



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 people aligned and moving forward,” Oliver reported. His team was now being asked to lead a lot of other planning processes.

People loved the flow charts and decision trees. But Oliver knew that before the launch, they needed more systems: HR, clinical, R&D reporting, and compliance systems.

To make matters worse, Oliver was discovering that the management team had a blame culture. One executive told Oliver, “Make it someone else’s problem.”

Another problem was that every team was in silos. Each team wanted to own its own data systems. This would be costly and redundant.

Oliver saw that the blame and silos were connected. When people feared being blamed, they protected themselves. Walls went up.

“We need to break down the silos and blame culture. The problems are everyone’s, and we need to work together to solve them.”

Breaking Down the Silos with a Vision

Oliver decided to create a quarterly IT Council. Every department would participate.

The council would help reduce blame and break down silos by showing everyone a bigger picture and listening to each other.

He envisioned it: “When we run into someone’s anxiety, I’ll step in and validate the risk. Then we can break down what is creating the risk and how to mitigate it.”

The theme of the first IT Council was data management.

- Where will the employee data be located?
- How will the clinical data be protected?
- What are our rules for data governance?

- Who will oversee compliance?

During the discussion, Oliver noticed that departments were afraid to lose control of their data if there was a companywide data center.

Oliver proposed an ownership split:

- Departments that generate data own the data
- The company and IT own the systems to store it.

“Think of it like a traffic system. People own their own cars and trucks and drive where they want. Anything in your car or truck is yours.”

He went on. “But the city owns the streets and the parking spaces. The city’s job is to make it easier and safer for you to drive and park your car. They fix the potholes and protect the streets.”

“It will be the same for IT,” he explained. “If you are in clinical trials, your data is yours. You control access, who sees it, audits and compliance reviews. But the system where it sits is an IT system, so we maintain it and make sure it’s safe from threats.”

In the end, he summed it up like this: “We fix the potholes, and you get to drive.”

Everyone seemed to like that idea.

The proposal worked because it addressed the concern underneath the objection. Departments weren’t resisting technology. They were protecting ownership.

In the end, there was agreement. The CEO sent him a note to thank him for pulling the team together.

He said to me later, it was a miracle to get everyone agreeing in one room at one time. “It was all based on the trust that my team has built over the last few months. They are going to trust us with their data.”

As he looked back, Oliver realized that trust wasn’t just helping people share risks. It was helping departments solve problems together.

How to Break Through When Collaboration Gets Tough

Frustrated by one person or department that keeps stalling everyone else's progress?

After the first IT council, Oliver's team identified 44 large IT systems to complete. They were up for it, but now they were running into a new roadblock.

A new General Counsel took pride in extracting small concessions from major IT vendors like Google.

But Oliver was frustrated. "She spends six months negotiating small risks, but the benefits are unlikely to happen. We can't afford the six-month delays."

The Difficult Conversations Approach

First Oliver tried a difficult conversation. He would listen and empathize. He would avoid judgment and blame. He would just try to get her to see how the delays affected the company.

He said, "The vendors who are willing to negotiate are weaker vendors. The stronger vendors don't negotiate, but they have better systems and are more likely to protect the company."

He pointed out that commercialization was happening quickly. Then he asked, how can you help us get better vendors more quickly?

In theory, this was a good approach, but unfortunately it didn't work. She took no responsibility for delays and tried to convince Oliver that this was normal.

Oliver knew it was not normal. So, he tried another tactic.

Using Peers to Make Your Case

Oliver used pre-meetings to find that the legal team was creating the same delays for other teams as well. He decided to use the IT Council to make some progress.

He announced the next IT Council theme as Mitigating Risks. "Individuals should not be put in a position of taking risks."

He went on: "The purpose of technology is to find

standardized and safe solutions to the risks people face at work. Whether it's standardizing financial statements or clinical data, they should be able to rely on processes that enable safe, accurate reporting."

Today's goal was to identify risk gaps so they could be addressed.

One by one, department leaders discussed the risks their teams were dealing with. More than half of them mentioned delays by the legal team as a major source of risk for their team.

At the end of the meeting, the head of the legal department was quiet. Everyone was looking at her, including the CEO.

"We have to re-think some things," is all she said.

After the meeting, Oliver debriefed the meeting in coaching. "The IT council is functioning exactly as I hoped it would. It's a place where we can surface risk factors together, without blame or shame, and just solve them."

Oliver noted that when he first raised the concern, it was easy for her to dismiss it as his opinion. But when leaders from across the company described the same problem, something needed to change.

Oliver discussed what he was learning.

"I understand her position. When I was solving everyone's problems, I felt useful and that I was adding something. But now I see that leadership is more powerful when it empowers other people and is less focused on heroics."

Over the course of the next couple of months, the legal team actually started to approve better contracts with better vendors in reasonable times.

By the time the next IT council came around, many leaders praised legal for helping them accomplish their goals. Everyone came out happy.

The Leadership Shift from Subject Matter Expertise to Strategic Partnership

You got here by being the expert with the answers. Here's the mindset shift that gets you taken seriously as a strategic leader instead.

"I used to think my role was to solve problems. But being a problem solver was keeping me in the role of a subject matter expert. **Only when I stopped trying to be the expert could other people see me as a leader,**" he told me.

What Oliver had discovered was that his expertise created distance. When he solved problems too quickly, other people felt threatened. He made people feel they might lose control.

So, the more expertise he demonstrated, the less collaborative people became.

Strategic Partnership Begins When People Trust You with Their Problems

In coaching conversations, Oliver discovered that strategic partnership begins when people trust you with their problems.

He realized that empathy was the tool that:

- Built trust
- Reduced fear
- Encouraged openness
- Helped people be honest about risks they faced
- Improved collaboration

Once he understood how to use empathy, he shifted from solving problems to listening, aligning, facilitating, and building systems of trust.

Slowing down and resisting the urge to solve problems at first felt unnatural. But over time, he noticed that the more he listened, the more people relaxed. The more they felt understood, the more openly they talked about the operational risks, delays, fears, and political tensions.

Instead of resisting him, they started inviting him into larger strategic conversations.

When he taught his team to use listening and empathy to build trust, they built influence across

the organization.

They used flow charts and decision trees to communicate ownership and data systems.

His vision of using IT systems to reduce risk across the organization brought the company together and strengthened his influence as an executive leader.

Influence Expanded When Others Felt Ownership

Oliver realized that trust grew when people believed he was helping them succeed—not trying to take control away from them.

By helping teams preserve ownership while reducing risk, he gradually became someone leaders turned to early instead of someone they resisted until it was too late.

Strategic Partnership Is About Trust

Over time, Oliver realized that strategic leadership was not about having the best answers. It was about creating enough trust, clarity, and alignment for people to solve problems together.

Once departments stopped feeling controlled and started feeling understood, collaboration became possible.

That shift expanded not only his influence, but the company's ability to scale safely through commercialization.

In the end, the real shift was learning that leadership at enterprise scale was less about being the hero with the answer and more about creating the trust, alignment, and structure for others to solve problems together.

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*I help people learn how to use
what they already have.*



Key Leadership Lessons

Oliver's journey illustrates how leaders build influence by creating trust, alignment, and shared ownership across a growing organization.

- Empathy isn't emotional support — it's how you get people to stop being defensive and start collaborating.
- Strong leaders do not solve every problem themselves. They create the conditions for others to solve problems together.
- If people are stalling, delaying, or pushing back for reasons that don't quite add up, they're probably protecting something they haven't said out loud.
- People give you influence when they believe you're helping them succeed — not when you're the smartest person in the room.
- Strategic partnership starts the moment people trust you with the problem they haven't told anyone else.

Continue Learning

- [The Leadership Framework](#) — Confidence, empathy, and trust: the three foundations behind every client breakthrough.
- [Empathy at Work](#) — How Good Leaders Unlock Motivation and Performance

If any of this sounds familiar, you don't have to figure it out alone.

If Oliver's story resonates with you, you may be navigating a similar leadership challenge.

I'm here to help. Book a quick call. No pitch, no pressure — just a conversation about where you are and whether coaching might help.

[Book your call here](#)

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