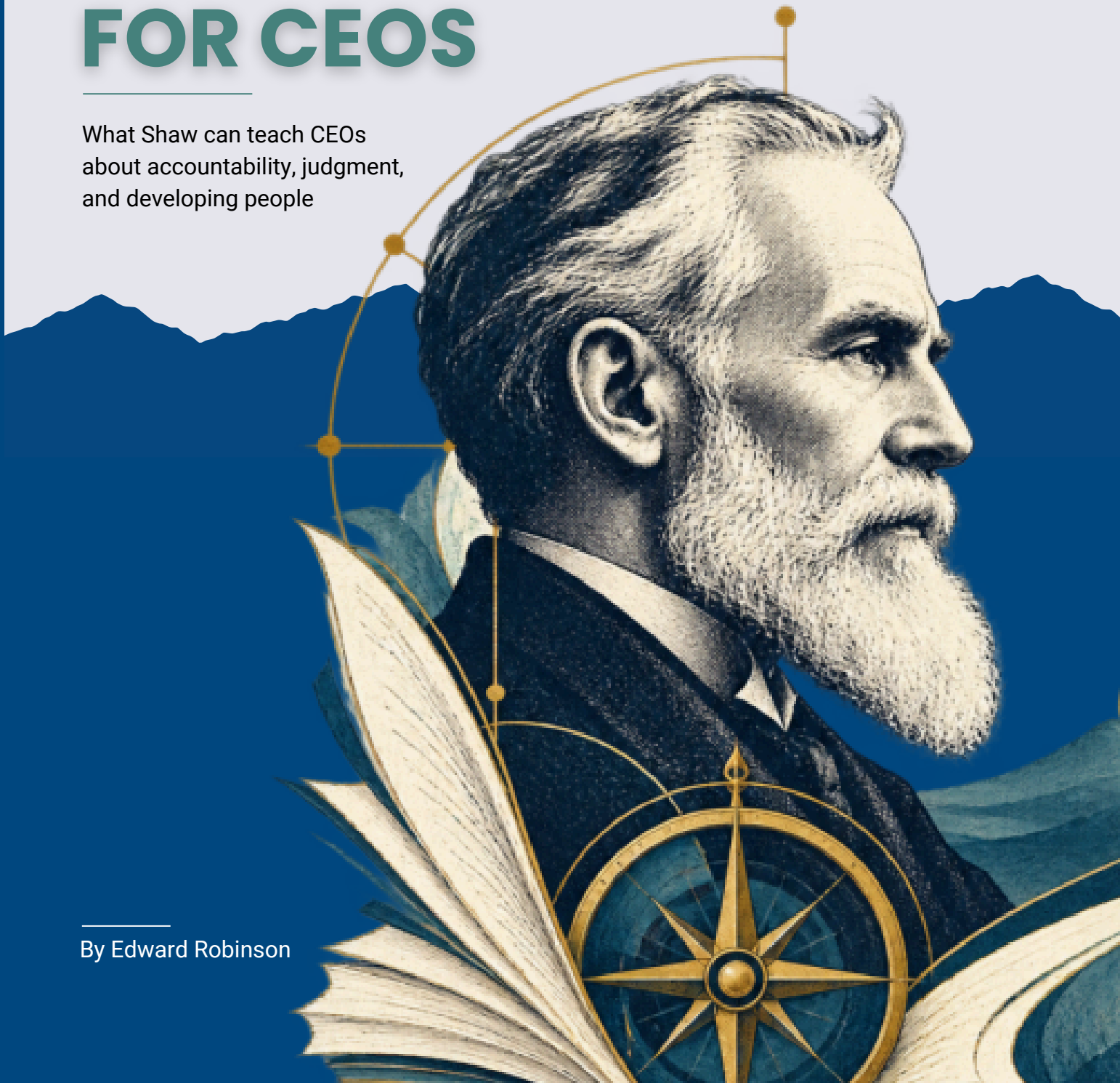
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GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S LEADERSHIP LESSONS FOR CEOS

What Shaw can teach CEOs about accountability, judgment, and developing people



By Edward Robinson

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Executive Summary



George Bernard Shaw was not a management writer, and this paper does not try to turn him into one. His value to leaders comes from the way he examined people. He paid attention to the gap between the explanations people offered and the motives their behavior revealed. He challenged accepted ideas, questioned respectable institutions, and showed how capable people could remain blind to their own contradictions. Those habits of mind are directly relevant to leadership.

Shaw helps us examine those patterns from several angles. He reminds leaders to distinguish circumstances from agency, stated reasons from actual motives, support from rescue, expertise from judgment, hope from denial, and freedom from avoidance. He also makes a strong case for constructive dissent. Progress depends on people who are willing to question the current arrangement, but challenge must lead to disciplined action rather than argument for its own sake.

The business issues leaders bring to a peer group, coaching conversation, or leadership meeting are rarely as simple as they first appear. A people problem may also be a delegation problem. A delegation problem may be tied to the leader's need for control. A strategic delay may look like caution while serving as protection from a difficult choice. A performance issue may continue because the leader has been unclear, inconsistent, or unwilling to impose consequences. The visible problem matters, but the pattern underneath it often determines whether any solution will hold.

The central leadership idea in this paper is that better judgment begins with a more honest understanding of reality. Leaders need to see the facts, including the facts about their own behavior. They need to hear perspectives that complicate the story they prefer. They need to decide what is truly outside their control, what they can influence, and what responsibility remains theirs. They then need to turn that understanding into a decision, a commitment, and observable follow-through.

Each section begins with Shaw's words, moves quickly into a practical leadership application, and ends with reflection questions and an exercise. The questions are intended to help leaders examine the issue more carefully. The exercises are intended to move the work from insight to action. The goal is not to agree with Shaw on everything. It is to use his willingness to challenge comfortable explanations as a way to improve leadership judgment, accountability, and the development of other people.

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Introduction

George Bernard Shaw was an Irish playwright, critic, essayist, and social commentator who lived from 1856 to 1950. He wrote more than 60 plays, including Pygmalion, Man and Superman, Major Barbara, Saint Joan, and The Doctor's Dilemma, and received the 1925 Nobel Prize in Literature. He was funny, provocative, stubborn, and never reluctant to challenge ideas that everyone else had accepted as sensible or respectable.

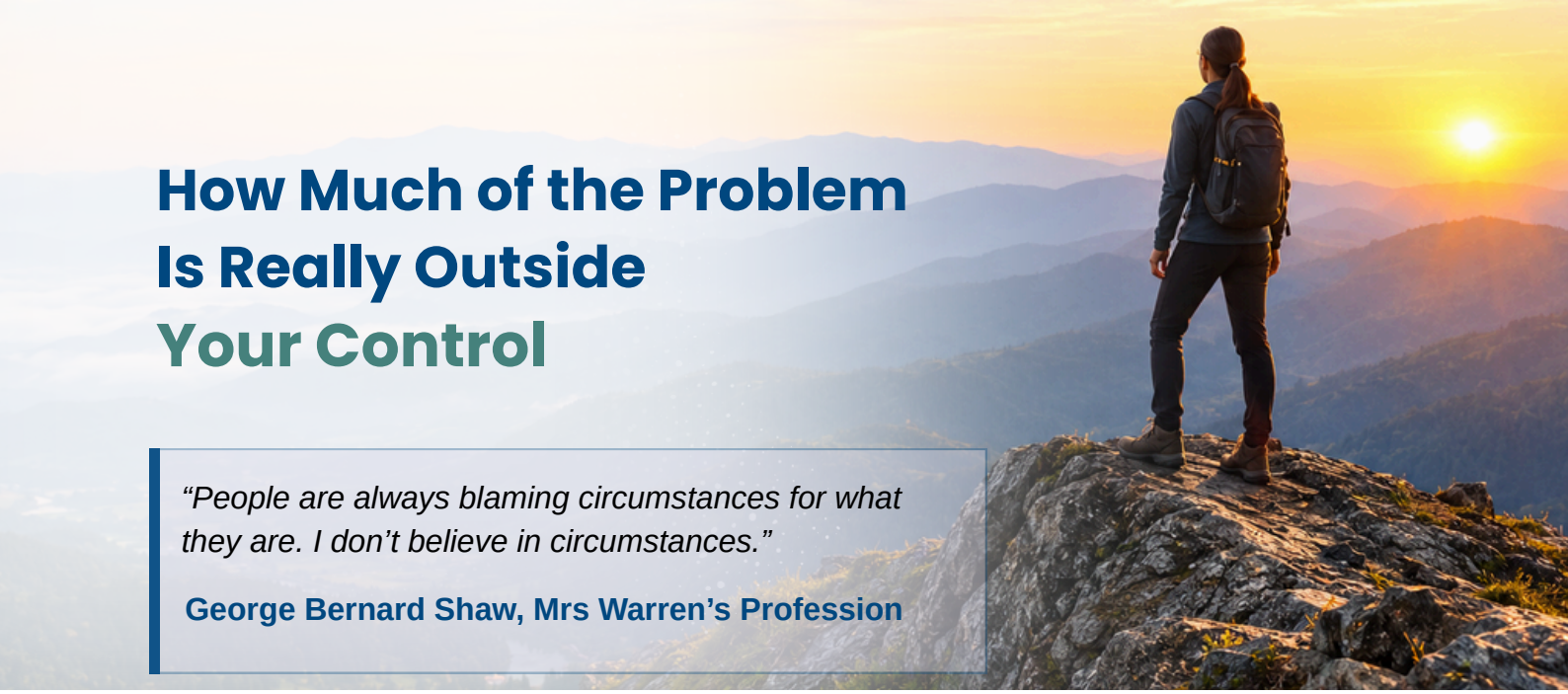
Shaw was not writing about management, and I certainly would not agree with everything he believed. What interests me is how he thought. He noticed the gap between what people said and what they actually did. He questioned conventional wisdom and had a gift for exposing the explanations people used to avoid an uncomfortable truth. That makes his work surprisingly relevant to anyone responsible for leading a company or a team.

In my experience, the problem a leader first describes is rarely the whole problem. A hiring issue may also involve a founder who has trouble letting go. A performance problem may have continued because expectations were never made clear or consequences were never enforced. A strategic problem may rest on an assumption that no one has challenged in years. Before reaching for an answer, a leader needs to slow down, look at the whole situation, and consider how their own choices may have helped create it.

This paper is meant to be used, not simply read. Each section connects one of Shaw's observations to a leadership issue I regularly see with CEOs, owners, and senior executives. The reflection questions are designed to slow the reader down. The exercises are designed to turn that reflection into a decision, a conversation, or a visible change in behavior. Shaw's language can be sharp, but the purpose here is practical: to help leaders see more clearly and act with greater intention.

There is also a reason to read Shaw with some caution. His language can be sweeping, and his confidence sometimes outruns the complexity of the situation. Leaders can make the same mistake. A provocative idea is useful when it opens inquiry, but it becomes dangerous when it turns into a slogan that ends inquiry. Throughout this paper, the test is not whether a quotation sounds powerful. The test is whether it helps a leader understand the situation more fully and make a better decision.

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How Much of the Problem Is Really Outside Your Control

> *“People are always blaming circumstances for what they are. I don’t believe in circumstances.”*
>
> **George Bernard Shaw, Mrs Warren’s Profession**

Circumstances matter. Markets change, money gets more expensive, good people can be hard to find, and customers do not always behave the way we expect. Shaw was not suggesting that we can simply wish those realities away. The more useful point is that circumstances can also become a convenient explanation for a result we do not like.

Leaders often tell me their people are not ready, their industry is different, their customers will never accept the change, or the timing is wrong. Any of those statements may be true. The important questions are: What is genuinely outside your control? What have you simply accepted as fixed? And what decision might this explanation be helping you avoid? Those questions do not make the problem disappear, but they usually create more room to act.

A fair examination of circumstances should avoid two extremes. One is helplessness, where every disappointing result is attributed to forces outside the leader’s control. The other is false ownership, where a leader assumes responsibility for conditions no individual could have prevented. Good judgment sits between the two. It acknowledges the market, the timing, the resources, and the actions of other people while still asking what choice remains. That is where leadership becomes practical rather than rhetorical.

The most useful shift is from explaining the entire result to identifying the next point of leverage. A leader may not control interest rates, labor supply, or a customer’s decision. The leader may still be able to change the offer, redesign the role, narrow the market, improve the conversation, or make a decision sooner. Agency does not mean unlimited control. It means refusing to overlook the part that can still be influenced.

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Reflection Questions

- Which part of your current challenge is truly outside your control, and which part can you influence?

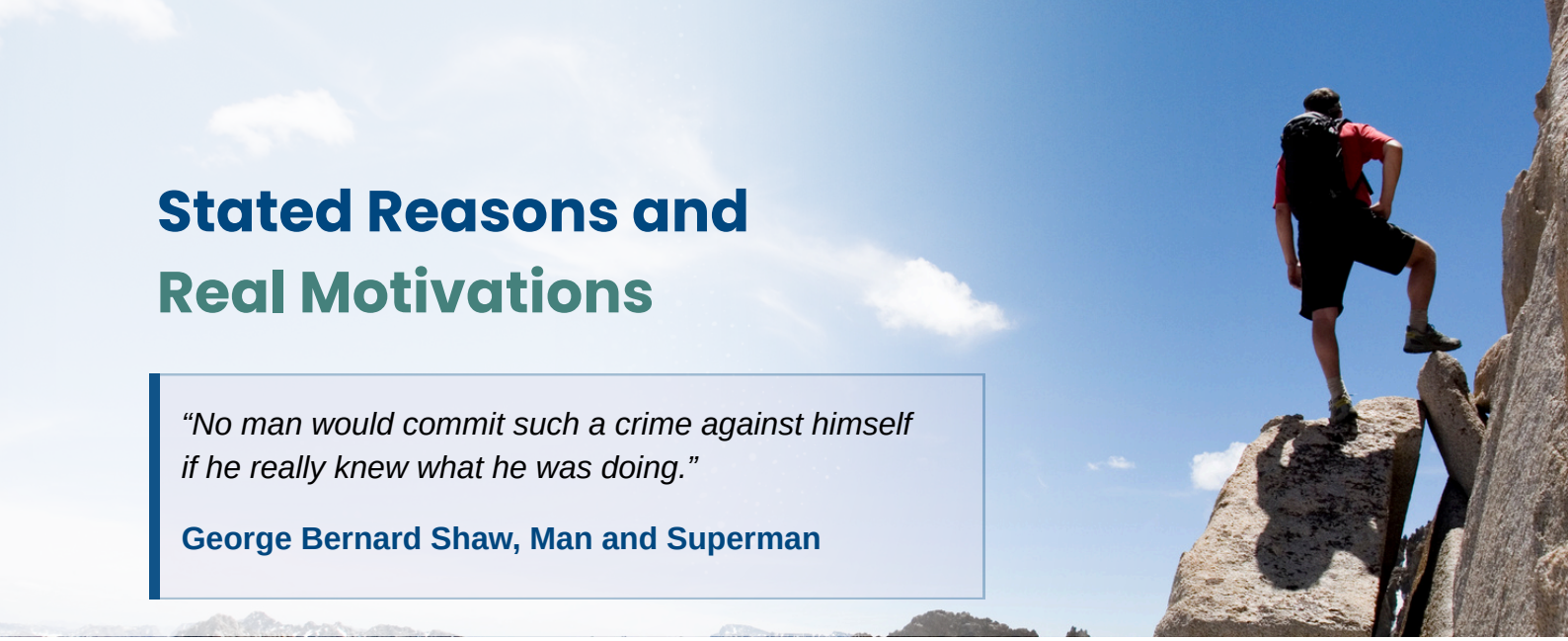
- What assumption have you accepted as a fact without testing it recently?

- What decision might you be postponing because circumstances provide a reasonable explanation for waiting?

Leadership Exercise

Choose one current issue and divide a page into three columns: outside my control, within my influence, and within my control. Identify one action from the final two columns that you will take during the next seven days.

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Stated Reasons and Real Motivations

> *“No man would commit such a crime against himself if he really knew what he was doing.”*
>
> **George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman**

In Man and Superman, Jack Tanner sees himself as independent, rational, and largely immune to the expectations of other people. Ann Whitefield understands that his motives are more complicated than the story he tells about himself. Tanner’s explanation is intelligent. It is also incomplete. Shaw uses the gap between the explanation and the behavior to show how easily thoughtful people can misunderstand what is really driving them.

Executives do this too. A leader may explain a decision in financial, operational, or strategic terms while also protecting something personal: control, approval, status, loyalty, identity, or the need to remain indispensable. That does not mean the business case is false. It means the business case may not be the whole case. Until the personal stake is acknowledged, the leader may continue to defend a position that no longer serves the organization.

The useful question is not, “Are you being emotional?” Every important decision has an emotional dimension. The better question is, “What else are you protecting?” When leaders can answer that honestly, they usually become more capable of separating the needs of the business from the needs of their own role or identity.

This is particularly important when the leader’s history is part of the decision. The person who built the company may feel responsible for protecting every relationship and preserving every practice that contributed to early success. Loyalty and gratitude are legitimate considerations, but they can also make it difficult to evaluate a role, partnership, or strategy on its current merits. The past deserves respect without being given permanent control over the future.

A leader does not need to eliminate personal motives before making a sound decision. That would be unrealistic. The task is to bring them into the open. Once the need for approval, control, security, or continuity is named, it can be weighed alongside the financial and operational facts. Unacknowledged motives tend to control the decision. Acknowledged motives can become part of it without dominating it.

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Reflection Questions

- What personal need may be influencing the decision along with the business logic?

- What outcome do you say you want, and what outcome does your behavior suggest you want?

- What are you protecting besides the company?

Leadership Exercise

Write the business reasons for one difficult decision on one side of a page and the personal stakes on the other. Do not judge either list. Identify where the two support each other and where they pull in different directions. Decide what the business requires once the full picture is visible.

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The Leader May Be Contributing to the Problem

> *"It seems to me that people are always putting things on other people in this world."*
>
> **George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman**

Many of Shaw's characters are convinced that the obstacle sits somewhere outside themselves. As the story develops, it becomes clear that their own behavior is helping to create the conflict they want to escape. The same thing happens in business. A CEO wants accountability but keeps rescuing people. A founder wants a strong leadership team but continues to override its decisions. An owner wants more freedom but holds on to every important choice.

This does not mean every problem is the leader's fault. It does mean the leader has a responsibility to examine the part they are playing. Two questions help: "How might I be creating the condition I say I want to eliminate?" and "What would I need to stop doing for someone else to step forward?" Neither question is comfortable, but both move the conversation from blame toward something the leader can change.

The leader's contribution is often found in a pattern rather than a single mistake. A CEO asks the team to take ownership but changes decisions after the meeting. A founder asks for honest feedback but becomes defensive when it arrives. A manager delegates a result but continues to prescribe every step. People adapt to those patterns. Over time, they learn that the safest course is to wait, seek approval, or avoid initiative. What looks like a weak team may partly be a team responding rationally to the leader's behavior.

This is why self-awareness has to become observable change. A leader may sincerely acknowledge being too involved and then continue to attend every meeting, approve every expense, and rewrite every proposal. Insight matters, but the organization experiences behavior. The practical question is what the leader will do differently, how other people will notice, and what will prevent the old pattern from returning under pressure.

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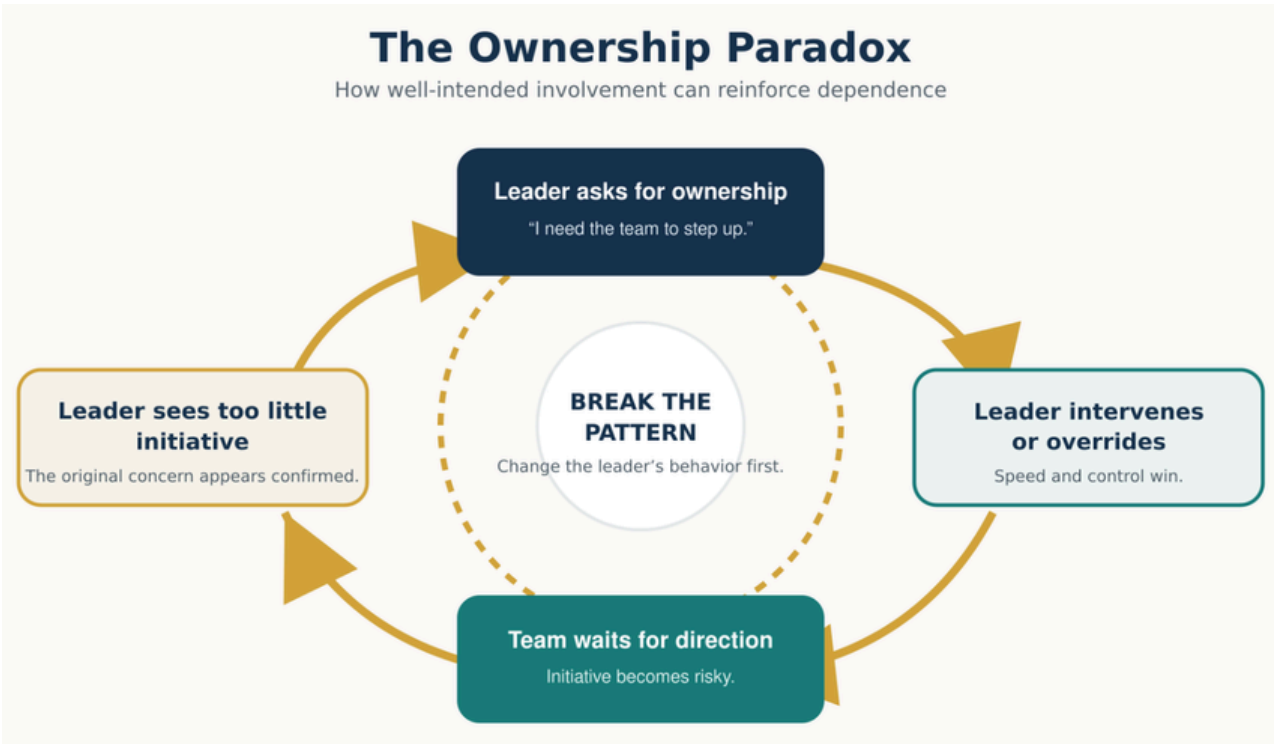


Figure 1. The ownership paradox: a leader's intervention can unintentionally teach the team to wait.

Reflection Questions

- Where are your actions sending a different message from your stated expectations?

- What behavior are you rewarding, rescuing, or tolerating without intending to?

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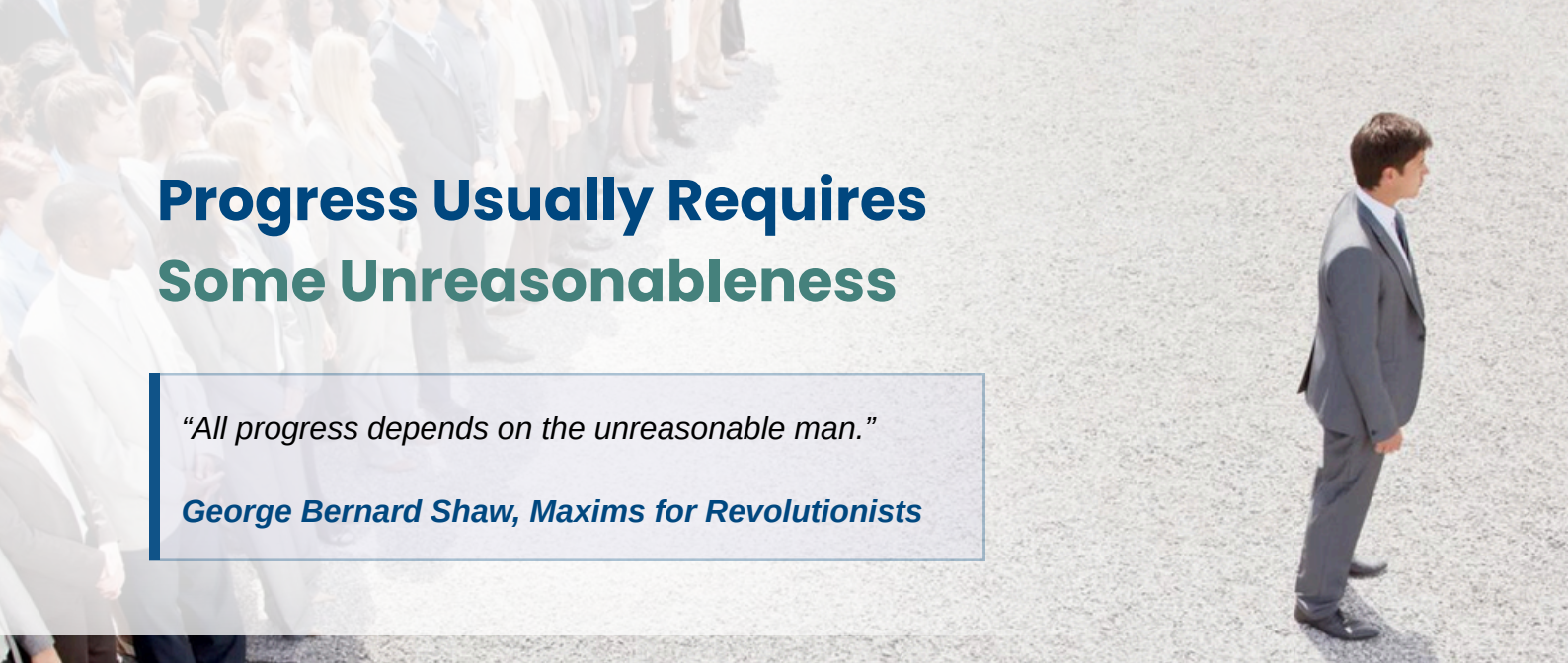
- What would become possible if you changed your part of the pattern first?

Leadership Exercise

Select one recurring organizational problem. Write down what other people are doing, then list the decisions, habits, or signals from you that may be reinforcing it. Commit to one behavior you will stop and one you will start.



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Progress Usually Requires Some Unreasonableness

> *"All progress depends on the unreasonable man."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Maxims for Revolutionists***

Shaw was not arguing for irrational behavior. He was describing people who refuse to accept that the current way is the only way. Most meaningful progress starts with someone questioning an industry practice, a customer assumption, or an internal habit that everyone else has learned to live with.

This is why constructive dissent matters. The unusual idea should not win simply because it is unusual, but it should not be dismissed for that reason either. A leader should ask what a newcomer would question, which customer frustration the industry has learned to tolerate, and whether the idea is actually weak or merely unfamiliar. Experience can sharpen judgment, but it can also make yesterday's assumptions feel permanent.

Constructive unreasonableness also needs discipline. Some people enjoy challenging the status quo but lose interest when it is time to test an idea, address the tradeoffs, or own the execution. The leader's job is to protect unconventional thinking long enough to understand it and then require the same rigor that would be applied to a familiar proposal. The idea needs evidence, an economic case, operational ownership, and a way to learn from the result.

Leaders should also notice who is permitted to be unreasonable. In many organizations, senior people are praised for bold thinking while employees closer to the work are described as negative when they question a plan. That double standard removes valuable information. A healthy leadership culture makes room for challenge regardless of rank, while holding everyone to the same expectation of respect, evidence, and responsibility.

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Reflection Questions

- Which practice in your company continues mainly because it is familiar?

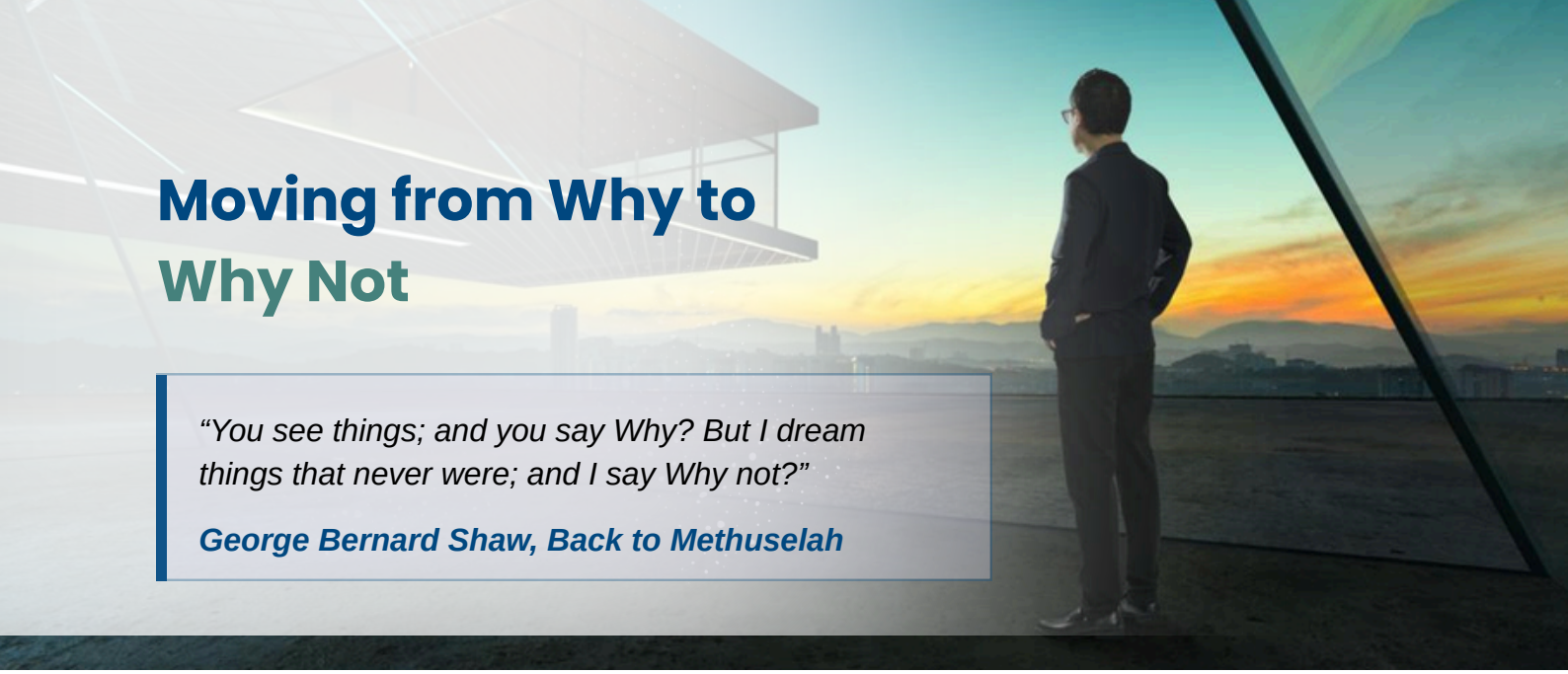
- Where might experience be protecting you from risk but also limiting what you can see?

- Who is most likely to challenge your assumptions honestly, and are you making it safe for that person to do so?

Leadership Exercise

Bring one long-standing practice to your leadership team. Assign one person to make the strongest case for keeping it and another to make the strongest case for replacing it. Decide what evidence would justify a change or confirm the current approach.

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Moving from Why to Why Not

> *"You see things; and you say Why? But I dream things that never were; and I say Why not?"*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Back to Methuselah***

Why is the language of diagnosis. It helps a leader understand how the present situation developed, which constraints are real, and which incentives are keeping the problem in place. That work matters. But a leadership team can become so skilled at explaining the current state that the explanation begins to sound like a reason nothing can change.

Why not shifts the conversation from explanation to possibility. It asks what a better result would look like and what would have to become true to make it possible. The question should not be used to ignore facts or indulge fantasy. Its value is that it prevents current assumptions from setting the outer limit of the organization's imagination.
The strongest leadership process uses both questions. First understand why the problem exists. Then ask why a different outcome is not possible. Finally, turn the possibility into an experiment, a decision, or a commitment. Diagnosis without imagination produces resignation. Imagination without discipline produces talk.

This sequence is especially useful when a team has discussed the same issue several times. Repetition often signals that the group is trapped in one mode of thinking. It may keep returning to causes without defining a different outcome, or it may keep proposing solutions without confronting the incentives that preserve the current state. Moving deliberately from why to why not, and then to what next, gives the conversation a beginning, middle, and end.

The final step matters most. Possibility needs to be translated into a test that can produce information. A small experiment is often more useful than another broad debate because it exposes assumptions to reality. The point is not to make every decision small or reversible. It is to avoid using the size of the issue as a reason to remain in discussion when there is something practical the organization can learn.

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Reflection Questions

- Has your team become better at explaining the problem than changing it?

- What better outcome have you dismissed before defining what would make it possible?

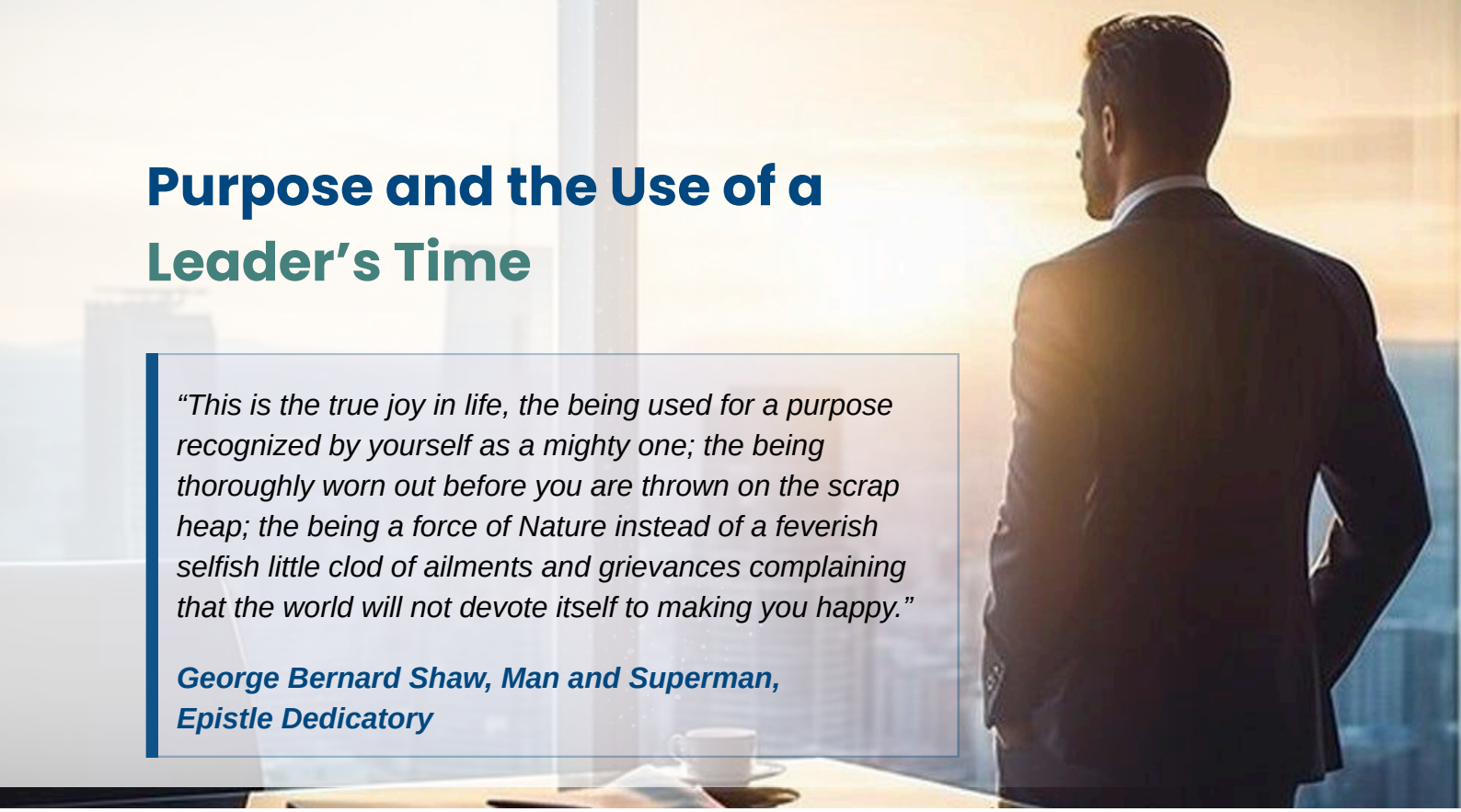
- What is the smallest credible experiment that could test a new direction?

Leadership Exercise

Take one recurring issue through three rounds. Write why it continues, then write why a materially better result might be possible, and finally design a thirty-day experiment with an owner, a measure, and a review date.



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Purpose and the Use of a Leader's Time

> *"This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman, Epistle Dedicatory***

Shaw connects energy with purpose, not with constant activity. That distinction matters for senior leaders because a full calendar can look like commitment while keeping the most important work untouched. Busyness is sometimes a consequence of responsibility. It can also become a respectable way to avoid a strategic decision, a difficult relationship, or a necessary change in the leader's own role.

As a company grows, the work it needs from the CEO changes. The leader who created value by solving problems may now create more value by building people who can solve them. The founder who knew every customer may need to spend more time on direction, culture, capital, or succession. Holding on to old work can feel productive because the leader is good at it. It may still be the wrong use of the leader's time.

Purpose is not an abstract mission statement. It shows up in choices about attention. A leader's calendar reveals what is actually being treated as important. If the work only the leader can do is continually crowded out by work others could own, the problem is not time management alone. It is role clarity and discipline.

Shaw's language is deliberately extreme, but the distinction is useful. Leaders can become preoccupied with whether the work is satisfying them while paying too little attention to whether the work is serving a purpose they actually respect. That does not mean exhaustion is virtuous or that health and relationships should be sacrificed. It means that meaning is more likely to come from worthwhile contribution than from monitoring one's own level of happiness.

For a CEO or owner, the purpose question becomes more important as the company matures. Early in the business, survival provides clarity.

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Later, the organization may be successful enough that the leader has choices. That freedom can create drift unless the leader decides what the company is for, what role they should continue to play, and what work deserves their remaining time and energy. A full calendar cannot answer those questions.

Reflection Questions

- What important work that only you can do is being crowded out?

- Which activity keeps you busy while allowing you to avoid a harder leadership question?

- Is your calendar consistent with the purpose and responsibilities you say matter most?

Leadership Exercise

Review the last four weeks of your calendar. Mark each block as work only I can do, work I should develop someone else to do, or work that should stop. Reallocate two recurring blocks during the next month to the leadership work the organization most needs from you.

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The Way We Treat People Shapes What They Become

> *"Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Maxims for Revolutionists***

Shaw's version of the Golden Rule is deliberately provocative, but there is a practical leadership point behind it. People do not all need the same amount of direction, encouragement, autonomy, or feedback. Treating everyone exactly the same may look fair while ignoring what different people need to perform and grow. The standard should remain consistent, but the way a leader supports each person may need to change.

Developing people does not mean protecting them from consequences. It means setting clear expectations, giving people real authority, providing useful feedback, and allowing room for responsible mistakes. Leaders should regularly ask whether they are building capability or reinforcing dependence. The distinction matters because a leader can be trying to help while stepping in so often that no one else gets the chance to grow.

The way people are treated becomes part of the informal development system. When a leader asks for an opinion and then ignores it, the employee learns that participation is ceremonial. When a manager corrects the work without explaining the standard, the employee learns to wait for the manager's answer. When someone is given meaningful responsibility, clear boundaries, and honest feedback, the person has a chance to build judgment rather than simply complete tasks.

Fairness does not require identical treatment. It requires a consistent standard and a reasonable response to differences in experience, readiness, and responsibility. One person may need closer checkpoints while another needs more room. The leader should be able to explain the difference without lowering expectations or creating favoritism. Development becomes credible when authority, support, and accountability grow together.

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Reflection Questions

- Who on your team needs more direction, and who needs more room?

- Where are you treating people the same even though their experience and readiness are different?

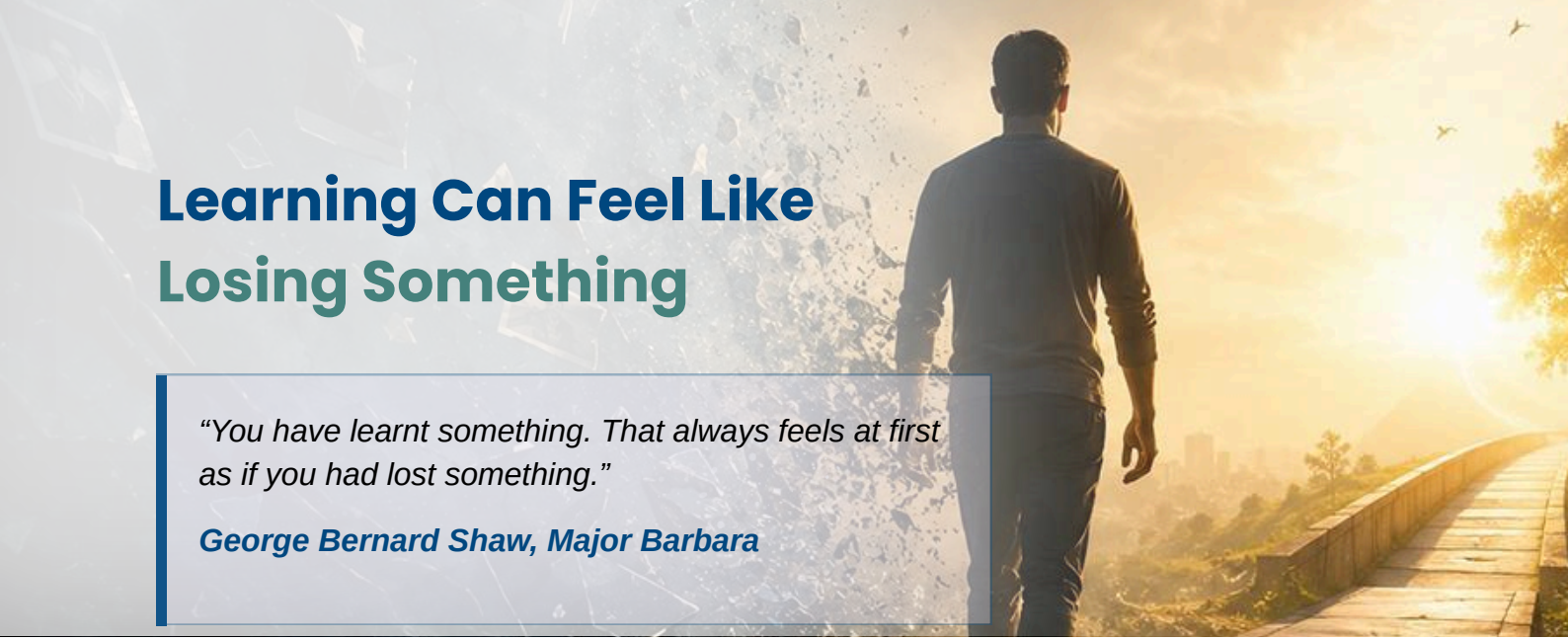
- Are your efforts to help someone building capability or reinforcing dependence?

Leadership Exercise

Choose one direct report and define a responsibility you can transfer more fully. Clarify the expected result, decision rights, checkpoints, and consequences. Then resist the urge to take the work back when the person approaches it differently than you would.



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Learning Can Feel Like Losing Something

> *"You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Major Barbara***

This is one of Shaw's observations that has stayed with me. Growth usually requires us to give something up: an identity, a habit, a comfortable certainty, or a source of status. A founder who delegates an important responsibility may lose the satisfaction of being the person who solves every problem. A CEO who changes a long-held position may worry about looking inconsistent. A senior leader who confronts an underperforming friend may put a valued relationship at risk.

That is why knowing what to do is not the same as doing it. A leader can understand the right decision and still resist the loss that comes with it. It helps to make the tradeoff explicit: What will I gain if I act? What will I have to give up? Once the personal cost is acknowledged, the business decision often becomes easier to see clearly.

The loss may be harder to recognize because it is attached to something that once worked. The founder's direct involvement may have protected quality. The executive's skepticism may have prevented expensive mistakes. The manager's availability may have built trust. A strength becomes a limitation when the context changes and the leader continues to use it in the same way. Letting go can feel like abandoning part of what made the leader successful.

Leaders often need permission to describe that cost without being accused of resistance. Naming the loss does not excuse inaction. It makes action more realistic. Once the leader can say what is being surrendered—status, familiarity, closeness to the work, certainty, or identity—the conversation can move from persuasion to choice. The leader can decide whether preserving that benefit is worth the organizational cost.

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Reflection Questions

- What identity, habit, relationship, or source of status may be tied to the decision in front of you?

- What will you gain if you change, and what will you have to give up?

- Is the business paying a price because you have not acknowledged the personal cost of moving forward?

Leadership Exercise

For one delayed decision, complete two statements in writing: *"If I make this change, I may lose…"* and *"If I do not make this change, the organization may lose…"* Compare the two costs before deciding your next step.

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Indifference Is Also a Leadership Choice

> *"The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, The Devil's Disciple***

Indifference is rarely announced. It shows up when a leader stops paying attention to something that has become familiar. A struggling employee receives neither honest feedback nor meaningful support. A high performer's destructive behavior is tolerated. Customer complaints are discussed but never addressed. Over time, a standard becomes negotiable because enforcing it would be uncomfortable.

Good leadership requires paying enough attention to step in, clarify expectations, confront behavior, and follow through. Silence communicates a standard just as clearly as anything printed on the wall. When a problem has been tolerated for months, ask who is paying the price. It is usually not just the person whose performance is in question. Colleagues, customers, and the culture are paying as well.

Indifference can also appear as endless patience. A leader may continue coaching someone without defining the improvement required, the support available, or the date by which a decision will be made. That can feel compassionate, but it often leaves everyone in uncertainty. Respect requires clarity. People deserve to know where they stand, what must change, and what will happen if it does not.

The same principle applies to strong performers. Results do not erase the effect of destructive behavior. When a high producer is allowed to undermine colleagues or violate stated values, the organization learns which standard is real. The leader may be avoiding a difficult short-term consequence, but the cost accumulates in turnover, distrust, and weakened authority.

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Reflection Questions

- What problem has become so familiar that you no longer respond to it with appropriate urgency?

- Who is paying the price for a conversation you have avoided?

- What standard are you communicating through what you tolerate?

Leadership Exercise

Identify one behavior or performance issue that has gone unaddressed. Prepare for a direct conversation by writing the observable facts, the effect on the business and other people, the standard that must be met, and the follow-up date.



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Expert Advice Does Not Replace Executive Judgment

> *"No man can be a pure specialist without being in the strict sense an idiot."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Maxims for Revolutionists***

Shaw's wording is blunt, but his warning is useful. Expertise can narrow a person's field of view. That is not a reason to distrust specialists. Leaders need good attorneys, accountants, bankers, consultants, and technical experts. They also need to remember that no specialist is responsible for the whole business decision.

Every advisor views risk through the lens of their profession. The lawyer may focus on legal exposure, the accountant on financial controls, and the banker on repayment capacity. Those perspectives matter, but the CEO still has to put them together. Ask what question the expert was actually answering, what assumptions support the recommendation, and what may sit outside that advisor's field of view. The leader can seek advice, but cannot delegate judgment.

Good advisors usually understand this distinction. They clarify the boundaries of their expertise, explain the assumptions behind the recommendation, and help the leader understand the tradeoffs. Problems arise when either side asks advice to carry more weight than it should. An advisor may present one professional concern as though it settles the entire decision. A leader may accept that conclusion because it reduces the discomfort of choosing.

Executive judgment is the work of integration. It includes financial, legal, operational, human, cultural, and strategic considerations that no single specialist owns. The leader does not need to know more than every expert. The leader does need to understand enough to ask good questions, identify conflicts among recommendations, and accept responsibility for the final choice.

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Reflection Questions

- What question did each advisor actually answer, and was it the question you most needed answered?

- Which important business, cultural, or human factor falls outside the advisor's specialty?

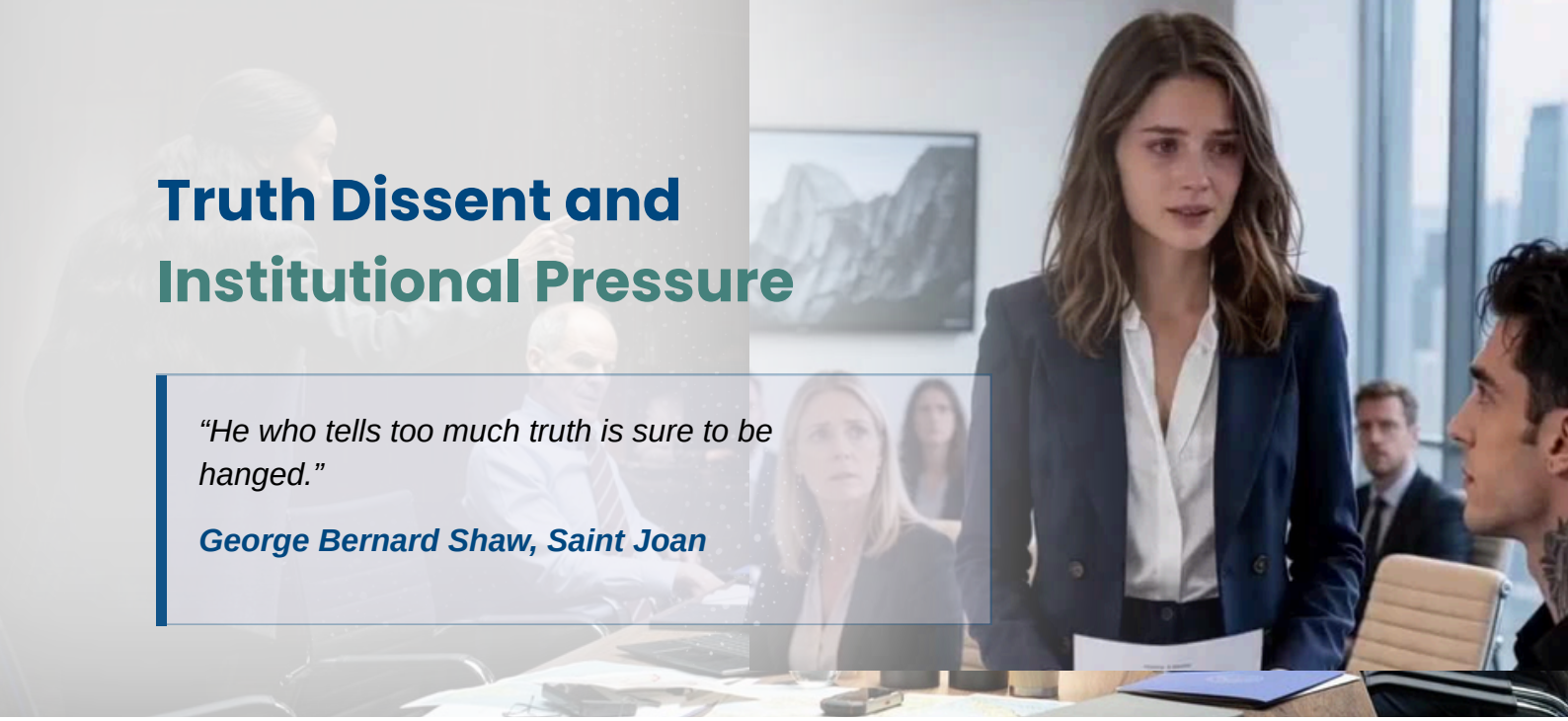
- After hearing the experts, what judgment remains yours alone to make?

Leadership Exercise

For an upcoming decision, create a one-page decision record. List each advisor's recommendation, the assumptions behind it, the risks emphasized, the risks omitted, and your final judgment. Revisit the record later to improve how you make similar decisions.



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Truth Dissent and Institutional Pressure

> *“He who tells too much truth is sure to be hanged.”*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Saint Joan***

Saint Joan is not a simple story about one courageous person surrounded by fools. Shaw gives the institutions their own logic, responsibilities, and fears. That is what makes the play useful to leaders. Organizations can value candor in principle while making certain truths unsafe in practice. The pressure is rarely written down. People learn from what happens to colleagues who question a favored plan, challenge a powerful executive, or bring unwelcome evidence into the room.

The dissenting person may be awkward, emotional, poorly timed, or partly wrong. Those weaknesses make it easy to dismiss the message without examining it. A leader’s responsibility is to separate the quality of the delivery from the value of the information. If the person is only twenty percent right, the twenty percent may still matter.

Candor depends less on announcing an open-door policy than on the leader’s behavior when challenged. Curiosity, follow-up, and protection from retaliation make truth easier to tell. Defensiveness, ridicule, and premature certainty teach people to edit what the leader hears.

The more senior the leader becomes, the more deliberate this work must be. Power changes what people are willing to say. Even a leader who considers themselves approachable may receive filtered information because employees are trying to protect a relationship, a career, or the leader’s confidence. The absence of disagreement is not proof of alignment. It may be evidence that disagreement has become too costly.

Leaders can reduce that cost by asking specific questions instead of inviting general candor. “What are we missing?” is easy to answer politely. “Which assumption in this plan is most likely to be wrong?” or “What would you challenge if I were not in the room?” gives people a clearer opening. The leader then has to respond in a way that makes the next honest conversation more likely.

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Reflection Questions

- What truth has become politically difficult to express in your organization?

- Whose message have you discounted because you disliked the way it was delivered?

- What do people observe when someone challenges your preferred view?

Leadership Exercise

Ask three people at different levels, “What do you think I may not be hearing clearly?” Listen without rebuttal. Record the themes, choose one that deserves investigation, and report back what you learned and what you will do.



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Courage Without Theater

> *"You can always do a thing when you know it must be done."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Arms and the Man***

In Arms and the Man, Shaw punctures romantic ideas about heroism. Captain Bluntschli is practical, tired, hungry, and more interested in what works than in looking brave. The play offers a useful correction for leaders who confuse courage with dramatic gestures or public certainty.

Executive courage is often quiet. It may mean admitting that an earlier decision was wrong, stopping an initiative after a large investment, addressing an underperforming friend, asking for help, or allowing someone else to lead. None of those choices necessarily looks heroic. Each can be difficult because it exposes the leader to judgment or loss.

The test is not whether an action appears bold. The test is whether it is necessary, grounded in reality, and taken with a willingness to accept the consequences. Sometimes restraint is courageous. Sometimes persistence is avoidance. Leaders need enough honesty to tell the difference.

Courage is easier to claim in advance than to recognize in practice. The difficult action is often ordinary and private. It may be a direct conversation, an apology, a change in position, or a decision to stop funding work that the leader once championed. These choices rarely produce the emotional reward associated with a dramatic stand. They simply address what the situation requires.

Practical courage also includes preparation. A leader who takes a large risk without understanding the downside is not necessarily brave. The disciplined leader examines the consequences, prepares for them, and acts when the purpose justifies the exposure. Courage and judgment should strengthen each other rather than compete.

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Reflection Questions

- Are you choosing the action that works or the action that looks courageous?

- Where are you defending appearances rather than results?

- What necessary action have you delayed because it offers little recognition?

Leadership Exercise

Identify one decision where image may be competing with effectiveness. Write what a dramatic response would look like, what a practical response would look like, and which result the organization actually needs. Choose the practical action and name the consequence you must be willing to accept.

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Hope Reality and Emotional Discipline

> *“He who has never hoped can never despair.”*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Caesar and Cleopatra***

Hope is important in leadership. People need to believe their effort can produce a worthwhile result. But hope becomes dangerous when a leader depends on one preferred outcome and begins discounting evidence that points elsewhere. Optimism is not a substitute for contingency planning.

A disciplined leader can work hard for the desired result while preparing responsibly for a different one. That is not pessimism. It is the ability to remain committed without becoming emotionally dependent on being right. The organization benefits when confidence and realism are allowed to coexist.

This is especially important in sales forecasts, financing, acquisitions, succession, litigation, and executive performance. A plan based entirely on what the leader hopes will happen leaves other people exposed. A plan that includes thresholds, alternatives, and decision dates protects the organization without draining energy from the primary goal. Leaders set the emotional tone for how reality is handled. If every setback is treated as a crisis, people become cautious and defensive. If difficult evidence is routinely explained away, people stop raising it. Emotional discipline allows the leader to take the information seriously without becoming controlled by it. The organization can remain hopeful while adjusting the plan.

The practical discipline is to separate commitment to the purpose from attachment to one path. A leader can remain committed to growth while changing the product, the timing, or the investment. A leader can remain committed to a person’s development while concluding that the current role is not working. Flexibility in method is not a loss of conviction when the underlying purpose remains clear.

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Reflection Questions

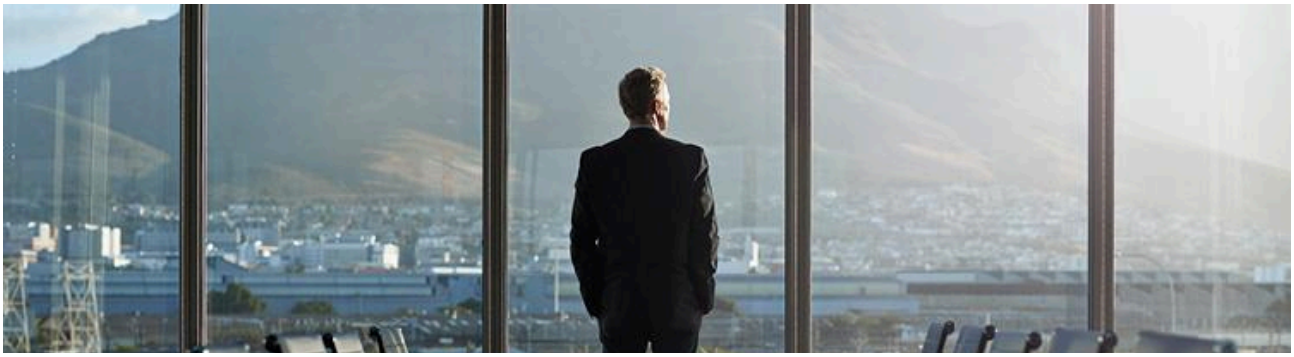
- What are you hoping will happen, and what evidence supports that hope?

- What evidence challenges your preferred outcome?

- What responsible preparation is required if the result is different?

Leadership Exercise

For one high-stakes outcome, write the desired case, the most likely case, and the difficult case. Define the evidence that would signal each case and the action you would take. Set a date to review the signals before hope turns into denial.



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Freedom Means Accepting Responsibility

> *"Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Maxims for Revolutionists***

Leaders sometimes describe freedom as keeping their options open. They postpone the conversation, ask for more information, or wait for better timing. Sometimes delay is appropriate. But refusing to choose is still a choice, and someone else often absorbs the cost while the leader preserves flexibility.

This comes up in succession planning, partner disputes, executive performance decisions, acquisitions, and changes in strategy. The questions are direct: What are you choosing by not deciding? Who is paying the price? What information would truly change the decision? At what point does keeping your options open become a failure to lead? Leadership means accepting both the responsibility and the limitations that come with a choice.

Commitment closes some doors. That is why it can feel like a loss of freedom even when it is the only way to make progress. A strategy becomes meaningful when the organization can say no to work that does not fit. A delegation becomes real when the leader gives up the right to control every method. A succession plan becomes credible when dates, roles, authority, and consequences are no longer left vague.

The leader should also distinguish a reversible decision from an irreversible one. Some choices deserve more time because the cost of being wrong is high and difficult to recover. Others can be tested and adjusted. Treating every decision as permanent creates unnecessary delay. Treating every decision as easily reversible creates carelessness. Responsibility includes matching the decision process to the actual level of risk.

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Reflection Questions

- What are you choosing, in practical terms, by not deciding?

- Who is carrying the cost of your continued flexibility?

- What specific information would change your decision, and when will you stop waiting for more?

Leadership Exercise

Choose one decision that has remained open too long. Set a decision date, identify the limited information still required, name the people who must be heard, and define what you will communicate once the decision is made.



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The Work of Leadership Is to Steer

> *"To be in hell is to drift: to be in heaven is to steer."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman***

Leaders rarely announce that they have decided to drift. They revisit the issue, gather more information, or wait for greater clarity. Meanwhile, the company keeps moving, and circumstances eventually make the decision for them. Drifting stops when a leader makes a real commitment: what will be done, who needs to be involved, when it will happen, and how everyone will know it has been completed.

This is why Shaw still feels relevant to me. He did not allow intelligent people to hide behind intelligent explanations. He paid attention to what their behavior revealed and whether their actions matched what they claimed to value. He also understood that sincere, capable people can be mistaken about themselves. That is not a character flaw; it is part of being human. Leadership requires enough humility to recognize it and enough courage to do something about it.

Most leaders do not need more advice nearly as much as they need greater clarity about the issue in front of them. They need to understand what they can control, recognize how they may be contributing to the problem, listen to perspectives that challenge them, and then decide. The work is often ordinary rather than dramatic: having the conversation, setting the expectation, delegating real authority, confronting poor performance, or making the choice that has been delayed. Shaw's words come from another era, but the leadership challenge is current. See the situation clearly, accept responsibility for your part, and steer.

Steering does not mean predicting everything correctly. A pilot adjusts to conditions while preserving a destination. Leaders do the same. They make the best decision available, establish what they will watch, and revise when evidence warrants it. Drifting is different. It allows conditions, habits, and other people's priorities to determine the direction without an explicit choice.

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A good commitment therefore includes more than an intention. It identifies an owner, a date, a result, and the evidence that will be reviewed. It also identifies the next conversation if the commitment is not met. That may sound basic, but leadership often fails in the distance between a thoughtful discussion and a visible action. Steering closes that distance.

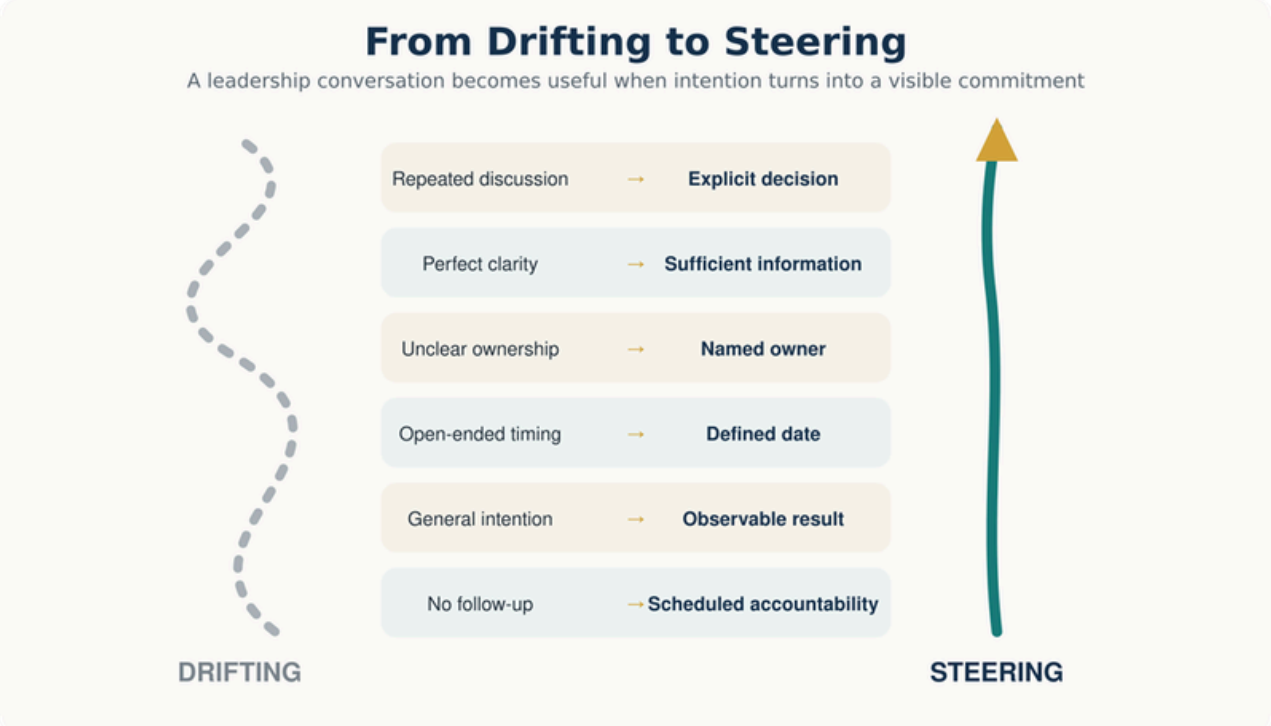


Figure 2. Steering converts a thoughtful conversation into an explicit, observable commitment.

Reflection Questions

- Where are you currently drifting rather than choosing a direction?

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- What commitment would make your intention visible to other people?

- How will you know that the decision has moved from discussion into execution?

Leadership Exercise

Write a one-sentence commitment for the most important issue you are facing: “By [date], I will [specific action or decision], involving [people], and we will know it is complete when [observable result].” Share it with someone who will hold you accountable.



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From Reflection to Leadership Action

> *"Why, to be able to choose the line of greatest advantage instead of yielding in the direction of the least resistance. Does a ship sail to its destination no better than a log drifts nowhither? The philosopher is Nature's pilot."*
>
> ***George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman***

Shaw's image of the pilot brings the paper back to a practical question. How does a leader move from a thoughtful conversation to a better decision? Reflection matters because the first explanation is often incomplete. Action matters because insight that never changes behavior has little value to the organization. The following sequence can be used in a peer group, an executive coaching conversation, a leadership-team meeting, or private preparation before an important decision.

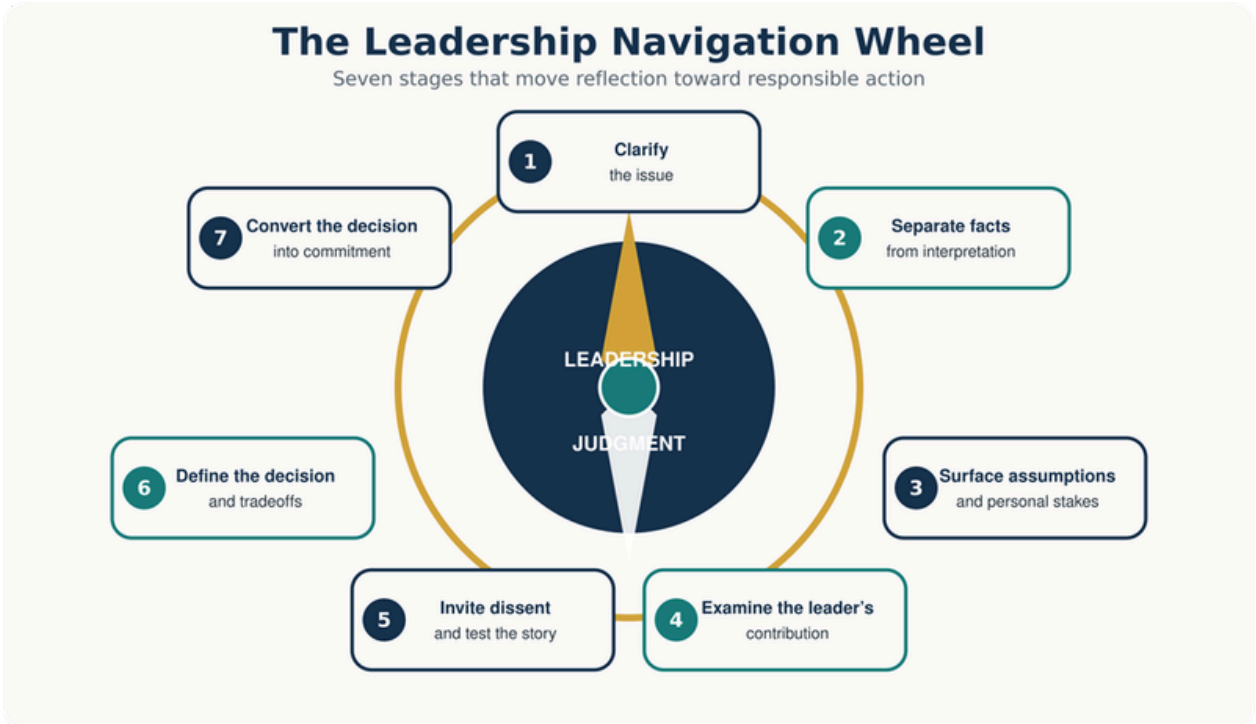


Figure 3. The leadership navigation wheel: seven stages for moving from the first explanation to accountable action.

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Clarify the Issue as the Leader Currently Sees It

Begin with the leader's own description. What is happening? What result is at risk? Who is involved? What decision appears to be required? This stage should establish the facts without rushing to correct the leader's interpretation. People are more willing to examine their story when they first feel that it has been understood.

Separate Facts from the Story Around Them

Identify what can be observed and what has been inferred. "The vice president missed three deadlines" is different from "the vice president does not care." "The customer delayed the decision" is different from "the customer will never buy." The story may ultimately be accurate, but separating it from the facts creates room to test other explanations.

Surface the Assumptions and Personal Stakes

Ask what must be true for the leader's explanation to hold. Then ask what the leader may be protecting: control, approval, loyalty, status, identity, security, or a valued relationship. The purpose is not to discredit the leader's reasoning. It is to make sure the decision accounts for the full situation rather than only the part that is easiest to discuss.

Examine the Leaders Contribution

Look for behavior, systems, incentives, and tolerated exceptions that may be sustaining the problem. What has the leader communicated through action? Where has the leader rescued, overridden, delayed, or remained silent? This stage should be handled without blame. The leader's contribution is valuable because it is usually the part most available to change.

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Invite Dissent and Test the Preferred Explanation

Ask what a credible person who disagrees would say. Identify evidence that does not fit the current story. Consider how the issue looks from the perspective of the employee, customer, partner, or advisor. The goal is not to create artificial balance. It is to reduce the chance that authority, familiarity, or emotional investment has narrowed the leader's field of view.

Define the Decision and Its Tradeoffs

State the decision in direct language. Identify what will be gained, what will be given up, who will be affected, and which risks will remain. If more information is needed, name it specifically and establish when it will be available. "We need more data" should not become an indefinite substitute for deciding.

Convert the Decision into a Commitment

Finish with an observable commitment: what will be done, by whom, by when, and how completion will be recognized. Establish the first step and the follow-up conversation. This is also the place for accountability. The leader should be able to explain what will happen if the commitment is missed and whether the obstacle was external, operational, or another sign of avoidance.

Using Humor Without Lowering the Standard

Shaw often used humor to reveal a contradiction before the audience had time to defend it. Leaders and advisors can do something similar, but the standard is important. Humor should make the pattern easier to see without making the person smaller. It should never be used to display superiority, avoid a direct statement, or turn a serious concern into entertainment.

A useful intervention might be, "You have made a very convincing case for why nothing can change. Would you like help preserving the situation or changing it?" The question works only if it is delivered with respect and genuine curiosity. The purpose is to interrupt the familiar explanation and return the leader to choice. If the humor creates embarrassment rather than insight, it has failed.

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Reflection Questions

- At which stage do your leadership conversations most often become incomplete?

- Where are you most likely to accept the first plausible explanation?

- How consistently do your decisions end with an owner, date, result, and follow-up?

Leadership Exercise

Apply the seven-stage sequence to one current leadership issue. Keep the written analysis to two pages. End with one decision, one commitment, and one scheduled accountability conversation.

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Conclusion

Shaw remains useful to leaders because he refuses to let intelligent people hide behind intelligent explanations. He asks what their behavior reveals, who benefits from the current arrangement, and whether the respectable answer is also the truthful one. He understands that capable and sincere people can still be mistaken about themselves.

That is why these ideas belong in the work of leadership. A business issue is often the visible expression of an untested assumption, an unresolved contradiction, a poorly designed system, or an unfinished stage in the leader's own development. The operational issue is real, but a tactical answer will not hold if the pattern beneath it remains untouched.

The standard is not whether a leader leaves a discussion with more advice. It is whether the leader has a more honest understanding of the issue, a clearer view of their own contribution, and a decision they are prepared to carry out. The practical work is to question the familiar story, listen for the truth that is difficult to hear, accept the responsibility that comes with choice, and steer.



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Sources

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