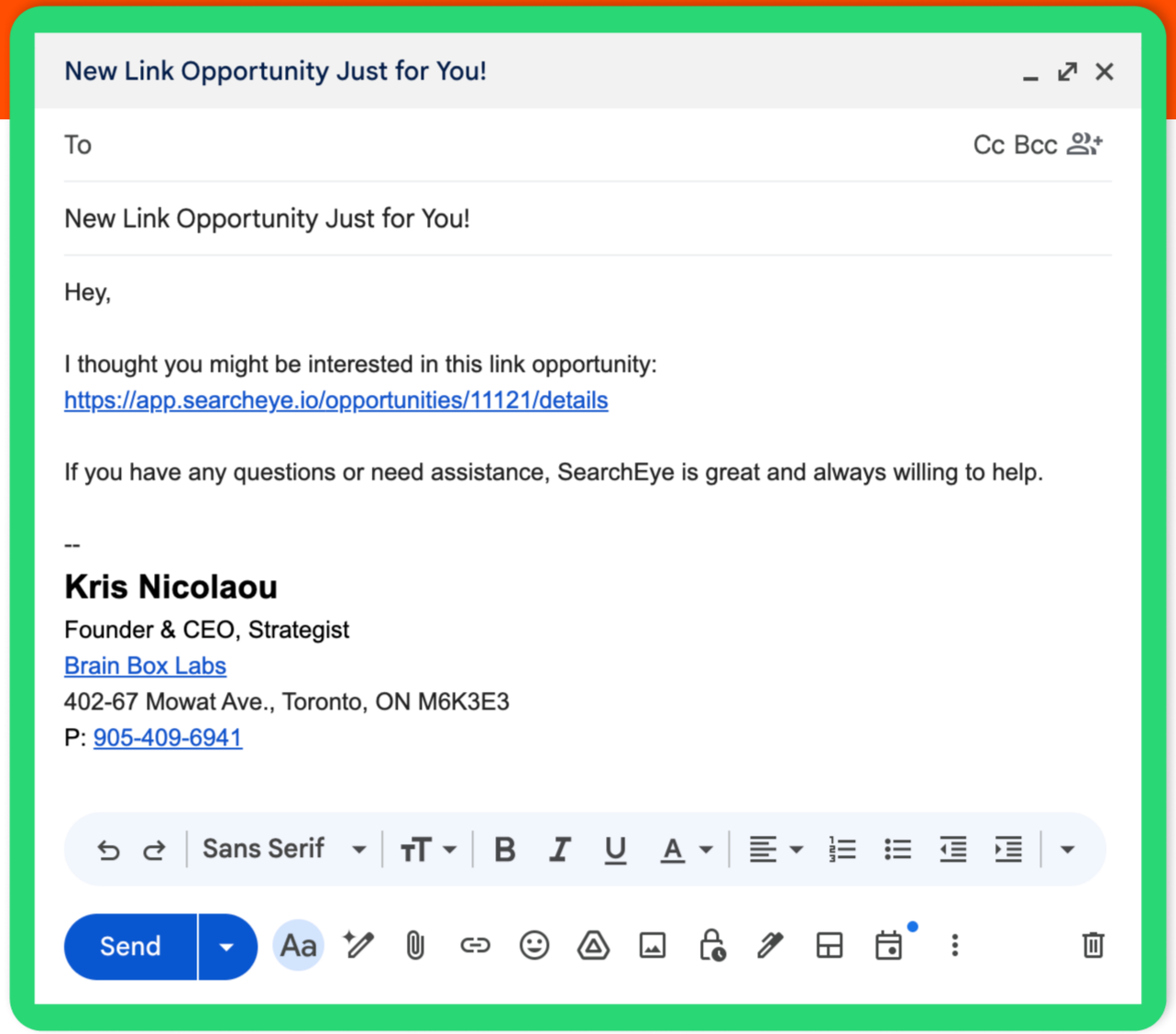
Discovery & Planning

The Smallest Thing



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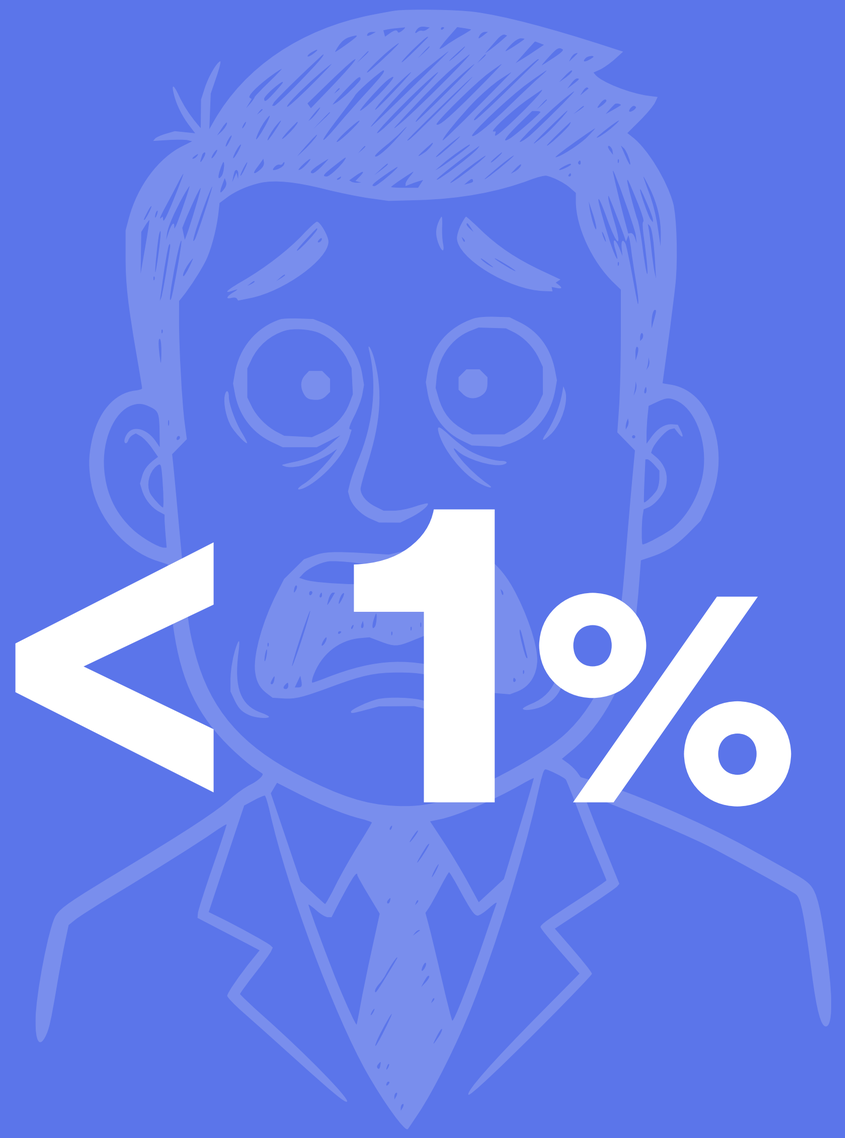

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Discovery & Planning

Principles of Good Scope Writing

Top 5:

1. The feature is accurately written without requiring the production team, i.e. designers and developers.
2. Non-technical people can easily understand good scope.
3. Each line of scope is written as a single actionable and testable outcome.
4. Good features are DRY (Don't Repeat Yourself) and not WET (Write Everything Twice).
5. Well-crafted features can be drawn out (pencil and paper) by two separate people and deliver the same outcome.

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PRODUCT SYSTEMS

EXECUTE, TEST, AND PREPARE

- Commit to scope + timeline
- Mid-sprint check-in → course-correct early
- Enforce the Definition of Done
- Walkthrough video (evidence)
- Sprint cutoff = controlled chaos
- QA confirms scope before testing

Execute, Test, Prepare

Mid-Sprint Check-In
Course-Correct Early

What: 15-minute check-in meeting

When: Midpoint of a 2-week sprint, i.e. end of Week 1 or beginning of Week 2

Who (is involved): The production team working on that sprint

How (to run it): Ask one question: Are there any features in jeopardy of not being completed?

Why a meeting (and not just just a Slack/Teams message)?

- Collect all the “nos” in that meeting–hear it first hand.
- Call out red flags:“Jim, you’ve got 6 features, but only 1 is in QA. Are the rest at risk?”
- Overall, the purpose is to know before the eleventh hour so that you can adjust

Execute, Test, Prepare

Enforce the Definition of Done

Describes what criteria must be completed before a feature is considered done.

What does "done" even mean...?

At a high level, these are the six steps that make up our DoD:

1. Feature complete as per the scope and double-checked.
2. Tests in place and passing.
3. Browser/device tested.
4. Code reviewed.
5. Deployed to staging.
6. Any functional/visual issues have been resolved or addressed.

Execute, Test, Prepare

Walkthrough video (evidence)

- Record a walk-through video demonstrating your completed feature
- What better way to ensure the developer tests their feature
- Side-by-side with the scope running through each line item
- Passed to QA for initial feature review

Pro Tip

Always record in staging, never local (or localhost).
Local can't be trusted, staging mirrors production.

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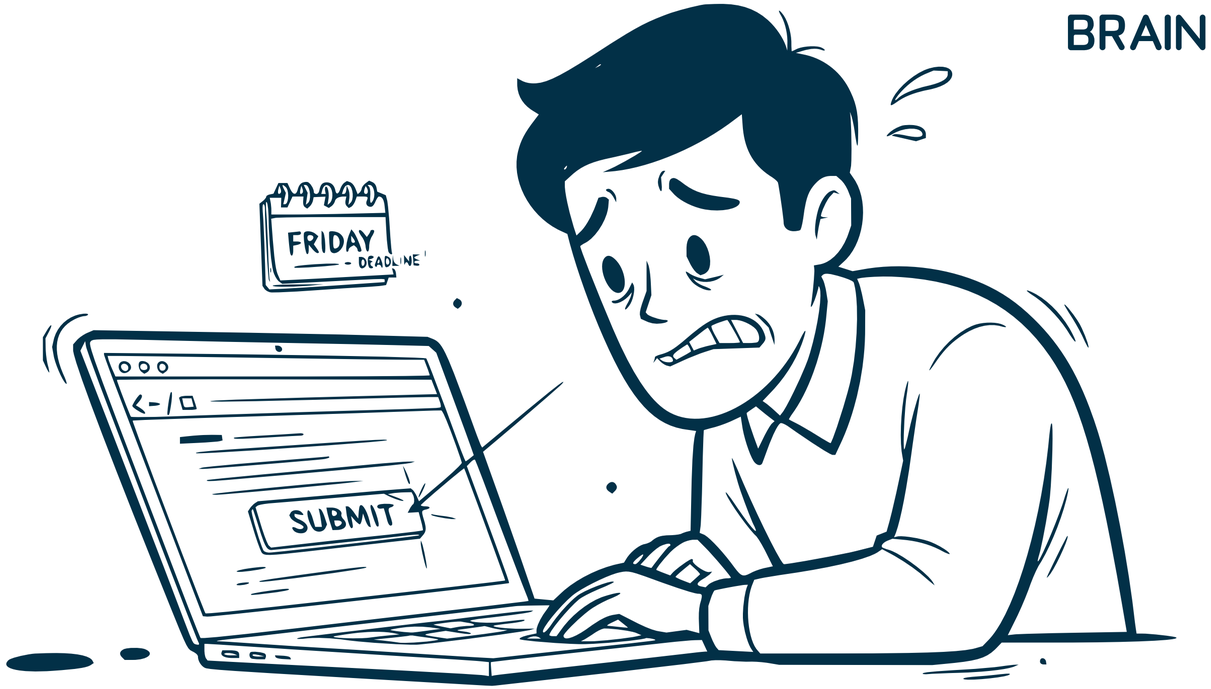
PRODUCT SYSTEMS

LAUNCH & RETROSPECTIVES

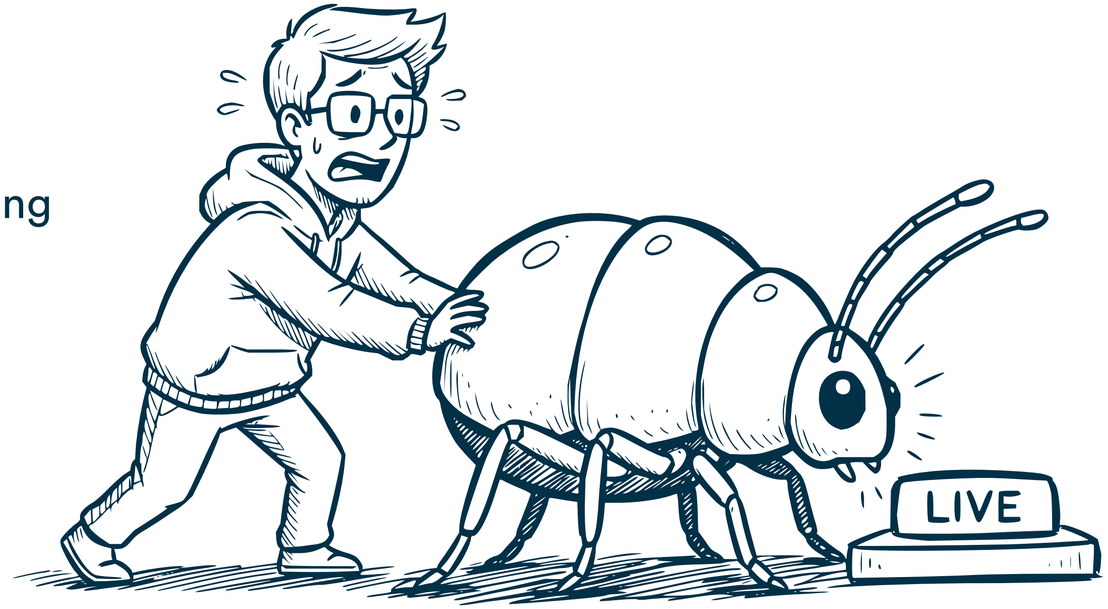


- **Launch on Monday (and never Friday)**
- Hotfixes = patch, not full fix
- First thing Tuesday **is retros**

Launch & Retrospectives

Launch on Monday–never Friday

- Everything is done as per our DoD, QA'd, and signed off by the “client” during UAT.
- Let’s launch...! On Monday.
- Only launch Monday to Thursday (unless your team loves working on the weekends)



Launch & Retrospectives

Hotfixes = patch, not full fix

- When? The user is blocked without a workaround
- Fix the issue; think, bubble gum and pipe cleaner
- **No welding on the lake**

You're in a boat. It springs a leak. Do you start welding in the lake? No. You patch it, get to shore, then repair it properly.

PRODUCT SYSTEMS

45.8%

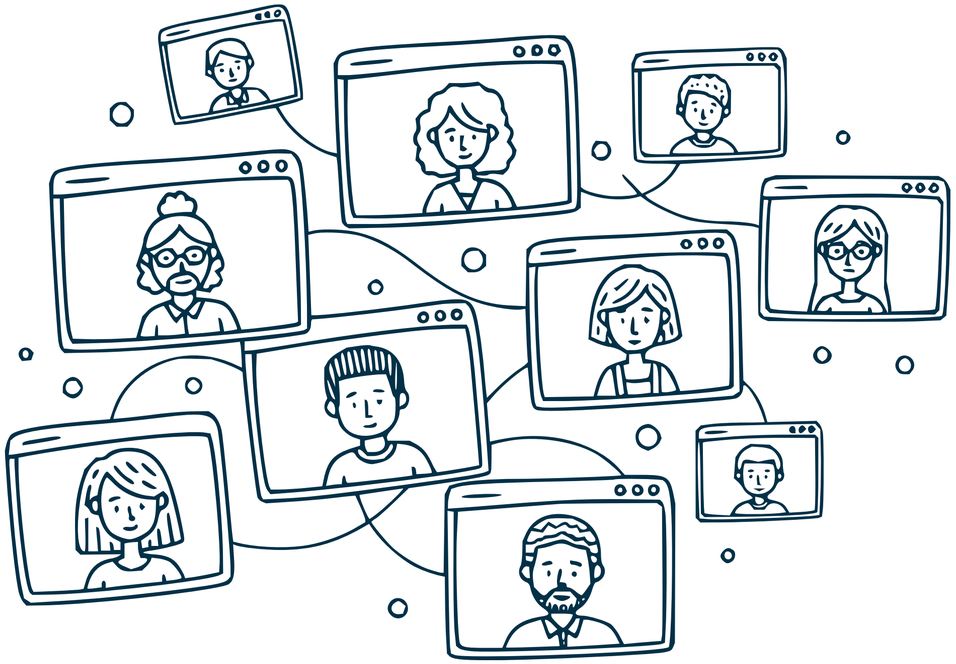
of teams are **skipping retros and sprint reviews**

Launch & Retrospectives

First thing Tuesday is retros

Why it matters:

- Keeps all the learnings top of mind
- Builds a culture of reflection, not blame
- Do, reflect, learn, improve.



How to run it:

- Use Happy, Sad, and Confused buckets
- 5 minutes to add thoughts to buckets
- Share your thoughts (1-minute per thought)
- End with the Happy bucket
- Turn feedback into owned actions

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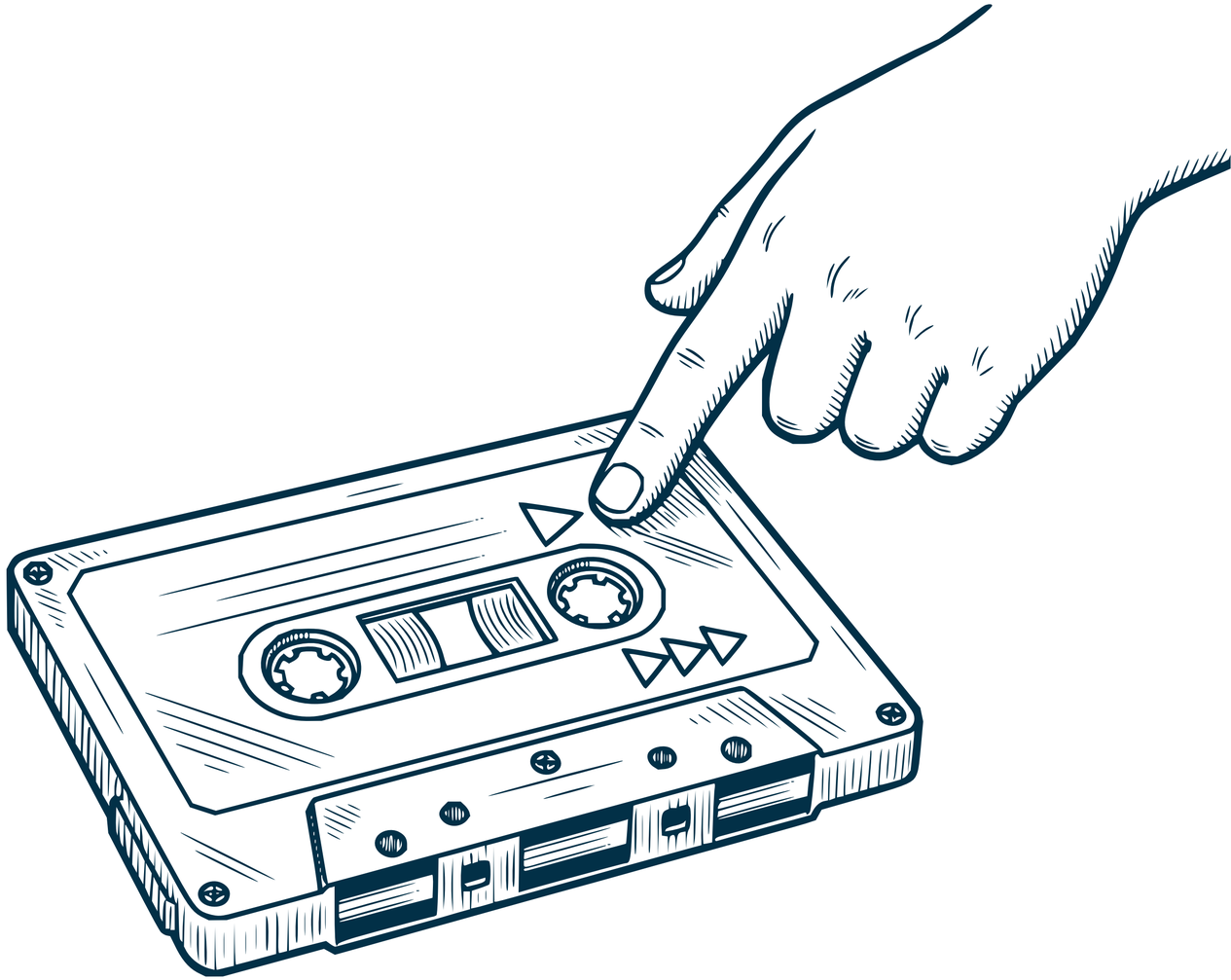
Quick Recap

- Simple conveyer belt sprint structure
- We know what we're building
- Ensure the success of your team with great scope
- We've checked in
- Work is "Done" with video evidence
- Launch, fixed and learned



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PEOPLE

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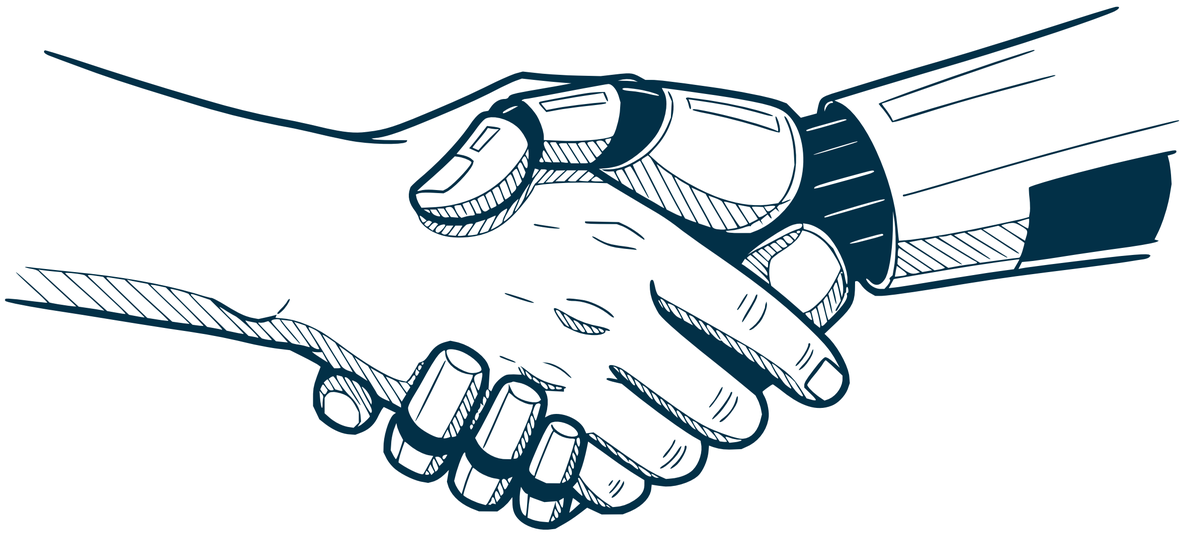
PEOPLE

GREAT SYSTEMS STILL NEED GREAT PEOPLE



- **Change:** Systems break without buy-in.
- **Pushback:** Most change efforts fail due to misalignment.
- **Coaching + Mentoring:** Your job is to guide, not just manage.
- **Tools to make them better:** Let's talk people frameworks.
- **Failure:** When people fail–don't punish.
- **A-players:** How to spot so you hold onto them.

PEOPLE

CHANGE: Systems break without buy-in.

What can you do?

Now you have all these new shiny tools to make your product system better

Go deploy them! Nothing can go wrong...

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ENTER HUMANS!

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PEOPLE

Change: Systems break without buy-in.

- **People don’t handle change well, especially product teams.**
- Why? They’re not regular people. Many are highly logical and exceptionally creative.
- And they're often order-tolerant, i.e. cannot tolerate much chaos.
- So, we created our own process to deploy changes.
- While it works for any team, it’s most effective with the diverse teams.

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PEOPLE

Change: Systems break without buy-in.

The challenge:

- Rolling out change isn't just about process, it's about people.
- If they're surprised, **they resist.**
- If they're informed, **they engage.**

A bullet proof way to create buy-in:

1. **Quick heads-up:** Light Slack/Teams message — "We're planning X."
2. **Mention it live:** Bring it up during stand-up or a regular touchpoint.
3. **Formal follow-up:** Send the official rollout email.

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PEOPLE

Change: Systems break without buy-in.

But, "change" is scary for most people...

Why? While change can be good, it can also be bad. So, ensure you don't start from behind by evolving your vocabulary:

Change → Enhance	Update → Improve	Transition → Evolve
"We are enhancing our current process..."	"We are improving the way we measure success..."	"We are evolving how we currently run sprints..."

What about this works?

- Everyone likes enhancements (think upgrades).
- People have positive feelings towards improvements, i.e., making things better.
- Evolution is gradual and not abrupt.

Pro Tip

Evolve your language to inspire, not alarm.

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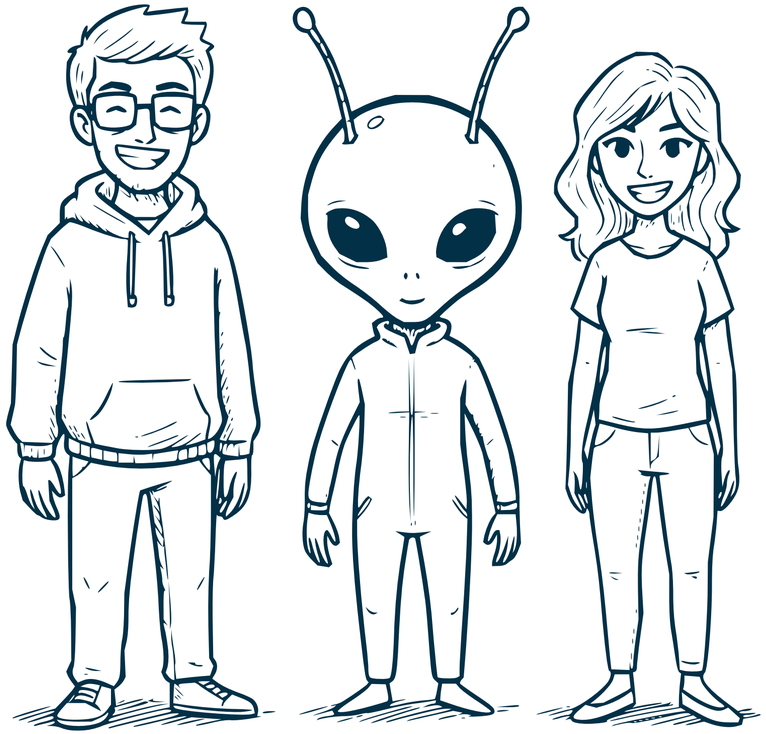
PEOPLE

Change: Systems break without buy-in.

Why this seemingly lengthy process?

- It covers all types of humans in one shot.
- Whether they're chaos-tolerant or order-tolerant, team-driven or self-driven– it lands with everyone.
- We're trying to maximize initial adoption of the enhancement.
- But even with this, there will still be feedback.



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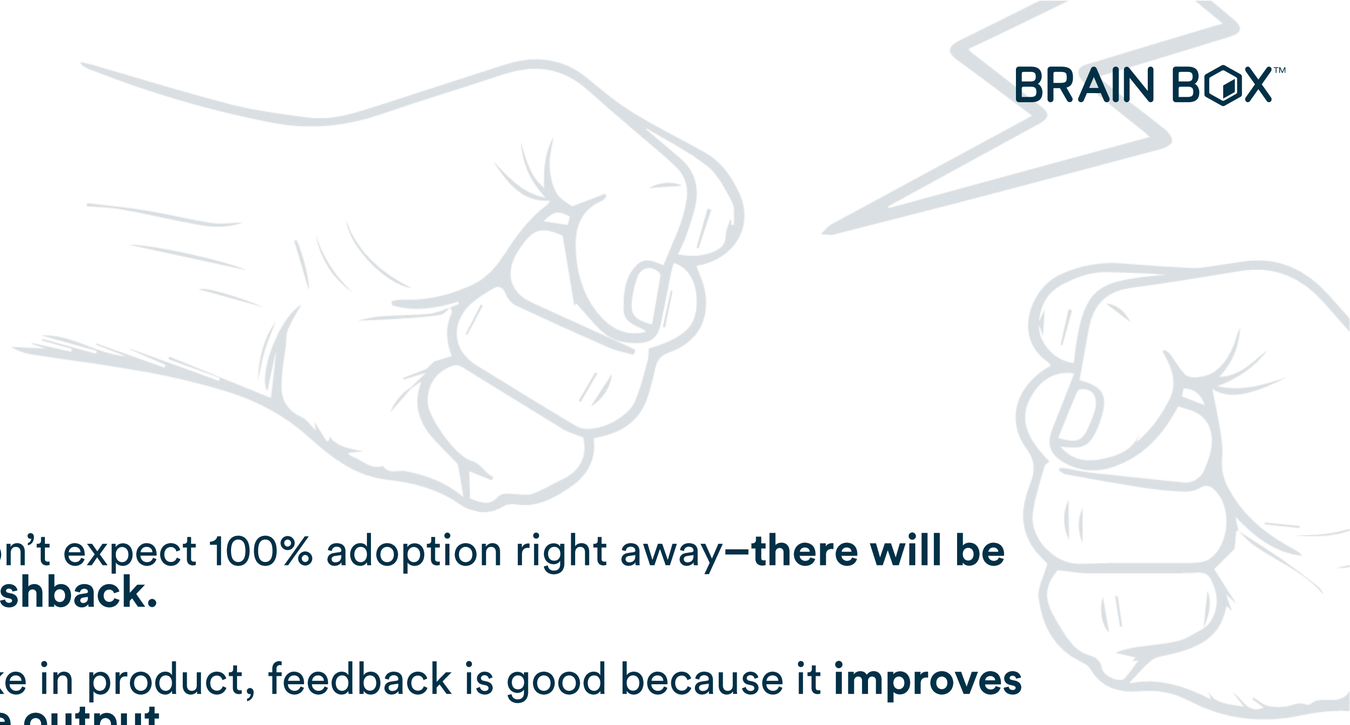
PEOPLE



PUSHBACK: Most change efforts fail due to misalignment

- Don’t expect 100% adoption right away–**there will be pushback.**
- Like in product, feedback is good because it **improves the output.**
- **Don’t shy away from it.** Address it quickly and always in private.
- Don't defend. **Get curious.**
- Facilitate, **don't force.**

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PEOPLE

Pushback: Most change efforts fail due to misalignment

We use a tactic called the Objective Loop to get to the root of someone's perspective.

- Simply put, **turn their statements into questions** to deepen the understanding.
- There's no magic; it forces you to **lead with genuine curiosity**.
- When you **treat feedback as neutral** and stay curious, you **uncover what's driving it**.
- That gives you the clarity to **offer a new perspective** or help them arrive at one on their own.

USE THE OBJECTIVE LOOP:

"How come?"

"What's the purpose?"

"What would make it better?"

PEOPLE

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43.6%

of people leave because of **lack of growth and poor leadership**

The next closest was compensation at 28.5%

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PEOPLE

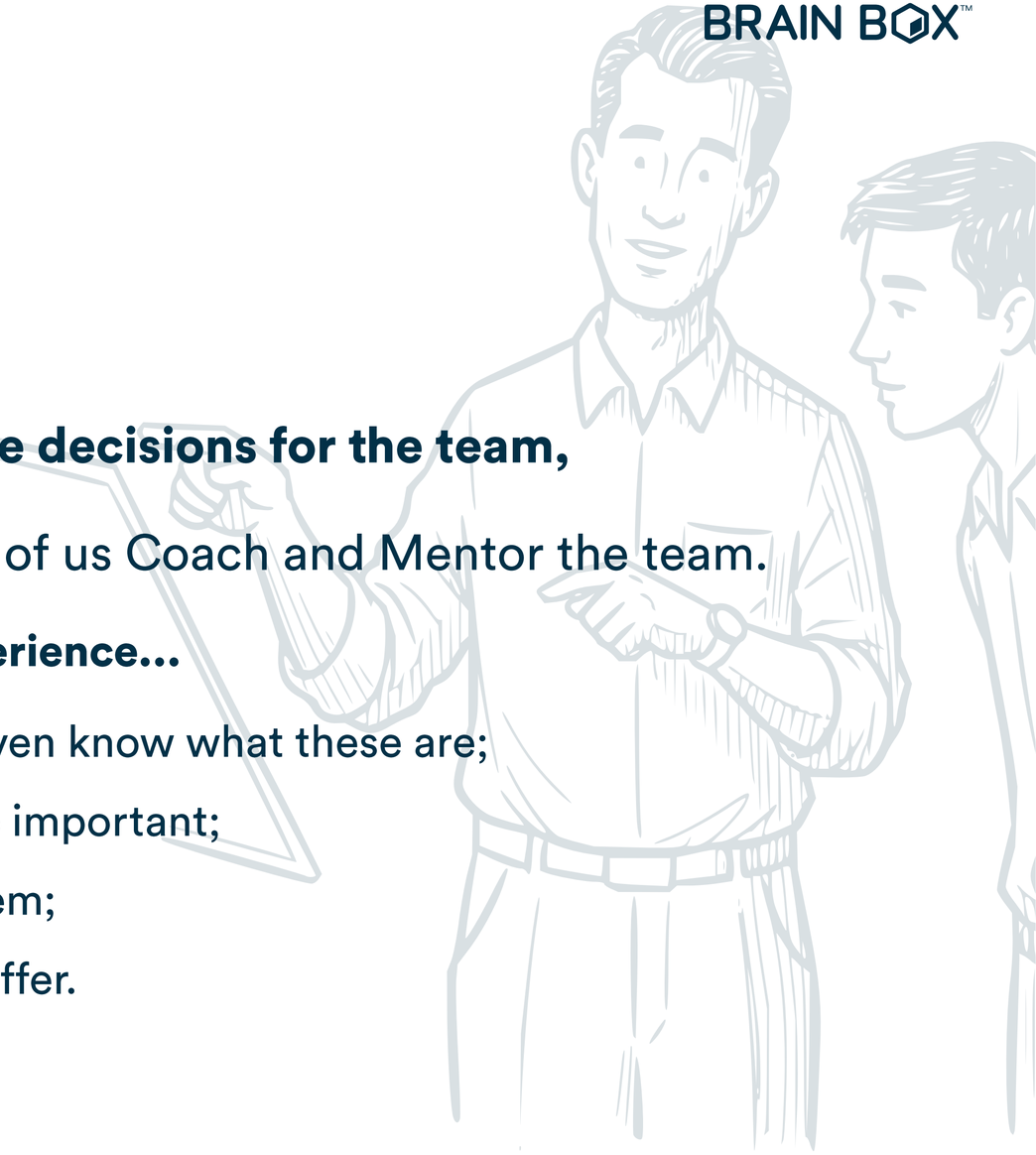
COACHING + MENTORING: Your job is to guide, not just manage.

A lot of us make decisions for the team,

but not enough of us Coach and Mentor the team.

Why? In my experience...

- People don’t even know what these are;
- Why they’re so important;
- How to use them;
- Or how they differ.



COACHING

Ask, don’t tell.
Guide them to their own answer, they already have it.

MENTORING

If they're unsure how to approach it, share your experience and lend a method.

TRAINING

If they can’t execute yet, **show them step-by-step.**

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PEOPLE

Coaching + Mentoring

Coaching	**Least** effort	**Highest** reward for the person
Mentoring	**More** effort	**Some benefit** to the person
Training	**Most** effort	**Least rewarding** to the organization

PEOPLE

Coaching + Mentoring

You always start **with coaching.**

1. See if they can get there by **guiding them through good (non-leading) questions.**
2. If they have no idea how to approach a situation or problem, **deploy mentoring.**
3. Lend them **your experience** and an approach.
4. If they are not confident they can execute at this stage, **you can move to training.**
5. Show them **exactly** what to do.

One caveat:

If you're **training someone on what their role already requires,** you may have a fit issue, not a development issue.

PEOPLE

Overwhelming

86.1%

of people reported that **autonomy and clarity** (a clear "why") where the **biggest drivers** of their day-to-day motivation.

Tools to make them better: Let's talk people frameworks

1-3-1 Framework

1 Problem → 3 Options → 1 Recommendation

- Puts them in the driver's seat (not you)
- Builds good judgment, confidence, and speed
- Prevents manager bottlenecks

PEOPLE

Failure: When people fail–don't punish.

Use the 3F Framework

1. **FACTS**
   What happened?
2. **FIX**
   How do we fix it?
3. **FUTURE**
   How do we avoid it next time?

Why does this work?

- Builds accountability, not fear
- It's faster than praise recovery

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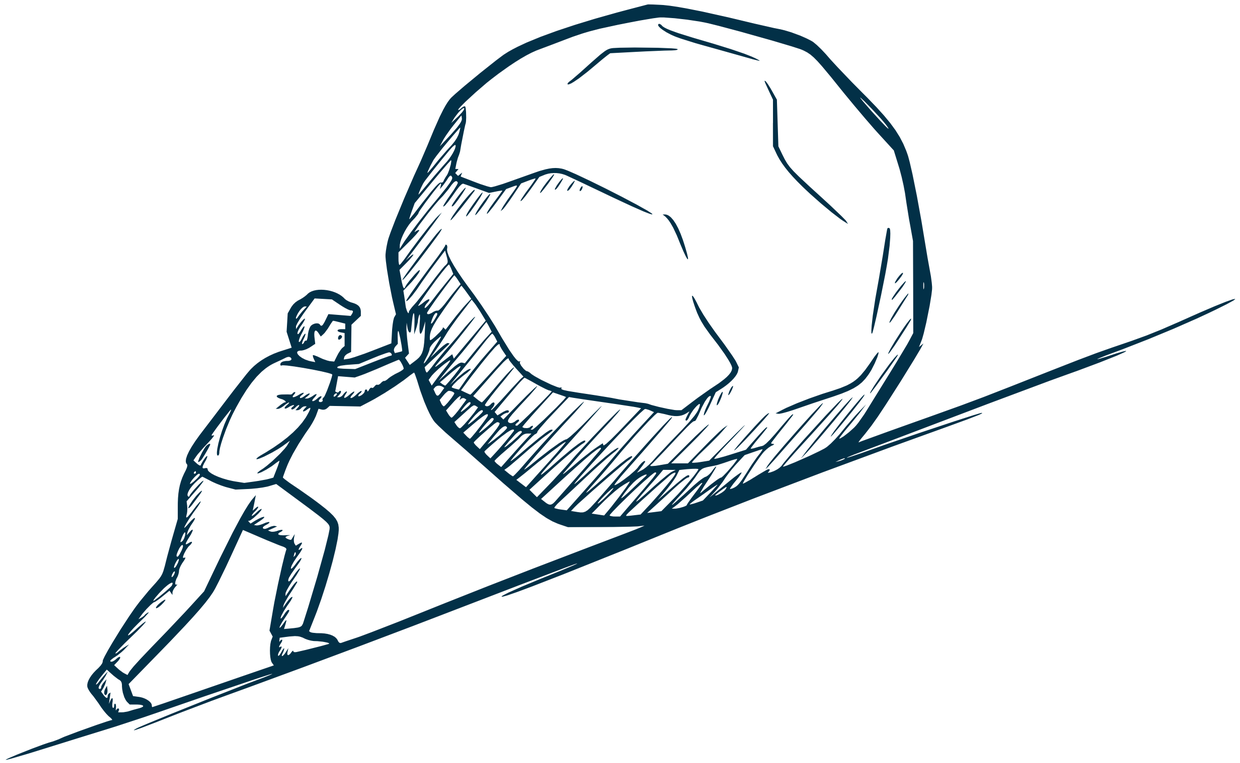
PEOPLE

A-players: How to spot so you hold onto them.

Traits of A-players

- Trustworthy
- Resourceful
- Coachable
- Clear communicators
- Deliver on their promise



Pro Tip

- **Keep your A and B players**
- **Get rid** of your C-players

"Put the right butts in the right seats"

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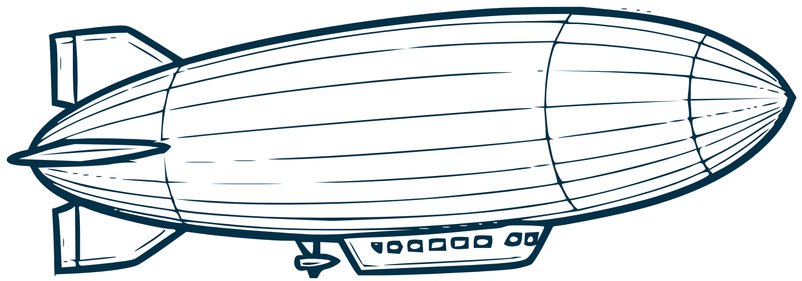
FULL SYSTEM RECAP

Two Systems, One Goal



The Product System

Structure → MaSoN → Scope → Mid-Sprint Check → Video Evidence → Launch, Fix, Learn

The People System

Communicate → Feedback → Coach + Mentor → Empower (1-3-1) → Accountable (3F) → A-Player Culture

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STEAL THIS PLAYBOOK

Want it all? Just come find me after the talk

We'll send you:

- ✓ These slides
- ✓ Complete sprint system
- ✓ **Bonus:** Our national survey results deck

Final Message

Yes, product is hard, but with...

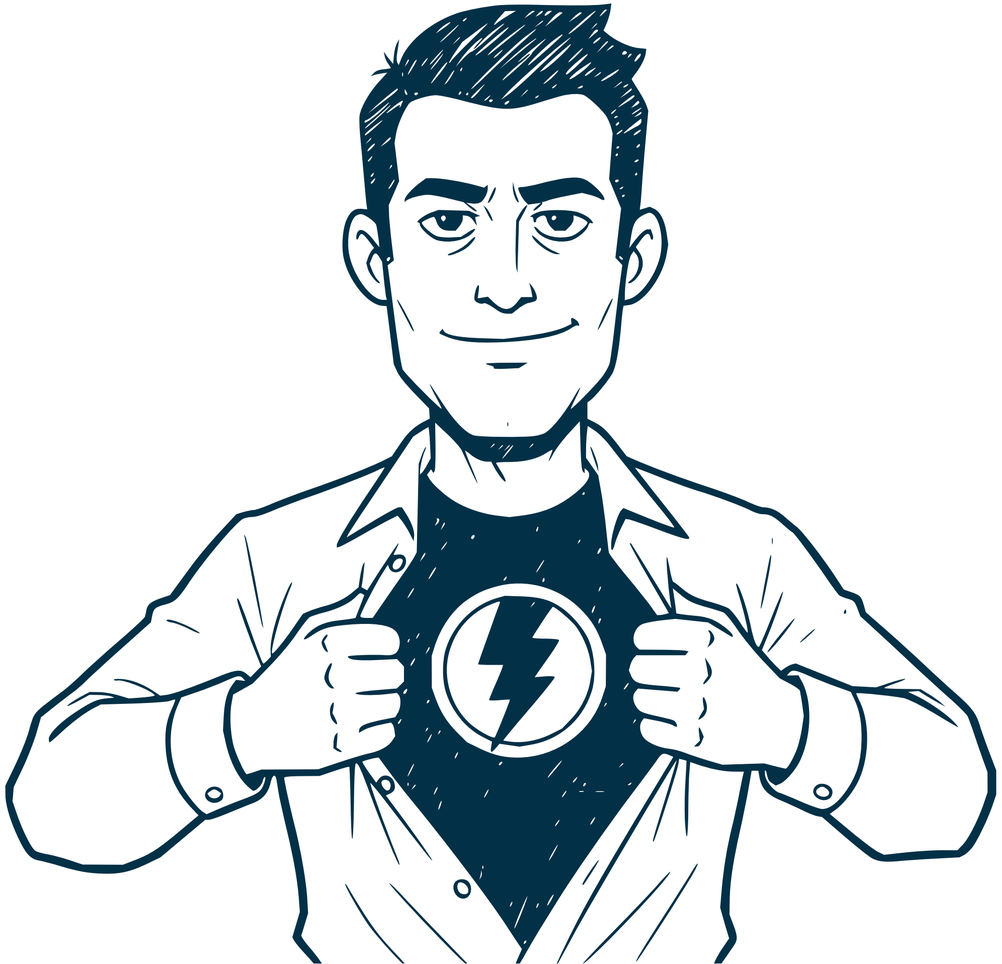
Great systems expertly deployed

Great teams because of better leadership

And, the tools, frameworks, and tactics to bring it altogether.

I can confidently say:

You've got this!



Now...

GO BE GREAT!

/KRISNICOLAOU BRAINBOXLABS.COM KRIS@BRAINBOXLABS.COM