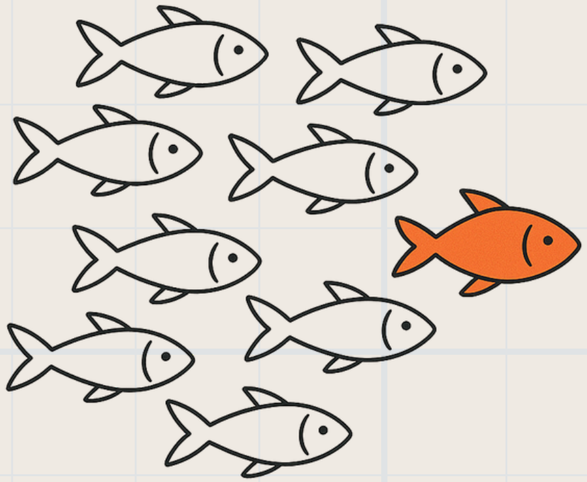
Working with a Neurodivergent Workforce

Updated: Sept. 22, 2025

# Not a Culture Fit—And That's the Point



Sam S. Easter

HR Elevate Conference - 2025

CATALYST SOLUTIONS
SPARK CHANGE

# Hi!

# I’m Sam

## Roles

Investigative Journalist → Educator → Instructional Design → HR Strategist → Communications Manager → Founder

## Experience

Leadership of People, Projects & programs · Small business · Education · Startups · Corporate · Policy

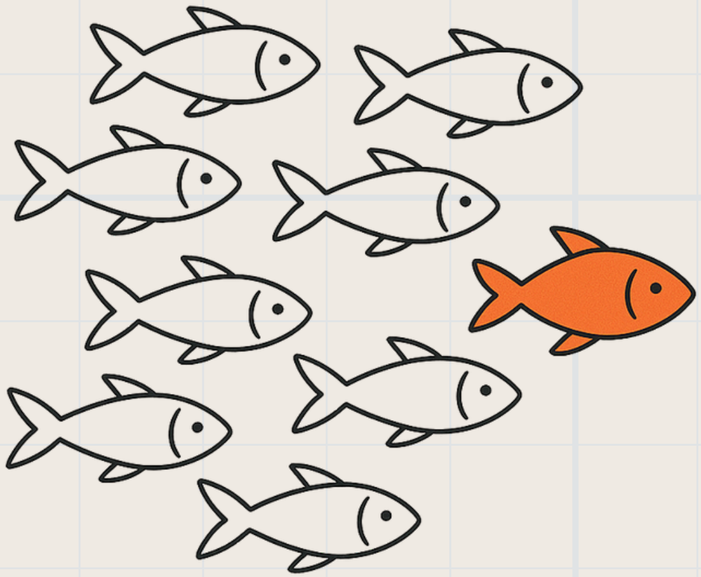
## Education

BA Journalism/Creative Writing + MEd Cross-Cultural Education + MBA (Analytics) + Six Sigma (Cert.) + Univ. Teaching (Cert.)

## Expertise

- Strategic communications & organizational storytelling
- Instructional design & workforce training
- Global & cross-cultural learning & development
- Skill-path design & assessment
- Research, data collection & analysis
- Neurodivergent: Autism + ADHD
- Nine therapists in 18 years (character development + field research)

# Agenda



1. My Interview Story
2. Neurodiversity 101
3. Culture Fit vs. Culture Add
4. The ROI of Different Thinking
5. Storytime: A Case Study

# 1 The Interview Story

**Context**
MBA (~2017) ·
Internship interviews
Allegiant Air — Financial Analyst (case interview)

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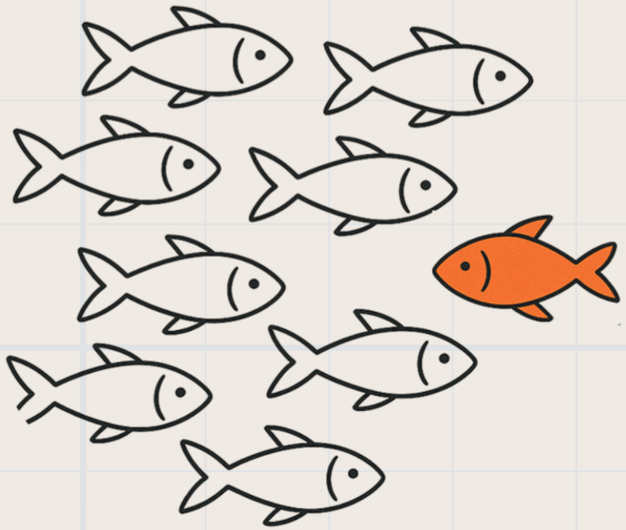
**Why it matters**
Not about the “right” number—about how you think under constraints.

“

**Prompt**
“How much revenue came from in-flight drinks on all our flights out of Miami yesterday?”

1



## My Answer

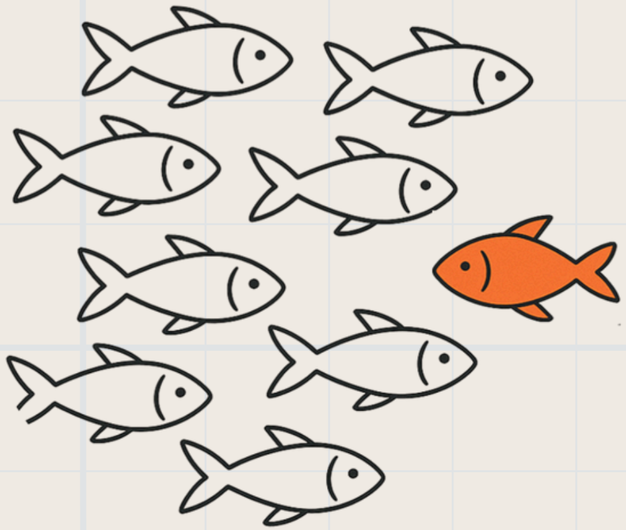
**"Zero."**

## The Reaction

"We were looking for a framework.

1

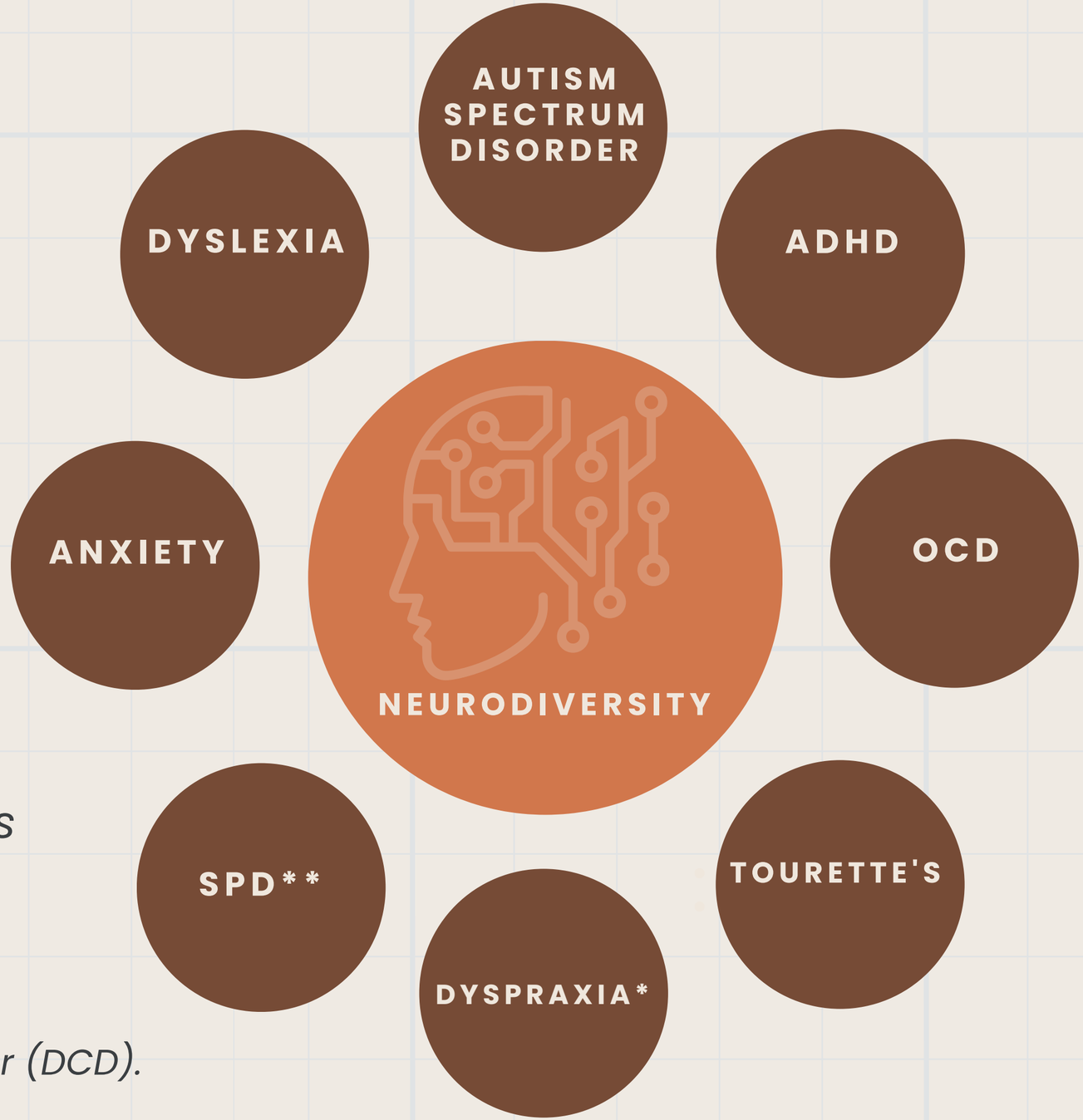
# The Takeaway



They weren't looking for the right answer—just the **right way of thinking.**

2

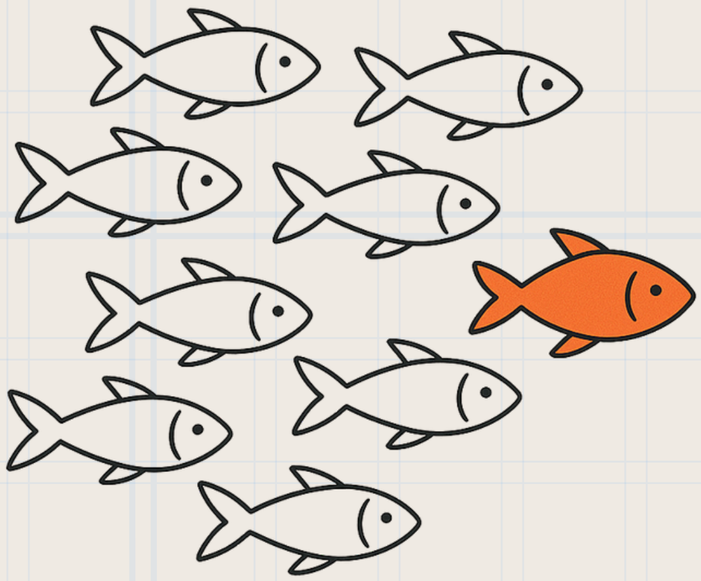
# Neurodiversity 101




**The list of neurodivergent conditions is hotly debated. This version covers what's common, what's frequent, and what plays nice with the cruel geometry of an 8-bubble chart*

*Also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD).*
*Also known as Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD).**

# 2 Neurodiversity 101



**Neurodiversity** is the idea that brains naturally work in different ways.

Autism, ADHD, and similar conditions come with both strengths and struggles.

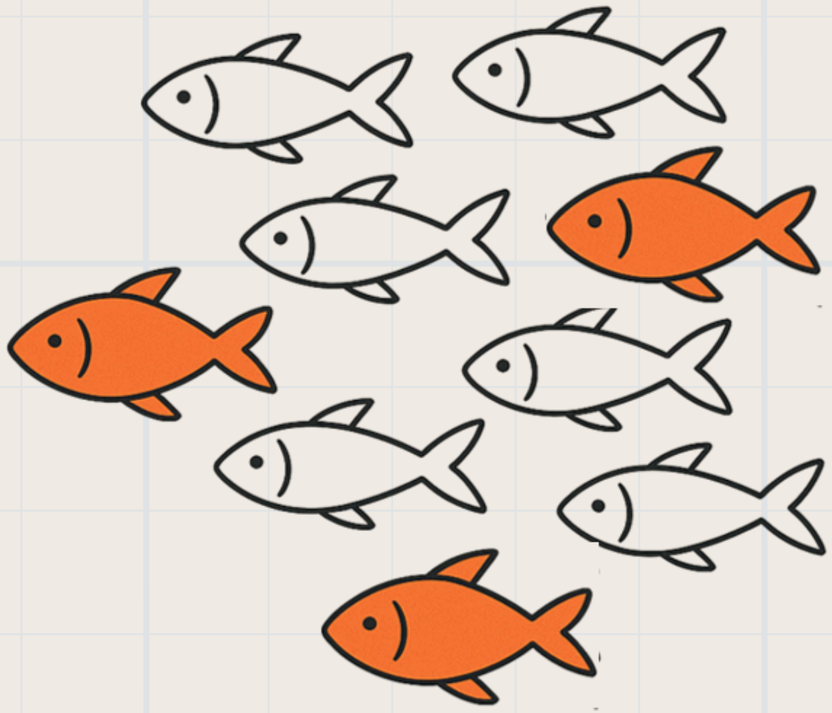
The focus is on **understanding** and **supporting**—not fixing—these differences.

# 2 Neurodiversity 101

10% to 40% of the U.S. population are neurodivergent.

In the US, approximately:

- 19% has anxiety
- 15% is dyslexic
- 11% has ADHD
- 3% is autistic



**76% don’t disclose at work..**

# 2 Neurodiversity 101

## Analogy: Different OS. Same work.

- Most people (neurotypical) run **Windows**.
- A significant minority (neurodivergent) run **Mac**.

If you build for Windows-only, Mac users struggle—not because they can’t do the job, but because the system isn’t built for them.

2

**“Everyone says they are neurodivergent today.”**

Left-handedness didn’t suddenly appear—it became visible once society quit punishing it.

# 2 Neurodiversity 101

## Real Reasons for the Rise in Neurodiversity

- **Awareness & access**: more screenings, adult pathways
- **Criteria changes:** DSM updates, broader recognition
- **Stigma drop:** safer to seek diagnosis/support
- **Environment:** prenatal exposures, early stressors
- **Genetics**: heritability + better family documentation

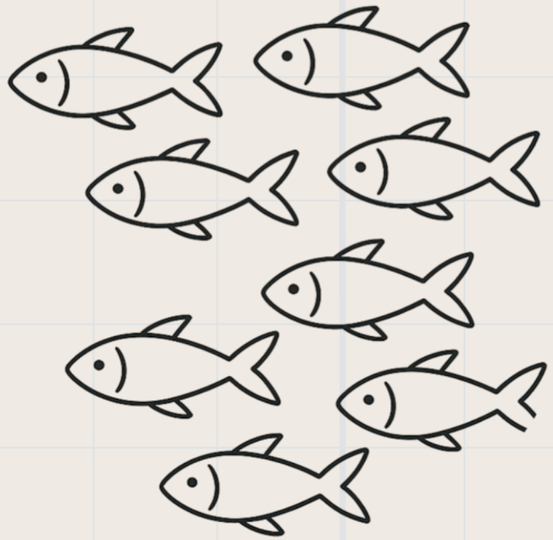
# 3 Culture Fit vs. Culture Add

## The Innovation and Engagement Blindspot

**"Culture Fit"** is often a well-intentioned blindspot.

We think it reduces risk.
In reality, it maximizes groupthink.
It's hiring for comfort and conformity.

The result? An echo chamber.

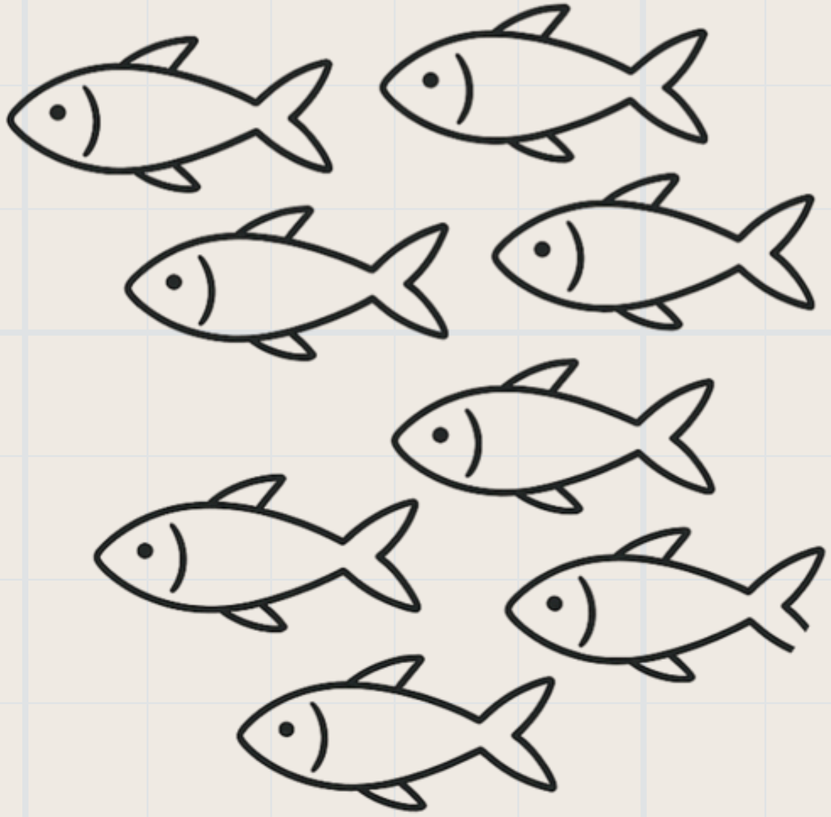


# 3 Culture Fit vs. Culture Add

## The Price of Sameness

- Slows adaptation
- Misses opportunities
- Vulnerable to disruption

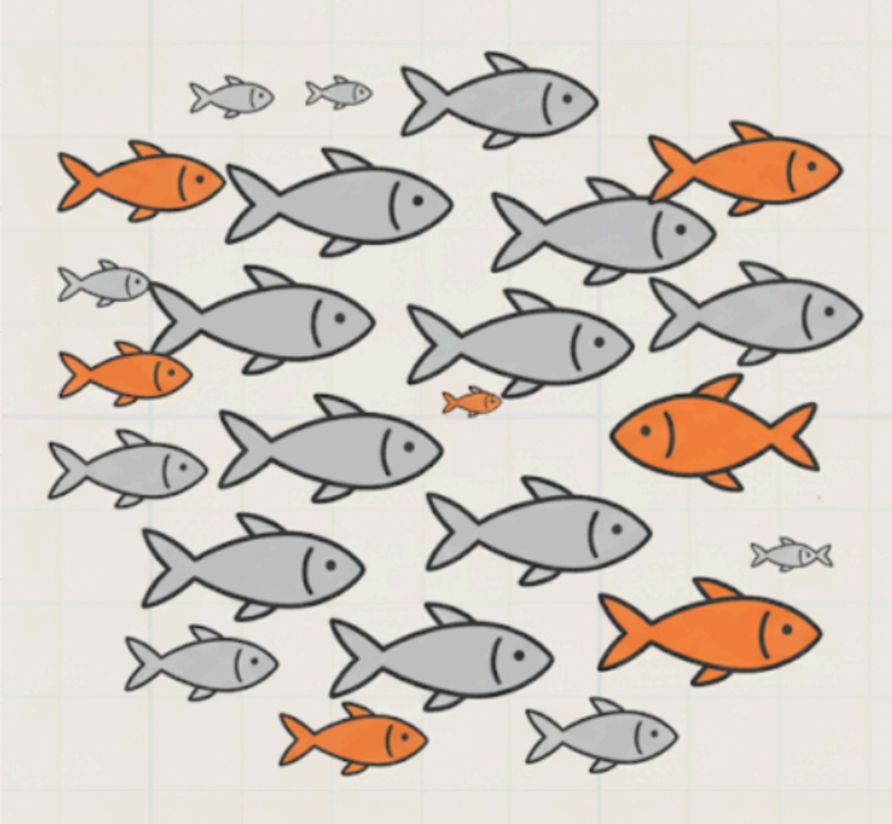
**Innovation requires difference.**



# 3 Culture Fit vs. Culture Add

## Culture Add: De-risking Your Future

- Drives innovation
- Boosts adaptability
- Builds resilience
- Deepens engagement



**Diversity is strength.**

# 3 Culture Fit vs. Culture Add

## The Permission Signal

We add to the culture by who we are:

- We question assumptions.
- We model that failure is part of innovation.
- We make unexpected connections.

**It sends a clear message:**

# 4 The ROI of Different Thinking

## The Hiring Blindspot

We say we want innovation, but our systems are built for conformity.

Hiring processes often test for:

- **Familiarity**: Does their thinking match what we expect?
- **Comfort**: Do they present their ideas in a comfortable way?
- **Polish**: Can they perform well in a traditional interview?

This creates a blindspot that filters out the very people we need most.

# 4 The ROI of Different Thinking

## Would your process hire a genius?

**Leonardo da Vinci:**
A chronic procrastinator who constantly missed deadlines. Unemployable by modern HR standards.

The traits we flag as "risks" are often the flip side of genius.

# 4 The ROI of Different Thinking

## Performance, Not Pity

*‘I have offended God and mankind by doing so little with my life’*
**-Leonardo da Vinci:**

High performers don't need the bar lowered. They need the friction removed.

# 4 The ROI of Different Thinking

## Small investment. Massive return.

What's the ROI on a little trust?

**The Investment:**

- Trust me to keep going.
- Expense a burrito.
- Flexibility to sleep in tomorrow.

**The Return:**

- 4 more hours of "full-system-lock" deep work.
- A day and a half of value
- A case study shared with our C-Suite

This isn't an accommodation. It's the best deal you'll get all week.

# 4 The ROI of Different Thinking

## You're Already Using Our Tools

The good news? Your teams are already using systems created for neurodivergent minds.

- **The Bullet Journal:** A worldwide phenomenon for focus, created by a designer with ADHD.
- **Visual Planners (Trello, Asana):** A lifeline for non-linear thinkers who need to see the whole picture.
- **Remote Work:** Championed for years by the disability community as a better way to work.

You've already adopted our scaffolding. Now, embrace the architects.

# 5 Storytime: A Case Study

## The Meeting Meltdown

Let's walk through a real-world scenario.

We have Alex, a brilliant AudHD systems-thinker.

She's in a high-stakes meeting and spots a critical error.

**Core Conflict:** Correctness vs. Cohesion

# 5 Storytime: A Case Study

## The Dialogue

**Alex**: "The data source is wrong... it's a 15% margin error."

**Grant** (Consultant): "We can clean up those details later."

**Bob** (Peer): "You're nitpicking the details again."

# 5 Storytime: A Case Study

## Alex's Status Log

- Late 3.5 min (vendor finally called back).
- Spotted a 15% margin error: “active” ≠ producing; ~15% downtime excluded → forecast skewed.
- Asked source / clarified definition; room cooled.
- Pushback: “nitpicky again.”
- State: Tried to follow the rules; unclear what to fix → pausing to observe.

**“I messed up again, but I'm not sure how. I'll just try to stay out of trouble.”**

# 5 Storytime: A Case Study

**What was the real issue?** *(Choose the best answer)*

A. She was late to the meeting

B. Her timing and approach were off

C. She focused on too granular of a detail

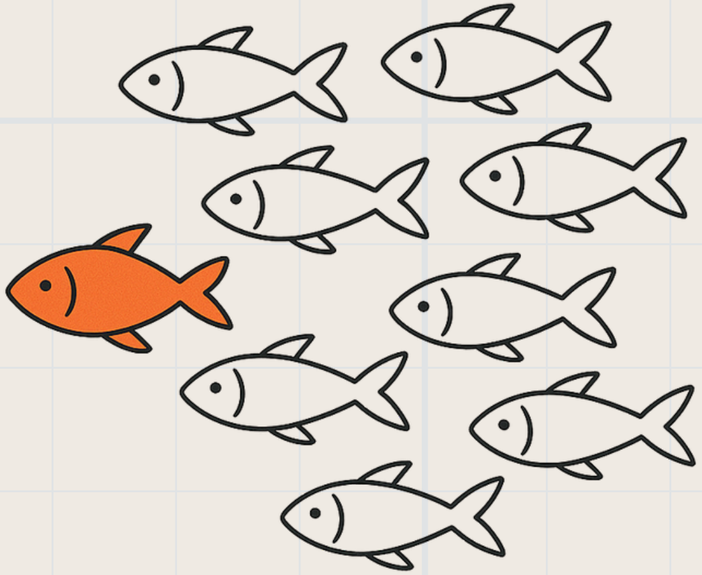
D. She interrupted the presenter

# Where to go next?

**Fix Your Job Descriptions:** Describe the problem to be solved, not the person.

**Rethink "Culture Fit":** Replace it with "Value Alignment" or "Mission Contribution."

**Create Side Doors:** Use paid, project-based trials to see real skills in action.



# Thank you!

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