



Customer Journey

Oliver

Oliver's journey explores trust, empathy, team growth, fast IT expansion, and collaboration across a rapidly scaling organization.

CUSTOMER JOURNEY: OLIVER

Meet “Oliver,” CTO in a pharma company scaling up to begin commercialization for a new drug.

Oliver’s journey explores trust, empathy, team growth, fast IT expansion, and collaboration across a rapidly scaling organization.

Each post explores a real coaching conversation or leadership challenge from that journey.



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When You Stop Solving Other People's Problems

You're the person with the answers — so why has your team stopped collaborating with you?

Oliver was the CTO at a pharma company scaling up to get a product to market.

Oliver wanted to be more than just a tech guy. He wanted to move from subject matter expert to strategic partner.

To realize that vision, he would have to become attuned to the fundamentals of leading people: using empathy to build trust, respect, and alignment.

"What worked before isn't working anymore," he told me in our first session. "I can't decide on the technology to put in place. They want to make the decision. But when I offer technological solutions, it doesn't go so well. People don't want to collaborate."

Oliver continued. "Now that we've gone public, people are afraid of getting blamed if something goes wrong. They don't trust anyone."

The way Oliver saw it, the role of IT wasn't just about making the same processes easier. It was about productivity and safety gains at scale.

"The problem is getting people to open up. If people can trust me to share where the risks are, we can mitigate them and make everyone more successful. I just don't know how to get people to drop their defenses and open up."

How a Strength Can Become a Weakness

Oliver was excellent at solving problems. But to others, his problem-solving ability didn't feel like optimization or risk reduction. It felt like control.

So, I asked him to stop doing what he was good at: solving problems. Instead, I asked him to focus on empathy, how the problem felt to the other person.

Because it's difficult to try something new at work, I asked if he had kids at home.

"Yes, I have two teenage daughters," Oliver said.

"Perfect," I said. "Your coaching homework for the next two weeks is to listen to your daughters without solving their problems. Just listen and try to guess how the problems of teenage girls feel. Just say, 'well, that must be disappointing,' or something like that, and don't offer any solutions."

I explained that teenage girls don't want their dad telling them what to do. "They want to know that you understand how difficult their problems are and that you believe in them to solve them."

Two weeks later, Oliver came back saying, "My daughters love you."

Oliver recalled how hard it was at first to listen to the problems without shifting into problem solving mode. He had to hold back to focus on how they felt. But when he did, something else happened.

They stopped resisting and started opening up. That was the first time Oliver realized empathy wasn't just emotional support. It was a way to reduce defensiveness and build trust.

The more he listened, the more they shared and the safer they felt. They started being bolder and speaking up more for themselves.

"How can you apply that lesson in the workplace?"

"Do you mean for me to stop offering solutions at work? It's my job to offer solutions."

I said, "It's the same with your peers as with your daughters. Empathize first and wait until they are ready to collaborate on a solution. If you jump to the solution too quickly, it can feel like you're trying to take control, and they won't trust you."

Suddenly, he saw that his expertise was exactly what was limiting him.

At the office, instead of dismissing or criticizing his colleagues' concerns about blame, I encouraged him to empathize with them.

Over the next few months, Oliver turned this key lesson into a new way of operating and achieved some extraordinary breakthroughs.

Oliver stopped treating problems as technical puzzles and started treating them as human conversations.

What began as an experiment with his daughters would soon transform how he worked with peers, department heads, and executives across the company.

Oliver's Leadership Values

Over the time I worked with him, Oliver's focus expanded far beyond technology to the leadership principles that helped him work with the team.

1. Trust
2. Patience
3. Alignment
4. Psychological Safety: help people feel safe enough to solve difficult problems together

How Empathy Builds Trust at Work

Every department gives you a different excuse for delay. What if they're all protecting the same thing?

Oliver led a team of eight, mostly Gen Z'ers, all familiar with empathy. The challenge was to figure out how empathy could help an entire organization.

The company's future technology needs were unpredictable.

"People here don't like planning ahead," Oliver explained. "These are million-dollar implementations that take six months or more. This is enterprise scale. Somehow, we have to get ahead of their needs."

Oliver and his team decided to meet one-on-one with key people in each department. The goal was to listen to how they wanted to use technology. No interrupting. Just empathy as they encountered the uncertainty that comes with forecasting.

After the first round:

- The clinical team needed more analysis.
- The HR team needed more information.
- The legal team needed time to review.

Oliver and I discussed it in coaching. He suspected that under the external problems, there were internal problems—a fear, concern, or desire influencing people's behavior.

I offered a classic validation technique: guess what they're feeling. "If you're right, they'll likely confirm it. If you're wrong, they might correct you."

We made a list of what they might be feeling internally:

- Fear of getting blamed
- Fear of losing credibility
- Fear of losing control

In the next round of listening, Oliver's team tried saying something like, "I wonder if you're hesitating because you're afraid you'll lose control of your data."

This worked. When they suggested that the legal

team was delaying because they didn't want to get blamed if something went wrong, one of the lawyers smiled and said, "Now you're getting smart."

Once they uncovered the underlying fears, team members started talking about what could go wrong.

That's exactly what Oliver wanted. He knew that if he could just get them to open up about the risks, they could use technology to mitigate them.

The team discussed the process: When people feel heard, they lower their defenses. When defenses drop, trust begins to grow. When people trust you, they'll tell you what they're really worried about. Then, you can solve the real problem instead of the presented one.

It all started with trust. Without trust, organizations get stuck.

They weren't trying to convince people. They were trying to understand them.

And once people felt understood, they opened up about where the real risks were.

It took a couple months, but they started making progress. Planning started going more smoothly and they encountered less resistance.

When the IT team understood their real needs—for control, to avoid blame, and to look competent—it was much easier to collaborate on the risk factors.

Looking back, Oliver realized they had developed a repeatable leadership system:

1. Listen
2. Make people feel heard
3. Build trust
4. Uncover concerns
5. Reveal the real problem
6. Collaborate
7. Build solutions

Strategies to Get People Aligned and Moving Forward

Your teams operate in silos, protect their own turf, and blame each other when things go wrong. Sound familiar?

“Coaching has helped me with strategies to get

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HOW DOES OLIVER BRING THE TEAM TOGETHER?

Continue Reading

If this sounds familiar, you're not the only leader dealing with team divisions.

Continue Oliver's complete journey in the Customer Journey Library. You'll receive

- ✓ His complete five-part coaching journey
- ✓ All six Customer Leadership Journeys — find the one closest to your situation
- ✓ The leadership insights behind each journey

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