Mission-driven storytelling for defence & dual-use startups

2026 edition

From master storytellers
Jonathan Winch
& Michael Best

Foreword

We created this e-book because defence storytelling is underserved — and because the stakes are too high for generic advice

Startups entering defence face complexity, scrutiny, and responsibility unlike any other sector. Many underestimate how much narrative clarity shapes trust, adoption, program advancement, team alignment, and strategic positioning.

We created this e-book to level the playing field.

Our goal is simple:

to give founders, teams, and leaders the tools they need to communicate with honesty, precision, and operational relevance — and to build stories worthy of the missions they support.

Jonathan Winch & Michael Best

2026

Contents

This e-book was created from real-life experience, not clever AI prompting!

Why should you read this e-book?

- It can help your company win trust – the currency of defence.
- It can shorten complex sales cycles by clarifying value.
- It can differentiate you in a crowded, jargon-heavy market.
- It gives you a repeatable communication framework to use in pitches, proposals, and conversations with operators.
- It addresses the unique sensitivities of defence work, something generic storytelling guides never do.

About the authors

Michael Best's early career included work within the U.S. defence ecosystem, contributing to global supply chain portals for the United States Air Force, the U.S. Army and the Pentagon under USJFCOM.

Over 30 years, he has supported everyone from startups to Fortune 50 companies as a creative director, designer, photographer, and filmmaker. His skillset is uniquely suited to defence: simplifying complexity, making operational value visible, and translating technical ideas into narratives that resonate with operators and decision-makers.

Your mission deserves storytellers who understand defence, technology, and responsibility.

Jonathan Winch has spent three decades building corporate and capability narratives for global companies.

He has worked at the intersection of strategy, brand, and capability development with organisations ranging from multinational manufacturers to next-generation technology firms. His focus today is on helping defence and dual-use innovators articulate intent, differentiate credibly, and align their internal culture with the responsibilities of operating in high-stakes industries.

If you're new to defence, it's not business as usual

And it's not storytelling as usual, either!

In an industry that exists to protect human lives and ways of living, the most powerful element of any narrative is **intent**.

Technology, capability, and performance matter - but they are not what earns trust. What matters most is why the company chooses to innovate, who it seeks to protect, and what principles guide its decisions when trade-offs arise. Intent is the moral compass behind every product roadmap, partnership, and deployment.

For defence and dual-use startups, articulating intent is not optional. It is the foundation for credibility in a world where ethical scrutiny is high and the consequences of failure are profound.

A clear statement of intent reassures employees that their work serves a purpose beyond profit. It signals to partners and customers that the company operates with restraint and responsibility. And it provides a narrative anchor when explaining complex technologies to stakeholders who care deeply about societal impact.

Intent also shapes culture. When teams understand that their mission is to safeguard lives, uphold lawful defence, and strengthen resilience, they can reconcile the tension between innovation and ethics.

This clarity helps attract talent, guide decision-making, and sustain trust - even in moments of uncertainty. In short, intent is not just a line in a vision statement; it is the cornerstone of a story that aligns ambition with responsibility.

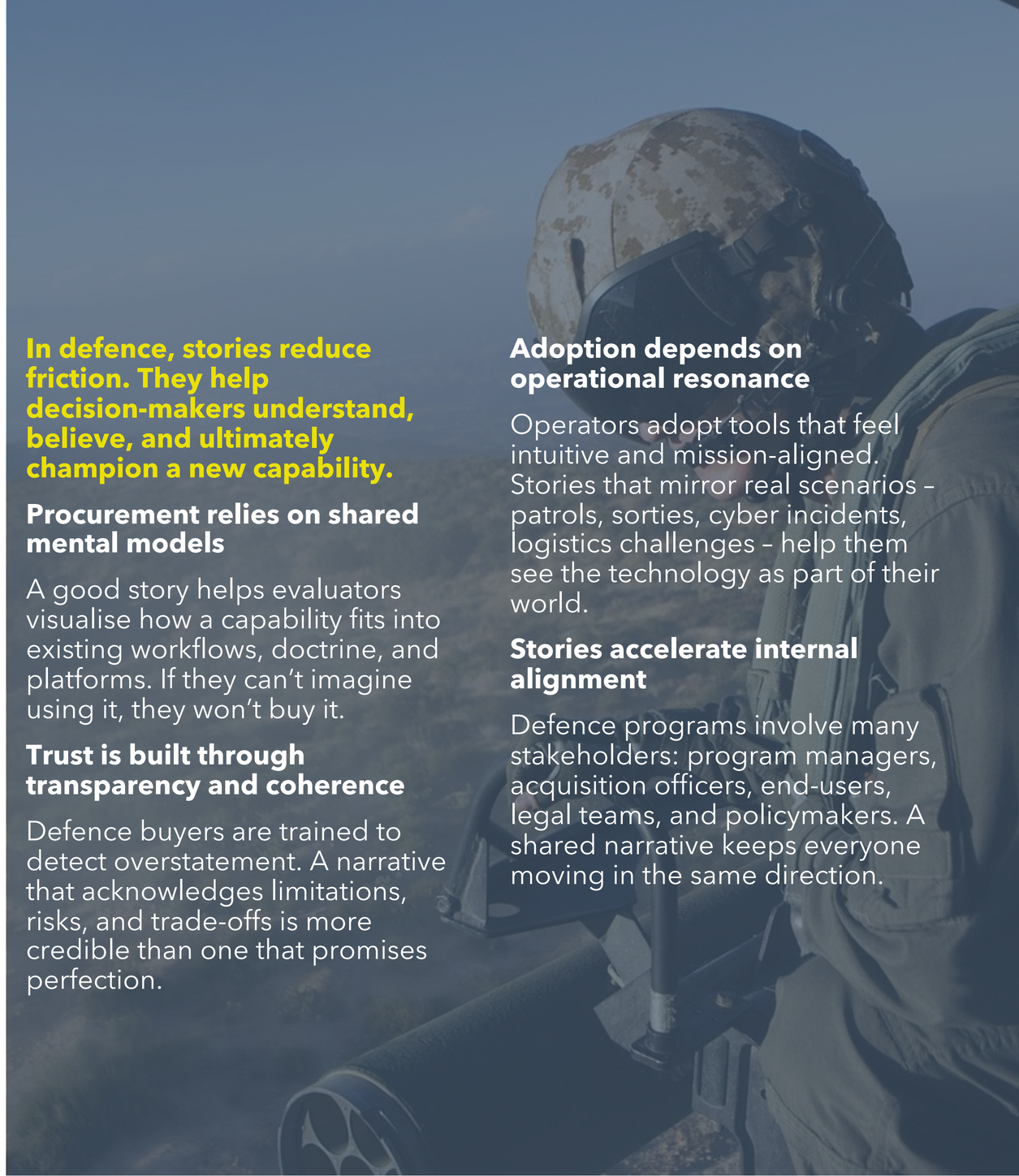
Chapter 1

The strategic role of storytelling in defence

Defence founders often underestimate how much narrative shapes credibility.

This section reframes storytelling as a strategic asset, not a marketing trick.

How stories influence procurement, trust, and adoption



In defence, stories reduce friction. They help decision-makers understand, believe, and ultimately champion a new capability.

Procurement relies on shared mental models

A good story helps evaluators visualise how a capability fits into existing workflows, doctrine, and platforms. If they can't imagine using it, they won't buy it.

Trust is built through transparency and coherence

Defence buyers are trained to detect overstatement. A narrative that acknowledges limitations, risks, and trade-offs is more credible than one that promises perfection.

Adoption depends on operational resonance

Operators adopt tools that feel intuitive and mission-aligned. Stories that mirror real scenarios – patrols, sorties, cyber incidents, logistics challenges – help them see the technology as part of their world.

Stories accelerate internal alignment

Defence programs involve many stakeholders: program managers, acquisition officers, end-users, legal teams, and policymakers. A shared narrative keeps everyone moving in the same direction.

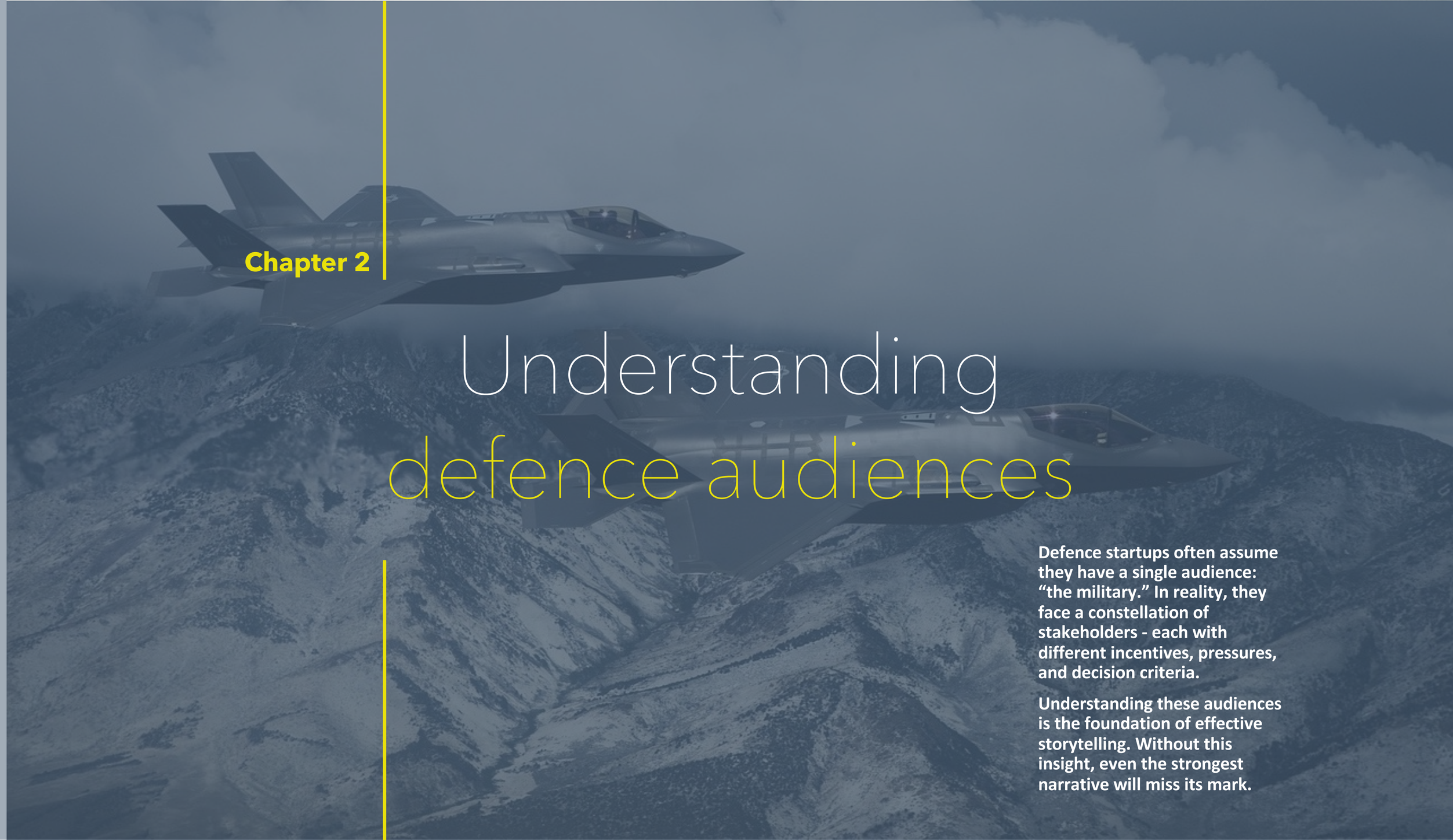
Civilian vs. defence storytelling

Defence storytelling is a different discipline from civilian commercial storytelling. The audiences, incentives, and risks are unique.

Defence storytelling must balance clarity with restraint, ambition with responsibility, and innovation with credibility.

It's less about "selling a dream" and more about "demonstrating mission value."

Aspect	**Civilian (B2C) storytelling**	**Defense storytelling**
Primary audience	Consumers, businesses, general investors	Operators, procurers, investors, primes, policymakers, employees
Value-framing	Convenience, lifestyle, efficiency	Mission impact, survivability, deterrence
Risk tolerance	High: products can fail without major impact	Low: failure can cost lives, comprise security, inflate budgets
Language style	Emotional, aspirational, brand-driven	Precise, grounded, operationally founded
Sales cycle	Fast, iterative	Long, bureaucratic, multi-stakeholder
Proof required	Testimonials, demos	Test data, certifications, operational validation



Chapter 2

Understanding defence audiences

Defence startups often assume they have a single audience: "the military." In reality, they face a constellation of stakeholders - each with different incentives, pressures, and decision criteria.

Understanding these audiences is the foundation of effective storytelling. Without this insight, even the strongest narrative will miss its mark.

Who's listening?: Audience nature and drivers

Your story must resonate across several distinct groups.

Each one evaluates solutions through a different lens.

Operators (end-users)

The people who will ultimately use the technology - pilots, analysts, cyber defenders, infantry, logisticians, and more.

They care about mission relevance, ease of use, and reliability under stress.

They respond to stories grounded in real scenarios, not abstract benefits.

They are often the strongest internal champions if they believe in the capability.

Procurement & acquisition officers

Gatekeepers of budgets, contracts, and compliance.

Care about risk reduction, integration, sustainment, and cost justification.

Need clarity on how your solution fits into existing programs.

Respond to narratives that show predictability, not just innovation.

Program managers

Oversee long-term capability development.

Think in terms of roadmaps, milestones, and lifecycle value.

Want to know how your technology evolves, scales, and stays relevant.

Respond to stories that show strategic alignment with future needs.

Policymakers & senior leaders

Shape doctrine, budgets, and national priorities.

Care about deterrence, readiness, and geopolitical impact.

Respond to narratives that connect your innovation to strategic advantage.

Defence investors

Dual-use VCs, defence-focused funds, and strategic investors.

Care about market timing, dual-use potential, and regulatory barriers.

Respond to stories that show credible pathways to adoption.

Need a tailored narrative. The startup that understands this wins attention faster and avoids the common trap of "one-size-fits-all" messaging.

Employees

Form the backbone of innovation and delivery.

Think in terms of purpose, impact, and personal alignment with company values.

Want to know how their work contributes to protecting lives and sustaining ways of living.

Respond to stories that connect the mission to societal benefit and ethical responsibility.

Top of mind: Risk

Defence audiences are united by one thing: Risk sensitivity. But the type of risk they care about varies.

Understanding these risk lenses allows a startup to craft narratives that feel credible rather than speculative.

Operational risk

Operators ask:

- *Will this work when everything goes wrong?*
- *Does it make my mission easier, safer, or faster?*

Showcase realistic edge cases to build trust.

Programmatic risk

Program managers and procurement officers ask:

- *Can this be delivered on time and integrated without disruption?*
- *Does it align with existing doctrine and infrastructure?*

Demonstrate compatibility, scalability, and predictability to resonate.

Strategic risk

Senior leaders ask:

- *Does this capability strengthen deterrence or readiness?*
- *Does it introduce ethical, political, or geopolitical complications?*

Stories that show responsible innovation and strategic clarity matter here.

Financial risk

Investors ask:

- *Is this a viable business, not just a cool technology?*
- *Can it survive long sales cycles and regulatory hurdles?*

Stories that show dual-use potential, market timing, and traction are key.

How **operators** evaluate risk, value, and mission impact

Operators trust stories grounded in realistic scenarios, edge cases, and honest limitations.

Risk is defined as...

Will it fail under stress, degradation, or adversarial pressure?

Does it introduce new points of failure or cognitive burden?

Value is defined as...

Improved survivability, speed, and effectiveness in real conditions

Simplicity, reliability, and ease of use under pressure.

Mission impact is defined as...

Clear, immediate contribution to mission success

Advantage in contested or degraded environments

How **program managers & procurement officers** evaluate risk, value, and mission impact

Program managers and procurement officers respond to stories that demonstrate compatibility, scalability, and institutional awareness.

Risk is defined as...

Schedule slippage, cost overruns, and integration friction.

Dependency on unproven suppliers or immature technology.

Value is defined as...

Predictable delivery and lifecycle sustainability.

Fit with existing systems, standards, and acquisition pathways.

Mission impact is defined as...

Reduced implementation risk across programs

Incremental improvement that does not disrupt doctrine or operations

How **senior leaders** evaluate risk, value, and mission impact

This audience looks for strategic clarity, responsible innovation, and foresight.

Risk is defined as...

Strategic vulnerability, escalation dynamics, and unintended consequences.

Political, ethical, and alliance implications.

Value is defined as...

Contribution to deterrence, readiness, and long-term advantage.

Alignment with national or alliance priorities.

Mission impact is defined as...

Strengthening overall force posture and credibility.

Supporting strategic objectives beyond immediate use cases.

How **investors & financial stakeholders** evaluate risk, value, and mission impact

Financial audiences are persuaded by stories of traction, timing, and durable relevance, not just technical novelty.

Risk is defined as...

Long sales cycles, regulatory uncertainty, and customer concentration.

Capital intensity and dependency on defence budgets.

Value is defined as...

Business model resilience and path to scale.

Evidence of demand beyond a single programme or customer.

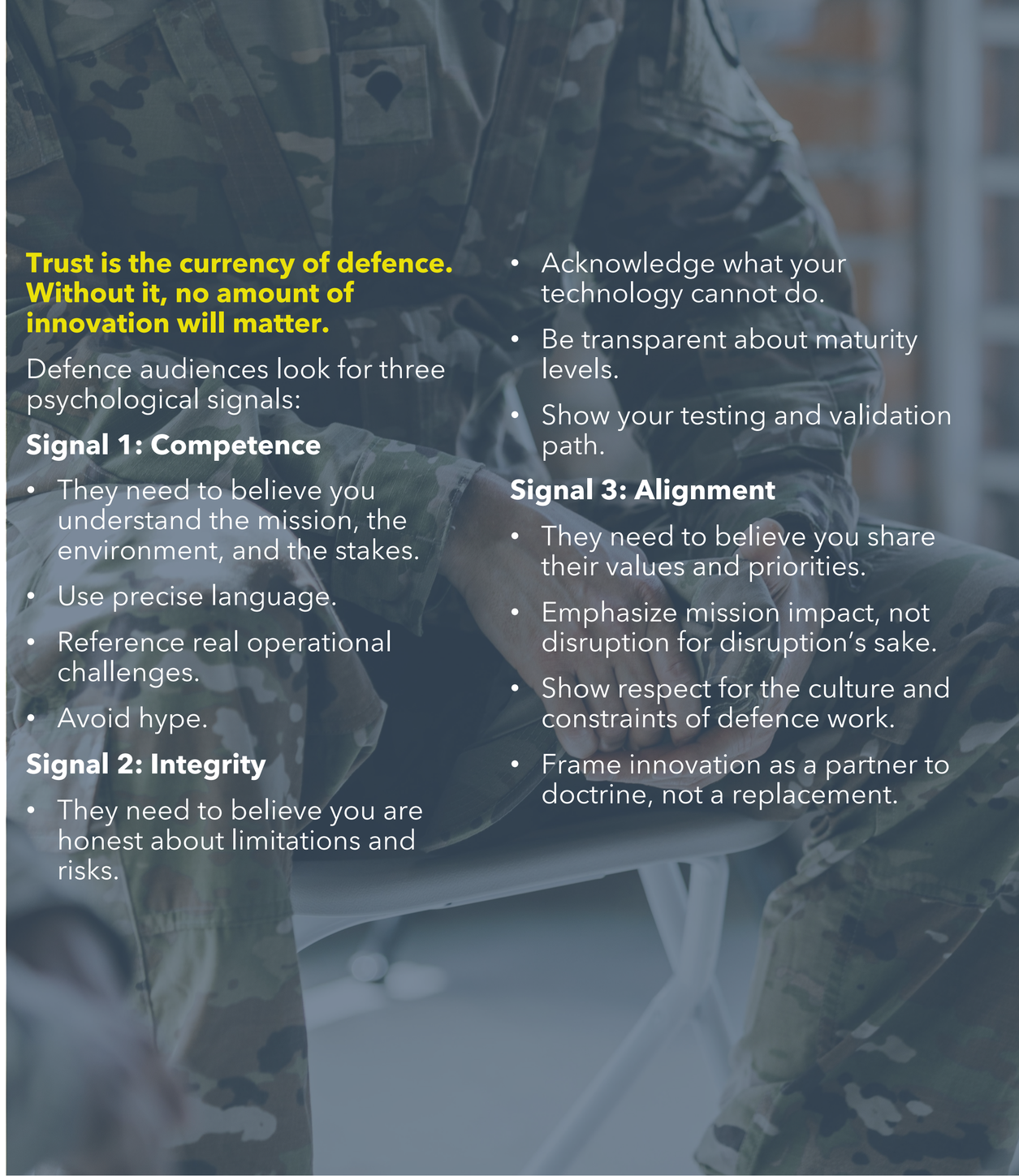
Mission impact is defined (indirectly) as...

Financial sustainability that enables long-term contribution to defence needs.

Dual-use or adjacent markets that support survivability of the company.

The psychology of **trust and security** in defence contexts

When a startup demonstrates competence, integrity, and alignment, its story becomes not just persuasive - but trustworthy.



Trust is the currency of defence. Without it, no amount of innovation will matter.

Defence audiences look for three psychological signals:

Signal 1: Competence

- They need to believe you understand the mission, the environment, and the stakes.
- Use precise language.
- Reference real operational challenges.
- Avoid hype.

Signal 2: Integrity

- They need to believe you are honest about limitations and risks.
- Acknowledge what your technology cannot do.
- Be transparent about maturity levels.
- Show your testing and validation path.

Signal 3: Alignment

- They need to believe you share their values and priorities.
- Emphasize mission impact, not disruption for disruption's sake.
- Show respect for the culture and constraints of defence work.
- Frame innovation as a partner to doctrine, not a replacement.

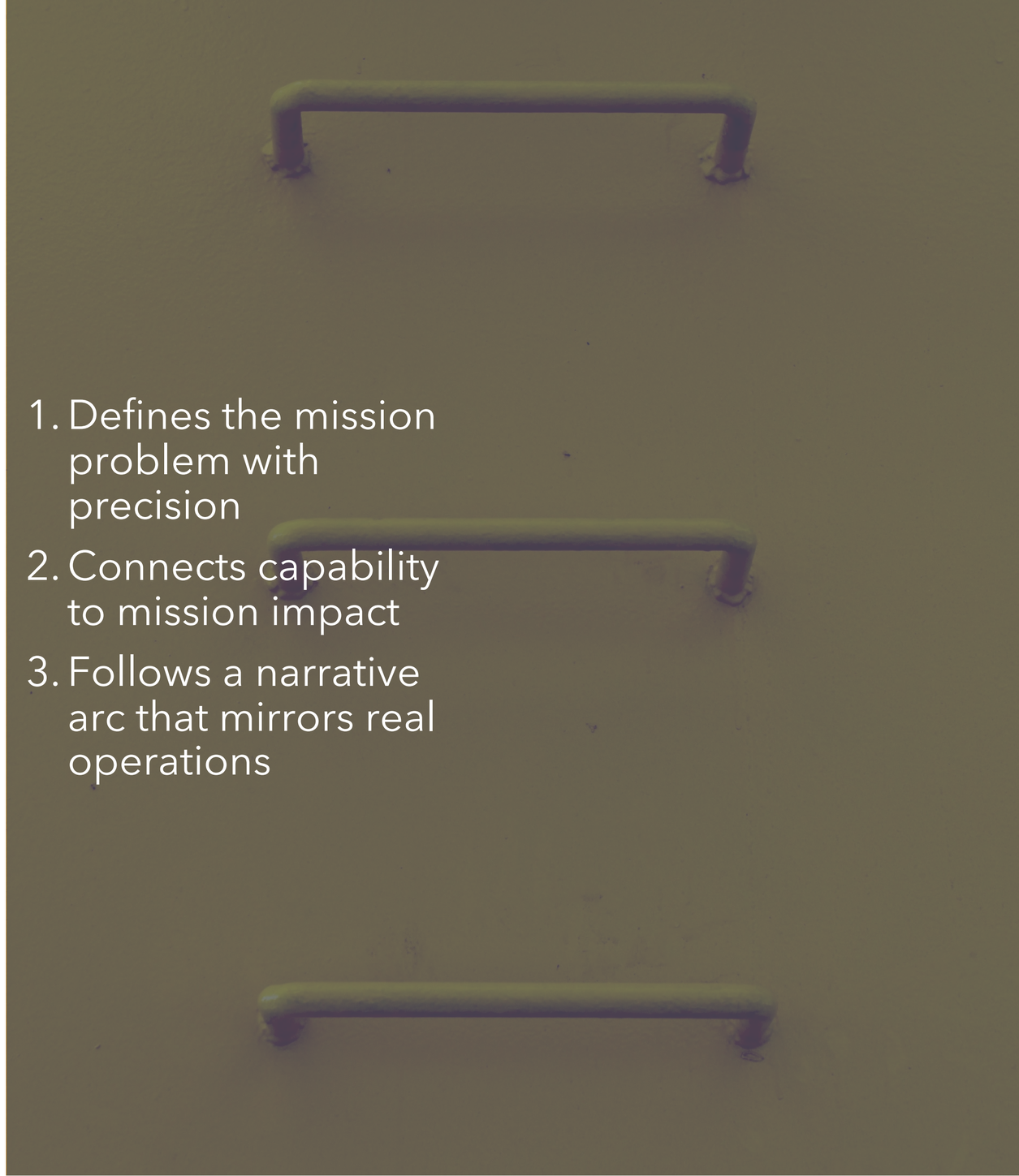
Chapter 3

Crafting a mission-driven narrative

Defence startups often begin with extraordinary technology but an underdeveloped story. A mission-driven narrative bridges that gap. It translates engineering brilliance into operational relevance, helping audiences understand not just what the technology does, but why it matters in the context of real missions, threats, and decisions.

A strong mission-driven narrative does three things:

1. Defines the mission problem with precision
2. Connects capability to mission impact
3. Follows a narrative arc that mirrors real operations



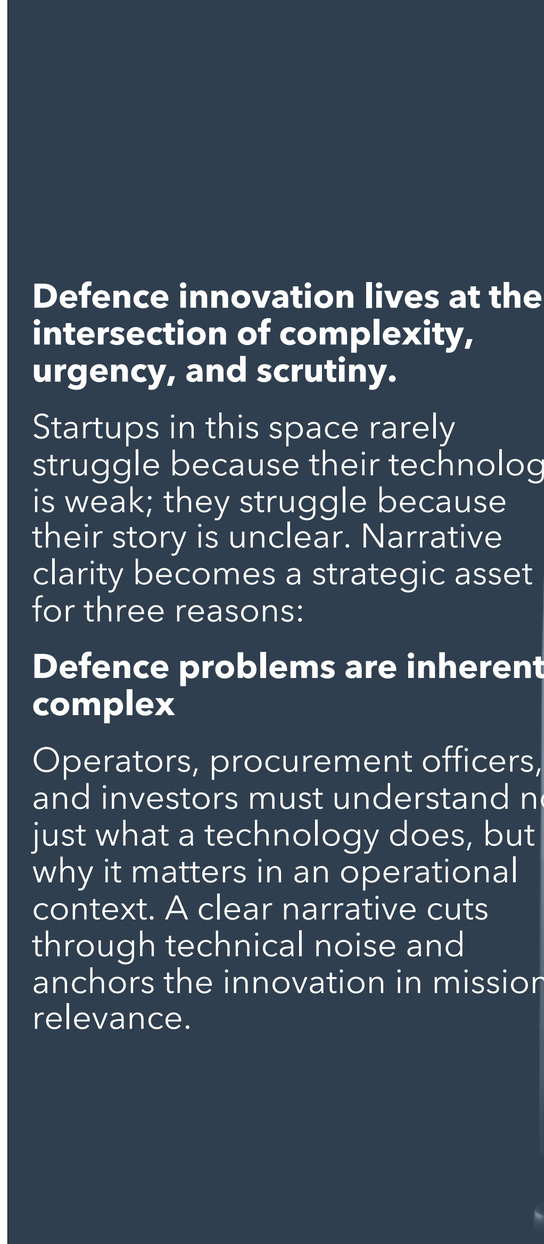
Why defence innovation needs narrative clarity

Defence innovation lives at the intersection of complexity, urgency, and scrutiny.

Startups in this space rarely struggle because their technology is weak; they struggle because their story is unclear. Narrative clarity becomes a strategic asset for three reasons:

Defence problems are inherently complex

Operators, procurement officers, and investors must understand not just what a technology does, but why it matters in an operational context. A clear narrative cuts through technical noise and anchors the innovation in mission relevance.



Stakes are higher than in commercial markets

Defence buyers cannot afford ambiguity. They need to know exactly how a capability improves survivability, readiness, deterrence, or decision advantage. A crisp narrative reduces perceived risk.

Startups must bridge the gap between engineers and end-users

Many defence founders come from technical backgrounds. Their instinct is to explain features. defence audiences, however, think in terms of missions, threats, and outcomes. Narrative clarity translates engineering into impact.

A strong narrative becomes the connective tissue between technology, mission, and trust. Without it, even groundbreaking innovations can be overlooked.

Defining the mission problem
in operational terms

The most compelling defence stories begin with a clear articulation of the mission problem. Not a generic industry challenge, but a specific operational friction point.

What "operational terms" actually mean

- They describe what operators experience, not what technology enables.
- They focus on mission outcomes, not features.
- They reflect real constraints: time pressure, contested environments, limited bandwidth, cognitive load, logistics bottlenecks.

How to frame the mission problem

A strong mission problem statement includes:

- The mission context (e.g., ISR, logistics, cyber defence, maritime security)
- The operational friction (e.g., slow targeting cycles, data overload, unreliable comms)
- The consequence of inaction (e.g., reduced survivability, delayed decisions, increased risk)

Example structure

"In contested environments, units struggle to maintain situational awareness because sensor data arrives too slowly and is difficult to interpret. This delays decision-making and increases operational risk."

This framing does two things:

- It shows you understand the mission.
- It sets up your technology as a response to a real, validated need.

Turning technical capability into **mission impact**

Once the mission problem is clear, the next step is translating your technology into operational value. defence audiences don't buy features; they buy mission advantage.

Shift from features to effects

Instead of:

"Our system uses advanced multi-modal sensor fusion."

Use:

"Our system reduces target identification time from minutes to seconds."

The three layers of mission impact

A compelling narrative shows impact at multiple levels:

Tactical impact

- How does this help an operator in the moment?
- Faster decisions, reduced workload, improved accuracy.

Operational impact

- How does this improve mission execution?
- Higher sortie effectiveness, better coordination, increased resilience.

Strategic impact

- How does this strengthen deterrence or readiness?
- More credible posture, reduced escalation risk, improved force projection.

The credibility rule

Mission impact must be:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Believable

Explaining technical capability **simply** (without dumbing it down)

In defence storytelling, clarity is not a stylistic choice. It is a credibility test. Audiences across defence are technically informed, time poor and naturally sceptical of anything that feels inflated or unnecessarily complex. The goal is not to strip away the sophistication of your technology. It is to communicate it in a way that makes the operational value obvious.

The simplest way to do this is (again!) to begin with the mission problem. When the friction point is clear, the technology becomes easier to understand because the audience can see what it is trying to solve. This keeps the conversation grounded in their world rather than yours.

From there, describe the capability in plain, precise language that focuses on what it enables.

Replace internal terminology with functional meaning. Instead of listing algorithms or components, explain what changes for the operator or mission commander in real conditions. Talk about time saved, workload reduced or decisions made clearer under pressure.

Do not hide the constraints. Defence audiences trust teams that acknowledge limitations, maturity levels and environmental dependencies. Transparency signals discipline and builds confidence that your claims will hold up when tested.

The aim is simple: communicate in a way that is easy to understand yet serious enough to trust. When you tie capability to mission relevance and realistic outcomes, you achieve both.

Building a **narrative arc** that mirrors real-world operations

Defence storytelling is most effective when it mirrors how missions actually unfold. This creates intuitive resonance for operators and decision-makers.

The operational narrative arc

A simple but powerful structure:

1. Situation

The mission environment, constraints, and stakes.

"A patrol enters a contested area with limited comms and incomplete intel."

2. Complication

The friction point or threat that creates risk.

"Multiple sensor feeds overwhelm the operator, slowing threat identification."

2. Intervention

Where your capability enters the story.

"The system automatically fuses and prioritizes data, highlighting threats in real time."

4. Outcome

The mission advantage created.

"The unit reacts faster, avoids ambush, and maintains momentum.

Why this works

- It aligns with how operators think
- It avoids hype by grounding the story in reality
- It demonstrates value through action, not adjectives
- It helps procurement visualize integration and use cases

Chapter 4

Explaining complex technology simply

Defence tech is often deeply technical. Startups need tools to make complexity accessible while maintaining credibility.

Simplicity matters more in defence

Defence startups often operate at the cutting edge of autonomy, AI, sensing, cyber, space systems, and advanced materials.

So defence audiences are inundated with technical claims. They evaluate dozens of proposals, each filled with jargon, acronyms, and abstract promises.

What cuts through is not the most sophisticated explanation, but the clearest one.

Three truths shape this reality:

Operators don’t have time for abstraction

They need to understand how a system behaves under pressure, not how it works internally.

Procurement officers must justify decisions

If they can’t explain your capability to their chain of command, they won’t buy it.

Senior leaders think in strategic outcomes

They care about deterrence, readiness, and advantage - not algorithms.

The challenge isn’t just building breakthrough technology - it’s making that technology understandable to audiences who must trust it, fund it, and eventually deploy it in high-stakes environments.

Frameworks for simplifying advanced technology

The goal is not to "dumb down" your work. It's to translate it into language that preserves accuracy while increasing accessibility.

Below are three frameworks that consistently work in defence contexts.

The "Function-effect-impact" Framework

A clean way to explain any capability:

Function – What the system does

Effect – What changes in the mission environment

Impact – Why that change matters

Example:

Function: "The system fuses multi-source sensor data in real time."

Effect: "Operators see a single, prioritized picture instead of dozens of feeds."

Impact: "Decisions are faster and more accurate in contested environments."

The "Before-after" operational contrast

Show the difference your technology makes by contrasting the old reality with the new one.

Before: "Analysts manually review hours of drone footage."

After: "The system flags anomalies automatically, reducing review time by 80%."

This structure is intuitive for operators and procurement alike.

The "One layer deeper" rule

Explain your technology at a high level. If the audience wants more detail, go one layer deeper – never five.

Communicating uncertainty, limitations, and risk - honestly

Be explicit about maturity

"The system is TRL 6 and entering field testing next quarter."

Clarify environmental constraints

"Performance degrades in heavy electromagnetic interference, and we're addressing that."

State what the system does not do

"This is not a replacement for human judgment; it accelerates it."

Defence audiences are trained to detect exaggeration. They trust founders who acknowledge constraints.

Visual metaphors and analogies that work (and don't) in defence

Analogies are powerful – but only when they respect the audience's expertise. defence professionals respond best to metaphors grounded in operations, not consumer tech.

Effective defence-aligned analogies

"It acts like a digital wingman."
(Conveys autonomy without implying full independence.)

"Think of it as a logistics GPS that updates in real time under contested conditions."
(Makes complex routing algorithms relatable.)

"It's like having a second pair of eyes that never gets tired."
(Works well for, e.g., AI-enabled sensing.)

Analogies to avoid

Anything comparing defence systems to social media, gaming, or consumer apps.

Overly cute or playful metaphors.

Analogies that imply unrealistic autonomy or infallibility.

The goal is to make the unfamiliar feel operationally intuitive.

A **three-layer explanation model** for defence audiences

A powerful structure for any pitch, briefing, or proposal

This model satisfies operators, procurement officers, and technical evaluators simultaneously:

Layer 1 – Mission language

Explain the capability in terms of mission outcomes.

"It reduces the time from detection to decision."

Layer 2 – Technical mechanism

Give a concise explanation of how it works.

"It uses onboard AI models to prioritize sensor inputs."

Layer 3 – Proof and validation

Show evidence that it works.

"In field trials, it cut processing time by 60%."

Be **precise** without being overwhelming

Precision is not the same as detail

Defence audiences value:

- Clear definitions
- Operational relevance
- Realistic performance claims
- Transparent limitations
- Evidence over adjectives

A precise explanation is one that is correct, concise, and mission-anchored.

Chapter 5

Navigating ethics and responsibility

Defence startups often struggle with public perception. This section helps you to articulate your values and intent.

The ethics and responsibility layer

Defence startups operate in a domain where innovation intersects directly with national security, geopolitical stability, and human lives.

That reality creates a unique responsibility: Every capability you build carries ethical weight. A strong narrative doesn't avoid this – it embraces it.

This chapter helps founders articulate responsible innovation in a way that builds trust, strengthens credibility, and differentiates them from competitors who treat ethics as an afterthought.

Defence audiences respond to companies that understand the moral context of their work.

Why **ethics matter** in defence storytelling

Ethics in defence aren't abstract principles. They are practical considerations that shape procurement decisions, public perception, and long-term viability.

Key reasons ethics must be part of the narrative include:

defence buyers need to trust your intent

- They want to know you understand the gravity of the missions you support.

Public scrutiny is higher than ever

- Dual-use technologies, AI autonomy, and data-driven systems raise legitimate societal concerns.

Ethical clarity reduces procurement friction

- When you proactively address risk, you make it easier for acquisition teams to justify working with you.

Responsible innovation is a competitive advantage

- Startups that demonstrate ethical maturity stand out in a field often criticized for opacity.

How to address **dual-use** concerns transparently

Many defence technologies have civilian applications, and many civilian technologies can be weaponized. This dual-use ambiguity can create anxiety among investors, policymakers, and the public. But a transparent dual-use narrative can signal maturity and foresight.

Responsibily framing dual-use

- Acknowledge the dual-use reality - pretending it doesn't exist undermines trust.
- Clarify your intended use cases. Be explicit about the missions and scenarios your technology is designed to support.
- Explain your safeguards. This includes export controls, user vetting, and technical limitations that prevent misuse.
- Show alignment with democratic values

Framing **responsible innovation** without sounding defensive

Ethics can be framed as a strength rather than an apology. The key is to integrate responsibility into your story naturally, not as a disclaimer.

Three principles for confident ethical storytelling

1. Lead with mission impact, follow with responsibility. Start with the operational value, then show how you deliver it safely and ethically.
2. Use concrete examples, not vague assurances, e.g. “We comply with export controls” is less compelling than “We built automated compliance checks into our deployment pipeline.”
3. Show your decision-making process. defence audiences appreciate companies that can articulate how they evaluate ethical trade-offs.

The ethical narrative as a **strategic asset**

When done well, your ethical narrative becomes a differentiator.

A strong ethical narrative achieves multiple goals:

- It reassures procurement officers that you are a low-risk partner.
- It signals to investors that you are building a sustainable, defensible business.
- It builds public trust, which matters for long-term legitimacy.
- It aligns your team, giving them a shared sense of purpose and responsibility.

Think of ethics not as a separate chapter in your story – but woven through every part of it.

Chapter 6

Storytelling across audiences

Defence startups must communicate differently depending on the audience.

This section gives you a toolkit for each context.

Adapting your narrative across **audiences**

Defence startups rarely communicate in a single direction. They pitch to investors, brief operators, submit proposals to procurement teams, speak to policymakers, and occasionally address the public.

Each of these audiences requires a different narrative style - not a different story, but a different expression of the same core truth.

Across all audiences and contexts, the core narrative remains the same:

- The mission problem
- The capability
- The impact
- The responsibility

What changes is the emphasis, the language, and the level of detail.

Pitch decks for defence **investors**

Investors in the defence space—whether dual-use VCs or mission-driven funds—look for clarity, credibility, and commercial viability.

A pitch deck must translate mission impact into a compelling business case.

What matters most in a defence pitch deck.

A crisp mission problem
Investors want to see a real operational pain point, not a theoretical opportunity.

A believable path to adoption
Show how you'll navigate long sales cycles and procurement hurdles.

Dual-use or adjacent markets
Many investors need to see commercial or civilian applicability.

Evidence of traction
Pilots, field tests, letters of interest, or early contracts.

A roadmap that aligns with defence timelines
Investors want to know you can survive the "valley of death".

Operational use-case storytelling for **Procurement**

Procurement officers and program managers need to understand how your capability fits into existing workflows, doctrine, and systems. They are not buying a product—they are buying integration.

Procurement-focused storytelling must include:

A clear operational scenario
Show exactly where your capability enters the mission.

Compatibility with existing systems
Procurement teams need to know you won't break anything.

Lifecycle considerations
Sustainment, training, updates, and long-term support.

Risk reduction measures
Testing, validation, certifications, and compliance.

A predictable delivery path
Timelines, milestones, and integration steps.

Internal storytelling for **team alignment**

Inside a defence startup, storytelling is a leadership tool. It shapes culture, motivates teams, and keeps everyone aligned through long development cycles.

The degree to which you can achieve alignment – and, the amount of focus and resources you will need to apply often depends on whether the majority of your employees are from the defence industry or the general public. The latter, in our experience, take a lot more convincing!

Internal storytelling should reinforce:

The mission problem you exist to solve
Teams stay motivated when they understand the stakes.

The operator's perspective
Engineers build better systems when they empathize with end-users.

The company's ethical boundaries
Shared values reduce internal friction.

The long-term vision
defence timelines are long; teams need a horizon to aim for.

The meaning behind the work
People want to know their effort contributes to something larger.

Chapter 7

Storytelling examples and tools

This chapter gives you practical, plug-and-play tools: narrative transformations, mini case studies, and templates you can adapt immediately.

Before-and-after narrative transformations

How can you craft narratives that feel credible rather than speculative?

Example 1 – autonomy system

Before:

"We use advanced reinforcement learning to enable autonomous navigation in complex environments."

After:

"Our system helps unmanned vehicles navigate safely through contested terrain, reducing operator workload and increasing mission survivability."

The transformation in this example shifts from technology-first to mission-first, making the value immediately clear.

Example 2 – cyber defence platform

Before:

"Our platform uses AI-powered anomaly detection to identify network threats."

After:

"Our platform detects intrusions in seconds instead of hours, giving cyber defenders the time they need to contain threats before they spread."

The improved version shifts focus from algorithms to operational impact.

Example 3 – logistics optimization tool

Before:

"We built a multi-modal optimization engine for supply chain routing."

After:

"We help logistics teams deliver supplies faster and more reliably, even when routes are disrupted or contested."

This reframing speaks directly to mission continuity.

Case studies

In our experience, people learn best from concrete examples.

Abstract principles are useful, but nothing accelerates understanding like seeing how a weak narrative becomes a strong one - or how a company could translate complex technology into mission-driven clarity.

The confidentiality of projects with which we work can never be compromised so we hope you'll forgive us if most the following cases are entirely fictional!

Case study 1
“Skytrace”: Aerial ISR startup

Background

SkyTrace was founded by two former aerospace engineers who had built a breakthrough sensor-fusion algorithm capable of merging EO/IR, radar, and SIGINT feeds into a single, coherent picture. Technically brilliant – but their early messaging was dense, academic, and nearly impossible for non-engineers to parse.

Their pitch deck opened with:

“Our proprietary multi-modal fusion engine reduces noise in heterogeneous sensor environments using adaptive weighting functions.”

Procurement officers glazed over. Operators shrugged. Investors were confused.

The real problem

During field interviews, the founders discovered something crucial:

Operators weren’t struggling with data quality – they were struggling with time. They were drowning in feeds, alerts, and raw imagery, and losing minutes during critical moments.

SkyTrace’s technology solved that problem, but their story didn’t.

Case study 1

“Skytrace”: Aerial ISR startup

The narrative shift

Skytrace reframed its entire narrative around a single operational truth:

“Units lose precious minutes interpreting sensor feeds. We give them clarity instantly.”

This shift changed everything.

Telling the new story

A real mission scenario
A patrol aircraft entering contested airspace with fragmented intel.

Friction point
Operators juggling multiple feeds, missing emerging threats.

Intervention
SkyTrace auto-prioritizes and fuses data in real time.

Outcome
Faster threat recognition, safer flight paths, and reduced cognitive load.

Result

- Operators became internal champions because the story reflected their lived experience.
- Procurement teams could visualize integration into existing ISR workflows.
- Investors finally understood the value – not the algorithm, but the mission impact.

Key lesson

Clarity beats complexity. When founders speak the language of the mission, everything accelerates.

Case study 2

“Shieldnet”: Cyber defence AI

Background

ShieldNet built an AI-driven anomaly detection system for military networks. Their early messaging leaned heavily on technical superiority:

“Our unsupervised learning models detect latent anomalies in high-dimensional data.”

Cyber analysts were skeptical. Commanders were wary. Procurement teams couldn’t differentiate them from dozens of AI-cyber vendors.

The real problem

Analysts weren’t looking for “AI magic.” They were exhausted. They were overwhelmed by alerts, false positives, and 24/7 monitoring demands. They didn’t want replacement – they wanted reinforcement.

Case study 2

“Shieldnet”: Cyber defence AI

The narrative shift

ShieldNet reframed their story around partnership, not automation:

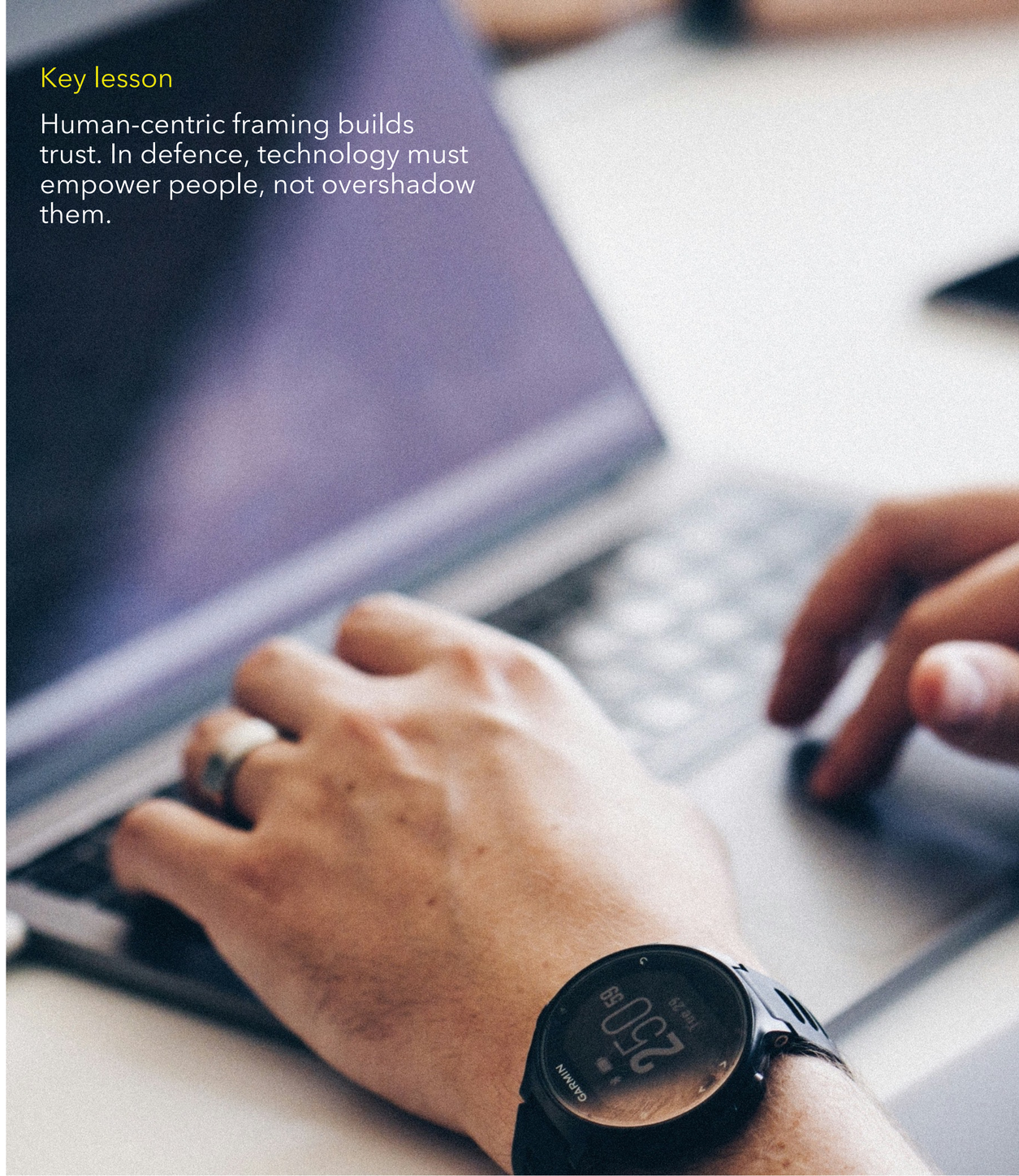
“We don’t replace analysts – we give them a 24/7 partner that never gets tired.”

Telling the new story

- A day-in-the-life narrative showing an analyst drowning in alerts.
- A realistic threat scenario where ShieldNet flags a subtle intrusion pattern.
- A human-machine teaming frame emphasizing collaboration, not replacement.
- Transparent limitations: “The system escalates anomalies; humans make the final call.”

Result

- Analysts trusted the system because it respected their expertise.
- Commanders saw reduced operational risk through faster detection cycles.
- Procurement teams appreciated the honesty around limitations and maturity.



Case study 3

“Pathfinder”: Autonomous ground robotics

Background

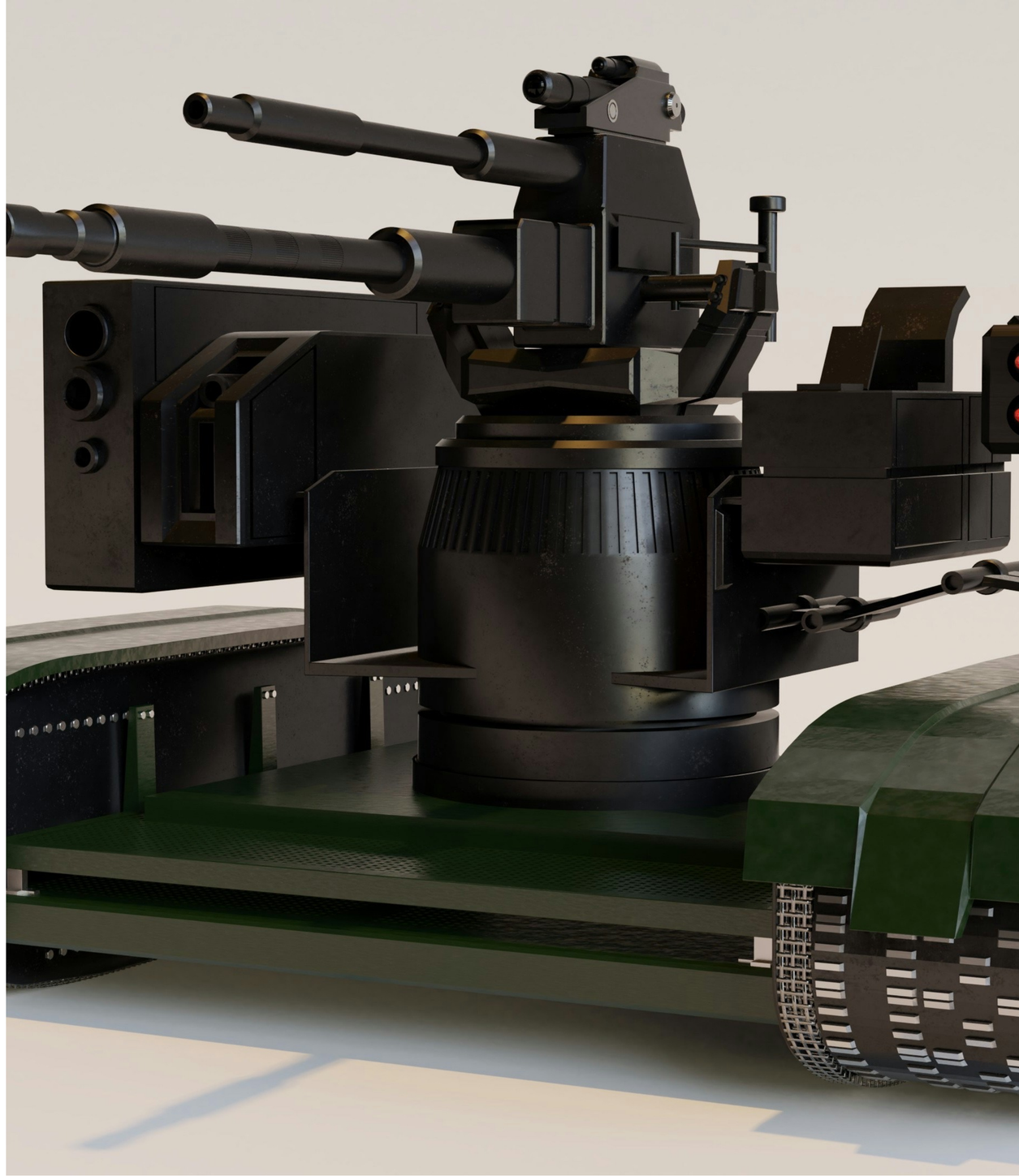
Pathfinder developed autonomous ground robots for reconnaissance and logistics. Their early messaging emphasized disruption:

“We’re redefining ground operations with fully autonomous systems.”

Commanders and operators raised red flags. The word “autonomous” triggered concerns about reliability, control, and doctrine compatibility.

The real problem

The founders misunderstood the cultural context. defence organizations value predictability, control, and doctrinal alignment. “Disruption” is not a selling point – it’s a warning sign.



Case study 3

"Pathfinder": Autonomous ground robotics

The narrative shift

Pathfinder reframed autonomy as a force multiplier, not a replacement:

"Pathfinder takes on the dangerous, dull, and dirty tasks so soldiers can focus on what only humans can do."

"A partner that never gets tired."

Telling the new story

- A realistic patrol scenario where Pathfinder scouts ahead to detect IEDs.
- A logistics mission where Pathfinder carries heavy loads, reducing soldier fatigue.
- Clear boundaries: "Human operators remain in control at all times."
- Evidence of reliability from field trials in harsh terrain.

Result

- Commanders saw doctrinal alignment – Pathfinder wasn't replacing soldiers, it was protecting them.
- Operators embraced the system because it removed the most dangerous tasks.
- Procurement teams saw reduced risk through clear boundaries and validation data.

Key lesson

Alignment with defence culture accelerates adoption. Innovation must fit into the mission, not fight it.

Fill-in-the-blank templates
for defence storytelling

The templates provided on this and the following pages are designed to help you craft key narrative assets clearly and quickly.

How to use these templates effectively:

- Start with the mission problem before describing technology.
- Adapt the level of detail depending on the audience.
- Keep language operational, not academic.
- Test your narrative with operators whenever possible.
- Iterate - storytelling improves with repetition and feedback.

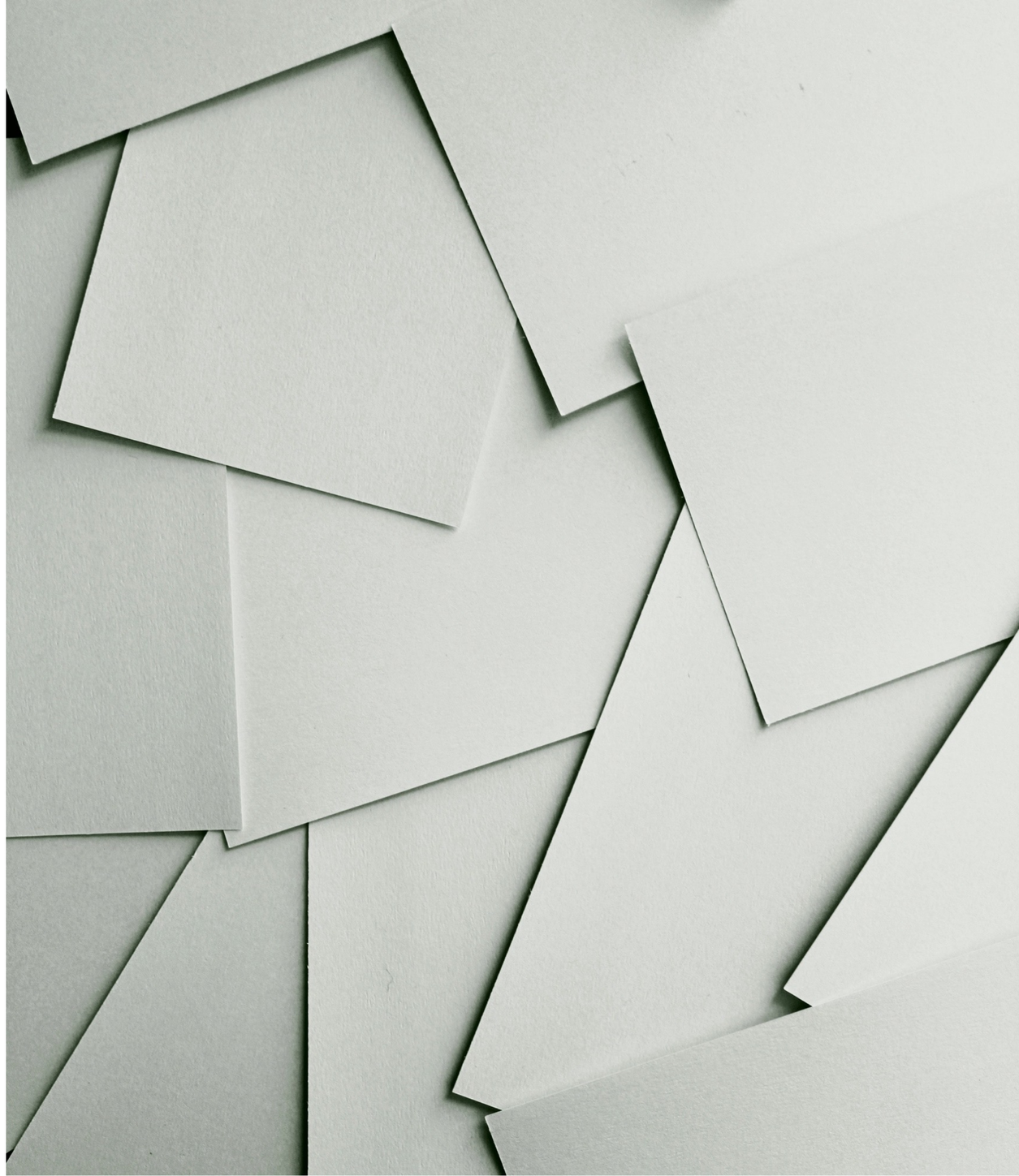
These templates are not scripts; they are scaffolding. They help founders build narratives that are clear, credible, and mission-anchored.

Template 1: Mission problem statement

"In [mission context], teams struggle with [operational friction], which leads to [negative consequence]. This reduces [mission outcome] and increases [risk or cost]."

Example:

"In maritime patrol missions, crews struggle with data overload, which delays threat identification. This reduces situational awareness and increases operational risk."



Fill-in-the-blank templates
for defence storytelling

Template 2: Capability explanation (Function–Effect–Impact)

Function:

"Our system [what it does]."

Effect:

"This means operators can [what changes]."

Impact:

"As a result, missions become [tactical/operational/strategic benefit]."

Fill-in-the-blank templates
for defence storytelling

Template 3: Operational use-case narrative

Situation:

"During [mission scenario], teams face [environmental constraint]."

Complication:

"This creates [friction point]."

Intervention:

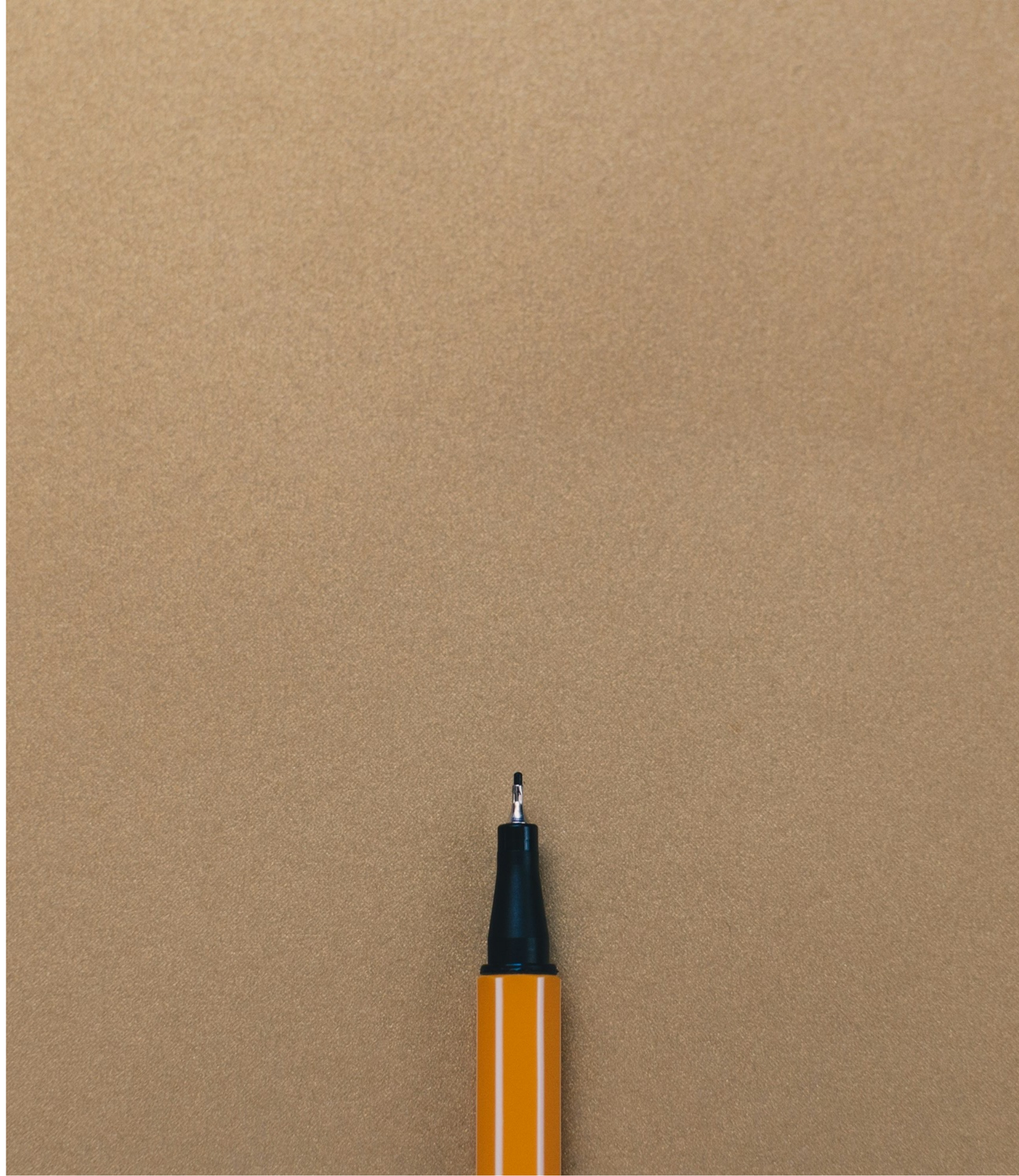
"Our capability [how it enters the mission]."

Outcome:

"This enables [mission advantage]."

Template 4: Ethical responsibility statement

"Our technology is designed for [intended mission]. We have implemented [safeguards] to ensure responsible use, and we do not support [unacceptable use cases]."



Chapter 8

Building a story culture inside a defence startup

Storytelling becomes a force multiplier when the whole team uses it consistently.

Build your culture
step by step

A strong story culture is not about slogans or spin. It is about giving people a shared language for why their work matters, how it creates value, and what responsibilities come with that value in a high-stakes domain.

In defence and dual-use startups, this also means addressing ethical discomfort directly and respectfully.

In a company moving into the defence industry as part of its new, dual-use business model, many of your colleagues may not have joined the industry to be part of a war effort, and you should never trivialize that concern.

A healthy story culture acknowledges complexity, sets principled boundaries, and helps people see their contribution as protecting society while balancing civilian and defence roles.

This chapter is a practical guide for founders and leaders to build that culture, step by step.

Anchor the narrative in **purpose**, **restraint**, and **service**

Your story culture stands on three pillars. Craft these statements succinctly and publish them internally.

1. Purpose
The positive change you exist to create. What harm are we reducing, what deterrence or resilience are we enabling, and for whom?

2. Restraint
The lines you will not cross. Which customers, uses, or geographies we will not serve; what export controls and ethics reviews apply; what we do if a use case becomes inconsistent with our standards.

3. Service
The stakeholders you are committed to protect. Whose safety and rights our products must uphold, from service members and first responders to civilians and critical infrastructure operators.

Explicitly address **ethical tension**

Many employees, especially those from non-defence backgrounds, will experience an internal conflict: contributing to a capability that could be used in war may not feel ethically responsible. Ignoring this does not make it go away. Your job is to create a space where people can reconcile their values with the mission, or decide not to.

Practical steps:

Host "values town halls"
Quarterly, facilitated sessions where leadership and employees discuss real scenarios, not hypotheticals. Share tough decisions you have made and why. Invite questions.

Publish an ethics FAQ
Answer the questions you hear most often, in plain language. Example prompts are at the end of this chapter.

Normalize principled dissent
Establish a process to raise concerns without career penalty. Track issues and publish anonymized resolutions.

Connect to protective outcomes – shift the frame from contributing to conflict to reducing harm. For example, precision, accountability, resilience, and deterrence can reduce collateral damage, shorten conflicts, and prevent escalation. Do not overpromise. Show evidence and caveats.

It's a key reframing!
In most cases, defence players around the world are not building tools for war as an end in itself. They are building capabilities that protect societies, uphold lawful defence, and safeguard civilians and critical infrastructure. Protection and restraint are central to their stories.

Build a **story library** with **ethical guardrails**

Centralize assets to ensure your employees, advisors and media services suppliers communicate consistently and responsibly.

Core narratives
One-page versions of your vision, mission, customer value, and societal impact, each with approved language on protection and restraint.

Case studies
Where applicable, include both civilian and defence vignettes, with explicit discussion of risk mitigations and compliance.

Visuals and diagrams
Show workflows that embed safety, privacy, and human oversight.

Consent and clearance tracker
A simple database that flags which stories are public, internal only, export-controlled, or embargoed.

Terminology glossary
List preferred terms, terms to avoid, and why. For example, avoid language that trivializes harm. And favor language that centers safety, accountability, and lawful use.

Weave storytelling into **everyday operations**

A story culture is a set of habits. Our advice is to embed narratives in how you recruit, onboard, build, and sell.

Hiring

Write job descriptions that include your purpose, restraint, and service pillars. During interviews, invite candidates to ask ethics and dual-use questions.

Onboarding

Week one includes a mission workshop, a walk-through of your dual-use balance framework, and a short exercise where new hires practice explaining the company to a skeptical friend.

Weekly rituals

Open stand-ups or all-hands with a 90-second customer or operator vignette that foregrounds protection and restraint. Rotate storytellers.

Pre-briefs and debriefs

Before major demos or proposals, run a story clinic where teams align on audience, impact, risk, and redlines. Afterward, capture what resonated and what felt off.

Sales enablement

Arm teams with scenario-based narratives, not just feature lists. For defence audiences, lead with mission fit and proof. For civilian buyers, if appropriate, lead with productivity, safety, and ROI, and acknowledge dual-use context.

Measure, inspect, and improve

What gets measured gets managed – so here we share thoughts on KPIs and processes to let you know if you're achieving success and what, if anything, needs to be improved or updated as your company evolves.

Leading indicators

Percentage of teams using approved story templates, number of ethics issues raised and resolved, attendance at story clinics, sentiment in pulse surveys about clarity of purpose.

Lagging indicators

Win rates, partner feedback on clarity and credibility, employee retention in sensitive programs, compliance findings.

Quarterly story review

Revisit your pillars, portfolio mix, and use case taxonomy. Update language if the environment or your product has shifted. Share changes and the reasoning behind them.

Chapter 9

Internal storytelling in a dual-use business

Storytelling becomes a force multiplier when the whole team uses it consistently.

Create a **dual-use framework**

Building a story culture in a defence or dual-use startup begins with candid ethics, not after-the-fact messaging.

Consider:

- Anchoring your narrative in purpose, restraint, and service.
- Creating a dual-use balance framework that gives people real choices.
- Embedding the story in daily work through rituals, libraries, and training.
- Measuring what matters and evolving with it.

Above all, respect that some colleagues may struggle with the moral weight of defence work.

Give them the tools to reconcile that weight as a commitment to protect society, and, if it's appropriate to your business, the runway to opt into roles that align with their values.

The rest of this chapter touches on each of these points in turn.

A dual-use working model: A suggestion for how to **balance dual-context roles**

While not strictly defence industry storytelling, having a structure similar to that below is a necessary element in being able to tell a credible and consistent story to internal and external audiences.

Team lanes

Define civilian lanes, defence lanes, and shared platform lanes. Engineers can opt for a primary lane, with time-boxed rotations.

Seams and safeguards

Create handover rituals where platform teams provide capabilities and customer lanes integrate them, with security and compliance reviews at each seam.

Ethical opt-in

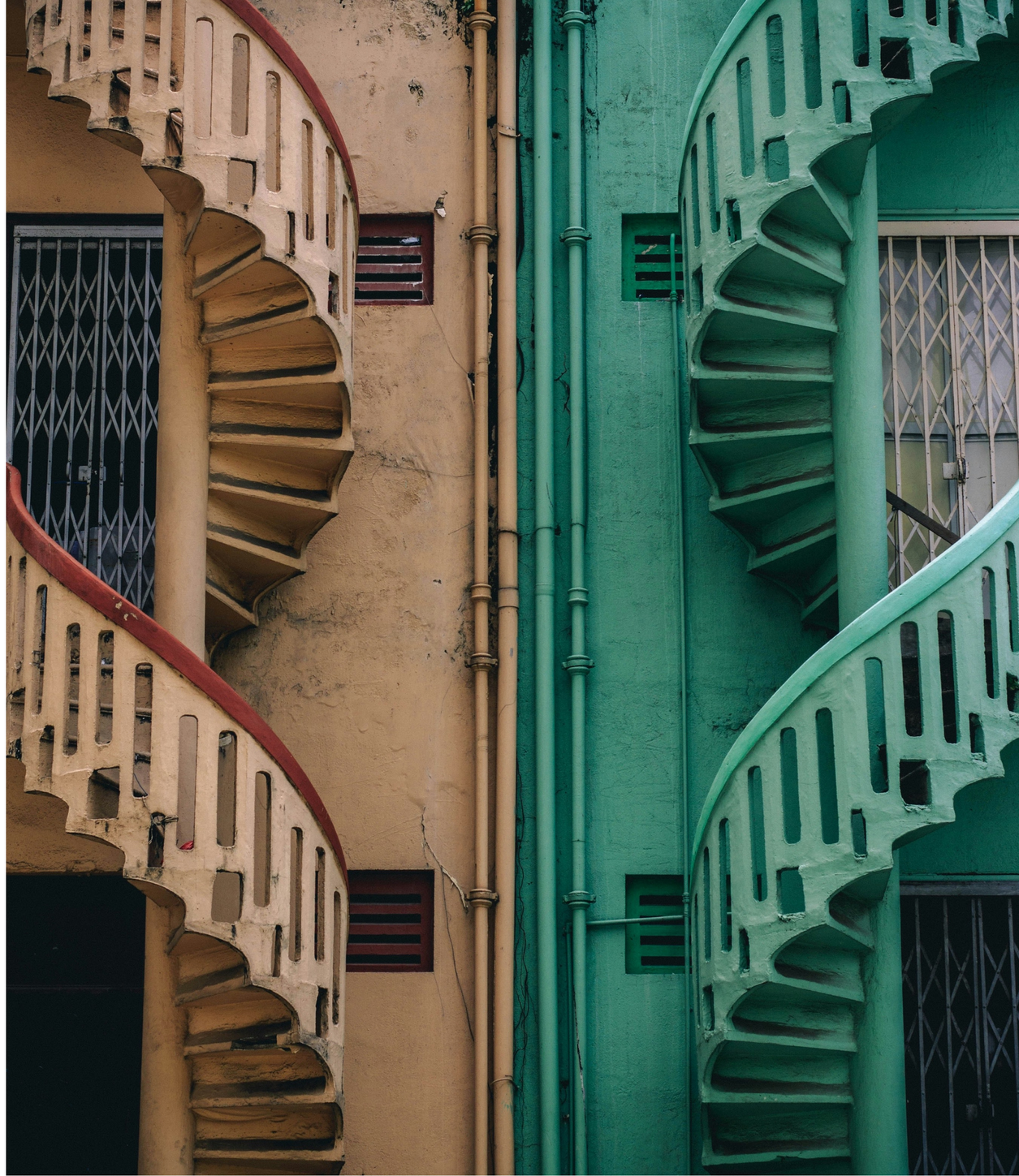
Allow employees to declare preferences and constraints, revisit them quarterly, and respect them absent critical business continuity needs.

Shadow and swap

Pair civilian and defence PMs to shadow each other one sprint per quarter. This transfers learning without forcing people into unwanted assignments.

Communications clarity

For mixed audiences, use dual-track messaging. First, the universal value and safety story. Second, a tailored appendix for defence or civilian specifics.



Scripts and examples for **dual-use startups**

Use the suggestions on this page as starting points and tailor them to your context.

Let's start with a short mission script for internal use:

We build [capability] to protect [who] from [risk or harm]. Our work strengthens deterrence and resilience, and it is governed by clear lines we will not cross. We serve civilian and defence customers. In both cases, we design for safety, accountability, and lawful use.

Answering the tough question, are we contributing to war?

"It is fair to ask that. Our commitment is to protect people and uphold the laws and values of our society. Some of our customers operate in defence, where our capabilities can reduce risk to service members and civilians, improve precision and accountability, and deter aggression. We do not support unlawful uses, and we have clear redlines and review processes to enforce that. If any use becomes inconsistent with our standards, we stop."

Explaining your dual-use balance to a civilian customer:

"Our technology is used in hospitals and in disaster response, and it also supports defence programs under strict oversight. We maintain separate data, teams, and compliance workflows where needed, and we prioritize safety and privacy across all deployments. For you, the benefit is a solution hardened by high reliability requirements, with the same quality bar applied to civilian outcomes."

Scripts and examples for **dual-use startups**

Managers carry your story culture day to day. But they need to be properly equipped to ensure success.

Preparation

Understand the employee's values and prior work. Gather concrete examples of protective outcomes, not talking points.

Conversation frame

Acknowledge the discomfort, share your personal reasoning, and create choices.

Options

Offer civil-use projects, rotations, or role changes where feasible. Be honest when constraints limit options.

Follow-up

Document agreements, check in after one month, and escalate unresolved ethical conflicts for broader review.

Sample opener

"I hear that the dual-use aspects of our work feel uncomfortable. Thank you for raising it. Let's talk through how our purpose and redlines apply here, what protective outcomes this program aims to deliver, and what options you have if you prefer a different lane."

A sample **FAQ** document

Here are some key questions faced by a typical dual-use company – start here and build your own, specific entries as you go.

Q: *Why do we do defence work at all?*

A: Because some threats cannot be addressed by civilian tools alone. Our capabilities can protect service members and civilians, strengthen deterrence, and reduce harm through precision and accountability. We operate within lawful frameworks and our own stricter standards.

Q: *How do we ensure our tech is not misused?*

A: We vet customers, restrict geographies, build safeguards, and include auditability and human oversight. We stop support when use diverges from approved purposes.

Q: *Can I avoid working on defence programs?*

A: Yes, within business constraints. We maintain civilian, defence, and platform lanes, and we support employee preferences wherever possible.

Q: *What happens if a use case changes after deployment?*

Anyone can trigger a review. The ethics board decides quickly, with options from mitigation to suspension or termination.

Q: *How do we talk about this publicly?*

A: We emphasize protection, restraint, and evidence. We do not disclose sensitive details. We do not glamorize conflict.

Chapter 10

Choosing a defence-capable storytelling agency

Full disclosure: We believe we are a great choice to help you – but you're welcome to share this e-book with whichever storytelling facilitator you choose!

You're going to need an experienced facilitator – but who?

Who will help you to navigate the complexities of arriving at a powerful, successful company story and all its elements?

In a perfect world, you could ask AI to create your company story and all of its elements and the result would be amazing. We're not there yet. And frankly, it's hard to see that being possible in the next five or so years, (even then company stories are heavily dependent on input from key stakeholders).

Choosing a partner can be harder than it seems at first. For example, we recently encountered a large, international company that had tried to solve its company story challenges for almost a decade, using two large advertising agencies and a top-three global business consultancy.

Why couldn't they do the job? Perhaps because they lacked defence knowhow. Or the agencies didn't put the right people on the task. Or the business consultancy was best at, well, business consulting, not storytelling.

3 success factors you simply must have in place

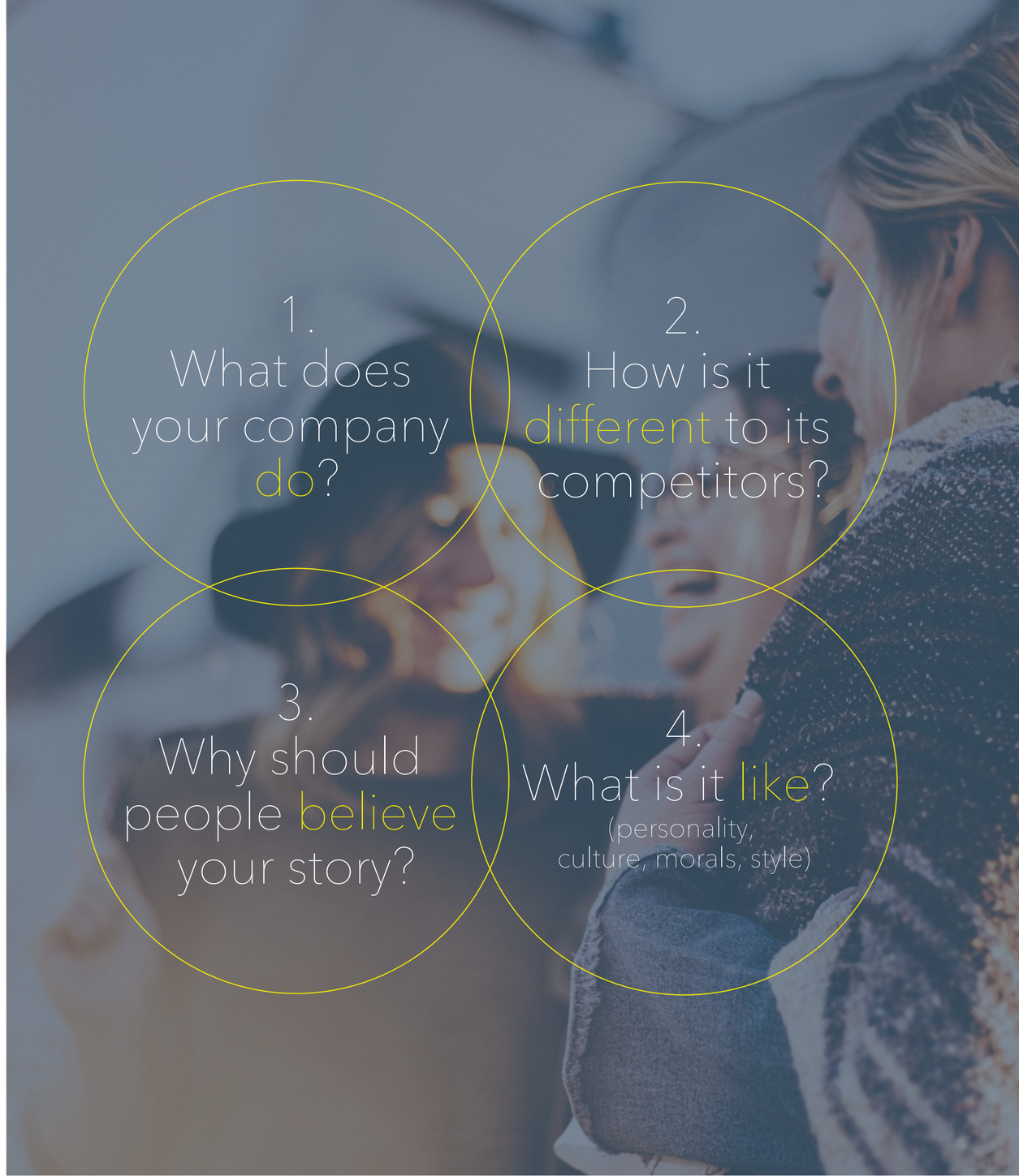
1) Use a **well-tested storytelling method** that is designed for creating defence-focused narratives - and for linking the go-to-market strategy to your brand strategy.

2) Work with an **experienced defence storytelling partner.** Someone who doesn't just come up with cool-sounding slogans and headlines, and visually impressive slide decks, to sell in a narrative that doesn't really do what it's supposed to. It doesn't have to be us, just make sure they've got what it takes!

3) **Stick to the method.** Failure to spend the time it takes to execute each step of a solid story creation process, or even skipping steps to save budget or time, will damage your chances of success.

The goal:
A compelling, memorable, purpose-driven and actionable Big Picture story

Our story-building method describes both strategic and creative steps to generate your company story, the Big Picture of which comprises the answers to four key questions:



Turning strategy into story – step by step

where to go

how to get there

refine and revise

1 Project mapping

Design the project organization, set goals, priorities, deliverables, timelines and budget, determine what's in scope and what's not.

2 Baseline

Gather as much relevant and potentially useful information as possible to inform strategy and creative directions in later phases.

3 Aspiration

Agree upon where we are now as a company – and where we want to go (the future we would like to see).

4 Brand strategy

Create the elements (e.g., mission, value proposition, tagline, storyflow) that will enable us to move toward our Aspiration.

5 Implementation

Prepare the elements for launch across content types, channels and media.

6 Roll-out

Launch the new company story in all its glory!

Finally, a note of thanks

We would like to thank everyone who has helped, over the years, to build and refine our story-building process. From colleagues and academics to clients and partners, we owe a deep debt of gratitude for your insight, challenge and trust.

As Europe and its allies work toward greater defence readiness by 2030, the need for clear, credible and responsible storytelling has never been greater. Strategy, capability and commitment must be understood as well as executed.

This approach has been shaped by those who believe that strong stories are part of strong defence, and that clarity today underpins readiness tomorrow.

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