

The Placemat

A preparation instrument for the conversation, decision, or transition that matters this month. Self-directed version.

A placemat is what sits under the work. In coaching engagements it is the brief I build before a session: raw material on one side, numbered hypotheses in the middle, and a way of knowing afterward whether any of them survived contact. This is that instrument, rebuilt so you can run it on yourself.

Allow forty minutes the first time and about fifteen after that. Use it before a conversation you have been postponing, or a role you are stepping into, or a decision where you notice you already know the answer and are gathering support for it.

The one discipline that makes it work

Most preparation produces intentions. Intentions cannot fail, which is why they teach you nothing. A placemat produces **hypotheses**, and a hypothesis is a statement that could turn out to be wrong, and you decide in advance what would show you that it was.

| What would I see if this were false?

Ask that of every claim you make about the situation before you go into it. The question does two things at once. It separates what you actually observed from what you assembled around the observation, and it turns the conversation into an inquiry with a result, so you come out of it knowing something you did not know going in.

THE FOUR MOVEMENTS

1. **Raw material.** What was said and done, in the words it was said in.
2. **Hypotheses and tests.** What you think is going on, numbered, each with its falsifier.
3. **The ledger.** Confirmed, open, contradicted. Filled in afterward.
4. **Outcomes.** What you are committed to, who you intend to be, what you will do.

ORDER MATTERS

Work through it in sequence and resist writing the outcome first. The value sits in the discomfort of holding a situation as genuinely open while you are still describing it.

THE SITUATION, IN ONE SENTENCE

DATE · WHO IS INVOLVED

One · Raw material

Verbatim only. Quotes you can attribute, events you can date, numbers you can source.

Anything you cannot put quotation marks around belongs in section two instead.

WHAT WAS SAID

Their words, in quotation marks. Include the ones you would prefer to round off.

WHAT WAS DONE

Observable behavior with a date attached. Decisions made, meetings moved, messages unanswered, work delivered or not.

WHAT IS MISSING

The information you do not have and have been proceeding as though you did.

Two · Hypotheses

Three is the right number. Each states what you believe is happening, and each names the specific thing you would observe if you were wrong about it.

#	I THINK THIS IS WHAT IS GOING ON	I WOULD KNOW I WAS WRONG IF I SAW
1		
2		
3		

Three · The ledger

Complete this after the conversation, within a day while the language is still exact. The third column is the valuable one.

CONFIRMED Held up under contact	OPEN Still untested	CONTRADICTED Evidence went the other way

A PLACEMAT WITH NOTHING IN THE THIRD COLUMN

An empty contradicted column usually means the hypotheses were written so they could not lose, or the conversation was steered toward confirming them. Both are worth knowing. Write the next set sharper.

Four · Outcomes

Three statements, in this order. Commitment sets the direction, being names the stance the commitment asks of you, and doing is the part with a date on it.

COMMITMENT : WHAT I AM COMMITTED TO

Larger than a task and smaller than a value.

BEING : WHO I NEED TO BE FOR THAT TO BE TRUE

A quality you can locate in your body when it is present and notice the absence of when it is gone.

DOING : THE SPECIFIC ACTION, WITH A DATE

One action, named person, named day. Anything longer than two weeks is a project rather than a move.

A WORKED SET, FOR CALIBRATION

Commitment: a team that can disagree in the room.

Being: steady when the temperature rises; breathing low rather than high.

Doing: Thursday's staff meeting, name the two positions out loud within the first ten minutes and then stop talking.

Five · Watch-fors

The last section of a professional placemat lists the coach's own tendencies in that particular room, so they are visible before they operate. Yours works the same way. Two or three is enough, and they should be uncomfortable to write.

WHAT I DO IN ROOMS LIKE THIS

Talk to fill silence. Answer my own question. Concede to end the tension. Get technical when it gets personal. Name yours.

THE THING I AM HOPING DOES NOT COME UP

Write it down. It usually comes up, and having named it in advance is most of what makes it survivable.

Running it again

The instrument compounds. Keep the completed placemats in one place and read the last three before building a new one. Two things emerge from the stack that no single sheet shows.

Your hypothesis quality improves visibly. Early ones tend to be about other people's motives, which are unfalsifiable and comfortable. Later ones tend to be about the system and your own part in it, which is harder to write and far more useful.

You become able to see your own change. People are unreliable witnesses to their own development, because the person doing the assessing has already changed. A dated record of what you believed, what you committed to, and what actually happened is the only thing that makes the distance visible. Clients regularly tell me they have made no progress, then read something they wrote four months earlier, and go quiet.