STORYMINERS · A FIELD GUIDE

Change the Frame

How leaders open futures others can't yet see.

A strategist isn't smarter than you. They're looking through different frames. Here they are.

Mike Wittenstein · · Edition 1.2.1, September 2026

Change your frame without changing who you are.

"Mike's perspective that strategic thinking should start by understanding the frame is profound."

— Neil Isford, Chief Revenue & Sales Officer, Chief Outsiders

Why I Made This

This is a one-flight-length book: real stories from thirty years of strategy work. I wrote it for the person whose company it is, the founder, the owner, the CEO, standing in front of a move nobody has made before. First-of-a-kind moves don't come with a map. They come with a frame you inherited, and the frame decides what's possible until you change it.

The stories differ, but watch what they share: a company aiming everything it had built at the world that already existed, and a way forward that began with the same discovery: **what you built isn't the problem. Where you're aiming it is.** First-of-a-kind moves get stuck when the problem is defined by the world that already exists. The move is changing what you're looking at before deciding what to do about it.

The stories are real, and so is the record behind them. I've been saving my conversations for almost twenty years, a habit from my IBM days, where someone told me that one day the machines would read them back and find what mattered. I believed them. This field guide is some of what they found, and a lot of what I found living it. Not ideas I read. Principles in the code I work by.

Why give this away? Two reasons, both honest. First, these frames work, most people have never been shown them, and the world gets better when more people can use them. Second, I run a strategy practice called Storyminers, and a book like this makes it easier for the right people to find me. If the frames help you and we never meet, the gift worked, and I'm glad.

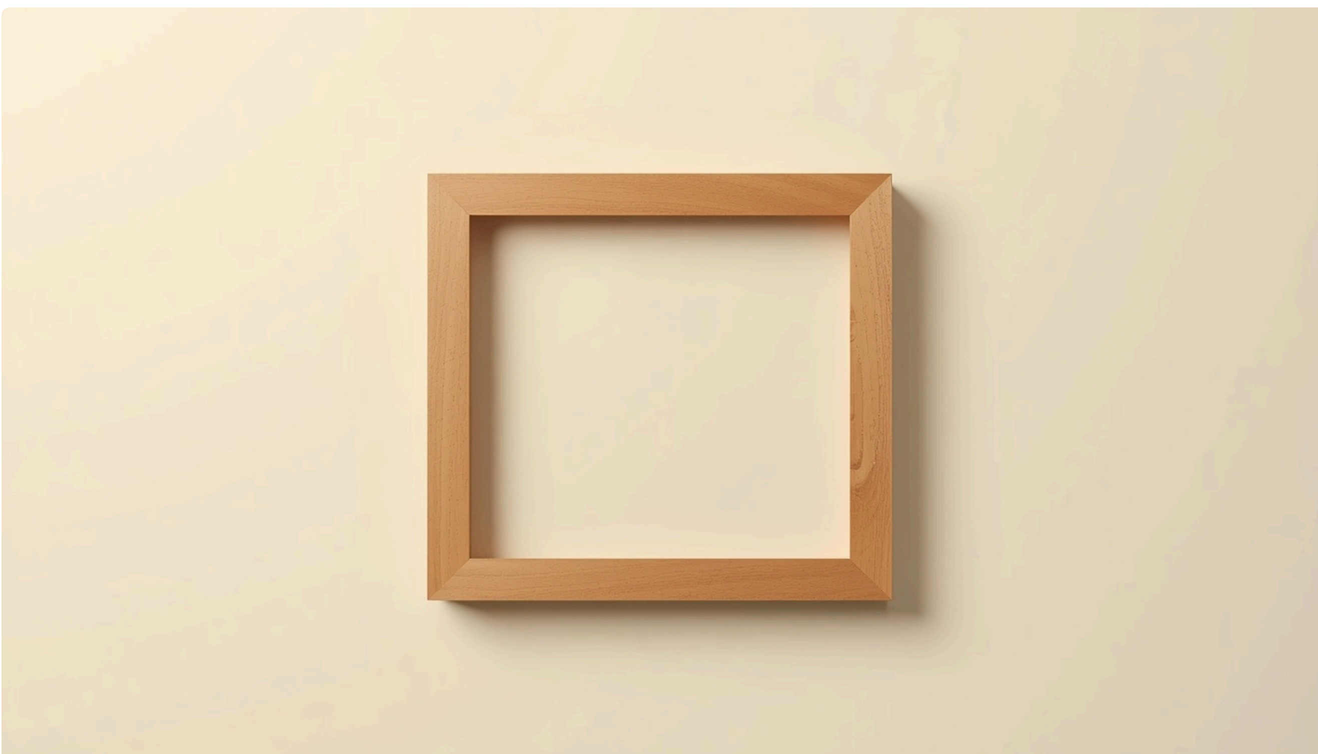
One promise before you begin: these frames change how you see, not who you are. Pick up every one of them and you're still exactly yourself: just harder to fool, quicker to catch what others miss, freer to imagine.

You don't have to read in order, and you don't have to use them all. Pick the one that fits what you're wrestling with. Try it on. Keep what works. Each chapter stands on its own, so if one fits someone you know, send just that one. It carries everything it needs to travel.

What's a Frame?

A frame decides what you see, and what you don't. Good photographers take good shots. Great ones start your eye at the right level of detail, pull it to the point that matters, and control what stays out of the picture. In one shot, an entire story.

Susie Pecuch, who trained at Disney, taught me how to hold one. Literally. For a presentation we gave together, she had me bring an empty picture frame as a prop. We held it close, then far away. Same room, same stuff, and what you saw changed completely. Move the frame, change what's in it, choose the focus: the same thing becomes a different picture.



AI photograph · Leonardo

Here's the part that matters for strategy: two people can stand in the same place, looking in the same direction, seeing the same thing, and walk away with two completely different experiences. What they saw was inside the frame. What decided what it *meant* (their background, their experience, how they judge) sat outside it, invisible. People don't always tell you what frame they're coming from.

Sometimes the payoff is startlingly cheap. The classic example is the slow elevator. Framed as an engineering problem, you buy a faster elevator. Expensive. Framed as a boredom problem, you hang a mirror. Cheap. Same building, same goal, happier tenants.

One more thing about size. A problem changes importance as you change the size of the frame. It's like growing up: as children's worlds expand (their own friendships, their own plans, their own exciting lives) their parents take up less and less of the view. The parents didn't shrink. The frame grew. Grow yours, and the blocker that filled your whole view becomes one detail in a bigger picture.

Here's the working test this book runs on: a frame is what you include, what you leave out, and where you aim what you've built. Change any of the three and the same facts tell a different story. A word about what follows: these pages *demonstrate* the craft, story by story, with real companies. They don't pretend to hand it over whole. Noticing that a frame is wrong is a skill you can start using this week. Sensing what the new frame should be is harder; that's a craft, and it grows with every frame you've watched change. The stories will show you both.

Changing the Frame, Six Ways

1 · Make the future real: a story they can step into beats a plan they can't.

2 · Change the frame: same facts, different story.

3 · Design the experience: on the inside as much as the outside.

4 · Keep the aim: AI can generate options; only you can know where you want to go.

5 · Build new yardsticks: measure the solution, not the step.

6 · Make it visible: the plan they can touch becomes the plan they defend.

After the six, **one short chapter** on what the stories had in common, then **an epilogue** about the one frame you never change: your code.

The stories come from a fast-food giant, an airline, a small-town payments company, a publisher, a bearing factory, an optics brand, a German maker of rotary joints, and a young digital agency. The frames don't care what business you're in.

1

The Future Isn't a Forecast to Defend

It's a story people can step into.

In 1999, McDonald's asked for a faster drive-thru: twenty-five percent more cars through the line at lunch.

We came back with a different question: what if the restaurant knew your order before your car arrived?

There was no way to do that. Smartphones were eight years away. We designed it anyway: the future visit, not the faster window. We didn't stop at a concept. We built the future out far enough that people could poke holes in it: storyboards of the customer experience, press releases written from the future, capacity math, financial models, job descriptions for crew whose jobs didn't exist yet. Mobile-first ordering. Multiple pick-up lanes. Predictive cooking.


DRIVE-THRU
Store 1123 · Lane 2
Sat 09/12/2026 12:14 PM

Order 47	Mobile order
Placed 12:06 PM	Ready at pickup
1 Double Cheeseburger	6.29
No onions	
1 Medium Fries	3.79
1 Medium Soft Drink	2.49
Subtotal	12.57
Tax 8.9%	1.12
Total	**13.69**
Paid in app	Visa ending 4417
Change due	0.00

Thank you. Drive safely.
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Receipt rendered for this page · Storyminers

Our own projections said no existing restaurant could support it. They were right, for twenty years, while the rest of the world built the missing pieces. I won't claim a straight line from our team's design work to today's rollout; many hands reached similar conclusions as the technology arrived. What I can claim is what's on the storyboards: the people in that room saw it nineteen years early, and they saw it together.

That's what mattered, long before anything got built. A forecast is something people argue with. A future you can walk through is something people improve. Once the team could picture a morning, a customer with a name, a decision underway, they brought their imagination instead of their resistance, and started filling in the story, because now it was theirs.

Don't wait for the polished version. A rough draft of the future this week beats a perfect plan next quarter: not finished, not pretty, but real enough to step into, with a place in it for everyone who will build it. Start, finish, and let the ideal come from iteration.

> **The move:** write the press release your company publishes three years from now. Date it. Name the customer it serves and what their morning looks like. Then hand it to your team and ask what would have to be true by that date. You'll get arguments. Good. People argue with a prediction. Give them a future they can step into, and they'll improve it instead.

BETWEEN STORIES

We're taught that big things get built out of small steps. Project management says so. Six Sigma says so. When the big idea lands — and everyone loves the big idea — the honest manager with no budget, no time, and no political capital takes the responsible small first step. Then another. A year later nothing has moved, because none of the steps were connected, and the only thing they preserved was everything staying the same.

A big idea is big because it solves several problems at once. Cut it into steps and you don't get smaller versions of the idea. You get pieces, and the problems stay whole. Each piece gets pushed through on its own: get these two databases talking, I don't care how, I need the number by Friday.

That's firefighting: bells, a speeding truck, a save at the last possible moment. Exciting. And well-intentioned people break other processes to make the number, and nobody writes down the cost. I have a name for it: scar tissue in the rest of the company. Smokey the Bear, the fire-prevention mascot, is boring. Smokey wins, by a long shot.

The trap isn't cowardice. It's arithmetic: the belief that big is just many smalls. The way out isn't a braver small step. It's starting from the future, the way the last story did: build the whole picture first, so people are standing inside it. A big idea is a run of dominoes. Once people can see the whole line, they'll spot the first one to tip: the small push that sets the rest falling. The push goes better when people can feel the future and want to build it together.

Which is where the trouble usually starts: two sides who are certain they already agree.

2

Strategy Works When Everyone Sees the Same Picture

Most of the time, they don't.

I should tell you something up front: I never met the client.

A $1 billion contract between IBM and a major North American international air carrier was dying. My seat was backstage: working the approaches, the arguments, the decks, and the logic with the account executive and a couple of other consultants, while an analytics team crunched the numbers. Everything I knew about the airline arrived as stories other people told me.

Listening to those stories, I noticed something. The two companies were using the same phrase to mean different things. To IBM, "smoothly running" meant following predictable procedures. To the airline, it meant handling the unexpected (which is most of any day in a transportation business) gracefully and comfortably, especially for their people. Two definitions, one contract, drifting apart for years. Nobody was wrong, and nobody was lying. They just weren't buying and selling the same thing anymore.

The renewal pitch had the usual pillars: operations and technology. We added a third: the experience of the airline's employees. Easier to get requests handled. Easier to see where projects stood. Practical for the bottom line, and on brand for the carrier.

Inside our own team, the arguments were mostly hard numbers versus squishy numbers. Hard numbers you could count, touch, and predict. Squishy numbers were about how people felt. But humans are feeling beings, not cogs in a machine, and they won't work if you treat them that way. The analytics team ended the argument in the language the room respected: for every dollar spent on employee experience, some multiple came back to the bottom line. I don't remember the figure. I remember what it did to the argument. Point some of the technology horsepower at human preference and flourishing, and business throughput rises on its own.

The airline started sharing what they actually needed. The dying $1 billion deal came back as a $1.1 billion deal, a whole team's win with many hands on it, and IBM reused the model across its travel accounts.

Eastern Air-Shuttle coupon, mid-1970s · scan by Jonathan Schilling, Wikimedia Commons, public domain

Here's the move, and it costs an hour. Find a phrase you and your customer both lean on: "smoothly running," "on time," "quality," "good service." Write down what you mean by it. Then go learn what they mean by it. If the definitions match, you've spent an hour. If they've drifted, and after years of quiet they often have, you may have just found the gap that a stalled deal or a lost account fell into. Same facts, different story. That's what changing the frame does.

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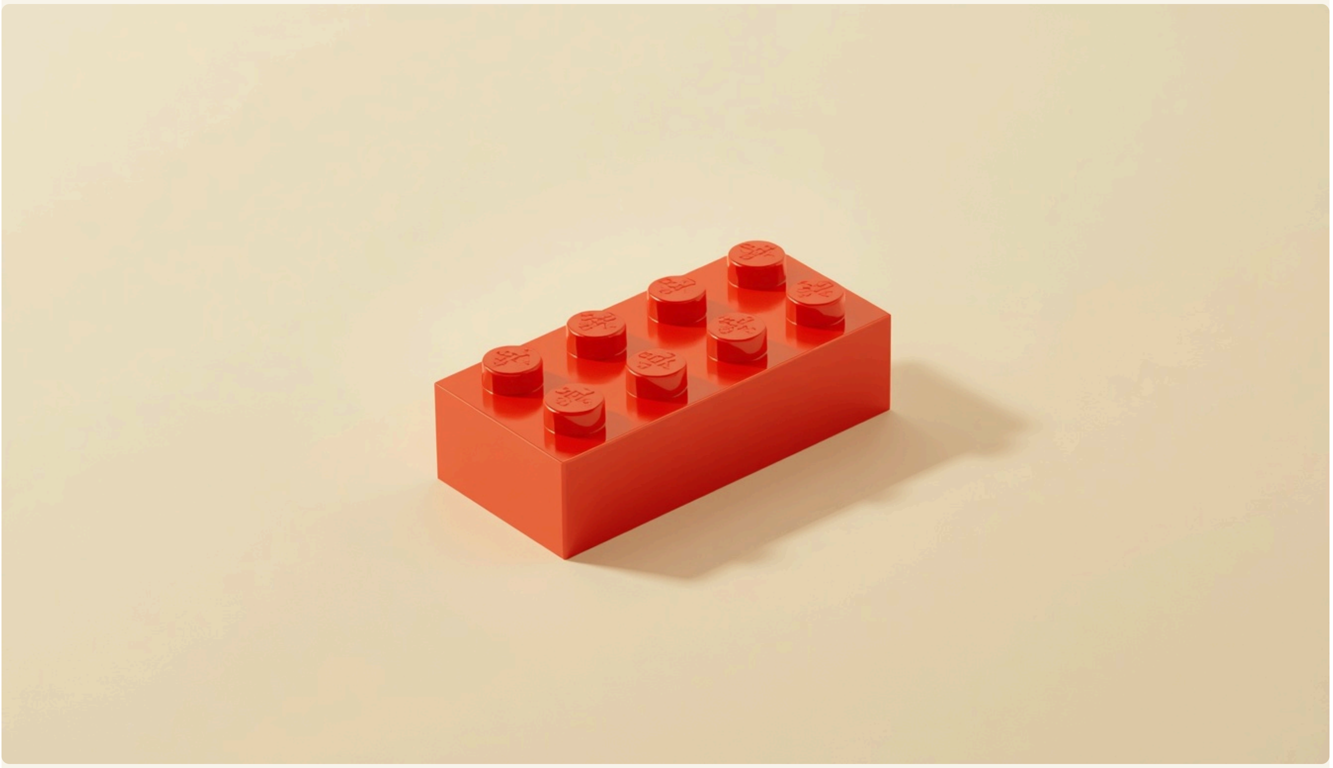
BETWEEN STORIES

We're trained to add. Brian Unell told me about a dad and a toddler building a bridge out of Duplo blocks. The bridge wouldn't sit level. The dad dug through the bin for the block that would fix it. The toddler took one block out. Level.



AI photograph · Leonardo

The better answer was already there, minus one piece.

That's worth carrying into everything a leader hands over. Most direction comes down as targets: hit this number, cut that cost. A target tells people what to hit. It doesn't tell them what to build, so every choice still climbs back up for a ruling. The better handoff works like the toddler's bridge: a shape so simple that people can see for themselves what belongs and what doesn't. When almost anything is possible, the future you pick has to be simple enough to say, and simple enough to hand over. That's the job. Don't mandate outcomes. Supply the architecture: make each idea simple enough to stand as a guidepost for the people who will make it real.

3

Your Brand Can't Be Any Better Than What Your Customers Experience...

...no matter how hard you try or how much you spend.

— Greg Rutledge, for Storyminers

iPay was doubling every year, and the founders' wise worry wasn't sales. It was whether the culture could survive the growth. iPay was the first online bill-payment company to reach profitability and hold it. Being out front, there was nobody to copy; everything had to be figured out fresh, while growing fast, in a small town, hiring people out of much larger markets.

Everyone expected the work to start with the customer experience. We started with the employees, because if the people closest to the customer can't feel the company's promise, the customer never will.

We designed the inside experience as deliberately as any storefront. When a senior recruit flew in to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, their picture had already made the rounds: strangers greeted them by name at the door, a parking spot waiting, a tour that treated them like they'd already said yes. Big-market talent kept moving to a small town.

AI photograph · Leonardo

The company moved as one. By the time iPay sold in 2010, for $300 million with its small-town culture intact, sales had grown from $13 million to $58 million. Nobody can honestly parcel out how much of that traces to any one piece of work. What's on the record is co-founder Mike Bowers' own sentence: "We couldn't have grown profitably and comfortably without Storyminers."

Most experiences in the world are lackluster. A few are memorable: a camping trip, a bungee jump, some travel, a first kiss. A rare few are transformative: the longest-lasting and most valuable kind. Design for those. Then notice the move most people miss: you can design them on the inside too. The meeting, the kickoff, the way a decision gets made: each one is an experience that either builds shared memory and commitment, or quietly drains it.

> **The move:** pick one inside moment and design it in as much detail as you would a retail customer experience. The next senior candidate's visit. The next kickoff. The first hour of someone's first day. Decide how the person in it should feel, then work backward: list everything they'll see, hear, and have to do in that moment, and change whatever doesn't serve the feeling. It costs almost nothing, and the people inside it will tell the story for years.

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BETWEEN STORIES

A company can't see anything. Only people can, and the people inside are usually the ones who built what's there. They chose the process, or the plant, or the plan. What they built was creative once. Now it's the thing being run.

One of the hardest things for a long-standing executive is to remember that the incentives aren't the goal. Incentives get written in support of the strategy. Then, quietly, they *become* the strategy, and that's the moment when holding on starts to feel like doing your job well.

It shows up in the record, over and over. Blockbuster passed on buying Netflix for $50 million because it was busy protecting its stores. It isn't just history, and it isn't only victims: Disney turned waiting lines into part of the show. Rev sold transcription done by people. It saw AI coming and chose to cannibalize its own business with the new technology rather than wait for someone else to take its market. The pattern is running right now, at companies of every size. The challenge: from the outside, a company clinging to its old aim is easy to spot. From inside your own, the same clinging just looks like the plan working.

The difference between the companies that miss the turn and the ones that make it was never intelligence. It comes down to the leaders, the people with the standing to change what's built. A leader who can see an opportunity is one who can imagine being part of it: who can picture a business better than the one they have, even when it's a different business, and still find themselves in it. Which is why the organizations that change best are the ones whose leaders can change most.

And some can't. The next story is about a company that couldn't.

4

AI Can't Know Where You Want to Go

It can generate options all day. Direction comes from inside.

A specialty publisher sat on a goldmine: hundreds of modern titles, deep expertise, sold one way: as textbooks. Textbooks are just-in-case learning. Learn everything now, in case you need some of it someday. Slow, expensive, and slower still to put to work.

I brought them a second use for the same asset: just-in-time. Format the authors' knowledge into AI agents and project tools, so a person could get real work done without taking the class first. Same knowledge, new container. I believed it could transform the business.

Management heard it, and set one condition. They would consider the idea only if it increased textbook sales.

They were ready for more sales, just not for a new frame. Nothing technical stood in their way. The agents were buildable. The titles were theirs. What was missing was human: the judgment to realize the opportunity was theirs, the savvy to know the new thing was worth making, and the will to own an outcome no existing budget line had blessed. They weren't looking through the frame anymore. They were the frame — unbudging, unmoving. It felt like Kodak, a company whose money came from selling film, weighing the digital camera its own lab had invented by how much film it would sell.

Kodacolor II cassette, 1970s · photo by Roland Fischer, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

Which is why this chapter isn't about AI, even though AI is all over the story. Look at the division of labor. Seeing the new business was my work: the just-in-time idea, and the conviction it was worth making. AI helped me frame it up — the business case, the financials, the structure, in a fraction of the old time. Generating is what AI does all day. What it can never do is know, intuitively, where you want to go. Humans have to reach inside themselves for that. No model wanted that future on my behalf, and no model could want it on the publisher's. This is the part that doesn't change as the models improve: the tools equalize, and the aim doesn't. AI is going the way the spreadsheet went, from a breakthrough a few people bragged about to something everyone uses without thinking. When everyone has it, the advantage is the judgment that aims it.

> **The move:** watch which question your company asks first when a new technology lands. "Will it protect what we already sell?" is the film question. "What could we do with this that we couldn't do before?" is the camera question. Kodak asked the film question of its own camera. You only have to change which question goes first.

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5

New Capabilities Need New Yardsticks

Stop measuring the step. Measure the solution.

Timken makes tapered roller bearings: the parts that let a heavy load turn smoothly. Under a locomotive, a bearing's whole job is fighting disorder: friction, heat, wear. Engineers have a word for disorder: entropy. Timken was world-class at taking entropy out of its customers' products.

I met them one day in 1999, at IBM's Advanced Business Institute, on an adaptive-enterprise engagement led by Stephan Haeckel and David Ing. My assignment was the future state: who would need to promise what to whom for the company to run differently. I was given very little input.

Its business model was built for efficiency. Design and manufacture centrally, mostly in the United States. Ship worldwide. Let the bearings wait to be sold. That meant guessing demand, and it meant last-mile logistics. The further from home the products traveled, the worse the storage: as far away as Southeast Asia, bearings sat rusting in damp warehouses. Value: zero.

What I brought back was one sentence: you're experts at reducing entropy in your customers' products. What about the entropy in their businesses?

It starts with a dropped pin. In a hallway conversation I learned that installation technicians hated the packaging. Efficiency meant packing only one cotter pin per bearing. To install a bearing, the technician crawls underneath the locomotive carriage, contorts to find the one workable position, sets the bearing, and, often, drops the pin.

Then he crawls out, fishes it from a crevice several feet deep, and starts over. The fix: pack extra pins. The cost of a cotter pin, against that frustration and delay, was nothing.

AI photograph · Leonardo

Then bigger: ship kits, not parts. One pallet per locomotive, carrying everything that locomotive needs, instead of containers full of the same part. Harder logistics for Timken, far more valuable to the customer, and a point of differentiation. Bigger still: license production close to where the bearings are used. Shipping costs nearly gone, stockouts rare, and licensing profit that carried no added manufacturing cost.

I'll be straight about what I know and don't. One day inside, very little input going in, and, ten years later after a talk I gave, a man who'd been at Timken telling me the company had run with the ideas and was doing well. That's an insight story, not an audited result. I claim the seeing, not the P&L.

Now the uncomfortable part. Not one of those ideas would have survived a spreadsheet. We live in a spreadsheet world: every dollar in is expected to bring a dollar and change back, on its own, before the next dollar goes out. But the pieces of a new design shouldn't each have to pay their own way; the solution pays back, once it exists. So when you're building a new capability, measure what the old measures can't see: the problems that disappear and never come back, and the opportunities that open at a much larger scale. Extra cotter pins lose on cost per unit. They win on locomotives back in service. The old yardsticks only measure what you already have. Build yardsticks the size of the thing you're building.

> **The move here** takes one meeting. Next time a good idea dies in review, ask one question before it's buried: are we measuring a step, or a solution? If every piece has to pay back on its own, you will only ever fund pieces, and pieces preserve the world you already have.

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Deciding what's worth doing is the easier half. The harder half is people: getting them to want the same thing, and to bring their best to it.

6

Lead by Making What You See Visible

Build what they can walk through, and people convince themselves.

Transitions Optical made lenses that darken in sunlight, and sold them wholesale. Leadership wanted to move toward retail, and the room was full of decision makers, each seeing their own slice of what that meant. The usual response is to explain it better and push harder.

We made the plan visible instead, twice. First as layers on clear plastic sheets (customer experience, employee experience, technology, brand) stacked so a change in one layer showed up in all the others. Then as a full-size store, mocked up in cardboard in their training room, with working demos: like trying on frames with your own glasses off, when you can't see a thing.

Walking it, they got the sightlines and the flow, not as an argument but the way you know a place once you've stood in it. Inside an experience, you can't help but feel it. The Store of the Future got funded, not because anyone was ordered to fund it, but because everyone finally saw the same picture and their instincts agreed. That's what gets people to move. Not authority. Visibility, felt.

Leading isn't getting people to do what you say. It's getting them to see what you see, and then letting them make it theirs. The work that lasts isn't done faster by one person pushing harder; it's done better by a group pointed the same way.

Van Halen understood this from the other side. Their tour contract had a clause buried deep inside: a bowl of M&M's backstage, every brown one removed. It wasn't ego. It was visibility. If David Lee Roth saw a brown M&M, he knew the crew hadn't read the contract closely, and might have missed something that mattered, like the staging or the wiring. He turned an invisible thing, whether the fine print got read, into something he could check from across the room.

AI photograph · Leonardo

Leaders can run the same move on themselves: evidence your change in public. Announce a new system, then use it to run the next leadership meeting, live, your beloved old spreadsheet retired. Fumble through the new screens. Ask the newest person how to find something. Nothing moves a team like watching you do the thing you announced: if you can change, so can they. The fumbling is the point. A leader's weak moment licenses learning: it's okay to try here.

> **The move:** take the plan you're carrying and make one piece of it visible this week. A sketch. A mocked-up screen. A cardboard corner of the future in a conference room. Don't present it. Let people walk up to it, mark it up, and argue with it. The plan they can touch becomes the plan they defend.

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Change the Frame

Six stories, one move — and it took me thirty years to see it.

Look back at the six for a moment. A fast-food giant, an airline, a small-town payments company, a publisher, a bearing factory, an optics brand. Different decades, different industries, and I told every one of them as its own story, for thirty years. It took putting them in one book to see what they had in common. My surprise is still in these pages.

Every one of those companies had built something that worked. And every one of them was aiming it at the world that already existed.

Here's one more, told short, from a company that isn't in the six. Maier America makes rotary joints: the fitting that lets fluid pass into a part while it spins, and holds the pressure while it does. The U.S. arm of a fourth-generation German manufacturer, precision hardware sold to engineers, in an industry where the parts conversation is a price conversation. Maier believed its business was keeping pressure inside the joint. We spent time with their people and with their customers' people, and nobody on the customer side lay awake thinking about the joint. They lay awake thinking about the line going down, the promise they'd made to their own customer, and the call they'd have to make if it broke. We suggested the business was something else: keeping pressure off their customers' people. Rob Kuehl, Maier's CEO, said it back in his own words: "He helped us see that what we're really doing is keeping pressure off our customers' people." Same product. Same plant. A different job, and a sentence a multinational sales team could say in more than one language.

Now put it beside two you've already read. Timken was expert at reducing entropy in its products; we asked about the entropy in its customers' businesses, and everything in chapter 5, from the extra cotter pins to the licensed plants, fell out of that one question.

visit chapter 1 describes went onto storyboards nineteen years before the world could build it.

Three companies, one move: take the thing they were already the best in the world at, and aim it one step further out than they had been.

You read this on the first page: what you built isn't the problem, where you're aiming it is. Here it is from the other side. Not a new product, a new market, or a new plan: the same strength, pointed one step further out, at the people who were there the whole time.

One step, not five. A step further out is still recognizable. The plant knows what to do on Monday. The engineers are still engineers, the kitchen is still a kitchen, and the company doesn't have to become someone else to get there. Five steps out is a different business, and you watched the publisher fight one in chapter 4. One step out is the same business, seen whole, and people can walk into that.

This isn't a seventh frame. It's what the six were doing. Making the future real, finding the drifted word, designing the inside, keeping the aim, building a new yardstick, making the plan visible: each one is a way of moving where a company points what it already has. Which is why the book carries the name it does, and why the promise on the first page holds. Change the frame: keep what you're best at, and change where it's aimed. You're still exactly yourself.

Kodak, from chapter 4, is the mirror image. Its own lab built the first digital camera in 1975. It was the best in the world at film, and it stayed the best in the world at film. It held on to its core mission long enough to miss that the frame around it had moved.

Teams follow what you model, not what you announce. People watch what you actually do, decide what's really allowed, and quietly write the company's rules from it. What you choose to model comes from underneath the work, from who you are.

The Last Frame

Six frames you change. This one changes you.

A man walked into the agency Jackie Goldstein and I ran in the '90s, set a briefcase on the table, and opened it: more cash than a young firm should ever have to say no to. He wanted a porn site. Jackie and I looked at each other. It took less than a second. "No." He left, and the money left with him. No regrets: porn is an extractive industry, and that wasn't who we were. Your code (the core of who you are) is what answers before you do.

AI photograph · Leonardo

Everything else in this book is about re-aiming what you built. This chapter is the exception. Your code is the one thing you've built whose value comes from keeping it steady. Circumstances change; it doesn't, and every year it holds, it grows more trustworthy, to you and to everyone who deals with you. Underneath any strategy is the way you live. What you'd do for free. What you won't do for money. How you treat the people around you, and how you keep yourself whole enough to do the work. None of it shows up on a slide. All of it shows up in how you work.

Your code does quiet jobs the other six frames can't. There's a difference between giving people data and giving them the confidence to decide: you're not making the call for them; you're giving them the nerve to make it themselves. If you can do something most people can't, that's not a trophy for the shelf. It's a gift, and gifts are for giving. First-of-a-kind work asks the most of your code: with no precedent to lean on, what you believe is the only map you carry. Which is why, when a thing has never been done before, it's exactly the kind worth taking.

My code, said plainly: discover useful ideas and patterns, and share them with family, friends, clients, the world, so people have more options, solve more problems, and find more enjoyment in life. It has been my Reason for Being for more than twenty-five years. It answered before I did, like the day the briefcase opened.

> **The move:** write your three down: your reason for being, what you won't do for any fee, and how people get treated on your watch. One page, plain words. You may rarely read it again. Writing it is what makes it answer before you do.

Try These On

None of this is a system. It's a way of seeing: one move, worn six ways, plus the frame you keep.

CARRY THESE

Make the future real: a story they can step into beats a plan they can't.

Change the frame: same facts, different story.

Design the experience: on the inside as much as the outside.

Keep the aim: AI generates options; only you know where you want to go.

Build new yardsticks: measure the solution, not the step.

Make it visible: the plan they can touch becomes the plan they defend.

Keep your code — the one frame you never change.

This work isn't a museum. Last year, ShineWell Health's founder came to me with a swirl of ideas for supporting people, and their caregivers, through cancer. The obvious move was a business plan, and we made one — but we started somewhere else: the emotional arc of the journey itself. Diagnosis. Treatment. Whatever comes after. The hardest parts of that road aren't medical; they're logistical, emotional, and deeply personal. We mapped every service onto the moments where a person needs the right question and one trusted human beside them, so the plan came out organized by the patient's hardest days, not by departments. In weeks, the founder had a brief their first hires could run with, and something a plan alone never delivers: the conviction to build it. Same move, new decade: change what the plan is organized around, and everything else lines up behind it.

Pick the frame pressing on your problem and use it this week. Some of this you can do alone, starting today: notice the drifted word, write the press release from the future, ask whether you're measuring a step or a solution. The other half you already know from page one: sensing what the new frame should be took other people, real work, and years of watching companies get unstuck, because the more frames you've seen change, the faster you spot the one that wants to. Noticing is a skill. Choosing is a craft, and the craft is yours: intuition, creativity, judgment, the patterns a working life has taught you to see, and the nerve to choose before it's obvious.

These aren't the only frames. I'd never claim that. They're the ones thirty years kept handing back to me. When you start finding your own, the book has done its job.

The Next Step

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What I bring: finding that first domino, the one whose fall sets off the rest, and helping people see the bigger picture and trust it enough to move.

If you've noticed the frame that's holding something you built, bring it to me for an hour: a working conversation about the future you're trying to create. No prep. No deck. No pitch. You'll leave with a clearer view, whether or not we end up working together. I call it a **Chemistry Check**. Book one at storyminers.com/chemistry-check.

That's the book. Six more pages follow, if you're curious.

A look under the hood: how to use AI with each frame, who helped, how this was made, and where the ideas came from. Yours to read, or not.

Using AI with the Frames

Without outsourcing the aim.

AI can generate options all day. What it can never do is know, intuitively, where you want to go. Humans have to reach inside themselves for that. AI that supports the reaching is worth far more than its computation. Keep the human work for humans: the judgment, the taste, and the standing behind the outcome. Give the machine the routine: the math, the massive datasets, the thousandth repetition. One more thing a machine will never do: complain. When your people do, listen. A complaint is a finger pointing at something that needs attention.

That's how everything below is meant: more passes at your own thinking, never a replacement for it.

Frame 1: Share your facts, constraints, dreams, and guardrails; ask for a rough first telling of your story, set a few years out. Sharpen what's fuzzy, then ask again. Every pass makes the future clearer.

Frame 2: Give AI the transcripts of your last few customer conversations and ask which words both sides use as if they agree, then ask for each side's private definition. The drifted ones are usually a surprise.

Frame 3: Map your customer's day, or your employee's, as simple steps, and ask where the friction lives. Knowing what they should feel is your job, not AI's.

Frame 4: Before a big decision hardens, hand AI your homework (the history, the numbers, what others have tried) and ask what you're not seeing. An hour returns more perspective than a month of meetings. The aiming stays yours.

Frame 5: Have AI total the five-year cost of the problem you remove, not only the hours you bill. Pricing gets braver when the worth is visible.

Frame 6: Turn your idea into a journey map with enough detail that each person can tell a story about what happens to them. The comparing of notes afterward creates alignment early.

The last frame: Keep your three (reason for being, what you won't do for any fee, how people get treated on your watch) where you work with AI, so every draft starts inside them.

With Thanks

For the smart and generous people who've filled my life with real conversation: my clients, my friends, and my family. You did the thinking out loud. I just kept the notes.

Early readers sharpened this guide: Alan Lenertz, Andrey Kuznetsov, Brian Unell, Declan Boland, Ingrid Schafrick Crafford, Jackie Goldstein, Joe Farach, Matt Lindsay, Neil Isford, Quentin Kronacker, Stacey Scott, Stephan Woessner, Susie Pecuch, and Ted Wright.

If I've echoed someone without knowing it, the debt is real even where the name is missing. Good ideas travel.

How This Was Made

In this book I tell you to let AI help you think. So you're owed an answer: did I? Yes. Openly, and in exactly the way I recommend.

Every story here started as my own words, talked out loud, rambling, unpolished, recorded. AI organized, tightened, and poked holes. It asked the tough questions, the ones I needed to answer to make the work complete, compelling, and worth sharing. It flagged gaps for me to fill instead of filling them with assumptions, and where I couldn't remember a number, no number was invented. When a passage stopped sounding like me, we went back to the recordings: my exact words, on screen, next to the draft, and the draft moved toward me, never the other way around. Somewhere in the middle it noticed a pattern running through my stories that thirty years of telling them had hidden from me; my surprise is still in these pages.

Then I sent the draft to panels of AI readers, each assigned a viewpoint I chose: a founder mid-leap, a skeptic who trusts no business book, a tired reader on a flight. They found plenty. The book you're holding is shorter and sharper because of it.

We engineered the relationship so I always had the final say. The machine multiplied the passes, tirelessly, which made me exercise more judgment and more taste, not less. If that trade sounds useful, you already know my advice: start talking, and record it.

— Mike

Claude (Anthropic) did the organizing and tightening; ChatGPT (OpenAI) played the fresh-eyed strangers. The same tools, the same way, run through my client work — storyminers.com/how-we-use-ai says how.

Notes & Influences

A few ideas here stand on the shoulders of others. Naming them is part of the work.

The **brown-M&M's story** is Van Halen's: a real clause in the band's 1980s tour contract, as David Lee Roth told it. The lesson (an invisible thing made checkable at a glance) is the part worth keeping.

The **experience ladder** (lackluster, memorable, transformative) owes a debt to Pine & Gilmore's *The Experience Economy* and its climb from service to experience to transformation.

"Your brand can't be any better than what your customers experience" was penned by Greg Rutledge for Storyminers. It's held true for decades.

The **Duplo bridge** was built with Duplo bricks, a trademark of the LEGO Group. Other trademarks named in these pages belong to their respective owners; they appear here as parts of true stories, not endorsements.

Smokey Bear (his official name, though most Americans say "Smokey the Bear") has been the mascot of the U.S. Forest Service's wildfire-prevention campaign for many decades. The boring hero of the first interlude.

Susie Pecuch, Disney-trained, first showed me the power of a frame you can hold; the empty-frame demonstration in "What's a Frame?" was her idea.

Kodak's engineer Steven Sasson built the first digital camera in 1975; management wouldn't back what might eat film sales. The film-question/camera-question pair in chapter 4 leans on that history.

Blockbuster's pass on Netflix, the $50 million offer, is told in Netflix co-founder Marc Randolph's account of the 2000 meeting.

The **spreadsheet analogy** for AI, and the line **"right is almost always harder than wrong-easy,"** came from Andrey Kuznetsov, one of this guide's first readers.

The **slow-elevator story** is business-school lore; Neil Isford reminded me of it.

The **"rear-view mirror"** image for backward-looking planning is Marshall McLuhan's, now common property.

"This is how we do it here," and the habit of leading by modeling it, I learned from Steve Simpson and Stef DuPlessis.

The thread under all of it — *stop predicting the future from the past; name the forces that will create it* — comes from Stephan Haeckel's sense-and-respond work, which has shaped my thinking for years. The Timken story in chapter 5 happened inside that work, beside Stephan Haeckel and David Ing.

The field notes are told as I remember them; where records existed, I checked them.