

LEADERSHIP FIELD GUIDE · JANUARY 2026

# Leadership *in Practice*

Practical Wisdom from the Field



**Cale Corbett**

Senior Program Manager, Growth PMO · Workiva | Adjunct Professor, UNO | USAF Veteran

This document captures practical leadership insights drawn from real situations across enterprise program management, team development, and organizational transformation. Each section addresses a core leadership challenge and offers actionable approaches — not theory, but methods tested in high-stakes environments at **Dell Technologies**, **General Motors**, **Workiva**, and through **15+ years of teaching** at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

The goal isn't to prescribe a single "right way" but to share frameworks that can be adapted to your context. Leadership is situational. What works in a turnaround won't work in steady-state. Use these as starting points — then build your own judgment from there.

## SECTION 01

# Recovering Stalled Initiatives

### THE CHALLENGE

You inherit a program that's been stuck for months — frustrated leadership above, demoralized teams below, and no one quite able to articulate why nothing is moving.

### THE INSIGHT

Stuck programs don't need more process — they need someone willing to cut through the noise and drive decisions. Complexity is almost always un-reconciled competing priorities: Product vs. Sales vs. Solutions. Name it, then resolve it.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- 1 Diagnose the real blocker first.** It's rarely what people say it is. Run 1:1s across the program to find where the real friction lives.
- 2 Force priority decisions.** Surface the competing priorities to the decision-makers. Don't manage around them — escalate clearly.
- 3 Create momentum with a small early win.** Demoralized teams need proof the machine can move. Pick one deliverable and drive it to completion fast.
- 4 Own the decision-making vacuum.** If no one is deciding, you decide — and document it. Leaders who fill vacuums get trusted with more.



### TAKEAWAY

Recovery is about clarity and courage, not better project plans.

## SECTION 02

# Developing People While Delivering Results

### THE CHALLENGE

You're accountable for aggressive timelines while simultaneously responsible for growing the capability of your team. Most leaders sacrifice one for the other.

### THE INSIGHT

Development happens in the work, not alongside it. Ownership builds skill. Pair emerging talent with experienced leads on real deliverables — with structured debriefs to lock in the learning.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- 1 Design stretch assignments with guardrails.** Give people work that's slightly beyond their comfort zone — then stay close enough to catch the fall without preventing the growth.
- 2 Debrief after key milestones.** Learning decays fast. Run a structured debrief within 48 hours: what worked, what didn't, what they'd do differently.
- 3 Build independent performers.** The goal is to make yourself unnecessary on those tasks. If the team can't function without you, you've built dependency, not capability.
- 4 Budget for the cost of development.** Growth costs time. Account for it in your estimates — don't pretend a stretch assignment is free.



### TAKEAWAY

If the team can't function without you, you've created dependency — not led.

## SECTION 03

# Managing Dependencies and Risk Across Functions

### THE CHALLENGE

Large programs depend on people and teams you don't control. Critical path items sit outside your authority — and the org chart tells you nothing about where actual power and interest live.

### THE INSIGHT

Force visibility early. Map stakeholders by actual power and interest — not org charts. Build relationships before you need them. The person you've never met becomes the longest path when you need a decision in 24 hours.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- 1 Tag tasks explicitly.** Distinguish "Our action" from "External dependency" in your tracking. Visibility forces accountability without confrontation.
- 2 Build a power/interest stakeholder matrix.** Know who needs to be informed, who needs to approve, and who has quiet veto power.
- 3 Never let key stakeholders be surprised.** A surprise escalation is a trust withdrawal. Pre-wire difficult conversations before they reach the conference room.
- 4 Pre-build waiting workstreams.** Maintain internal acceleration during external delays. Don't let the team go idle while waiting on someone else's dependency.



### TAKEAWAY

Proactive risk management means planning for the delay before it happens.

## SECTION 04

# Protecting Constraints While Adapting to Change

### THE CHALLENGE

The business shifts mid-program. Budget gets cut. Timelines compress. Scope expands without a corresponding resource adjustment. You're expected to absorb it all.

### THE INSIGHT

Kill scope creep before it kills the program. Every change request carries a hidden cost — usually paid in overtime, quality, or team morale. Weigh every change against what must stop. Protect the outcome, not just the plan.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- 1 Run monthly reality checks.** Ask: if budget was cut 30% tomorrow, what would survive? That's your real priority stack.
- 2 Present trade-offs, not just requests.** Frame it clearly: "We can do X, but it means stopping Y." Force leadership to own the decision.
- 3 Simplify bloated roadmaps.** More features ≠ more value. A focused roadmap executed well beats an ambitious one executed poorly.
- 4 Make leadership own the trade-off.** Don't absorb strategic decisions at the program level. Surface them, frame them clearly, and get explicit sign-off.



### TAKEAWAY

Discipline is knowing what to protect — and what to flex.

## SECTION 05

# Balancing Hands-On Execution with Leadership

### THE CHALLENGE

Senior leaders who rose through the ranks often stay too deep in the details — or overcorrect and detach entirely. Both are failure modes.

### THE INSIGHT

Use hands-on work strategically — to build governance, extract patterns, and document playbooks. Leadership multiplies impact through others. The question isn't can you do the work; it's should you be the one doing it.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- 1 Own high-stakes programs; delegate development opportunities.** Decide deliberately — not by default. Choose where your hands matter most.
- 2 Extract patterns and codify them.** Turn what's in your head into team-usable playbooks. If you're the only one who knows how it works, it's a liability.
- 3 Build operating models for team independence.** Intake processes, escalation frameworks, decision rights. Structure creates freedom.
- 4 Discern when to be at the wheel vs. the passenger seat.** High-ambiguity, high-stakes: you drive. Well-understood, developmental: let someone else steer and coach from the seat next to them.

#### ◆ TAKEAWAY

Leadership is multiplying impact through others — not proving you can still do everything yourself.

## SECTION 06

# Building Your Leadership Differentiators

### THE CHALLENGE

In a market full of credentialed, experienced leaders, what actually sets you apart? The answer is almost never a single skill — it's an uncommon combination.

### THE INSIGHT

Combine your unique experiences deliberately. A practitioner who also teaches. Military discipline applied to enterprise chaos. AI fluency layered on top of 30+ years of domain depth. The intersection is where your real value lives.

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- 1 Identify your unique combination of experiences.** What have you done that most people at your level haven't? Start there.
- 2 Translate differentiators into practical value.** "Military veteran" is a background. "Applies mission-command frameworks to enterprise program recovery" is a differentiator.
- 3 Leverage unconventional backgrounds deliberately.** The thing that makes you feel like an outsider is often the exact thing that makes you irreplaceable in the room.
- 4 Stay current — yesterday's differentiator is tomorrow's baseline.** The AI credential you earn today becomes table stakes in 18 months. Keep moving forward.



### TAKEAWAY

Value lives in the unique combination only you offer. Don't sand down the edges — they're the point.

# Core Leadership Principles

Six principles distilled from the field — adaptable to any context.

## ON RECOVERY

Clarity and courage over better project plans. Name the real blocker and drive a decision.

## ON DEVELOPMENT

Accountability and real ownership build skill faster than any training program ever will.

## ON DEPENDENCIES

Build the relationships before you need them. The unknown stakeholder is always on the critical path.

## ON ADAPTABILITY

Protect the outcome, not the plan. The plan is a means — the outcome is the mandate.

## ON EXECUTION

Multiply impact through others. If you're the bottleneck, you're not leading — you're blocking.

## ON DIFFERENTIATION

Leverage your unique combination of experiences. The intersection is where your real value lives.

*"Leadership isn't a title or a set of techniques — it's a way of seeing situations and taking responsibility for outcomes."*

These frameworks are lenses, not laws. Adapt them, break them, and rebuild them into something that fits your context and develops your own judgment. That's the work.