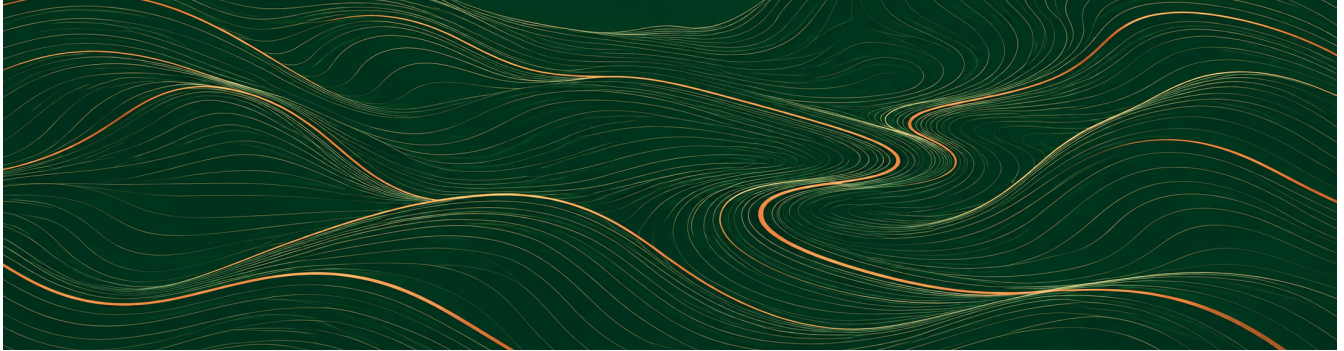


Before You Change Anything

What leaders can miss when proving their value comes before understanding the work.



The field note

More than twenty years ago, I entered my first formal supervisory role.

Four field staff reported to me, and one of our responsibilities was operating and maintaining a small wastewater treatment plant. I arrived with energy, technical confidence, and a strong desire to prove that I belonged.

I also arrived without a clear understanding of what the organization needed from me.

The role was new. My supervisor wasn't a field person, and there was no clear point between their direction and the people responsible for operating the utilities. The field staff needed someone who understood what was happening in their daily work and could give that reality a voice.

I didn't become that person.

When I started, the treatment plant was operating reasonably well. There was a small laboratory, but no proper bench or sink. My supervisor asked me to build one. I had the tools, so I did.

The finished product was functional, but it wasn't exactly something worth displaying. I had built a lab bench and sink for the first time, and the result looked like it.

I accepted that project because it had been assigned to me. Then I found another problem.

The field staff were completing tests to monitor the treatment plant, but the results weren't being compiled or reviewed in a way that showed trends or changes in operating conditions. I was reasonably capable with Excel, so I began building a spreadsheet.

The spreadsheet would allow the daily results to be entered and analyzed. It could show trends, identify acceptable operating ranges, and help explain what the data meant.

There was value in the idea.

There was also something else happening.

I was new in the role. I wanted to prove that I belonged. I wanted to show that I could make decisions, understand the operation, and bring something important to the organization. The spreadsheet gave me a project I could control and improve. I could make it more complete, more accurate, and more impressive.

So I spent a great deal of time in the office building it.

I became absorbed in the work. I was focused on making the spreadsheet function properly and explaining the value it could eventually provide. I rationalized the time I was spending because the project was important. Once it was finished, I believed, everyone would see what it could do.

But while I was building the spreadsheet, I wasn't building the team.

I wasn't spending enough time with the field staff. I wasn't learning what their days were actually like. I wasn't asking what made their work more difficult or what support they needed from a supervisor. I wasn't showing them what mattered to me beyond a spreadsheet.

I had taken ownership of a problem.

I hadn't yet taken ownership of the role.

The spreadsheet became something only I understood. I knew how it worked, how to interpret the results, and what the performance criteria meant. If I left, the knowledge left with me.

Eventually, I did leave. There were other factors involved, but I believe my lack of relationships and connection to the work contributed to the outcome. I had been in the role for only a few months, and there wasn't much for others to see or defend on my behalf.

The spreadsheet may have contained useful ideas. The lab bench may have served its purpose. But I hadn't made the work understandable, shared, or durable.

I had mistaken technical progress for leadership progress.

The work that looked like leadership

It's easy to confuse visible work with valuable leadership.

A spreadsheet can look productive. A new procedure can look organized. A redesigned process can appear to demonstrate initiative. Sometimes these things are genuinely useful.

The question is not whether the work has value.

The question is whether it is the most important work for the role and the moment.

When we enter a new position, especially one without clear expectations, we often look for something we can control. We find a gap, a problem, or an opportunity for improvement. If the work matches our existing capabilities, it can become a comfortable place to invest our attention.

This is where good intentions can quietly lead us away from the responsibility we were given.

The work may be technically sound, but disconnected from the people who need to use it. It may solve a problem that is interesting, while more important needs remain unaddressed. It may create a product that depends entirely on the person who built it.

Leadership is not only the ability to improve a system.

It is the ability to understand what the system, the people, and the organization require from you before deciding what to improve.

I was capable of building the spreadsheet. That capability created a possibility.
It did not automatically create an obligation.

Before you change anything

A leader entering a new role has a natural urge to make an impression. We want people to see our capability. We want to demonstrate that hiring us was the right decision.

But the first responsibility is usually quieter.

Learn the work.

See how people experience the operation.

Understand what the organization expects.

Find out what the team believes is important.

Only then should we decide what deserves our ownership.

I now think of this as getting in the water first. Before changing the direction of the current, spend enough time inside it to understand where it is moving and what it feels like for the people already in it.

This doesn't mean waiting forever. It doesn't mean accepting every weakness or delaying necessary action. It means learning the difference between an urgent need, an important need, and an interesting problem that happens to match our skills.

A useful sequence is:

- Listen to the people closest to the work.
- Observe the operation before redesigning it.
- Learn what your supervisor or organization expects from the role.
- Identify what the team believes is most important.
- Separate an actual need from an improvement you know how to make.
- Decide what should be changed now, later, or not at all.

Five questions for the work in front of you

Before taking ownership of a new problem, ask:

- What am I trying to prove through this work?
- Who understands this situation better because they live with it every day?
- What does this work require from others after I am gone?
- What important responsibility might my attention be displacing?
- Am I solving an actual need, or an interesting problem I know how to solve?

Why this matters over time

These questions are not meant to discourage initiative.

They are meant to make initiative more responsible.

Leadership is shaped by what we repeatedly give our attention to.

If a new leader spends all their time creating tools, people may learn that the leader values systems more than relationships. If the leader takes over every difficult problem, people may learn that their own judgment is secondary. If the leader changes processes before understanding the work, people may learn that experience is less important than the latest idea.

The message may never be spoken directly.

People learn it through where the leader is present, what the leader asks about, and what the leader chooses to improve.

A useful project that no one understands may disappear when its creator leaves. A simple practice that people understand and own can continue without the original leader.

That is the difference between work that depends on us and work that becomes stronger because of us.

One small action

Spend one week observing before proposing a substantial change.

Speak with the people closest to the work. Ask what makes their day harder, what regularly gets in the way, and what they wish someone understood about the operation.

Write down what you learn.

Do not immediately design a solution. Do not defend the ideas you already have. Simply notice the difference between what you assumed was important and what the people doing the work identify as important.

At the end of the week, choose one issue to act on.

It may be the problem you first noticed. It may be something entirely different.

The purpose is not to delay action. It is to make sure your action is informed by the work rather than simply by your capability.

The long work

Durable leadership requires more than solving the immediate problem.

It requires creating understanding that can be shared, responsibility that can be carried by others, and systems that continue to function when one person is no longer present.

That is the long work.

The goal is not to become the person who knows everything, fixes everything, or owns every improvement. The goal is to help create an operation where knowledge is visible, judgment is developed, and responsibility is distributed.

This is where The Long Work begins.

Trust, authority, and systems that endure are not built by one impressive intervention. They are built through repeated attention to what people need in order to understand the work and carry it forward.

Sometimes leadership means taking responsibility for a problem.

Sometimes it means refusing to take responsibility too quickly.

Just because you can, does not mean you should.

Sometimes the most responsible form of ownership is learning what the situation needs before deciding what you can do about it.

For your leadership ledger

This month, record one situation where you were tempted to take ownership.

Write down:

- What first attracted your attention
- What you believed you could improve
- What the people closest to the work said mattered most
- What your attention might displace
- What you decided to do, delay, or leave alone

Closing note

The purpose is not to judge your instinct to help.

It is to understand the reason behind it.

Some leadership lessons arrive as sudden realizations.

Others take years to become clear.

There was no single moment when I understood what I had done in that first supervisory role. The lesson developed gradually. It became part of how I now think about responsibility, initiative, and the difference between being capable of solving a problem and being responsible for solving it.

When I enter an unfamiliar situation today, I try to remember that I don't yet know enough.

I get in the water first.

I pay attention to the current.

I learn what the situation feels like for the people already in it.

Then I decide where my capabilities can serve a real need.

That is the work before the work.

And it often matters more than the change we were originally planning to make.

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