

The Governance Gap

12 Board Scenarios Every Nonprofit Leader Faces and Nobody Prepares You For

Whether you are the ED, the ops manager, or someone caught in the middle, board dysfunction has a way of landing on you. This guide names what is happening, explains why, and gives you a practical path forward for each scenario.

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About This Guide

Most resources on board governance are written for board members. This one is written for everyone else: the ED who is trying to manage upward without a roadmap, the ops manager who absorbs the consequences of dysfunction without any authority to address it, and the program director who watches boundaries get crossed and does not know what to do next.

The twelve scenarios in this guide are not hypothetical. They are patterns that repeat across organizations of every size, in every sector, on every continent. The people involved are rarely acting in bad faith. Most board dysfunction is not caused by malice; it is caused by role confusion, missing conversations, and the absence of explicit agreements about how things should work.

Each scenario follows the same structure. First, a description of what the situation looks like in practice. Second, an explanation of why it happens, because understanding the root cause changes how you respond to it. Third, a practical path forward for what should happen instead. Fourth, the research that explains why the recommended approach works.

Thirty years of working with organizations and their leaders has produced one consistent observation: the most expensive governance failures are the ones that nobody named until it was too late. This guide is an attempt to give you the language to name them earlier.

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SCENARIO 01

The Board Member Who Shows Up While the ED Is Away

Good intentions, real consequences

THE SCENARIO

A board member stops by the office unannounced to say hello, perhaps to pick something up or because they were nearby. The ED is traveling or otherwise unavailable. Within minutes, staff members begin gravitating toward the board member with questions they have been holding: a pending pay adjustment, a performance concern, whether they can borrow a piece of organizational equipment, or what is happening with a recent decision. The board member answers, because they want to be helpful, because they care about the organization, and because nobody ever told them not to.

WHY IT HAPPENS

The boundary between governance and operations is rarely made explicit in the early stages of an organization's life. Board members often joined when the organization was small and everyone did everything together. The habit of operational involvement carries forward long after the organization has grown. Staff naturally seek information from any available authority figure, especially when the ED is unavailable, and the board member fills that vacuum not out of malice but out of instinct.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

The board should adopt a formal, written policy governing board-staff interaction outside of meetings. The policy should be simple: all staff questions about compensation, performance, resources, and operational decisions go through the ED. When a board member visits the office, they are guests in the operational space, not supervisors. Any question they receive should be warmly redirected: 'That's a great question for [ED's name]. I'll make sure they follow up with you.' The board member should also notify the ED after any informal visit so the ED is aware of what conversations happened and can respond appropriately.

THE SCIENCE

Role theory, developed by sociologist Robert Merton and later refined in organizational research, shows that when roles are ambiguous, people default to whatever behavior feels natural in the moment. Staff with unmet informational needs will seek answers from any available authority figure, regardless of whether that person has legitimate standing to answer. The consequences compound: staff receive inconsistent or incomplete information, the ED loses visibility into staff concerns, and the board member develops a false sense of what their role entails. Clear role boundaries, documented and reinforced, are the only reliable preventive measure.

SCENARIO 02

The Board Member Who Communicated a Decision Before the ED Could

Transparency without context is its own kind of harm

THE SCENARIO

The board has just made a significant decision: a new expense approval process, a restriction on resource use, a change in organizational structure. The ED has a communication plan and intends to share the news with staff thoughtfully, in the right sequence, with appropriate context. Before they can do so, a board member sends an email to a group of staff, sometimes copying the full organization, sharing the decision with enthusiasm. Staff members who had no preparation receive unexpected news in their inbox, sometimes while in the middle of a client session, a presentation, or a difficult conversation of their own.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Board members who come from business environments often prize transparency above nearly everything else. Sharing information quickly feels like integrity. What they rarely consider is that organizational communication is not just about content; it is about sequence, tone, and the human capacity to receive change. The board member who sends that email is not trying to undermine the ED. They are simply operating without an understanding of why communication must be managed carefully, especially in organizations where staff welfare is central to the mission.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

The board should adopt a clear communication protocol as part of its governance policies: board decisions are communicated to the ED first, who then determines the how and when of internal communication. If the ED needs support crafting the message, the chair can offer that. Individual board members do not communicate operational decisions to staff directly, under any circumstances. This is not about controlling information; it is about ensuring that people receive news about their work environment with the care and context it deserves.

THE SCIENCE

Change management research, particularly John Kotter's foundational work on leading organizational change, consistently identifies communication quality as one of the primary drivers of whether change lands well or generates resistance. People do not object to change nearly as much as they object to feeling like change is happening to them without their leaders present. When staff receive news from a board member rather than the ED, the implicit message is that their direct leader was bypassed, which erodes trust in the ED and generates anxiety about what else is being decided above them.

SCENARIO 03

The Staff Member Who Speaks Up and Gets Called a Problem

What looks like disruption is usually investment

THE SCENARIO

A staff member regularly asks hard questions in team meetings, advocates for a different approach, or openly disagrees with a decision that has come down from leadership. A board member, who has either heard about this through the ED or witnessed it during a staff presentation, concludes that this person is a disruptor. They ask the ED, directly or through the chair, to 'deal with' the situation, by which they typically mean: quiet the staff member, manage them out, or at minimum signal that the behavior is unwelcome.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Leadership models that valued compliance were dominant for most of the twentieth century. Board members who built their careers in that era learned, often through direct experience, that questioning authority was career-limiting behavior. They internalized the idea that a smooth-running organization is a quiet one. When they encounter an employee who challenges decisions openly, their frame of reference reads that behavior as insubordination, even when the employee's intentions are entirely constructive.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

The ED needs to push back on this framing, professionally but without ambiguity. A staff member who advocates loudly for what they believe is right is an asset that most organizations spend years trying to cultivate. The ED's job in this conversation is to reframe the board member's concern and to protect the conditions that allow staff to speak up. If the staff member's delivery is creating problems, that is a coaching conversation between the ED and the staff member, and it is not a board matter.

THE SCIENCE

Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety, developed over two decades at Harvard Business School, is unambiguous on this point: teams where people feel safe to speak up, disagree, and raise concerns consistently outperform those where they do not, across every measurable outcome. Organizations that suppress dissent do not become safer or more stable; they become less informed. The voices that are silenced are often the ones carrying the most accurate read of what is actually happening on the ground.

SCENARIO 04

The Staff Member Who Didn't Know the Rules of the Room

Protocol gaps set good people up to fail

THE SCENARIO

A staff member is invited to attend a board meeting, either to take notes or to present on a specific topic. They prepare carefully and show up ready to contribute. What they do not know is that a board meeting operates under a different set of norms than any other meeting in the organization. When a topic comes up that they know something about, they offer an opinion. When a board member makes a statement they disagree with, they respond. A board member, trying to keep the meeting on track, responds with visible curtness. The staff member is mortified. The board member is frustrated. The ED is caught in the middle, and nobody prepared anyone for any of it.

WHY IT HAPPENS

EDs routinely invite staff into board meetings without briefing them on the norms because the norms feel obvious to someone who has been in those rooms for years. For a staff member attending their first board meeting, nothing about it is obvious. A board meeting is not a staff meeting. Board members run the agenda. The ED manages the relationship between staff and board. Staff who are present are there in a specific, defined capacity, and unless directly asked for input, their role is to observe, support, and report, not to participate in the governance conversation.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

Every staff member who attends a board meeting for the first time should receive a clear, specific briefing from the ED beforehand. The briefing should cover: your role in this meeting, when you speak and when you do not, how to handle a direct question from a board member, and what the meeting is designed to accomplish. This is not complicated, but it must happen before the staff member walks in the door. The board member who responded with curtness also has something to reflect on: a more gracious way of redirecting a well-intentioned staff member exists, and using it reflects better on the board.

THE SCIENCE

Research on role ambiguity, originating with Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman's foundational 1970 study, established that unclear role expectations are among the most reliable predictors of performance failure and workplace anxiety. When a person enters a new context without a clear understanding of what their role requires, they default to whatever behavior feels natural to them, which is almost always the wrong fit for the new context. Clear role definition before the event is the simplest and most effective intervention available.

SCENARIO 05

The ED and Chair Who Never Got on the Same Page

Everything downstream depends on this one conversation

THE SCENARIO

A new ED steps into their first board meeting. The chair opens the meeting and things move quickly. A board member raises a concern that the ED disagrees with. The ED is not sure whether to say so in the room, pass the chair a note, wait until after the meeting, or stay silent and address it privately later. They have no idea what the chair expects. They make a guess, get it wrong, and spend the next three months trying to repair the impression. Meanwhile, the chair assumed the ED knew how this was done, and neither of them ever had the conversation that would have prevented all of it.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Asking for the alignment conversation feels presumptuous, especially for an ED who is new and wants to demonstrate confidence. Chairs often assume that anyone who has reached the ED role already understands governance norms. Both parties assume the other will signal when something is off, and both are wrong, because signaling in real time in a board meeting is exactly what neither of them has the tools to do without having agreed on a protocol first.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

Before the first board meeting, the ED requests a dedicated conversation with the chair, framed not as uncertainty but as professionalism. The agenda for that conversation should include: what parliamentary or procedural process does this board follow, how does the chair want the ED to handle public disagreement in the room, what is the communication protocol between meetings, and is there a shared commitment to surfacing conflict privately before it plays out in front of the full board. This conversation, done well, sets the foundation for every difficult moment that follows.

THE SCIENCE

Research on leadership dyads, including the CEO-Chair relationship in corporate governance, consistently identifies explicit early expectation-setting as the highest-leverage action in the first stage of the relationship. Organizations where the ED and chair have a strong, explicitly negotiated working relationship demonstrate better governance outcomes, less board conflict, and greater organizational stability than those where the relationship develops by assumption. The absence of this conversation is not neutral; it guarantees misalignment on the first occasion that tests it.

SCENARIO 06

The Board Member Whose Values Contradict the Mission

Recruiting for capacity without checking for alignment is a governance failure

THE SCENARIO

The organization serves a population in need. The mission is explicit about equity, belonging, and inclusion. The board includes a successful business leader, recruited for their financial network and organizational credibility. In board meetings, this person makes comments that undercut the organization's DEIB commitments, sometimes openly and with apparent confidence that others share their view. Staff who hear about this through the ED or through meeting minutes feel the contradiction viscerally. The ED does not know how to address it without losing the donor or the board seat.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Boards of social service and nonprofit organizations frequently recruit members for their wealth, influence, and professional networks, treating values alignment as a secondary consideration, or as something that can be addressed through orientation documents rather than genuine conversation. The result is a board that can fund the organization but cannot credibly champion its mission. In many cases, the values gap was visible during recruitment and was set aside because the need for the resource felt more urgent.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

Values alignment must be part of every board recruitment conversation, not a box to check but a real exchange. Prospective board members should understand what the organization's commitments mean in practice, who the organization serves and why, and what it looks like when a board member publicly champions those commitments. When a sitting board member's behavior contradicts the mission, the chair and ED must address it directly, beginning with a private conversation and moving to formal action, including removal from the board, if the behavior continues.

THE SCIENCE

Organizational identity research, developed by Albert and Whetten in 1985 and extended across decades of subsequent study, shows that when an organization's stated values and enacted values diverge, staff trust erodes rapidly and disproportionately among the people the organization most needs to retain. For social service organizations, this effect is amplified because many staff members come from or identify with the communities being served. The presence of a board member who dismisses those communities is not just a governance problem; it is a direct threat to the organization's ability to attract and keep the talent its mission requires.

SCENARIO 07

The Board Member Who Has Everything to Offer and Says Nothing

Silence is not neutral in a governance room

THE SCENARIO

The board includes someone with exactly the experience the organization needs: legal expertise, clinical background, financial acumen, or lived experience of the populations served. In every meeting, this person listens carefully and contributes almost nothing. When the chair asks for their input directly, they defer or offer a brief comment that does not reflect the depth of what they know. The discussions that most need their perspective proceed without it, and decisions are made with incomplete information, not because the expertise was absent from the room, but because it stayed silent.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Board members who are under-contributors are rarely disengaged. More often, they are uncertain about when it is appropriate to speak, deferring to longer-tenured members out of a sense that they have not yet earned their voice. Some come from professional contexts where speaking without being formally invited carries risk. Some were recruited but never truly onboarded into a culture of active engagement. Some simply do not know that their specific expertise is what the organization needs most in this moment.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

The chair carries the primary responsibility for drawing out under-contributing board members, and this work happens outside of meetings, not in them. A direct, one-on-one conversation after a meeting where a board member's expertise was relevant and absent is the right opening. The conversation is not about performance management; it is an invitation: 'I noticed we were discussing X tonight, and I know you have deep experience there. I would love to hear your thinking before the next meeting, and I will make sure there is a moment for you to share it in the room.' Structured input opportunities in meeting design, like a brief round before a major vote, also give quieter members a formal opening.

THE SCIENCE

Research on collective intelligence, published by Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, and Malone in 2010, established that group performance is not determined by the intelligence of the most capable individual in the room. It is determined by the degree to which all members contribute. Groups with one or two dominant voices and several silent members consistently underperform groups with more evenly distributed participation, even when the dominant voice is objectively the most knowledgeable person present. Every silent board member is a governance liability, regardless of their credentials.

SCENARIO 08

The Board That Can't Stay Out of How Things Get Done

Governing and operating are not the same job

THE SCENARIO

The board is involved in decisions that should never reach them. They want to review social media posts before they go out. They weigh in on hiring decisions below the ED level. They question individual expense line items that fall within the ED's approved budget authority. A board member calls the program director directly to suggest a change in how a service is delivered. The ED spends more time managing board involvement in operations than on strategy, and staff who hear about this begin to wonder who is actually running the organization.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Many boards form during the founding stage of an organization, when operational involvement is not just acceptable but necessary. Board members during that period roll up their sleeves, make decisions, and build things alongside staff. As the organization matures and professionalizes, the board's role needs to evolve from operational to strategic, but nobody explicitly signals that transition, and old habits persist. Some board members also struggle to find meaningful strategic work and fill the vacuum with operational engagement because it feels more tangible and immediately satisfying.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

The board's role is to govern: set direction, ensure accountability, steward resources at the level of policy and strategy, and hire and evaluate the ED. Everything below that line belongs to the ED. This division needs to be explicitly documented in the board's governance policies, reinforced by the chair in every meeting where the line gets crossed, and revisited annually as part of the board's self-assessment. When a board member crosses the line, the response from the chair should be consistent, respectful, and immediate: 'That is a great question for [ED's name]. Let's make sure it gets routed appropriately.'

THE SCIENCE

John Carver's Policy Governance model, developed in the 1990s and since adopted by thousands of nonprofit boards, makes a clear structural distinction between ends (the outcomes the board directs the organization to achieve) and means (the methods the ED uses to achieve them). The board governs the ends and establishes boundaries on the means; the ED operates within those boundaries without board interference. Research on governance effectiveness consistently shows that boards adhering to this or similar frameworks produce better organizational outcomes, stronger ED tenure, and healthier organizational cultures than those that blur the line between governance and operations.

SCENARIO 09

The Ops Manager Who Sees Everything and Can't Say Anything

The people closest to dysfunction are often the last ones with a path to address it

THE SCENARIO

The deputy ED, ops manager, or program director can see the board dysfunction clearly. They watch a board member overstep in a meeting. They hear about a communication that went wrong. They know that a boundary has been crossed, and they know what it is costing the organization. The ED is either unaware, unavailable, or in more difficult cases, is part of the dynamic that makes addressing it impossible. The mid-level leader has no formal relationship with the board, no standing to raise a governance concern, and no organizational mechanism that would allow them to do so safely.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Governance is treated, almost universally, as an ED-level concern. The structures, training, and language of board management are directed at the most senior staff role, and the implicit assumption is that everything below the ED is insulated from board dynamics. In practice, mid-level leaders absorb the downstream consequences of governance dysfunction more directly than anyone, including staff anxiety, operational disruption, and erosion of trust in leadership, while having no formal channel to address its source.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

Organizations need internal mechanisms that allow mid-level leaders to raise governance concerns without having to circumvent the ED. This can take the form of a clear ethics or concern-reporting policy, a direct relationship between the board chair and senior staff that is transparent and bounded, or simply an organizational culture in which the ED actively solicits upward communication on governance issues. Mid-level leaders also benefit from training that gives them language for what they are seeing, so they can name it accurately rather than carrying it as a vague and unresolvable frustration.

THE SCIENCE

Voice behavior research, conducted by Van Dyne and LePine in 1998 and extensively replicated since, shows that employees are most likely to remain silent when they perceive that speaking up will be ignored or will put them at risk, and most likely to speak when they trust that the organization has real mechanisms to hear and act on their input. Mid-level leaders who carry accurate organizational knowledge and have no legitimate outlet for it do not simply adapt; they disengage, and the organizations that most need their insight are the ones least equipped to receive it.

SCENARIO 10

The Decision That Was Already Made Before Anyone Sat Down

Pre-meeting coalition building turns governance into theater

THE SCENARIO

Before a significant board discussion, a board member, or sometimes the ED, begins working the phones. They have coffee with two or three colleagues, share their perspective, and gather support. By the time the meeting begins, the vote is already determined. The board members who were not part of those conversations walk in blind, and the discussion that follows is not a genuine deliberation; it is a performance of one. Those who dissent or raise new information are not really heard, because the outcome was settled before they spoke.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Alliance building before a board meeting is often a response to uncertainty. A board member who is not confident their position will prevail in open discussion manages that risk by securing commitments in advance. In dysfunctional boards, it can be a survival mechanism for someone who has learned that open dissent is unsafe. In healthier boards, it is simply how things have always been done, a habit inherited from an earlier board culture that nobody has ever named or questioned.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

Pre-meeting conversations between board members are not inherently problematic, but their purpose matters. Gathering information, sharing a concern, or thinking through a complex issue with a colleague is appropriate and often valuable. Securing votes is not. The distinction is whether the conversation is designed to open thinking or to close it. Decisions belong in the room, made on the basis of what the full board hears together. When the chair observes that a vote is clearly predetermined, naming that dynamic directly at the start of the discussion is one of the most effective things they can do to restore the integrity of the process.

THE SCIENCE

Research on group decision-making, including Irving Janis's foundational work on groupthink and Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastie's more recent research on group deliberation, shows that the value of a group decision-making process lies precisely in the diversity of information that enters the room. Pre-meeting coalition building systematically reduces that diversity by ensuring that dissenting or unfamiliar perspectives arrive without the social support they need to be heard. The result is not a better decision; it is a faster one that carries the confidence of consensus while lacking its substance.

SCENARIO 11

The ED Who Was Asked to Write the Strategy

Delegating governance work downward is a shortcut with real costs

THE SCENARIO

The organization's strategic plan has expired, or the board has recognized that one is needed. The chair, aware that the ED knows the organization's operations better than anyone in the room, asks them to put together a first draft for the board to discuss and build on. The ED invests significant time, drawing on deep organizational knowledge, and produces a thoughtful document. The board reviews it, makes modest adjustments, and approves it. On paper, the organization now has a strategic plan. In practice, it has the ED's plan with the board's signature, and the two roles in that document are reversed from what they should be. The board is now executing on work the ED created, and the ED is executing on work they wrote themselves, which makes accountability for either nearly impossible to establish.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Strategic planning is difficult, time-consuming work, and boards that meet infrequently often lack the continuity needed to drive it from within. The ED, by contrast, is embedded in the organization every day and has a detailed understanding of its strengths, constraints, and opportunities. Asking the ED to draft the plan feels efficient. What it actually does is transfer the board's most important governance responsibility to the person the board is supposed to be directing. There is also a subtler dynamic at work: boards that are uncertain about their own strategic role sometimes default to asking the ED to lead because it is easier than doing the work themselves, and nobody names what is happening.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

Strategy is the board's work, informed and supported by the ED. The process should run in the right direction: the board, often with the help of a neutral facilitator, leads the strategic conversation, while the ED serves as a critical contributor of operational knowledge and context. The ED's role is to inform the strategy, not to author it. Once the board has set strategic direction, the ED translates it into an operational plan, which is where their expertise legitimately takes over. Before any planning process begins, the board and ED should have an explicit conversation that establishes this division clearly: the board owns where we are going, the ED owns how we get there. If the board lacks the capacity or time to lead the process, the right answer is a skilled external facilitator, not a downward delegation.

SCENARIO 12

The ED Who Can't Stay Out of How the Board Governs

Overreach runs in both directions

THE SCENARIO

An experienced ED has developed firm convictions about how the board should operate. They build the agenda alone, decide which information the board sees, steer governance discussions toward conclusions reached in advance, and treat the meeting itself as a briefing on decisions already made. Recruitment runs through the ED's personal network, so new members arrive already loyal to the ED rather than to the organization. When a board member questions a proposal, the response explains why the concern is wrong instead of exploring it. Over time the board stops preparing, stops probing, and settles into approving whatever is put in front of it.

WHY IT HAPPENS

The ED usually holds most of the operational knowledge and often has more governance experience than anyone else at the table. When a board under-functions, a capable ED over-functions to fill the vacuum, almost always out of genuine care for the organization. The pattern reinforces itself: the more the ED manages the board, the less capacity the board builds, which confirms the ED's belief that the board cannot be trusted with real governance work. It is the same role confusion that drives board overreach into operations, running in the opposite direction.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD

The ED's legitimate role in governance is to inform, to recommend, and to support the board's work: never to control it. The agenda should be built jointly with the chair, with room for items the ED did not originate. Recommendations should arrive as options with a clear staff preference, so the board makes a real decision rather than ratifying a finished one. Recruitment and officer selection belong to the board, typically through a governance committee, with the ED suggesting candidates rather than controlling the pipeline. If the underlying problem is a weak board, the honest response is board development led by the chair with the ED's support. An annual conversation about roles and mutual expectations keeps the boundary explicit instead of assumed.

THE SCIENCE

Managerial hegemony theory, first documented in Myles Mace's research on corporate boards and extended to nonprofits by Melissa Middleton, describes boards that hold formal authority while functioning as instruments of the executive. Research by Robert Herman and Richard Heimovics found that the most effective nonprofit executives do the opposite of dominating: they practice board-centered leadership, deliberately building the board's capacity to govern. The risk concentrates at leadership transition: when an ED who has absorbed the board's function departs, the organization loses its management and its governance at once, which is why succession crises hit executive-dominated organizations hardest.

THE SCIENCE

Research on principal-agent relationships in nonprofit governance, particularly work by Herman and Renz (1999) on organizational effectiveness, consistently identifies strategic direction as the board's core governance function and the one most directly linked to organizational performance. When the board delegates strategic planning to the ED, two problems compound: the board loses the engagement and ownership that come from doing the work themselves, reducing their commitment to the plan's implementation; and the ED is placed in the structurally awkward position of executing a strategy they wrote, with diminished standing to push back when circumstances change. The result is an organization with no genuine strategic dialogue between governance and management, which is precisely the conversation most responsible for setting long-term direction.

What to Do Next

Reading about governance dysfunction is different from knowing how to respond to it in the moment. The scenarios in this guide give you a frame, but the harder work is building the confidence to use it when you are sitting in a board meeting, watching something go wrong, and deciding whether to speak.

If you are an ED, the most valuable thing you can do right now is schedule the alignment conversation with your chair that Scenario 5 describes, if you have not already had it. Everything else in your board relationship is easier when that foundation is in place.

If you are a mid-level leader, the most valuable thing you can do is find language for what you are seeing and bring it to your ED clearly and specifically. Vague frustration rarely produces change. A well-framed observation does.

If you are a board member reading this, the most valuable thing you can do is be honest about which of these scenarios you have participated in, and what you would do differently with this frame in hand.

Continue the Conversation

Interface Coaching AI is available 24/7 to help you think through any of these scenarios in the context of your specific organization. Try it free at app.interfacecoaching.coach. For complex situations that go beyond what a guide can cover, a direct conversation is always available at interfacecoaching.coach.

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