Introduction

The Detective Mindset

Imagine a scene from a 1970s cop drama. A dark room. A single lamp hanging over a metal table. The air thick with tension and cigarette smoke. A detective leans across from a suspect, calmly laying out pieces of evidence as the pressure builds. The suspect begins to squirm in the chair. The detective's voice stays controlled, but the suspect starts to sweat and stutter. Round and round they go. Attack, parry, counter, deflect. The battle of wits crescendos. The cop pounds his fist on the desk, reveals the final piece of evidence, and the suspect breaks. A confession spills out in a rush of emotion, the detective slams the folder shut, and the mystery is solved.

It is a gripping scene. And for a long time, that is exactly how I imagined my father's work.

I grew up on the south side of Chicago in the 1970s and 80s. It was a good place to grow up and a great time to be there. My father was a homicide detective for the Chicago Police Department. When you are a kid and your father does that for a living, your imagination fills in the blanks. I pictured him walking into interrogation rooms just like the ones on television—sharp questions, tense confrontations, dramatic reveals. In my mind, every day was another episode of a crime drama unfolding in real time.

Later in life, I realized how far that picture was from reality. My dad used to laugh at those television scenes. "That's not how it works," he would say.

According to him, most interrogations were not dramatic at all. There was no shouting, no pounding on tables, no spectacular piece of evidence held back for the perfect moment. Real investigative work was far more mundane than Hollywood suggested. It was slow, controlled, and methodical. Mostly, it was a curious conversation—more *Columbo* than *Dirty Harry*.

The job was not to intimidate and force a confession. It was to understand what had happened and what the person sitting across the table had done that brought them there. That required patience and a certain kind of curiosity about people. Detectives asked questions, listened carefully, and let the conversation unfold. They built rapport. They paid attention to details. They returned to the same topics from slightly different angles. The process could take hours. Sometimes days. My father told me that the less the detective talked, the more the other person eventually revealed. The discipline of investigation demanded open-ended questioning and the patience to let the person with the answers fill the silence.

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My father was only twenty-five years older than me, and as I grew up, our relationship changed. He went from parent, to mentor, to business partner, to friend. His years first as a detective and then as a business owner gave him an unusual drive to understand behavior. He did not just want to know what happened. He wanted to know why it made sense to the person who did it.

As a kid, I came to know his favorite question: "Why would you do that?" Depending on how he said it, the question meant something different.

Sometimes he emphasized the first word—**WHY** would you do that?—which meant he wanted to understand the motivation behind the action. What was the person thinking at the moment they made the choice? What mattered enough to make that decision seem reasonable?

Other times the emphasis shifted—Why would **YOU** do that?—a subtle signal that the behavior seemed out of character. This might be expected from someone else, but not from you. What had changed?

And occasionally the focus was on the action itself—Why would you do **THAT**?—because the behavior did not logically follow from the situation. Why that response rather than some other option?

To understand what happened, he had to know all three: the motivation, the person, and the action.

My father loved being a detective because it challenged him to solve complex puzzles that the perpetrators did not want solved. He knew how to break an event down into its singular decision points and reconstruct the sequence that led there. That skill—taking something that looked senseless and breaking it into understandable parts—brought both clarity and justice to situations that desperately needed both. That same mindset eventually made him exceptionally effective in business.

After investigating hundreds of crimes and interviewing thousands of suspects and witnesses, there was not much he had not seen or heard. He could spot deception quickly and knew how to structure questioning so that people eventually revealed the truth themselves. He also understood that the environment in which information is presented plays a powerful role in what people say and do. The arrangement of facts, the sequence of questions, the tone of the room, the pauses in the conversation—these things mattered.

Later, as a business owner, he applied the same logic to employees and operations. He thought about the decisions people would face while doing their jobs. Where might someone hesitate? Where might they get confused? What information would they see first?

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What shortcuts might they take under pressure? Once he understood where mistakes were likely to happen, he designed the system to account for them and nudge people toward the right decision.

The same habits that made him a good detective—patience, curiosity, and attention to sequence—also made him unusually effective in operations. The questions he asked suspects were not so different from the questions he asked about broken processes or recurring mistakes. After years in corporate environments, I noticed how often leaders found themselves asking remarkably similar questions.

Something goes wrong. A shipment goes out incorrectly. A customer receives the wrong invoice. A project misses a deadline even though everyone involved knew the timeline. Somewhere in the chain of events, a choice was made that seems irrational in hindsight. When managers review what happened, the instinctive reaction is almost always the same: *Why would someone do that*?

At first glance, the explanation appears obvious. Someone made a mistake. Someone did not pay attention. Someone failed to follow the process. In other words, the problem is assumed to be the person. But if you spend enough time examining these situations carefully, that easy explanation starts to feel incomplete.

Most employees are neither careless nor incompetent. They do not come to work intending to create extra work for themselves or others. Yet the same errors repeat. Rework becomes routine. The same avoidable problems show up month after month, even after training sessions, reminders, policy changes, and stern conversations. When that happens across multiple people, the issue is rarely the individuals. The evidence points to the system surrounding the decision.

The bridge between crime solving and operational improvement is not in the behaviors themselves; it is in the methods used to investigate and diagnose them. In both cases, you must get down to the level of individual decisions to see what really happened. The surface event is only the outcome. The real explanation lies in the sequence of choices that produced it. Just like in my father's investigations, the question is not simply what happened. The real question is how a series of small decisions leads there.

In organizations, most mistakes are not failures of motivation or character. They are the natural outcome of the environment in which decisions are made. The structure of work—software interfaces, forms, procedures, option presentation, feedback, and incentives—quietly shapes the choices employees make throughout the day.

That environment sends signals about what matters, what is urgent, what is easy, and what is optional. Employees respond to those signals, often without realizing it. When the

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system is designed well, good decisions happen almost automatically. When it is designed poorly, even capable people struggle to make the right choice consistently.

Much like the layout of an airplane cockpit is designed around the pilot and built to support accurate decisions under pressure, every workplace has its own decision environment. This book is about learning to design that environment more intentionally. Not by demanding more from people, but by building systems that better support how real human beings actually think and act.

My father learned this lesson before behavioral economists began studying it formally. After leaving the police department, he founded a security company that eventually grew into a multimillion-dollar operation. This was long before modern business software became commonplace. There were no automated dashboards, no workflow systems, no digital prompts guiding employees step by step. Everything had to work through people. The company depended on guards, supervisors, and dispatchers making the right decisions in real time, often under pressure and with incomplete information.

In that kind of environment, mistakes were inevitable unless the systems themselves accounted for human behavior. A guard might miss a critical detail in a report simply because the form buried the most important information in the middle of a crowded page. Move that field to the top, and the mistake disappeared. The insight was simple but powerful: if a process depended on perfect attention or flawless memory, it would fail sooner or later. My father understood that the solution was not to demand perfection from employees. It was to design processes that anticipated normal human tendencies—fatigue, distraction, shortcuts, and misunderstanding—and guided people toward better choices anyway.

When I joined his company as a teenager, I saw this approach play out over and over again. I worked on the front lines, where the practical challenges of day-to-day operations were most visible. When something broke—a communication failure, a scheduling mix-up, an incomplete report—I would bring the issue back to him. Instead of immediately focusing on who had made the mistake, he would start dissecting the process itself.

- What information did the employee see first?
- What step came next?
- Where might confusion arise?
- What made the wrong action easier than the right one?

Then he would adjust the system so that the next person facing the same situation would naturally make a better decision.

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These changes were rarely dramatic. Sometimes it was as simple as reorganizing a form so the most important information appeared first. Sometimes it meant removing unnecessary options that created confusion. Sometimes it required adding a small piece of feedback that alerted someone to a potential error before it became a larger problem. Individually, these adjustments seemed minor. Over time, they produced systems that ran smoothly because the environment supported the decisions employees needed to make.

Years later, when I began studying behavioral economics and decision science, I realized that what my father had learned through experience was surprisingly similar to what researchers were uncovering in the lab. Scholars like Daniel Kahneman, Richard Thaler, and others showed that human decision-making follows patterns that are remarkably predictable. People rely on mental shortcuts. They respond strongly to how choices are presented. They avoid unnecessary effort and gravitate toward whatever seems easiest, most obvious, or least costly in the moment. In other words, people do not make decisions in a vacuum. Their choices are shaped by the structure of the environment around them.

Behavioral economists refer to that structure as **choice architecture**—the design of the context in which decisions occur. Just as the layout of a grocery store influences what customers buy, the design of a company's internal systems influences how employees act throughout the day. Sometimes those systems support good judgment. Other times they quietly encourage mistakes.

When leaders encounter recurring errors, the instinct is often to intervene directly with the people involved. They add more training. Issue stricter policies. Increase oversight. Sometimes those steps help for a while. But they rarely solve the deeper problem if the system itself continues to push people toward the wrong choice.

This book takes a different approach.

In the chapters ahead, I will show you how to redesign work systems using six practical tools drawn from behavioral science—tools that help eliminate errors before they happen, reduce rework, and make good decisions easier to make. The goal is not to force people to behave differently. It is to redesign the environment so that the right behavior becomes the easier, more natural choice.

Hollywood tells us that solving problems is dramatic and theatrical. Business has its own version of that fantasy: sweeping restructurings, motivational slogans, high-visibility initiatives, and leaders swinging figurative chainsaws at whatever looks inefficient. Those efforts may look decisive, but they often miss the real source of friction. Real progress tends to be quieter.

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In both policing and business, success often comes from something much simpler: careful observation, patient questioning, and small adjustments to the environment in which decisions are made.

My father never read Kahneman, Thaler, or Ariely. He did not need to. Through experience, he arrived at many of the same insights. Like them, he learned about behavior by observing what people actually did under pressure. He applied those learning by building systems that still worked when those people were tired, distracted, rushed, or emotionally overloaded. This book is, in many ways, the scientific translation of a lifetime of detective work and business leadership.

Good people make mistakes when the cockpit is badly designed. Fix the cockpit, and you rarely have to fix the people. That insight is the foundation of *Efficient by Design*. This book is for the owners, operators, and leaders who look at recurring mistakes inside their organizations and ask the same question my father asked across that interrogation table: *Why would you do that?*

Not as an accusation, but as the beginning of an investigation. The question is not who made the mistake. The question is why the system made that mistake possible. Once you see that clearly, the fix is rarely dramatic. More often, it is surprisingly simple.

Let’s begin.

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