

When Leadership Works: Why Good Intentions Are Not Enough

From blind spots and personal leadership to shared behaviour, training and execution

Leadership only becomes real when others can feel the difference

Most organisations do not lack ambition. They have strategies, values, competency plans and leaders who genuinely want to do the right thing. Yet there is often a noticeable gap between what is decided and what employees, colleagues and customers experience. That gap is not necessarily a sign of unwillingness. It arises because changing established behaviour is harder than expressing a new intention.

A leader may decide to delegate more, yet still intervene as soon as an employee chooses a different approach. A management team may agree to collaborate across functions, yet continue rewarding local results. A company may speak of openness while treating critical questions as resistance. In all three cases, the words make sense; everyday practice tells a different story.

A leadership development programme should therefore not primarily be judged by how interesting participants found the teaching. The decisive question is: What do they do differently afterwards — and can others notice?

1. Personal leadership begins with integrity

Leadership is personal because people notice whether our words and actions are consistent. If a leader speaks of accountability but blames others, the message loses credibility. If the leader calls for initiative but controls every detail, employees quickly learn that waiting for instructions is the safest choice.

Personal leadership does not mean making the workplace private. It means knowing your values, understanding your reactions and taking responsibility for the effect your behaviour has on others.

Under pressure this becomes especially clear. A calm leader may become impatient; a good listener may start interrupting; a trusting leader may suddenly centralise decisions.

Middle managers are crucial to an organisation's ability to turn ambition into action. This is particularly true when a skilled specialist becomes a leader. Professional expertise does not automatically provide the ability to achieve results through others. That requires a new understanding of responsibility, communication, priorities and relationships.

2. Blind spots: We see the world through our own lenses

Imagine a leader who knows what they intend, but whose implementation falls short. Employees hear and see the intention being expressed and communicated, yet mainly experience the action that follows. This creates a natural gap between self-image and how others experience us. A blunt message may be intended as clarity but perceived as mistrust. A quick answer may be intended as help but deprive a colleague of the chance to take responsibility.

Such blind spots are difficult to identify alone. We often interpret feedback through the same assumptions that produced the behaviour. That is why feedback, coaching and buddy-based reflection are more than useful additions to a course. They are ways of challenging what we take for granted.

One simple technique is to ask specifically: “What did I do in the meeting that made it easier or harder for you to contribute?” This is stronger than asking “Do you think I am a good leader?” because it asks about observable behaviour. The leader must then listen, explore and only later decide what to change. If every response is immediately explained away or defended, the learning opportunity disappears.

3. The hidden commitments behind resistance to change

When an organisation fails to change, the cause is not always open resistance. Sometimes people are protecting something they consider important: professional quality, safety, status, independence or belonging. A leader may want to delegate more while also feeling a powerful obligation never to lose control. Two commitments pull in opposite directions.

In work on blind spots, such hidden commitments help explain why people and organisations can maintain behaviour that undermines their stated goals. The point is not to identify opponents but to make the underlying assumptions open to examination.

A practical question for a management team is: “If we actually made the change we say we want, what are we afraid of losing?” Answers may reveal real risks that need managing, or assumptions that should be tested. Only when these become visible can the group work with them honestly.

4. From values on the wall to shared standards

Values such as trust, responsibility, respect and collaboration are easy to endorse. But two people may mean different things by the same words. Values must therefore be translated into shared, visible actions.

If we say we want to collaborate, what do we do when another department needs help but our own calendar is full? If we say we share accountability for all results, how do we respond when an error is discovered?

A management team can start with three concrete situations: a difficult meeting, a decision involving disagreement and a delivery that is slipping. For each situation, the team describes the behaviour it expects of one another. That may mean raising problems early, exploring disagreement before a decision and supporting joint decisions afterwards.

[Shared High Team Standards](#) only become meaningful when members also accept mutual accountability for them. This is not about controlling personality but establishing a shared professional standard of collaboration. Repeated in everyday work, these standards can develop from formal agreements into a recognisable pattern of performance.

5. Training must also take place in the company's reality

It is possible to understand a model and still behave exactly as before. Leadership development must therefore include practical training. A leader may work on a difficult feedback conversation, unclear responsibilities or a decision that has yet to be translated into action. The situation is examined, alternative actions are tested, and the participant returns with experiences from their own organisation.

Action learning is useful here: learning through action, reflection and renewed action. Talking about delegation on a course is not enough. Participants must choose a specific task, clarify the framework and expectations, delegate it, observe the process and then examine what happened. The same applies to feedback, customer dialogue and change leadership.

A buddy pair can make the difference between a good intention and an actual experiment. The two leaders agree what each will practise, when it will happen and what they will ask each other afterwards. The necessary discipline is simple: one small action, one concrete observation, honest reflection and another attempt.

6. The middle manager connects strategy and operations

A strategy is not implemented simply because it has been presented. It must be translated into priorities, ways of working, collaboration and decisions in each department. The middle manager has a central role: creating understanding of the direction while giving senior management insight into what is actually happening in the organisation.

This requires the ability to prioritise. When everything is important, nothing is genuinely chosen. The leader must explain which tasks matter most to customers and the business, and which activities must be given lower priority. Employees must also see the connection between their daily work and the wider goals.

A practical management meeting can therefore start with three questions: Which strategic priority are we working on right now? Which behaviour or work process must change for us to succeed? Who will do what before the next meeting?

In this way, the conversation moves from general ambitions to actions that can be followed up.

7. Measure development through action and impact — not just satisfaction

A satisfaction survey after a course can show whether participants found the programme relevant. It cannot show whether leadership behaviour changed. That requires other signs. Are leaders holding the agreed follow-up conversations? Are problems raised earlier? Are decisions clearer? Do employees receive more useful feedback? Are customer handovers handled better?

Start with a simple baseline: What do we see today? Then agree on a few indicators that can be tracked without a burdensome measurement system. Some indicators relate to behaviour, others to processes, quality or the customer experience. When measuring outcomes, avoid attributing every improvement to one development programme; many factors influence results.

The most important discipline is follow-up. If a management team agrees new standards but never revisits them, they become another poster on the wall. If the team regularly examines where standards are followed and where they are breached, development becomes part of management work.

8. A simple working model for the next management meeting

Start with one specific challenge, not a broad wish to “get better”. Describe the situation in which collaboration or leadership is not working well enough. Then ask participants to define the observable behaviour they want instead. Explore what has made it difficult so far, including hidden assumptions or competing concerns.

Agree on one realistic experiment for the coming week. Who will do what, in which situation, and who can provide feedback? When the group meets again, it does not start with another presentation but with experience: What did we try? What happened? What did we learn? What will we adjust?

Such a rhythm does not necessarily require more meetings. It requires using part of existing meetings to follow up on action rather than merely exchange information. Small, consistent changes can over time create more credible development than grand declarations without practical grounding.

Conclusion: Behaviour reveals the culture

Culture and leadership become visible in small choices: how we respond to mistakes, how we give feedback, whom we involve and whether we keep our commitments. Personal leadership provides direction; feedback reveals blind spots; shared standards clarify expectations; practical training makes change possible; and follow-up makes it lasting.

What matters, therefore, is not how much leaders can say about leadership, but what they actually do when everyday pressures mount. Repeated actions become habits. When habits are shared by a group, they begin to shape its culture. And when that culture supports the company's priorities and customers' needs, leadership development has become organisational value.

Three questions to use tomorrow

- Which specific behaviour do we want to see more of — and when?
- What is holding us back from doing it today?
- What will we try before the next meeting, and how will we obtain feedback?

Further inspiration and tools

- Article on [Change Management and Organisational Culture](#)
- Article on [Building Real Dream Teams — based on five real-world cases](#)

Would you like to develop your management team into a team that turns intentions into reality?

Cronquist Consult ApS helps companies with change management, management team development and strategy execution through integrated development programmes. [Contact us](#).