

THE FEEDBACK

CASE STUDY

Priya Anand had been an engineer for three years when she submitted the structural calculations for a pedestrian bridge to David Kowalski for review. David was a senior engineer at the firm, quiet and methodical, not someone who said much in meetings but whose opinion carried weight in the way that reputations built slowly over decades tended to. Priya had spent two weeks on the calculations. She thought they were solid.

She got them back in four days. Every page had marks on it.

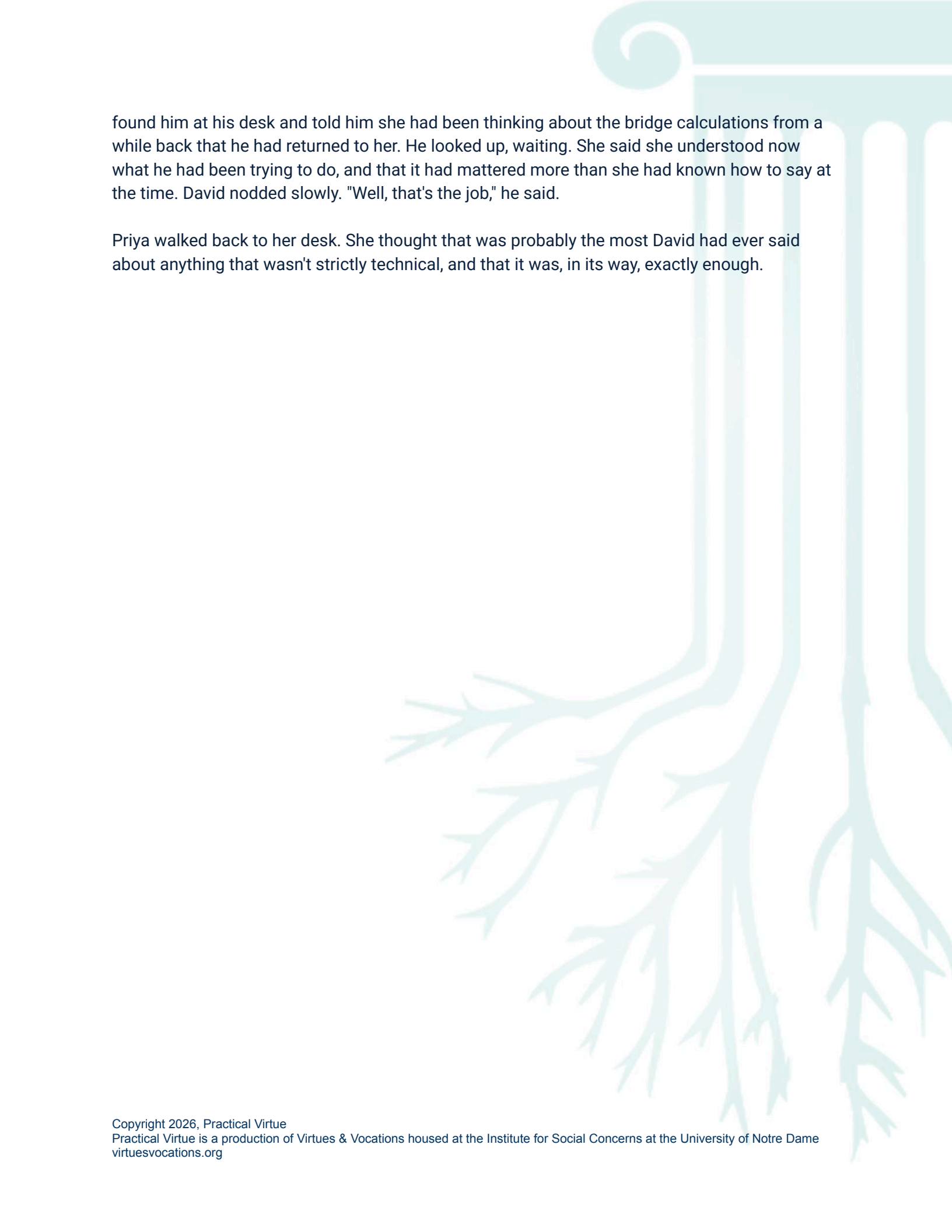
David's marks were corrections, not suggestions. He pointed out places where her assumptions were too generous, her margins too thin, her documentation unclear. He had not been unkind, but he had also not softened any of his comments. There was a note on the first page in his small, precise handwriting: The thinking is good. The discipline needs work.

Priya had read that note three times and then put the document in a drawer for two days. She had worked hard on those calculations and had been quietly proud of them, and the experience of having that pride quietly dismantled, page by page, was not one she was in any hurry to return to. When she took it out again she worked through every comment, not because she had processed her feelings about it, but because the project had a deadline. She incorporated the changes, resubmitted, and received a one-line response: Much better. She had filed that away too, in a different kind of drawer.

In the months that followed she thought about David's comments less than she expected to. She was busy. There were other projects, other deadlines, other reviews that went more smoothly. She moved through the work and got better at it in a gradual way.

It was not until a year and a half later, when her own junior colleague submitted a set of calculations that reminded her uncomfortably of her own early work, that she understood what David had given her. She sat with the document and found herself making marks on it in the same places David had marked hers, often for the same reasons. The thinking was good. The discipline needed work. She wrote a version of that note on the first page and then sat for a moment looking at it.

She had never said anything to David about that project and his feedback. They worked in the same office, and she saw him most days, but it had simply never come up. That afternoon, she

A faint, light blue background illustration. On the right side, there is a classical column with a capital. From the base of the column, a network of tree roots extends across the bottom half of the page, branching out towards the left.

found him at his desk and told him she had been thinking about the bridge calculations from a while back that he had returned to her. He looked up, waiting. She said she understood now what he had been trying to do, and that it had mattered more than she had known how to say at the time. David nodded slowly. "Well, that's the job," he said.

Priya walked back to her desk. She thought that was probably the most David had ever said about anything that wasn't strictly technical, and that it was, in its way, exactly enough.