

6 The Jackie Stewart Principle

Precision is not a popular concept in leadership conversations. It is seen as technical, constraining, insufficiently inspiring. But the evidence from any domain where the margin between success and failure is genuinely small is that precision is not a restriction on excellence. It is one of its primary mechanisms.

Most organisations have a feedback problem. Not in the sense that feedback does not happen, but in the sense that the feedback that does happen is too general to be useful. Performance reviews that describe an impression rather than a behaviour. Strategic conversations that reach a conclusion without naming the specific conditions that will determine whether that conclusion holds. Development conversations that leave the person being developed with a feeling about how they are doing but no clear information about what to do differently. The result is that the gap between current performance and better performance remains wide, not because people lack the willingness to improve but because the information needed to improve is not specific enough to act on.

Jackie Stewart's Formula One career illustrates the alternative with unusual clarity, because the context made the cost of imprecision literally fatal. The principle he developed from that context turns out to apply far beyond the circuit.

The Crash at Spa and What It Changed

Jackie Stewart raced Formula 1 in the 1960s and early 1970s. He won three World Championships, in 1969, 1971 and 1973, and retired as the sport's most successful driver at that point. He raced in an era that is genuinely difficult to imagine now: circuits without barriers, cars with no meaningful safety structures, and a rate of driver fatality that was accepted, by the sport and by the drivers themselves, as simply the nature of the thing. Between 1963 and 1973, more than a dozen Formula 1 drivers died in racing accidents.