



Leadership Development: Intent vs Action

Why people remain the #1 business challenge, and how leadership capability is built.

For anyone who is required, expected, or committed to lead effectively, and for organisations responsible for developing them.

Steve Riddle | CoachStation | Updated October 2026

Executive Summary

Leadership is regularly identified as one of the biggest influences on team performance, culture, accountability, retention and day-to-day working relationships. Yet leadership capability is still often treated as something people will acquire through promotion, experience, good intent or occasional training. That assumption is one of the central reasons the intent-action gap persists.

The core proposition

Leadership is one of the few important disciplines where people are expected to perform without practising.

This briefing goes beyond the question of whether organisations invest enough in leadership development. It asks a more practical question: how does a person become more capable at leading other people?

Key findings in this paper:

- **Recognising a leadership problem is different from knowing how to lead through it.** Managers can know that something feels wrong without knowing what effective leadership requires in that situation, how to communicate it, or how to adapt when another person responds unexpectedly.
- **Translation is the missing step.** Concepts and theory only become useful when a leader can translate them into their own people, pressures, relationships and context.
- **The workplace is the practice environment.** Leadership practice happens in emails, one-to-ones, meetings, decisions, follow-up, informal conversations and difficult moments, not only in training rooms.
- **Experience is not the same as practice.** Years in a role can reinforce existing habits. Capability develops when experience is deliberately prepared for, noticed, reflected on and repeated differently.
- **Coaching can accelerate development, but it cannot outsource it.** Coaching can provide perspective, options, challenge and reflection. The leader still has to translate, Practice, notice, own and repeat.
- **Organisations shape whether development sticks.** Role modelling, reinforcement, time, expectations and access to meaningful development all influence whether leaders can turn learning into sustained behaviour.

What this means for you

If you lead people, your development is part of the job.

If you are responsible for developing leaders, the task is not simply to provide information. It is to create the conditions for translation, practice, reflection and increasingly sound judgement.

The Paradox

Everyone says people matter. Leadership development is still treated as optional.

In leadership workshops and coaching programmes I have facilitated over many years, I often ask a simple opening question:

"What is the biggest challenge facing your organisation right now?"

Across industries, sectors and organisations of quite different sizes, responses repeatedly return to a familiar set of themes:

- **Our people**
- **Management and leadership capability**
- **Communication breakdowns**
- **Lack of accountability**
- **Performance and behaviour challenges**
- **Culture, trust or engagement**

In one leadership programme with around twenty managers, every table identified people capability as the organisation's biggest constraint. Not market conditions. Not technology. Not funding. People. I then asked a second question.

"How many of you have had structured leadership development in the past two years? Not just attended training. Personalised or tailored development that has been reinforced by your immediate manager?"

Two people raised their hands. Most had no active support. Even fewer had experienced ongoing coaching or mentoring, and in both cases the individuals had initiated and paid for the development themselves. That gap is not unusual. Organisations can be clear about the cost of people problems while remaining remarkably passive about building the capability required to deal with them.

What leaders say is critical	What often happens in practice
Finding and keeping great people	Recruitment receives attention while retention and manager capability receive less
Strong management capability	People are promoted on technical performance and left to learn leadership on the job
Effective communication	Meetings, messages and feedback occur without deliberate practice in listening, questioning or adaptation
Real accountability	Expectations remain unclear or difficult conversations are delayed
A strong leadership bench	People are given the title before they have developed the capability

The deeper paradox

Organisations expect leadership performance in the real world while providing remarkably little structured opportunity to Practice leadership before, during and after those moments.

Why the Paradox Persists

The intent-action gap is not caused by one thing. It is sustained by several reinforcing dynamics, some organisational and some individual. Together they make leadership development easy to value in principle and easy to postpone in practice.

1. Invisible ROI and long causal chains

Leadership development rarely produces one neat line on a profit and loss statement. Its value appears through better conversations, fewer escalations, stronger retention, clearer expectations, improved decision-making, less rework and more capable teams. Because those outcomes have multiple causes, development can be easy to underweight even when its absence is expensive.

From the field: the workshop that changed nothing

I have been brought in after isolated development initiatives more times than I can count. The feedback was positive and the ideas were remembered vaguely, but six months later little behaviour had changed. The issue was not necessarily the workshop. Leadership capability had been treated as an event, not a practice.

2. Budget optics and time pressure

Development is visible as a cost and time commitment. The cost of weak leadership is dispersed across turnover, delays, friction, poor decisions and management time. Under pressure, development is therefore one of the easiest things to defer, even when underdevelopment is contributing to the pressure itself.

3. The senior leadership blind spot

A recurring pattern is that senior leaders sponsor development for the managers below them but do not participate themselves. This creates a contradiction. Managers are asked to communicate, delegate, coach, hold accountability or lead change differently inside a system where the behaviour above them has not changed.

From the field: the manager sent to training three times

I knew a leader who sent the same manager to the same two-day leadership programme three times over twenty months because he was not seeing the results he wanted. Between programmes there was no coaching, reinforcement or change in his own leadership behaviour. The intervention was repeated. The development environment was not.

4. The promotion trap

Most managers are promoted because they were effective individual contributors. They are then expected to develop others, read complex situations, build trust, manage emotion, set standards, delegate appropriately and hold difficult conversations. The role changes immediately. Their capability does not.

5. Experience is mistaken for capability

Time in a role matters, but experience alone does not guarantee development. A person can spend ten years managing people while repeating the same habits for ten years. Experience becomes developmental when the leader deliberately prepares, experiments, notices what happens, reflects on it and adapts the next attempt.

6. The "we tried training before" hangover

One-off programmes disconnected from real work often produce little sustained movement. Organisations can then conclude that leadership development does not work. The more accurate conclusion is usually that information without translation, practice, reinforcement and follow-through is unlikely to become capability.

The Missing Middle: From Intent to Capability

Knowing that something needs to change is different from knowing how to lead through it.

It is tempting to assume that managers already know what good leadership requires and simply fail to act. Sometimes that is true. Often, it is not.

A manager may recognise that a relationship is deteriorating, that performance is not good enough, that a team member is disengaged or that a difficult conversation is overdue. Recognition is useful, but it does not automatically tell them what effective leadership looks like in that situation.

They may still need to work out what is reasonable to expect, what matters to the other person, what assumptions they are making, what questions to ask, what to say clearly, when to challenge, when to listen, when to pause and what consequence is proportionate. This is where judgement and capability begin to matter.

Intent is not the bridge to action

Translation and practice are the bridge. Leadership ideas become useful only when a person can make sense of them in their own context and evaluate them in the real world.

A practical development loop

1. Notice

Recognise that this interaction, decision or pattern matters and deserves more than an automatic response.

2. Understand

Build enough knowledge and perspective to see options, not just one habitual response.

3. Translate

Ask what the principle means for this person, this relationship, this context and this moment.

4. Prepare

Spend a few deliberate minutes clarifying the outcome, assumptions, questions and likely points of difficulty.

5. Practice

Act in the real workplace. Leadership capability is built through repeated human interactions, not passive consumption.

6. Notice and adapt

Pay attention while it is happening. Read the words, emotion, body language and level of understanding, then adjust.

7. Reflect and repeat

Identify what worked, what did not, what you would change and what you will Practice next time.

A useful distinction

Experience is different from practice. Practice is experience that has been deliberately prepared for, examined, learned from and repeated with adjustment.

Leadership Practice Happens in the Work

Leadership development does not require a separate hour every time someone wants to improve. The practice opportunities already exist throughout the working day. The difference is whether the leader uses them deliberately.

A three-minute corridor conversation, an email, a 1:1, a project update, a decision, a disagreement, a missed commitment or an informal follow-up can all become practice. The leadership task is to bring greater intention and awareness to those moments.

Before, during and after

Before	During	After
Prepare for the moment. What matters here? What outcome do I need? What am I assuming? What do I need to understand? What question should I ask?	Notice what is happening. Am I listening? Is the message landing? What has changed in their tone or body language? Do I need to pause, question or adapt?	Reflect without self-recrimination. What worked? Why? What did I miss? What would I repeat? What would I change next time?
A few deliberate minutes can materially improve the quality of the interaction.	Emotional intelligence becomes useful when it helps you read and respond to the real moment, not merely describe yourself.	Capture enough to retain the learning. A short note is often more useful than relying on memory weeks later.

Questioning and listening are leadership practice

Many difficult leadership situations are framed too quickly as a need to "give feedback". Sometimes the more important leadership move is to ask a better question and then genuinely listen to the answer.

Effective listening is not simply staying quiet. It is hearing the words someone chooses, noticing what they emphasise or avoid, recognising values-related language and testing whether you have understood their meaning. A person may value respect, autonomy, clarity, achievement, recognition or being able to see the impact of their work. Those clues matter in the current conversation and in future ones.

Self-awareness is active, not theoretical

The leader is also part of the interaction. Practice includes noticing your own urge to solve, defend, soften, rescue, dominate, withdraw or move on too quickly. Emotional intelligence becomes a skill when that awareness changes what you do next.

Ownership creates developmental leverage

Context matters. Other people can be difficult. Systems can be dysfunctional. Senior leaders can create genuine constraints. Development stalls, however, when every reflection ends with what someone else should do differently. A more useful question is: "What is mine to influence, clarify, challenge, change or own?"

Read our [Leadership and the Productivity Gap](#) briefing paper to explore these points further.

What Coaching Can, and Cannot, Do

Coaching can enable development. It cannot Practice leadership for the leader.

Coaching can provide perspective, challenge assumptions, surface options, improve preparation, create accountability and offer a structured place to reflect on what happened. It can also help a leader see patterns they may struggle to recognise alone.

That makes coaching valuable. It does not make coaching the answer to all leadership development. The development still occurs when the leader returns to their workplace and applies what has been explored.

The development happens between sessions

The strongest coaching relationships are not built on what the coach says. They are built on what the leader translates, Practices, notices, reflects on and brings back into the next conversation.

What the strongest coachees tend to do

- **They come prepared.** The agenda is theirs. They bring the real situations, people, tensions and decisions they are working through.
- **They translate.** They do not leave an idea as theory. They work out what it means in their context and how they might apply it.
- **They practice between sessions.** They treat everyday leadership interactions as repetitions, not as unrelated events.
- **They notice and capture.** They make brief notes about what worked, what did not, what surprised them and what they want to revisit.
- **They can explain why something went well.** "It went well" is not reflection. They begin to identify what they did, what the other person did and what made the difference.
- **They accept challenge and take ownership.** Trust in the coaching relationship allows direct conversations about avoidance, assumptions, impact and personal responsibility.
- **They return with richer evidence.** The next coaching conversation starts from lived experience, which allows the development to become increasingly specific and useful.

In this sense, coaching is one part of a wider practice architecture. It can accelerate learning and provide a valuable human relationship around the work, but it is most effective when the leader remains an active participant in their own development.

Accountability Is a Missing Link

Accountability is often discussed as a performance management tool. In practice, it is a leadership discipline.

It is the point where intent becomes visible in behaviour, where expectations become real and where standards stop being aspirational and start becoming operational. Accountability requires more than a single difficult conversation. It requires clarity, follow-through, appropriate consequences and leaders who are prepared to stay engaged long enough for behaviour to change.

A manager may care deeply and still lack the capability to create accountability well. They may not know how to make an expectation specific, how to test understanding, how to address a missed commitment, how to remain constructive under emotion or how to distinguish consequence from punishment. Those are skills that can be developed, but only through translation and practice.

Accountability is therefore an excellent example of the broader thesis of this paper. Understanding the concept is not enough. The leader must be able to apply it with a real person in a real context and adapt as the situation unfolds.

From the field: "We don't really need leadership development."

I have met with founders who tell me with genuine confidence that their organisation does not need formal development. They have a tight team and communicate well. They are not a big corporate. In the same conversation, they describe classic growth - ceiling symptoms: key person dependence, inconsistent decision-making, middle managers avoiding difficult conversations, and the owner personally resolving issues that should never have reached them.

When I eventually facilitate a workshop with the team, or conduct coaching, the participants consistently comment that it is the first time they have talked honestly about these topics. That moment can be confronting. It can also be the most productive thing that has happened in the organisation in years. Coaching and leadership development are not a luxury for big corporates; they are a lever for any business that wants to grow beyond the personality of its founder.

Three Development Traps

How organisations and leaders unintentionally keep the gap open

1. Delegation

Development is positioned as someone else's responsibility. Senior leaders send managers to programmes without participating themselves. Managers are told to own development without being given clear expectations, support or reinforcement. Responsibility is passed down, but the environment does not change.

2. Intervention

Development becomes an event: a workshop, keynote, assessment or coaching conversation. The activity can be well received, but there is no deliberate translation into real work and no sustained practice afterwards. The event occurs. Capability does not necessarily follow.

3. Avoidance

Leadership development is treated as unnecessary, too difficult to prioritise or something experience will eventually solve. Difficult conversations and capability gaps remain unaddressed until the cost is large enough that intervention can no longer be avoided.

The common thread

Delegation, intervention and avoidance all reduce the opportunity for deliberate practice. They make leadership development episodic when the work of leading is continuous.

Why Organisations Still Matter

Leadership development belongs to the individual leader, but organisations determine a great deal about the environment in which that development occurs. Expectations, role modelling, workload, access to support, reinforcement and consequences can either strengthen practice or quietly undermine it.

Frontline and mid-level leaders remain a major leverage point

First and second-line managers translate organisational intent into operational reality. Every priority, culture statement, change initiative and performance expectation eventually becomes a conversation, decision or behaviour at this level. These leaders also tend to receive less structured development than the consequences of their role would suggest.

The current operating environment amplifies this gap. Hybrid and distributed work, accelerating technology change, sustained cost pressure, and higher expectations from employees mean frontline leaders are being asked to do more with less preparation, less bandwidth, and less structural support than at any point in recent memory. Burnout typically shows up here first. Implementation drag on key initiatives also emerges at this level. The costliest attrition is most often triggered by an employee's relationship with their frontline manager.

Investment early in a leader's development compounds over time. Building competence, capability and confidence at the frontline improves performance in the role they hold now, strengthens the performance of the people around them, and better prepares them for greater leadership responsibility later. Just as importantly, these leaders are more likely to be promoted because they have demonstrated genuine leadership capability, rather than simply because they performed strongly as individual contributors. In practice, this helps counter the [Peter Principle](#) by developing and observing leadership capability before the next promotion, rather than discovering its absence afterwards.

Level	Typical development attention	Day-to-day leverage
Executives	Often high per head	Strategic direction, operating conditions and visible role modelling
Mid-level Managers	Variable	Cross-functional alignment, translation of strategy and development of other leaders
Frontline Leaders	Often inconsistent or low	Direct daily impact on teams, customers, safety, performance and working relationships

What effective organisations do differently

- **Treat leadership as practice, not events.** Programmes, coaching and workshops are connected to real situations, repeated application and reinforcement.
- **Start at the top and stay involved.** Senior leaders demonstrate that development applies to them too and actively reinforce the behaviours expected below.
- **Link development to real work.** People Practice around the conversations, decisions, relationships and performance issues they are facing.
- **Create space for preparation and reflection.** A few minutes before and after important interactions can be more valuable than another hour of passive content.
- **Expect managers to develop managers.** The immediate leader reinforces development between formal sessions instead of outsourcing the task to HR, a programme or a coach.
- **Measure behaviour and outcomes, not attendance.** Completion rates are useful administration. They are not evidence that leadership capability has changed.

A useful organisational question

Where does leadership get practiced here, not simply discussed?

Practical Next Steps

For the individual leader: five moves for the next 30 days

1. Choose one behaviour to Practice.

Make it specific enough to observe, such as asking one more question before offering a solution, setting clearer expectations or addressing issues earlier.

2. Prepare for important interactions.

Use two deliberate minutes before a meeting, one-to-one or difficult conversation to clarify what matters, what you need to understand and what you may be assuming.

3. Translate one idea into your world.

When you learn a concept, identify where it applies to a real person or situation in the next week.

4. Reflect and capture.

After important interactions, write a few lines about what happened, why it happened and what you would repeat or change.

5. Bring evidence to development conversations.

If you are being coached, mentored or supported by your manager, bring specific situations and observations rather than relying on general impressions.

For organisations: four moves for the next 90 days

1. Audit the people pain points.

Map where turnover, friction, escalation, missed expectations or excessive dependence on senior leaders are occurring. Ask how much of the pattern is also a leadership capability question.

2. Map the current development environment.

Look beyond the training budget. What structured support, manager reinforcement, practice, coaching, reflection and follow-through exist at each leadership level?

3. Choose one cohort and build practice around real work.

Select a group where stronger leadership would materially improve outcomes. Create a sustained development experience tied to the situations those leaders are genuinely facing.

4. Measure movement, not activity.

Track a small number of behavioural and business indicators connected to the development goal. Ask whether conversations happen earlier, decisions remain at the right level, commitments close and leadership dependence changes.

Take the Next Step

Strategic Leadership and Organisational Health Audit

For organisations, reading about the intent-action gap is one thing. Understanding where it is showing up in your own leadership system is another. The CoachStation Strategic Leadership and Organisational Health Audit provides a structured starting point.

The diagnostic considers leadership maturity across three areas: Structural Flow, Human Core and Future Readiness. It is designed to help leaders identify where organisational conditions are supporting effective leadership and where gaps may be limiting performance.

Structural Flow	Human Core	Future Readiness
How clearly strategy translates into day-to-day decisions, accountabilities and operating rhythms.	The quality of leadership, culture, trust, relationships and people capability across the organisation.	The organisation's capacity to adapt, innovate and lead as work, technology and expectations continue to change.

The assessment takes around ten minutes and provides a tailored leadership profile with prioritised next steps. It is one option for organisations that want to move from broad concern about people issues to a more specific conversation about where leadership capability is helping or hindering performance.

How CoachStation Supports Leadership Practice

CoachStation is built around a simple premise: leadership development should connect directly to real work. Different leaders need different levels of support, but no single intervention substitutes for translation, practice and ownership.

Support	Examples	Best used for	Contribution to development
Coaching and Mentoring	Individual coaching, mentoring, leadership transition support	Leaders working through real situations, relationships and decisions	Perspective, challenge, preparation, reflection and accountability
Structured Development	CSLDP, leadership programmes, workshops	Individuals and cohorts building shared capability over time	Concepts, practice, feedback, repetition and common language
Self-directed Learning	Falling Into Leadership, CoachStation resources	Leaders who want practical ideas they can translate into their own work	Understanding, reflection and prompts for application
AI and Between-session Support	CoachStation AI tools and guided use of AI	Leaders extending preparation and reflection between human interactions	Rehearsal, questions, continuity and situational support

The purpose is not to make leaders dependent on CoachStation. It is to help them become more capable of noticing, interpreting and responding to the leadership moments already occurring around them.

A Final Thought

Leadership is complex because people are complex. There is no script that can remove judgement, emotion, context or uncertainty from the work. That is precisely why leadership should be treated as a discipline that is learned, translated, Practiced and refined over time.

The opportunity is available every day. A leader does not need to wait for the next programme, coaching session or annual review. The next email, one-to-one, meeting, decision or difficult conversation is another opportunity to prepare more deliberately, listen more carefully, ask a better question, notice more, take greater ownership and improve the next attempt.

Leadership practice, in one sentence

*Understand enough to see options. Translate them into your world. Prepare for the real moment.
Practice. Notice. Reflect. Own the result. Adapt. Repeat.*

Small improvements do not make leadership easy. They make capability more likely. Over time, repeated practice builds the judgement, confidence and adaptability required to lead different people through different situations without pretending there is one perfect answer.

That is the shift from intent to action.



contactcs@coachstation.com.au | coachstation.com.au

About CoachStation

CoachStation is an Australian leadership coaching and organisational development practice founded by Steve Riddle. For more than fifteen years, CoachStation has collaborated with leaders and organisations to strengthen leadership capability through coaching, mentoring, workshops, structured development and practical workplace application. Steve is the author of [Falling Into Leadership](#), co-authored with Kath Riddle, which explores the development gap facing people who enter leadership without formal preparation.