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Guiding Star OKRs

A New Approach to
Setting and Achieving Goals



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Catchball: Defining Guiding Stars Cross-Collaboratively

Catchball—inspired by the Japanese strategic planning framework [Hoshin Kanri \[CD97\]](#)—offers a collaborative approach to setting organizational goals within the Guiding Star OKR framework. This structured process encourages a dynamic exchange of ideas, ensuring everyone contributes to shaping the organization’s direction. By promoting inclusivity and moving away from traditional top-down directives, catchball aligns with modern leadership styles and fosters a more engaging goal-setting process.

In this chapter, we’ll explore how catchball operates across all levels of an organization, breaking down hierarchical barriers. We’ll also examine the connection between catchball and the influential work of management theorist Mary Parker Follett, whose ideas on collaborative leadership continue to resonate in modern organizations.

Additionally, we’ll introduce the OODA concept and its connection to catchball, demonstrating why involving all perspectives speeds up decision-making and improves your goal accuracy.

Finally, we’ll discuss cadence and horizon in setting goals at different levels, and how shared OKRs and strategy broadcasts can foster shared purpose and drive collaborative work.

A Collaborative Exercise

Imagine having a Sunday picnic with good friends. After eating, you start tossing a tennis ball around. It’s fun and challenging, with no winners or losers.

An old man strolls by and observes the ball moving faster and faster between you. Your goal is to maintain this momentum, fostering a flow of ideas and energy. This is the essence of catchball—a collaborative exercise in which everyone’s unique perspectives combine to create something extraordinary.

Let’s take a look at an example of how the catchball process can work in a four-level organization: CTO, portfolio owners, project managers/product managers, and development teams (see also the [image on page 5](#)).

1. *The CTO initiates.*

The CTO begins by creating drafts of one to three guiding star OKRs and presents them to the portfolio owners in personal meetings.

2. *The CTO asks for feedback and reflection.*

The CTO asks the portfolio owners to consider two questions:

(a) “Are these OKRs understandable to you?”

(b) “Are these the right OKRs, or should they be adjusted?”

3. *The portfolio owners give feedback.*

The portfolio owners take the questions home, reflect, and then return with feedback to the CTO.

4. *The CTO adjusts (if necessary).*

Based on the feedback, the CTO adjusts the OKR drafts.

5. *The ball is passed on.*

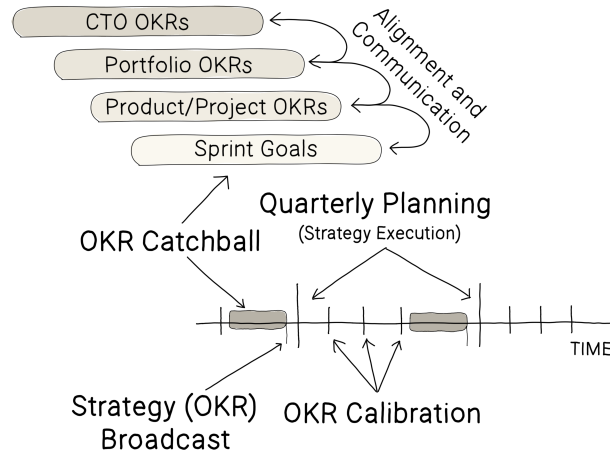
Now it’s the portfolio owners’ turn to create one to three OKR drafts at their level and ask their product and project managers to review these OKRs based on the same two questions (a) and (b) in step 2. The portfolio owners also seek feedback from the CTO to ensure that knowledge from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives is incorporated.

6. *The process continues.*

Catchball continues down and up the organization. Product and project managers have their OKRs reviewed by the development teams and the portfolio owner while the development teams have their goals reviewed by the product and project managers.

7. *Conduct a strategy broadcast.*

After defining all OKRs, you conduct a company-wide strategy broadcast to ensure that everyone understands and aligns with the current long-term goals.



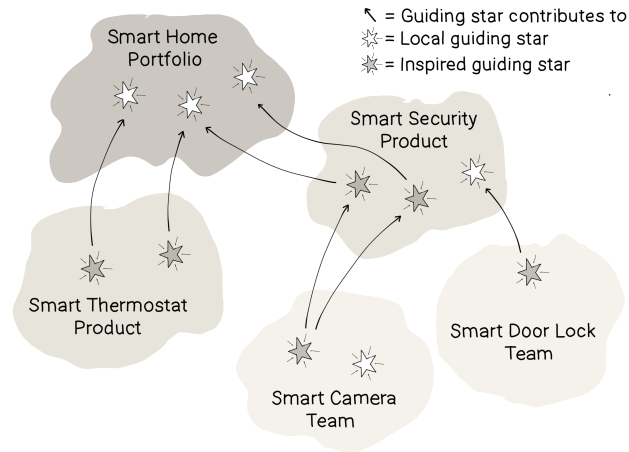
The entire process precedes the agile planning and usually takes two weeks. Keep a high pace, but don't underestimate the required time. There's a deadline but no strict schedule for each step. The ball flies back and forth through the air, and no one counts the number of throws. It's important to remember that feedback can be just as valuable for higher levels since the information might reveal areas where they need to adjust their goals or strategies.

Not all OKRs are created equal. Some are “inspired guiding stars,” aligning directly with higher-level goals. Others are “local,” for example, focusing on specific products, such as improving a music app's recommendation algorithm—a goal not directly relevant to the CTO's overarching vision.

The [image on page 6](#) illustrates a company's portfolio of smart home products, focusing on security and thermostat devices. Two teams contributing are the camera team and the door lock team. Arrows indicate that a guiding star is “inspired” by another guiding star at the level above it. Those without upward arrows are instead “local.”

Remember, an “inspired” guiding star isn't merely a subset of a higher-level goal—it's a unique strategic objective that creates viable value while still supporting the bigger picture. Treating OKRs like projects or task lists that can be broken down into sub-projects or sub-tasks is sometimes referred to as “cascading OKRs”—a term derived from the Italian word for “waterfall.” That top-down approach isn't suitable for the dynamic nature of strategic goals. I strongly advise against cascading OKRs.

The beauty of catchball isn't about who has the final say, but rather the collaborative exchange of ideas and knowledge as drafts are reviewed throughout the organization. This back-and-forth creates a synthesis, blending insights



from every level to shape the most effective OKRs. No one “owns” the process or has the “best” ideas—it’s about using collective intelligence to find the best direction. Like cooking a delicious dish, each unique ingredient contributes to the final result, making it difficult to pinpoint the origin of any single flavor.

In the previous example, the CTO, portfolio owners, and others assume the OKR-initiating role of *guiding star sponsor*—a hat they then wear throughout the lifecycle of a guiding star OKR. But true innovation often stems from collective intelligence. Consider assembling a diverse group of experts when brainstorming your initial OKRs. This cross-functional collaboration often leads to more holistic perspectives, minimizing biases and blind spots. It’s just one example of how emergent collaboration within the Guiding Star OKR framework can spark ideas no single individual could’ve conceived on their own.

Catchball is a structured process of informal, organic conversations, *not* debates or large group votes. The latter often results in either the most powerful person—not necessarily the most knowledgeable—getting their way or a mediocre compromise. It’s also *not* about mechanically breaking down large projects into tiny, non-viable pieces that can then be handed off to separate teams to work on in isolation.

Why Hierarchy Still Matters (Even if You Hate It)

Top-down goal setting is rarely successful, but completely abandoning hierarchy isn’t ideal either. Fortunately, there are ways to integrate decision-making across a large organization, as Mary Parker Follett suggested (see [Mary Parker Follett Didn’t Like Compromises](#)).

In a small family, it's often easy to keep track of everyone's needs and wishes. You can easily communicate and make decisions together without any formal structure. But imagine the family lives in a big city with many other relatives and a great number of extended family members. Suddenly, it becomes much more difficult to coordinate everyone's needs and wishes. It becomes chaos without an overarching structure to organize and govern the city, with different levels of focus and decision-making.

Similarly, small companies can function without explicit hierarchies, as everyone knows each other and collaborates easily. But as companies grow and become more complex, structure becomes essential for aligning efforts toward common long-term goals and ensuring efficient and effective decision-making.

Hierarchy in the Guiding Star OKR framework isn't about power dynamics but rather about creating a clear structure for managing your complex reality. Different levels focus on different aspects of the business, from strategic planning at the management level to specialized tech expertise at the team level.

Like a small company, effective information flow is crucial for any organization, regardless of size. Formal structures alone aren't enough. Frequent, informal interactions across levels are necessary to avoid bureaucracy and maintain agility. Cross-pollination (see [Chapter 7, Cross-Pollination: Everyone's Ears, Insights, and Ideas, on page ?](#)), calibration (see [Chapter 6, Calibration: Fine-Tuning Guiding Stars, on page ?](#)), and catchball make the Guiding Star OKR framework an antidote to the hidden chaos of unchecked bureaucracy.

Mary Parker Follett Didn't Like Compromises

Mary Parker Follett [Ton03] was a pioneering thinker in management and organizational theory during the early 1900s. Her ideas were revolutionary for that time and are still relevant today.

One of Follett's most famous stories involves two people in a library who disagreed about an open window. One person felt hot, while the other feared catching a cold. Instead of a half-open compromise, they found a solution benefiting both: opening a window in an adjacent room.

The story illustrates Follett's view of conflicts and the advantages of integration over compromise. A compromise means that both parties give up something, which often leads to no one being completely satisfied. Integration, on the other hand, is about finding a solution where all needs are fully met, as with the window.

The catchball process emphasizes collaborative conversations to determine what the organization can truly accomplish rather than competing for project funding.