CHAPTER 1 · The Administrator Test

Whatever you are trying to win, a sale, a job, a round of funding, a simple yes, the person who actually decides is almost never the person in the room with you.

You prepare for the room. You learn the names, you anticipate the hard question, you sharpen the answer you already know is coming. And then the room nods, and the room says this is interesting, let us take it back to the team, and the room leaves.

Somewhere you cannot see, in a meeting you will never sit in, the person from your room tries to explain to someone else what you do. That second person is the one who decides. You were never selling to the room.

You were selling to whoever the room talks to next.

This is the most expensive thing nobody teaches you about selling anything, a product, a company, an idea, yourself. Your value has to survive a retelling by a person who did not create it and was never impressed by you, because they never met you. If it cannot survive that retelling, it does not matter how well the meeting went. The meeting was never the point. The retelling was the point, and you were not in the room for it.

I am starting the book here on purpose. This is the single most useful instrument I own, almost no one runs it honestly, and the people who do not run it lose deals they are certain they won.

I call it the administrator test, and the name is not an accident. In the world I work in now, the person who finally says yes or no is often an administrator who will never touch the product, never sit through the demo, never read the white paper, and never once feel the thing the engineers are so proud of. They hold the pen. They sign, or they do not sign. They are, by any technical measure, the least qualified person in the entire chain to evaluate what you have built, and they are the only person whose evaluation counts.

Your administrator may wear a different title. It may be a procurement manager comparing you against two competitors on a spreadsheet they built in an afternoon. It may be a chief financial officer who joined the call eleven minutes late.

It may be a spouse, asked in a kitchen whether this is worth the money. It may be a school board, a city council, a committee that meets once a month and decides forty things in ninety minutes. The detail changes. The shape never does. Somewhere between you and the yes there is a person who does not understand your work and is not going to, and that person is the one you are actually writing for.

Picture the same product described two ways. The first description is accurate, complete, and proud. It explains the novel method, the proprietary step, the reason the engineering was hard.

Every word of it is true. The administrator hears it, nods, and at the next meeting says, I think it does something clever with the data, I did not totally follow it. That is a no, arriving three weeks later wearing the clothes of a maybe.

The second description never mentions the method. It says, in one breath, what the buyer will have on a Tuesday that they do not have today, and by when. The administrator hears that one and at the next meeting says, it takes the thing that costs us four days and makes it one, we should look at it.

Same product. Same truth underneath. One of them can be repeated by a stranger and one of them cannot, and that difference, not the technology, decides which company is still here in five years.

The test only makes sense once you see the mechanism underneath it. Value does not travel cleanly. Every time your message is retold, it loses detail, the way a sentence loses detail passed down a line of children at a party.

The nuance goes first. The cleverness goes next. The mechanism, the architecture, the thing you spent three years perfecting, all of it strips away in the retelling, because the person retelling it does not know which parts were load-bearing.

What survives the compression is the outcome, if you gave them one, and nothing at all, if you did not. You cannot supervise the retelling. You will not be there.

All you can do is decide, in advance, what is repeatable and relevant enough to survive it.

So you run the test, and you run it before the market runs it for you. Take the one sentence you would put at the top of the page, the one that states your real value instead of your tagline. Find the least technical person who will give you two minutes, someone with no stake in being kind to you.

Read them the sentence once. Then do the part everyone skips. Ask them to explain it to a third person, in their own words, while you stay quiet.

Listen to what comes back. If what comes back is the outcome, in their language and not yours, you have a value proposition, and you have just watched it survive a retelling in miniature. If what comes back is a description of your technology, you have a feature list.

If what comes back is a pause, an apology, and some version of I did not quite follow all of it, you have nothing yet, and you have learned it for free, in a friendly room, before a hostile one charged you for it.

The test has a trap in it, and I have been fooled by it, so let me arm you. A repetition is not automatically a pass. The most dangerous result is the false pass, where the person hands your jargon back to you with confidence and you mistake the confidence for comprehension.

Someone repeats that your product is AI powered, or end to end, or fully integrated, and it sounds like understanding, because they used your exact words. They used your exact words because they had none of their own. Borrowed words are what people reach for when they have nothing real to say.

A genuine pass sounds different. A genuine pass is clumsy. It is the outcome in plain, slightly wrong, entirely homemade language, the words of someone who got the point so completely they no longer need yours.

Listen for the clumsy version. The clumsy version is the one that goes on to win the deal in a room you are not in.

There is a second half to this, and it took a lost deal to teach me. Repeatable is necessary. It is not sufficient. The same clean sentence can survive the retelling and still land on the wrong desk, because the person who signs the check is rarely the person who uses the thing, and the two are almost never moved by the same words. A later chapter is built entirely on that split. And leading with the outcome never means hollowing out the substance beneath it, a balance that earns a chapter of its own further on. Here the administrator test asks only this. Build the sentence so a stranger can carry it, and aim it at what the person who actually signs is on the hook for.

Once you own the test, you start seeing everywhere it applies, and it is humbling. It applies to the name of your product, which a stranger has to say out loud without wincing. It applies to your category, the shelf you are asking to be placed on, because if the administrator cannot name your shelf they cannot find your budget line.

It applies to how you hire, because the pitch that brings you the right person is the one a candidate can repeat to a skeptical spouse over dinner. It applies to your own board, who will represent you to people you will never meet. Anywhere your value has to pass through a person who does not share your expertise, which is to say almost everywhere that matters, the administrator test is deciding your outcome, whether you choose to run it or not.

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Let me make it concrete, because the test is easy to nod at and hard to live. Picture the same company explained twice in the same week, to two different rooms. In the first room sit the experts, the engineers and the specialists, and the founder says the product runs a novel architecture that fuses three data streams in real time, and the room nods, because the room speaks that language and the sentence is true.

In the second room sits the person who actually signs, an operator with a budget and a problem and no patience for architecture, and the founder, still glowing from the first room, says the very same sentence. Nothing lands. The signer is not hostile, only unmoved, because the sentence answered a question they never asked.

The deal does not die because the technology was weak. It dies because the only sentence the founder owned was built for the wrong listener, while the sentence that would have won was sitting right there, simpler and unsaid: this hands your people back the hour they lose every morning. Same company, same truth, two sentences, and the whole outcome turning on knowing which room you are standing in.

This is the near cousin of the retelling problem, not the same animal, and it is worth keeping them apart. The retelling test asks whether your sentence survives leaving the room. This asks whether it lands inside the room in the first place. You need both. A sentence that cannot travel loses you the rooms you never see. A sentence aimed at the wrong listener loses you the room you are standing in.

I run this test by reflex, and I think I finally understand why. I have already told you that I am a generalist, that I have never been the deepest expert in any room. For most of my career I treated that as a wound to hide. I see it now as the reason the test comes naturally to me. I used to think the reason was simple, that I could not give the message an expert would give because I was not one. That is not quite true, and the untruth matters. Put me in front of my own product and I can go as deep as anyone, and that is exactly the trap the test is built to catch. The real reason is quieter. I have spent a career as the least expert person in the room, in one industry after another, until translating my value for someone two rooms away stopped being work and became the way I hear my own sentences. I do not have to simulate the administrator. Enough years on the outside, and you simply become one. I am the administrator.

I am the person two rooms away, sitting inside my own head, asking what this actually gets me and refusing to be impressed by the parts I do not understand. The outsider does not have to simulate the non-expert. The outsider is the non-expert, and that turns out to be the most valuable seat in the building, because it is the only seat that tells you the truth about whether your value can travel.

None of this is about dumbing anything down, and I want to be precise about that, because the test gets mistaken for a plea to simplify and it is the opposite. The test does not measure whether your idea is simple. It measures whether you understand your own outcome well enough to hand it to a stranger and let go of it.

That is a harder thing than sounding smart, and a rarer one. Sounding smart is the easiest thing in the world, and it loses in rooms you are not invited to, to people who could say the plain thing. So say the plain thing. Then go build the substance that makes the plain thing true. The administrator is already describing you to the person who decides. The only question this chapter asks is whether you handed them something worth repeating.

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You can start running the administrator test tomorrow. The next time you finish explaining what you do, watch the face of the least expert person in the room, and notice the exact moment their eyes change, the instant they stop following and start nodding politely. That moment is where your sentence failed.

Back up to the words just before it, and you will almost always find the place where you traded the outcome for the mechanism, where you stopped saying what they get and started saying how it works. Rewrite from there. Do this for a month and you will grow an ear for it, a small alarm that goes off the instant you hear yourself speaking the language of the room you are not actually trying to win.

WHAT IS THE LEARNING

You are selling to whoever the room talks to next. Build your value so it survives a retelling by a non-expert you will never meet. That person, not the expert across the table, is the one who actually decides.

A real pass sounds clumsy. When you run the test, listen for your outcome in someone else's plain, slightly wrong, homemade words. Your own jargon handed back to you is a failure wearing the costume of success.

The test measures you, not your idea, and it is not a plea to dumb down your work. What it checks is whether you understand your own outcome well enough to hand it to a stranger and let go of it.