

The Smallest Move That Works

Half a decibel.

That is the size of many of my best moves. A gentle shelf at 12 kHz. Half a decibel of gain reduction with a slow release. On a good day, leaving something alone takes more nerve than the alternatives.

Mastering equipment can do enormous violence to music. The craft is withholding it.

Headroom

For roughly two decades, records grew louder. A louder master jumped out on radio, on a compilation or in an A&R playback. The digital ceiling was fixed, so the only way up was to squash everything underneath. Records became exhausting inside three minutes. If everything is loud, nothing is loud.

The engineers could hear it, but people optimising for the first ten seconds had set the target outside the music. The work degraded to the target.

Organisations do this to people. Every measurable target rises; the place loses its dynamic range. Without contrast, nothing lands: an ordinary day and a real crisis are treated the same.

Headroom looks like waste on a spreadsheet. It is the mechanism by which anything is able to breathe.

One thing, four consequences

Listen long enough to find which single thing is causing the rest.

What sounds like five problems is often one problem with four consequences. Correct the one and the four go with it. Treat all five and you have a record messed with everywhere, and it sounds like it.

A leader lists eleven things that are wrong; most are downstream of one. My usefulness rests on finding that one and having the restraint to leave its consequences alone.

That is harder than it seems. A long list of interventions looks like effort. One small change can look like I did very little for my fee.

Committing

At some point, the engineer prints the master. Finished is its own standard, and it arrives some distance before perfection.

Perfectionism is a leak. Adjust beyond the point where your ear is reliable and you defend choices made while tired. Commit while you can still hear, then let the thing go into a world where other people's lives will happen over it.

Craft is knowing when to stop. Decide while the judgement is good. Print it. Live with it.

Inaudible work

The finest mastering is undetectable. Nobody listening to a great record thinks about the person who set the final balance. They think the band sounded that way all along.

I want the same invisibility in organisational work. Success looks like a team believing they solved it, because they did. My part is creating the conditions in which what they have can translate.

A person, a team and a piece of music all have their own intent and history. The work is not to remake them in your image. Hear what they are trying to become, make the smallest move that helps them arrive, let them breathe, and know when to take your hands off.

I am putting the studio back into my week. Whatever comes back with me will show up in the other work, half a decibel at a time.