Chapter 1

The Setlist: Preparation Is the Foundation of Communication

It's 3:30 p.m. Four hours before showtime.

Deep within the arena, Bruce Springsteen sits in his private dressing room, instrument in hand. He knows that what he does in the next hour will determine how tonight's show will go.

And he knows the stakes.

He's long had a reputation as one of the greatest live performers in rock and roll history. His audience will undoubtedly include thousands of fans who have seen him perform countless times before, comparing this performance to those of the past. And his audience will also include thousands of newcomers who are seeing him for the first time, wondering what the fuss is all about.

He needs to deliver.

He grabs his instrument. And he gets to work. But at this moment, the instrument isn't the modified Fender Telecaster guitar that he's holding on the cover of 1975s Born to Run*—the same guitar that he still plays today. And it's not the piano he uses to compose songs. Nor even the humble harmonica.*

The instrument in his hand is a pen.

It's the most important instrument of the entire concert, because right now, Bruce is writing out the setlist for the show. (Check out Figure 1.1.)

As he sits with a pen in his hand and a sheet of paper in front of him, he's doing much more than just creating a list of songs. He's writing

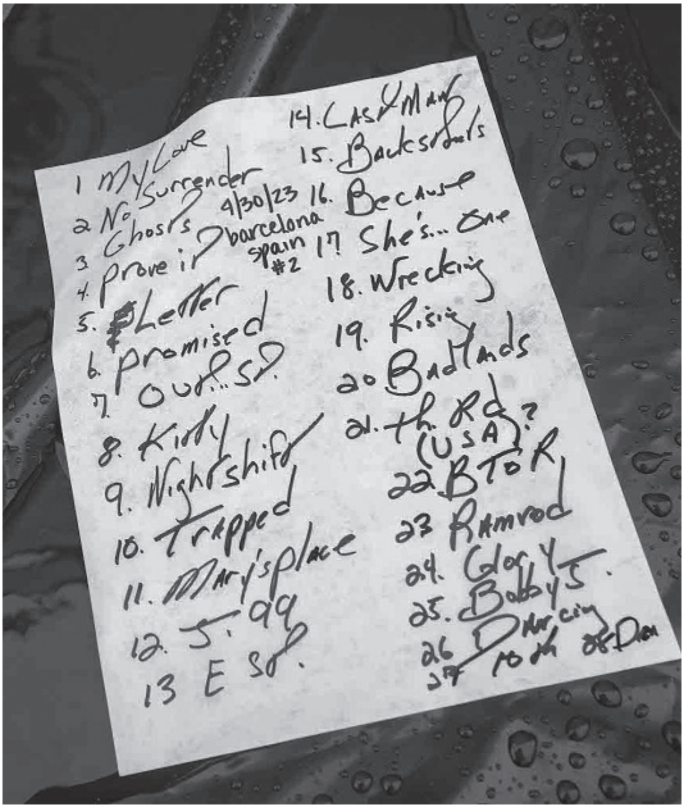

Figure 1.1 Photo of setlist from Barcelona, April 30, 2023. Photo by Robert DeMartin.

a script—a script for how the show will unfold, and one that communicates a story and answers some important questions:

- *How will he open?*
- *Will he do so in a way that removes all doubt from the audience to show that even in his mid-70s, he remains The Boss?*
- *What emotions does he want the audience to feel during the show? When will they be joyous? When will there be moments of introspection?*

- *What will they feel when they're leaving the arena at the end of the night?*
- *What will the audience do along the way? Will there be moments where the audience is participating?*

In short, the setlist is Bruce's way of spelling out what the audience will think, feel, and do.

There's one thing he knows for sure. He would never step on stage with the E Street Band and "just play," hoping for the best. He knows he has one chance to lead the audience for three hours. And you don't become The Boss by letting those chances pass you by.

Chapter 1 Setlist

1. Communication = leadership.
2. Have a plan.
3. Every band practices.
4. It's the music, not the instruments.
5. The three key questions.

Failed Communication Is Failed Leadership

When it comes to what leaders do most, it's communicate. Leaders communicate constantly with staff, investors, clients, board members, partners, and peers—yet few leaders think of their core job function as communications. Leadership often thinks of communication as a marketing function, focused on delivering messages outside the organization; communications strategies are about messaging *externally*. Rarely do CEOs consider it their mandate to message with precision and intention *within* their organization.

When asked to describe their job, most CEOs mention "setting the strategic vision" and "making key decisions" as their prime responsibilities. However, the reality is that the execution of strategic vision and key decisions relies on effective internal communication to set a successful course for the company.

Communication is the true implementation phase of every decision. It involves collaborating with key members of your team to inspire them to transform the vision into reality. It's the leadership version of the tree falling in the forest—with no one there to hear it. If a leader is setting a strategy but hasn't conveyed it in a way in which listeners understand it, feel confident they can execute against it, and know what to do, has that leader really set a strategy?

PowerPoint Does Not a Meeting Make

Here's a scenario many CEOs face every day:

Fictional CEO Chris is planning the quarterly "town hall" meeting for his 200-person professional service firm, PSF Partners. For many in the audience, the meeting feels like a quarterly obligation. After the last quarterly meeting, Chris overheard some of his team talking to a colleague. One said, "It's just the same stuff every time," and another added, "I go, but I don't really listen."

Their disinterest has impacted Chris. He, too, sees this meeting more as an obligation than an opportunity, and this lack of interest has made him lax in his preparation. The professional service business that he leads is at a crossroads. Sales numbers at PSF have been stagnant for the past two years, and the sales and marketing teams are struggling to grow revenue in new industries. Chris is more concerned with finding new ways to sell PSF's services than he is about communicating with his team.

Because he has run more than 30 quarterly meetings at PSF Partners, the upcoming meeting is not a heavy lift. He has a standing agenda for the staff meeting that looks like this:

1. Welcome
2. New employee introductions
3. Quarterly financial results
4. Client updates
5. New business report
6. Closing

So, at 3:30 p.m. that afternoon, Chris opens PowerPoint, clicks on the presentation from the most recent quarterly meeting, changes the date on the title slide and the name of the file, and starts updating slides. By 5 p.m., he's ready. He has updated the slides, and he's good to go.

The next morning, he delivers his talk. Some of the audience log on remotely through Zoom, but they also continue to work through their email in another window. People in the conference room listen politely as they covertly gaze at their phones. When it's over, two coworkers meet by the coffee machine moments after the meeting ends. One asks the other, "What did they talk about in the staff meeting?" The inevitable response: "I don't know . . . nothing, really . . . just the usual." Some in the audience latch on to various messages about new staff or client updates, but there is no single unified message that people are passing on to one another.

For the listeners, the hour felt like a commercial break in their busy day, with no clear relevance to their deliverables or goals. No one walked out of the meeting feeling more energized than they did when they went in.

By 11 a.m., the moment has passed.

This isn't just a wasted staff meeting or a wasted communication opportunity. This is a wasted *leadership* opportunity, because leadership and communication are inextricably linked.

Nobody wants that to happen—no CEO comes to the office hoping to miss leadership opportunities.

What's the big deal if a staff meeting isn't perfect? If a one-on-one meeting isn't as effective as it could be, there can be another one tomorrow, right? After all, we're leaders, not performers, aren't we?

Bullshit.

Here's a cold, hard truth. Clicking "New" on the PowerPoint menu bar isn't how great communication starts. Nor is clicking "Join meeting" on Zoom with no forethought of how the meeting will go. It's the equivalent of Bruce Springsteen counting in the E Street Band and just hoping for the best.

Every communication should carry a sense of urgency and an opportunity for impact.

Self-Awareness, Time, and Practice

Preparation, or lack thereof, comes down to two seemingly contradictory reasons that feed off each other to create a "downward spiral" of communications:

- We think preparation is too hard.
- Technology makes us think communication is easy.

When you're a leader, your audience is always watching. How you show up matters, and it sends a message. People are listening to your words, watching your body language, and gauging your reaction. With that in mind, why aren't CEOs more prepared for communication? Preparation takes self-awareness, time, and practice.

Self-Awareness

You have likely been a working professional long enough to know your strengths and weaknesses. Too many of us spend time and effort working to overcome weaknesses, versus leaning into our strengths. Some of my clients are incredibly effective at communicating one-on-one, but less so in a group. Our job isn't to turn them into great presenters in front of a large audience; it's to figure out how to leverage their ability one-on-one. Maybe it's done through video, either live conferences or video recordings. Or maybe it's as simple as scheduling multiple one-on-one sessions.

Not only is this approach better for the presenter, but it's also often more comfortable for the audience. We once had a client who was always anxious on stage, yet every year her organization insisted she speak at their 1,200-person conference. Over time, the feedback that we received from attendees wasn't critical of her; it was critical of the organization. “She clearly hates this . . . why do you keep putting her in this situation?” It was evident that the issue wasn’t her capability but rather a mismatch in her strengths and the setting. In contrast, the time she could have spent engaging in multiple one-on-ones likely would have yielded a higher return than trying to force someone who simply doesn’t feel comfortable in front of a large audience to change.

Finding your groove and understanding how you best communicate creates a natural rhythm for a leader. It’s like slipping into a perfectly fitted pair of shoes—they become so much a part of you that you forget you’re wearing them. Comfort comes from aligning your communication style with what feels most genuine to you. Almost everyone has a preferred method of communication that feels comfortable: small or large groups, written or verbal, slides or no slides, group discussions or solo. When you find a method you love and lean into it, it feels more natural—for you and your audience.

Time and Practice

Finding your comfort zone doesn’t absolve you of the need to improve—if anything, it accentuates it. Years ago, I heard author Patrick Lencioni speak about Tiger Woods. At the time, Woods was leading the PGA Tour in every category except for sand saves—he was terrible from the sand traps. Instead of spending all his time practicing bunker shots, which he disliked, Woods spent his time improving his driving accuracy, his strength. Because he honed his drives, he rarely hit traps, eliminating the necessity of that shot in his game. That’s your job as a communicator. Practice your strengths until you never hit the traps.

Doing so requires one quality above all: commitment. What does that look like?

I love Clemson Football. At every home game, a video plays just before the fourth quarter begins. It captures a moment filmed at an early morning practice. The strength coach is yelling at the team, "They don't put championship rings on smooth hands . . . you win championships when the stadium is empty . . . when the band ain't playing, when the cheerleaders ain't cheering."

Imagine if we approached preparation for communication the same way?

I don't become a better communicator when I need to. I do it when the conference room seats are empty. I do it when the PowerPoint projector is off. I do it while practicing on the plane, in my office, even in my car—anywhere I can rehearse without an audience. It's not fourth-quarter video-worthy, but it's what it takes to be a better leader.

Ultimately, this preparation time is a vital investment. The most valuable and scarcest resource any leader has is their time. You can borrow money. You can hire resources. But there's no escaping the fact that you have only 168 hours available to you in the week. Preparation ultimately enables you to use that time more effectively. It's why Bruce has been known to rehearse with the same vigor and energy that he brings to his performances. For months before a tour, the band plays day after day in an empty arena until they get it just right—the right song, and the right order—because The Boss knows that preparation matters.

Technology: Focus on the Music, Not the Instruments

Without a doubt, technology has made communication easier than it has ever been. Whether it's creating a presentation, drafting a memo, or meeting with a colleague a world away, the ubiquity and access to technology have simplified the process. Further, with the advent of generative AI, it's become even easier. Anyone who fears the blank page has access to a massive head start thanks to the power of generative AI.

But this technical ease can come at the cost of quality. For evidence, look no further than your smartphone. I have 138,505 pictures on my iPhone. That's a half dozen pictures for every day I've been alive. Or, more appropriately, about 22 per day every day since the iPhone was released. As with most of us, nearly all of those pictures are terrible. Sometimes there might be a dozen shots of the same moment. But unlike in the days of film, when photos were more finite due to the limitations of the phone and the need to physically have a camera, the unlimited nature of digital photography combined with the omnipresence of the camera phone removes that barrier. And with it, any concern about quality has been eliminated.

In many ways, technology has done the same thing with communication. There was a time when speakers had to paint vivid images and tell stories with only words. Martin Luther King Jr. didn't have PowerPoint slides behind him at the Lincoln Memorial. Even when visuals first became available, creating them required assistance, necessitating forethought and preparation to employ. But the ease with which this can be done today often removes that forethought and preparation.

While technology has made communication easier than ever, do not let ease replace intention. Until you have figured out your "think, feel, do," don't open PowerPoint or start the Zoom.

The key is to approach communication the way Bruce creates his setlist. Consider what you want your audience to think, feel, and do in response to your message.

The Three Key Questions: Think, Feel, Do

You will see more explanation of the elements of "think, feel, do" throughout the book, but let's start by breaking it down and explaining how to use it in a meaningful way in your own communications.

These three words unlock something incredibly valuable: intent. When you communicate with intent, you guide your audience to where you want them to go. Remember, communication isn't about what's being said—it's about what's being heard. The purpose of the "think, feel, do" exercise is to put yourself in the shoes of the listener and think about how you're guiding their experience.

"Think, feel, and do" preparation comes before taking any other action. It's hard to emphasize this enough in an age of widespread technology, where there is a temptation to act quickly before thinking through the true context. But I can't stress enough that skipping this critical step, going right to that PowerPoint, will lead to miscommunication, lack of alignment, and disengagement. It's Bruce walking up to the microphone and just playing.

Think

Considering what you want your audience to think in response to your interaction will shape your message.

My company works with membership-based organizations that are forming, growing, and changing. As such, growth plans are a common denominator for many of our clients: growing the number of members in the organization, growing their influence, or increasing the usage of the technology that they promote. While every customer is different, the components of talking about a growth plan are often the same; we help them identify target customers and explain each outreach plan. As the leader, my mission in communicating this is for my client to *think* that the plan is both sensible and attainable. In the case of fictional CEO Chris of PSF Partners, who you read about earlier in this chapter, he wanted his audience to think about ways to grow revenue, but his message got lost in the lack of intentionality for the meeting.

At Virtual, our clients often describe how a piece of technology works or how a technical standard may have evolved. For example, we work with the PCI Security Standards Council (PCI SSC), a global organization that sets the standards for payment card security. At their essence, their mission is to protect credit card data from the bad guys who want to steal it.

These bad guys work hard. And the technology that works today may not work tomorrow. For example, at one time there was an encryption technology called Wireless Equivalent Privacy (WEP) that protected online transactions. But the bad guys figured out how to break it. So the good guys—our client, PCI SSC—had to evolve. This meant that the PCI standard could no longer allow the use of WEP.

PCI's message was simple. Listeners had to *think* that there was a good reason to move off WEP and appreciate the urgency to do so. PCI SSC wanted its audience to *think* it was an authority with others, and for them to take action as a result.

That's the key to unlocking the power of "think"—putting yourself in the listener's shoes. Imagine the communication has ended and then ask yourself, "What do I think is happening with . . ." For example, if the presentation is about a new health plan for your company, "What do you think is going on with our health coverage?" Or in the case of the technical standard, "What do you think has changed in the new version?" If you can't answer that question clearly and succinctly, you haven't thought enough about this phase.

Feel

If "think" is the most (deceptively) straightforward part of the "think, feel, do" trifecta, "feel" is the most ignored. Many leaders balk at the idea that they're responsible for how their audience feels. Leaders believe they're about results and earnings, not "feelings."

They couldn't be more wrong.

This is where communication goes off the rails. The speaker hasn't thought about "feel" in a way that accentuates their message and creates a willingness on the part of the listener to hear it. The problem with communication isn't that it gets "feel" wrong; it's that it overlooks "feel" entirely. The "detail dump" of many technical presentations is often accompanied by a set of PowerPoint slides completely devoid of emotion.

Imagine you're tasked with presenting to your company about a new health insurance plan. Here are two paths.

The first goes right to the facts:

> We have a new plan. We've switched from Acme to NewCo. The increase in your premium is 7.2%. Here's a number you can call with questions.

The second considers feelings:

> We know that health insurance is an important benefit—not just for you, but for your family. It's how you stay healthy and it helps with treatment if you're sick. So we take our decision about with whom we partner for healthcare very seriously. That's why NewCo is our new partner—they met this standard. We did our best to keep premium increases to single digits. And since this is so important, I bet you have questions, so here's a number you can call.

Both convey the same information, but one does it devoid of feeling, and the other leans into how the listener feels. And that's the central takeaway—in the end, people may not remember everything that you've said as a leader. But they will remember how you made them feel. And that shouldn't happen by accident.

There are many feelings that a leader may want to convey in their communication. I've spent a good part of my life both as an athlete and coaching athletes. As a coach, I knew that I wanted my team to feel differently during different situations. Pregame, before a game in which we were overmatched? I wanted them to feel prepared. Pregame, before a game when we were clearly more talented than the other team? I wanted them to feel a little scared, to avoid overconfidence. (As a Boston sports fan—sorry, not sorry—I believe that no one did this better than coach Bill Belichick. The Patriots could be 15–0 in their heyday, and about to play a team that was 0–15, and Belichick would make the Pats feel they needed to give 110% to even stand a chance.) Halftime might have similar feelings. After a tough loss, how I wanted the team to feel depended on the circumstances: whether we should have won, whether we had another game coming up, and more. But no matter the situation, their feelings were always guided by intention.

The common thread across all of these is to once again put yourself in the shoes of the listener. Feeling is often the key to unlocking someone's ability to hear your message. If a listener doesn't feel safe or feel that the speaker cares about them, they may not be able to hear anymore.

Sometimes it's the tone of the presenter that carries the feeling. The same message of "We need to be better for our clients" creates a different feel if it's said as inspiration versus when it's said by my alter ego, "Cranky Andy." If Cranky Andy says it, my team's reaction is, "We're in trouble. I wonder if someone's getting fired." They're not hearing anything else in my message. If my tone is inspirational and I'm thinking about creating a feeling of safety, they'll listen and follow me. They not only embrace the vision of doing better, but also take the next step to learn how.

To better understand the tools that you have for using tone to shape feeling, look no further than The Boss. At every concert, Bruce relies on three tools to set the tone and create feeling.

- **Voice:** It should come as no surprise that Bruce modulates his voice to sound different when he's singing a ballad versus a rock anthem. As leaders, we, too, need to think of our voice as an instrument that can drive feeling. Volume, pitch, emphasis, and pace are vocal elements that bring feeling to our voice. Think about volume as a starting point. Loud can mean emphasis or excitement, while soft can be used to "pull people in." Similarly, pace can be used to convey calm, or conversely, urgency. The phrase "we have a lot of work to do" can evoke different feelings depending on the pace used to convey it.
- **Body:** We'll talk more about body language in Chapter 2, but remember—your body is one of the most critical tools that you have for conveying a message. Simply put, body language

conveys tone by reinforcing or contradicting spoken words through facial expressions, posture, or hand gestures.

- **Rhythm:** The beat alone tells you whether a song is a soulful ballad or a pumping rock anthem. The rhythm of your communication can relay a similar message. Urgent communication, for example, may come across via short, direct sentences. ("We need to change our approach today.") Something meant to convey calm may take on longer form communication or more storytelling. The rhythm should vary depending on the feeling you're seeking.

Which leads us to . . .

Do

You're communicating for a reason. You want something to be different at the end. That is the essence of the "do" part of the CEO's communication preparation trifecta.

On Election Day, legendary congressman Tip O'Neill used to lean across the breakfast table and ask his wife for her vote. He did that because he knew how important it was to explicitly tell his audience what he wanted them to do. The simplicity and clarity of O'Neill's intention may be hard to match in some situations, but it's critical for leaders to get to the point of directing the audience to take specific action. An audience can't be left at the end of a communication wondering, "Now what?"

A Three-Legged Stool

A stool can't stand on just two legs, and the same is true for "think, feel, do." In fact, what matters most isn't the order, but making sure that all three legs are there. The sequence can shift at times, which may subtly change the impact or clarity of your message.

Let's go back to that health insurance plan announcement. You open with "I wanted to give you the URL to sign up for our new health plan. Here's a QR code so you can easily do so."

No matter how good the plan is, brace yourself. You've given an action step without making the sale. You led with do and never covered think or feel.

In this case, you need people to *think* that you've evaluated plans and looked at alternatives before reaching this decision. They need to *think* that this action comes as the result of a process. They need to *feel* your compassion and understand that this isn't just another benefit; this is the company talking about their health as well as that of their loved ones.

What if you started with this: "For the past 90 days, we've evaluated five health plans to find the right one for you. We know how important this is—this isn't just about benefits; it's about making sure that you and your family stay healthy. That's why we picked NewCo. I'd like to give you the link to sign up today."

You could also start with "feel" in another way. For example, show a picture of the babies born to your team during the last year and say, "I love looking at these pictures. Not just because they're beautiful babies, but because I know that our benefits help keep them healthy. These benefits aren't just for you; they're for them, too. That's why we spent 90 days looking at five plans to find the right one. Today I want to walk you through how to sign up."

Starting with “feel” can be particularly effective if the topic is more dry (like health insurance), because it creates an immediate emotional bond between you and the listener. Once you’re connected, people are apt to listen, even if the material is technical.

Here’s another example. I’m trying to drive employee engagement and retention by talking about how our work matters. I’d like to use an example from one of our clients who develops standards for mobile credit card payment.

I could start with the think. “Mobile payment is a growing trend worldwide. It’s essential to the growth of commerce.”

True, but very dry.

So, in this case, I might start with “feel”: “This is an Icelandic horse. In 2024 I was in Iceland. My daughter wanted to feed one of these horses. In the middle of nowhere, we found a farm that had a sign that said, ‘Feed the horses.’ We pulled over and bought horse feed. We paid using our phones. There, in the middle of Iceland, a farmer was using technology that we helped to create.” Next, I might talk about mobile payment facts (the “think”) and then close with how I want people to engage in a new way (the “do”). Starting with “feel” opened the door to more engagement. And again, we hit all three legs of the stool.

Opening with the “do” step can be a bit trickier. You need to have some level of authority—or enticement—to have the audience follow. As you do this, you need to recognize that you’re dipping into a bank of goodwill with the immediate reaction you’ll receive.

For example, if I lead off a staff meeting saying, “Starting Monday, we’re all going to use new project management software,” I’ve got some good news and bad news on my hands. The good news is that this statement is a strong, unambiguous, declarative opening. But the bad news is I may face pushback due to the lack of context and emotional connection. If I open this way, I need to close those gaps quickly or risk resistance. I need to match my strong "do" step with an equally strong "think" and "feel."

All three legs. Every time.

The Full Brain

Done right, "think, feel, and do" complement one another. They cover three key components—cognition, emotion, and action.

Cognition starts by enabling your audience to understand something—you use logic, facts, evidence, and background. This appeals to their rational brain—the neocortex—but logic alone isn't enough to compel action. This becomes the trap of "analysis paralysis." This phenomenon was documented in 1994 by USC professor Antonio Damasio in his book *Descartes' Error,* which studies a patient with damage to the brain's limbic system. He described a patient who could complete logic puzzles, but struggled with simple decision-making. Emotion was needed to guide decisions.

That's why "feel" is a crucial leg of the stool. Emotions have to be part of the focus. Connecting with heart is prime ground for storytelling and evocative visuals. This appeals to the emotional brain—the limbic system. Emotions—anxiety, excitement, joy, sadness, anger—can compel action.

But you can't have the audience "choose their own adventure" when it comes to action. You've stirred up something in their head and heart. They're ready to do something, and it's your job to tell them what. Otherwise, you risk a cacophony of actions that don't support one another. Your audience needs to know precisely what to do.

That last sentence is phrased that way for a reason. The point isn't that *you* know what your audience needs to do. It's that *they* do. Knowing what you want your audience to do isn't the measure of success when you communicate: It's whether they know what you want them to do.

And telling them once isn't enough. This is something that—without irony—you're about to read repeatedly. Tip O'Neill didn't lean across that breakfast table once; he did it every year. People need to hear things multiple times before they act. And ultimately, it's the "do" step that you'll want to become the refrain—the action that drives your multiplier effect.

The Size of the Audience Doesn't Matter

The "think, feel, do" technique works for any size audience. The framework applies whether you're talking to an audience of one or a crowd of a thousand. Less prominent messages follow the "think, feel, do" construct perfectly.

For example, this preparation sets the stage for a solid performance review discussion. You want your employee to think that they need to develop in some areas and that they can build on strengths in others. You want them to feel that you care about their performance and that you want them to succeed. And you want them to do a set of action steps to continue to develop. One person. Maximum impact.

Taking the Stage

Because this "think, feel, do" exercise is a necessity when communicating like The Boss, it's built into the conclusion of every chapter. It serves as a reminder always to keep your audience's point of view at top of mind as you communicate with anyone, anywhere.

It's a tough day. You need to announce some layoffs. With the departure of a key client, you've had to let eight people go. You're sending a note to the company. What do you want them to think, feel, and do when they read that note?

> **Think:** You want people to think that this decision was the right one for the company and that it wasn't made lightly. You want them to think that this choice helps the overall health of your company. You want them to think that leadership has thought this through—that the change is in their best interests.
>
> **Feel:** You want them to feel that they are safe. That despite this change, their jobs are secure because the company is on better footing. You want them to feel reassured that the people who have left were treated fairly.
>
> **Do:** You want them to stay with the company and help through the transition (and inevitable dropped balls) that come when people depart. You want them to lean into their strengths and look for ways to add value. And you want them to support one another and show empathy to those who were affected.

■ ■ ■

It's 7:00 p.m. Thirty minutes to showtime. The band members are in their dressing rooms, making final preparations and greeting some of the VIPs who have come backstage for photo opportunities.

One by one, they're handed the setlist. Lead guitarist and E Street Band musical director Steve Van Zandt looks it over and nods and smiles as he reads it. He's pleased to see some of the songs that anchor the setlist night after night, and one "tour premiere," a song they haven't played yet on this tour—and haven't played publicly as a band since 2016.

More than anything, as he reviews the set list, Stevie feels a growing confidence. He knows that Bruce, and he, and the band, can deliver a great performance tonight. And it's not something he just hopes for—it's something he knows. Because in his hand, he has a plan for how it will all unfold.

It's going to be a great show tonight. They're going to send 20,000 fans home happy.

And it all started with a blank piece of paper.