

THE ROAD TO COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR



The Hard Truth About Getting There

clearnorth. THE QS PEOPLE

THE ROAD TO COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR

The Road To Commercial Director © 2026

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in whole or part, or used in any matter without express written permission from the author—except for brief quotations in a book review.

THE ROAD TO COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR

CONTENTS

Introduction: The Broken Ladder.....	1
A Note on Sources	6
Chapter 1: The Accidental Empire	8
Chapter 2: Get Your Boots Dirty	18
Chapter 3: The “Hollow Title” Trap	28
Chapter 4: The Recovery Playbook	38
Chapter 5: The Bad Boss Survival Guide.....	48
Chapter 6: The “Kaleidoscope” of Personality	56
Chapter 7: Stop Doing, Start Directing	69
Chapter 8: The Lonely Top	79
Chapter 9: Future-Proofing.....	87
Chapter 10: Redefining the Win	97
Conclusion: The 10 Commandments of the Commercial Director....	105
Final Words: The Commercial Director’s Manifesto	109
With Thanks.....	114

Introduction

THE BROKEN LADDER

Something is broken in how construction careers now progress.

Scroll LinkedIn, and you'll see "Senior" titles attached to people still learning the basics. Moves every 18 months are framed as ambition. CVs are built for optics, not outcomes.

A quiet rule sits underneath all of this:

Time served equals entitlement.

Sit in the seat long enough, and the next title arrives.

That rule doesn't just mislead people.

It sets them up to fail.

Across the industry, people are being promoted based on what they've already done. Not what the next role will demand of them. Each step up looks logical on paper. In practice, the gap widens.

What made them effective before stops working.

The decisions change.

The pressure changes.

The consequences multiply.

And the promotions keep coming.

The result is a growing class of senior-looking professionals who've never carried full responsibility. They've never owned a job end-to-end. Never stood in front of a subcontractor with nothing but judgment and credibility to rely on. Never felt the moment where one decision can't be hidden, escalated, or blamed away.

They want the authority.

They struggle with accountability.

This creates another problem. One that hides behind spreadsheets and polished CVs. An industry increasingly run by people who understand numbers, but not the process that produces them. People who manage risk from a distance because getting close to the work exposes what they don't know.

Faking it works for a while. Titles help. So does movement.

But gaps have a habit of surfacing. Usually, when the cost of getting it wrong is highest.

Here's the uncomfortable truth:

There are no shortcuts to commercial leadership.

The depth required isn't academic. It's experiential. It comes from years of exposure, repetition, and consequence. Not time served, not box-ticking, not clever positioning.

Try to skip that, and you don't just stall.

You become dangerous.

And yet, this broken ladder creates an opportunity.

While many chase titles, a smaller group is quietly building capability. While others optimise for speed, they optimise for substance. As experienced commercial leaders exit the industry, a vacuum is forming at the top. Most people are unprepared to fill it.

This guide exists for those who want to do it properly.

It isn't a textbook.

It doesn't explain theory.

It shows patterns, warnings, and decisions drawn from people who have already paid the price.

But before you go any further, you need to understand the cost.

This path is isolating.

Relentless.

Unforgiving of excuses.

You can delegate tasks.

You can't delegate accountability.

If you're looking for comfort, stop here.

If you want to earn the role rather than inherit the title, keep reading.

Who This Is NOT For

This guide is not for everyone.

That's intentional.

Do not read this if:

- You want a faster title more than you want real responsibility.
- You think being a Commercial Director is about status, salary, or a car allowance.
- You prefer spreadsheets to site walks and avoid uncomfortable conversations.
- You believe years served matter more than decisions owned.
- You want reassurance that you're "on track" without changing how you operate.

- You hide behind email because picking up the phone feels confrontational.
- You want a shortcut that removes the need for judgment.
- You blame the market, the client, or the subcontractor when things go wrong.
- You want the authority of leadership without the weight of accountability.
- You're looking for balance, comfort, or certainty.

Want validation? Stop here.

Want to feel better about where you are? Stop here.

This guide will not:

- Protect your ego
- Justify hollow titles
- Explain away poor decisions
- Tell you that “everyone struggles” so you don't have to improve

It will expose gaps.

It will challenge assumptions.

It will force you to confront whether you're ready.

Who This IS For

This is for you if:

- You want authority that survives pressure, not optics that collapse under it.
- You're willing to be uncomfortable now to avoid being exposed later.
- You care more about earning trust than collecting titles.

- You want to understand the game before you're responsible for winning it.
- You're prepared to finish what you start and own what it costs.
- You're willing to be the person who carries bad news, not deflects it.
- You want to deserve the seat before you sit in it.

A word on pace. Moving fast is not a disqualifier. Some of the best Commercial Directors in this guide got there quickly. But every single one of them got there because the substance was there first not because the title arrived and they scrambled to catch up. If you are on the fast track, keep going. Just make sure there is actually a track underneath you.

If that feels heavy, good.

That's the weight of the role you're aiming for.

Turn the page.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This guide draws from interviews with 42 construction industry professionals, Commercial Directors, Senior Qs, and C-suite executives from regional specialists to Top 10 national firms. Their combined experience represents over 800 years across boom cycles, recessions, liquidations, and recoveries.

Why Some Are Anonymous

Some contributors hold positions where public criticism could damage client relationships or violate company media policies. Others discussed failures, toxic cultures, and unethical practices that could be traced back to specific projects if names were attached.

Anonymity isn't a weakness; it's proof of access. If every contributor were retired or freelance, they could all be named. Some Active Directors simply couldn't be. That tells you we reached the top of the industry and covered the topics that matter.

What We Changed

To protect identities, we occasionally combined perspectives from multiple sources under one attribution (e.g., "A Commercial Director at...") or removed identifying details from anecdotes, changing project types, sectors, while preserving the lesson.

This is standard practice in business journalism and case study research.

The Standard We Held

Every insight in this guide comes from real experience. Not theory. Not speculation. Not corporate marketing.

If someone is named, you can verify their background.

If someone is anonymous, the insight still came from a real conversation with a real professional who lived through what they're describing.

The construction industry is smaller than people think. It's a village disguised as a sector.

This guide exists because 42 people were willing to help you avoid the mistakes they made.

Some could afford to be named. Others couldn't.

Both groups want you to succeed.

Chapter 1

THE ACCIDENTAL EMPIRE

(How to Win at a Game You Didn't Intend to Play)

The uncomfortable truth: You probably didn't choose this.

Most Commercial Directors in the UK's top infrastructure and construction projects are alike. Most didn't dream of procurement routes or JCT contracts at seven. The difference between Option A and Option C NEC wasn't childhood fantasy material. No one ran around the playground pretending to value a compensation event.

Shaun Judge puts it best: "I've never come across anyone who was doing front flips out of bed when they were 16, wanting to be a QS."

The reality is that this profession is the island of misfit toys. It is where intelligent, driven people land when Plan A failed, or when they just needed a job to pay for a car. It is an industry built on accidents.

Look at the lineup:

- The Infrastructure Commercial Manager wanted to be a fighter pilot. That was the only thing in his mind. Then his eyesight failed him. He didn't choose construction because he loved bricks; he fell into it because he needed a Plan B.
- Mark Heap was stacking shelves at Tesco. He had a business degree, didn't know what he wanted to do, saw a job ad for a "Trainee QS," and applied without knowing what it was. He spent 12 years grinding from that accidental start to where he is now.
- Daniel Gray was working in the police service. He drew a Venn diagram of "Good at Maths" "Likes Construction," and "Pays Well." He triangulated those three things and landed here.
- Darren Bird was on his way to join the army or become a geography teacher. A month before university, Tarmac offered him a job. He took it. That decision changed the next 30 years of his life.

Sinead Maguire's route in was even more unconventional. Her parents ran a small civil engineering firm. Her first job was running ten gangs on a United

Utilities contract planning their schedules, telling them what materials to buy, raising the invoices. No degree. No trainee scheme. Just the cold reality of cashflow in a family business. “We had some tricky times where we didn’t get paid,” she says. “That pinch point you feel it more when it’s your family.”

She spent five years there, then a decade at Capita running highway contracts into local authorities, then back to United Utilities but this time as a client. Now, as a Commercial Director, she looks back and sees the logic in what felt like accidents: “I’ve added all the bits into my career to do this one I’ve got now.”

That is the point. The path never looks deliberate from inside it. It only makes sense in the rear view mirror.

Rob Dabner began his career as a trainee estimator after a previous business collapsed, leaving him in need of employment. He has now been in the game for 40 years.

The point is this: It does not matter how you got here. It matters that you realise you have stumbled onto a goldmine.

Andy Brown calls this the “unknown profession”. Most people walking down the street don’t even know it exists. Your school friends are struggling in crowded fields like marketing, law, and business management. Meanwhile, you’ve found a sector where skills are so rare, they’re nearly priceless.

The reality: sitting on a winning lottery ticket. The question is: are you going to cash it in, or are you going to let it expire because you’re too busy wishing you were a pilot?

The “Accidental Advantage” Model

Before we dive in, understand the 3-step framework for this chapter. This is how you turn an accidental entry into a deliberate career weapon:

1. Acceptance: Stop apologising for not knowing this industry existed.

2. Translation: Take the skills from your “previous life” (police, army, retail) and apply them to construction.
3. Leverage: Use your outsider perspective to spot the inefficiencies the “lifers” miss.

I. The “Square Peg” Superpower

(Why Your “Weirdness” is Your Wealth)

Because this is an accidental profession for many, some will find people trying to force themselves into a “corporate” mould they don’t fit. They try to act like robots. They try to be the “textbook” QS. They think that to be a Commercial Director, you need to be a grey suit who loves Excel.

This is a fatal mistake.

The people who win are the ones who lean into their unique wiring. If you are neurodivergent, if you are obsessive, or if you are socially awkward but brilliant at patterns, that is not a bug. That is a feature.

Matt Parker is the perfect example. He realised early on that he had traits of Asperger’s/ADHD. In a typical corporate job, like sales or HR, this might be a hindrance. It might be seen as a “personality defect.”

In Quantity Surveying? It was his superpower.

He realised that his brain allowed him to see patterns in numbers that neurotypical people missed. He could spot the anomaly in a spreadsheet of ten thousand rows. He stopped trying to hide his neurodivergence and started leveraging it. As he puts it: “Square pegs in square holes... that’s my superpower”.

The Freelance Commercial Director explicitly says he “switches off” when people are too academic. The industry doesn’t need more people who can recite Clause 60.1 like a parrot; it needs people who can think on their feet.

What this actually means on a job: Imagine you are in a Final Account meeting. The other side has a slick presentation. But you, because of your “obsessive” nature, have read every single site diary entry for the last 18 months. No slick presentation needed. “On November 14th, your site manager wrote in the diary that the delay was due to your crane breaking down, not our materials.” That’s the square peg superpower.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Hiding your non-traditional background or unique personality to fit in with corporate culture.
- Better Move: Audit your “defects.” If you were a policeman like Daniel Gray, use your interrogation skills on subcontractors. If you were in the Army like Richard Langbridge, use your calmness under chaos when the client is screaming.

II. The “Mathematician” Fallacy

(Stop Counting, Start Building)

Here is the trap that kills careers in the first 24 months: The trap: thinking the job is about the numbers.

It isn’t. The numbers are just the output. The building is the input. If you focus only on the output, you are flying blind.

Brian Ormson warns that too many new Qs are just “mathematicians”. They look at the bottom line. They move cash from Column A to Column B. But they don’t want to get out and measure. They don’t understand the process.

If you don’t understand how a single-sided shutter wall stands up, you cannot value it. That’s guessing. And guessing is dangerous.

The Infrastructure Commercial Manager is brutal on this: “Money is an out turn... The input for what we do is building something”. If you try to run a job from a remote office without knowing the difference between a D6 and a D9

dozer, you will get found out. The subcontractors will smell your ignorance and they will eat you alive.

The “Pink Card” Method: Darren Bird didn’t learn by sitting in a lecture hall. He learned by scrubbing out “pink cards” in construction magazines.

Back in the day, magazines had enquiry cards at the back. He would circle every single product, glazing, pipes, drainage, plant, and send them off. He would get brochures back and read them. He learned what the materials were. He learned the difference between the machines. He spent Mondays with chippies and Tuesdays with bricklayers.

He didn’t rely on the “admin” of the job. He relied on the dirt of the job.

Mark Coburn backs this up: Measurement is often overlooked in degrees now, but it is non-negotiable. Understanding measurement and basic law is non-negotiable. If you can’t measure it, you can’t value it.

What this actually means on a job: CVR meeting, Tuesday morning. The groundworks subcontractor claims they moved 10,000m³ of muck. The “Mathematician” QS checks the invoice math, it adds up, so they pay it. The “Builder” QS knows that they only had two 20-ton excavators on site for a week, and it is physically impossible to move that volume in that time. The Builder QS rejects the application. The Mathematician QS loses the company money.

The “Site Credibility” Checklist: Before you try to value a package, can you answer these three questions?

1. Do I know the difference between the plant machinery being used (e.g., D6 vs D9 dozer)?
2. Have I physically walked the site to see the install method, or am I relying on the drawing?
3. If the subcontractor walked out tomorrow, would I know roughly what is left to finish?

III. The “Admin” Trap

(How to Escape the £40k Ceiling)

The biggest mistake you will make is treating this job like an admin role. Process the payment application. Stamp the form. Input the data. Go home.

If you do this, you will cap your earnings, and you will be bored to tears within 18 months.

Navneet Bawa’s story is the blueprint for escaping this trap.

He started at a very low level, doing “admin-type stuff” on small EPC contracts. It would have been easy for him to stay there. But he got aggressive with his curiosity.

He started playing with the data systems (Business Objects) that nobody else wanted to touch. He realised the data was there, but nobody was using it. He began creating management intelligence reports. His bosses had never seen an analysis like this before.

He created a benchmarking system called “Bob” (Best of the Best). He gathered thousands of rates from eight bidders. Then, he found the lowest rates and made a “perfect” bid. This bid served as a benchmark for everyone else.

The Result: He saved the project £60 million.

He didn’t wait for a promotion to start acting like a Commercial Manager. He didn’t wait for someone to tell him to analyse the data. He just did it. And because he did it, he became undeniable. When a £3.2 billion contract came up, his boss said, “You are going”.

Here’s the trap: thinking the job is processing paperwork. The reality: Your job is to find the money your boss doesn’t know is missing.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Asking your boss, “What do you want me to do next?”

- Better Move: Tell your boss, “I checked the variation account. We’re overpaying on concrete waste. I’ve also drafted a letter to the supplier to fix this.” Do you want to review it?”

IV. The Foundation of Integrity

(You Cannot Hack Trust)

The temptation will come: cut corners, fake your way through when stuck. Every new hire faces this.

Mark Waller warns against “flannel” (bluffing). The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director tests for this specifically with his “day one to Final Account” approach. He drills down into the CV. If you say you ran a £50m project, he will ask you specific details. If you stumble, if you lack the knowledge, you are finished.

Stuart Goodwin puts it bluntly: You have to be systematic and procedural. Loose cannons doing their own thing? Unacceptable.

But more importantly, you need integrity. Paul Redgate says the basics are simple but rare: “Do the right thing... even when people aren’t looking”.

- Don’t commit to something you can’t deliver.
- If you say you’re going to do it, do it.
- If you make a mistake, own it immediately.

Daniel Gray backs this up. He says he would rather a decision be made wrong than not made at all, as long as there is accountability. “I’d rather the wrong decision for the right reasons... than doing nothing at all”. If you own the mistake, you can fix it. If you hide the mistake, you become a liability.

What this actually means on a job: You forgot to issue a Pay Less Notice on time. The bullshit artist tries to bury it or argue a technicality they don’t understand. The “Director-in-training” walks into the Commercial Director’s office and says, “I missed the date. That means we have to pay this cycle. I have

already called the client to explain, and I've set a reminder so it never happens again." The first QS gets fired eventually. The second QS gets promoted eventually.

V. The "15-Year" Reality Check

(Patience is a Weapon)

A Commercial Director at a leading global contractor drops a hard truth that most of you won't want to hear: The reality: "15 years in the tank" to take a commercial leadership position seriously.

We are currently seeing "Senior QSs" with 3 years of experience. David Lane calls this "impossible." He says you cannot be a Senior QS in 5 years because you haven't had enough experience.

If you chase the title before you have the scars, you are setting yourself up for a massive fall. The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director warns: "You get found out. Might not be today, might not be tomorrow...but at some point, you get found out".

The Strategy: Don't rush. Luke Mighall became a Director at 35, which is fast, but he admits he "stalled" at times because he didn't have the right boss. Rob Smith advises: "Learn the management stuff early". Don't just chase the money in the QS role; chase the management experience.

The "Am I Ready?" Audit: Before you apply for that Senior or Manager role, ask yourself:

1. Have I run a job from day one to final account on my own?
2. Have I handled a major dispute or insolvency without my boss holding my hand?
3. Can I manage a team member who is underperforming?

If the answer is no, stay where you are and learn.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY: THE ACCIDENTAL EMPIRE

1. Own the “Accident”: You didn’t plan to be here. Good. Neither did The Infrastructure Commercial Manager (fighter pilot) or Daniel Gray (police). Use your unique background as leverage, not a liability.
2. Reject the “Mathematician” Label: Stop looking at the bottom line and start looking at the bricks. If you don’t know your D6 from your D9 dozer, get out of the office and find out.
3. Aggressive Curiosity: Be like Navneet Bawa. Don’t just do the admin. Interrogate the data. Create value that nobody asked for. Find your “Bob.”
4. Stop Chasing Hollow Titles: You are not a Senior QS after 3 years. Accept that this is a craft that takes time. The money will follow the competence. If you chase the money without the competence, you will crash.

You don’t get judged on how you arrived here.

Only on whether the ladder holds once the weight is on it.

From here on, progress either compounds capability, or exposes the lack of it.

Chapter 2

GET YOUR BOOTS DIRTY

(The “Site Credibility” Leverage)

There is a disease in the modern commercial sector. It is silent, it is expensive, and it is killing careers before they even start. It is called the “Spreadsheet QS.”

These are the people who think their job is to move numbers from Column A to Column B. They sit in a warm office, 40 miles from the project. They look at a drawing, they apply a rate from a book, and they think they have done their job. They believe that because the cell in Excel turns green, the project is making money.

Here is the hard truth: The map is not the territory. The spreadsheet is not the build.

If you cannot visualise how the thing is built, you cannot price it. If you cannot price it accurately based on the physical reality of the site conditions, you are guessing. And in this game, guessing costs millions.

The Infrastructure Commercial Manager lays out the fundamental law of this career: “Money is an out turn... The input for what we do is building something”.

If you focus only on the money (the output) without understanding the build (the input), you are trying to drive a car by staring at the exhaust pipe. Understand the engine. Stop hiding behind the laptop. Put on PPE. Get boots dirty.

The “V.I.P.” Framework

To escape the trap of the Spreadsheet QS, you need to adopt the V.I.P. Model. This is how Commercial Directors think:

1. Visualise: Can I see the construction method in my head?
2. Interrogate: Do I know why we are using this specific plant/material?
3. Price: Only after steps 1 and 2 do I apply the cost.

I. The “Pink Card” Method

(How to Not Look Stupid in Front of Subcontractors)

When you are 22 years old and you are arguing with a 50-year-old groundworks foreman about a variation, you are at a massive disadvantage. He has been pouring concrete since before you were born. He knows you don't know what you are talking about. He smells it.

If you don't know the difference between the kit he is using and the kit he should be using, you are going to lose that argument every single time. Without that knowledge, you'll sign the day work sheet without questioning why he needed the big machine.

Darren Bird cracked this code early. He didn't rely on his degree. He used what he calls the “Pink Card” method. Back in the day, construction magazines had pink enquiry cards in the back. He would circle every single product, glazing, pipes, drainage, plant, and send them off to get the technical brochures.

He learned the difference between a D6 and a D9 dozer. He learned what the materials actually were and how they fitted together.

What this actually means on a job: Valuing a variation for “hard dig” excavation. The subbie claims it took three days because the ground was rock.

- The Spreadsheet QS: Agrees because the math works and the hours match the timesheet.
- The Pink Card QS: Looks at the site photos. They see the subbie was using a 13-ton excavator with a grading bucket, not a digging bucket with teeth. The delay wasn't the ground; the delay was the wrong kit. Slash the valuation. Win.

If a subcontractor charges you for a D9 dozer on day works, you save the company money by knowing a D6 could have done the job in the same time for half the rate. If you don't know the difference, you bleed margin.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Nodding when a subcontractor talks about a complex issue. Avoiding the appearance of inexperience.
- Better Move: Stopping the conversation immediately. “Show me. Take me to the workface and explain why that specific machine is necessary for this specific trench.”

The “Kit & Context” Checklist: Don’t sign a day work sheet unless you can answer these three questions:

1. [] ID The Machine: Is that actually a 20-ton excavator, or is he charging me for a 20t when he’s using a 13t?
2. [] Efficiency Check: Is this the most efficient machine for this specific task, or is he just using what he had parked nearby?
3. [] Visual Confirmation: Did I actually see it working, or am I trusting a piece of paper signed by a busy site manager?

II. The “Night Shift” Standard

(Respecting the Production)

There is a dangerous myth that commercial staff exist in a separate bubble from operations. That you handle the cash, and they handle the concrete. The Engineering Senior Commercial Manager tells a story that destroys this myth.

He had a sandwich year student, a 21-year-old kid, working on a wind project that was running 24/7 shifts. He walked onto the site one morning and started asking the student questions about the numbers.

The student stopped him. He didn’t waffle. He didn’t try to bluff. He said, “Don’t talk to me.”

He asked why. The student replied: “I’m not talking to anybody until I’ve got my boots on. I’ve walked to the entire job and see what the night shift

has managed to achieve because I want to make sure they're getting their efficiencies”.

He went out, marked up his drawings against the physical progress, and then he was ready to talk. That student wasn't relying on a report from a site manager who might be trying to hide a delay. He was verifying the truth with his own eyes.

What this actually means on a job: It is Tuesday morning. The application for payment has landed. The drylining contractor claims they have closed up 50 rooms on the second floor.

- The Spreadsheet QS: Looks at the tracker sent by the Project Manager. It says “100% complete.” They pay it.
- The Builder QS: Walks the floor. They realise that while the board is on the wall, the head track isn't fixed properly, and the pattresses for the radiators are missing. They know those walls have to come down. They do not pay.

Here's the trap: Relying on the Project Manager's word. The Project Manager is optimistic. Reality is the requirement.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Valuing the works from your desk using the site manager's progress percentage in an email.
- Better Move: Walking the site every Tuesday morning with a drawing, a red pen, and a yellow highlighter. Mark up exactly what is installed. If it's not installed, it doesn't get paid.

The “Validation” Protocol: Before submitting your CVR (Cost Value Reconciliation), execute this routine:

1. [] Physical Walk: Walk the critical path activities.

2. [] The “Why” Question: Ask the trade supervisor why that wall isn’t finished yet. (The answer is usually materials or access, both commercial risks).
3. [] Photo Evidence: Take a photo of the delay. Date stamp it. File it.

III. The “Mathematician” Fallacy

(Process Over Profit)

Brian Ormson warns that the industry is full of “mathematicians” who just look at the bottom line. They see a loss on a spreadsheet, and they panic. They act surprised. But they can’t tell you why there is a loss.

If you are a mathematician, you are just a historian. Reporting old news. To be a Commercial Director, you must be a predictor.

Pricing without understanding temporary works? Impossible, it’s required to build it. The Infrastructure Commercial Manager asks the killer question: “How does a single-sided shutter wall stand up?”

If you are pricing formwork and you don’t account for the bracing required to stop a single-sided wall from falling over, your budget is wrong. Money lost, cause unknown until the invoice lands for “extra bracing.”

Nick O’Brien admits his biggest regret was not spending enough time on-site in his early career. He realised later that “knowing the operational end product” is the trait that separates the best QSs from the rest.

What this actually means on a job: A bricklayer asks for extra money because of “logistics.”

- The Mathematician: Asks for a breakdown of the cost and argues about the hourly rate.
- The Builder QS: Looks at the site layout. They see that the scaffold loading bay is 50 metres from the workface. This means the brickies are moving every pack of blocks twice. The Builder QS pays the extra but

then forces the site manager to move the loading bay for the next lift, saving the project £10k in future labour.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Reporting a £50k loss on concrete and saying “prices went up.”
- Better Move: Investigating the waste. The groundworkers dug the foundations too deep by 300mm. This mistake led to pouring £50k of concrete that wasn’t needed. Charging that cost back to the groundworker.

The “Process” Checklist:

1. [] Temporary Works: Have I priced the thing that holds the building up while we build it? (Scaffold, propping, shuttering).
2. [] Logistics: How do the materials get from the lorry to the fix point? Is that time covered?
3. [] Waste: Am I paying for waste because of bad design or bad workmanship?

IV. The “Encyclopaedia” Hack

(Immerse Yourself in the Jargon)

Every sector has its own language. Rail has a different language to nuclear. Housing has a different language to fit-out. If you don’t speak it, you are an outsider. If you are an outsider, you get taken advantage of.

Rob Smith works in rail. When new people join his team, he tells them to buy Ellis’s Railway Encyclopaedia. It has 26,000 acronyms and definitions of railway paraphernalia.

Why? Because if you sit in a meeting and they start talking about “signalling diagrams” and “possession overruns” and you don’t know what they mean, you are useless. Commercial management requires linguistic understanding.

Agreeing to “possession overrun” costs without realising that it costs £100,000 a minute in fines.

What this actually means on a job: In a meeting with the M&E subcontractor. They tell you they need a variation for “containment tray.”

- The Mathematician: Nods and writes it down.
- The Builder QS: Knows that “containment” is just the metal tray the cables sit in. They ask, “Is this for primary or secondary containment? And why wasn’t this in your original drawings?”

Stuart Donovan backs this up: “I was walking the site, I was speaking to people... trying not to run before I can walk”. He built his knowledge by admitting what he didn’t know and asking the trades to explain it.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Using generic terms like “stuff” or “materials” in your emails.
- Better Move: Using the specific trade dialect. Calling a “CBR test” a CBR test. Calling “muck away” by its proper classification.

The “Imposter” Audit: Do you know the specific jargon of your current project?

1. [] Residential: Do you know the difference between first fix (structural/ pipes) and second fix (visuals/fittings)?
2. [] Civil: Do you know what CBR tests are and why they matter for the road sub-base?
3. [] M&E: Do you know the difference between a containment tray and trunking?

If the answer is no, stop working and go find out. As Brian Ormson says, when tradesmen ask you questions and you actually have the answers, they look “stunned”. That shock is the sound of you gaining respect.

V. The Practical Toolkit

(How to Learn “The Kit” When You Are Stuck in The Office)

You don’t always have the luxury of spending three days a week on site. Sometimes you are chained to a desk doing procurement schedules. That is not an excuse for ignorance.

Rob Smith enforces a rule at Croftstone: Get the right books. He makes everyone buy Ellis’s Railway Encyclopaedia because it contains 26,000 definitions. If you don’t know what a “possession” is, you can’t value it.

The “Office-Bound” Hack: If you can’t get to the site, bring the site to you. The Engineering & Construction Commercial Manager taught a construction QS to understand M&E by making her look under her kitchen sink. “Blue pipe is mains water... look at the fuse board.” He related complex systems to domestic reality.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Googling a material and reading the Wikipedia page.
- Better Move: Calling the supplier listed on the invoice. “I’m looking at this invoice for 200 Flange Adaptors. Explain to me why we needed the PN16 version instead of the PN10? What’s the physical difference?” You learn the spec, and you check the cost simultaneously.

The “Extraction” Checklist: Use this when you finally get 20 minutes on site:

1. [] Find the Oldest Guy: Find the foreman who looks like he hates being there.
2. [] The “Help Me” Play: Say, “I’m looking at this on the drawing, but it doesn’t look right on the ground. Can you show me how you set this out?”
3. [] The Plant Audit: “Why are we using that specific crane? Is it reach or weight?” (Listen for the answer, it usually contains a claim for downtime).

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY: THE FIELD RULES

1. Validate, Don't Assume: Be like The Engineering Senior Commercial Manager's student. Don't speak until you have walked the site and seen the progress with your own eyes.
2. The V.I.P. Model: Visualise the build, Interrogate the method, then Price the work.
3. Hack the Knowledge: Use the Pink Card Method and The Engineering & Construction Commercial Manager's "Kitchen Sink" analogy. If you are stuck in the office, call the supplier and ask "Why this spec?"
4. Speak the Language: Buy Ellis's Railway Encyclopaedia. Learn the slang. If you can't speak "Bricklayer," you can't price "Brickwork."

Leaving early feels like momentum.

It's usually just avoidance.

Finish the work or carry the gap with you.

The industry remembers both.

Chapter 3

THE “HOLLOW TITLE” TRAP

(Why Fast-Tracking is Killing Your Career)

If you open LinkedIn right now, you will see a flood of 24-year-olds with “Senior Quantity Surveyor” in their bio. Look around: 28-year-olds calling themselves “Commercial Managers.”

They look successful. They are posting about their new company car, their sign-on bonus, and their rapid ascent up the ladder. They look like they have “made it.”

Here is the trap: They are building a skyscraper on a swamp.

They have chased the title, but they haven’t earned the competence. They are what the industry calls “Hollow Titles.” They have the label, but they don’t have the leverage. They have the salary, but they don’t have the skills to defend it when the market turns.

Shaun Judge refers to a concept known as the “Peter Principle” here. It observes that people (in all industries) tend to get promoted to a level of respective incompetence. This is currently rife in our industry. They focus on money and title instead of gaining necessary experience which unfortunately, requires patience. He notes that people are getting Senior QS roles “a year or two out of uni” and bluntly states that it is a disaster waiting to happen as it is diminishing the knowledge and experience levels required across all leadership roles in industry.

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director backs this up with a brutal reality check: “You get found out. Might not be today, might not be tomorrow... but at some point, you get found out”.

This chapter is about resisting the urge to sprint so you don’t break your legs before you reach the finish line.

The “3C” Maturity Model

To understand why fast-tracking is dangerous, you need to understand the 3C Model. A sustainable career moves in this specific order:

1. Competence: You learn how to do the job.

2. Confidence: You know you can do the job because you've done it repeatedly.
3. Compensation: You get paid for the job.

The Hollow Title Trap flips this. Compensation and Title first. Confidence faked. Competence frantically learned., while frantically trying to learn the Competence. That gap creates massive anxiety and eventual failure.

I. The “Paper Tiger” Problem

(CV vs. Reality)

It is easy to lie on a CV. It is easy to say you “managed a £20m package” when really you just did the admin for the guy who actually managed it. It is easy to claim you “led the final account negotiation” when you actually just took the minutes.

Rob Dabner sees this constantly. He notes that people jump ship from Company A to Company B to Company C, getting a title bump each time. But this drives a “lack of quality in the markets”.

The problem is that you become a “Paper Tiger.” You look dangerous on paper, but you have no teeth. When a subcontractor pushes back or a client won't pay, you feel powerless. The experience to fight back is missing because you haven't been through the struggle.

David Lane calls it out: “They're going from trainee to senior QS now in five years, and that's impossible... Not all eventualities will have been experienced”.

Sinead Maguire offers the most measured take on fast-tracking in the whole guide and she is careful to acknowledge both sides. Fast movers, she says, have real strengths. They show tenacity. They show hunger. She would not dismiss them.

But what they consistently lack is something that cannot be faked, bought, or fast-tracked: calmness.

“That calmness that comes from weathering enough storms,” she says. “You’ve been through enough that something’s going to come your way and there’s not going to be a panic.”

That calmness is not a personality trait. It is a deposit account. Every difficult project, every subcontractor dispute, every Final Account that nearly went wrong each one pays into it. If you have jumped too quickly, you have not made the deposits. And when the pressure hits at director level, the account is empty.

Rebecca Jones sees the same gap from a different angle. The fast movers she has watched up close tend to share a common flaw: they become yes people. They learn that agreeing with the people above them is the fastest route to the next title. They are friendly with the uppers, they say yes to everything, and they get promoted.

“That’s great to get a promotion,” she says. “But actually you’re not doing your job. You’re just a yes person.”

The wreckage becomes visible only after they have moved on. She has gone back to look at projects after these people left. She knows what she found.

A QS cannot be a yes person. The whole point of the role is to be the person who says no when no is the right answer to the client, to the subcontractor, to the programme manager screaming for a decision. If you have spent two years telling everyone what they want to hear in order to secure a promotion, you have not developed the one instinct the job most demands.

What this actually means on a job: The newly promoted “Senior QS” on a £40m project. A subcontractor hits you with a complex “Loss and Expense” claim citing a precedent regarding concurrent delay.

- The Hollow Title: Panics. They don't understand the case law. They try to bluff or reject it without grounds. The subcontractor smells fear, goes straight to adjudication, and you lose.
- The Veteran: Smiles. They saw this exact claim in 2012. They know exactly which clause dismantles it. They pick up the phone, explain why it won't stick, and kill the issue in ten minutes without spending a penny on legal fees.

The point is this: Googling won't solve boardroom disputes. in a boardroom. Muscle memory of experience is essential.

Rebecca Jones learned this lesson under real pressure, not in a classroom.

She describes the moment that defines every junior commercial professional eventually: the project is demanding, people are pushing from every direction, and every instinct says to just make a decision, send the instruction, get it done.

"The project might get demanding and you might be pushed really hard from all parts of the project to just make a decision, get it done, send out whatever the instructions," she says. "But stick to the contract, contracts are black and white. They're there to protect both sides of the party."

She watched too many people crumble under that pressure and cave. And once you cave, the other side knows they can push again. The floodgates open. "That was my biggest learning curve sticking to my guns. Because otherwise you create a lot of problems for yourself which are easily avoidable."

The grey areas come later. When you are more senior, you have to live in the grey. But early on, the contract is your spine. Remove it and you have nothing to stand up with.

The "Battle Scars" Checklist: Do not accept a Senior title until you have survived these three things:

1. [] The “Oh St” Moment: A job where you lost money, you had to report it, and you had to explain why to a Director without blaming someone else.
2. The Final Account War: A disagreement that couldn’t be settled by email. It needed a face-to-face meeting. No one left satisfied, but they reached an agreement.
3. [] The Cradle to Grave: Running a project from the first hole in the ground to the release of retention. If you haven’t seen the end, you don’t know how the beginning affects it.

II. The “Peter Principle” in Action

(Promoted to Your Level of Incompetence)

Shaun Judge explains the “Peter Principle” well: People get promoted for being good at their current role, until they reach a role/level they’re not good/efficient in. And then they either stay there and learn, facing stress and unfamiliar challenge or jump before they are pushed, often irrationally to an even more advanced role to continue the cycle.

Here is how it happens:

- You are a great Assistant QS. Organized and fast.
- They promote you to QS. Good at measurement and valuations.
- You demand to be a Senior QS. They promote you to keep you.
- Now you are managing a team. But you have zero leadership skills. Bad at this job. You stop progressing. Now stuck at the level of incompetence.

The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director warns that if you don’t have the experience, you can’t have the “day one to Final Account” conversation with authenticity. His bullshit detector will spot the gap immediately, and you fail.

What this actually means on a job: Your Assistant QS makes a mistake on a payment notice.

- The Hollow Senior: Blames the Assistant to save their own skin because they are terrified of being found out. They destroy the team morale.
- The Real Senior: Spots the mistake before it goes out because they have the experience to check it properly. They coach the Assistant on why it matters.

Here's the trap: The mistake: thinking titles grant authority. The reality: Competence gives you authority. The title just puts a target on your back.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Threatening to leave your company because your friend from uni got made "Senior" at a rival firm and you want to match their status.
- Better Move: Ask your Commercial Director, "What skills do I need to reach Senior level? Can we create a 12-month plan to close that gap?"

Luke Mighall advises that you need to "do the job before you get the job". If you are already operating at that level, the title is just a formality. If you need the title to prove you can do it, you aren't ready.

III. The Opportunity Cost of Jumping

(Loyalty vs. Leverage)

There is a myth that you have to move every two years to get a pay rise. While this might maximise your salary in the short term, it destroys your education in the long term.

If you leave a project halfway through, you never see the consequences of your own decisions. Procurement strategy results? Never seen. Budget performance? Unknown. Robbing yourself of the feedback loop.

Mark Heap admits he stayed in roles perhaps a bit too long, but he built a foundation. He notes that “you need to do your time” because if you jump too quickly, you don’t see the consequences of your own decisions.

Andy Brown is blunt: “Don’t be in a rush to get somewhere because if you work hard... you’ll get there”. He realised that titles like “Managing QS” or “Commercial Director” meant nothing if he was just doing the same job but with a different label.

What this means for a job: You start a project, get the groundwork package, and make some risky cuts to stay on budget. Then, you leave for a “better offer” at a competitor. Six months later, that groundworks package goes bust because of those exclusions.

- The Jumper: Is at a new company, oblivious to their mistake, thinking they are a genius because they “hit the budget.” They will repeat this mistake again.
- The Stayer: Is dealing with the fallout, learning a painful but valuable lesson that they will never repeat. The Stayer becomes the Director. The Jumper becomes a liability.

The “Cycle” Rule: Before you hand in your notice, ask:

1. Have I seen the results of the decisions I made 12 months ago?
2. Am I leaving because I have stopped learning, or just because I want £5k more?
3. If I stay, will I get to move to the next logical step in my career path?

IV. The “Imposter” Reality

(The Mental Toll of Faking It)

This is the part nobody talks about on LinkedIn. If you arrive at the top without the skills, you live in a constant state of “Imposter Syndrome.”

Nick Farmer warns that the higher you go, the lonelier it gets. The “fear of responsibility” sets in. If you don’t know what you are doing, that fear is paralyzing.

Days spent terrified of unanswerable questions. Nights spent worrying about unsolvable problems. You become defensive. You hide information. Protecting ego creates toxic management.

Rob Dabner says that “pressure makes diamonds,” but only if you have the foundation to withstand it. If you don’t, you just crumble. He has seen people get promoted to Commercial Director at 32 and suffer mental health crises because they couldn’t manage the stress.

What this actually means on a job: The Managing Director calls you in. The project is bleeding cash. He asks, “What is our position on the steelwork final account?”

- The Hollow Commercial Director: Flannels. Uses buzzwords. Says “we are monitoring it.” They leave the meeting sweating, knowing they have no grip on the number.
- The Real Commercial Director: Says, “We are £50k down, but I have a strategy to recover £30k through a design change claim. I am meeting them Thursday.” They sleep like a baby.

The point is this: The money is great, but the stress of being incompetent is expensive. It costs you your sleep, your reputation, and eventually your job.

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director puts it best: “Nobody looks after you as an employee... Get a firm career path in mind... and crack on”. But that path must be built on substance, not just speed.

CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY: THE PATIENCE PROTOCOL

1. “Be wary of the Peter Principle”: Promotions before time just to stroke your ego are not always the best path forward. This can often lead to exposing incompetence at worst or shining a light on critical knowledge and experience gaps.
2. Complete the Cycle: Be like Luke Mighall. Do the job before you get the title. Finish what you start so you learn from your mistakes.
3. Ignore the LinkedIn Flex: Your friend with the “Senior” title might be earning £5k more now, but if they don’t have the skills, they will hit a ceiling. The “15-year tank” rule is the only way to ensure you stay at the top once you get there.
4. Value Experience Over Cash: In your 20s, earn with your ears and your eyes. In your 30s and 40s, you will earn with your wallet.

Titles don’t create authority.

They magnify weakness.

The higher you climb without depth, the harder the fall when the seat asks for more.

Chapter 4

**THE RECOVERY
PLAYBOOK**

(How to Fix a Broken Career)

You might be reading this with a knot in your stomach because you realise you have already messed up.

You chased the money. You took the “Senior” title when you were 23 because your mate did. You joined a company for an extra £5k, and now you are drowning. You are sitting in meetings praying nobody asks you a technical question about the accruals. You are what the industry calls a “Hollow Senior.”

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director warned you: “You get found out. Might not be today, might not be tomorrow... but at some point, you get found out”.

Well, you’ve been found out. The subcontractors know you’re bluffing because you agreed to a variation that doesn’t exist. Your Commercial Director is starting to CC you into fewer emails because they don’t trust your input. You are in a “death spiral.”

This chapter is the triage unit. It is about how to stop the bleeding and reset your career before you become un-hireable.

The “R.R.R.” Recovery Model

If you are currently in a hole, stop digging and execute this framework immediately. This is the only way to reverse the damage of a premature promotion:

1. **Radical Admission:** Admit to yourself (and potentially your boss) that you are out of your depth. The cover-up kills you, not the incompetence.
2. **Retreat to Basics:** Step back from “strategy” and get back to “measurement.” You cannot commercially manage what you cannot measure.
3. **Rebuild Credibility:** Deliver small, technical wins to prove you aren’t useless. You need to become safe again.

I. The “Hollow Senior” Trap

(The 23-Year-Old with the Credit Card)

There is an epidemic of young surveyors who think the job is about the perks, not the profit. They think “Senior” means “Expense Account.”

An Engineering & Services Commercial Director tells a story that perfectly illustrates this delusion. He had a young lad in Bristol, just out of his apprenticeship, moving into an Assistant QS role. He was getting structure, training, and support, the holy grail for a junior.

But he left. Why? He chose a smaller rival for £45k, a big jump. Plus, they promised him a company credit card. He would take clients out and entertain them.

Here is the trap: That lad thinks he has made it. He thinks the job is buying lunch. The reality: He has just walked into a firing squad. He is going to be thrown into high-pressure, quick-turnaround contracts with zero support. In 18 months, when a job goes wrong and he can't explain why the margin has eroded by 15%, he will be fired. He has traded his education for a debit card.

If this is you, if you are the “Senior” who can't run a CVR without sweating, you are in immediate danger. You are one bad month away from being exited.

What this actually means on a job: You are in a CVR meeting with the Commercial Director. The margin has dropped 2% on the steelwork package.

- The Hollow Senior: Blames the site manager. Blames the weather. They try to bluff with terms like “supply chain volatility” and “program compression.” They hope the Director won't dig deeper.
- The Recovery Move: You stop bluffing. You say: “I haven't got the full detail on that yet. That is my fault. I need to go back to the remeasure and check the variation account against the site instructions. I will have the answer on your desk by 9:00 AM tomorrow.” Then you stay until 9:00 PM figuring it out.

The “Imposter” Audit: If you cannot check these boxes, you need to demote yourself mentally:

1. ☐ Can I build up a rate from first principles (Labor, Plant, Material) without looking at a previous CVR?
2. ☐ Have I read the specific Z-clauses of this contract, or am I assuming it's a standard NEC?
3. ☐ If the subcontractor walked off site today, could I value the work done to date within 5% accuracy?

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Trying to hide your lack of knowledge by being aggressive or defensive in meetings.
- Better Move: Using Matt Hopwood's advice on “guile”. Admit you don't know, but commit to the solution. “I don't have that answer right now, but I am going to find it.”

II. The “Job Hopper” Syndrome

(CV Ruin and How to Fix It)

Recruiters and Directors are not stupid. If they see four jobs in five years, they know exactly what you are. You are either:

1. A Mercenary: You leave for £5k, so you will leave us for £5k.
2. A Liability: You get found out after 12 months and jump before you get fired.

Nick Farmer warns that “loyalty is worth a lot,” and jumpers are viewed with extreme suspicion. If you have hopped too much, your CV is now “radioactive.” You are un-hireable by the Tier 1s because they know you won't stick around to finish the project.

The point is this: You cannot learn commercial management in 12-month stints. You never see the consequences of your procurement decisions. You buy the package, you leave, and someone else cleans up the mess. You have 5 years of experience, but it's the same year of experience repeated 5 times.

The Fix: The “Anchor” Role. You need to stay somewhere for 3 years. No matter what. No matter how bad the boss is, no matter how boring the work is. You are not working for money anymore; you are working to buy back your reputation.

The Strategy: Find a large firm, like a Balfour Beatty or Morgan Sindall. You can move internally if you get bored without changing the logo on your CV. This allows you to “refresh” without “hopping.”

What this actually means on a job: You are 14 months into a job. The project is getting tough. The margin is tight. A recruiter calls you with a job that pays £7k more.

- The Hopper: Takes the call. Leaves. Thinks they are “progressing.”
- The Professional: Realizes that the pain of this difficult project is the lesson they need. They stay. They finish the job. They fix the margin. They put “Final Account Settled” on their CV. That line is worth £20k more in the long run than the £7k quick win.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Telling a recruiter you are leaving because “I’ve learned everything I can here” after 18 months. (Everyone knows that is a lie).
- Better Move: Staying put. Telling the recruiter: “I need to see this project through to Final Account. Call me in 2027.”

III. The “Bulls**t Artist”

(Loss of Credibility)

“Flannel” is the industry term for bluffing, waffling, or bulls**tting. It is when you use many words to say absolutely nothing because you don’t know the answer.

The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director tests for this specifically. He asks granular questions about your CV. If you say you ran a £20m job, he asks about the specific procurement of the steelwork. He asks about the disputes. If you lack the details, his bullshit detector spots it immediately. He knows you were just the postman delivering the notices, not the author writing them.

Once you are branded a “Bulls**t Artist,” you are finished. Nobody will trust your numbers. If you tell the Board the profit is £500k, they will assume it is £200k because they know you guess.

The Fix: Radical Honesty. Richard Bradley advises that you need the humility to ask. If you don’t understand something, say: “I don’t really understand this. Do you understand it?”.

It disarms people. It builds trust. It is better to look ignorant for five minutes than to be revealed as a liar in five months.

What this actually means on a job: You are discussing a complex NEC Option C “Disallowed Cost.” You don’t actually know if the cost is disallowed because you haven’t read the Schedule of Cost Components recently.

- The Flannel: “Well, under the contract mechanisms, we feel that the spirit of the agreement suggests that this is a shared risk profile...” (Everyone in the room knows you have no idea).
- The Recovery: “I am not 100% sure on the clause interpretation for this specific defect. I’m going to check the guidance notes and the Z clauses and come back to you this afternoon.”

The “Flannel” Audit: Before you speak in a meeting, ask yourself:

1. Do I know the fact?
2. Do I know the clause?
3. Do I have the evidence? If the answer is No, say “I will find out.” Do not guess.

IV. The External Reset

(When Life Resets It for You)

Not every career derailment is a product of ambition outpacing ability. Sometimes the world simply collapses around you and you have to rebuild from scratch.

Rebecca Jones is one of the most honest voices in this guide on what that actually looks like.

She was self-employed. She had built her own client base. She had a young daughter, not yet two years old. Then in March 2020, in a single month: separation began, COVID hit, and every client she had disappeared. “I lost everything financially. All clients. Because I was the first to go. They didn’t even know what to do with their staff, let alone people who were consulting.”

The instinct when everything collapses is to panic. To take the first thing available. To move fast to feel in control.

She didn’t.

She sat down and thought strategically about where the floor was. Which industries would survive if the pandemic continued? Which sectors were immune to the logic of lockdown? She identified water as the answer. It is not optional infrastructure. It does not stop being needed in a recession, a pandemic, or a crisis.

She found a role in that sector: maternity cover, no guaranteed job at the end, a deliberate risk. “I figured that’s my way in,” she says. “And if I do a good job

and do it right, that would be a stepping stone.” She stayed. She built. She didn’t look back.

The Recovery Model here is different from the others in this chapter. It is not about correcting a premature promotion or repairing a job-hopper’s CV. It is about what you do when the external world removes the floor entirely.

The principle is the same: Stop. Think. Choose the sector, not the salary. Make the decision that looks conservative in week one but compounds over three years.

The “External Reset” Checklist: If circumstances redundancy, recession, pandemic, personal crisis have wiped your position, ask:

1. ☐ Which sectors are structurally immune to what just happened?
2. ☐ Am I choosing this role for security now, or for optionality in three years?
3. ☐ Is there a “way in” role lower status, higher learning that gives me a foothold?

The temptation is to replace income as fast as possible. The move is to replace momentum as deliberately as possible. They are not the same thing.

Confront it early and it can be fixed.

Delay only increases the cost of being exposed.

V. The Burnout (The Wall)

(When You Can’t Do It Anymore)

Sometimes, you haven’t failed because you’re incompetent. You’ve failed because you are exhausted. You have hit the wall.

Luke Mighall admits he “stalled” at times in his career. It is okay to stall. The Infrastructure Commercial Manager took 18 months off after Dubai because he needed to reset. He realised he was burning out.

If you are waking up with a sense of dread, if you are physically sick at the thought of opening your laptop, you are useless to the business. You are making bad decisions because you are tired.

The Fix: The “Reset.” You need to change the pace. You cannot sprint a marathon.

- The Move: Go freelance for 6 months.
- Why? Freelancing removes the “politics” and “HR stuff” that The Energy & Construction Commercial Director warns about. You strip away the line management, the strategy meetings, the “town halls.” You just do the work (measure, value, agree) and go home. It lets your brain heal while you keep earning.

What this actually means on a job: You are a Commercial Manager. You are managing 10 staff. You are dealing with HR issues, client disputes, and profit reporting. You are drowning.

- The Burnout: You keep pushing until you make a catastrophic error or have a breakdown.
- The Reset: You resign. You take a Senior QS freelance role on a defined package. You go back to measuring pipework. You finish at 5:00 PM. You rediscover the craft. You regain your confidence.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Thinking you have to keep climbing. “If I step back, I’m a failure.”
- Better Move: Viewing a step back as a “tactical retreat.” You are regrouping to attack the hill again later.

CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY: THE REDEMPTION PROTOCOL

If your career is off the rails, you need to pull the emergency brake.

1. Kill the Hollow Title: If you are drowning as a Senior, step back. Move to a subcontractor to learn the nuts and bolts. Be like the Engineering & Services Commercial Director's cautionary tale, don't trade your future for a credit card.
2. Fix the CV: If you are a "Job Hopper," stay put for 3 years. No matter how much you hate it. You are buying back your reputation. Listen to Nick Farmer, loyalty is the currency you are currently bankrupt in.
3. Stop the Flannel: If you don't know NEC Option C, stop pretending. The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director can smell it. Ask for help before you cost the company £100k. Use Richard Bradley's humility.
4. The Burnout Reset: If you are physically sick, go freelance. Remove the politics, do the work, heal your brain. Follow The Infrastructure Commercial Manager's lead and take the time you need.

Protect the title and the gap grows.

Chapter 5

THE BAD BOSS SURVIVAL GUIDE

(How to Win When Your Leader is a Liability)

This guide assumes you have a boss who wants you to succeed. It assumes a rational commercial environment where logic prevails and competence is rewarded.

But we do not live in a perfect world. The reality is, at some point in your career, you will report to someone who is incompetent, insecure, absent, or actively dangerous.

Stuart Goodwin lives by the rule: “Don’t trust people that don’t trust people”.

If your boss doesn’t trust you, or if they are actively blocking you, you are not in a job; you are in a war zone. You are in a position where your hard work is being erased, your reputation is being damaged, and your mental health is being eroded.

Most people handle this by complaining to HR (which rarely works) or quitting without a plan. Both are strategic failures. You need a survival strategy that protects your sanity and your CV while you engineer your escape or their removal.

The “Containment” Framework

You cannot change a bad boss. You cannot “fix” their personality disorder or their incompetence. You can only contain the blast radius of the damage they do to you.

The Model:

1. Document (The Shield): Create an undeniable paper trail that makes you impossible to blame.
2. Bypass (The Network): Build relationships with their boss and peers so you aren’t reliant on their word.
3. Outlast (The Wait): Bad bosses usually get fired, moved, or promoted out of the way. Your goal is survival until that happens.

I. The Blocker (The Insecure Gatekeeper)

(They Hide Your Work)

This boss is terrified that you are better than them. They see your competence not as an asset, but as a threat.

The Symptoms:

- They don't invite you to client meetings.
- They present your CVR to the Board without you present.
- They take credit for your wins and blame you for their losses.

If you attack them head-on, they will destroy you because they have the rank. You have to outmanoeuvre them by making your value visible to the rest of the business without looking like you are undermining them.

Genna Rourke talks about the "Leadership Shadow". You can cast your own shadow even if you aren't the boss. You do this by being helpful to everyone except the blocker. You build influence laterally.

What this actually means on a job: You have identified a £50k saving on the groundworks package. You know your boss will take credit for it in the board meeting.

- The Victim: Tells the boss, who says "good work," then tells the Director "I found £50k."
- The Survivor: Sends an email to the Project Manager and the Construction Director: "Hi everyone, I'm confirming we've saved £50k on the groundworks we talked about on site. I've updated the CVR too." You have planted the flag. The boss cannot claim it was their idea because the ops team already knows it was yours.

The point is this: You cannot let your career exist solely through the lens of one person. You must diversify your stakeholders.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- **Mistake:** Complaining to the Commercial Director that your manager is holding you back. It sounds like whining.
- **Better Move:** Ask the Commercial Director for “advice” on a tricky issue your manager couldn’t solve. This shows you’re thinking at a higher level.

The “Visibility” Checklist:

1. [] The CC Rule: Are key stakeholders copied into your good news emails?
2. [] The Site Walk: Do the operational leads know your name and face?
3. [] The Data Trail: Is your name on the bottom of the spreadsheets you produce?

II. The Ghost (The Absentee Landlord)

(They Are Never There)

They are “working from home” (playing golf). They are in meetings all day (hiding). When you have a crisis, their phone goes to voicemail.

The danger here is not malice; it is negligence. When the project goes wrong, and it will, they will claim they “weren’t informed.” You are left holding the bag for decisions you weren’t senior enough to make.

Rob Smith recommends finding mentors outside the business. If you can’t get guidance internally, you must get it externally. You cannot operate in a vacuum.

The Counter-Move: The “Shadow Board.” You need to build a proxy leadership team. Create a “Shadow Board” of 3 people you trust (an ex-colleague, a recruiter, a friend). When you have a complex dispute, run it past them.

What this actually means on a job: A subcontractor submits a complex “Loss and Expense” claim for £100k. Your boss is uncontactable. You have to make a decision on the payment notice by 5:00 PM.

- The Victim: Guesses. They reject it without grounds. The subbie adjudicates. The company loses. You get fired.
- The Survivor: Calls their mentor. “I’m looking at this claim. It looks like a time-bar issue. Does that sound right?” The mentor confirms. You issue the notice. You send an email to your Ghost boss: “As discussed previously, strict adherence to contract. I have issued the notice based on Clause X.” You have protected the commercial position and covered your back.

Here’s the trap: You think silence means approval. It doesn’t. Silence means you are on your own.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Waiting for permission that never comes, missing the contractual deadline.
- Better Move: The “Negative Assurance” email. “I am going to issue this notice at 4:00 PM unless I hear otherwise.” If they don’t reply, you have permission.

III. The Chaos Merchant (The Reactive)

(Everything is Urgent, Nothing is Written Down)

This boss is dangerous. They scream. They change their mind every hour. They promise the client things you can’t deliver. They agree to variations verbally on site and then deny it when the cost comes in.

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director warns that “nobody looks after you as an employee”. He is right. In a chaotic environment, you are the

insurance policy. When the audit happens, the Chaos Merchant will say, “I never told him to pay that.”

You need a Liability Shield.

The Counter-Move: The “Paper Trail.” You must become a bureaucratic assassin. Every time they give a verbal instruction that sounds crazy, risky, or expensive, you email them immediately.

What this actually means on a job: Your boss runs into your office, sweating. “Just pay the groundworker £50k on account! He’s threatening to walk off! We’ll sort the paperwork later!”

- The Victim: Pays the £50k. Two months later, the groundworker goes bust. The Finance Director asks why you paid £50k without a valuation. You say, “Dave told me to.” Dave says, “I never said that.”
- The Survivor: Says, “Okay Dave.” Then, he quickly sends an email: “Dave, I’m confirming your verbal instruction at 10:30 AM to release £50k to GroundCo right away. This is despite the lack of valuation, to avoid site stoppage.” I will action this now as instructed.”

The point is this: They will either run into your office and stop you (saving the money) or, when it blows up in 6 months, you have the evidence that saves your job.

The “Chaos” Checklist:

1. ☐ Never accept verbal instructions on money.
2. ☐ Daily Diary: Keep a personal log of decisions made.
3. ☐ Pre-emptive Strike: If they are panicking about a deadline, send them the status update before they ask. It kills their adrenaline.

IV. The Exit Protocol

(Leaving Without Burning the Bridge)

Sometimes, the Containment Framework isn't enough. The toxicity is affecting your health. You have to go.

But the construction industry is tiny. Everyone knows everyone. You will meet these people again on another project, or they will end up working for a client you are trying to win.

Chris Hird warns against burning bridges. It feels good in the moment to tell them exactly what you think of them, but it is commercially expensive.

The Rule: Never badmouth the bad boss in your exit interview. HR works for the company, not you. They will file your complaint, tell the boss what you said, and the boss will spend the next 10 years badmouthing you to recruiters.

What this actually means on a job: You have secured a new role. You hand in your notice. The Director asks why you are leaving.

- The Mistake: "Dave is a bully, he's incompetent, and the project is a disaster." Result: Dave marks you as an enemy for life.
- The Better Move: "I have loved my time here. However, this new opportunity offers a specific strategic pathway into data centres. That path aligns with my 5-year plan." It was too good to turn down." Result: You leave as a professional "ambitious" surveyor, not a "troublemaker."

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Checking out early. Doing a bad job in your notice period because "I'm leaving anyway."
- Better Move: The "Golden Handover." Leave your files so immaculate that the person replacing you thinks you are a god. That reputation lasts longer than the notice period.

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY: THE SURVIVAL CHECKLIST

You cannot fix a bad boss, but you can survive them.

1. Flank the Blocker: Use Genna Rourke's "Leadership Shadow." Build relationships with their peers so your value is visible regardless of what your boss says.
2. The Shadow Board: If your boss is a Ghost, listen to Rob Smith. Find mentors outside the business to test your decisions so you aren't guessing
3. The Paper Trail: If your boss is a Chaos Merchant, remember The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director's warning. Nobody looks after you. Confirm every verbal instruction via email. That email is your insurance policy.
4. Leave Well: Never badmouth them on the way out. The industry is too small. Leave with your dignity and your reputation intact.

You don't beat a bad boss with emotion.

You beat them with positioning.

Make your work undeniable, your risk contained, and your exit optional.

In a small industry, survival is a strategy.

Chapter 6

THE "KALEIDOSCOPE" OF PERSONALITY

(Why Soft Skills Will Make You Richer Than Excel Skills)

There is a misconception that Quantity Surveying is a “numbers game.”

University teaches you that if the math is right, you win. If the measurements are correct, the Final Account agrees. If the clause exists, the entitlement is yours.

Here is the trap: The construction industry is not run by robots. It is run by people with egos, mortgages, stress, and agendas.

Being the best technical QS around. Knowing JCT Design & Build perfectly. Measuring groundworks to the millimetre but if you can't read a room, you'll face a glass ceiling. The result: producing data for Directors, never becoming one.

The Energy & Construction Commercial Director says a Commercial Director does not just crunch numbers. Instead, the role involves dealing with a “kaleidoscope of different backgrounds”.

One minute you are speaking to a groundworker in a muddy welfare unit who is angry about his day work sheet. Ten minutes later, you are presenting a £50m turnover projection to a CEO who doesn't care about the mud; he cares about the margin.

If you speak to the CEO like a groundworker, you get fired. If you speak to the groundworker like a CEO, you get ignored.

To win at this level, you must master the “Hybrid Protocol.”

The “Hybrid Protocol”

Commercial leadership requires you to exist in two states simultaneously. The requirement: being a hybrid:

1. The Introvert (The Nerd): You have the technical discipline to find the money in the detail.
2. The Extrovert (The Negotiator): You have the social intelligence to convince the other party to give it to you.

Most people are one or the other. The Fit-Out Commercial Director notes that you have to be able to “flip the personality switch”. If you can’t switch, you lose.

I. The “No Flannel” Rule

(Authenticity as a Weapon)

In an industry built on risk and contractual arguing, people have highly tuned “bullshit detectors.”

Walk into a boardroom or site meeting and try to bluff your way through a Final Account with buzzwords and corporate jargon, and you’ll be in trouble. The veterans, the ones who have been doing this for 30 years, can smell fear and they can smell a lie.

Mark Waller warns against empty “flannel” (waffle or bluff). The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director has a specific test for this, his “bullshit detector.” He looks for people who can speak authentically about “day one to Final Account.” He tests candidates by making them run through their CVs in granular detail. If they lack specific knowledge, he knows they haven’t actually done the job.

The point is this: Authenticity is your strongest commercial weapon.

If you don’t know the answer, say “I don’t know, but I will find out by 2:00 PM.” That builds trust. If you try to bluff and you get caught, your credibility is zero. And in this game, if your credibility is zero, your emails get ignored and your variations get rejected.

What this actually means on a job: You are in a settlement meeting. The client asks about a specific delay event from six months ago that is driving £50k of your claim. You have forgotten the detail.

- The “Flannel” QS: Tries to bluff. “Oh, well, generally speaking, the site conditions were difficult and...” The client knows you are lying and slashes the £50k.

- The Authentic Commercial Director: Stops the meeting. “I don’t have that specific record in front of me. I am not going to guess. Let’s park that £50k, agree on the other £200k, and I will send you the site diary for that specific day within the hour.” You keep the trust, and you keep the money.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Using corporate buzzwords like “circling back” or “synergies” to impress site teams or clients.
- Better Move: Using plain English. “We need to agree this price by Friday or the bricklayers leave.” Radical simplicity wins.

The “Flannel” Audit: Before you enter a negotiation, check yourself against this list:

1. [] The “I Don’t Know” Rule: Am I prepared to admit if I don’t know a number, or am I planning to guess? (Never guess).
2. [] The Story Arc: Can I explain the story of this account from Day 1 to today without looking at a spreadsheet?
3. [] The Specifics: Do I know the names of the people involved, or am I just talking about “the subcontractor”?

II. The “Phone Phobia” Epidemic

(Email is Where Deals Go to Die)

We are raising a generation of Quantity Surveyors who are terrified of the telephone.

They will spend 45 minutes drafting a carefully worded email to reject a subcontractor’s application, send it, and then hide. They think they have “dealt” with the issue.

They haven’t. They have just started a war.

Kevin Baker identifies this as a critical failure. He says the job is relationship-based. You have to “pick up the phone”. If you hide behind email, you become faceless. And it is very easy to say “No” to a faceless email. It is much harder to say “No” to a human being you have built a rapport with.

Andy Brown agrees, noting that the younger generation “don’t pick up the phone,” they prefer emails. But emails remove tone, nuance, and humanity.

Here’s the trap: treating email as a record. The other side thinks email is an attack.

What this actually means on a job: You need to issue a Pay Less Notice. It’s going to hit the subcontractor hard, £20k less than they expected.

- The Keyboard Warrior: Sends the Pay Less Notice by email at 4:55 PM on Friday. Result: The subcontractor stewards on it all weekend, gets angry, and pulls his labour off-site on Monday.
- The Commercial Director: Calls the subcontractor at 10:00 AM. “Dave, I’m looking at your app. You haven’t got the substantiation for the steelwork. I have to issue the Pay Less Notice today to protect my position, but if you get me the tickets by Tuesday, I’ll include it in the next run.” Result: Dave isn’t happy, but he understands. The labour stays on site.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Engaging in “Email Tennis”, back and forth arguments that span days.
- Better Move: The “Two-Email Rule.” If a problem isn’t solved after two emails, pick up the phone. Solve it in 3 minutes.

Sinead Maguire runs a simple rule in her organisation: pick up the phone. Not as a preference. As a rule. “We have rules in here about that,” she says.

For her, the defining skill of a good QS is not technical at all. She assumes data literacy if you are in this profession, you are data-driven, and that is the

baseline, not the differentiator. What separates the people she wants from the people she doesn't is something far harder to teach.

"Likability," she says, and then immediately qualifies it. Not charm. Not social ease. Something more specific: the ability to hold a difficult conversation and remain personable while doing it.

"Qs have tricky conversations," she says. "If they can have a tricky conversation and hold their own and be personable and friendly when it's a tricky situation that is the skill. It's not about the emails. It's not about the data. It's being able to have the tricky conversation."

This matters because the conversations that determine whether you progress are almost never easy ones. Telling a subcontractor they are not getting paid. Telling a client their variation is not going to fly. Telling your own director that the margin has moved in the wrong direction. These conversations cannot be resolved by a well-formatted email or a clean spreadsheet. They require a human being who can sit in discomfort and keep talking.

Common Mistake → Sending the difficult message in writing because it feels safer and creates a record.

Better Move: Making the call first, having the conversation, and then confirming in writing. The record is useful. The relationship is essential.

III. The Introvert/Extrovert Hybrid

(The Personality Switch)

One-dimensional characters fail here.

If you are purely an introvert who loves spreadsheets but can't look a client in the eye, you will stay a Senior QS forever. If you are purely an extrovert who loves lunch but can't do a CVR, you will get fired for losing money.

Matt Parker admits he has traits of Asperger's/ADHD (Square pegs in square holes) which makes him brilliant at the data patterns. But to be a Director, he had to learn the other side.

The Fit-Out Commercial Director calls it the ability to “flip the personality switch.” You need to be corporate in the boardroom and relatable on the site walk. You need to speak “Contract” to the lawyers and “Bricklayer” to the trades.

What this actually means on a job:

- Morning (Introvert Mode): You lock your door. You go through the CVR with forensic detail. You spot that the preliminaries are running hot. You are cold, analytical, and ruthless with the data.
- Afternoon (Extrovert Mode): You go to the client progress meeting. You don't mention the spreadsheet. You ask about their kids. You joke about the football. You “soften them up” so that when you drop the variation claim on the table, they are in a good mood.

The “Room Reader” Checklist: Before you speak, assess the audience:

1. [] The Board: They want headlines, bottom line margin, and risk exposure. Be concise. (Introvert/Data Mode).
2. [] The Client: They want reassurance, progress, and to feel like they are winning. Be charming. (Extrovert/Sales Mode).
3. [] The Subcontractor: They want fair payment and clear instruction. Be direct but human. (Hybrid Mode).

IV. The Psychology Shift

(Managing Humans, Not Just Costs)

The assumption: promotion means managing money. You are actually getting promoted to manage emotions.

Rob Dabner warns that the higher you go, the more you become an “agony uncle”. You aren’t just managing costs; you are managing divorce, stress, burnout, and conflict within your team.

If your Senior QS is going through a messy divorce, his CVRs will be wrong. If you don’t have the empathy to spot that and manage him, you will have a commercial hole in your project.

Genna Rourke talks about the “Leadership Shadow”. Everything you do sets the tone. If you are stressed, manic, and aggressive, your team will hide problems from you. If you are calm, approachable, and decisive, they will bring problems to you early enough for you to fix them.

Stuart Goodwin says the biggest career anchor is: “Don’t trust people that don’t trust people”. You have to build a culture where people feel safe to tell you the bad news.

What this actually means on a job: A QS in your team makes a £10k error in a package order. They are terrified.

- The Bad Boss: Screams. “How could you be so stupid?” Result: The QS hides the next mistake, which turns out to be £100k.
- The Commercial Director: “Okay. It’s done. £10k is gone. What is the solution? How do we fix it? And what process do we change so it never happens again?” Result: The QS is loyal for life and never makes that mistake again.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Thinking “soft skills” means being soft.
- Better Move: Realizing that empathy is a commercial tool. If your team trusts you, they work harder and they don’t hide financial risks from you.

V. The Authenticity Trap

(Why Imitation is Commercial Suicide)

The construction industry is still overwhelmingly male. When you walk into a site cabin, the testosterone is often thicker than the mud.

For women entering this environment, the instinct is often survival through camouflage. You think you need to shout louder, swear more, and act “tougher” to be taken seriously. You think you need to be “one of the lads.”

Genna Rourke destroys this myth. Her advice is blunt: “Do not try and become like a man. Don’t feel you have to change who you are to be seen and to be heard”.

Here is the trap: If you try to out-shout a loud, aggressive subcontractor, you are playing their game on their home turf. You will lose. But if you bring organisation, empathy, and forensic detail to the table, you strip them of their weapons.

Nick Farmer backs this up with a simple observation: “Women in construction tend to be a lot more organised than men”. In a chaotic industry, organisation is not just a skill; it is a weapon.

The “Authenticity” Protocol

To succeed as a woman in commercial leadership, you must execute the A.C.E. Model:

1. Authenticity: Be yourself, not a caricature of a male QS.
2. Competence: Your technical knowledge is your shield.
3. Empathy: Use the emotional intelligence that many of your male counterparts lack.

The “Toughness” Test

(Don't Be Intimidated)

When Genna Rourke interviewed for her first role, the interviewer warned her: “You’ve got to be quite tough in this role... you’ll be dealing with a lot of men who won’t like dealing with women.”

Her response was legendary: “I don’t think we’ll have a problem. Maybe they would”.

This is the mindset shift. If a man has a problem dealing with you because you are a woman, that is a him problem, not a you problem. Do not internalise their insecurity.

What this actually means on a job: A Project Manager screams at you because you haven’t processed a payment he forgot to sign off.

- The “One of the Lads” Reaction: You scream back. It descends into a swearing match. You look unprofessional.
- The Authentic Leader: You wait for him to finish. You calmly slide the unsigned timesheet across the desk. You say, “I can’t pay what you haven’t signed. Sign this, and the money goes Friday.” You win by being the adult in the room.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Changing your personality to be “abrasive” or “forceful” because you think that equals authority.
- Better Move: Using “Radical Consistency.” Be calm, be factual, be unmovable.

The “Soft Skills” Advantage

(Why Empathy is Profitable)

We established in Chapter 5 that soft skills make you rich. Genna Rourke highlights that women often naturally possess the traits that the modern industry is desperate for.

She talks about becoming a “counsellor” to her team, dealing with domestic abuse issues, health scares, and family stress. She realised that caring about the person is the job.

While the “lads” are down the pub ignoring the fact that the Senior QS is burning out, you are spotting the signs and fixing it before the project collapses.

Genna Rourke warns that some women go too far the other way to prove they are tough, becoming “actually rude”. Don’t do this. Your ability to read a room is your superpower.

The “Network” Rule: Genna Rourke admits she used to be sceptical of “women’s networks,” thinking she didn’t need them. She changed her mind when she saw women crying because they had been bullied and had nowhere to turn.

The Lesson: Seek support. “Don’t take any of that kind of crap... look out for yourself”.

VI. The Script Bank

(What to Actually Say When the Heat is On)

Theory is great. But when you have to tell a subcontractor they aren’t getting paid on Friday, you need the words.

Kevin Baker says it clearly: Stop hiding behind email. “You’re getting back to back emails...just pick up the phone”.

Here are the scripts for the three hardest conversations you will have.

Scenario 1: The “Pay Less” Notice (The Bad News)

- The Flannel: “Hi Dave, yeah, sorry, the directors haven’t signed it off yet and there’s a bit of an issue with the quality so we might be struggling...”
- The Script: “Dave, I’m calling you before the email lands. We are issuing a Pay Less Notice today. We are cutting £20k. It’s for the defects on Level 4. I know you disagree, but I have to protect the company’s position. If you can get the remedial plan to me by Tuesday, I can look at releasing £10k in the interim run. But for today, the number is X.”

Scenario 2: The Client Rejection (The “No”)

- The Flannel: “We feel that this variation is perhaps unfair given the circumstances...”
- The Script: “I can’t accept that valuation. If I sign that, I’m signing a loss, and I won’t do that. We need to agree on the measure of the concrete first. Let’s park the rate. Do we agree on the volume? Yes or no?”

Scenario 3: The “I Don’t Know” (The Shield)

- The Flannel: “Well, generally speaking, the output should be...”
- The Script: “I don’t know the answer to that. I am not going to guess and give you bad information. I will find out and email you by 4:00 PM.”

The Rule: James Dunne learned from his MD that “sometimes the best thing you can do is to just do nothing”. If you are angry, shut up. If you are unsure, shut up. Speak only when you have the data.

CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY: THE HYBRID PROTOCOL

To move from a spreadsheet manager to a Commercial Director, you must master the kaleidoscope:

1. Kill the Flannel: Be radically authentic. Mark Waller warns against empty flannel. The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director spots “bullshit” when candidates lack detail, know your “day one to Final Account.” If you don’t know, say so.
2. Pick Up The Phone: Email is for confirmation; the phone is for negotiation. Kevin Baker is right, don’t hide behind the screen.
3. Flip the Switch: Be the nerd when you are checking the numbers, but be the human when you are selling the numbers. The Fit-Out Commercial Director’s ability to switch is the key to the boardroom.
4. Embrace the Psychology Shift: Accept that 50% of your job is now psychology. If you can’t manage people’s stress, you can’t manage the project’s margin.

Technical skills: covered. Now you need the human skills to sell them.

5. Reject the Camouflage: Listen to Genna Rourke. Do not try to be “one of the lads.” If you try to out-shout the loudest voice, you lose. Use your natural strengths, organisation and empathy, as your commercial weapons.

Distance feels safe until reality intervenes.

If you don’t understand how value is created on site,
you will eventually misjudge it on paper.

Chapter 7

**STOP DOING,
START DIRECTING**

(The Delegation Pivot)

There is a fatal flaw in the way the construction industry promotes people. Promotion to Senior QS comes from excellence at execution. You are fast at measurement. You spot the contract clauses. You win the arguments. You are the “fixer.”

Then, you get promoted to Manager or Director, and the very thing that got you promoted becomes the thing that kills your career.

The Trap: needing to be the best QS in the room. The fear: letting go means mistakes. You think that nobody can do it as fast or as accurately as you.

So you become the bottleneck. You work 14-hour days fixing your team’s spelling mistakes while the strategy of the business goes up in flames.

Genna Rourke had this realisation when a boss dropped a hammer blow of truth on her: “What got you here won’t get you there”.

She realised she was trying to do everything herself because she felt she had to. She was drowning. To survive, she had to fundamentally change her operating system from “I do it” to “Who can do this?”.

If you cannot make this shift, you will burnout, and your team will leave.

The “Owner vs. Helper” Framework

To escape the “micro-management trap,” you need to change how you view your team.

1. The Helper Model (Bad): Telling them exactly what to do. They do it. You check it. You fix it. They learn nothing. You are exhausted.
2. The Owner Model (Good): You give them the outcome required. They figure out the method. They own the result. You sleep at night.

I. Delegate Responsibility, Not Just Tasks

(Stop Creating “Admin” Staff)

Most managers think they are delegating. They aren’t. They are just creating “job lists.”

Joe Priestley identifies the classic mistake new managers make: “delegating the admin tasks”. You drip-feed small, boring tasks to your team, “write this letter,” “check this measure”, because you are terrified to give them the whole job.

The result? “There’s nothing more demotivating for a team member than just being drip fed”. They become bored. They don’t understand the big picture. And when you are away, they can’t function.

The Fix: You need to delegate the responsibility, not the task.

Joe Priestley explains: “I expect that on Thursday, there’s a report... We’re having a conversation about what you’re doing about it, not telling you how you should go about it”.

You have to let them come up with their own solutions. If you tell them how to solve the problem, it is still your problem. If you ask them how they are going to solve it, it becomes their problem.

Simon Banwell applies “Situational Leadership” to this. The principle: your leadership style must adapt to each team member’s capability and confidence. A graduate needs directive support. A Senior QS needs autonomy. If you micromanage the experienced or abandon the inexperienced, both fail.

What this actually means on a job: A dispute arises with a groundworker.

- The Micro-Manager: Writes the email response themselves and asks the Assistant to hit send.
- The Director: Tells the Assistant: “The groundworker is claiming £20k. I think they are wrong. Go away, review the site records, draft a response, and bring it to me on Tuesday morning. Tell me your strategy.”

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Correcting a junior's work in silence and sending it out because it's "quicker."
- Better Move: highlighting the error, sending it back, and saying, "This section is weak. Fix it." It takes longer today, but it saves you 100 hours next year.

II. The "Reverse Organogram"

(You Work for Them)

There is an ego trip that comes with the "Director" title. The assumption: pyramids have you at the top.

Rob Smith flips this entirely. He operates on a "reverse organogram" (building the foundation at the bottom to support the top). He believes the people at the top are actually at the bottom, supporting the people doing the work.

If you are a Commercial Director, your job is not to do the CVR. Your job is to remove the obstacles stopping your team from doing the CVR.

Richard Langbridge echoes this. He focuses on "empowerment." He recruits his senior leadership team and then gives them the keys. He says, "I am giving you all of this. You go away and run it".

The Warning: This does not mean you abdicate responsibility. Stuart Goodwin warns against the mindset of "I can't trust anybody." He says you have to trust people, otherwise "you just put the anchors on your career". If you don't trust them, you can't scale.

What this actually means on a job: Your Senior QS is struggling to get information from the Project Manager.

- The Bad Boss: Calls the PM and screams at them, undermining the SQS.

- The “Reverse Organogram” Boss: Asks the SQS, “What do you need from me to help you unlock this?” Maybe you make a subtle phone call, or maybe you coach them on how to have the difficult conversation. You support, you don’t takeover.

The “Blocker” Checklist: Ask your direct reports this question every Monday:

1. What is stopping you from doing your job this week?
2. Do you have the resources you need?
3. Who do I need to call to get out of your way?

Sinead Maguire uses an analogy that cuts through the noise on this better than most: it is like the career choice in nursing between the clinical track and the managerial track.

At a certain point in nursing, you choose. Do you want to be the clinical expert, the senior specialist that everyone comes to for the hard cases, the oracle of knowledge? Or do you want to run the ward, manage the people, deal with the rotas, the budgets, and the human chaos?

Both are valid. Both are senior. But they are fundamentally different jobs that require fundamentally different people.

Commercial leadership has the same fork in the road. She describes it clearly: “Do you want to stick with QS and be the owl where everyone goes to for knowledge? Or are you more aligned to managing teams and happy doing that?”

The problem the industry creates is that it rarely acknowledges the fork exists. People move into management because the salary ceiling at Senior QS forces them to, not because they are built for it. “That’s the attraction,” she says. “Not because people genuinely want to do it.”

The result is a management layer full of people who would have been extraordinary technical experts, now doing a job they don’t want, managing people they don’t understand, wondering why they feel so out of place.

The fix is not a skills course. Some of it can be learned, and she is clear that good leadership can identify the gap and upskill people. But there is a ceiling. Smart organisations need to create a genuine expert track, a path where the owl is valued and paid accordingly, without being forced through a management door they were never meant to walk through.

Common Mistake → Promoting your best technical QS into management because it is the only way to give them a pay rise.

Better Move: Building a senior technical track with genuine compensation so the owl stays an owl instead of becoming a reluctant and unhappy manager.

III. Managing Emotions, Not Margins

(When the Job Becomes Personal)

The assumption: NEC Contracts are the hard part. It isn't. The hard part is the messy, irrational, emotional humans you employ.

Rob Dabner warns that the higher you go, the more you become an “agony uncle”. You aren't just managing costs; you are managing divorce, stress, burnout, and conflict.

Matt Parker agrees. He notes that as you climb the tree, you deal with more “extended family” problems. If you have zero empathy, you will fail because you won't spot when a key team member is about to crack.

Genna Rourke learned this the hard way. She admits she used to be “quite abrasive” or forceful, thinking people just needed to be told. She realised that you have to understand the human in front of you. She talks about the “Leadership Shadow”, the idea that your mood, your stress, and your behaviour cast a shadow over the whole team. If you are manic, they are manic. If you are calm, they are calm.

What this actually means on a job: Your best QS starts missing deadlines.

- The Spreadsheet Manager: Puts them on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP).
- The Agony Uncle: Takes them for a coffee. “You’re usually on time. What’s going on?” Finds out their parent is sick. Adjusts their workload. Retains the employee for life.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Ignoring personal issues because “we are here to work.”
- Better Move: Acknowledging that personal issues are work issues. If their head isn’t in the game, your numbers are wrong.

IV. The “Safe to Fail” Environment

(Why Fear Kills Profit)

If your team is terrified of you, they will hide bad news. In construction, hidden bad news is like cancer, by the time you find it, it’s terminal.

The Freelance Commercial Director emphasizes that it’s a “two-way journey” involving a lot of trust. You have to create an environment where people can tell you they messed up.

Genna Rourke’s rule is simple: decisions are protected, indecision isn’t. She teaches her team to seek forgiveness rather than permission. She would rather they make a wrong decision than no decision, because a wrong decision can be fixed.

Simon Banwell backs this up: “It’s okay to make mistakes because by making mistakes... that’s how you evolve”. If you scream at a junior for miscalculating a variation, they will never try to value a variation again without asking you first. You have just created a dependency.

What this actually means on a job: A QS realises they missed a notice date, costing the project £5k.

- The Fear Culture: They hide it, hoping the client won't notice. It blows up later and costs £50k.
- The Trust Culture: They walk into your office. "I missed the date. We lost £5k. Here is my plan to get it back elsewhere." You say: "Okay. Don't do it again. Go get it back."

The "Bad News" Protocol:

1. Thank them for telling you early.
2. Ask them for their proposed solution.
3. Critique the process, not the person. (Why did we miss the date? Not "Why are you stupid?").

V. Mental Health Maintenance Plan

(How to Not Break Your Spine)

This industry breaks people. Physically and mentally.

The Infrastructure Commercial Manager ignored the stress until he needed C5/C6 vertebrae fusion surgery. His body literally shut down because he wouldn't stop. Rob Dabner admits the hardest part is "switching off the work personality" when he walks through the door.

Matt Hopwood warns about the "first in, last out" mentality. It looks heroic, but it leads to burnout.

The Stress Audit: If you answer "Yes" to two of these, you are in the danger zone:

1. ☐ Do you check emails while on the toilet?
2. ☐ Do you drink alcohol on a Tuesday just to "come down" from the day?
3. ☐ Do you wake up at 3 AM thinking about an adjudication?

The "Capacity" Script: How to tell your Director you are drowning without sounding weak:

- Weak: “I’m really stressed and I can’t do it.”
- Strong: “I am currently at capacity delivering Project X. If you want me to take on Project Y, I need to deprioritise X or I need additional resource. Which one is the priority for the business?”

CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY: THE DELEGATION PIVOT

To move from a “Doer” to a “Director,” you must execute these four shifts:

1. Stop Being the Fixer: Genna Rourke is right, what got you here won’t get you there. If you are still measuring drawings at 8:00 PM, you are failing as a Director.
2. Delegate Outcomes, Not Tasks: Follow Joe Priestley’s rule. Don’t just give them admin. Give them the problem and demand they bring the solution.
3. Manage Emotions, Not Just Margins: Accept Rob Dabner’s reality. You are managing people’s lives. If you can’t handle emotions, go back to being a QS.
4. Serve the Team: Adopt Rob Smith’s “Reverse Organogram.” Your job is to clear the road so they can drive the car.

Fix everything yourself and you stay indispensable.

Let go and you become accountable.

Leadership begins where control ends.

Chapter 8

THE LONELY TOP

(The Price of the Keys)

The big chair was wanted. You wanted the “Director” title. You wanted the salary, the car allowance, the equity, and the prestige.

Congratulations. You got it.

Now, let me tell you what nobody told you in the interview.

The silence is deafening.

When you are a Senior QS and you make a mistake, you go to the Commercial Manager. You say, “I missed a notice,” and they fix it. When the Commercial Manager has a problem, they come to you to get the data, or they go to the Director for cover.

But when you have a problem, there is nobody above you to fix it. This is true when the project is bleeding £500k a month or when the client is threatening termination. It is also true when cash flow is negative for the third month in a row. You look up, and there is only the ceiling.

The Engineering & Construction Commercial Manager calls this being the “last bastion”. He says the higher you go, the more you realise that you are the final line of defence. If you can’t fix it, the company takes the hit. The shareholders lose money. People lose jobs.

Nick Farmer admits that the hardest part of the transition is the “fear of responsibility”. You realise you’re not just playing with monopoly money. You’re dealing with real mortgages and the company’s financial health.

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director puts it brutally: “When your head goes above the parapet, it can get chopped off”.

This chapter is not about scaring you. It is about preparing you for the Isolation of Command.

The “Buck Stops Here” Matrix

To survive at the Director level, you need to understand the fundamental shift in accountability. You are no longer paid for effort; you are paid for the result.

1. The Doer (QS): Responsible for the Task. (Did I measure the wall correctly?)
2. The Manager (MQS): Responsible for the Team. (Did the team measure the wall correctly?)
3. The Director (Commercial Director): Responsible for the Consequence. (Does the business survive if the wall is wrong?)

The point is this: You cannot blame the tools, the team, or the market anymore. The outcome is owned.

I. The “Parapet” Syndrome

(Exposure and Vulnerability)

When you are a Commercial Director, you are the face of the financial health of the business. You are the one who has to sign off on the numbers.

When things go well, the Project Director usually takes the credit for “delivering a great scheme.” When things go badly, the Commercial Director takes the blame for “losing the margin.” You are the goalkeeper. Nobody remembers the 10 saves you made; they only remember the one goal you let in.

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director warns that you have to be very careful how you set your stall out because “nobody looks after you as an employee”. You might think your line manager or the MD is looking after you, but business is business. If the numbers turn red and shareholders get nervous, you are the one exposed. You are the insurance policy they will cash in.

The Infrastructure Commercial Manager is a living example of what happens when you take too much on without pushing back. He admits: “There’s too much being put on me... I know I’m sort of slowly failing. I can’t deal with it all”. He reached a tipping point where he had to say, “By mid-January, some of this needs to be off my plate”.

Here's the trap: Protecting the team by absorbing all pressure. You think that "good leadership" means being a heat shield. The reality: single point of failure. If you crack, the department cracks.

What this actually means on a job: It is Thursday afternoon. The CVR forecast shows a £1m loss for the quarter due to a supply chain insolvency. The board meeting is on Friday.

- The Amateur Commercial Director: Spends all night trying to "massage" the accruals. They move value from another pot to hide the loss. They hope to fix it next month before anyone notices. This is fatal. You will get fired for the cover-up, not the loss.
- The Pro Commercial Director: Walks into the MD's office on Thursday afternoon (before the papers go out) and says: "We are going to lose £1m. Here is why. Here is the plan to recover £400k of it. The other £600k is gone. I need you to sign off on this strategy."

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Delivering bad news in the board meeting with zero warning.
- Better Move: The "Pre-meeting." Never let a Director see a bad number for the first time on a projector screen. Call them 24 hours before. "The numbers are ugly. I wanted you to know first."

The "Exposure" Checklist: Before you sign off a CVR or a Board Report, ask:

1. [] The "Nan" Test: Could I explain why we lost this money to my Nan? (If it's too complex, you don't understand it).
2. [] The Trail: If I get hit by a bus, is there an audit trail showing who made the decision that caused this loss?
3. [] The Recovery: Have I presented a solution, or just a problem?

II. The “Beacon” Burden

(You Cannot Have a Bad Day)

This is the hardest psychological shift. You are human. You are allowed to be terrified. You are allowed to be stressed. But you are never allowed to show it to the team.

Your mood is the weather. If you walk in looking thunderous, the whole office gets their umbrellas out and stops working. If you walk in calm, they feel safe enough to do their jobs.

James Dunne calls this being a “beacon of hope”. He says that even when things are going wrong, you have to be the one projecting confidence. “The minute you start to sort of show [fear], the team drops”.

If the Commercial Director looks panicked, the Senior QS looks for a new job. It is that simple. They look at you to gauge the severity of the situation. If you crumble, they run.

The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director spends his time “revving people up”. He has to be the energy source. He demands that his team push themselves to make “10 on the job, not 6,” but he has to do it while maintaining a culture of “fairness and balance”. He has to drive performance without driving fear.

Genna Rourke was told she needs to be like a swan: “calm on the surface... paddling like f**k underneath”. You absorb the chaos, you filter it, and you pass down clear, calm instructions.

What this actually means on a job: A key subcontractor has gone bust at 9:00 AM, leaving a £200k hole in the budget and a half-built steel frame.

- The Panic Reaction: You storm into the open-plan office, swearing, slamming doors, shouting, “Who procured these guys? Why didn’t we see this coming?” Result: The team freezes. They stop making decisions because they are scared of being blamed.

- The Beacon Reaction: You go into your office, close the door, take five minutes to breathe. Then you walk out and call the team into a huddle. You say, “Okay, Steel Co has gone under. It’s bad, but it’s solvable. Dave, call the administrator. Sarah, ring the second-lowest tenderer. We fix this by Friday. Let’s go.” Result: The team mobilizes.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Venting your frustrations down the chain of command.
- Better Move: Venting up or out. Vent to your MD (if you trust them), your mentor, or your spouse. Never vent to your subordinates.

III. You Are Now a Therapist

(The Burden Nobody Warned You About)

You thought you were promoted for your knowledge of JCT Design & Build. You weren’t. You were promoted to manage human beings. And human beings are messy.

Rob Dabner says the higher you go, the more you become an “agony uncle”. You aren’t managing costs; you are managing divorce, stress, burnout, gambling debts, and conflict.

Matt Parker agrees: “The higher up the tree you get, the more extended family you get... people coming to you more with the problems”.

If you cannot handle the emotional weight of 20 people’s personal problems, you will burnout. You have to care, but you cannot carry it home.

Simon Banwell practises Rob Smith’s “reverse organogram” mindset. He believes he is at the bottom, supporting everyone else. His job is to catch the problems so his team can do the work. But catching those problems takes a toll.

What this actually means on a job: Your best Managing QS requests a meeting. You think it's about the Final Account. They walk in, close the door, and burst into tears because their marriage is falling apart.

- The “Technician” Boss: Looks awkward, checks their watch, and says, “Sorry to hear that, but can we get the report done by 5?” You lose that employee forever.
- The “Agony Uncle” Commercial Director: Puts the pen down. “The report can wait. Take the rest of the week off. Sort your life out. The job will be here when you get back.” You gain loyalty for life.

IV. The Health Tax

(The Physical Cost of Leadership)

This is the part nobody puts on the job description. The stress of this job sits in your body. It accumulates in your lower back, your neck, and your blood pressure.

The Infrastructure Commercial Manager has the scars to prove it. He had bulging discs in his neck (C5/C6) removed and his vertebrae fused with titanium. Why? Because of the stress and the physical toll of the job. He ignored the pain until a physio told him his nerves were shutting down. He literally broke his back for the job.

Rob Dabner talks about the difficulty of “switching off”. He works from a garden room, and his commute is 30 seconds. If he isn't careful, he never leaves work. He has to force the separation.

The “24/7” Myth: There is a toxic belief that to be a Director, you must be online at 10:00 PM. Matt Hopwood challenges this. He admits that sometimes the culture is, “everyone's been in since half seven and they're leaving at five.” But he warns that if you don't take care of your mental health, you will break.

The point is this: The company will replace you in a month if you drop dead. Your family won't.

The "Stress Audit": Ask yourself these three questions honestly:

1. Are you sleeping through the night, or are you waking up at 3:00 AM thinking about adjudication?
2. Are you ignoring physical pain (back, neck, headaches) hoping it will go away?
3. Are you drinking more to "wind down" on a Tuesday night? (As The Engineering & Construction Commercial Manager admits, "you get to a level where you'd be the village elder... but you can't just rely on that").

If the answer is yes, you are heading for a cliff. You need to build a firewall between work and home.

V. Strategy vs. Firefighting

(The Struggle to Let Go)

James Dunne hired an external mentor when he took his Commercial Director role. The mentor had to keep redirecting him: "You need to find somebody who you trust to do those things [nitty gritty] for you... you need to be looking at how you grow the business".

The biggest failure mode for new Directors is reverting to the comfort zone. Pricing variations is familiar. You know how to argue a final account. Writing 5-year strategies isn't or present to investors. So, when you get stressed, you start pricing variations again because it feels safe.

You must stop.

Simon Banwell is brutal on this: "Stop focusing all the stuff that doesn't have value... Focus on the bits that do". You have to let the fires burn sometimes so you can build the fire station.

What this actually means on a job:

- Firefighting: Spending 4 hours checking a subcontractor's final account because you don't trust your SQS.
- Strategy: Spending 4 hours having lunch with a new client who could bring in £50m of work next year.
- The Director is paid for the Strategy. The Manager is paid for the Firefighting.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: "I'll just do this quickly because it's faster than explaining it."
- Better Move: "I will explain this once, slowly. Then I never want to see it on my desk again."

CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY: THE SURVIVAL GUIDE

To survive the lonely top, you need to accept the new rules of the game:

1. Accept the Exposure: As The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director says, your head is above the parapet. Don't hide. Own the bad news before it owns you. Pre-warn your stakeholders.
2. Be the Beacon: James Dunne is right; you cannot show panic. Your team needs certainty, not chaos. Be the swan.
3. Prioritize Health: Learn from The Infrastructure Commercial Manager's surgery. The job is not worth your spine. Set boundaries or your body will set them for you.
4. Stop Doing, Start Thinking: Listen to Simon Banwell. If you are doing the work, you aren't leading the business. Get out of the weeds and get onto the bridge.

At this level, there is no escalation, only explanation.

If you need cover, this role will break you.

Chapter 9

FUTURE-PROOFING

(Why AI Can't Buy You a Beer)

There is a spectre haunting the construction industry. It isn't recession. It isn't material shortages. It is the fear that a computer program is about to make your job obsolete.

You see the LinkedIn posts. You see the "AI for Construction" webinars. You hear the buzzwords about automation, machine learning, and parametric estimating. And if you are sitting there processing invoices manually, you start to worry.

The mistake: valuing Directors for data processing.

If your entire value proposition is that you can add up a spreadsheet faster than the person next to you, then yes, you are in trouble. A computer can do that in a nanosecond.

But if your value proposition is judgment, negotiation, and relationships, you are untouchable.

David Radley puts it perfectly when asked what will trip up the next generation: "Over reliance on AI will trip them up".

He explains that while AI is amazing for efficiency, it lacks the one thing that defines commercial leadership: Nuance. It cannot read the room. It cannot understand that the contract says one thing, but the relationship requires another.

This chapter is about how to ride the wave of technology without drowning in it. It is about becoming the Tech-Enabled Human.

The "Tech-Enabled Human" Framework

To survive the next 10 years, you need to operate using the A.H.A. Model:

1. Automate: Let the machine do the grunt work (data entry, basic measurement).
2. Humanise: Apply context, empathy, and strategy to that data.
3. Act: Make the decision that the machine is too scared to make.

I. The “Black and White” Blindspot

(Why Algorithms Fail at Nuance)

Computers operate in binary. Ones and zeros. Yes and no. True and False.

Construction contracts operate in the grey. They operate in the “maybe,” the “reasonable endeavour,” and the “fair and reasonable.”

If you feed a contract into an AI model, it will tell you exactly what the words say. But it won’t tell you what they mean in the context of a 20-year client relationship.

David Radley tested this. As part of process improvement, using non-confidential, dummy and sanitised materials. His view is simple: they can be useful for a range of tasks, but they cannot be relied on for final sign-off or commercial judgement. Treat AI as a high-speed highlighter, not a decision maker.

He gives a specific example: “I found it great at times for referencing purposes, but some elements it gets completely wrong. The most memorable was where it misread payment terms, it stated 30 days, but when you read the contract wording it was a 60 day payment period; a significant cashflow risk.”

What this actually means on a job: Reviewing a JCT Design & Build contract. You upload it to an AI review tool.

- The Lazy Commercial Director: Reads the AI summary that says “Risk Profile: Low” and signs it. Three months later, you find out the “Design Portion” clause changed. Now, you’re responsible for the ground conditions, and it will cost you £500k.
- The Future-Proof Commercial Director: Uses the AI to highlight the non-standard clauses, then reads them personally. You spot the ground risk amendment. You pick up the phone to the client and negotiate it out.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Using AI as a decision-maker.
- Better Move: Using AI as a “second pair of eyes” or a high-speed highlighter pen. You must always be the final signatory.

The “AI Audit” Checklist: Before you trust a piece of software with a commercial decision, ask:

1. [] The Sanity Check: Does this output look right based on my 20 years of experience? (If the rate looks low, it is low).
2. [] The Context Check: Does the AI know that we are trying to win more work from this client, or is it treating this as a one-off transaction?
3. [] The Liability Check: If this is wrong, whose insurance pays out? (Hint: It’s yours, not ChatGPT’s).

Sinead Maguire’s concern about AI is more specific and more unsettling than most.

She is not worried about efficiency. She is not worried about job displacement in the abstract. She is worried about knowledge extinction.

“There’s been studies done on kids doing exams,” she says. “They get AI to do their coursework. They do badly in their exams because they haven’t learned.”

The same logic applies here. If you use AI to review a contract without reading it yourself, you are not saving time, you are outsourcing the comprehension. The next time you face that clause in a dispute, at 11 PM on a Thursday with the adjudicator’s deadline looming, you will not have the instinct to reach for. You will have a tool that is not connected to the internet.

“We’ve got the NEC in the office and people come in and take it and flick through it,” she says. “Losing that would be criminal.”

There is a version of the future where two commercial teams, both using AI contract review tools, end up in a dispute that neither side fully understands

because neither team actually read the contract. “My AI versus your AI,” as she puts it. “We all lose. We lose the actual knowledge.”

The risk is not that AI replaces the expert. The risk is that it prevents the next generation from becoming one.

Rebecca Jones names the answer from the other end of the career: apprentices. She has managed them. She watched them bring a hunger that graduates sometimes don’t. “You’re not going to commit three to five years of your life just because you fancy it,” she says. The apprenticeship is a self-selecting filter. Those who choose it want to learn the craft.

But she has also watched them be held back. Apprentices ready for an Assistant QS role being told to wait until their degree finishes in five years despite the fact that they know the business, the projects, and the work. “Give them the opportunity,” she says. “If you keep stagnating them, they will go elsewhere to find it. And you lose good people.”

The answer to AI eroding knowledge is not to slow down technology. It is to build the human pipeline faster and give people real ownership of real work earlier.

The “Knowledge Preservation” Checklist:

1. ☐ Are you using AI to draft and then reading the output critically or just accepting it?
2. ☐ Can you explain the key commercial clauses in your current contract without opening a tool?
3. ☐ Are the apprentices and juniors in your team being given ownership of work, or just tasks?

II. The “Dinner Deal” Defence

(You Cannot Automate Trust)

Construction is a contact sport. It is played by people, not processors.

In this industry, the biggest deals, final account settlements, framework agreements, and dispute resolutions are rarely settled through emails or data sets. They settle in a room, face-to-face, often over a coffee or a beer.

Rob Dabner is adamant about this. He states: “AI has its place... but there’s aspects that it’s never going to replace and it can’t replace. It can’t replace that personal relationship piece... a lot of projects and work is not secured through written communication. It’s secured personalities”.

An algorithm cannot look a subcontractor in the eye and tell if they are lying about their insolvency risk. An algorithm cannot sense that the client’s Project Manager is under pressure from his boss and needs a “win” to sign off the variation.

What this actually means on a job: Stalemate on a Final Account. You are £100k apart.

- The Tech-Obsessed QS: Sends a well-organised spreadsheet showing why the subcontractor is wrong. The subcontractor digs their heels in. We go to adjudication.
- The Commercial Director: Invites the subcontractor’s MD for a curry. They talk about football for an hour. Then the Commercial Director says, “Look, I can’t do £100k, but I can do £60k and I can pay you next week.” The deal is done on a handshake. The spreadsheet is irrelevant.

Here’s the trap: confusing efficiency with effectiveness. (getting the result). AI gives you efficiency. Relationships give you effectiveness.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Hiding behind data to justify a commercial position.
- Better Move: Using data to frame the conversation, but using empathy to close the deal.

III. The “Admin” Automation

(Stop Being a Data Entry Clerk)

While AI can’t replace the relationship, it should replace the drudgery.

If you are a Commercial Director and you are still manually typing data from an invoice into a spreadsheet, you are wasting your salary. You are being a very expensive admin clerk.

The Freelance Commercial Director sees the shift coming. He predicts: “AI is going to be the biggest change... I’m seeing project managers evolve into taking over the commercial functions... doing CVRs”.

This sounds scary, but it is actually liberation. Smart tools can automate the “boring” parts of the QS role like measurement, invoice processing, and cost reporting. They can also help non-specialists do these tasks. This frees you up to do high-value work.

The Fit-Out Commercial Director takes it a step further. He envisions a future with more tech people as commercial directors. This role focuses on process, risk management, and data efficiency.

What this actually means on a job: It is month-end reporting week.

- The Old School Commercial Director: Spends three days chasing spreadsheets, fixing formulas, and entering values by hand. They have zero time to analyse the numbers.
- The Future-Proof Commercial Director: Has a system that pulls the data automatically from the site tablets. They spend 30 minutes reviewing the dashboard, and then spend 2.5 days strategizing how to improve the margin based on what the data tells them.

The “Automation” Audit: Look at your diary for last week. Highlight every task that involved just moving data.

- If it is more than 20% of your time, you are at risk.

- Find a tool to kill that task. (e.g., Use AI to summarize meeting minutes, use software to scrape invoice data).

IV. The “Tech-Savvy” Leader

(Adapt or Die)

Coding skills? Not required. Python knowledge? Optional. But you do need to know what is possible.

If you are the Commercial Director who refuses to look at the new software because “Excel worked fine in 1998,” you are becoming a dinosaur. And we know what happened to them.

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director is sceptical about the timeline, noting “I genuinely believe we’re 10 years off there being a major impact of AI... AI can’t go out in sight and measure 25 square metres of brickwork and value it”.

He is right, physically, the robot isn’t walking the site yet. But the data from the site is being captured. Drones, 360 cameras, and site audit apps are already doing the measuring.

The future Commercial Director is not the one who measures the brickwork. They are the one who interprets the data coming from the drone that measured the brickwork.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Rejecting new technology because it has “teething problems” on day one.
- Better Move: Being the pilot project. Be the one who says, “Let’s try this on one small job.” If it works, you look like a visionary. If it fails, you learned something cheap.

The “Future-Skill” Checklist:

1. ☐ Data Literacy: Can I read a dashboard as well as I can read a Bill of Quantities?
2. ☐ Tool Awareness: Do I know what tools my competitors are using to bid faster than me?
3. ☐ Hybrid Management: Can I manage a team where half the work is done by software?

V. The Industry Shifts

(The PM Takeover and The Data Commercial Director)

The role is changing. The Freelance Commercial Director is seeing “project managers evolve into taking over the commercial functions”.

Why? Because software is making the “counting” easy. If a PM can press a button and get a CVR, they don’t need a QS to count bricks. They need a QS to manage risk.

The Fit-Out Commercial Director predicts we will see “more tech people becoming commercial directors”. They don’t just measure walls. They manipulate data flows to predict margin fade three months in advance.

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director is sceptical about AI doing the physical site work (“AI can’t go out in sight and measure 25 square metres of brickwork”). He’s right. But the data from that brickwork is being captured by drones and processed by algorithms.

The Shift:

1. The Admin QS is Dead: If your job is data entry, you are gone.
2. The Risk Manager is King: The new Commercial Director is a risk analyst who understands contract law.
3. The “Local” Advantage: As one Director with international experience notes, regarding Dubai, the “expat premium” is dying. Clients want local knowledge or high-level strategic input, not just a British accent.

CHAPTER 9 SUMMARY: THE HUMAN EDGE

The robots are coming, but they are not coming for your job if you do your job right. They are coming for the tasks you hate doing anyway.

1. **Don't Outsource Your Brain:** As David Radley warns, over-reliance is fatal. Use AI to summarise the contract, but use your brain to understand it.
2. **Double Down on Dinner:** Rob Dabner is correct. The most “un-automatable” thing you can do is build a human bond. Go to lunch. Pick up the phone. Be a human.
3. **Let the PM do the CVR:** Listen to The Freelance Commercial Director. If the admin moves to the Project Manager via software, accept it. It clears your desk for the strategic work that actually justifies your £100k+ salary.
4. **Stay Curious:** You don't need to be a tech expert, but you can't be a luddite.

AI will make average faster.

It won't make weak safer.

Use tech to remove admin not judgement.

Because when it goes wrong, the signature is still yours.

Chapter 10

REDEFINING THE WIN

(Your Terms, Your Path)

There is a toxic myth in the construction industry that career progression is a vertical straight line.

The myth goes like this: Assistant goes to QS, then Senior, Managing QS, Commercial Manager, and finally Commercial Director.

It tells you that if you aren't a Commercial Director by 40, you have failed. It tells you that if you aren't managing a team of 50 people and sitting in board meetings discussing EBITDA, you lack ambition.

Here is the trap: You might be a world-class Quantity Surveyor, but a terrible Commercial Director.

The two roles are fundamentally different. One is about contracts, cost, and construction. The other is about politics, HR, and corporate strategy. If you love the build but hate the politics, climbing the ladder is not "progress." It is self-sabotage.

Andy Brown cuts through the noise: "Don't be in a rush to get somewhere... titles like Managing QS or Commercial Director... none of that means anything to me". He realised he was often doing the same job, just with different badges.

The Freelance Commercial Director backs this up, noting that some of the best people just want to be a "quantity surveyor" and not a manager, and that is fine.

David Lane has friends who stepped back from management to freelance and are "happy doing it".

This chapter is about making a deliberate choice not opting out, but owning the definition of what mastery looks like for you.

The "Autonomy vs. Authority" Matrix

To decide your future, you must choose what you value more:

1. The Leader (Authority): You want to manage people, shape strategy, and hold status. You accept high stress and high politics.

2. The Expert (Autonomy): You want to manage projects, master contracts, and execute. You accept high accountability but gain freedom from corporate games.

I. The “Super-Senior” (The Expert Track)

(Earning £100k Without the Headaches)

There is a belief that you hit a salary ceiling as a Senior QS. This is false.

If you're ready to tackle the biggest and messiest infrastructure projects in the country, the sky's the limit.

A Commercial Director at a major contractor notes that on major projects, you can have “Senior Quantity Surveyors” earning over £100,000.

Why? Because the project is worth £200m. The risk profile is enormous. The client needs a sniper who can administer an NEC4 Option C contract with forensic precision. They don't need a manager who spends all day doing PDRs and approving holiday requests. They need a “Super-Senior.”

Mark Heap admits some people just want to be agile and hands-on, not bogged down in management.

What this actually means on a job: It is 2:00 PM on a Wednesday.

- The Commercial Director Is stuck in a 4-hour board meeting explaining why the overheads are 0.5% over budget. They haven't seen a construction site in three weeks. They are bored and stressed.
- The Super-Senior: Is on site, wearing boots, negotiating a £5m final account with the steelwork contractor. They are arguing about the impact of a compensation event. They are using their brain, their technical skills, and their experience. They win the argument, save the project £200k, and go home at 5:00 PM feeling like they did something.

The point is this: You can out-earn your boss if you are valuable enough to the project.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Accepting a promotion to “Managing QS” because you think it’s the only way to get a pay rise.
- Better Move: Telling your boss, “I don’t want to manage people. I want to manage the biggest, riskiest package you have. Pay me for the risk I am managing, not the people I am managing.”

The “Expert” Checklist: To survive on this track, you must be technically bulletproof:

1. [] Contract Law: Can you quote the clause without looking it up?
2. [] Measurement: Can you measure from first principles?
3. [] Dispute Resolution: Have you successfully led an adjudication?

II. The Freelance Specialist

(The “Fixer”)

If you have the skills but hate the “corporate fluff”, the town halls, the mandatory fun days, the politics, then the specialist path is for you.

You become a “gun for hire.” You specialise in dispute resolution, closing out difficult accounts, or rescuing distressed projects. You are not there to make friends; you are there to stop the bleeding.

Chris Hird points out you can charge a “commanding day rate” that is higher than a Director’s salary.

The Upside: You are paid for your output, not your presence. If the job is done, you leave. You stay out of office politics because you simply don’t care who gets promoted next year.

The Reality Check: David Radley warns that “over reliance on AI will trip them up”. In the freelance world, you cannot hide. You need pure human smarts. You need to be able to walk into a burning building, assess the damage, and put the fire out while everyone else is panicking.

What this actually means on a job: A project is six months late and £2m over budget. The previous QS has had a breakdown and left.

- The Employee: Walks in terrified, worrying about their career prospects if they fail.
- The Specialist: Walks in on Day 1. No induction. No “getting to know you.” They open the files, find the missing notices, identify the gaps in the account, and draft a recovery strategy by Friday. They charge a premium for the stress they absorb.

Here’s the trap: Thinking freelancing is just “doing the same job for more money.” It isn’t. You have no safety net. No sick pay. No pension. You have to be good enough to be rehired every single day.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Freelancing too soon (before 10 years of experience) can harm your reputation. You might rely too much on supervision.
- Better Move: Waiting until you have a “black book” of contacts who know you are the person who fixes messes.

III. The Client Side

(The Poacher Turned Gamekeeper)

This is often seen as the “retirement home” for contractors. That is a lazy assumption.

Moving to the client side, working for a developer, a bank, an investment fund, or a consultancy, is about shifting from creation to control.

You move to a developer, a bank, or an investment fund. You monitor the costs. You are the person asking the difficult questions, not answering them.

Martin Van Rooyen points out that clients often feel frustrated. They struggle to understand the construction details. Your value is being the translator. You

explain to the bank why the groundworks are delayed. You explain to the developer why the variation costs £50k.

What this actually means on a job: The contractor submits a claim for “unforeseen ground conditions.”

- The Client (Non-Technical): Panics. Calls their lawyer. Agrees to pay it because they are scared.
- The Client-Side QS (You): Looks at the borehole logs from the tender pack. You realise the ground conditions were clearly identified in the Site Investigation report. You write a one-page response rejecting the claim. You just saved the client £100k.

The “Gamekeeper” Protocol:

1. Protect the Asset: Your job is no longer to build; it is to protect the budget.
2. Spot the Lies: Use your contractor experience to spot when the supply chain is lying about their capabilities (see Chapter 6).
3. Bridge the Gap: Translate technical problems into financial risks for the investors.

IV. The Portfolio Career

(The “Semi-Retired” Pro)

This is the ultimate flex. This is where you use your high value to buy back your time.

You work 3 days a week as a QS, and you do something else with the other four days, property development, teaching, consulting, or just playing golf.

Rob Dabner mentions training people to retain them. You could be the trainer. You could be the person coming in to mentor the juniors because the Commercial Director is too busy.

Simon Banwell talks about people wanting to “plod” and being happy. In this context, “plodding” isn’t an insult. It means you have found a level of competence where you can deliver value without burning out. It allows you to build a life outside of construction.

The Strategy: If you can earn £450/day as a freelance QS, working 3 days a week earns you £65k-£70k a year. For many people, that is enough money, and it buys you a 4-day weekend, every week.

What this actually means on a job:

- Tuesday - Thursday: You are laser-focused. You run the procurement for a specific project. You deliver high-quality work.
- Friday - Monday: You turn your phone off. You renovate your own house. You spend time with your kids. You have escaped the rat race while still being in the race.

Common Mistake → Better Move:

- Mistake: Waiting until you are 65 to slow down.
- Better Move: Designing a “Portfolio Career” in your 40s or 50s. Leveraging your specific knowledge to work less, but charge more.

CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY: YOUR TERMS, YOUR PATH

The most ambitious thing you can do is decide what winning actually means to you and then pursue that with the same discipline this guide has demanded from the start.

1. **Define Your Own Success:** As David Lane says, success is being “happy doing it.” You don’t need the title to win the game. If you are happy earning £60k and going home at 5 PM, you are winning.
2. **The Super-Senior is Valid:** You can earn £100k without managing a single person if you are good enough at the craft. Be the expert, not the boss.
3. **Know Your Lane:** Matt Parker talks about “square pegs in square holes”. If you are a technical nerd, stay technical. Don’t force yourself into leadership if you hate people.
4. **Freedom Over Status:** The freelance route offers autonomy that a Director role never will. You are a business of one. Treat yourself like a consultant, not an employee.

The ladder isn’t the goal.

The life is.

Choose authority if you want people and politics.

Choose autonomy if you want craft and freedom, but own the trade-offs.

Conclusion

**THE 10
COMMANDMENTS
OF THE COMMERCIAL
DIRECTOR**

(The Rules of Engagement)

We have dissected the careers of over 40 industry leaders. We have looked at the broken spines, the hollow titles, and the successful exits.

These are the 10 non-negotiable laws.

1. Thou Shalt Not Sprint to the Swamp

Stop chasing the title. The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director warns that if you have holes in your makeup, “you get found out”. Andy Brown confirms that titles mean nothing if you are doing the same job; do not rush to get somewhere you aren’t ready for. If you sprint to a Senior role in 3 years, you are building a skyscraper on a swamp.

2. Thou Shalt Get Thy Boots Dirty

Valuing what you don’t understand? Impossible. The Engineering Senior Commercial Manager tells the story of the student who refused to speak until he had walked the site to see the night shift’s output. Navneet Bawa is brutal on this: if you don’t know the bucket size of a mini-digger, you can’t interrogate the cost. Know the product, not just the spreadsheet.

3. Thou Shalt Pick Up The Phone

Email is for confirmation; the phone is for negotiation. Kevin Baker warns that we are losing the art of communication because people hide behind screens. Rob Dabner agrees, you cannot build a relationship or resolve a dispute via email tennis.

4. Thou Shalt Own The Bad News

Bad news must travel fast. Genna Rourke has a rule: “I will never, ever have a go at you for making a decision... as long as you made the decision”. The Engineering & Technology Commercial Director warns that if you try to be the leader where “nothing ever goes wrong,” you are not authentic. Own the error, present the solution, and survive.

5. Thou Shalt Serve The Team

Adopt Rob Smith's "Reverse Organogram", you work for them. Your job is to clear the blockers. Richard Langbridge leads by empowering his team and giving them the "keys" to run it. If you are doing the work, you aren't leading.

6. Thou Shalt Not Outsource Thy Brain (The AI Rule)

David Radley warns that "over reliance on AI will trip them up". Use AI to check the contract, but never use it to make the judgment call. The Fit-Out Commercial Director notes that AI will handle the efficiencies, but your job is the human interpretation.

7. Thou Shalt Protect The Asset (Your Health)

The job is not worth your mobility. The Infrastructure Commercial Manager required spinal fusion surgery because he ignored the stress. Rob Dabner reminds us that this is a vocation where you must be able to switch off, or you will burn out. Set boundaries, or your body will set them for you.

8. Thou Shalt Document The Chaos

The Construction & Fit-Out Commercial Director is clear: "Nobody looks after you as an employee". If you have a bad boss, you must create a paper trail. Stuart Goodwin advises: "Don't trust people that don't trust people". Protect yourself with written confirmation of every verbal instruction.

9. Thou Shalt Define Thine Own Win

You do not have to be a Director. David Lane notes that many are happier stepping back to freelance. A Commercial Director at a global contractor confirms you can earn huge money as a "Super-Senior" on major projects without the management headache. Success is autonomy, not a job title.

10. Thou Shalt Leave A Legacy

Rob Dabner reminds us that if you can help one person and they pass it on, that legacy continues forever. Paul Redgate looks for a high standard of ethics and values. Do the right thing, even when nobody is looking.

Final Words

THE COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR'S MANIFESTO

We have spent thousands of words dismantling the myths of this industry. We have looked at the hollow titles, the burnout, the bad bosses, and the seduction of fast money. We have heard from the veterans who have survived recessions, liquidations, and the grind of 60-hour weeks.

Now, you stand at the end of the guide, and you have a choice. You can treat this as just another document you skimmed, or you can treat it as the blueprint for the rest of your life.

If you are serious about this career, if you truly want to sit in the big chair and stay there, you need to understand the gravity of what comes next. This is not a job you do; it is a reputation you build. And in the construction industry, your reputation is the only asset that doesn't depreciate, unless you destroy it yourself.

The Illusion of Speed

The greatest enemy you face right now is your own impatience. The market is screaming at you that you are worth more. Recruiters are whispering that you should be a Senior QS after two years. Your peers on LinkedIn are posting about their new Audis and their inflated job titles.

Ignore them. They are building on sand.

True commercial leadership is not a race to the top; it is a war of attrition. The leaders we spoke to didn't get there by jumping ship every 12 months for an extra £5,000. They got there by staying in the trenches when the project went wrong. They got there by enduring the difficult final account meetings where nobody was smiling. They got there by making mistakes that cost money, owning those mistakes, and fixing them before the client fired them.

If you skip the "muddy boots" phase, you'll miss important lessons. Skipping years of measuring brickwork and arguing over details leaves you with nothing to share in the boardroom. You will be a "spreadsheet manager," not a Commercial Director. And when the market turns, as it always does, the spreadsheet managers are the first to go. The builders stay.

The Human Algorithm

We are entering an era where Artificial Intelligence will be able to write a contract clause faster than you. It will be able to process a payment application in seconds. It will be able to spot a formula error in a CVR before you even open Excel.

If your entire value proposition is that you are good at math, you are obsolete.

The future of this role belongs to the translators. It's for those who can take cold, hard data from a failing project. They turn it into a recovery plan that a worried client can grasp. It's for those who can enter a site cabin, read a subcontractor's body language, and persuade them to stay on the job without spending a dime.

You cannot automate a handshake. You cannot automate the trust built over ten years of fair payment. You cannot automate the "gut feel" that tells you a tender price is too low and the contractor will go bust.

Your technical skills are just the price of admission. Your human skills are key. Your empathy, ability to listen, and calmness, especially in tough times, will help you stay employed. Be the person people want to work for, not just the person they have to work for.

The Burden of the Keys

There is a seduction to the title "Director." It implies power, status, and freedom. But the reality, as every single leader in this guide has attested, is that the higher you go, the heavier the burden becomes.

When you are a QS, you look after a package. When you are a Manager, you look after a team. When you are a Director, you look after the mortgage payments of every person in your department.

The silence at the top is real. When the cash flow dries up, there is nobody above you to fix it. You are the backstop. You have to be the one who sleeps less so your team can sleep more. You need to be the "umbrella," protecting

your surveyors from the political storm from shareholders. This lets them work without distractions.

If you are not ready for that weight, if you want the salary but not the sleepless nights, then do not take the keys. There is no shame in being an expert Senior QS. In fact, mastering the craft without taking on the crown offers a quiet dignity and a significant fortune to be made. But if you take the crown, you must wear it with a sense of responsibility. You cannot blame the market, the client, or your team. You own the outcome.

The Integrity Protocol

The construction industry is smaller than you think. It is a village disguised as a global sector. The person you screw over on a final account today will be the Commercial Director of the client you are trying to win work from in five years.

Memories in this game are long. If you are known as someone who fakes knowledge, talks bullshit, or hides bad news, that label will enter the room five minutes before you do.

Integrity is not about being nice; it is about being consistent. It is about paying the subcontractor what they are due, even when it hurts your margin, because you know you need them for the next job. It is about telling your Board the truth about a loss three months before it happens, rather than hiding it until it is too late to fix. It is about admitting “I don’t know” rather than making up an answer that could cost millions.

Your integrity is your currency. Protect it with your life. You can recover from a bad project. You can recover from a bad year. You cannot recover from others knowing you as a liar.

The Final Choice

This career becomes what you choose to make of it.

You might be the “Hollow Title,” always chasing the next pay rise. You feel stressed, unsure, and keep looking over your shoulder, fearing discovery.

Or, you can be the “Village Elder.” You can be the person who took the time to learn the trade from the bottom up. The person who respects the craft. The person who builds teams based on trust, not fear. The person who understands that the building matters more than the spreadsheet.

The road is hard. Conflict, pressure, and complex problems that have no easy answers fill it. But it is also filled with the immense satisfaction of driving past a skyline that you helped shape, knowing that you did it the right way.

Stop rushing. Get your boots dirty. Pick up the phone. Look after your people.

The industry is waiting for leaders, not just managers.

Go and build it.

WITH THANKS

This guide would not exist without the generosity of the following contributors, who gave their time, their stories, and their hard-won experience to help the next generation of commercial leaders.

To every one of you named and anonymous alike, thank you.

Andy Brown

Brian Ormson

Chris Hird

Daniel Gray

Darren Bird

David Lane

David Radley

Genna Rourke

James Dunne

Joe Priestley

Kevin Baker

Luke Mighall

Mark Coburn

Mark Heap

Mark Waller

Martin Van Rooyen

Matt Hopwood

Matt Parker

Navneet Bawa

Nick Farmer

Nick O'Brien

Paul Redgate

Rebecca Jones

Richard Bradley

Richard Langbridge

Rob Dabner

Rob Smith

Shaun Judge

Simon Banwell

Sinead Maguire

Stuart Donovan

Stuart Goodwin

The 12x Anonymous Contributors

*Anonymous contributors are listed without name at their own request.
Their insights are no less valuable for it.*