

Building Leadership Capacity

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A NOTE FROM JENNY

The Decisions Are Being Made Now

October always arrives faster than I expect. Summer feels like it was just here, Thanksgiving is around the corner, and suddenly Q4 is not coming, it is here.

It is also the month when most organizations decide what next year will look like. Budgets, headcount and priorities for 2027 are shaped in the next few weeks, often in fewer conversations than we realize.

If you are like many leaders heading into Q4, you may be facing one of two challenges. You have a good idea that is not getting traction with the people above you. Or you are carrying so much that you have no room left to think about next year. Often it is both. This issue is about why they are connected, and what to do about each.

Make it a great month,



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THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

Earn the Decision

Two disciplines for leading upward and protecting the capacity to deliver.

Leading a team and influencing the people above you are two different skills. The first is usually what gets a leader promoted. The second is what determines how far they go from there.

As leaders become more senior, more of what they need sits outside their direct control. Investment, headcount, priorities and the freedom to stop doing something all depend on decisions made at a higher level. A strong idea is rarely enough on its own to move those decisions.

Whether you are asking for investment, pushing back on scope, or recommending that something stop, the quality of the decision you get depends heavily on the quality of the preparation you bring.

Two disciplines matter here:

- Preparing for influence instead of hoping for it.
- Protecting capacity as a leadership decision, not a personal one.

01 • DISCIPLINE ONE

Managing Up Is Not Politics. It Is Preparation.

Many leaders are uncomfortable with the phrase “managing up.” It sounds like politics, flattery or working the room. So they avoid it and rely on the strength of their ideas instead.

The trouble is that a strong idea is rarely enough on its own. Senior leaders are making many decisions at once, with incomplete information and competing demands on the same money and the same people. When your recommendation arrives unprepared, it competes on equal footing with everything else. Usually it loses. Not because it was wrong, but because it was hard to say yes to.

Managing up, done well, is not about getting your way. It is about **helping the people above you make a better decision.**

Bring a Recommendation, Not a Frustration

It is a familiar scene. A leader walks into their manager's office and describes a problem in detail. The workload is not sustainable. The process is broken. Another department keeps missing deadlines. All of it is true. And the meeting ends with sympathy and no decision.

Now picture a leader who walks in and says:

“Here is the problem, here is what it is costing us, here are the options I considered, and here is what I recommend. What I need from you is a decision by the end of the month.”

Same facts. A completely different conversation.

The first leader handed the problem upward. The second one did the thinking and asked for a decision. Guess which one gets a yes, and which one gets asked to “leave it with me.”

The Real Work Happens Before the Meeting

The formal meeting is usually the worst place to introduce a new idea. People react defensively when they are surprised, especially in front of their peers. By the time a recommendation reaches the leadership table, the people who matter most should already have seen it, questioned it and helped shape it.

That is not manipulation. It is respect for how decisions actually get made. Before a significant recommendation goes forward, ask yourself:

- Who makes this decision, and who influences it?
- What does each of them care about most right now?
- Where does each of them currently stand?
- Who needs to hear this from me before they hear it in a meeting?
- What concern will come up first, and have I already addressed it?

TRY THIS WEEK

The one-page decision brief

Pick one decision you need from someone above you before year-end. Put it on a single page under five headings:

1. **The decision I need.** One sentence. If you cannot write it in one sentence, you are not ready to ask for it.
2. **My recommendation.** State it plainly. Do not make them guess what you think.
3. **The options I considered.** Show that you weighed the alternatives, including doing nothing.
4. **The cost of not deciding.** Money, time, risk, people. Be specific.
5. **What I need from you, and by when.** Approval, resources, support, an introduction. Make the ask clear.

Then act on it: take it to one or two key people individually before it goes anywhere formal. Listen for the concern you did not see coming.

Your influence at a senior level is not measured by how well you argue in the room. It is measured by **how easy you make it for a good decision to happen.**

02 - DISCIPLINE TWO

If Everything Is Urgent, You Are Not Leading Priorities

Here is a sentence I hear in some form almost every week: **“I know I should be thinking about the bigger picture, but I just have not had the time.”**

When everything is urgent, a leader stops leading priorities and starts absorbing them. Every request gets accepted. Every deadline is treated as fixed. Every new initiative gets added on top of what is already there. The calendar fills, the strategic thinking disappears, and the leader becomes busy in a way that feels productive and is not.

Capacity Is Not a Personal Matter

Many leaders treat their own workload as a private issue. Something to manage quietly, handle with longer hours, and never raise with their manager because it might look like weakness.

That is a mistake. Your capacity, and your team's capacity, is an organizational resource. When it is overcommitted, the organization is setting priorities by default instead of by design. And the work that suffers is almost never the urgent work. It is the important work: the development conversation, the strategic plan, the thinking about next year.

Protecting capacity is not selfish. **It is how you make sure the most important work actually gets done.**

Say “Not Now” Well

This is where the two disciplines meet. For many leaders, the most important upward conversation in Q4 is not a request for more. It is a clear, prepared recommendation about what should wait.

“I can’t take that on” sounds like a limit. “**Here is what we can deliver well by December, here is what I recommend we move to Q1, and here is the risk if we try to do everything**” sounds like leadership.

The second version gives your manager what they need to make a real trade-off, instead of discovering in January that something important quietly slipped.

TRY THIS WEEK A Q4 capacity check

Set aside 30 minutes and look honestly at what you have committed to between now and December:

- List every commitment you or your team have made that is due before year-end.
- Estimate the time each one will genuinely take. Be honest, not optimistic.
- Compare the total with the time you actually have, after meetings and the work that never stops.
- Identify what is at risk of being done poorly, done late, or not done at all.
- Decide what you will recommend deferring, reducing or stopping.

Then act on it: take that list to your manager as a recommendation, using the decision brief from Discipline One.

Leaders who protect their capacity are not doing less. They are **choosing deliberately where their best thinking goes**.

ONE QUESTION TO FOCUS ON IN OCTOBER

Have You Made It Easy for Them to Say Yes?

Before year-end, most of you will need something from someone above you. A budget. A hire. A decision. Permission to stop something.

What decision do I need from someone above me before year-end, and have I made it easy for them to say yes?

If the honest answer is no, you are in good company. It is one of the most common gaps I see in capable leaders. They carry the thinking in their heads and expect the logic to speak for itself. It rarely does. Busy executives respond to clarity, preparation and a clear ask.

The good news is that this is entirely within your control. You cannot control the decision. **You can control how ready it is**

YOUR ACTION PLAN

The Q4 Decision Plan: three moves before the calendar fills

1. **Write one decision brief.** Choose the most important decision you need from above before year-end and get it onto one page.
2. **Have one pre-conversation.** Take that brief to one key stakeholder individually before it goes anywhere formal.
3. **Make one “not now” recommendation.** Run the Q4 capacity check and bring your manager one clear recommendation about what should wait.

Three moves. About two hours of preparation. That is the difference between hoping 2027 goes your way and helping to shape it.

What Great Leaders Get Right

At a leadership retreat last week I helped facilitate, a former professional athlete spoke to the senior team about what separates good leaders from great ones. His answer had little to do with talent or title. It came down to four fundamentals that any leader can apply, and that most leadership teams could apply better.

Here are his four fundamentals, and what each looks like in practice for senior leaders.

1. Lead With Heart

People follow leaders who genuinely care about them, and they can tell the difference between real care and performance management. Connection is not a soft skill. It is what makes the hard conversations possible. A leader who has invested in relationships can deliver difficult feedback and be heard. A leader who has not will find the same conversation turns into conflict.

In practice:

- Invest in relationships before you need them, not when a difficult conversation is already overdue.
- When conflict arises, understand the issue fully, then address it in person. Email and text are the wrong tools for anything that matters.
- Build a team that has each other's back, and show them you have theirs.

2. Let Your Character Do the Talking

Respect is not conferred by a title. It is earned through hard work, focus and a visible commitment to the outcome. Teams watch what their leaders do far more closely than what they say.

In practice:

- Check your ego at the door. Put the team's success ahead of your own recognition.
- Do what needs to be done to get the job done, including the work that is not glamorous.
- Stay composed under pressure. A leader who lets emotions take over passes uncertainty on to the team.

3. Build the System, Not Just the Effort

Effort without structure does not scale. High-performing teams run on a clear game plan, the right people in the right seats, and a shared vision that keeps the leadership team aligned.

In practice:

- Put the right people in the right seats before asking anyone for more effort.
- Run a consistent system, and adjust it when the scorecard tells you something has to change.
- Make sure your leadership team is working toward one shared vision. Cohesion depends on it.
- When performance slips, return to the basics: structure, discipline, a clear plan, and a firm grasp of what your team does best.
- Fix the process first. A bad process will not produce a good result, no matter how hard people work.

4. Prepare for Pressure, Learn From Failure

Confidence in high-stakes moments is built long before they arrive. It comes from consistent habits and thorough preparation.

In practice:

- Know your facts. Gather as much information as you can before the moment arrives.
- Prepare the same way every time, so pressure feels familiar rather than threatening.
- Treat failure as learning. You learn as much from what goes wrong as from what goes right, provided you take the time to examine it.

None of these fundamentals depends on talent. Each is a choice leaders make every day: how they treat people, how they prepare, and whether they build systems or rely on effort alone. That is the thread running through this entire issue. The leaders who earn the decision are the ones who have done the preparation.

Which of these four fundamentals would your leadership team say you model consistently, and which one would they say needs work?

RESEARCH INFORMING THIS ISSUE

For anyone who wants to explore this month's themes further:

- **Rebecca Knight, "How Senior Leaders Can Build Their Influence," Harvard Business Review, 23 March 2026.** Knight explains why a solid, well-reasoned case can still stall at senior levels, and how to build momentum and buy-in with peers and bosses.
- **Melody Wilding, Managing Up: How to Get What You Need from the People in Charge (2025).** A practical guide from an executive coach and human behaviour professor, built around ten key conversations with the people above you. These include how to say no and push back with tact when more work lands on your plate.
- **Karen Walker, "3 Questions to Pressure-Test Your Priorities," Harvard Business Review, July 27, 2026.** Walker describes leaders working under constant urgency and argues for fewer, better choices about what to pursue, delegate, defer or stop.
- **Greg McKeown, Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less (2014).** A widely read guide to identifying what is truly essential and eliminating the rest, so your time and energy go where they make the greatest contribution.
- **Gallup, State of the Global Workplace, 2026.** Gallup found that global manager engagement fell from 31% in 2022 to 22% in 2025, including a five-point drop in the last year alone. It is a clear signal of how much pressure leaders are carrying.



STRATEGIC DIRECTION, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND EXECUTIVE TEAM PERFORMANCE.

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