

THE LEADERSHIP LENS

Twelve months to observe, reflect, shape and create

SUJ MUNIR

For those who choose to lead
through a different lens.

"He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present and future, for it is from the past that we learn."

SHEIKH ZAYED BIN SULTAN AL NAHYAN

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INTRODUCTION

How leadership begins

Leadership is not what we do. It is how we see.

Before decisions are made, before words are spoken, before strategies are drawn, leadership has already taken shape. It begins quietly, as a way of interpreting the world. Every leader carries an inner lens through which complexity is filtered into meaning, and meaning into action. That lens, more than any technique or title, determines the quality of influence that follows.

> *Leadership begins long before it becomes visible.*

Most leadership literature is concerned with behaviour. It catalogues what effective leaders say, how they move, and what they choose. This book begins earlier. It asks what is shaping the way you perceive situations, people, and yourself, because every action, however skilled, arises from a deeper orientation of mind.

The erosion of clarity

Over time, many capable leaders experience a subtle loss of internal alignment. Experience grows. Responsibility expands. Yet something quietly shifts. They become more

proficient but less certain. More influential yet less grounded.

The result is not failure, but a kind of internal dissonance. Leadership begins to feel like something performed rather than inhabited.

I have watched this happen to leaders I admired, and for a period it was happening to me.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> *Where in your own leadership do you feel most confident, and where do you feel least certain?*

What this book offers

This book exists to address that gap.

The Leadership Lens is a year-long practice in clarity and coherence. It does not offer a system to impose on others. It offers a way to see yourself more clearly as you lead. Through twelve months of focused reflection, it invites you to examine how judgement, identity, attention, and direction shape every moment of influence.

Each chapter explores a distinct dimension of leadership, from self-understanding to decision-making, from communication to long-term direction. Together, they form a single, integrated lens through which leadership becomes something you inhabit rather than perform.

> *When leadership is coherent, influence becomes natural.*

The aim is not to make you louder, faster, or more visible. It is to make you more internally aligned, more perceptive, and more grounded in your own authority.

This book is an invitation to that coherence.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

A year, not a sprint

This is not a book to rush.

Each chapter represents one month of leadership practice. You may read more quickly if you wish, but its full value emerges when it is allowed to unfold over time. Leadership does not change through information alone. It changes through attention.

The leadership lens

At the heart of the book is a simple reflective lens. Throughout the year, you will be invited to notice how you are leading through four fundamental orientations: how you judge, what you attend to, how you understand yourself, and where you are heading.

These are not traits to acquire. They are perspectives to become aware of.

The diagram appears in full in Month 1 and again at the start of each season, with one region shaded. The shaded region is where the next three months are looking. You will use it in four ways, and none of them involves scoring yourself.

At the end of each week, write one sentence that answers two questions: which of the four forces did most of the

work this week, and which did none? Over a season those sentences show where your leadership sits without anyone having to plot it.

When you reach a Through the Lens box, stop and answer it before reading on. Each one is placed where the chapter has just given you the means to answer it.

At each season page, answer the Looking back prompt without turning back, then read the season practice line. It is the one thing to do differently for the three months that follow.

And in the moment itself, when something feels wrong and you cannot yet say why, the four forces become four questions: what actually matters here, what am I not noticing, is this consistent with how I have decided before, and where does this lead? Month 12 shows what those questions become once they are fast.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> *Which of these four ways of seeing feels most familiar to you right now?*

Why the year runs in this order

The twelve months move through four seasons, and the order is deliberate.

You will begin by observing: noticing how your leadership already sits, before attempting to change any of it. Then reflecting: examining how you decide, rather than whether the decisions turned out well. Then shaping: choosing a path and moving things along it. Finally creating: asking what you are building, and what will remain.

That sequence is not arbitrary. It is the order in which leadership matures. Leaders who shape before they have observed impose. Creating before you have reflected builds something you have never examined.

It is also, uncomfortably, the reverse of how leadership is usually taught. Most programmes begin with action, because action is what can be demonstrated at the end of them.

Patterns, not scores

You will not be asked to measure yourself in any rigid way. Instead, you are invited to pause, reflect, and observe where your attention naturally settles. Over time, patterns will emerge. Those patterns are the true curriculum of leadership.

You may find that certain months land harder than others. That is expected. Leadership is situational, and different contexts call different parts of us forward.

> *Clarity grows when we stop trying to improve and start trying to notice.*

Two habits worth keeping

You will not be asked to keep a journal, and there is no workbook. Two small habits, however, will make the year considerably more useful.

The first is to write something down. Material we put into our own words is retained far better than material we only read. A noticing that stays in the head tends to dissolve within the week. The same noticing, written, is still there months later, and becomes something you can return to and test. A sentence at the end of a week is enough.

The second is to look back before you move on. At the start of each season you will be asked to recall the months before it without turning back. The effort of retrieving something is what fixes it, and it fixes it far more firmly than rereading ever does. If the recall comes slowly, that is not a sign of failure. It is the mechanism working.

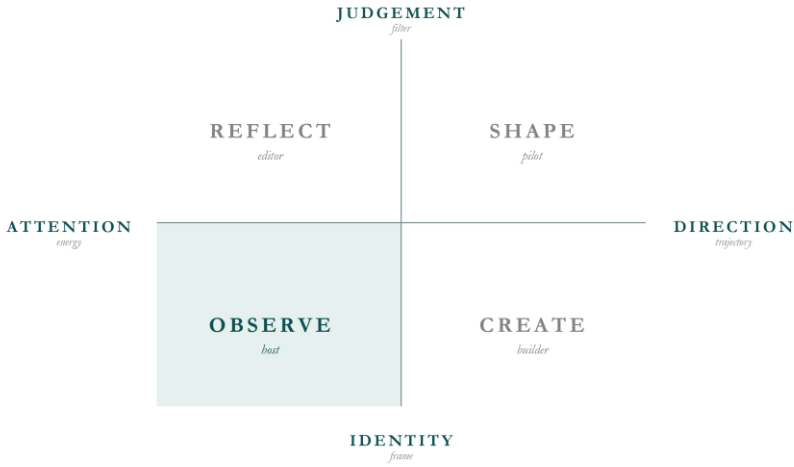
Neither habit is invented here. The first is what the psychology of learning calls the generation effect, the second retrieval practice, and the year-long structure itself rests on a third, the spacing effect. All three are among the better evidenced findings in the field, and the two habits cost a few minutes a month.

Return to the lens at the beginning of each chapter. Let it frame what you notice. Let it quietly reveal what is changing.

There is no final destination here. Only increasing clarity.

OBSERVE

Identity × Attention



Identity meets Attention. You begin by seeing.

> *Season practice: notice, do not adjust.*

MONTH 1

Seeing Leadership Clearly

Leadership as a state, not a title

Something goes wrong on a Thursday afternoon.

Eleven people end up in a room that was booked for something else. The most senior person present is talking, and what they are saying is sensible.

Watch where people look. After each thing is said, several of them glance at someone three seats down who has contributed almost nothing. When that person eventually speaks, the room settles, and the meeting acquires a direction it did not have four minutes earlier.

Nobody would describe what happened as a change of leadership. Nothing on the organisational chart moved. Afterwards, asked who led the meeting, most of them would name the senior person, and they would be describing the agenda rather than what they actually experienced.

Leadership was in that room. It was simply not where the title was.

Leadership is one of the most discussed ideas of our time, yet one of the least clearly understood.

It is often described as a role, a position, or a set of behaviours. In practice, it is none of these. Leadership does

not begin when authority is granted, nor does it end when responsibility is removed. It appears before titles and persists after them.

Leadership is a **state**.

It is the way a person shows up, decides, influences, and carries responsibility through moments that matter. It is revealed under pressure, sustained over time, and recognised by its effects rather than its announcements.

Most leadership confusion stems from mistaking activity for leadership. Meetings are held, strategies are written, decisions are made, and visibility increases, yet leadership itself may be weak, inconsistent, or absent. The presence of leadership work does not guarantee the presence of leadership clarity.

This book begins with a simple but demanding proposition:

leadership becomes effective only when it is seen clearly.

Why leadership feels harder than it used to

Modern leadership is exercised in conditions that are materially different from those of previous generations. Information is constant, decisions are rarely final, and authority is frequently questioned. Leaders are expected to be decisive without being rigid, confident without being arrogant, visible without being performative, and humane without losing direction.

In such conditions, technical competence alone is insufficient.

Daniel Kahneman's account of two systems of thought is useful here. One is fast, automatic and intuitive. The other is slow, effortful and deliberate, and has limited capacity. Under load the second yields to the first, and a leader who believes they are deliberating is in fact running on habit. When leaders are stretched, they default to habit, avoidance, or imitation. Over time, leadership becomes reactive rather than deliberate.

At the same time, leadership is increasingly observed rather than formally assessed. People experience leadership through tone, presence, and consistency long before they analyse decisions. Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee argue that a leader's emotional state does not stay with the leader: it transmits, setting the tone of the group as resonance when the leader is steady and as dissonance when they are not. How leaders manage themselves, on that account, shapes trust before anything they say does.

Add to this the rise of automated systems, algorithmic recommendations, and artificial intelligence, and leadership becomes even more exposed. When systems suggest actions, optimise processes, or accelerate decisions, responsibility does not disappear. It concentrates.

In such an environment, leadership cannot be reduced to techniques. It must be understood as a **coherent internal state** that expresses itself outwardly.

The cost of unclear leadership

When leadership is unclear, three patterns tend to emerge.

First, **over-reliance on performance**. Leaders focus on appearing effective rather than being grounded. Language becomes inflated, activity increases, and reflection decreases.

Second, fragmentation. Different versions of the leader appear in different contexts. Values shift with audiences, and decisions lack continuity. This erodes trust slowly, and for good.

Third, **fatigue**. Without internal coherence, leadership requires constant effort. Energy is spent managing impressions rather than directing purpose. Over time, this leads to exhaustion or withdrawal.

None of these patterns result from a lack of ability. They result from a lack of clarity.

The four forces

Rather than defining leadership through traits or behaviours, this book treats leadership as a state shaped by four forces. They are always present. They are rarely balanced.

Judgement is the filter. It decides what is allowed to count: what is relevant, what is ignored, how risk is weighed, where responsibility lands. Judgement is how a leader chooses when the answer is not given, and it is a different thing from intelligence.

Direction is the trajectory. It is where leadership is taking things over time: what is being built, what is being left behind, how today connects to tomorrow. A leader can be quiet and have strong direction. A leader can be loud and have none.

Identity is the frame. It is the internal reference point that holds leadership together across roles and under pressure. Identity here means coherence, and has nothing to do with ego.

Attention is the energy. It is what leadership is tuned into: which people, which signals, which risks. What others call presence is simply attention made visible. Attention, as the word is used here, means focus rather than effort.

Go back to the Thursday room. The senior person had an agenda, which is not the same as direction; the room acquired direction only when somebody else spoke. Look at what that person was doing in the minutes before. While the room attended to the agenda, they were attending to the thing that had actually gone wrong. That is attention, and the other three grew out of it. From what they had noticed they made a judgement about what counted and what did

not, which is why the room settled when they said it. They said it in their own terms, anchored to what they thought was true rather than to what the room would reward, which is identity, and is the difference between coherence and confidence. And what they said gave the room its next step, which is direction. Four forces in one person, and the leadership sat where they met rather than where the chart put it.

These are not traits to acquire. They are forces to notice.

The leadership lens

Picture the four forces as two axes.

Judgement and Identity run vertically: how you decide, and who you are while deciding. Attention and Direction run horizontally: what you are tuned into, and where you are heading.

Between them sit four regions. Each is what happens when two forces meet.

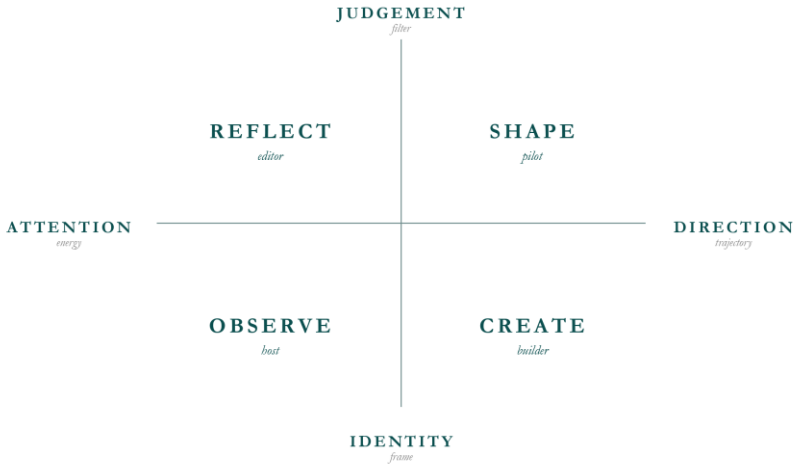
Where Judgement meets Attention, leadership reflects. This is the editor, reading the environment and adjusting course.

Where Judgement meets Direction, leadership shapes. This is the pilot, filtering what matters and setting a path.

Where Identity meets Attention, leadership observes. This is the host: present, grounded, trusted.

Where Identity meets Direction, leadership creates. This is the builder, purpose-anchored and moving forward.

Observe, reflect, shape, create. Four things leadership does, formed from four forces it is made of.



The leadership lens.

This is not a measurement.

It is not a diagnostic.

It is not a scorecard.

It is a lens.

At any given moment, leadership leans. Sometimes towards judgement, because a decision cannot wait. Sometimes

towards attention, because someone needs to be heard. At other times it draws more heavily on identity or direction.

The purpose of the lens is only to notice:

where your leadership tends to sit

which forces take over under pressure

which are consistently underused

No leader operates evenly across all four. Balance does not mean equality. It means appropriateness.

You do not need to evaluate yourself. But do write something down. A sentence at the end of a week, in whatever you already carry, is enough. What you write matters far less than the act of writing it: a noticing held only in the head tends to dissolve by Friday, while the same noticing put into your own words is still available to you months later. Hold the lens in mind, and let it leave a trace.

Where this thinking comes from

The claim that leadership begins in perception rather than behaviour is not new, and it would be poor practice to present it as though it were.

Otto Scharmer, in the body of work he calls Theory U, argued that leadership carries a blind spot: not what leaders do, nor how they do it, but the inner place from which they operate. Two leaders in the same circumstances, taking the same action, produce different outcomes depending on that interior condition. He named the quality of attention

involved presencing, and built an extensive methodology for organisational and social change around it.

This book shares that premise and does something narrower with it.

Theory U is a method for collective transformation, intended for institutions and systems. What follows is a personal practice, intended for one leader over one year. There is no process to convene, no group to assemble and nothing to deliver at the end. It asks that you notice how your own leadership is currently arranged, on the assumption that what you cannot see clearly you cannot change deliberately. Noticing is not the whole of it. It is what lets you choose what to try, and then understand what happened when you tried it.

Where Scharmer describes a descent and return through the U, this book describes four forces and the regions where they meet. The purpose is the same: to make visible the thing shaping your decisions before you make them.

The lens itself came from a longer detour. I trained in education, where you are taught the history and the theory before you are allowed near a classroom, on the principle that you cannot teach what you have not first understood. Later, leading and coaching other people, I noticed that the same principle held and that almost nobody applied it. Leaders were handed techniques without the understanding that would let them carry a technique into a situation it was not designed for.

What transfers is not the method. It is the way of seeing that produced it. The four forces are an attempt to make that way of seeing explicit enough to practise, rather than leaving it to accumulate by accident across a career.

Leadership as coherence

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's work on self-determination identifies three conditions under which people sustain effort without being driven to it: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Motivation that is internally regulated tends to persist. Motivation sustained by external pressure is poorly maintained once the pressure is withdrawn, and transfers badly to situations the pressure never reached.

Leaders who act from internal coherence are less reactive, more consistent, and better able to handle complexity. They do not need to constantly assert authority because their leadership is felt through steadiness and judgement.

This does not mean leadership is calm or effortless, and it does not mean it is quiet. Coherence is not a temperament. An expressive, high-energy leader can be entirely coherent, and a soft-spoken one can be entirely performed. The volume tells you nothing about whether the person inside it is aligned with what they are doing.

Where this book sets clarity against loudness, it means the loudness that arrives under pressure as a substitute for

clarity, not the register a person naturally leads in. Intentional leadership is available at any volume. What it is not is reactive.

Why this book follows a year

Leadership does not develop in moments. It develops through accumulation.

This book is organised as a year not to suggest linear progression, but to reflect the way leadership is actually formed. Understanding deepens, patterns repeat, and insight compounds.

Each chapter explores leadership from a different angle. Some chapters will land immediately. Others may feel uncomfortable or untimely. That is expected.

By returning to the same lens throughout the book, leadership is not constantly redefined. It is steadily clarified.

Thought leadership and influence

In recent years, leadership has increasingly been associated with visibility. Profiles, platforms, and public statements shape perception. This has created opportunity, but also distortion.

Influence without coherence is fragile.

Coherence without visibility is limited.

True thought leadership is neither performance nor silence. It is the ability to articulate perspective with integrity and restraint. It is revealed through consistency of thinking, clarity of judgement, and respect for complexity.

This book does not aim to teach persuasion. It aims to restore **leadership clarity**, upon which influence naturally rests.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> 
>
> *Which of the four forces does your leadership reach for first, and which do you reach for last?*

Holding the lens

As you move into the next chapter, resist the urge to evaluate yourself or to seek conclusions. Leadership is not improved by grading yourself. It is improved by seeing yourself accurately.

Instead, notice:

- where your leadership feels grounded
- where it feels stretched
- where it feels reactive
- where it feels deliberate

These observations are sufficient for now.

Leadership clarity begins not with answers, but with seeing more accurately.

Closing reflection

Leadership is a way of being that is revealed over time, rather than a collection of behaviours to be adopted.

Before you turn the page, consider this question quietly:

If leadership is a state rather than a title, how often am I truly in it?

That question is where the year begins.

MONTH 2

Self-Leadership and Identity

Why coherence matters more than confidence

At ten in the morning you tell your own team that the project is behind, that you are concerned, and that you would rather hear bad news early than be protected from it.

At three in the afternoon you tell the executive group that the project is broadly on track with some manageable risks.

Neither statement is a lie. The first is candid because candour is what your team needs in order to tell you things. The second is measured because the executive group escalates, and escalation at this stage would cost more than it would solve. You could defend both, and if challenged you would, persuasively.

Six people were in both meetings.

They did not hear two audiences being handled appropriately. They heard two versions of you, and they will calibrate everything you say from now on against the gap between them.

Coherence is not consistency of message

Leadership is routinely associated with confidence, and confidence is unreliable. It can be borrowed, projected or

performed. When circumstances shift, it collapses, and it tends to collapse at the moment it was most needed.

What sustains leadership is coherence.

Coherence is the alignment between who you believe yourself to be, how you decide, and how you behave when pressure is applied. Leaders with it do not always appear confident. They are trusted anyway. Leaders without it can appear impressive for a long time and still feel, to those around them, faintly unreliable in a way nobody can quite specify.

Note what coherence is not. It is not saying identical words to every audience, which would be naive. The morning and afternoon meetings could have been handled differently at the level of emphasis without dishonesty. What the six people detected was not tailoring. It was the absence of a single person underneath the tailoring.

Self-leadership is the capacity to maintain that person. It is neither self-control in the narrow sense nor self-promotion. What it names is the ability to stay anchored to values, judgement and purpose while the context keeps changing around you.

Every other form of leadership rests on it. When self-leadership weakens, influence becomes fragile, decisions become reactive, and authority starts to require assertion.

The quiet work of leading yourself

Self-leadership is largely invisible, which is why it is undervalued and why it is easy to postpone.

It happens in moments nobody observes: choosing to respond rather than react, choosing restraint over the satisfaction of the immediate reply, acting in line with a value at a point where doing so costs something real.

This is the practical weight of Deci and Ryan's distinction between internally and externally regulated behaviour. People function most effectively when action is self-endorsed rather than externally driven. Leaders who run on approval, pressure or comparison struggle to stay consistent under strain, because the source of their steadiness sits outside them and can be withdrawn by other people.

Weak self-leadership rarely announces itself. It shows up as over-commitment, as boundaries that blur, as difficult decisions that keep not quite arriving, and as integrity eroding in small rationalised steps, each of which was reasonable.

Strong self-leadership, by contrast, looks like very little. It does not require explanation.

Identity as an anchor, not a label

Professional identity is widely misunderstood. It is not a job title and it is not a personal brand. In leadership terms, identity is the internal account you actually live by, and it

answers a specific question: what kind of leader am I trying to be when nobody is watching and nothing is at stake?

Identity anchors leadership because it supplies continuity across situations. When it is clear, decisions align more easily, because most of them have already been made in principle. When it is unclear, leadership shifts with context, audience and pressure.

Leadership feels exhausting when identity is vague for the same reason. Every decision becomes a fresh negotiation. Every interaction requires calculation. That expenditure is invisible on any calendar and it is the largest single drain on most leaders.

Identity-led leadership is not rigidity. It is knowing which principles are non-negotiable and which are simply preferences you have held for a while, a distinction most leaders have never actually made.

The authenticity problem

There is a complication here that this book should not pretend away, because it cuts against the method.

Six weeks into a new role, a leader is running meetings the way their predecessor ran them, because they do not yet have a way of their own and the meetings still have to happen.

Someone who knows them well says, kindly, that they do not seem like themselves.

They agree. They do not seem like themselves. The advice that arrives, from several directions at once, is to be more authentic.

The difficulty is that the authentic version of them is the person who was excellent at the job they left eight weeks ago. Being that person now would not be authenticity. It would be a refusal to grow into the role.

Herminia Ibarra has written about this directly, calling it the authenticity paradox: the point at which being yourself and being effective appear to pull in opposite directions. Her research on professional transitions found that people move through them by experimenting with what she called provisional selves, trying out ways of leading borrowed from others, keeping what survives contact with their own standards and with the reactions of the people around them, and discarding the rest.

Her conclusion is uncomfortable for a book of this kind. You cannot reflect your way out of the authenticity paradox. You act your way into a new understanding of yourself, and the thinking follows the behaviour rather than preceding it.

That is worth holding alongside everything else here. Noticing is not sufficient on its own, and this book does not claim it is a substitute for doing anything. What noticing provides is the standard against which the experiments get evaluated. Ibarra's provisional selves are tried, and then judged; identity is what does the judging.

A leader with no internal reference point does not experiment. They simply become whoever the room requires, repeatedly, and call it adaptability.

Presence begins internally

Leadership presence is usually described as something other people experience. It begins inside.

Presence is shaped by emotional regulation, clarity of thought and consistency of behaviour. Leaders who are internally unsettled tend to compensate outwardly, through visibility or control or an increase in the volume of their communication. Internally anchored leaders rarely need to, and the difference is legible from across a room.

Goleman's model of emotional intelligence places self-awareness and self-management ahead of every outward-facing competence, on the grounds that the outward ones cannot be reached without them. When leaders fail to regulate themselves, they transmit anxiety, impatience or defensiveness without intending to and usually without knowing.

Presence is therefore not performance. It is the outward expression of internal stability, and it is difficult to fake for long.

Judgement under pressure

Self-leadership is tested most clearly through judgement. Decisions made under pressure reveal priorities, values and limits, which is why they are remembered.

When leaders are fatigued or overwhelmed, judgement deteriorates before competence does. This is worth stating plainly, because it is the wrong way round from what most people assume. The work still gets done. It is the choosing that degrades first.

Under strain, as Kahneman's work shows, deliberate reasoning gives way to shortcuts. Leaders avoid difficult decisions, rely on habit, or defer responsibility, and rarely notice the substitution taking place.

Strong self-leadership does not eliminate this vulnerability. It recognises it, and builds in the small compensations that make it survivable: the decision postponed until morning, the message not sent tonight, the meeting moved because you know what you are like at the end of a week like this one.

What accumulates

Leadership shows itself in patterns, and isolated moments tell you less than they seem to.

Over time, leaders develop either greater coherence or greater fragmentation, and the direction is set by whether they reflect, learn and self-correct. Carol Dweck's

distinction between fixed and growth mindsets bears directly on this: leaders who treat capability as fixed experience difficulty as evidence about themselves, while leaders who treat it as developable experience the same difficulty as information.

Self-leadership therefore includes the willingness to examine your own conduct honestly. Not harshly, which is usually a way of avoiding the examination, and not defensively. Deliberately.

When self-leadership weakens

Periods of reduced self-leadership are not failures. They are signals, and the useful response is to read them rather than to judge them.

They commonly indicate overload, role conflict, a tension between stated and enacted values, insufficient recovery, or prolonged uncertainty with no resolution in sight.

Responding to any of those with self-criticism compounds the problem, because self-criticism consumes the same resource that self-leadership requires. Responding with clarity and restraint restores it.

Leadership maturity is not the absence of strain. It is the capacity to be under strain without fragmenting.

Re-establishing coherence

When self-leadership feels compromised, the effective response is rarely dramatic. Small acts of realignment do more, and faster.

Re-asserting a boundary. Making a decision you have been avoiding, in either direction, because the avoidance is costing more than the decision will. Reducing commitments that were accepted for reasons you no longer hold. Returning attention to what actually matters, which usually requires first admitting what you have been attending to instead.

None of these is visible to anyone else. All of them change the quality of leadership within about a fortnight.

What coherence costs

It is worth being honest that coherence has a price, or every leader would already have it.

It requires saying the same difficult thing to people who have different amounts of power over you, which is uncomfortable in exactly one direction.

It forecloses options. A leader who is known for something cannot easily be something else when it would be convenient, and there will be occasions when the flexibility would genuinely have helped.

It is also slower to reward than performance. The leader who is coherent looks, in any given quarter, much like the

leader who is merely consistent about their messaging. The difference emerges over years, usually at the point where something goes wrong and people decide, very quickly and without discussion, whether to tell you.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> *Where do you behave differently from the leader you believe yourself to be?*

Noticing your leadership orientation

As you reflect on self-leadership, you may notice that your leadership leans in particular ways.

Some leaders draw heavily on internal principles but struggle to stay present in demanding environments. Others are composed externally while feeling internally conflicted. Some decide quickly and rarely reflect. Others reflect deeply and hesitate to act.

None of these orientations is inherently flawed. They become problematic when they operate without awareness.

Holding the lens introduced in the opening chapter, consider where your self-leadership feels strongest and where it feels stretched. Consider also which room you are most different in, and why that room in particular.

Closing reflection

Self-leadership is the least visible and most consequential form of leadership you will practise.

It determines whether influence is steady or fragile, whether authority is grounded or performed, and whether leadership can be sustained without costing you something you needed.

Before moving on, consider this question:

When pressure increases, does my leadership become clearer, or does it become louder?

You will not always know. The people who work for you will have decided some time ago.

MONTH 3

Presence, Attention and Signal

How leadership is experienced, up close and at a distance

Someone stops by with something they are not yet sure is a problem.

They are tentative, because it might be nothing and they can see you are busy. You keep half an eye on the screen while they talk. You ask one clarifying question, and you give them an answer, and the answer is correct.

They thank you and go.

Three weeks later the thing that was not yet a problem is a problem, and you hear about it from somebody else, at a point where every remaining option is worse. Nobody withheld anything from you. You were told.

You were simply not present enough for the telling to register as a warning rather than a query. That exchange lasted ninety seconds and cost a quarter.

Attention is not a courtesy. It is a function.

Leadership is experienced long before it is analysed.

People rarely begin by assessing a leader's decisions. They notice tone, pace, attentiveness, consistency. They notice what feels calm and what feels rushed, what feels considered and what feels reactive. These impressions form quickly and persist quietly.

This is presence.

Presence has little to do with performance or charisma. What people are responding to is the quality of attention a leader brings into a space, and the effect that attention has on everyone else in it. Leaders with presence create steadiness. Leaders without it create friction, even when they are entirely competent.

The nature of leadership presence

Presence is often mistaken for visibility. Leaders who speak frequently, occupy space, or remain constantly available are assumed to be present. In practice, presence is revealed not by how much attention a leader demands but by how much they offer.

Presence is the ability to remain mentally and emotionally available in the moments that matter. It is expressed through listening, restraint, clarity and timing. Leaders who are present do not dominate interactions. They stabilise them.

Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee make a further point that leaders tend to underestimate: emotional states propagate. A leader's regulation, or lack of it, does not stay contained within the leader. It is picked up and reproduced by the people around them.

Presence is therefore contagious. It sets the emotional temperature of a room whether the leader intends it or not.

Influence begins with attention

Influence is commonly associated with persuasion. Persuasion is rarely the starting point.

Influence begins with attention. Who a leader attends to, what they prioritise, and where they place their focus signal values far more clearly than any statement of them. Leaders who consistently notice what matters accumulate influence without effort. Overlook people, patterns or consequences and authority drains away quietly, usually without anyone mentioning it.

Attention is finite. In environments saturated with communication, leaders who manage attention deliberately stand out simply by doing so. They respond rather than react. They pause rather than interrupt. They ask questions that reveal understanding rather than urgency.

These are not techniques. They are what internal coherence looks like from the outside.

The cost of fragmented presence

When presence fragments, leadership becomes difficult to read.

Fragmentation usually arises from overload. Leaders move rapidly between conversations, decisions and demands, carrying unresolved concerns with them. The result is a kind of partial attention. Interactions feel rushed. Listening becomes shallow. Decisions appear abrupt.

The cost is not only relational. Fragmented presence degrades judgement. Kahneman's work on cognitive load shows that divided attention degrades the quality of decisions. In leadership the effect is amplified, because those decisions carry consequences for other people.

Presence, then, is a functional requirement, whatever else it may also be.

Presence does not stop at the edge of the room

Everything above concerns leadership at close range.

A decision is being made in a room you are not in.

Your name comes up. Somebody says that you will want to see the numbers first. Or that you will not like it. Or, more quietly, that it is probably not worth raising with you.

Whatever happens next is shaped by that sentence. The proposal is adjusted, or delayed, or quietly dropped. You will never know it occurred, and the person who said it was not being political. They were being accurate, as far as they could tell, about someone who was not there to correct them.

That sentence is your presence, operating at a distance and without you.

That is the usual condition, not an unusual one. Decisions are discussed in rooms you are not in. Your judgement is characterised by people you have never briefed. Your reputation arrives before you do and stays after you leave.

Presence at distance has a different name. It is signal.

The mechanism is the same. Up close, attention is experienced directly: someone felt heard, or did not. At range, attention is inferred from evidence: what a leader has chosen to speak about, what they have let pass, who they have associated with, where they have stayed silent. People read that evidence exactly as carefully as they read a room.

A leader who is attentive in person and incoherent at distance has not solved presence. They have solved half of it.

Leadership as signal

Every leader emits signals.

Some are deliberate: statements, publications, positions taken. Others are entirely unintentional: silence, inconsistency, absence, association. Together they form a professional profile that others interpret continuously, whether or not the leader participates.

Signal is not branding. It is the accumulation of cues from which people infer credibility, judgement and intent.

Erving Goffman's account of social life is useful here. Goffman described identity as something performed for an audience and co-produced with it, never simply announced by the person themselves. How leaders see themselves matters. How they are received is what determines influence.

Ignoring professional signal does not switch it off. It leaves it unmanaged.

Visibility without clarity

Visibility has expanded enormously. Digital platforms, professional networks and public commentary mean leaders are now visible in contexts they do not inhabit and cannot observe.

This creates opportunity and distortion in roughly equal measure. Leadership is reduced to fragments: a comment stripped of its context, a position inferred rather than stated, a silence misread.

When visibility grows faster than clarity, misunderstanding follows.

Leaders who pursue visibility without grounding become performative. Avoid it altogether and you become irrelevant. The objective is not to be seen more. It is to be seen accurately.

Authenticity and restraint

Authenticity is usually framed as expression. In leadership it is more accurately described as alignment.

Leaders who share everything dilute meaning. Sharing nothing creates distance. Authentic signal emerges through selective visibility: deciding what to make visible and what to hold.

Restraint is therefore a skill, not a deficiency. Selective communication preserves authority. It signals confidence in one's own judgement and respect for other people's attention. Leaders who communicate sparingly but consistently are routinely read as more credible than those who communicate constantly without focus.

The same is true of public positioning. What a leader chooses to endorse, question or ignore is read as judgement. In a visible environment even neutrality is interpreted: silence is variously understood as avoidance, agreement, or irrelevance, depending on context.

This does not oblige leaders to comment on everything. It obliges them to know that absence communicates as much as presence does.

How presence becomes reputation

Both presence and signal reveal themselves through accumulation rather than moments.

Over time, leaders become known for being accessible or distant, steady or volatile, attentive or distracted. Their profile becomes either recognisable or confusing. These reputations are rarely constructed deliberately. They emerge from accumulated moments of attention or neglect, and from patterns nobody was tracking at the time.

What a leader speaks about repeatedly, what they avoid, what they amplify, what they challenge, where they stay

silent. Over years these form a narrative that others can recite and the leader has never read.

Leaders who are internally coherent tend to develop coherent profiles. Internal fragmentation shows up as public inconsistency, and the leader is usually the last to hear about it.

Profile reflects leadership state. It is not a separate activity.

> THROUGH THE LENS
>
> *What is said about your leadership in rooms you are not in?*

Noticing your presence and signal

Some leaders project strong presence in person but unclear direction at distance. Others are thoughtful in public and distracted in private. Some maintain composure externally while feeling internally unsettled. Others withdraw entirely when pressure increases.

None of these define leadership quality. They describe where attention currently sits.

Four questions for the month:

- When you enter a room, what changes?
- What are you known for beyond your role?
- Where does your visibility support your leadership, and where does it distort it?

Is the leader people describe when you are absent the same one they experience when you are there?

Restoring presence

Presence is not restored through effort. Leaders who resolve to "be more present" without addressing overload generally experience only frustration.

It is restored through alignment: reducing unnecessary demands, clarifying priorities, protecting attention. Presence strengthens when leaders create space between stimulus and response, limit simultaneous commitments, and engage fully in fewer interactions rather than superficially in many.

Attentiveness is more influential than availability. This is worth holding onto, because almost every incentive in professional life argues the opposite.

Presence as an ethical act

Presence has an ethical dimension as well as a relational one.

To be present is to take responsibility for the impact of one's attention. Leaders who are present acknowledge the humanity of the people in front of them. Distraction reduces those same people to tasks or obstacles, usually without intention and usually without notice.

The same obligation extends to signal. Leaders whose public image diverges significantly from their private

conduct erode trust the moment the gap becomes visible, and in a connected environment, it eventually becomes visible. Visibility magnifies integrity. It magnifies contradiction just as efficiently.

Closing reflection

Leadership does not end when an interaction ends. It continues in reputation, association and memory.

Two questions, and they belong together:

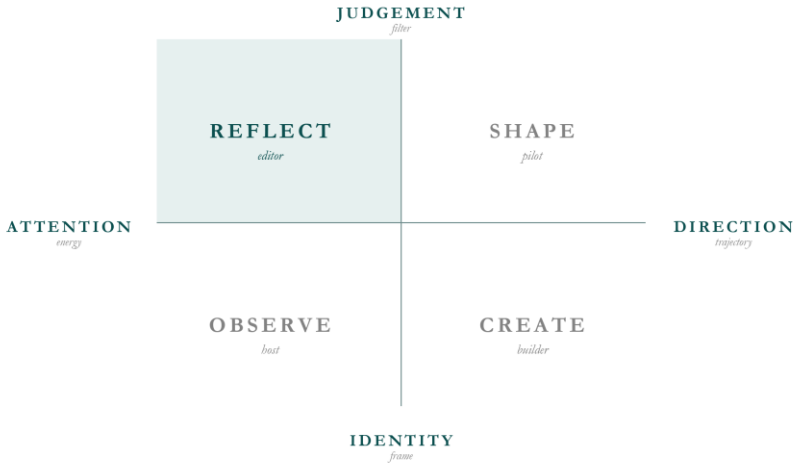
When I enter a room, does leadership feel clearer or heavier because I am there?

And when I am not there, does what remains resemble what I believe myself to be?

If the two answers do not match, the second one is the accurate one.

REFLECT

Judgement × Attention



Judgement meets Attention. You examine how you decide.

LOOKING BACK

Before you read on, and without turning back: what did you notice about your own leadership in the last three months that you had not seen before? Name one thing.

Season practice: examine the decision, not the outcome.

MONTH 4

Judgement in an Age of Noise

Deciding well when information never stops

The question is whether to continue with the supplier.

By the time it reaches the meeting it has become a slightly different question: whether to continue with the supplier, given that changing would be disruptive in the third quarter, that the relationship manager is well liked, and that the person who originally chose them is sitting at the table.

Forty minutes later a decision is reached. Everyone leaves satisfied. It is a careful, well-reasoned, defensible decision about a different question from the one that was asked.

Nobody in the room noticed the substitution, including the person who made it.

Judgement is the most visible act of leadership

It is what others experience when choices are made, priorities set, and responsibility either claimed or deferred. Confidence attracts attention and presence reassures, but judgement is what ultimately settles whether a leader is credible.

It has also never been exercised in harder conditions. Information is abundant, opinion is constant, and urgency is manufactured as a matter of routine. The difficulty is no

longer access to insight. It is discernment: not knowing more, but choosing what matters from more than anyone can hold.

This chapter is about how judgement survives that.

Why judgement deteriorates under pressure

Judgement rarely fails dramatically. It erodes.

As load increases, leaders decide more often, faster, with less room for reflection. Decision-making becomes reactive. Speed starts to feel like effectiveness and activity starts to feel like progress, and both feelings are convincing.

Kahneman's account of heuristics, built on decades of work with Amos Tversky, names the specific mechanism, and it is the one in the meeting above: under pressure, people substitute an easier question for the hard one in front of them, and answer that instead. The substitution is not experienced as a substitution. It is experienced as thinking.

Notice that the supplier decision was not careless. It involved real deliberation about real considerations. Disruption in the third quarter matters. So does the relationship. Every input was legitimate. What went missing was the question, which was whether this supplier is the right supplier, and which nobody returned to.

In leadership this appears as avoiding decisions that carry personal risk, deferring responsibility to process or

consensus, relying on precedent after the context has changed, and mistaking urgency for importance.

Judgement weakens not because leaders lack intelligence. It weakens because attention has been divided, and the division is invisible from inside.

The illusion of objectivity

Modern leadership culture leans heavily on evidence, metrics and data-driven decision-making. The emphasis is largely healthy and it carries a specific risk.

Data does not make decisions. People do.

Metrics illuminate patterns and cannot resolve competing values. Dashboards display performance and cannot allocate responsibility. Models recommend actions and cannot own consequences.

When leaders mistake information for judgement, they abdicate while appearing rigorous, which is the most durable form of abdication because it is so hard to name. People accept the outcome and do not feel led, and they are usually unable to explain why.

Leadership judgement is not the rejection of evidence. It is the integration of evidence with values, context and accountability, and the last of those is the part no dataset supplies.

When can you trust your instinct?

A leader with twenty years in the industry says a candidate feels wrong. Asked why, they cannot say. The interview went well. The references are good.

Is that expertise, or is it prejudice wearing the clothes of expertise?

This is the most practically useful question in the whole subject, and there is a real answer to it. Daniel Kahneman and Gary Klein, who had spent careers arguing opposite sides of it, set out to establish where they actually disagreed and found that they largely did not. Intuition is trustworthy, they concluded, under two conditions.

The first is that the environment must be sufficiently regular to contain genuine patterns. The second is that the person must have had prolonged practice in it with feedback that is both rapid and unambiguous.

Both conditions have to hold. Where they do, expert intuition is remarkable, and demanding that it be justified explicitly can make it worse. Where they do not, confident intuition is simply confidence, and the feeling of certainty carries no information at all.

Apply that honestly to senior leadership and the result is uncomfortable. Most consequential leadership decisions occur in environments of low regularity, with feedback that arrives late, confounded by everything else that happened in the interim, and often unambiguous only in the cases that

went badly. Those are the conditions under which intuition should be least trusted.

They are also the conditions under which it feels most authoritative, because twenty years of experience produces the feeling of expertise whether or not the environment permitted the expertise to form.

So the question to ask of any strong instinct is not whether it is strong. It is whether this is a domain where you have had thousands of repetitions with clear and quick feedback. Hiring, for most leaders, is not. Reading a room, for most leaders, is. The instinct is worth different amounts in each case, and it will feel identical in both.

Judgement as responsibility

Stripped back, judgement is the willingness to choose and then to stand behind the choice.

This is why it feels heavy. It involves trade-offs, uncertainty and the real possibility of being wrong in public. Leaders who wait for certainty discover that certainty does not arrive, and that delay is itself a decision, made passively and usually worse than the one they were avoiding.

Judgement does not eliminate risk. It clarifies ownership.

There is good evidence that this is what people actually respond to. As Month 5 takes up in more detail, Colquitt and colleagues found across a large body of research that trust tracks how a decision was reached considerably more

closely than whether its outcome was favourable. A principled decision, explained, is received better than a technically superior one that nobody will account for.

The role of identity in judgement

Judgement does not operate alone. It is shaped by identity.

Leaders who are clear about what they stand for decide more easily under pressure, because they are not conducting an internal negotiation in parallel with the external one. Where identity is unsettled, decisions are draining, because every choice feels like a concession to something.

Self-leadership and judgement are inseparable for that reason. Without an internal anchor, judgement becomes situational rather than principled, and the inconsistency is eventually noticed by everyone except the person producing it.

How a decision is received

Judgement includes how a decision is carried, and not only what was decided.

Leaders who deliver difficult decisions with composure create stability even where the decision is unwelcome. Defensiveness or haste transmits uncertainty regardless of how sound the decision was, and people respond to the transmission rather than the decision.

This is where Goleman's emphasis on self-management bears directly on decision-making. When leaders are unsettled, judgement is experienced as arbitrary. When leaders are regulated, the very same judgement is experienced as considered.

Judgement is therefore not purely cognitive. It is relational, and it is received.

The pattern behind the decisions

Judgement reveals itself across patterns rather than moments.

Over time, leaders acquire reputations for being decisive or hesitant, principled or expedient, consistent or unpredictable. None of these comes from a single decision. They accumulate, and they are assembled by other people from evidence the leader has forgotten providing.

Donald Schön's distinction between reflecting after the event and reflecting while still inside it, which Month 6 takes up properly, applies directly here. Leaders who examine how they decide, and not only what they decided, notice where judgement has quietly become habit. A review of outcomes alone teaches very little, because outcomes are contaminated by luck in both directions.

Restoring clarity in noisy environments

When judgement feels compromised, the instinct is to gather more information. In practice clarity is more often restored by reducing inputs than by adding them.

Leaders protect judgement by limiting the scope of what they personally decide, by separating urgent from important rather than assuming the two travel together, by being explicit about which decisions genuinely require them, and by accepting that some uncertainty will not resolve before the decision has to be made.

Judgement improves when attention is protected. It is not the only thing that improves it, and Month 6 takes up deliberate learning at length, but it is the one most often surrendered without noticing.

The price of deciding

Good judgement is expensive in ways that rarely get acknowledged.

It requires being wrong in public, sometimes, because a leader who is never visibly wrong is a leader who has been deciding only the safe things.

It forfeits the cover that process provides. The committee decision protects everyone in the room. Owning the call protects nobody, which is the point of owning it.

It is judged by outcome regardless. You will make a well-reasoned decision that goes badly and be criticised for the

reasoning, and a careless one that goes well and be congratulated on your instincts. Over a long enough period this averages out. Over any period a person actually lives through, it does not.

The compensation is narrow but real: you will know which of your decisions were good, independently of how they turned out, and almost nobody else in the organisation will have that information about themselves.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> 
>
> *Name the last decision you made too quickly, and the last one you left too long.*

Noticing your judgement orientation

This is the editor's territory, and the pilot's. You may notice tendencies in how you approach decisions.

Some leaders lean into judgement, deciding quickly and often. Others hesitate, preferring consensus or one more piece of information. Some use process to reduce personal exposure. Others trust instinct without ever checking whether the domain earns it.

None of these orientations is inherently flawed. They become limiting when they operate without awareness.

Take these one at a time:

When do I decide too quickly?

When do I delay unnecessarily?

Where do I avoid responsibility by deferring to process?

In which decisions have I actually had enough repetitions, with quick enough feedback, to trust what my instinct tells me?

The relationship between judgement and trust

Trust is built when people believe decisions are made thoughtfully, consistently and with accountability. Leaders who explain their reasoning, acknowledge what remained uncertain, and own the outcome strengthen trust even where the decision is unpopular.

Leaders who shelter behind process or decline to explain erode it, even where the outcome is favourable. Especially there, in fact, because a good outcome without an owner teaches people that nobody is steering.

Closing reflection

Leadership judgement was never about having the right answer. What it asks is that you choose responsibly and then remain present with what follows.

One question to carry into the month:

When decisions become difficult, do I seek clarity, or do I seek cover?

Cover is easy to recognise afterwards and very hard to recognise at the time, which is why the question has to be asked while the decision is still open.

MONTH 5

Ethics, Responsibility, and Trust

What leadership demands when there is no right answer

Ethical leadership is usually discussed as though it were a set of rules.

In practice, ethics emerges most clearly when the rules run out. It appears when leaders must choose between competing goods, when every available option carries a cost, and when responsibility cannot be handed to anyone else. These are the moments in which leadership is tested not by competence but by character.

They are also, awkwardly, the moments least likely to be recognised as ethical at the time. Most of them arrive looking like ordinary management.

This chapter is about how ethical leadership is exercised under pressure, why responsibility cannot be outsourced however much structure surrounds it, and how trust is built or lost through the way leaders behave when the outcome is not clean.

A decision with no clean answer

Someone on your team has been with the organisation eleven years. They are liked. For most of that time they were very good.

For the last eighteen months they have not been.

You have never said this to them plainly. You have gestured at it in reviews, in language soft enough to be survivable. You have quietly rearranged work so that less depends on them, and you have told yourself that this was kindness.

Now a restructure is announced. Their role sits among several under review. The criteria are objective, the process is legitimate, and the decision is not formally yours.

If you say nothing, the process will almost certainly remove them. Nobody will attribute that outcome to you. Possibly not even them.

Consider what is actually available.

You can say nothing. This is defensible: the process is fair, the decision is not yours to make, and the outcome is probably correct.

You can advocate for them. Also defensible: they gave eleven years, the decline may be temporary or have a cause you do not know, and nobody ever told them there was a problem.

Or you can tell them the truth now, before the process runs its course. This is costly, probably too late to change anything, and will produce the entirely fair question of why you did not say it eighteen months ago.

There is no version of this in which you emerge well.

That is what makes it an ethical question rather than merely a difficult one. Difficult decisions have a right answer that is hard to execute. Ethical ones have several defensible answers, each of which costs something you would rather keep.

The option that looks like neutrality

Return to the first option, because it is the one most leaders take.

Saying nothing feels like restraint. It has the texture of proper conduct: not interfering, letting a fair process do its work, declining to use influence on behalf of one individual.

But look at what it achieves. It produces an outcome you had already concluded was necessary, without requiring you to be the person who concluded it. The process does not merely decide. It absorbs.

This is the specific temptation of working inside any well-designed system. The better the process, the more completely it can stand in for a judgement you have already made and do not wish to sign.

Silence here is not neutrality. It is a decision, made quietly, to let something else carry your name.

Ethics beyond compliance

Most organisations approach ethics through compliance. Policies are written, procedures established, boundaries defined and trained. These measures are necessary. They are not sufficient, and they are not the same thing.

Compliance tells leaders what must not be done. Ethics concerns what should be done when compliance has nothing to say.

Notice that nothing in the restructure breaches a policy. No rule is bent. A leader could go through that entire scenario, choose the most self-protective option available, and pass any audit comfortably. The compliance framework is not failing. It is simply answering a different question from the one being asked.

Ethical leadership is therefore not primarily about avoiding wrongdoing. It is about choosing responsibly where values conflict and every consequence is imperfect.

Leaders who rely solely on rules find themselves unprepared for exactly the situations that matter most, because those situations are defined by the absence of an applicable rule. Judgement anchored in values moves through ambiguity without losing its footing.

Responsibility as a leadership burden

Responsibility is the weight leaders carry when their decisions land on other people.

In contemporary organisations that weight is routinely diffused. Decisions are attributed to committees, frameworks, scoring matrices, market conditions and systems. Shared decision-making has genuine value: it improves the decisions. What it does not do, and cannot do, is divide the answerability.

When responsibility is unclear, trust erodes. People may accept the outcome and still not feel led.

Hannah Arendt, writing about how ordinary people come to participate in systems that produce harm, argued that having followed a process is not a defence. Where a person retains the capacity to judge, responsibility stays with them. Systems distribute activity. They do not distribute answerability.

Leadership does not absolve responsibility. It concentrates it.

The practical form this takes is unremarkable and quite hard: the willingness to say, in words or simply in conduct, *this decision is mine to own.* Not that it was correct. Only that it was mine.

How drift actually happens

The uncomfortable part of the scenario is not the restructure. It is the eighteen months.

No single decision in that period looked wrong at the time. Softening the language in one review was reasonable; the

person was going through something. Moving one project elsewhere was sensible resourcing. Not raising it before the summer was considerate. Each step was defensible on its own terms, and each one made the next slightly easier.

There is research on this. Francesca Gino and Max Bazerman set up experiments in which participants acted as watchdogs, responsible for catching others cheating. When the cheating appeared abruptly, participants caught and condemned it. When exactly the same degree of cheating arrived gradually, in small increments, they were markedly less likely to object.

The finding is not that people tolerate slow erosion. It is that they do not see it.

This ought to concern leaders more than it usually does. It means integrity cannot be maintained by vigilance alone, because vigilance is calibrated to detect change, and gradual change does not register as change. By the time the accumulated position is obvious enough to notice, it has stopped feeling like a position and started feeling like circumstances.

It also means the useful question is not *am I behaving ethically?* Almost everyone answers yes, and at each individual step almost everyone is right. The useful question is comparative: *would I have accepted this eighteen months ago?*

That question works because it restores the abruptness the situation lost.

Trust as a consequence, not a tactic

Trust cannot be demanded, engineered or accelerated. It is a by-product of repeated conduct, and it accrues slowly for the same reason drift does.

People observe how leaders behave when decisions are hard. They notice whether reasoning is explained, whether uncertainty is admitted, whether accountability is accepted when it would be easier not to. These behaviours signal respect, and people are extremely good at detecting their absence.

There is substantial evidence for how this operates. Jason Colquitt and colleagues, reviewing a quarter-century of research across 183 studies, found that trust and commitment track most closely with procedural justice, how a decision was reached, rather than with the favourability of the outcome itself. Joel Brockner and Batia Wiesenfeld had found something more striking still, reviewing forty-five separate samples: fair process acts as a buffer. When people judge the process to have been fair, an unfavourable outcome damages their attitudes considerably less.

This is worth sitting with, because it inverts the instinct most leaders have under pressure. Faced with an unpopular decision, the instinct is to manage the outcome: soften it, delay it, present it as inevitable. The evidence suggests the outcome is not the main thing being judged.

People can absorb a decision that goes against them. What they cannot absorb is the sense that it was made carelessly, or that nobody will admit to having made it.

Why a framework cannot decide for you

Ethical leadership depends on judgement, and that is why it cannot be delegated to a framework.

Rules cannot anticipate every situation, and ethical dilemmas rarely present as right against wrong. They present as two goods that will not both fit: loyalty against honesty, the individual against the team, transparency against discretion. Judgement is what integrates principle, context and consequence when no principle alone resolves it.

Leaders who avoid this by deferring to policy protect themselves in the short term and spend their moral authority in the long term. The spending is invisible at first. People simply stop bringing them the difficult things.

Leaders who exercise judgement openly, even where the outcome is contested, build credibility, not because they are right more often, but because they are locatable.

Judgement aligned with values produces coherence. Judgement detached from responsibility produces cynicism, which is the most expensive cultural condition an organisation can acquire and the slowest to reverse.

What composure signals

People decide whether a hard decision was taken seriously long before they have finished hearing what it was.

Leaders who stay composed, attentive and open during ethical challenge signal that the matter is being taken seriously. Defensiveness and evasion signal fear instead, and people read fear accurately and immediately.

Presence makes it possible to hold disagreement without retreating from responsibility. It communicates that the decision is being confronted rather than managed away.

That steadiness is what internal clarity looks like from outside; there is no performance in it.

What integrity does not buy

The literature on ethical leadership is oddly quiet about what it costs.

Owning a decision means being available to be blamed for it. That is not a figure of speech. The leader who says *this was my call* has volunteered for an accountability that the leader who let the process decide has avoided, and both know it.

Ethical leadership is also frequently invisible. The conversation you had eighteen months ago, which prevented the situation entirely, produces no evidence. Nobody counts the restructure that was not needed. You

will be judged instead on the crises you handled, some of which you created.

Nor does it reliably win. Leaders who hold a principled position sometimes lose the argument, the budget, or the role. The claim that integrity pays off in the end is made most confidently by people for whom it did.

This is not an argument against behaving well. It is an argument for going in with accurate expectations, because the leader who expects ethical conduct to be rewarded is the one most likely to abandon it when it is not.

What people come to expect

Ethical leadership reveals itself across patterns rather than incidents.

Over time, leaders become known for what they prioritise when values conflict, how they respond to their own mistakes, whether they protect people or outcomes when they cannot do both, and how they balance transparency against discretion.

These patterns shape trust far more than any single decision. They are also assembled by other people without your involvement, from evidence you have forgotten providing.

Leaders who examine their ethical patterns, rather than defending individual episodes, are better placed to lead with

integrity over time, partly because patterns are the only level at which drift is visible at all.

> THROUGH THE LENS
>
> *When two of your values conflict, which one quietly wins?*

Noticing your ethical orientation

Consider where your judgement meets what you are attending to. You may recognise tendencies in how you respond to ethical tension.

Some leaders prioritise consistency, even where flexibility is what the situation requires. Others prioritise compassion, even where a boundary is what is needed. Some avoid ethical confrontation altogether, hoping the issue will resolve itself, and it often does resolve itself, badly, in a way that requires no decision from anyone.

None of these orientations is inherently flawed. They become problematic when they operate without awareness.

Worth asking, and worth answering honestly:

- When values conflict, which do I default to?
- Where do I avoid responsibility by seeking consensus?
- How comfortable am I acknowledging uncertainty publicly?

What have I allowed to become normal that I would have objected to two years ago?

Ethics in a visible world

In an environment of increased visibility, ethical conduct is amplified in both directions.

Decisions are scrutinised, shared and remembered. Silence is interpreted. Delay is noticed and given a motive. Leaders must consider not only what they decide but how it is understood and explained, which is not image management but its opposite, since image management is precisely the attempt to separate the two.

Ethical leadership under observation demands clarity, humility and restraint. It also demands accepting that the account which circulates will be partial, and that correcting every distortion is not available to you.

Repair and accountability

No leader behaves ethically at all times. Mistakes are certain, and the slow ones are the hardest to see.

What distinguishes ethical leadership is the response to error. Leaders who acknowledge a mistake, accept the consequence and attempt repair strengthen trust, often beyond where it stood before, because the acknowledgement itself is evidence of something.

Leaders who deflect, minimise or reframe weaken it permanently, and usually more than the original error would have.

Return once more to the eleven-year colleague. Suppose the process runs, the outcome lands, and you said nothing.

There is still something available. Not a remedy; that has passed. But the conversation in which you say, plainly, that you should have told them eighteen months ago and did not, and that the silence was yours rather than the organisation's, is not nothing. It restores to them an accurate account of what happened to them, which is the one thing you can still give.

Accountability is not self-punishment, and it is not confession for the relief of the confessor. It is the return of the truth to the person entitled to it.

Early in a new post I inherited a leadership structure I did not believe in. It carried more senior titles than the work required, and responsibilities inside it overlapped in ways that made accountability hard to locate. I could see that within weeks.

I left it alone for far longer than I should have. Not because the evidence was unclear. Because changing it meant taking a title from somebody who had held it for years, and I did not want that conversation.

The cost did not fall on me. It fell on departments that could not get decisions made, on staff who read the drift

accurately and said nothing, and on students, who of everyone affected had the least power to challenge it.

When I finally made the case I made it with evidence, and the evidence had been available the whole time. What had been missing was my willingness to be unpopular for a term, and to own the change if it failed. I told the heads of those departments, afterwards, that the delay had been mine.

Closing reflection

Ethical leadership is not revealed when decisions are easy. It is revealed when every option carries a cost and responsibility cannot be handed anywhere else.

A question for the next time every option costs something:

When there is no right answer, do I seek protection, or do I accept responsibility?

Whatever you decide, somebody will carry the cost of it. The question is only whether you are one of them.

MONTH 6

Learning, Metacognition, and Growth

How leaders remain adaptive without losing coherence

You give feedback to someone excellent.

They listen properly. They do not become defensive, they do not interrupt, and they thank you for raising it. Then they explain.

The explanation is good. It addresses every point you made, situates each one in context you did not have, and accounts for the constraints they were operating under. By the end you are less certain of your original observation than when you began, and you find yourself half apologising.

Nothing changes. Six months later the same conversation is available again, in almost the same words.

At no point was anybody dishonest. What you encountered was not resistance. It was a very capable person doing what capable people do with uncomfortable information, which is to process it fluently enough that it does not have to be acted upon.

Experience is not learning

Leadership is not sustained by experience alone.

Experience accumulates, and without reflection it hardens into habit. Leaders who rely on what has worked before become steadily more effective in familiar conditions and steadily less effective in unfamiliar ones, and the two happen at the same time, which is what makes it difficult to notice.

Experience is exposure. Learning is revision.

Leaders acquire experience simply by remaining in post. Learning requires something more demanding: examining assumptions, questioning patterns, and being willing to conclude that something you have believed for years was a local truth about conditions that no longer obtain.

Learning in leadership is therefore not cumulative in any simple way. It involves unlearning as much as acquisition, and unlearning is the part nobody schedules.

Why success prevents learning

Chris Argyris identified the mechanism behind the conversation above, and it is unusually inconvenient.

Highly capable professionals, he observed, rarely experience failure. They have been successful at most things they have attempted, often for decades. Because they have rarely failed, they have never had to develop the capacity to learn from failure, and so when they finally encounter it they have no practice at the one response that would help.

What they have instead is defensive reasoning: the ability to construct an account in which the problem is situated anywhere other than in their own assumptions. The better the professional, the better the account.

Argyris drew a distinction that is worth carrying. Single-loop learning corrects the error: the result was wrong, so change the action. Double-loop learning asks what it was about the way you were thinking that generated that action in the first place, and then changes that.

Single-loop learning is efficient and most organisations reward it. It is also how an intelligent person can address every piece of feedback they receive, indefinitely, while the underlying pattern remains completely untouched.

The uncomfortable implication is that the capacity to learn is not distributed in proportion to ability. Some of the least adaptable leaders are the most accomplished ones, and their accomplishment is the reason rather than a consolation.

It looks like this.

A situation arises that resembles one you handled well in 2019. You do what worked then, with the confidence of someone who has done this before, and it does not work.

Two conclusions are available. The first is that the people are different now, or the market is, or the organisation has lost something it used to have. The second is that what worked in 2019 worked for reasons you never examined, because it worked, and those reasons are no longer present.

The first conclusion is available immediately, costs nothing, and is occasionally true. The second requires going back through a success and treating it as a puzzle.

Almost nobody does the second. The people least likely to are those with the most successes available to re-examine.

I left an inspection role at a point when most of the people around me thought it was the wrong decision. The position carried standing, and standing is difficult to give up precisely because it is doing something for you that you have stopped noticing.

What I had not anticipated was the reversal. For years I had walked into schools and formed judgements about the leadership in them. Now I was the leadership being judged, in a building I was responsible for, with my own decisions on the table.

I had believed I understood what that felt like. I did not. Knowing the criteria is not the same as sitting on the other side of them, and I had been confident about a great deal that I had only ever seen from one direction.

Metacognition as leadership capacity

Metacognition is the ability to think about your own thinking.

For a leader this means noticing how decisions are actually reached, where attention goes without being sent, and what conclusions arrive under pressure before the reasoning has

caught up. It involves recognising your own defensiveness, overconfidence, avoidance and habitual certainty, which is harder than recognising anyone else's.

Donald Schön distinguished reflection-on-action, which happens afterwards, from reflection-in-action, which happens while the work is still underway. Leaders who can observe their thinking as it unfolds adjust in real time. Reflecting only afterwards tends to repeat the very pattern being reflected on, because the reflection happens in a different mental state from the one that produced the behaviour.

Metacognition does not slow leadership down. It is what stops experience from calcifying.

Growth without fragmentation

One risk of continuous development is fragmentation.

Leaders attend courses, adopt frameworks and experiment with approaches, and end up unable to integrate any of it. Leadership becomes cluttered rather than deepened, and the clutter is often mistaken for sophistication.

Sustainable growth requires integration. Leaders who grow well align new insight with existing values and purpose, and discard what does not fit even when it is interesting.

This is why growth has to be selective. Not every good idea deserves adoption, and the capacity to decline one is a form of discernment rather than closed-mindedness.

Learning orientation and resilience

Leaders with a learning orientation respond to difficulty differently. They treat it as information rather than as a verdict on their competence. This does not remove the frustration, but it removes the defensiveness, which is the part that blocks the learning.

This is the practical consequence of Dweck's distinction. Leaders who view capability as developable tend to seek feedback more readily and to adjust more quickly, not because they are more optimistic, but because information about their own limits is less threatening to them.

Learning orientation supports resilience not through optimism but through adaptability. The optimist expects things to improve. The learner expects to have to change, which is a more reliable basis for actually improving.

The role of feedback

Feedback is the most misunderstood element of leadership development.

Leaders associate it with evaluation, and so they either seek reassurance or avoid the subject. Effective learning requires a different stance entirely: curiosity rather than validation.

Feedback that challenges an assumption is uncomfortable and useful. Feedback that confirms your self-image is comfortable and nearly worthless, and it is the kind most

senior leaders receive, because seniority filters what people are prepared to say.

Put plainly: the more senior you become, the less accurate your feedback gets, and the more confident you are likely to feel. Those two curves move in opposite directions for the same reason.

The capacity to receive challenge without producing an explanation is a marker of leadership maturity, and it is rarer than the capacity to receive it without becoming angry.

Reflective or entrenched

Leadership growth reveals itself across patterns.

Over time, leaders become either more reflective or more entrenched. They either expand their capacity to hold complexity or resolve it prematurely into something simpler. Neither trajectory is chosen consciously, and both feel from the inside like accumulating wisdom.

Leaders who step back periodically to examine how their thinking has changed can tell which one they are on. Without that, they find out considerably later, from circumstances.

Growth is sustained not by constant change but by ongoing attention.

The price of revising

Learning is described as though it were straightforwardly good. Few senior people do much of it, and the reason is not that they are incapable.

It requires being visibly uncertain in a role where certainty is what you appear to be paid for.

It costs standing. A leader who revises a strongly held position is, in the short term, a leader who was wrong, and organisations are not reliably good at distinguishing that from being unreliable.

It is slower than defending. Explaining why the feedback does not apply takes four minutes. Establishing whether it applies takes months, and produces nothing you can show anyone.

Least helpfully of all, it does not feel like progress. Double-loop learning mostly feels like losing an argument with yourself, which is why the fluent explanation is so attractive and so available.

> THROUGH THE LENS
>
> 
>
> *What do you know that may simply have stopped being true?*

Noticing your learning orientation

This is the editor's month. You may recognise tendencies in how you approach learning.

Some leaders actively seek new ideas and struggle to integrate them. Others rely on past experience and resist challenge. Some reflect deeply and hesitate to act. Others act decisively and rarely reflect at all.

None of these orientations is inherently flawed. They become limiting when they operate without awareness.

Some questions to sit with this month:

- How open am I to examining my own thinking?
- Where do I rely on experience when the context has changed?
- What assumptions do I rarely question?
- When was the last time I changed my mind about something that mattered, and what changed it?

Learning in an age of acceleration

Technological change has accelerated the rate at which leaders must adapt. Information is abundant. Understanding is not, and the two are easily confused.

In such conditions, learning is less about mastering tools and more about maintaining discernment. Leaders have to decide what to engage with and what to leave alone, and attention becomes the scarce strategic resource rather than information.

Metacognitive leadership is what allows a leader to use a technology without being quietly reshaped by it.

Growth as responsibility

Leadership growth is a responsibility rather than a personal indulgence, because it is contagious in both directions.

Leaders who stop learning limit not only themselves but everyone whose range is defined by theirs. Modelling reflective learning makes adaptation feel survivable, which is the precondition for anyone else attempting it.

Growth signals humility. More usefully, it communicates that leadership is not a finished state, which gives everyone else permission to be unfinished too.

Closing reflection

Leadership does not demand certainty. It demands learning.

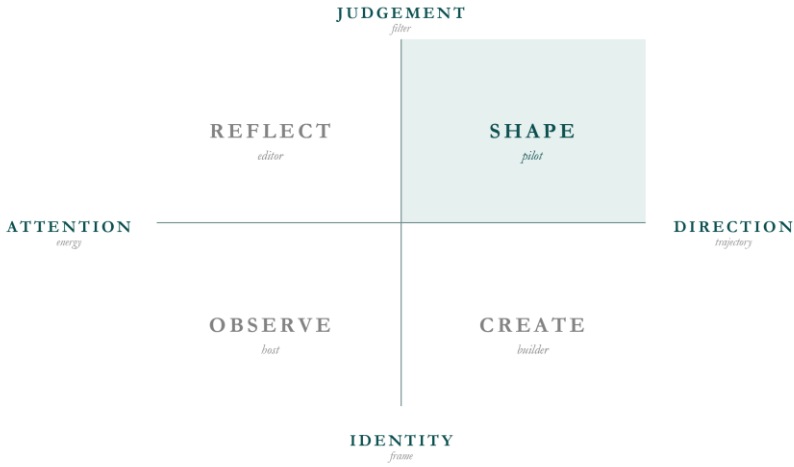
Ask yourself, before the next month begins:

Do my experiences deepen my understanding, or do they merely reinforce what I already believe?

Twenty years of experience and one year repeated twenty times are difficult to tell apart from the inside.

SHAPE

Judgement × Direction



Judgement meets Direction. You choose a path.

LOOKING BACK

Before you read on, and without turning back: what have the last three months shown you about how you decide? Name one pattern you can now see in your own judgement.

Season practice: direction endures, method changes.

MONTH 7

Strategic Direction in Unstable Systems

Thinking beyond the moment

The strategy names three priorities. Everyone in the leadership team can recite them.

Now look at the last twelve months instead. Where did the new headcount actually go? Which projects were protected when the budget was cut, and which were quietly allowed to slip? Which meetings did the executive team clear their diaries for? Which deadline moved without anyone minding?

Four of those five answers point somewhere the strategy does not mention.

Nobody changed the strategy. Nobody proposed changing it, and if asked, every leader involved would defend it sincerely. The strategy was changed by a sequence of individually reasonable decisions, not one of which was about strategy.

Strategy is orientation, not planning

Strategy is routinely mistaken for planning, and the mistake is expensive.

Strategy is orientation: the capacity to hold direction when circumstances are uncertain, information incomplete, and pressure demands something immediate. Leaders who treat strategy as prediction become paralysed the moment conditions move. Treated as direction, it stays useful while the plans change around it.

In unstable systems, leadership is defined less by foresight than by sense-making. The question is not what will happen. It is what matters enough to guide our decisions as things unfold.

This chapter is about supplying direction without certainty, and about why strategic leadership turns out to be as much about restraint as about ambition.

Why instability undermines strategic thinking

Unstable systems compress time.

Urgency crowds out reflection. Short-term problems occupy attention because they are the ones with deadlines. Leaders are drawn into continuous response, and over months this produces strategic drift: decisions are still being made, but direction has stopped being one of the inputs.

Henry Mintzberg and James Waters defined strategy as a pattern in a stream of decisions, and separated deliberate strategies, realised as intended, from emergent ones, which form through consistency of action rather than intention. Most real strategy sits between the two.

That definition explains the opening of this chapter exactly. The organisation did have a strategy. It had two. One was written down and one was being enacted, and only the second was real, because a pattern in a stream of decisions is not affected by what the document says.

Instability does not remove the need for direction. It intensifies it, and it disguises the loss of it as busyness.

Strategy as choice, not aspiration

Strategic direction is defined by what leaders choose to prioritise and, in equal measure, by what they choose to leave aside.

In conditions of abundance, several ambitions can be pursued at once. In unstable systems that breadth stops being affordable, and strategic leadership becomes the work of narrowing focus without becoming short-sighted.

This is where most leaders struggle, because saying yes feels constructive and saying no feels obstructive. Direction without exclusion is not direction. It is a list of things you would like.

Effective strategy makes four things explicit: what will be protected, what will be developed, what will be deferred, and what will be allowed to end.

The fourth is the one that gets omitted, and its omission is why so many strategies are simply additions to the previous strategy.

The good opportunity

Something arrives that is genuinely good.

Not a distraction, not a vanity project, not an obviously poor fit. A real opportunity, with a credible case, that a competent organisation would be pleased to have. It is also not what you are doing.

This is the decision that actually determines strategy, and it is much harder than declining something bad. Declining something bad requires only judgement. Declining something good requires direction, because the only available reason for saying no is that it is not what you are for.

Leaders without direction cannot decline it. They have no ground to stand on, and the case in favour is sound, and so it gets absorbed. Then another one does. Within three years the organisation is doing eleven things reasonably and nothing distinctively, and no single decision along the way was wrong on its own terms.

Strategic failure is rarely a sequence of bad choices. It is usually a sequence of good ones that belonged to somebody else's strategy.

The relationship between values and direction

Strategic direction is inseparable from values.

Values stabilise when external conditions do not. Leaders who are clear about what they stand for find trade-offs

easier, because the decision is anchored internally rather than negotiated freshly every time.

This does not mean values determine outcomes. It means they inform priorities, which is a more modest and more useful claim.

Leaders without clear values experience strategy as exhausting, because every decision is provisional and every decision is therefore reopenable. Leaders with them experience strategy as demanding but settled.

Judgement and strategic responsibility

Strategic leadership concentrates responsibility rather than distributing it.

When leaders set direction they shape countless decisions they will never see, made by people they may never meet. This magnifies the consequences of judgement in both directions. Poorly articulated direction creates confusion that multiplies as it travels. Clear direction simplifies decision-making everywhere downstream, which is the main return on getting it right.

Richard Rumelt calls the core of any strategy its kernel: a diagnosis of the situation, a guiding policy for addressing it, and a set of coherent actions that follow from both. The common failure is the missing diagnosis, which produces a list of goals presented as a plan.

The diagnosis is missing so often because it is the only part that requires admitting something. Goals can be stated without conceding anything at all.

Strategic judgement therefore involves honesty about constraints as much as ambition about possibilities, and the honesty is the harder half.

Why steadiness makes direction credible

Direction is not established through documents or announcements. People work out whether it is real by watching the person who set it.

Leaders who hold direction through disruption provide reassurance without pretending to certainty. Public oscillation between priorities transmits instability regardless of how sound the reasoning is, because people read the oscillation and not the reasoning.

Presence is what makes direction credible. Without it, strategy remains abstract, and abstract direction does not survive contact with a difficult quarter.

Consistency as signal

Strategic leadership reveals itself through consistency across decisions rather than clarity within documents.

Over time, leaders become known for what they protect, what they challenge and what they allow to drift. These patterns communicate direction far more reliably than any

statement, and people read them accurately, because patterns are harder to fake than language.

Leaders who revisit direction periodically strengthen coherence. Revision under pressure weakens trust even when the revision is correct, because the organisation learns that direction is a function of pressure.

Direction gains its power from continuity. It is the only source of power it has.

Restraint as a strategic act

The least discussed part of strategic leadership is restraint.

Restraint is holding direction when the distraction is tempting. It is absorbing pressure rather than transmitting it downward, which is one of the most useful things a senior leader does, and one of the least visible. It is protecting space for thinking at exactly the moment when immediate action is being demanded.

Restraint means selective action, and the selection is where the strategy actually lives. It should never be mistaken for inaction.

Leaders who practise it preserve clarity for the decisions that need it. A leader who responds to every stimulus exhausts themselves and, more damagingly, teaches the organisation that everything is equally urgent.

What direction forecloses

Direction is expensive, and the costs land on the leader rather than the strategy.

You will decline good things, and some of them will succeed elsewhere, visibly, for someone else. Nobody will remember that declining them was correct.

You will look inflexible during periods when flexibility is being praised. Holding a line while conditions change is indistinguishable, from the outside and in real time, from failing to notice that conditions have changed.

You will also be wrong sometimes, publicly, having declined the alternative. A leader who holds direction owns the direction. The strategy never takes the blame. The leader who held it does.

The compensation is that everyone below you can decide faster, because they know what the organisation is for. That benefit is real, large, and almost impossible to attribute to you.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> *What does your calendar say you are prioritising, rather than your intentions?*

Noticing your strategic orientation

Shape and create both run through this month. You may notice tendencies in how you approach direction.

Some leaders lean towards ambition, continually seeking expansion. Others lean towards protection, prioritising stability past the point where it is affordable. Some respond to instability by tightening control. Others respond by disengaging from long-term thinking altogether, and calling it pragmatism.

None of these orientations is inherently flawed. They become limiting when they operate without awareness.

Consider:

- When systems become unstable, do I narrow focus or expand it?
- What do my decisions signal about what truly matters?
- Where might I be avoiding strategic responsibility by remaining reactive?
- What good opportunity have I accepted in the last two years that was not actually mine?

Strategy and meaning

Direction supplies meaning, which is the part most strategy documents forget they are for.

When people understand why decisions are made and how their work connects to something larger, effort becomes

sustainable in a way that incentives cannot replicate. When direction is absent or self-contradictory, motivation erodes, and it erodes without announcing itself, showing up first as competence without energy.

Strategic leadership therefore has a moral dimension. It shapes not only what an organisation achieves but what the work feels like to the people doing it.

Closing reflection

Strategic direction does not require predicting the future. It requires choosing what will guide you through it.

One question worth returning to when the ground moves:

When circumstances become unstable, does my leadership offer direction, or does it amplify uncertainty?

Direction is not the same as confidence. People will follow a leader who says they do not know yet, provided they can tell what that leader is steering by.

MONTH 8

Influence Without Control

Leading beyond hierarchy

You need three teams to change how they do something. None of them reports to you.

All three managers agree the change is sensible. You have the analysis, the rationale and, as far as anyone has said out loud, no opposition at all.

Six weeks later one team has done it, one has done half of it, and the third has not started and has stopped replying to your messages.

You have no lever. You cannot instruct, you cannot fund, you cannot escalate without cost. The work is correct and it is not moving, and nothing in your role description explains what to do about that.

This is the ordinary condition of modern leadership. Nothing about it is unusual, and nothing about it is a failure of organisational design. This is what leading looks like once the org chart stops doing the work for you.

What escalation buys

The instinct, at week six, is to escalate.

Consider what escalation actually purchases. It may produce compliance from the third team. It will also inform

all three managers that you are a person who escalates, which changes what they tell you in future and how early they tell you.

Escalation converts a relationship into a transaction. Sometimes that is the right trade. It is rarely the cheap one, and it is almost never as cheap as it feels in the moment of frustration.

The leader who escalates at week six may have run out of influence, or may never have had any to spend here. Sometimes a mandate really is contested, or the money really is not there, and no amount of relationship would have moved it. The question worth asking afterwards is which of the two it was, because only one of them is about you.

The shifting nature of power

Traditional leadership models assumed a clear hierarchy. Decisions flowed downward, compliance was expected, authority was rarely questioned. That environment no longer describes most leaders' working lives.

Modern organisations are flatter, more networked and more fluid. Expertise is distributed. Teams form and dissolve. Influence travels sideways at least as often as it travels down.

David Krackhardt and Jeffrey Hanson described this directly, arguing that most real work in any organisation moves through informal networks rather than the formal

chart. They distinguished three that matter: the advice network, meaning the people others actually go to in order to get something done; the trust network, meaning who is told the delicate things; and the communication network, meaning who talks to whom about work at all.

The uncomfortable implication is that a leader can hold a senior position on the chart and a peripheral position in all three networks. Nothing announces this. It shows up only as work that does not move.

Influence without control exposes leadership quality because it removes the shelter of position. When leaders cannot compel action, they must invite commitment, and the invitation has to be worth accepting.

What creates influence when authority is limited

Three things, in combination.

Credibility. People are influenced by those whose judgement they have reason to trust. Credibility is built through consistency over time, not asserted in the moment it is needed.

Clarity. Leaders who state purpose and priorities plainly reduce the effort required to engage with them. Clarity attracts alignment because it is cheaper to follow than ambiguity is to interpret.

Relational trust. Influence grows where people feel respected, understood and fairly treated. Trust is not

agreement. It is confidence in intent, which is a different and more durable thing.

John French and Bertram Raven's account of social power distinguished five bases: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert. The first three belong to the position. Only referent and expert power belong to the person, which is why only those two survive the loss of the role. Leaders who rely solely on role authority may achieve compliance, but they rarely achieve commitment, and the difference between those two becomes visible the moment nobody is watching.

Two people join the same group

Two people join the same cross-functional group in the same month.

The first has the stronger analysis and says so early, thoroughly, with evidence. Every contribution is accurate. Nothing is overstated.

The second spends the first three meetings mostly asking what each team is actually dealing with, and saying comparatively little.

Six months on, the second is consulted before decisions are made. The first is invited to review them afterwards.

Nothing in that outcome is about competence. Both are competent, and the first is arguably more so.

There is research that explains it. Amy Cuddy, Matthew Kohut and John Neffinger, drawing on a long line of social psychology on how people are assessed, argued that we judge others on two dimensions above all others: warmth and competence. Crucially, warmth is judged first and weighted more heavily, because warmth signals intent, and intent is what determines whether competence will be used for you or against you.

Their practical conclusion inverts most leaders' instinct. Faced with a room they need to influence, leaders reach for credentials, analysis and proof of competence, and by doing so risk producing exactly the fear, resentment or envy that closes a room down. Establishing warmth first is what allows the competence to be heard at all.

The first joiner was not ignored for being wrong. They were discounted for arriving as an argument rather than as a person.

Influence as consistency, not persuasion

Persuasion has its place, but influence is rarely the product of a single convincing case. It develops through repeated alignment between what a leader says and what a leader then does.

Leaders who say one thing and do another lose influence even where the inconsistency is entirely reasonable and fully explained. Act consistently with stated values and influence survives decisions that are unpopular.

This is why influence is cumulative. Small moments of integrity compound. Small moments of convenience also compound, and are noticed later than they occur.

Influence is less about persuading people to agree and more about creating the conditions in which agreement feels reasonable.

What people infer from your decisions

When leaders demonstrate sound judgement, people infer reliability. When leaders acknowledge uncertainty honestly, people infer maturity. When leaders avoid responsibility, people infer self-protection, and they infer it quickly.

Judgement aligned with values strengthens influence because it signals accountability. Judgement detached from responsibility weakens it because it reads as transactional, and nobody commits to a transaction.

Leaders who own their decisions, explain their reasoning and remain genuinely open to challenge accumulate influence even where they hold no authority at all.

Influence and restraint

Influence often increases when leaders decline to use it.

Restraint is not the same as withdrawal. A leader who goes quiet when challenged loses influence, and a leader who dominates the discussion loses it too, more slowly and less

visibly. What holds influence is staying engaged while a view is still forming, without needing to win the exchange.

Leaders who resist the urge to control create room for ownership. Allowing others to contribute meaningfully strengthens commitment rather than merely securing agreement. Restraint in the small decisions keeps influence available for the ones that warrant it.

Restraint signals confidence. Constant intervention signals its absence, whatever is being said.

Influence that is spent everywhere becomes noise. Influence applied selectively retains its force, and the selection is the skill.

Why influence is rented

Influence is usually described as though it were free.

It is slow. Credibility accrues over months in which nothing visible is happening, and there is no way to demonstrate to anyone, including yourself, that the time was well spent.

It looks like not working. The conversations that build an advice network are indistinguishable, from the outside and often from the inside, from chat.

It does not guarantee the outcome. You will sometimes be right, be trusted, be heard, and lose the decision anyway, because influence is not a mechanism for getting your way. It is a mechanism for being considered properly.

It is rented rather than owned. Influence is granted by other people and can be withdrawn by them without notice or explanation, usually for reasons you will not be told.

The mistake is not building influence. It is expecting influence to behave like authority, which is what makes leaders reach for escalation at week six.

Why reputation arrives first

Influence reveals itself across patterns rather than moments.

Over time, leaders become known as people whose involvement clarifies or complicates, steadies or unsettles, aligns or fragments. These reputations then determine future influence: leaders seen as consistent and fair are brought into conversations early, while leaders seen as unpredictable or self-interested are routed around, politely and without anyone ever saying so.

Reputation is not managed. It is lived, and it arrives in the room before you do.

The third team

Return to the three teams.

There is a version of week six that does not involve escalation. It involves finding out why the third team has stopped replying, on the assumption that there is a reason and that it is probably a good one.

Often there is. They are carrying something you did not know about. The change costs them more than it costs the others. Someone senior told them something that contradicts what you told them. They tried it, it went badly, and nobody wants to say so.

None of that is visible from the position of assuming the change is correct, which it may well be. Correctness is not the obstacle. It rarely is.

The leader who asks is doing something more useful than persuading. They are locating themselves in the advice network, which is where the work actually moves.

For a number of years my work was to walk into an organisation I had no authority over, form a judgement about how well it was led, and leave behind something its leaders would actually act on. Nothing I said could be enforced. If they chose to disregard it, they disregarded it.

What I learned there transfers further than I expected. People will engage with a hard assessment of their own work, and engage with it seriously, when two conditions hold. The first is that the assessment is evaluative rather than judgemental, a distinction almost everybody feels immediately and very few can name. The second is that the effort already made is acknowledged first, and acknowledged genuinely rather than as a technique.

Where either condition failed I had nothing left, because there was no authority underneath to fall back on.

THROUGH THE LENS



Where does frustration at a lack of control conceal an unwillingness to persuade?

Noticing your influence orientation

You may recognise tendencies in how you attempt to influence.

Some leaders rely heavily on reasoning and evidence. Others rely on relationships and rapport. Some assert direction quickly. Others wait for alignment to emerge, sometimes past the point where waiting is useful.

None of these approaches is inherently flawed. They become limiting when used exclusively, or unconsciously.

Ask yourself:

When authority is absent, how do I attempt to influence?

What do people most often respond to in my leadership?

Where do I feel frustrated by a lack of control?

Who comes to me for advice, and who used to?

Ethical influence

Influence carries responsibility, and it carries more of it when there is no authority to check it.

Manipulation erodes trust quickly, even where the outcome is favourable, and particularly where the outcome is

favourable, because that is when it is most tempting to repeat. Ethical influence respects autonomy. It invites engagement rather than engineering agreement.

Sustainable influence is transparent about trade-offs and honours disagreement rather than absorbing it. The test is simple enough: would this still work if the person could see exactly what you were doing?

Closing reflection

Influence without control is where leadership becomes most visible.

When authority is removed, what remains is clarity, judgement, presence and integrity. None of these can be demanded. All of them must be demonstrated, repeatedly, to people who are under no obligation to notice.

A question to sit with:

When I cannot rely on my role, what do people rely on in me?

If nothing comes to mind, that is itself the answer, and it is better learned now than at the point you need it.

MONTH 9

Leading Change in a Technological Age

Staying human while systems accelerate

Change has always been a feature of leadership. What is new is its speed.

Technological development, global interconnection and algorithmic decision-making have compressed time and expanded consequence. Leaders are expected to respond quickly while thinking deeply, to innovate without destabilising, and to adopt new tools without losing purpose.

In this environment, leadership is less about mastering technology and more about maintaining coherence while the systems around it evolve.

This chapter closes the season concerned with shaping, where judgement meets direction. It is the hardest place to hold that meeting, because technology changes the methods available faster than anyone can re-examine the purpose they were meant to serve.

Change as a constant, not a project

Many organisations still treat change as an initiative with a beginning and an end. In practice, change has become

continuous. Leaders who wait for stability before adapting find that stability never arrives.

This does not mean leadership must be reactive. It means leadership must be orientated.

John Kotter's study of organisational transformation found that change efforts fail for predictable reasons, and two of them matter here: a vision under-communicated, by his estimate by a factor of ten, and victory declared before the change has settled into the culture. Yet vision alone is insufficient when change is continuous rather than episodic. A vision designed to carry an organisation through one transformation will not carry it through a decade of them.

Change leadership today requires pacing. Too much change overwhelms. Too little stagnates. Most leaders are better at diagnosing this in other people's organisations than in their own.

What has actually changed

It is worth being specific, because vagueness here ages badly.

For most of the period in which modern management developed, technology did things leaders asked it to do. It calculated, stored, transmitted and reported. The outputs were inputs to a decision that a person then made.

What has changed is that systems now arrive with the decision already formed. They recommend the candidate,

draft the message, flag the risk, rank the priorities, and present a conclusion attached to a number that looks like confidence. The work they perform is no longer clerical. It is advisory.

This is a different relationship, and it asks a different question of leadership. The old question was whether the tool was accurate. The new question is whether the leader is still deciding, or merely ratifying.

Those can look identical from the outside. They frequently look identical from the inside too.

Technology as amplifier, not replacement

Technology amplifies leadership rather than replacing it.

Automated systems can accelerate processes, surface patterns and support decisions. They cannot assume responsibility. When leaders defer judgement to systems, accountability does not transfer with the decision; it blurs.

This distinction matters more than it appears to.

Tools reflect the values and assumptions embedded in them by the people who built them, usually for purposes other than yours. Leaders remain responsible for how a tool is used, how its output is interpreted, and where its authority stops. Delegating a decision to a system does not remove the ethical obligation. It redistributes the risk, generally onto people who were not consulted.

Leaders who engage with technology seriously ask not only *what can this do?* but *what should this do, and where should it stop?*

Misuse and disuse

The failure has two sides, and most leaders only guard against one.

Raja Parasuraman and Victor Riley mapped the ways people go wrong with automated systems and found the errors fall into opposite categories. Misuse is over-reliance: accepting what the system produces without adequate scrutiny. Disuse is under-reliance: ignoring or disabling a system that is more reliable than the judgement replacing it.

Both are failures of calibration rather than character. The leader who overrides every recommendation on principle is not being rigorous. They are making a different error from the leader who accepts every one, and often a more expensive one.

What is required is neither trust nor suspicion but calibration: reliance matched to actual reliability, revisited as both change.

This is unglamorous work. It is also the whole of the skill.

Judgement in algorithmic environments

Algorithmic recommendations create the illusion of objectivity. Yet they are shaped throughout by data

selection, weighting and design choices, each of which encodes a judgement someone else already made.

Parasuraman and Dietrich Manzey later separated two distinct problems in how people respond to this. Complacency is the drift towards relying on automated advice because it has been right before. Automation bias is the narrower failure of adopting that advice without independent verification. Both, they argued, are fundamentally problems of where attention is allocated, which is to say they intensify exactly when a leader is busiest.

Judgement therefore becomes more important as automation increases, not less. But it must be exercised at a particular moment: before the recommendation arrives, when it is still possible to decide what would count as a reason to reject it.

Leaders must determine which decisions can be supported by systems, which require human deliberation, and how to interpret a recommendation without surrendering responsibility for it.

Judgement exercised alongside technology strengthens leadership. Judgement replaced by it does not announce the substitution.

The nearest available human

There is a further risk, and it falls specifically on leaders.

Madeleine Clare Elish studied how responsibility is assigned when complex automated systems fail, and found a consistent pattern. Blame does not distribute itself across the system that produced the outcome. It concentrates on whichever person was closest to the controls. She called this the moral crumple zone: like the crumple zone of a car, the human absorbs the impact, except that here what is being protected is the integrity of the technological system, at the expense of the person nearest to it.

Consider how this arrives in practice.

Something goes wrong in a process that is largely automated. There is a review. The review establishes that the system performed as designed, that the inputs were within expected parameters, and that the model behaved correctly given what it was given.

It then identifies the person who approved the exception on the fourteenth of the month.

That person read a summary, had about ten minutes, and was not in a position to evaluate the model's reasoning, because nobody in the organisation was. They approved it because the alternative was halting a process that thousands of people depended on, on a misgiving they could not have defended either.

Nothing is at fault. The system is working. What has happened is that accountability has been gathered from across the whole arrangement and delivered, in full, to whoever was standing nearest the controls.

Leaders should recognise the position. The person who signs off on a system's recommendation becomes the nearest available human.

This is not an argument against using such systems. It is an argument for insisting, in advance and in writing, on what a leader is actually being asked to approve: the output, or the reasoning that produced it. A leader who cannot answer that question has accepted the liability without the authority.

A recommendation arrives

A system flags a decision. It comes with a ranking, a short explanation and a confidence figure of eighty-seven per cent.

There are twenty minutes before the meeting. Reconstructing how the figure was produced would take considerably longer than that, and the people who could explain it are in a different organisation.

There are three available responses. Accept it, and discover later whether it was right. Reject it, and be unable to say why beyond discomfort. Or ask the only question that can be answered in twenty minutes: if this turns out to be wrong, what will we wish we had checked?

The third is not a technical question. It requires no understanding of the model. It is a judgement about consequence, and it can be made by someone who does not

know how the system works, which is fortunate, because that is nearly everyone.

The leader who asks it is still deciding. The leader who does not has become a signature.

Silence during change

Periods of change heighten anxiety. Uncertainty invites speculation, and silence during it is almost always interpreted unfavourably.

Leaders who remain present during transition stabilise their environment even when the outcome is unclear. Presence here does not mean constant reassurance, which is usually recognised as management. It means visibility, honesty and attentiveness, including the willingness to say that a decision has not yet been made and to say why.

Leaders who acknowledge uncertainty while holding direction build credibility. False certainty spends that credibility, and the reckoning arrives when reality does.

Presence signals care. During change it is often the only signal people can read.

Learning at the edge

Technological change challenges established expertise, which is what makes it uncomfortable for exactly the people who have the most of it.

Leaders who rely on past success feel most exposed when familiar skills lose their relevance. In those moments learning stops being a personal preference and becomes a leadership act, because what is being modelled is whether not knowing is survivable here.

This is where the distinction drawn in Month 6 does its work. A leader who treats capability as fixed experiences obsolescence as a verdict on themselves. A leader who treats it as developable experiences the same obsolescence as information, and acts on it sooner.

Leaders who model learning invite others into it. Defending certainty teaches an organisation to conceal confusion, which is more expensive and much harder to detect.

Learning at the edge requires being comfortably visible while not knowing something.

Ethics in accelerated systems

Speed intensifies ethical risk.

When decisions are made quickly and at scale, unintended consequences multiply before anyone has noticed the intention. Leaders must attend to fairness, bias and impact with particular care where technology mediates the outcome, because the mediation makes the harm harder to see and much easier to defend.

Ethical leadership in these contexts means asking difficult questions early rather than managing harm later. It requires

slowing a decision when the stakes justify it, even where speed is what gets rewarded, and it is almost always what gets rewarded.

Far from obstructing innovation, ethics is a condition of its surviving.

Holding course

This is where the season's argument concludes.

Change challenges direction, and it does so by disguising itself as direction. New capability arrives, and with it the suggestion that the destination should be revised to accommodate it. Leaders may find themselves revising priorities frequently in response to information that is genuinely new and genuinely irrelevant to where they were going.

Effective leaders distinguish between direction and method.

Methods evolve. Direction endures. Technology belongs almost entirely to the first category, which is why it can be adopted enthusiastically without disturbing anything that matters, and why adopting it as though it were the second is so destabilising.

Maintaining the distinction allows leaders to adapt without incoherence. It also reassures everyone else that while the processes will keep changing, the purpose they serve will not. That reassurance is not rhetorical. In a period of continuous change it is the main thing a leader supplies.

THROUGH THE LENS



When a new capability arrives, do you ask what it lets you do, or what it lets you do better?

Noticing your change orientation

You may notice how you respond when change accelerates.

Some leaders embrace novelty readily but struggle to maintain continuity. Others protect stability and resist adaptation past the point where it is affordable. Some require certainty before acting. Others act well before understanding, and call it decisiveness.

None of these tendencies is inherently flawed. They become limiting when they operate without awareness.

For the month ahead:

- How do I respond when change accelerates?
- Where do I rely on technology to avoid a judgement I should be making?
- What anchors my leadership when familiar structures shift?
- If a system I depend on were wrong, how long would it take me to find out?

These reflections deepen readiness without demanding certainty.

The human core of future leadership

Despite the acceleration, leadership remains relational.

People continue to look for clarity, fairness and meaning. They continue to respond to presence, integrity and judgement. Technology changes how leadership is expressed and how quickly its effects propagate. It does not change why leadership matters, and it has not yet produced anything that will accept responsibility on a leader's behalf.

The future of leadership belongs to those who can integrate innovation with humanity, and who remain willing to be the person who decided.

Closing reflection

Change will continue to accelerate. Technology will continue to evolve. Leadership will continue to be tested by both.

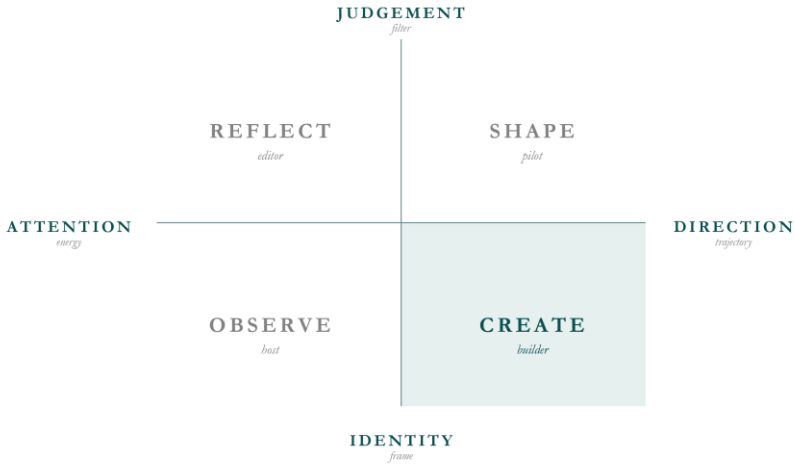
One question that does not change with the technology:

As systems become faster and more complex, what remains non-negotiable in how I lead?

Whatever survives that question is the part of your leadership that was never really about the circumstances.

CREATE

Identity × Direction



Identity meets Direction. You build what remains.

LOOKING BACK

Before you read on, and without turning back: what direction have you set since the last season, and who has moved because of it? Name one of each.

Season practice: build past yourself.

MONTH 10

Purpose and What You Are Building

Why direction without meaning eventually stalls

Leaders are asked constantly what they are working on. They are almost never asked what they are building.

The two questions sound similar. They are not. Work describes activity. Building describes accumulation: what exists at the end because of the choices made along the way. Most leaders can answer the first question immediately. The second usually produces a pause.

That pause is the subject of this month.

Purpose is not motivation

Purpose has been flattened by overuse. It is commonly offered as a source of energy: find the reason, and the effort becomes easier. This is a small idea wearing the clothes of a large one.

Purpose is not fuel. It is a constraint.

Its function is not to make leaders work harder but to make certain choices unavailable. A leader with clear purpose has fewer options, not more. Opportunities that would once have been tempting become obviously wrong. Requests

that would have required deliberation are declined in a sentence. Purpose reduces the size of the decision.

This is why leaders without purpose describe exhaustion more often than confusion. Every option remains live. Nothing has been ruled out in advance. The work of leadership becomes the work of continuous evaluation.

Purpose does not add energy. It removes the drain.

What building actually means

Consider two leaders who inherit the same struggling department in the same month.

The first stabilises it. Performance recovers, reporting improves, complaints fall. After three years the department works, and the leader is promoted.

The second stabilises it more slowly. Along the way, decisions are pushed to the people closest to them. Two junior colleagues are seated in meetings they have no formal right to attend. An unreasonable amount of time is spent explaining reasoning rather than simply issuing it. After three years the department works, and this leader is promoted too.

The difference appears in year four.

The first department declines. The second does not.

Nothing in the first leader's conduct was wrong. The recovery was real and the promotion was earned. But what

was built was a period of good performance, and periods end. What the second leader built was a way of working that no longer required them.

Building is not the same as achieving. Achievement belongs to the leader. What is built belongs to whatever comes next.

Where identity meets direction

This is the fourth region of the lens.

Judgement meeting direction produces strategy: what matters, and where it leads. Identity meeting direction produces something else. It produces purpose, not where leadership is going, but why that destination is the one worth reaching.

Direction alone answers where. Identity alone answers who. Held together, they answer the only question capable of sustaining leadership across years rather than quarters.

What is this for?

Leaders who hold direction without identity build efficiently towards ends they have never examined. Identity without direction stays principled and produces very little. Neither is failure. Both are incomplete.

The turn towards what outlasts you

Developmental psychology has a name for the shift this month describes.

Erik Erikson placed at the centre of middle adulthood a tension he called generativity against stagnation. Generativity is the concern with establishing and guiding what comes after: investment in people, work and institutions that will continue without you. Stagnation is its opposite: effort turning inward until the self becomes the project.

Erikson was not writing about leadership. The distinction transfers anyway.

Most leaders reach a point at which further accumulation stops producing meaning. More responsibility, more visibility, more achievement: the returns flatten. What remains available is contribution.

This is rarely a dramatic conversion. It arrives more often as a quiet loss of interest in things that mattered a great deal only recently.

Leaders who recognise the shift redirect. The alternative is to intensify, working harder at a version of leadership that has stopped repaying the effort.

Why purpose decays

Purpose is not established once.

It erodes, and it erodes invisibly, because nothing announces the loss. The work continues. The results hold. The decay shows only as a slow increase in the effort required to care.

Three causes are common.

Success. When an ambition is met, the purpose that organised the climb no longer applies. Many leaders keep climbing, because the alternative is choosing again.

Substitution. Measures built to track progress towards a purpose gradually become the purpose. The proxy replaces the thing.

Dilution. Enough reasonable compromises accumulate that the original intention survives only in the language used to describe it.

None of these are moral failures. They are the ordinary physics of sustained work. The response is not guilt but attention: noticing decay early, while restoring purpose is still a matter of adjustment rather than reinvention.

How the measure eats the purpose

Substitution deserves a closer look, because it is the one that happens to competent, well-intentioned teams.

A customer service function exists to reduce the effort customers have to expend. That is the purpose, and everyone believes it.

Effort is hard to measure, so the team measures average call handling time, which is a reasonable proxy and easy to collect. Targets are set. Dashboards are built. Performance conversations begin to reference the number, because it is the number that is available.

Within two years, handling time has improved substantially and customers are calling back more often, because the fastest way to end a call is not always to resolve the problem. Every individual is meeting target. The function is performing well against everything it measures. It is now producing the opposite of what it exists for.

No one decided this. No one would defend it if it were described to them in these terms, which is why it is never described in these terms. The purpose was not abandoned. It was replaced by something that could be counted, and the replacement happened one sensible reporting decision at a time.

The test is simple and rarely applied: if your measure improved and your purpose did not, would you find out?

Building past yourself

The clearest test of what a leader is building is what happens in their absence.

Leaders who build capability produce colleagues who decide well without being asked. Build dependency and you produce colleagues who wait. While the leader is present, the two look almost identical. Only one has built anything.

When schools moved online at short notice, I built a way of evaluating provision remotely, because every instrument we had assumed a building. It was used across a group of schools, and at the time it felt like the most useful thing I had made.

It did not last. As the technology improved, the instrument stopped fitting what it was measuring, and it was replaced by something better, which is what should have happened.

What survived was not the process. It was the assumption underneath it, that provision can be examined whatever form it arrives in. I would rather have built something permanent. What continued was a question, and questions turn out to be more portable than instruments.

The credit problem

Building rather than achieving is not the comfortable choice, and it is better to know why now than to find out later.

Credit becomes unclear. Work that outlasts a leader rarely carries their name, and the leader who made a team capable of thinking will usually be less visible than the leader who did the thinking.

The returns arrive late, often after you have gone. You will not be in the room when the thing you built does its most useful work, and you will not hear about it.

It is slower in the period where speed is being assessed. The second leader in the department above took longer to produce the same recovery, and in most organisations the first one would have been promoted sooner.

Whoever follows can undo it, without malice, simply by not valuing it.

Some leaders find all this intolerable.

That, too, is information, and it is better to have it now than to discover it at the point where the choice actually presents itself.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> *What are you building that would still exist if you left tomorrow?*

Noticing your creative orientation

Some leaders are clear about purpose but vague about direction: what they stand for is settled, where it leads is not. Others move decisively towards ends they have never examined. Some build capability in others instinctively. Others build systems that quietly require their continued presence to function.

None of these are flaws. They describe where leadership's weight currently sits.

Hold these against the year so far:

- What would remain if you left?
- What are you accumulating that will not compound?
- Where has a measure quietly replaced the thing it was meant to measure?

What would you still choose to build if no one attributed it to you?

Closing reflection

Leadership is eventually measured less by what a leader achieved than by what continued.

A question for the long view:

If my leadership were judged only by what remains after I go, what would I be leaving?

Most of what a leader accumulates does not survive their leaving. What does survive is usually something they were not counting.

MONTH 11

Leading with Others

What continues in the habits of others

In a meeting, someone fairly junior begins a sentence and someone senior talks across them.

Neither notices. The meeting continues. Nothing about the exchange is remarkable enough to remember by lunchtime.

It happens again three weeks later, and again a month after that. No one is unkind. No one intends anything. At no point does anybody decide that this person's contributions are worth less than the others.

By the sixth month the person has stopped beginning sentences. They wait to be asked now, and they are asked less often, because people who wait are easy to overlook.

Nothing was decided. A norm was established.

What culture is made of

That is what culture is: not the values on the wall, but the accumulated residue of moments nobody thought were about culture at the time.

It forms through what leaders notice, tolerate, reward and ignore. It is shaped by whose voice carries and whose is talked over, by which questions get answered and which get

deferred, by what happens in the three seconds after someone says something inconvenient.

Culture does not require statements in order to exist. It requires repetition.

Leaders who assume culture can be engineered through declaration underestimate how it is actually made. A stated value that contradicts a repeated behaviour does not compete with that behaviour. It is simply filed as something the organisation says.

Culture reflects leadership conduct long before it reflects leadership intention, and it reflects it more accurately.

Collaboration beyond cooperation

Collaboration is routinely mistaken for cooperation.

Cooperation means working together within agreed boundaries. Collaboration asks for something harder: thinking together, challenging assumptions, and holding disagreement long enough for it to be useful.

Effective collaboration does not remove tension. It contains it.

Leaders who equate collaboration with harmony end up suppressing disagreement in the name of efficiency, and they usually succeed, which is the problem. Understood as a thinking process instead, collaboration lets productive friction surface without letting it turn personal.

What actually makes a group intelligent

There is direct evidence about what determines how well a group thinks, and it is not what most leaders assume.

Anita Woolley, Christopher Chabris, Alex Pentland, Nada Hashmi and Thomas Malone tested groups across a range of tasks and found something they called a collective intelligence factor: a general capacity that predicted how well a group would perform, much as individual intelligence predicts individual performance.

The striking part was what it correlated with. Collective intelligence was only modestly related to the average intelligence of the members, and to the intelligence of the smartest member. What predicted it more strongly was the social sensitivity of the group, the proportion of women in it, and how evenly conversational turns were distributed.

That last factor deserves attention. Groups in which a few people did most of the talking performed worse than groups in which contribution was spread, independent of how able the talkers were.

Return to the meeting at the start of this chapter. Whatever that junior person would have said is now permanently unavailable, and the group has become measurably less capable without anyone experiencing a loss. Talent was not wasted through any decision. It was displaced by an interruption pattern that nobody was tracking.

A leader cannot make people more intelligent. A leader can determine how the available intelligence is distributed across the conversation, which turns out to matter more.

Psychological safety and responsibility

Psychological safety has become a prominent idea in leadership, and a frequently misread one. It is the belief that one can speak, question and contribute without fear of humiliation or reprisal.

Amy Edmondson arrived at it by accident. Studying medication errors across hospital nursing units, she found that the better-led teams reported more errors than the worse ones. They were not making more mistakes. They were willing to say so. Her later study of fifty-one work teams established the mechanism: psychological safety predicts learning behaviour, and learning behaviour predicts performance. Safety is not the reward for a good team. It is the condition that produces one.

The common misreading is to treat it as comfort.

Safety without responsibility produces complacency. Responsibility without safety produces silence, which looks like agreement and behaves like risk.

Leadership creates safety not by lowering standards but by separating challenge from threat. The distinction is audible in how a leader responds to being contradicted, and everyone in the room hears it.

The leader's role in collective thinking

Leaders shape how groups think, mostly without speaking about thinking at all.

They do it by framing the question, setting the pace, and modelling whether curiosity is safe. Leaders who dominate the thinking limit what the group can produce. Abdicating it produces drift, which is slower to notice and harder to correct.

Effective leadership sits between: enough structure to focus effort, enough space for contribution to be real rather than invited.

This requires restraint, and restraint is difficult in exactly the moment it matters. Leaders who resist resolving uncertainty too early allow better ideas to arrive. A leader who can sit in ambiguity signals confidence in the group's capacity, which is itself a form of instruction.

Attention as permission

In a group, attention is not a private act. It is distributed, and everyone can see where it went.

Leaders who listen attentively, acknowledge contributions and stay engaged during disagreement signal that participation is worth the effort. Multitasking, interrupting or dismissing ideas suppresses it, regardless of intention, and usually without the leader learning that they have.

This matters most where power differences exist. The more authority a leader holds, the more their attention functions as permission. A senior person glancing at a screen while someone speaks is not merely being rude. They are setting a price on contribution.

Leadership presence either expands or contracts the space available to everyone else.

Judgement and group decision-making

Collective decision-making does not remove the need for judgement. It redistributes it, and it concentrates the remainder.

Leaders stay responsible for outcomes even when the decision was informed by many voices. That responsibility cannot be transferred to a process, however genuinely consultative the process was.

Effective leaders combine wide input with clear ownership. They listen broadly, decide plainly, and explain the reasoning, including the parts of the input they did not take. Judgement exercised after genuine consultation strengthens trust. Consultation followed by a decision that was already made destroys it, and is detected far more often than leaders suppose.

What the group becomes

Collective leadership reveals itself through patterns rather than events.

Over time, groups become known for being open or guarded, thoughtful or rushed, inclusive or hierarchical, adaptive or rigid. None of these are accidents. Each is a behaviour that was repeated until it stopped requiring a decision.

Leaders who periodically examine how collaboration actually feels inside their teams can still adjust. After a certain point the pattern stops being a pattern and becomes simply how things are done here, and at that stage it outlasts anyone's intention to change it.

Two years later

Suppose you return to a team you used to run, two years after leaving it.

The first thing you notice is what they have kept. Someone uses a phrase you used to use, in a discussion about something you never worked on. A decision gets made in a way you recognise. Nobody credits any of it to you. They think it is simply how things are done.

The second thing you notice is what they have dropped, and that is the more useful information.

Everything that required your presence to enforce has gone. The meeting format you insisted on, the reporting rhythm you defended, the standard you personally held the line on: unless someone else found it worth holding, it went within months of your leaving, and quietly.

What remains is the part that was built rather than imposed. It is almost never the part you would have predicted, and it is usually smaller than you hoped and more durable than you expected.

This is the only reliable test of a culture. Not whether it exists while you are enforcing it, but what survives the removal of the enforcement.

One cost is specific to this, and belongs here rather than in any general account of leadership. Building a culture rather than directing one means talking less in rooms where talking is how contribution gets counted. Leaders who distribute the conversational space give up some of their own, and organisations rarely promote for it.

> THROUGH THE LENS
>
> *Whose contribution did you make room for this week, and whose did you not?*

Noticing your collaborative orientation

You may notice tendencies in how you lead with others.

Some leaders prioritise efficiency and struggle with inclusion. Others prioritise inclusion and avoid deciding. Some create space for ideas but supply no direction. Others supply direction and leave no space.

None of these orientations is inherently flawed. They become limiting when they operate without awareness.

A last set of questions:

- How do others experience collaboration with me?
- Where do I invite contribution, and where do I close it down?
- How comfortable am I with disagreement that slows progress?
- In my last meeting, who spoke least, and do I know why?

Culture as legacy

Leadership legacy is rarely found in documents or initiatives. It is found in the habits people carry forward, and in whether those habits still work once the leader who shaped them has gone.

Leaders who cultivate thoughtful collaboration leave behind groups that continue to learn. Centralised control leaves behind dependency, which looks like loyalty until the moment it is tested.

Collective intelligence is a leadership inheritance. It is the clearest evidence that something was built rather than merely achieved.

Closing reflection

Leading with others is not about consensus, and it is not about control. It is about creating the conditions in which thinking, contribution and responsibility are shared in more than name.

One question, at the end of the next meeting you lead:

When I leave the room, does the quality of thinking improve, decline, or remain unchanged?

The third answer is the one to stay with, and not because it is bad news. If the quality of thinking holds when you leave, ask what made that possible. It may be the clearest evidence of what you have built.

MONTH 12

Leadership Revisited

Integration, renewal, and the long view

Leadership rarely changes through revelation.

It changes through accumulation.

Over twelve months, moments of judgement, attention, restraint and responsibility begin to cohere. What once felt fragmented starts to align. Leadership becomes less effortful, not because the demands have reduced, but because the coherence has increased.

This final chapter returns to leadership as a state rather than a role. It asks what a year of sustained attention has produced, what it has not, and what happens after it ends.

Returning to the lens

At the beginning of this book, leadership was introduced as something that could be seen rather than measured. Four forces, and four regions formed where they meet.

Return to it now and it should read differently. The forces are no longer definitions. They have become specific.

Judgement is no longer a word. It is a set of decisions you could name: the one made too quickly, the one avoided for a fortnight, the one that was right and unpopular and held anyway.

Direction is no longer an aspiration. It is visible in what you protected and in what you allowed to end, and a year is long enough for that to show in a calendar rather than in intentions.

Identity is no longer a statement of values. It is what stayed constant when the pressure changed, and what did not. The second of those is the more useful information.

Attention is no longer a resource to be managed. It is a record of who was noticed and who was not.

A year is long enough for four categories to become four kinds of evidence.

The year in four movements

The twelve months moved through the regions of the lens in a deliberate order.

The reason was given at the start. Leaders who shape before they have observed impose. Creating before you have reflected builds something you have never examined.

You have now moved through it in the intended sequence, which is more than most leadership development offers.

Ask which season you found hardest. That is usually the one your leadership leans away from, and the lean is more informative than the difficulty.

What matters is not balance

What matters is not whether leadership feels balanced. Balance is situational.

What matters is whether leadership feels intentional.

Leaders who hold leadership intentionally can adjust emphasis without losing themselves. They know when to lean into judgement, when to attend more fully, when to clarify direction, and when to return to identity. They are not evenly distributed across the four. They are deliberate about which one the moment is asking for.

This fluency is the mark of leadership maturity.

A moment, compressed

Here is what a year of this can make possible.

A decision arrives in a meeting. It is not a large decision, but it is contested, and the room is waiting.

A year earlier the response would have been immediate. Either a quick resolution to relieve the discomfort, or a deferral dressed up as consultation.

Now something different can happen. Before the response, four questions pass: what actually matters here, and what am I being distracted by? What am I not noticing, and who in this room has not spoken? Is this consistent with how I have decided before? Where does this lead if it becomes a precedent?

None of them is articulated, and none of them takes long. Then the decision is made, and whatever comes of it, it was made rather than reached for.

That is what a year of noticing is for. Not a framework being applied, but a set of questions that have become fast.

The lens does not stay open. It compresses.

What has changed, and what has not

After sustained reflection, some things usually become clearer. Leaders notice that they tolerate ambiguity with greater ease, decide with more restraint, attend more carefully to presence, react less to noise, and recognise patterns earlier than they used to.

Equally, some things remain exactly as they were.

Leadership does not resolve itself. Pressure persists. Uncertainty remains. Responsibility continues to carry weight, and carries it whether or not you have spent a year thinking about it.

The difference lies not in the absence of difficulty but in the quality of the response.

Renewal is not reinvention. It is refinement.

What a year of attention does not do

This is the point at which most books of this kind go vague, so the limits should be stated.

A year of attention does not make leadership comfortable. It does not reduce the weight of responsibility, and it may well increase it: leaders who notice more are carrying more.

It does not resolve structural problems. A leader with excellent judgement inside a badly designed organisation will make better decisions within a system that continues to produce bad ones. Clarity about that is useful. It is not the same as fixing it.

It does not guarantee recognition. Coherent leadership draws less attention to itself than the performed kind, and what draws less attention is noticed later, if at all.

It does not stop the patterns returning, either. Under sufficient pressure the old defaults reassert themselves: the rushed decision, the avoided conversation, the attention that narrows to whoever is loudest. What changes is the lag. How long before you notice, and how much is spent before you correct.

That is a smaller claim than most leadership books make. It is also the one that survives contact with a difficult year.

Integration rather than optimisation

Modern leadership culture emphasises optimisation: better habits, sharper skills, greater efficiency. Each improvement is real. The difficulty is that improvements accumulate without necessarily cohering.

Integration offers something different.

It involves aligning judgement, presence, values and direction so that leadership feels whole rather than segmented. Leaders who pursue optimisation alone often improve their performance while increasing their fragmentation: more capable in more directions, and less certain which one they are facing.

Integration allows leaders to carry complexity without becoming brittle.

This is why development that focuses solely on technique rarely endures. Techniques change. Coherence remains.

Leadership over time

Leadership is best understood longitudinally.

Viewed across months and years, it reveals trajectories rather than snapshots. Leaders move through phases of expansion and contraction, certainty and doubt, influence and restraint. None of these phases is a verdict. Each is a season, and seasons are not moral.

Those who remain attentive to the cycles are able to renew themselves without crisis.

Renewal does not require withdrawal. It requires recognition.

Recognition of fatigue before burnout. Recognition of drift before the loss of direction. Recognition of misalignment before compromise hardens into habit. In each case the

cost of noticing early is small, and the cost of noticing late is not.

Authority that needs less asserting

Renewed leadership usually needs to assert itself less.

Where it used to assert, it clarifies. Where it used to hurry, it judges. It needs less visibility because it has more presence.

This is not the same as becoming quieter. Some leaders renew into something more expressive than they were, not less. What changes is not the register but the source: the authority no longer depends on being asserted, which is why it is so often mistaken for diminished ambition by people who have not encountered it before.

Leaders who renew themselves periodically remain able to lead others without depleting themselves. They resist the pressure to perform leadership, and instead inhabit it.

Holding leadership lightly

One of the paradoxes of leadership maturity is that leaders begin to hold leadership more lightly.

There is no disengagement in it. What reduces is attachment to role, to ego, and to having events confirm your judgement. Leaders who hold leadership lightly are more adaptable precisely because they are less defensive: there is less of themselves tied up in being right.

They listen more openly. They decide more cleanly. They relinquish control more willingly when relinquishing it is the correct thing to do.

Holding leadership lightly allows it to travel further than you can carry it.

What endures

Across contexts, cultures and technologies, the same preferences keep surfacing: clarity over certainty, presence over performance, judgement over rhetoric, and integrity over image.

These are not fashionable. They are foundational, which is a different and more durable thing.

Leadership that endures is rarely dramatic. It is consistent, thoughtful and accountable, and it is usually described, by those who worked under it, in unremarkable language.

Leadership as contribution

Leadership is a contribution before it is an identity.

It is what leaders offer others through the way they decide, attend and act. It is measured not by recognition but by effect, and the two are frequently unrelated.

Leaders who understand leadership as contribution remain oriented outward. They spend less effort proving themselves and more serving what they have chosen to serve.

Contribution sustains leadership long after ambition has stopped being sufficient.

> **THROUGH THE LENS**
>
> *Which of the four forces has changed most this year, and which has not moved at all?*

Month thirteen

The obvious question, having reached the end of a year, is what to do with the next one.

The answer is not to begin again, though you may. The four forces do not need relearning. What changes is the interval at which you return to them.

In the first year the lens needed a season for each region. After that it tends to need considerably less: a full turn through all four in a quarter, perhaps, or simply those moments when something feels wrong and the reason is not yet obvious. That feeling is almost always one of the four forces reporting a problem. Identifying which one is often the whole of the work.

This book does not end with a model to complete or a plan to follow. It ends with something smaller and more durable: a set of questions that have become quick enough to use while leading, rather than only afterwards.

The lens does not belong to a year. It belongs to moments. To the moments when leadership is required, when pressure rises, and when responsibility cannot be deferred.

Some readers will eventually want the lens measured rather than noticed: a profile of where their leadership sits, drawn from more than their own account of it. That is a different instrument, built on the same four forces, and the address at the end of this book is where to find it when it is ready.

Leadership clarity is not a destination. It is a practice.

Closing reflection

As you close this book, consider this question quietly:

Has my leadership become clearer, or merely more complex?

If clarity has increased, even slightly, renewal has begun.

That is enough.

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Years later he mentored me through university. Years after that he became my line manager, and taught me that professional development is not a box to be completed but the ordinary condition of doing the work properly.

To be taught by the same person as a pupil, as a student and then as a colleague is unusual. It is also the nearest thing I have to evidence for what this book argues: that leadership accumulates, that it shows itself in patterns rather than in moments, and that what it builds only becomes visible much later.

At the Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates, Phil Banks and Paul Collins-Smith taught me more about inspection, leadership, school improvement and educational reform than I can reasonably set down here. A good deal of what this book argues about judgement and direction was formed in conversation with them, frequently while the

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suj Munir is a Scottish educator who has spent over a decade in leadership positions in international education, most of it in the United Arab Emirates.

He has taught, led schools as a senior leader, and inspected international schools. At the Ministry of Education in the UAE he worked on inspection, school improvement and educational reform. He now works for GEMS Education, one of the largest education providers in the world.

Inspection is an unusual training for a book of this kind. It involves walking into an organisation you did not build, forming a judgement about how it is led, and being answerable for that judgement to the people who have to live with it. It teaches you quickly how much of leadership is visible from the outside, and how much of what is visible is not the part that matters.

That combination, the classroom, the leadership team and the system looking in from outside, shaped the questions this book asks. He has assessed leadership, and he has been the person being assessed.

The Leadership Lens grew out of a conviction formed across those years: that everything we ask of the people we lead, we are obliged to ask first of ourselves. A lens that is used changes what it sees. Leadership that is examined stays

capable of adapting. Leadership that is assumed simply hardens.

He is the founder of Archema Labs and writes on leadership, professional development and educational reform. He lives in Dubai with his wife and their two children.

Leadership and teacher assessments built on the lens are in development at Archema Labs. To hear when they are ready, or to say what the year produced, go to leadershiplens.otovios.com.

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The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Free edition.

This book lives at leadershiplens.otovios.com, where there is also news of the leadership and teacher assessments being built on the lens at Archema Labs.

Leadership is not what we do. It is how we see.

Before decisions are made, before words are spoken, leadership has already taken shape. Every leader carries an inner lens through which complexity becomes meaning, and meaning becomes action. That lens, more than any technique or title, determines the quality of influence that follows.

The Leadership Lens is a year of practice in seeing clearly. Across twelve months it moves through four seasons, observe, reflect, shape and create, and the four forces that leadership is made of: judgement, direction, identity and attention.

There is no model to apply and no score to reach. Each chapter opens on a scene you will recognise, then asks one question at a time about how you actually lead. Read a chapter a month, and let the year do the work.

For leaders who have grown more proficient and less certain, and who suspect the answer is not another technique.

Suj Munir has spent over a decade in leadership positions in international education. His work spans Ministry of Education inspection and school improvement in the United Arab Emirates and international school inspections. He works at GEMS Education and is the founder of Archema Labs.