

The Second Language

You are not starting over. Your experience is real — it's just written in a language your new world doesn't read yet. A field guide for crossing into corporate life.

How to use this guide

- **Use a pen.** Print this, or write in a notebook alongside it. Typing invites editing; editing invites performance. The pen is slower than your defenses.
- **Write for the drawer.** No one will read this — not me, not your manager, not the person you're thinking of. Answers written for an audience are worthless here.
- **Honesty over polish.** A true half-sentence beats a beautiful paragraph. If an answer comes out clean and flattering on the first try, it's probably the press release. Write the second answer.
- **One sitting or three.** The guide is built in three parts. Take them together or a day apart — but finish. The last page is the point.
- **Bring the Tuesday-night version.** This guide runs on specifics — a shift, a customer, a deadline, a promise you kept. The résumé version of your past won't translate. The real one will.

The Misattribution

Somewhere between accepting the offer and your first all-hands, you reached a quiet conclusion: *everyone here has experience, and I don't*. This guide exists because that conclusion is wrong — and because being wrong about it is expensive.

Here is what actually happened. You spent years building real competence — managing a dinner rush, de-escalating a furious customer, closing the store alone, running a shift short-staffed, hitting a number with no margin for error, keeping a classroom or a unit or a kitchen from coming apart. Then you crossed into corporate life, and none of it seemed to count. Not because it stopped being real, but because it stopped being *legible*. The capability traveled. The vocabulary didn't.

So the felt problem is *I have no relevant experience*. The actual problem is misattribution: you have plenty, and you can't see it or name it in the language this new context rewards. Those are radically different problems. The first one takes years to fix. The second one takes a translation — and translation is a skill, not a credential.

One more thing before the pen comes out. The rules of corporate life are unwritten, and they are unwritten for a reason: knowing them is how insiders stay inside. When you collide with one — and you will — the collision is information about the system, not a verdict on you. Hold that. Part III is where we map the system. First, the inventory.

01

Write about the moment you have felt most behind since arriving — or since deciding to cross. What exactly did you conclude about yourself in that moment? Write the conclusion word for word.

02

List five things you were genuinely good at in your pre-corporate life. Not job titles — moments. Things other people counted on you for. Things that would have gone wrong without you.

03

Which of those five have you never said in an interview, a meeting, or a résumé? Pick the biggest omission and write down why you left it out. Be honest about whether the reason is theirs or yours.

The Translation

The move you are about to practice has three steps, and you will use it for the rest of your career: name what you did, find the capability underneath it, and say it in the second language.

Watch it work. Managing a Friday dinner rush is *prioritization under constraint* — triaging in real time, sequencing work when everything is urgent and resources are fixed. Talking down an angry customer is *stakeholder management and de-escalation* — holding someone's frustration without absorbing it, and moving them to an outcome anyway. Closing the store alone is *ownership and operational reliability* — being the person the system trusts when no one is watching. Training the new hire on a chaotic Saturday is *onboarding and mentorship under pressure*. None of these are stretches. They are literal descriptions of the same muscle, relabeled.

Notice what the move is not. It is not inflation — you are not dressing up small things in big words. It is *attribution*: giving the capability its transferable name instead of its local one. The local name is the trap. As long as your experience is filed under “restaurant” or “retail” or “the military” or “teaching,” it can't travel. Filed under the capability, it goes anywhere.

Now do it with your own material. Take the first item from your Part I list and run the three steps.

04

Describe it concretely. What did the situation demand of you? What would have happened if you had failed? Who was counting on you, and for what?

05

Name the capability underneath it. Not the task — the muscle. What was that situation secretly training, every single time you did it?

06

Now write it in the second language: one sentence you could say in a meeting or an interview without flinching. If it makes you cringe, it's inflated — rewrite it until it's simply true.

Then compress the whole move into one line. This is the sentence the guide has been building toward — write it slowly:

My years in _____ trained me to _____ — which here is called

_____ .

Run the same three steps on two more items from your list. You now have three translated capabilities — which is three more than you believed you had on page one.

The Hidden Curriculum

Translation gets you in the door with your history intact. What follows is the part nobody writes down — the four unwritten rules that most reliably read as personal failure when you collide with them unwarned.

Competence is not the currency you think it is. In your old world, being good at the work was the whole game — the rush got handled or it didn't, and everyone could see which. Here, competence is the entry fee, not the differentiator. Nearly everyone around you is competent. What separates people is whether their competence is visible, connected, and trusted — which brings us to the rule that will annoy you most.

Relationships are load-bearing. Not networking as schmoozing — relationships as infrastructure. Work in a corporation moves through people: who vouches for you, who thinks of you when a project forms, who explains what a meeting was actually about. Treating relationships as optional politics — something the work should speak louder than — is the single most common way capable outsiders stay invisible. The work does not speak. People speak, or nothing does.

The feedback loop is slow, and silence is not a signal. Your old world told you daily — sometimes hourly — whether you were good. Corporate tells you quarterly, vaguely, if at all. If you calibrate your confidence on the old loop, the silence will read as failure and you will start shrinking. It isn't failure. It's the loop.

Confidence is not a feeling you summon. It is a byproduct of knowing your experience is real and translatable — which is exactly what Part II was for. You do not need to feel confident to act on what you wrote there. The sentence is true whether or not you feel it.

08

Where has silence been reading as failure? Write the story you have been telling yourself about it — then reread the third rule and write what the silence more likely means.

09

Name the three people who are load-bearing for your work being seen — not the ones you like, the ones through whom your work travels. When did each of them last see your work directly? If the answer is “never,” write what they see instead.

Which unwritten rule have you already collided with? Write what happened as you experienced it — then rewrite the same event as information about the system instead of a verdict on you. Notice which version leaves you able to act.

THE HONEST ENDING

This guide did one translation with you. On purpose, it did not do the rest. Because here is the part that matters most: translation is not an onboarding hack. It is a permanent capability. Every role change, every pivot, every reinvention for the rest of your career is this same move in a new dialect — and the people who thrive across transitions are not the ones with the best history. They are the ones who can re-map their history into whatever language the next room speaks. Building that translator — practicing the move until your experience travels wherever you go — is the actual work I do with people.

If Prompt 06 produced a sentence you could actually say out loud — that's the conversation.

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A SLOAN FIELD GUIDE · N° 03

The Second Language is part of a small series of field guides on self-knowledge and behavior change from Sloan Coaching & Consulting — coaching for early-career professionals who want practiced skill, not just insight.

Also in the series — *N° 01: The Mirror Problem* · What self-awareness can do for you, what it can't — and how to tell the difference. *N° 02: The Architecture of You* · Why willpower keeps failing you, and what to build instead.

Keep this guide. A year from now, reread your five things from Part I — you will not believe you ever left them off the page.

This guide is a reflection tool, not therapy, diagnosis, or a validated instrument.

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