

From Knowing to Doing

Why knowing what to do is only one part of change and what helps new leadership behaviors stick

Leadership development often focuses on what leaders need to know and the skills they need to build. But knowing what to do is only one part of change. Sustaining new leadership behaviors requires practice, reflection, feedback, and attention to the habits, assumptions, and organizational conditions that can make change difficult to sustain.

Leadership development often starts with a reasonable assumption: if people understand what effective leadership looks like and have the right skills, they will lead differently.

Sometimes that is exactly what is needed. A new manager may need to learn how to structure a difficult conversation, delegate effectively, set expectations, or provide useful feedback. Training, tools, and frameworks can build that capability.

But knowing what to do does not necessarily mean a leader will be able to do it consistently.

A leader may know they need to delegate but repeatedly step back into the work. A manager may understand how to give feedback but continue to postpone difficult conversations. A senior leader may recognize the need for stronger boundaries while remaining available at all hours.

When someone does not know how to do something, teach them. When someone knows how but is not doing it consistently, get curious.

What Shapes Behavior Change

Behavioral science provides a useful lens for understanding what may sit between intention and action. The COM-B model proposes that behavior depends on three interacting conditions: capability, opportunity, and motivation (Michie et al., 2011).

Capability includes whether someone has the knowledge and skills to perform the behavior. **Opportunity** considers whether the surrounding environment makes the behavior possible or reinforces it. **Motivation** includes deliberate intentions as well as the habits, emotions, assumptions, and more automatic responses that influence what people actually do.

Training can help build capability, but sustained behavior change also depends on motivation and opportunity. A leader may have the skill to act differently while still contending with habits, assumptions, competing priorities, or organizational conditions that make the new behavior difficult to maintain.

Although much of the research comes from other behavioral contexts, it offers a useful lens for leadership development. The questions become broader: **Does the person have the capability to act differently? What may be making the change difficult? Does the environment support it?**

What Keeps the Current Behavior in Place

The way someone currently leads usually makes sense in some context, even when the behavior is no longer serving them particularly well. The behavior may provide something the leader values or has come to rely on, such as a sense of control, familiarity, expertise, accomplishment, approval, or being needed.

Research on behavior maintenance suggests that sustained change is shaped not only by skills, but also by motives, self-regulation, resources, habits, identity, and social and environmental influences (Kwasnicka et al., 2016).

Kegan and Lahey describe a related dynamic as “competing commitments”: people may sincerely want one outcome while also behaving in ways that protect another, less visible commitment (Kegan & Lahey, 2001).

That is why **“What do you need to do differently?”** is only part of the conversation. Another set of questions may be more revealing:

What is the current behavior doing for you?	What need, value, or sense of security does it support?
What might you gain by changing it?	What becomes possible if the new behavior takes hold?
What might you lose?	Control, familiarity, approval, speed, expertise, or being needed?
What will doing this differently require of you?	What discomfort, uncertainty, or new way of seeing your role will you need to tolerate?

From Intention to Action

Once the underlying challenge is clearer, the next step is to get specific. “Delegate more,” “be more strategic,” “set better boundaries,” and “communicate better” are development goals. They are not yet behaviors.

Research on implementation intentions shows that people are more likely to follow through when they translate a goal into a concrete plan for what they will do when a particular situation occurs. A meta-analysis of 94 independent tests found a meaningful positive effect of these “if-then” plans on goal attainment (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

In a leadership context, that means moving from a broad intention to an observable action that can be practiced in a real moment:

Leadership Intention	Behavior to Practice	What Doing It Differently May Require
I need to stop solving everything for my team.	When someone brings me a problem, I will ask what they recommend before offering my own solution.	Resisting the urge to rescue; tolerating a slower process or a different answer.
I need to give feedback sooner.	When I notice an issue I would normally let go, I will address it in our next one-on-one rather than waiting for the problem to become larger.	Tolerating discomfort and the possibility that the other person may be disappointed or defensive.
I need better boundaries.	When a non-urgent request arrives after my workday, I will leave it until the following morning rather than responding immediately.	Being unavailable; trusting that not every problem requires an immediate response.
I need to delegate more.	When I assign a piece of work, I will define the outcome and decision boundaries, agree on a check-in point, and wait until that point before stepping back in.	Letting go of control and allowing someone else to approach the work differently.
I need to be more strategic.	I will protect a recurring block of time for strategic work before I fill the week with operational tasks.	Giving up some of the immediate sense of productivity that comes from completing visible tasks.

The goal is not to reduce complex leadership challenges to a formula. It is to make the desired change visible enough that a leader can notice the moment, choose a different response, and learn from what happens.

Turning Development into Ongoing Practice

There is often an unspoken expectation in leadership development that insight should quickly produce change. A leader recognizes the issue, decides to operate differently, and is then expected to do so. Behavior change is rarely that clean. The early attempts at a new behavior may feel less natural, less efficient, or more uncomfortable than the old one. Delegating and then watching someone struggle can feel uncomfortable. Giving direct feedback may initially feel harsher than avoiding it. Asking a question instead of immediately providing the answer can feel inefficient. Protecting time for strategic work can feel less productive than clearing a long list of operational tasks.

Habit-formation research suggests that repeated behavior in a consistent context can become more automatic over time (Lally et al., 2010). The useful lesson for leadership development is simple: new ways

of leading become more familiar through practice, not simply through understanding. **Discomfort is a natural part of learning something new. New leadership behaviors may feel awkward or unfamiliar at first, but they become easier through practice.**

Practice also needs reflection and feedback. Research suggests that monitoring progress improves goal attainment, particularly when progress is recorded or shared with someone else (Harkin et al., 2016). For leaders, this can be as simple as asking: Where did I practice the behavior? Where did I fall back into an old response? What happened, and what will I try next time?

Turning development into ongoing practice requires opportunities to act, notice, reflect, adjust, and try again. Coaching, peer reflection, manager check-ins, or learning from people who model the behavior well can provide the structure and feedback needed to support that practice.

The Environment Can Support—or Undermine—Change

Looking beneath individual behavior should not mean turning every organizational problem into a personal development issue. Sometimes the environment is reinforcing exactly the behavior the organization says it wants a leader to change.

An organization cannot tell leaders to delegate while requiring every decision to move upward for approval. It cannot ask managers to prioritize while continuing to add priorities without removing anything. It cannot encourage leaders to develop their teams while rewarding the people who personally rescue every project. And it cannot tell someone to set boundaries while maintaining norms that equate constant availability with commitment.

The “opportunity” component of the COM-B model is an important reminder that behavior is shaped partly by the conditions around us (Michie et al., 2011).

That also means leadership development cannot end when the training or development experience ends. If a behavior matters, leaders need opportunities to practice it and receive feedback, and the expectations, systems, and signals around them should reinforce it. That might include manager check-ins, performance expectations, decision-making structures, or simply what senior leaders consistently notice and reward.

Sustainable change therefore requires asking two questions at the same time: What does the leader need to do differently, and what in the surrounding environment needs to support that change?

Making the Benefits of Change Visible

Starting a behavior and sustaining it are not necessarily driven by the same processes. Research suggests that while people may initiate change because of the outcomes they hope to achieve, maintenance is influenced by the outcomes they actually experience, along with motives, resources, habits, and environmental support (Rothman, 2000; Kwasnicka et al., 2016).

That suggests a useful question after a leader begins working differently: What is becoming possible because of the change? Perhaps delegating has created more time for longer-term thinking. Perhaps earlier feedback has prevented larger performance issues. Perhaps stronger boundaries have improved focus. Perhaps giving the team more ownership has produced better ideas than expected.

Noticing these outcomes matters. If the new behavior is experienced only as sacrifice, it will be difficult to sustain. When leaders can see evidence that a different approach is producing something worthwhile - more time, stronger team ownership, fewer escalations, or better conversations - the benefits of change become more concrete. Leaders also need space to adjust when the new approach is not producing the intended result.

A Practical Reflection: What Will Doing This Differently Require of You?

When there is a leadership behavior you have been trying to change, move beyond the question “What should I do?” and work through the questions below. Consider not only the behavior itself, but also the people, examples, and resources that can help you practice and sustain the change.

Question	What to Examine
1. What specifically do I want to do differently?	Describe an observable behavior, not an aspiration.
2. Do I know how to do it?	If not, training, modeling, tools, or skill practice may be the right intervention.
3. What is the current behavior doing for me?	Consider what it provides: control, familiarity, approval, speed, expertise, predictability, or being needed.
4. What might I lose by doing this differently?	Name the tradeoff rather than pretending the change is cost-free.
5. What discomfort will I need to tolerate?	Identify what may feel unfamiliar, uncertain, slower, or emotionally difficult.
6. What is one behavior I can practice?	Make the change small, specific, and observable in a real situation.
7. How will I monitor and reflect?	Decide what you will notice, record, discuss, or seek feedback about.
8. Who or what can support this change?	Who does this well? What can you learn from them? Consider a mentor, peer, coach, manager, or resource that can help you observe, practice, and reflect.
9. What in the environment needs to change too?	Look for systems, norms, incentives, decision rights, or workload conditions that reinforce the old pattern.

What Helps Leadership Change Stick

Training remains an important part of leadership development. Leaders need frameworks, tools, knowledge, and opportunities to build new skills. But learning is only one part of development.

Sustaining change also requires understanding what may be keeping a behavior in place, getting specific about what to do differently, practicing in real situations, reflecting and adjusting, and having support and an environment that make the new behavior easier to maintain.

Sometimes the most useful leadership-development question is not “What do you need to learn?” but “What will doing this differently require of you?”

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