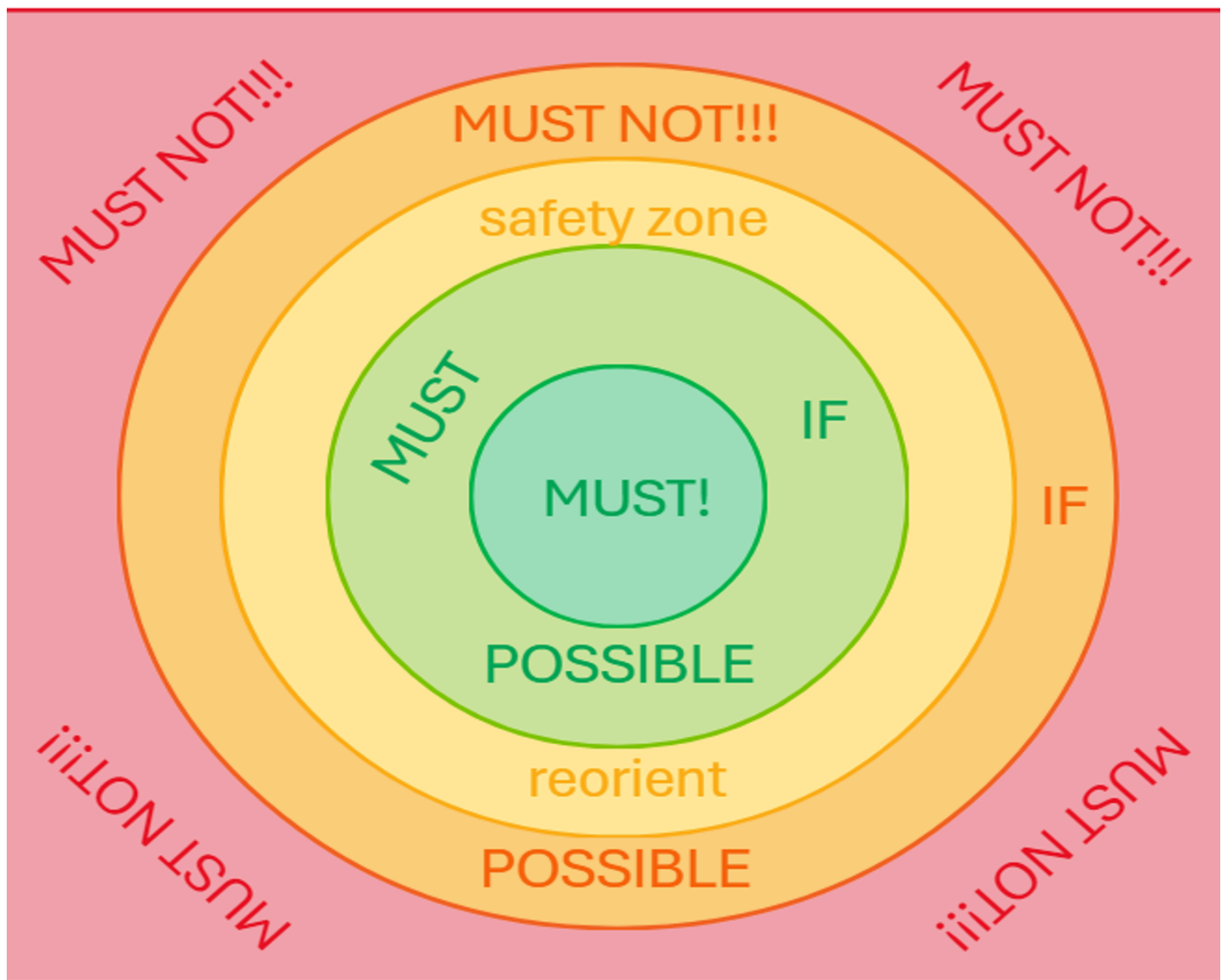


Fundamentals of Leadership: Guidelines & Guardrails

How Communicating Clear Imperatives Creates a Safer, Less-Stressful Environment for Employees ...and Sets the Stage for Performance and Agility.

by [Alicia Zaklan](#), Strategic Advisor & Founder of [Growth Curved](#)



Guidelines & Guardrails Onion Diagram - created to help leaders capture and communicate positive and negative imperatives effectively.

Imagine, it's your first week at a new job. You've been doing corporate onboarding all week, and you've only spent a few hours getting trained by a coworker. Your coworker left for an appointment and you are all alone for the first time, and you don't really feel prepared.

A customer comes in asking you for something that wasn't covered in your training, and you're not entirely sure what to do or how to do it, but no one is around for you to ask and the customer is in a hurry. What they want seems simple enough but you feel uncertain. You need this job and you don't want to mess it up, but you also don't want the customer to be unhappy. You're very stressed but you do your best, trying to follow as closely as possible what you were taught. The customer leaves happy and you are relieved.

The next day, the same customer returns with a similar request, but this time your coworker tells them that the company can't accommodate the request. The customer gets upset, saying the company didn't have a problem with it last time, pointing to you. Your coworker is frustrated and confused, the customer is upset, you're stressed out, and the manager gets called to come resolve the issue.

After the customer leaves, the manager asks you and your coworker about the transaction. The manager is upset because you did something that you should NEVER do, as well as not doing something that you should ALWAYS do, and it's going to skew reporting and look bad for your department. Your coworker is upset because they don't want to be in trouble for your mistake. You feel terrible, but you're also frustrated because the situation is unfair to you. No one told you that you should NEVER do that one thing, or that you ALWAYS have to do the other thing. How were you supposed to know? If someone had told you, you would have followed protocol! Instead, everyone involved is stressed and upset, especially you and you're having second thoughts about the job.

This is a silly, hypothetical situation, meant to demonstrate the impact of **employee uncertainty- when an employee doesn't know what to do or what the organization expects or needs from them in a given situation-** but the reality is that similar, and often much worse, cases happen in organizations all the time. Most of us have experienced it at some point in our work lives and know how stressful it can be.

Not only is **employee uncertainty** stressful for everyone involved, but it **can introduce a lot of unnecessary waste and risk into organizations.**

We can examine some of the ways employee uncertainty impacts organizations by considering different ways an employee might respond in a situation where they are uncertain.

An employee may do one, or more, of the following:

1. **Clam up** - they may decide doing nothing is better than doing the wrong thing, creating delays and possibly leading to other issues.

2. **Make something up** - they may decide doing something is better than not doing anything at all, and improvise, causing issues they aren't aware.
3. **Call for reinforcements** - they may decide they need help and go find someone who may be able to help them, causing delays.
4. **Confess & fumble through** - they may confess their lack of knowledge or capability in order to manage expectations or defer blame, undermining confidence

Best case scenario in any of these situations is that your organization experiences **some form of time delay and a hit to resource utilization**, both costly forms of waste. **Worst case**, you don't find out that something wasn't done, or was done incorrectly, until you incur some impact from it - frustrated employees, missed deadlines or SLAs, regulatory or compliance issues, quality defects, unhappy customers, reputational risk, etc- resulting in **even more costly forms of waste and risk**.

All forms of employee uncertainty will impact your organization's ability to achieve or maintain satisfactory function and respond with agility, because all forms of it indicate confusion which results in stress, creates waste, introduces risk, and is a drag on your resources, stymying the possibility of either enhanced performance or agility.

Most organizations these days are seeking enhanced performance, and agility- the ability for their organization to maintain above-average performance and also be able to be responsive and adaptable in the face of changing business realities. However, many leaders seem to be unaware of the preconditions necessary to support their aim. For instance, agility is predicated on awareness. One cannot recognize the need to respond or adapt if one is not made first made aware of what factors may indicate this need, how to recognize them, and what to do if so. **Awareness is the first precondition for the possibility of organizational agility**.

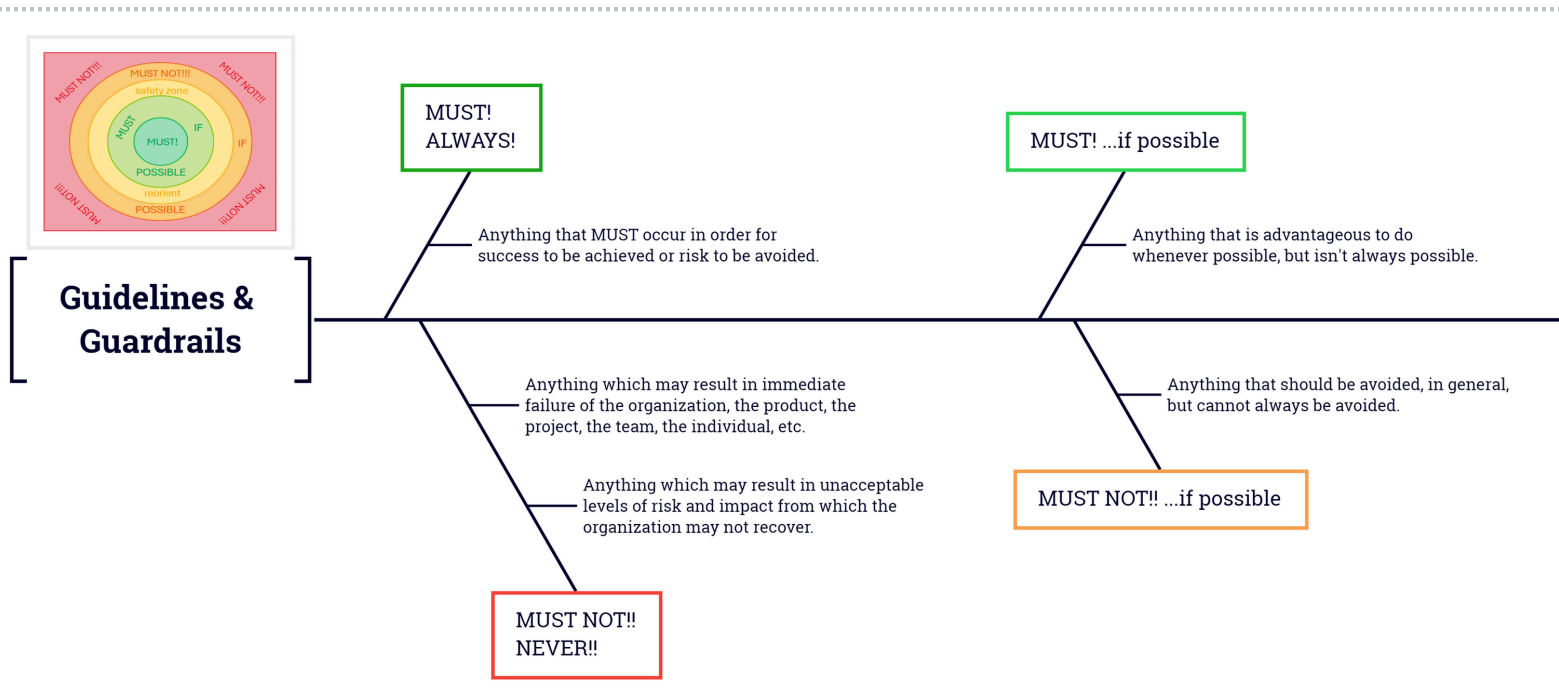
A lot of instances of employee uncertainty are a result of imperatives not being communicated or explained so that the training employees receive is understood in context and they can maintain proper awareness. **People cannot communicate about, or act in consideration of, information they are not aware of**, and so imperatives get violated, wreaking unnecessary havoc in organizations. Sadly, leaders often fail to broadly communicate imperatives or ensure that they are understood or well-reinforced. Luckily, this problem is one that can be remedied with some thoughtwork and careful communication of imperatives.

When we increase awareness by communicating imperatives clearly, we reduce stress, waste, and risk, creating a situation in which **employees know what to look out for, how to recognize both opportunities and risks, and how to react appropriately when they do**. They understand better what they could do that might help or hurt the organization, are better prepared to communicate and collaborate within the organization, and are able to be better advocates for the good of the organization.

When we reduce stress, waste, and risk, we also create relief in the system of work, allowing us to progress toward stable function- a situation in which an organization can consistently and reliably perform at the most basic level required to meet expectations. The achievement of stable function allows us to capture meaningful baseline measurements for performance, giving us valuable information about current function that we can use to inform our approach, as well as data we can evaluate against.

Without having achieved stable function and established baseline measurements, we have no objective way to evaluate ongoing performance or attempted improvements. Therefore, **both** are necessary **preconditions for proving** any level of **elevated-performance**. These are **also** preconditions **for the ability to be effectively responsive**, which is **the second precondition for organizational agility**.

If you want **to tune** your organization **for performance and/or agility**, you are going to want to **be relentless in your pursuit to identify and resolve any issues you have with employee uncertainty**. One of the best ways to do this is to identify, capture, and communicate clear guidelines and guardrails to your employees.



Guidelines are positive imperatives- **what must happen, always or if possible**- that give employees clear targets to aim for. **Guardrails are** negative imperatives- **what must not happen, ever or if possible**- that give employees clear boundaries to stay within. **When employees are clear about what they are aiming to achieve, and need to avoid, they are better equipped to reorient themselves and navigate through uncertainty.**

The two diagrams above are tools created by my company to help clients capture and communicate imperatives. **When completed, the diagrams contain at-a-glance information that is useful and easy to understand.** Once defined they can be easily distributed and referenced, easing the burden of communication and encouraging reinforcement. These can

be used in many ways- onboarding new employees, performance evaluations, organizational analysis- but the original function was to facilitate employees confidently and effectively executing their functions, with minimal possible stress, waste, or risk being incurred.

It should be noted that there are a lot of possible versions of these diagrams you could create, because there are many types of imperatives for every different level and segment of an organization, down through each division, department, unit, team, and individual. However, that is not to say that they are necessary in every, or any, form. The diagrams are merely tools, though very useful ones.

Whatever method of approach, the exercise to identify and communicate organizational imperatives is a critical task that a leader shouldn't overlook, particularly if you desire to achieve enhanced performance or agility, or your organization is experiencing any form of employee uncertainty.