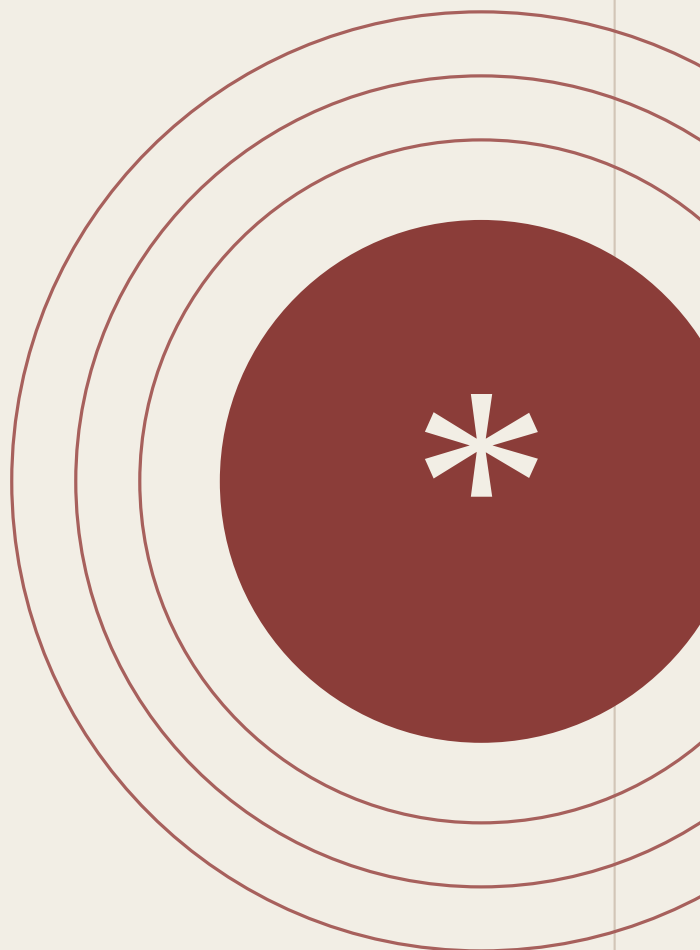


SAHIL TAYAL / THE UNWRITTEN ARCHIVE

Invisible Contracts.

A field guide to the rules we never quite agreed to.



18 FICTIONAL CASE FILES • 12 BETTER QUESTIONS

Learn to separate what happened from the story you told about it. Discover multiple fair readings, negotiate voluntary expectations, and make room for revision.

OBSERVE / INTERPRET / ASK / NEGOTIATE

SAHILTAYAL.COM

A free companion to invisiblecontracts.sahiltayal.online • October 2026

READ THIS FIRST / 01

The moment before the argument

An awkward pause at dinner. A late reply. A missing name on a slide. Each event can contain more than one reasonable interpretation.

We often behave as though the people around us have read the same invisible rulebook: reply within an hour, help when asked, split everything equally, know when to leave, take the initiative, never overstep. But the rules may never have been stated, and sometimes they are in tension with one another.

This book is a collection of constructed scenes and tools for clarifying expectations. It is not a personality test, a method for diagnosing motives, a legal contract kit, or a script for convincing somebody to agree. The examples are fictional; their interpretations are possibilities rather than psychological findings.

THE CENTRAL DISTINCTION

An observation can be checked. An interpretation is an explanation we bring to it. An agreement requires actual, freely given participation.

How to use the field guide

01 / Pick a case Choose a scene resembling a setting you know, not necessarily a person you know.

02 / Notice the evidence What happened, and what cannot be inferred from it?

03 / Hold multiple stories Compare two possible rules and a contextual explanation without presuming anyone's motive.

04 / Ask before drafting Use the suggested question or make one more suitable.

05 / Leave room for no Any draft is provisional. Choosing not to agree is a legitimate outcome.

*“I thought that went without saying.”
Sometimes that is exactly the sentence worth discussing.*

THE PRACTICE / 02

The four moves

A small method for turning social friction into a clearer, more voluntary conversation.

01 / OBSERVE

Describe what another person could verify, not the motive you suspect.

TRY SAYING

"The plan changed after the deadline."

02 / INTERPRET

Name your explanation as one possibility, and generate alternatives.

TRY SAYING

"I read that as a lack of consultation; there may be another reason."

03 / ASK

Ask about expectations, capacity, boundaries and the practical constraint.

TRY SAYING

"What had we each assumed would happen?"

04 / NEGOTIATE

Write a modest, testable proposal, and include a way to revisit it.

TRY SAYING

"Could we try a 24-hour notice rule for two weeks?"

A caution about fairness

An equal rule is not necessarily an equitable one. A person working nights, using a wheelchair, caregiving, or on a limited budget may face different costs for identical rules. Yet context is not an automatic excuse for unmet commitments. The task is to discover a workable arrangement without replacing one person's unspoken assumption with another's command.

THE THREE-COLOUR PENCIL / 03

What kind of rule is it?

Look for the difference between behaviour, perceived norms, and commitments.

DESCRIPTIVE

What people seem to do. A pattern is not automatically an obligation.

"Most people here answer messages at night."

NORMATIVE

What someone thinks people ought to do. People can disagree on what is proper.

"Good teammates should answer at night."

AGREED

What the involved people have explicitly and voluntarily accepted.

"We have agreed that an assigned on-call person answers after 8 p.m."

Before calling something disrespect

Ask whether the expectation was communicated, whether the other person had a meaningful chance to decline, and whether both parties are discussing the same behaviour. A difference in habits can be real without being a moral failure.

When conversation is not enough

Not every conflict is a misunderstanding. Harassment, coercion, threats, discrimination and persistent boundary violations are not solved by requesting that harmed people negotiate harder. Choose safety, documentation, appropriate support, and applicable rules where needed.

*A proposal is not consent. Silence is not agreement.
And better questions cannot guarantee a shared answer.*

CASE FILE 01 OF 18 / SHARED HOUSING

The clean sink

A KITCHEN, TWO STANDARDS

After dinner, Mira rinses her plate and leaves a saucepan in the sink until morning. Her housemate Jo notices it before bed and asks, “Are we really leaving this overnight?” Mira is surprised by the sharpness of the question. They have never named a time by which dishes need to be finished.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

A pan was left overnight; Jo expressed frustration. There is no recorded conversation about a deadline for washing up.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether Mira was careless, exhausted, busy or unaware; whether Jo had additional reasons to need the sink.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. “By morning is fine.”

Mira might have learned that finishing by the next day is considerate enough, especially after a long evening.

B. “Shared means ready for use.”

Jo might expect common spaces to be reset promptly so the next person does not inherit a task.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

A tiny kitchen, shift work, or an early breakfast can turn timing into a practical need rather than a character judgment.

“What would a workable end-of-day kitchen routine look like for each of us?”

A workable first draft

Practice: We will clear the sink by an agreed time on ordinary days and mention in advance when that is not possible.

Choice & limits: Each person can ask for flexibility. Neither person has agreed to clean the other’s dishes by default.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 02 OF 18 / FRIENDSHIP

The unread message

A SILENCE WITH MANY MEANINGS

Tara sends a friend two messages about meeting at the weekend. The messages are marked as seen, but a reply arrives the next evening. Tara says the delay made planning difficult; the friend says, “I didn’t know you needed an answer by then.” Neither had named a deadline.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

Two messages were seen, and a reply arrived the following evening. No time-sensitive deadline had been stated.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Attention, emotional investment, competing obligations, or what the read indicator meant to the recipient.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. “Seen means acknowledged.”

Tara may rely on a quick reply to know whether to keep a weekend slot free.

B. “An invitation is not a deadline.”

The friend may regard a casual invitation as something to answer when their schedule becomes clear.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Read receipts report an interface event, not a person’s capacity or willingness to commit.

“When we’re making plans, what response window should we actually count on?”

A workable first draft

Practice: For time-sensitive plans, the sender will state a reply deadline; the other person can say “not sure yet.”

Choice & limits: Ordinary messages do not require immediate availability or explanations for every delay.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 03 OF 18 / TEAMWORK

The midnight ping

WHEN “URGENT” GOES UNSAID

A project lead sends a task in the team chat at 11:42 p.m. A colleague responds at 9:00 a.m. The lead brings up the delay in the next meeting. The colleague points out that the team has not discussed after-hours coverage. The message itself never said when a reply was needed.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

A message arrived near midnight and was answered the next morning. The team’s after-hours rule was not stated in the message.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether the sender intended an immediate response, whether the colleague was free, and whether authority made expectations harder to challenge.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. “Launch week is exceptional.”

The lead may believe unusual deadlines imply temporary rapid-response expectations.

B. “Urgency must be explicit.”

The colleague may reserve evenings for non-work commitments unless on-call time was agreed.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Power asymmetry matters: a message from a manager can feel like an instruction even without saying so. An on-call rotation may solve more than goodwill.

“What counts as an after-hours emergency, and who has agreed to cover one?”

A workable first draft

Practice: For true launch-blockers, use a clearly named escalation channel and a rota agreed in advance.

Choice & limits: An evening message alone does not require a reply. No one is assigned on-call work without agreement.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 04 OF 18 / FAMILY

The empty chair

A RITUAL, TWO KINDS OF LOVE

A family has eaten together on Sundays for years. Arjun begins missing occasional dinners to rest or see friends. One evening his aunt says, “We never see you now,” though he had visited earlier in the month. Arjun looks puzzled; neither has said how often attendance is expected.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

Attendance changed; a relative expressed disappointment. There was no explicit agreement to attend every Sunday.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

How much each person values the ritual, why a particular week was missed, and whether a different ritual would matter as much.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. “Showing up shows care.”

The aunt may understand reliability at family meals as one of the everyday languages of connection.

B. “An invitation leaves room for no.”

Arjun may understand loving participation as a choice rather than a standing obligation.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Age, transport, cultural traditions and work schedules can change the cost of attending without changing anyone's affection.

“Which parts of Sunday togetherness matter most, and what frequency can we each choose?”

A workable first draft

Practice: We will share which Sundays we hope to attend and plan occasional meals together in advance.

Choice & limits: Declining a particular dinner is allowed and need not be treated as a rejection of the family.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 05 OF 18 / GROUP PROJECT

The final slide

CREDIT IS ALSO A COORDINATION PROBLEM

Four students assemble a presentation. One member creates the graphics; another compiles and submits the deck. The closing slide lists only the presenter's name. The designer asks whether the others' contributions should appear too. The compiler says they were submitting as a group; no credit convention was set beforehand.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

One contribution was not named on a slide, while the group submission went ahead. The credit convention was not settled beforehand.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether the omission was intentional, what the assessor requires, or whether other members had the same expectation.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Contributions should be visible."

The designer may see attribution as basic recognition, independently of marks.

B. "The outcome is collective."

The compiler may have treated names on the slide as irrelevant when the deliverable is shared.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Institutional assessment rules might specify credit. Ambiguity about ownership often increases when deadlines are close.

"How should we name contributions before the next handoff?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Before submitting, we will check the required credit format and ask each contributor to confirm how their work is acknowledged.

Choice & limits: No one's work or personal information should be credited publicly against their wishes.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 06 OF 18 / ONLINE COMMUNITY

The deleted post

WHEN A MODERATION RULE IS INVISIBLE

An admin removes a member's post offering a local repair service from a neighbourhood forum. The member asks why a nearby service would be irrelevant. The admin points to the rule "keep it relevant." That is the entire published guideline; it offers no examples of what counts.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

A post was removed and the published guideline was broad. Both parties had different plausible definitions of relevance.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Why the admin chose this particular post, how similar posts were handled, and whether the poster saw a prior explanation.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Useful to neighbours is relevant."

The member may have understood a local service announcement as community information.

B. "Relevant isn't automatically promotional."

The admin may have been protecting the discussion from becoming a sales feed.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Moderation at scale requires legible categories and consistent appeal channels; an individual confrontation may be a symptom of unclear infrastructure.

"Could we publish concrete examples of what belongs here, and how decisions can be queried?"

A workable first draft

Practice: We will describe allowed promotions with examples, and moderators will give a short reason when removing posts where feasible.

Choice & limits: Members can request clarification; moderators can keep reasonable safety and spam boundaries.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 07 OF 18 / NEIGHBOURS

The quiet corridor

ONE WALL, TWO CLOCKS

A neighbour practices guitar at 8:15 p.m. A parent from next door knocks and explains that a child has just gone to bed. The guitarist is surprised that the sound carried through the wall. They have never discussed which times are most sensitive or whether the volume can change.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

Music was audible after 8 p.m.; the neighbouring family reported disruption. No agreed quiet-time schedule is known.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

The actual sound level, building acoustics, how much practice can shift, or which local rules may apply.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Evening hours are usable."

The guitarist may feel that reasonable hobbies are part of ordinary home life.

B. "Bedtime needs protection."

The family may need predictably quiet hours and hear the music through a thin wall.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Acoustics, volume and headphones can matter more than a debate about who is considerate. Local noise rules may also be relevant.

"Can we map the hours that are difficult and try a practical sound solution?"

A workable first draft

Practice: We will compare schedules and try lower volume or headphones during the identified bedtime window.

Choice & limits: Neither household is promising total silence, and applicable building or local rules still apply.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 08 OF 18 / VOLUNTEERING

The extra shift

THE HIDDEN PRICE OF BEING RELIABLE

At a community food drive, Anika covers an unfilled shift for the third time. When she declines a fourth request, the coordinator says, “I was counting on you.” Anika replies that she had volunteered for the earlier days, not the next event. No backup list is available.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

Anika covered three additional shifts and declined a fourth. No standing coverage commitment had been established.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Anika’s capacity, the coordinator’s staffing constraints, or whether others are being asked equally.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. “Helping once doesn’t enroll me.”

Anika may think of volunteering as an offer within chosen limits.

B. “Past patterns become planning cues.”

The coordinator may have mistaken repeated generosity for dependable future capacity.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Scarce staffing can turn goodwill into a brittle system. A volunteer roster should not rely on silent availability.

“How can we plan backups without treating anyone’s generosity as a standing promise?”

A workable first draft

Practice: We will recruit backup shifts explicitly and confirm each additional shift before assigning it.

Choice & limits: An earlier yes does not create an automatic yes next time; saying no is permitted.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 09 OF 18 / GROUP TRAVEL

The shared bill

EQUAL PARTS, UNEQUAL VALUE

On a group trip, six travellers divide the restaurant bill evenly. Two have ordered only snacks and water; others have eaten several courses. One traveller hesitates before paying but says nothing. The group has not discussed splitting methods, and the next meal is already planned.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

The bill was divided evenly despite different orders. The payment method was not discussed before eating.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Who can afford the difference, whether anyone wanted to speak up, or whether simplicity was actually shared priority.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Split equally, keep it easy."

Some travellers may value speed and not tallying every item between friends.

B. "Split by use, avoid subsidizing."

Others may think it fairer to pay for their own order, particularly with a tighter budget.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Economic differences and social pressure can make "easy for the group" costly for someone reluctant to object at the table.

"Before we order, should we do individual bills or an equal split everyone opts into?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Before ordering, we will choose individual payment or an equal split with explicit agreement.

Choice & limits: Anyone can request separate payment without explaining their budget.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 10 OF 18 / SMALL BUSINESS

The quick decision

SPEED VERSUS PARTICIPATION

Two founders share responsibility for a small studio. While one travels, the other changes the homepage pricing after several customer queries. The returning founder is upset that no one checked first. The editor says it was a quick site improvement. Their working arrangement never named pricing as a joint or solo decision.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

A published price changed while one founder was absent. Decision rights for pricing had not been written down.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

The commercial impact of the change, the urgency behind it, and what earlier conversations implied.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Fast iteration is my job."

The editor may regard responsive adjustments as ordinary operational discretion.

B. "Pricing is a joint decision."

The traveller may see price as strategic and difficult to reverse without reputational cost.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Decision categories—copy edits, discounts, prices, promises to clients—need different approval thresholds; "communicate better" is too vague.

"Which decisions can either of us make alone, and which need a check-in first?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Routine copy fixes can proceed with a note. Public pricing, contractual terms and major promises require both founders' prior input.

Choice & limits: No decision is approved merely because one founder was temporarily unreachable.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 11 OF 18 / CLASSROOM

The silent partner

WHEN PARTICIPATION HAS ONE SHAPE

In a seminar, the tutor asks for ideas. Laila waits to hear the question fully and makes careful notes. Later a classmate says she never contributes. Laila has been posting detailed suggestions on the shared document, but the group has not discussed what counts as participation.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

Laila spoke little in class and added written suggestions. The group offered no explicit participation standard.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether silence reflects uncertainty, thinking style, language load or disengagement; how others used the written suggestions.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Speaking proves engagement."

The classmate may associate live contribution with shared energy and efficient discussion.

B. "Thoughtful work has several forms."

Laila may regard careful written input as just as meaningful as an immediate spoken reply.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Assessment incentives and unequal comfort speaking publicly can make a single participation metric both convenient and misleading.

"Can we agree what participation looks like in speech, writing and follow-through?"

A workable first draft

Practice: At each discussion we will leave room for spoken ideas and asynchronous written notes, then assign clear follow-through.

Choice & limits: Nobody is required to share personal reasons for preferring one mode.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 12 OF 18 / CREATIVE COLLECTIVE

The borrowed spotlight

COLLABORATION AND ITS PUBLIC STORY

Three artists build an installation. When a gallery posts a photograph, it tags only the member who spoke to the curator. Another member feels erased. The tagged artist says the caption was written by the gallery and assumed the shared project credit was obvious.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

One artist was tagged in a public gallery post despite multiple contributions. A credit request had not been made beforehand.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether the omission was deliberate, who approved the caption or how the gallery normally attributes collective work.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Credit should follow the labour."

A contributor might rely on attribution as an essential part of sustaining an artistic career.

B. "A mention is not ownership."

The tagged artist might see the gallery's mention as incidental publicity rather than a claim to sole authorship.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Credit is shaped by platform defaults, curatorial workflows and whether the group documented authorship before publication.

"What exact credit line would represent our work, and who will check it before posting?"

A workable first draft

Practice: We will agree a default credit line and send it with every public submission.

Choice & limits: No one's name, image or personal account is published without asking them.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 13 OF 18 / RESEARCH LAB

The unpublished draft

SPEED, SCRUTINY AND AUTHORSHIP

A junior researcher shares a preliminary figure in a private team channel. A senior colleague wants it in tomorrow's presentation. The junior researcher objects that the analysis still has unresolved exclusions. Neither knows whether the channel meant "ready to use" or "seeking feedback."

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

A preliminary figure was shared privately and later proposed for public presentation. No publication status was specified.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether the findings will survive checking; whether the supervisor understood the caveat; whether the team has an established protocol.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Shared means available to present."

The senior colleague might assume team materials can be reused when deadlines are short.

B. "Feedback is not final clearance."

The junior researcher might see sharing as an invitation to detect errors before outside exposure.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Hierarchical power and uncertainty in evidence increase the importance of version labels, author approval and explicit confidence limits.

"What should be labelled exploratory, and whose review is needed before external use?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Mark materials DRAFT / INTERNAL or APPROVED, and require explicit review before external presentation.

Choice & limits: Unresolved uncertainties must remain visible; pressure to present does not establish scientific confidence.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 14 OF 18 / SOCIAL GATHERING

The photo at the picnic

A HAPPY MOMENT IS NOT BLANKET CONSENT

At a picnic, Farah takes a group photo and posts it publicly. Sam asks to be untagged and removed from the image. Farah says everyone was smiling for the camera. Sam says smiling for a photograph was not consent to an open social-media post.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

The group posed for a photograph, which was later posted publicly. One person requested removal.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Why Sam wanted privacy, whether the audience was discussed or whether others were comfortable with public posting.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Posing means the photo is shareable."

Farah may have learned that group photographs are meant for public memories.

B. "Taking and posting are separate choices."

Sam may be happy to keep a private picture but unwilling to appear in a public feed.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Platform reach, work concerns, family privacy and tagging defaults can alter the cost of a seemingly ordinary share.

"Can we ask before posting identifiable photos, and remove them when someone objects?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Ask before public posting or tagging, and honour requests to remove a shared image.

Choice & limits: Explaining a privacy preference is optional; no one owes a justification to decline public exposure.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 15 OF 18 / CARE NETWORK

The medicine pickup

HELP IS NOT AN INFINITE RESOURCE

When an older neighbour needs a pharmacy pickup, Dev offers to help. Soon several relatives begin texting Dev whenever errands arise. One evening he cannot go and is told he is unreliable. No one has checked whether Dev's one kind offer was meant to become a standing role.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

Dev offered help once and received repeated requests without an explicit recurring arrangement.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

The relative's expectations, alternate support options, or the actual urgency of each errand.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Someone has stepped up."

The relatives might assume repeated help indicates willingness to serve as a contact person.

B. "An offer is scoped to the moment."

Dev might be glad to help occasionally but unable to guarantee future availability.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

When care tasks lack explicit ownership and backup plans, goodwill can turn into pressure on one available person.

"Who can reliably cover which tasks, and what should happen when a helper is unavailable?"

A workable first draft

Practice: We will ask for each errand individually and keep a backup contact for time-sensitive needs.

Choice & limits: Anyone can decline without needing to prove that they are busy enough.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 16 OF 18 / HOSPITALITY

The table reserved for six

WHEN INVITED TURNS INTO ENTITLED

A host prepares dinner for six friends. An invited guest brings two colleagues without notice and says they are lovely people. The host has cooked exact portions and only has six chairs. The guest feels that hospitality should be spontaneous; the host feels placed in a difficult position.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

Two additional guests arrived without advance confirmation, creating a mismatch with the prepared seating and meal.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether the guest knew the limits, how the colleagues understood the invitation or how flexible the host could be.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Friends can bring friends."

The guest might see an invitation as a welcoming, informal social space.

B. "A named invitation has a limit."

The host might plan resources and comfort for exactly the invited people.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Space, food costs, accessibility needs and social anxiety can make surprise additions harder than they look.

"Could we check with the host before bringing anyone new?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Guests will ask before inviting others; the host will answer clearly about capacity.

Choice & limits: An invitation is not transferable without checking, and a host may say no.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 17 OF 18 / PUBLIC FORUM

The unclaimed microphone

WHO GETS SPACE TO SPEAK?

At a residents' meeting, the moderator invites open comments. Two confident speakers take most of the session. A quieter attendee later complains no one made room for others. The moderator replies that anyone could have raised a hand. No time allocation or speaking order had been stated.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

A few speakers used most speaking time and no turn-taking rule was announced.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether quieter people wanted to speak, felt comfortable interrupting or had barriers to joining.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "An open floor is fair."

The moderator might value spontaneity and assume anyone can enter the conversation.

B. "Equal invitation does not ensure access."

The attendee may see time limits and explicit invitations as necessary for wider participation.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

Status, familiarity with meetings, microphone placement and language confidence affect who can use an apparently open opportunity.

"Should we use timed turns and a clear queue so more people can contribute?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Announce a speaking queue, a per-turn limit and an optional written channel for contributions.

Choice & limits: No participant is required to speak publicly; disagreement remains welcome.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

CASE FILE 18 OF 18 / MUSIC COLLECTIVE

The changed rehearsal

WHEN FLEXIBILITY BECOMES A DEMAND

A band changes Saturday rehearsal to Friday night in a group poll. A member does not vote before the poll closes and discovers the decision after work. Others say the majority chose Friday. The member says Friday is a caregiving night. The band has never defined voting deadlines or whether availability can be overruled.

WHAT WE CAN OBSERVE

A majority selected a new time through a poll, but not everyone confirmed availability before the deadline.

WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Whether the poll was clearly announced, whether alternatives existed or what the band's prior scheduling rule was.

Two rules, neither automatically true

A. "Majority vote settles logistics."

Some members may regard a quick poll as a democratic way to avoid endless scheduling debates.

B. "Presence cannot be voted into existence."

The absent member might accept majority preferences without being able to attend the new slot.

THIRD LENS / CONTEXT

A democratic process can still ignore binding constraints; rotating slots or splitting practice tasks may work better than treating attendance as loyalty.

"Which scheduling constraints are non-negotiable, and when does a poll become final?"

A workable first draft

Practice: Poll with a stated deadline and ask for hard conflicts before confirming dates; share a practice plan for anyone absent.

Choice & limits: No one is asked to neglect care commitments or other prior obligations to prove dedication.

YOUR FIELD NOTE / A constraint that might change my reading

A POCKET DECK / 04

Twelve better openings

Questions are most useful when they allow a real answer instead of smuggling in a verdict.

- 01** What did each of us think was already agreed?
- 02** Which part of this is an expectation, and which part is an actual need?
- 03** What would feel workable for both of us on an ordinary day?
- 04** Is there a practical constraint I might not be seeing?
- 05** What does “fair” mean to each of us in this setting?
- 06** What would you like me to ask before assuming next time?
- 07** Which requests are invitations, and which are commitments?
- 08** What kind of notice would help when plans change?
- 09** What is a boundary you want respected, even if I prefer something else?
- 10** Could we try an arrangement for two weeks without making it permanent?
- 11** Where can we disagree without needing to change each other?
- 12** How should we revisit this if our capacities or circumstances change?

MAKE THE QUESTION YOURS

Replace “each of us” with the relevant roles. Avoid questions beginning with “Why do you always...?” if your goal is clarification rather than accusation.

CONVERSATION SCRIPTS / 05

Three repairs in miniature

These examples do not guarantee agreement. They show the difference between describing conduct and attacking character.

The late reply

EASY TO SAY / HARD TO USE

"You clearly do not care about me."

MORE SPECIFIC / OPEN TO ANSWER

"I needed a decision by Friday and forgot to say so. Can we name a deadline next time?"

An invitation with a deadline is easier to coordinate than a read receipt loaded with meaning.

The missed credit

EASY TO SAY / HARD TO USE

"You stole my work."

MORE SPECIFIC / OPEN TO ANSWER

"The post names only one of us. Could we agree a credit line and ask the publisher to update it?"

Addresses a visible omission before concluding why it occurred.

The surprise shift

EASY TO SAY / HARD TO USE

"You always dump work on me."

MORE SPECIFIC / OPEN TO ANSWER

"I covered three extra shifts, but did not agree to a standing rota. Could we assign backups explicitly?"

Separates an earlier favour from an ongoing obligation.

WORKSHEET 01 / OBSERVATION LEDGER

What actually happened?

Do not begin with “They are selfish.” Begin with what another observer could see.

Scene and setting

Visible action or words (quote precisely if possible)

What I felt or needed - without pretending it is evidence of intent

What I genuinely do not know

WORKSHEET 02 / ASSUMPTION DECODER

More than one story

You are not required to believe all explanations. The goal is to avoid treating your first one as the only possibility.

My immediate explanation

A different explanation, including a logistical one

A contextual factor (workload, power, resources, timing, access)

The simplest respectful question that could help me learn

WORKSHEET 03 / FAIRNESS LENSES

Who carries the cost?

A rule can be simple and still distribute burdens unevenly.

The proposed rule

Who benefits, and how?

Who pays in time, money, privacy or opportunity?

One small adjustment that preserves the goal while reducing an unfair burden

WORKSHEET 04 / CONVERSATION PREPARATION

An invitation, not a trap

Draft a question that leaves the other person room to explain, decline or counter-propose.

What matters to me (a need, not a verdict)

What might matter to the other person (leave it as a question)

My first sentence, beginning with something observable

What response or boundary would I respect even if disappointed

WORKSHEET 05 / DISCUSSION DRAFT

A proposal in plain language

A written draft can clarify expectations. It does not prove that anyone accepted them.

Who is discussing this, and for what purpose?

A specific, realistic practice: who does what, and when?

What remains voluntary; what is out of scope?

What counts as notice when plans change?

How will we respectfully repair a miss or misunderstanding?

When and how will we review or revise this draft?

STATUS: DISCUSSION DRAFT / NOT YET AGREED

WORKSHEET 06 / REPAIR & REVIEW

What happens next time?

An agreement is more humane if it contains a way to change without a courtroom atmosphere.

What is a sign the arrangement is not working?

How can either person raise it safely and respectfully?

What repair is proportionate (notice, rework, apology, new plan)?

What would tell us to revise, pause or end the arrangement?

A NOTE ON AUTHORITY

A mediator, teacher, manager or organiser may hold decision-making power others do not. Make the limits of choice explicit. Do not disguise a unilateral rule as voluntary consent.

THE READING ROOM / 06

Where these ideas come from

The cases and practical questions are editorial thought experiments. The following readings offer useful theory, not validation of the individual stories.

Social Norms — Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Patterns of behaviour, social expectations and how norms differ from conventions.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-norms/>

The Psychology of Groups — Noba

Norms, roles and participation in group settings.

<https://nobaproject.com/modules/the-psychology-of-groups>

Conformity and Obedience — Noba

The influence of others' behaviour and beliefs, including potential misperceptions.

<https://nobaproject.com/modules/conformity-and-obedience>

Promises — Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Moral and practical questions surrounding voluntary commitments.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/promises/>

*No culprit is required to ask a better question.
And no conversation is owed at the cost of safety or autonomy.*

About this book

Written and designed as a free learning resource in Sahil Tayal's publishing universe. The scenarios are invented, culturally situated examples, not statements about any real person. Neither this book nor the site provides legal, clinical or therapeutic advice. The term "contract" is metaphorical.

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