

A ROOM FULL OF ADVICE

Emerson on Taking Counsel Without Surrendering the Decision

Leaders have more advice available than at any time in history, yet many are less certain about which advice to use. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrestled with this problem in 1841. His answer still holds: stay in the room, listen closely, and keep responsibility for the decision. This paper translates that idea into six practical principles, a ninety-minute leadership discussion, and an action plan that can begin Monday.

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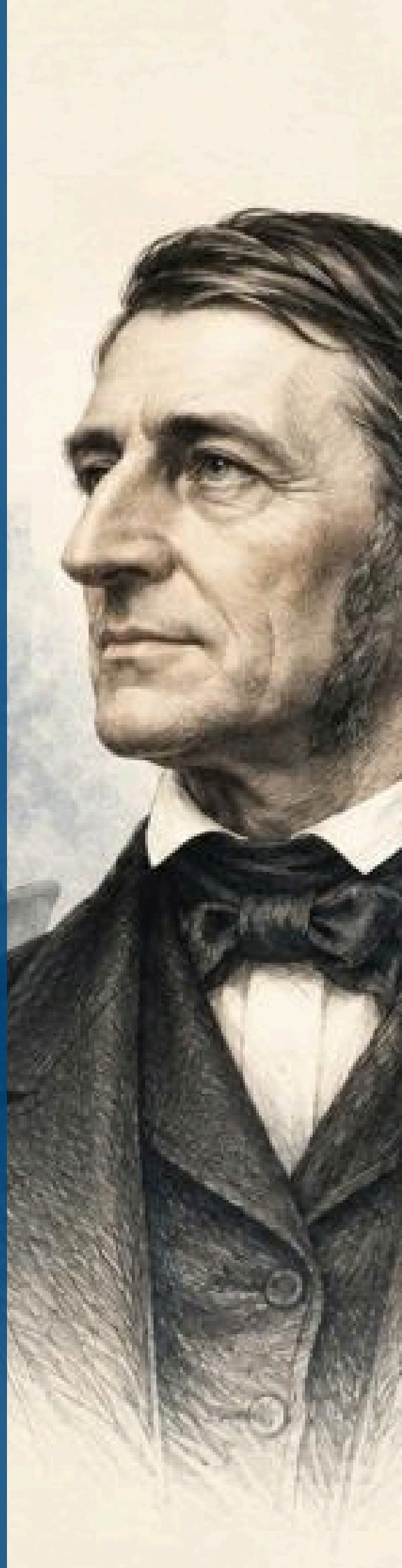


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." – Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

The central leadership problem in this paper is simple to describe and difficult to handle well. A leader needs other people's judgment, experience, and dissent. At the same time, the leader cannot hand responsibility for the final call to the room. When those two obligations blur, one of two things usually happens. The leader becomes overly dependent on consensus, or the leader withdraws and mistakes isolation for conviction.

Emerson's language helps separate those choices. In "Self-Reliance," he praises the person who can remain among other people and still retain an independent mind. In "Greatness," he makes the companion point that every person we meet knows something we do not. Taken together, those ideas produce a practical discipline: take the counsel and keep the decision.

That discipline matters even more now. Leaders operate inside a constant stream of recommendations from advisers, boards, peer groups, consultants, dashboards, social media, podcasts, and artificial intelligence. The volume is useful, but it also creates a subtle risk. The strongest voice, the cleanest presentation, or the emerging agreement in the room can begin to feel like the decision itself. Research on advice taking describes a similar pattern: people often adjust their judgments in response to advice, but the weight they give it depends on confidence, expertise, incentives, and how the advice is presented.

The practical answer is not to listen less. It is to become more deliberate about what belongs to the adviser and what belongs to the decision owner. Advisers contribute facts, experience, questions, options, and warnings. The owner of the decision determines the standard, weighs the tradeoffs, accepts the consequences, and acts. A good process protects both roles.

The paper develops six ideas that support that process. Own the call. Learn the specific thing another person knows better than you do. Change your mind when the facts or your judgment change. Study competitors without copying their identity. Build relationships that combine truth with care. Remember that deferred costs eventually reach the owner. The final idea comes through Emerson's treatment of Napoleon: a strength that nobody can question or restrain eventually becomes a liability.

The test is behavioral. A year from now, leaders using this approach should be able to point to difficult decisions that were improved by counsel but remained clearly theirs. Their teams should be more willing to disagree without becoming careless or cruel. Deferred issues should be named earlier. Most important, leaders should be able to explain what they believe, where the advice changed their thinking, and why they chose the path they did.

THE MAN WHO WROTE IT

"Life only avails, not the having lived."
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"



Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of those names people know without knowing much. Most of us were handed one of his essays in school, read four pages, and put it down. That is a shame, because the man who wrote them had a harder life than his reputation suggests, and he was working on a problem every leader has.

He was born in Boston in 1803. His father was a minister and died thirteen days before Waldo's eighth birthday. There were five boys. His mother sold her husband's library and took in boarders to keep the family going. They were not destitute, but money was short for the rest of his childhood, and he knew it.

He got into Harvard at fourteen. He paid his way by running errands for the college president for about forty dollars a year, waiting tables in the dining commons, and tutoring on the side. He graduated in 1821 and taught school for four years before following his father into the ministry.

Then came the part that shaped him. In 1829 he married Ellen Tucker. Seventeen months later she was dead of tuberculosis at nineteen. He was twenty-seven, a widower, and running a church he was starting to doubt.

He quit. In 1832 he resigned from Boston's Second Church because he could not in good conscience serve communion any longer. He was walking away from his profession, his income, and the only career he had trained for, at twenty-nine. His family thought he had lost his mind. He sailed for Europe that December, met Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle, and came home in the fall of 1833 with no job and no plan.

What he built instead was a speaking career. He gave his first public lecture in November 1833 and kept going for almost fifty years, somewhere around fifteen hundred talks in all. He spent roughly six months a year on the road, traveling as far as San Francisco in an era when that meant weeks of hard travel. Eighty lectures in 1867 alone. The essays people read today started as those talks, rewritten again and again based on how audiences responded. His own publisher put it well: he molded his books on the platform.

An inheritance from his first wife's estate, which he had to go to court to collect, eventually gave him about twelve hundred dollars a year. That was roughly what the church had paid him. It bought him a floor, not a fortune, and he worked for his living every year after.

He settled in Concord, remarried in 1835, and published *Nature* in 1836. In 1837 he gave a speech at Harvard that people still quote. In 1838 he gave another one at Harvard's divinity school that offended the faculty so badly the university kept its distance for nearly thirty years. He did not take it back.

"Self-Reliance" came out in March 1841. Ten months later, his five-year-old son Waldo died of scarlet fever. Two years after that he published an essay in which he admits, in plain words, that the grief taught him nothing at all. He had written the most famous argument in American life for standing on your own, and then life tested it in the worst way available, and he did not pretend the argument covered it. That honesty is a large part of why he is still worth reading.

He kept working for another thirty years. His memory began failing in the early 1870s, and by the end he sometimes could not come up with his own name. He died in 1882 at seventy-eight.

He was a man of his century and he held some views we would not defend today. He is worth reading anyway, the way you read anyone: take what is useful, leave what is not.

Here is why a working leader should care. Emerson was not a professor and never ran a company, but he was self-employed, he earned what he ate, he made an unpopular call in public and paid for it for decades, and he spent his whole career on one question. That question is this: what do you owe your own judgment, and what do you owe the people around you?

Every leader answers that question every week, usually without noticing.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which part of Emerson's life makes his argument about independent judgment more credible to you?

Where have you had to make a decision that challenged your professional identity or the expectations of people you respected?

Where have you had to make a decision that challenged your professional identity or the expectations of people you respected?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Identify one difficult decision from your career that required you to act without full approval from the people around you. Write down what you knew, what you feared, whose counsel helped, and what responsibility remained yours. Then note what you would repeat or change today.

WHAT HE WAS ACTUALLY SAYING

"Every man I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn of him."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Greatness"

The essay everyone half-remembers is "Self-Reliance," and most people remember it wrong. They think it means trust your gut and ignore everybody else.

That reading is not just wrong, it is dangerous. A leader who already thinks he is the smartest person in the building will take it home and use it as permission to stop listening. There are lines in the essay that seem to back him up. Emerson writes that society is in a conspiracy against every one of its members. Taken alone, that sounds like an argument for going it alone.

But look at what he actually builds to. One sentence carries the whole thing:

It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. "Self-Reliance," 1841 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Read that twice. He is naming two ways to fail, not one.

The first failure is living by what the room thinks. That one is obvious and most of us can spot it.

The second failure is the one that gets missed. Going off by yourself and calling your isolation integrity is also a failure. It just looks like strength from the outside. The leader who stops taking advice has not protected his judgment. He has stopped getting the information that would improve it.

What Emerson respects is harder than either one. Stay in the room. Take the full weight of what everyone thinks. Keep your own center anyway.

He even names how uncomfortable that is. You will always find people, he says, who think they know your duty better than you know it. Anyone who has taken a real problem to a board, a partner, or a group of peers has felt exactly that. And here is the part nobody quotes, from a short essay he wrote later called "Greatness":

Read that one carefully too. He does not say every man is my master. He says my master in some point. In one thing, this person knows more than I do, and I would be a fool not to take it.

Put those two sentences side by side and you have the whole working model:

Everyone in the room knows something you do not. None of them is going to run your company on Monday.

Take the counsel. Keep the decision. That is the idea. Everything else in this paper is about how to actually do it.

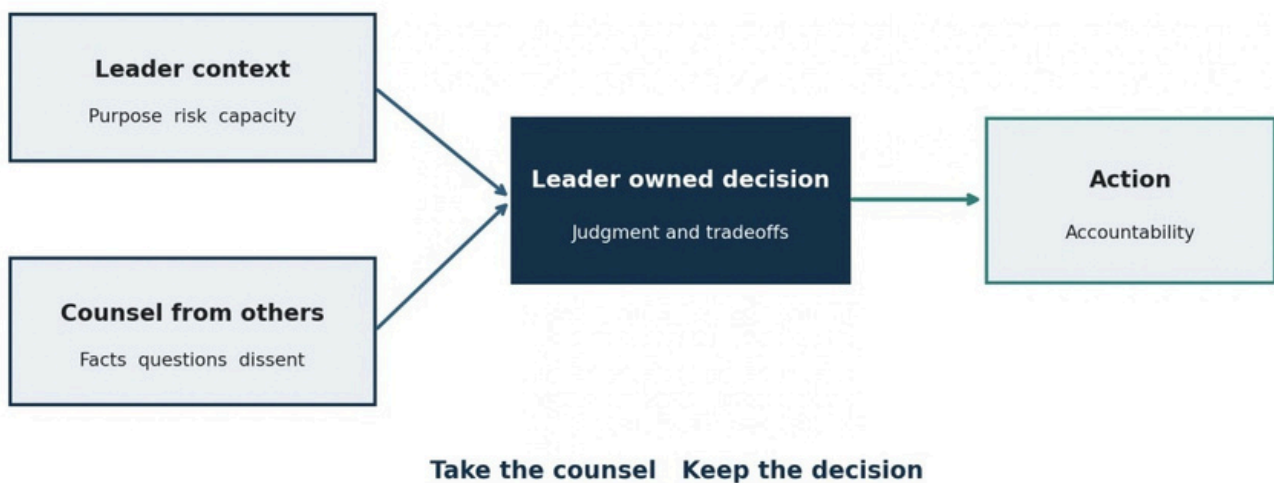


Figure 1 Counsel improves the decision while ownership remains with the leader

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

When do you tend to follow the room, and when do you tend to withdraw from it?

Who knows something important that you may be discounting because you disagree with that person's larger point of view?

What current decision requires you to listen fully without surrendering ownership?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Choose one decision you are actively considering. List what each adviser knows that you do not, what context only you possess, and the judgment that cannot be delegated. Finish with a one-sentence statement of what you currently believe and why.



WHY THIS MATTERS MORE NOW

“Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not.”
– Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”

Emerson was writing for Americans he thought were borrowing their opinions. He would not believe what we are up against.

A leader today has more advice available than any generation before him. Benchmarks, dashboards, consultants, podcasts, peer groups, a board, an industry association, and now software that will hand him a confident recommendation on any subject in about nine seconds. None of it tells him which of that advice is actually his to act on.

decisions change hands, and it almost never looks like surrender. It looks like listening.

I have watched it happen for thirty years. The clearest version is in a peer group. A leader brings a real problem to a dozen people who have no stake in his company. They work it hard. The questions are better than the answers. Somewhere near the end the room starts to agree with itself, and you can feel it happen. Then he says some version of “this was really helpful,” writes down what he heard, and walks out with a decision that belongs to the group instead of to him.

He carries it out at about seventy percent. It underperforms. He does not blame anybody out loud, but a year later there is a small pause before he answers when the subject comes up.

The room is not the problem. The same thing happens everywhere:

- ▶ In a board meeting, when a CEO reads the temperature and softens his recommendation before he finishes making it.
- ▶ On an executive team, when the founder asks what everyone thinks, hears three confident answers, and quietly drops his own.
- ▶ In a family business, when a decision gets routed around the person whose name is on the building.
- ▶ With a consultant whose deck is better than his judgment. ☒ With a trusted number two who is usually right, which is how you stop checking.

None of that is a failure of character. It is what happens when the volume of advice goes up and nobody has language for the difference between taking counsel and handing over the decision. Emerson has that language. It is a hundred and eighty-five years old and it still works.

WHAT MODERN RESEARCH ADDS

Emerson gives us the language. Modern decision research adds a useful warning: people do not weigh advice as cleanly as they imagine. We tend to discount advice when we feel confident, even when the adviser has relevant expertise. At other times, we place too much weight on a recommendation because it is delivered with confidence, because several people repeat it, or because agreeing feels socially easier than defending a different view. Researchers often describe this as a judge-adviser system: one person owns the judgment, while others provide information intended to improve it.

The distinction matters because advice can improve a decision without determining it. The owner has access to context that an adviser may not have: the organization's appetite for risk, promises already made, the capability of the team, the cash position, and the consequences if execution falters. The adviser may bring pattern recognition, technical knowledge, or distance from the problem. The best decision uses both sets of information and remains explicit about who is accountable.

There is a second research connection. Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety shows why teams need an environment where people can raise concerns, ask questions, and admit uncertainty without expecting interpersonal punishment. Psychological safety does not mean comfort, agreement, or low standards. It means that candor is possible. That is very close to Emerson's pairing of truth and tenderness. Truth without sufficient safety gets withheld. Safety without truth becomes politeness.

A leader can put this into practice by separating the stages of the conversation. First, ask for facts and questions. Next, invite recommendations and disagreement. Then pause before announcing the decision. Finally, explain what you heard, what changed your thinking, and what remained yours to decide. This prevents a lively discussion from quietly turning into an unowned consensus.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which sources of advice have earned disproportionate influence over your decisions?

Where has the volume of information created delay rather than clarity?

How often do you explain what you heard, what you decided, and why the two are not always the same?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

For one week, keep an advice log for a consequential decision. Record the source, the recommendation, the evidence behind it, your initial reaction, and the weight you ultimately gave it. At the end of the week, look for patterns of overreliance, defensiveness, or avoidance.

SIX IDEAS WORTH KNOWING

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Emerson wrote a lot. Six ideas carry almost all of the practical value, and a leader who knows six will use them. A leader handed forty will use none.

The idea	His words	When you need it	How it gets misused
Own the call	"the independence of solitude"	Any room where you are taking advice on something you own	As permission to dismiss everyone
Everyone knows something	"my master in some point"	Sizing up whose advice to weigh	As flattery, when the advice was poor
You can change your mind	"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds"	You announced something and have outgrown it	By someone who changes direction every quarter
Do not copy	"imitation is suicide"	Strategy, benchmarking, the competitor everyone wants to be	As an excuse not to learn from anyone
The bill always comes	"in labor as in life there can be no cheating"	Deferred maintenance, underpaid people, shortcuts	As a sermon, if you use it often
Truth and tenderness	"Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo"	Setting how your people tell you the truth	By the person who was already too blunt

The first two are the ones we just covered. Two more are quick.

You can change your mind. Almost all the stuck leaders I meet are not stuck on the facts. They are stuck on what it will cost them to look inconsistent. A CEO announced a three-year plan at the company meeting. Eighteen months in, the market moved and he knows it. He is not confused. He is doing arithmetic on his own credibility.

Most people know the line about consistency, usually in the shortened version. Fewer know that Emerson goes much further a few sentences later. Say what you think today in hard words, he writes, and tomorrow say what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, even if it contradicts everything you said today. That is not permission to change your mind. That is an instruction to.

I have watched that idea move a leader who had been circling the same reversal for six months.

Do not copy. This one needs a limit or it turns into an excuse for ignorance. The line is: study the competitor's numbers, take his methods, do not take his identity. A framing contractor who decides to become a general contractor because the fastest-growing firm in his market is one has not studied anything. He has envied something. That is exactly why Emerson puts envy and imitation in the same sentence.

The last two ideas are big enough to get their own sections, because they change how a whole team works rather than how one person decides.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which of the six ideas is most relevant to a decision you are facing now?

Where are you protecting consistency at the expense of better judgment?

What useful practice could you learn from a competitor without copying the competitor's identity?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Select one of the six ideas and apply it to a current business issue. Write the issue at the top of a page, describe how you are handling it now, and then identify one concrete change you will make during the next seven days.



HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH

"A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Friendship"

The advice problem has a twin. You cannot keep your own judgment if the advice you are getting is dishonest, and the higher you go, the more of it is.

Emerson wrote an essay called "Friendship" that solves this better than most leadership training does. He says friendship has two parts, and he refuses to say which one matters more. The first is truth. The second, a couple of pages later, is tenderness.

Truth and tenderness. Honesty and care, equal weight, and neither one excuses the absence of the other.

I have not found a cleaner statement of what a leader should ask for from the people closest to him, or what he owes them back. It also beats most of what ends up on a values poster, and it is two words long.

His line about what honesty actually buys you is worth memorizing:

That is the thing senior people run out of. The higher you go, the less you can think out loud. Say a half formed idea in front of your leadership team and somebody starts building it. Say it to your banker and he worries. Say it at home and it lands on the person who has to live with you.

A question worth answering before you read further. Every leader needs at least one place where he or she can think out loud and nothing happens. It may be a peer group, a board member, a coach, or an old friend. Which one matters less than whether it exists. If you cannot name yours right now, that may be the most useful thing this paper tells you.

Emerson is also honest about why this is hard. Every man alone is sincere, he says, and the moment a second person walks in, the pretending starts. He is right. Put a dozen people in a room and everyone has eleven reasons to perform instead of level with each other. Anyone who tells you honesty happens naturally among good people has never had to run that room.

Here is how to use the two words. Teams and groups go wrong in one of two directions, and naming which one tells you what to fix.

Too much tenderness, not enough truth. Good attendance, warm meetings, nobody ever changes a decision. Emerson's rebuke is the best sentence in the essay. He hates, when he was looking for real resistance, to find a mush of concession. Better be a nettle in your friend's side than his echo.

Too much truth, not enough tenderness. The room where you get taken apart. People stop bringing the problems that scare them, which are the only ones worth the meeting.

Ask your team which one you have. Most teams know immediately and have never had words for it.



One place I part company with him. Emerson's own idea of friendship is cold. He says the real test of a high friendship is being able to do without it. That is not a team and it is not a peer group. Most of us need the people around us in ways he would have found undignified. Take the two words and leave the rest.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Does your team need more truth, more tenderness, or both?

Who can hear you think out loud without turning an unfinished thought into a commitment?

What did someone tell you recently that was difficult to hear, and how did your response affect the chance that person will speak honestly again?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Ask your leadership team to rate the group privately from one to ten on truth and tenderness. Discuss the gap between the scores without defending the current culture. Agree on one behavior that will make candor safer and one behavior that will make it more direct.



THE BILL ALWAYS COMES

"Always pay; for first or last you must pay your entire debt."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation"

Some decisions cannot be settled with a spreadsheet. For those, the essay is "Compensation," and it is about the oldest idea in business: you pay for everything eventually.

Emerson puts it flatly. In work as in life, there is no cheating. The thief steals from himself. The swindler swindles himself. And later, the line worth taping to a wall: always pay, because first or last, you must pay your entire debt.

The situations show up in every company I have ever seen:

- ▶ Equipment run past its service interval for the third straight year, because every quarter has a reason.
- ▶ The best operations person paid twenty percent under market, with the difference counted as profit.
- ▶ A company bought on a handshake and a trailing twelve, now revealing what nobody asked about.
- ▶ A destructive top producer tolerated for six years, while the culture problem gets described as if weather caused it.
- ▶ Sixty percent of revenue in two accounts, and a plan to fix that which has been coming since 2019.

In every one of those, the numbers look fine right now. That is the whole point. Nobody is lying. They believe the cost can be avoided rather than just delayed, and the spreadsheet agrees with them, because a spreadsheet only shows the periods you have already paid for.

Emerson's phrase for this is that men suffer their whole lives under the foolish superstition that they can be cheated.

I should be straight about where this argument is weak, because a sharp person will find the hole. As a description of how the world works, it does not hold up. Plenty of people cut corners and do fine. Careful companies get killed by an interest rate. Anyone with thirty years in business has watched somebody cheat successfully and retire on it.

Where it does hold is narrower and more useful. The closer you are to owning the place, the less you can pass the bill to somebody else. A division president who defers maintenance for three years and books the margin gets promoted before the invoice shows up. An owner is still standing there. He is the balance sheet, the personal guarantee, the guy the key employee quits on, and the seller across the table in ten years when a buyer's due diligence finds everything that got deferred.

For him, this is not philosophy. It is accounting with a longer time frame.

Used once or twice a year, the idea is powerful. Used monthly, it is a sermon, and people start bracing when they see it coming.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What cost is your organization postponing and calling a savings?

Who is likely to inherit the consequence of a decision that looks attractive in the current reporting period?

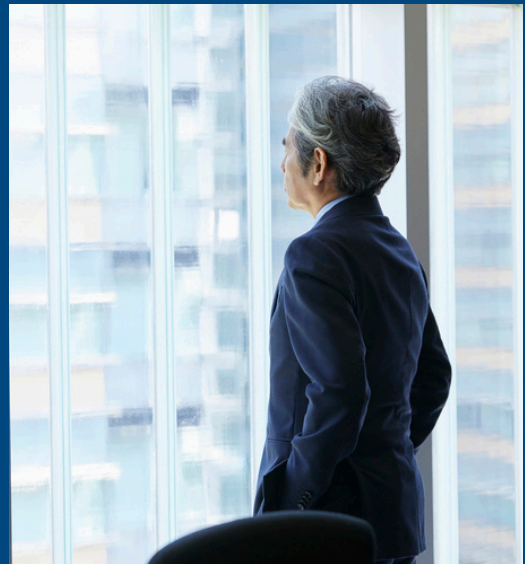
Which deferred obligation would become harder to ignore if you extended the time horizon by three years?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Create a deferred-cost inventory. List maintenance, talent, customer concentration, culture, technology, compliance, and succession obligations that have been postponed. Estimate the present benefit, the likely future cost, the owner, and the date by which a decision must be made.

WHEN YOUR STRENGTHS TURN ON YOU

"Men found that his absorbing egotism was deadly to all other men."
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Napoleon or the Man of the World"



In 1850 Emerson published a book of profiles of famous men, and one of them is about Napoleon. It is the most useful thing he wrote about leadership, and almost nobody reads it.

He does not treat Napoleon as a military figure. He treats him as a businessman. That is the surprising move, and it is why the essay belongs here:

I call Napoleon the agent or attorney of the middle class of modern society; of the throng who fill the markets, shops, counting-houses, manufactories, ships, of the modern world, aiming to be rich. "Napoleon; or, the Man of the World," 1850
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Napoleon or the Man of the World" [6]

Then the line that sets up everything after it: he had the virtues of the people he represented, and he had their vices too.

Emerson is writing about the most extreme version of the ambitious, self-made, market-facing operator. Which is to say, a type you can find in any room of business owners.

What makes the essay useful instead of just harsh is that he takes the man's ability seriously first. He describes someone built of stone and iron, able to stay on a horse for sixteen or seventeen hours. Then he names the executive gift exactly: he sees where the matter hinges, throws himself at the precise point of resistance, and ignores everything else.

Every strong operator recognizes himself in that sentence. Some are flattered by it. That recognition is what makes the rest land.

Because the rest is rough. Napoleon took credit that belonged to his generals. He lied constantly. Emerson calls him singularly lacking in generous feeling. And then comes the line that names the actual failure:

He follows it with a picture of an electric fish that shocks anyone who grabs it until the man is paralyzed. Then the verdict on what Napoleon did to his own team: this enormous ego narrowed, impoverished, and absorbed the power and the existence of the people who served him.

Any leader who has watched good people shrink around a dominant founder knows that sentence is not really about France.

The conclusion is the part to carry:

It was not Bonaparte's fault. He did all that in him lay to live and thrive without moral principle. It was the nature of things, the eternal law of man and of the world which balked and ruined him; and the result, in a million experiments, will be the same.
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Napoleon or the Man of the World"

That is the argument. The collapse was not bad luck at Waterloo. It was built into how he operated, and the same experiment run at any size gets the same result. The strengths were real. What finished him was that nothing ever checked them.

The question this leaves on the table. What checks you? Name the person and the last time that person actually stopped you. If you cannot name one, you have found your project for the quarter.



Figure 3 A leadership strength creates less value when it becomes overused and unchecked

I am building a program around this for August 2027, taking a group of CEOs to the battlefield at Waterloo for three days. Finding that Emerson had made the same argument in 1850 was the best thing that happened to that curriculum.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which strength has contributed most to your success, and what happens when you overuse it?

Who has standing permission to challenge or stop you?

What evidence would tell you that capable people are shrinking, waiting, or becoming overly dependent around you?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Ask three trusted people to complete this sentence independently: 'You are at your best when..., and that same strength becomes costly when....' Compare their answers, identify the recurring pattern, and choose one safeguard you will put in place this quarter.

RUN THIS WITH YOUR TEAM

"A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature." – Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Friendship"

Here is a ninety-minute session you can run with a leadership team, a peer group, or any room of people who trust each other. You need one printed page and nothing else.

The goal is narrow enough to check later: everyone leaves having named one decision they are handing off to somebody else, and a date by which they will make it themselves.

Part	Time	What happens
Your story	10 min	You go first, then one round the table, no discussion
The reading	8 min	Read the excerpt out loud, hand out the page afterward
Quiet		
writing	7 min	Everyone answers the first two questions on paper
Discussion	45 min	Questions three through six, whole group
Commitments	15 min	One decision, one date, each person, nobody responds
Close	5 min	The measure, and when you will ask about it

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion. [...] Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. [...] It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. "Self-Reliance," 1841 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Then say one sentence and stop: he is not telling you to quit listening, he is telling you that both of the easy choices are failures.

The six questions. The first two are written privately and shared only if somebody wants to. The rest you work as a group.

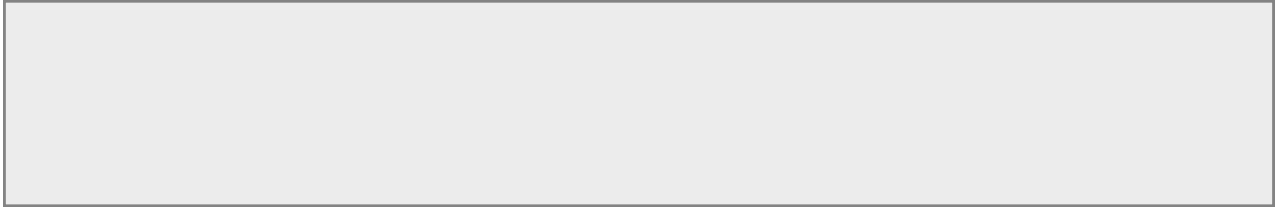
1. Name a decision you are sitting on right now that you have not made because you already know who will disagree. What is the delay costing, in dollars or in months?

2. Where in your company has agreement replaced judgment? Name the person and the meeting.

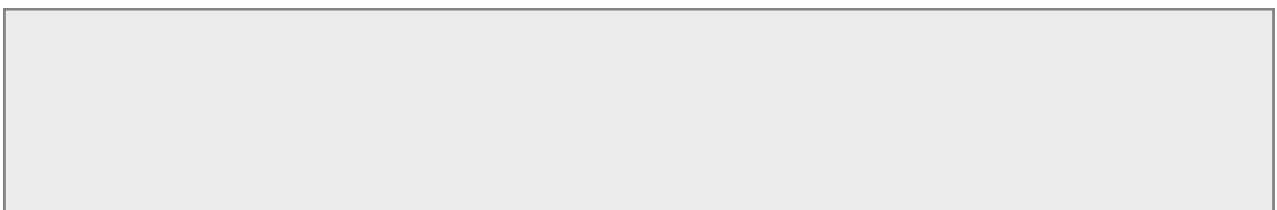
3. Whose approval do you weigh most heavily when you decide something? Name three. When did you last check whether their track record earns that much weight?

4. What is the strongest opinion you hold that you have never said out loud to your team? What are you waiting for?

5. What are you still doing only because you announced it? What would it cost to say you changed your mind, and what is it costing you not to?



6. Of the last three problems you brought to this group, which did you bring for advice and which did you bring for permission? Everybody here has done both.



Question six is the one that changes a group, and it is also the one somebody will duck with a joke. Let the joke land, then ask it again.

These will not get equal time and should not. Watch for the question that produces the first long silence and stay there.

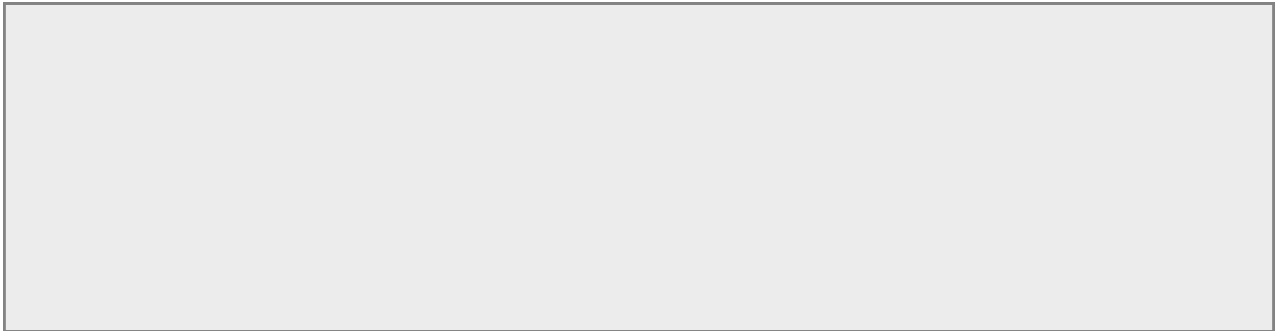
Commitments, with one rule. Nobody responds. Each person says the decision they are taking back and the date they will make it by. No advice, including from you. That rule is the whole point of the session acted out instead of explained, and people notice by about the third person.

Close with the measure. Success is not that the reading was interesting. Success is that in ninety days, most of those decisions got made by the people who owned them. Say that before anyone leaves, write the commitments down, and actually go back and check.

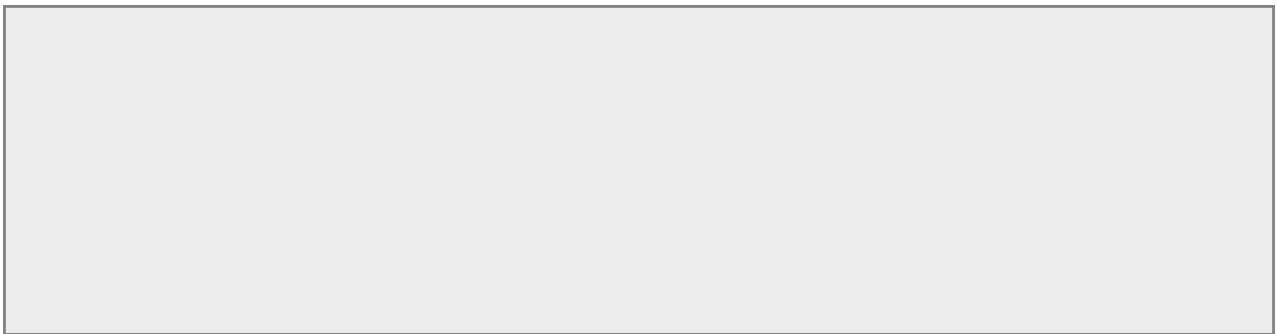
A word of caution. Do not run this session with a group that is still building trust. It asks people to admit where they deferred or avoided a decision. A young group may perform instead of answer.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

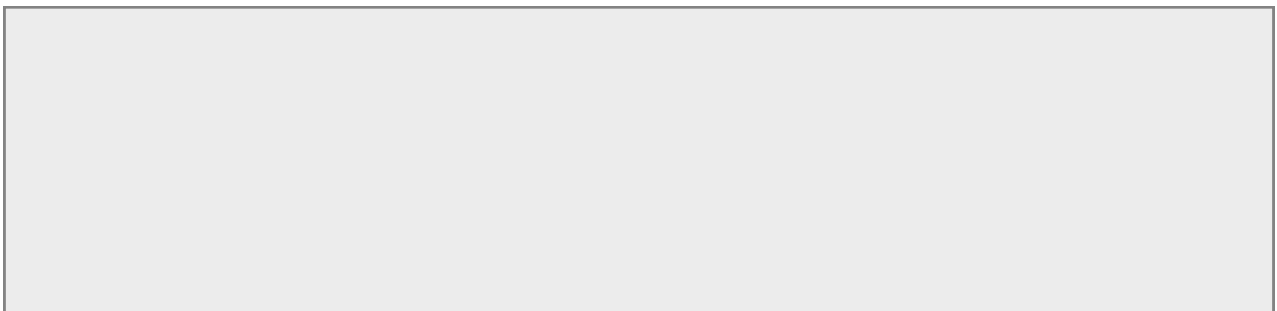
Is there enough trust in the room for people to admit where they have deferred a decision?



What will you disclose first so the discussion does not become an abstract book conversation?



How will you follow up ninety days later so commitments do not disappear after the meeting?



PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Schedule the ninety-minute session described in this section. Send only the purpose and the preparation question in advance. Record each person's decision and deadline, then schedule a ninety-day review before the meeting ends.

EIGHT SITUATIONS AND EIGHT QUESTIONS

"Every good quality is noxious if unmixed."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience"

This is the most portable page in the paper. Read it as self-diagnosis, or use it on somebody who brings you one of these problems.

What is going on	The idea	The question to ask
Stuck on something you announced	You can change your mind	If you had never announced it, would you choose it today?
Copying a competitor's model	Do not copy	Whose numbers are you copying, and have you actually seen them?
Your team has stopped disagreeing with you	Truth and tenderness	When did somebody last tell you no and keep their standing with you?
Putting off a real cost and calling it margin	The bill always comes	What are you paying for with something other than money, and when does it come due?
Deferring to the room out of habit	Own the call	Where does your own judgment differ from what they told you last month?
Cut off, dismissing everybody	Everyone knows something	Who around you is better than you at one thing? Name them and say what it is.
Nothing and nobody checks you	Napoleon	Who stopped you last, and what did it cost them to do it?
You have taken a serious personal hit	Say nothing, at first	—

That last row is deliberate and it is the one I would defend hardest. When somebody has been hit by a death, a diagnosis, a divorce, a partner walking out, philosophy is not the answer. I have watched capable people reach for a quote in that moment because sitting in silence is uncomfortable, and the person across the table always knows.

Months later, when he is trying to make sense of it and getting angry with himself for not having learned the lesson yet, Emerson's line about grief teaching him nothing is the most useful sentence I know. It gives a man permission to have suffered without being improved by it. That is a real relief to somebody who has spent a year being told his setback was a gift.

The row that comes up most is the first one, because it is the cheapest win available. Somebody circling a reversal for two quarters can usually be moved in a single conversation, because the analysis was never the problem. The question about announcing does most of the work. Once he admits he would not choose it today, the rest of the hour is logistics: who hears it first, in what order, and what he says about why he changed.

One note on the cut-off leader, because this material can make him worse. Do not use “everyone knows something” as a rebuke. Ask him to name one person around him who is better at one thing, and then wait. If he cannot name anybody, no essay is going to fix it, and the conversation he actually needs is a harder one.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which of the eight situations appears most often in your work with leaders?

Which question produces the most defensiveness, and what might that reaction reveal?

Where would a direct question be more useful than another recommendation?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Use the eight-question page in your next three decision conversations. Record which question you chose, what changed in the person's understanding, and whether the decision moved forward. Revise your use of the questions based on what actually helped.

WHAT TO DO MONDAY

"Do the thing, and you shall have the Power."

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation"

If you remember nothing else from this paper, remember these five things.

- 1 There are two ways to fail, not one. Living by what the room thinks is one. Going off alone and calling it integrity is the other. Most leaders only watch for the first.
- 2 Taking advice and handing over the decision are different acts. Nobody teaches the difference, which is why capable people blur them every week.
- 3 Everyone around you is better than you at something. Not at everything. At something. Your job is to find out what, and to take that part seriously.
- 4 You are allowed to change your mind, out loud. Most stuck decisions are not stuck on facts. They are stuck on what it costs to look inconsistent.
- 5 Whatever you are deferring, you are financing. The bill comes to whoever is still standing there, and if you own the place, that is you.



THE ACTION PLAN

- ▶ This week - change two sentences. When you ask for advice, say up front that the decision is yours and may end up being none of what you hear. When the advice is finished, ask what you actually believe and where it differs from what you just heard.
- ▶ This week - answer one question. Where do you think out loud? Name the person or the room. If you cannot name one, fixing that is worth more than anything else on this list.
- ▶ This month - pick your one decision. Choose the decision you have been routing around because you already know who will object. Write it on a card and put a date on it. ▶ This month - run the truth-and-tenderness check. Ask your leadership team whether the group is short on honesty or care. Let them answer. Fix the one they name over the next two meetings rather than trying to fix both at once.
- ▶ This quarter - find out who checks you. Name the person who can stop you and the last time that person actually did. If nobody comes to mind, that may be the most expensive problem in this paper.
- ▶ This quarter - run the ninety-minute session. Put a ninety-day reminder on the calendar the same day, then go back and count what actually got decided.
- ▶ This year - read one essay. Do not start with the collected works. Read "Self-Reliance" in three sittings over a month.

A few of those need a sentence more. On the two sentences: saying ownership first changes how people advise you. They stop arguing a case and start handing you material. And if you run the meetings where other people bring problems, make the same two changes on their behalf. On the date: without a date, picking your one decision is just a nice thought. The date is the part that matters. On who checks you: fix it by giving somebody specific the standing to tell you no, and then proving it is safe the first time they use it. The proving is the hard part and it is the whole thing.

ONE HONEST WORD ABOUT ALL OF THIS

This is not research. There is no study behind it, no data, nothing I could put in a chart. It is language, and language is not proof.

But language is not nothing either. Most leaders I know already sense when a decision is sliding away from them. What they lack is a way to name it in the moment. Give a person the words and he can usually do the thing.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

A year from now, one thing should be true, and you can check it.

A practical measure of success. When you take a hard problem to the people whose judgment you respect, you walk out with your own decision rather than theirs. And ninety days later, that decision has been made and carried out with conviction, whether they agreed with it or not.

That is the whole of it. You do not need to become more agreeable to good advice. You need to be able to sit in a room full of it and still know your own mind.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which decision do you need to reclaim this week?

What have you continued mainly because you announced it publicly?

Who will know whether you followed through, and when will that person check?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Write a one-page Monday commitment. Name the decision, the counsel still needed, the deadline, the person who owns the final call, and the first action. Share it with someone who will ask for the result rather than offer more advice.

WHERE TO START READING

"Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar"

If somebody asks where to begin, the wrong answer is "read Emerson." Hand a busy person the collected essays and he reads four pages and decides the problem is him. Here is the version that works.

Start with "Self-Reliance." Read it in three sittings, not one. It is about twenty pages and there is no plot to lose, so you can stop anywhere. If reading it is slow going, listen to it instead. He wrote it to be spoken from a stage, and it goes down easier in the ear than on the page.

After that, pick by what you are dealing with:

If you are...	Read
Leading a team or sitting in a peer group	"Friendship"
Weighing a shortcut	"Compensation"
Wondering whose advice to take	"Greatness" — only a few pages
Being told you are a strong leader	"Napoleon; or, the Man of the World"

Any paperback of Essays: First Series covers the first two. All of it is free and legal online; everything he wrote went into the public domain a century ago, and the sources below say where to find it.



TWO THINGS PEOPLE GET WRONG

The Emerson line you see most on conference slides is not his. "Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be" is a modern rewrite. The word "inspire" is nowhere in the passage. What he actually wrote is that our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us do what we can.

The real one is better. It is not about being inspired. It is about having someone in your life who makes you do what you are already capable of, which is a fair description of a good advisor, a good friend, or a good group.

The second is the consistency line. He did not write "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." He wrote "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." The word "foolish" is the whole point. He is not against holding a position. He is against holding one you have stopped believing.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which Emerson essay best matches the leadership problem you are dealing with now?

Would listening to the essay help you hear the argument more clearly than reading it silently?

What idea from the reading deserves to be tested in practice rather than merely underlined?

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Choose one essay from the reading guide and schedule three short reading sessions. After each session, write one paragraph connecting a passage to a current leadership decision. End by identifying one behavior you will test for thirty days.

SOURCES

Quotations from Emerson have been checked against full-text editions or page scans. Bracketed numbers in the paper correspond to the sources below. Commentary, examples, questions, and recommendations are the author's application of the source material to leadership practice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Robinson is a Vistage Master Chair and the founder of Capacity Building Solutions, Inc. He works with CEOs, business owners, and senior leaders in lower- and middle-market companies.

His work centers on better decisions, stronger leadership teams, honest accountability, and the organizational capacity required to turn good intentions into consistent execution.