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The Paradox of Leadership

Why the best leaders refuse to choose.

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WHERE THIS STARTS

A farm kid from Booneville, Mississippi.

> *There is no dress rehearsal in life. You get one shot. Make it count.*

HOMETOWN

Booneville, Mississippi. Raised by my grandmother.

THE WAY OUT

A scholarship for academics and music. The Army National Guard.

FOUR DECADES OF LEADING INSIDE THE TENSION

Every company I have led was a paradox wearing a P&L.

Mission and margin. Speed and quality. Control and letting go.

30+
YEARS LEADING PE-BACKED BUSINESSES

3
COMPANIES FOUNDED, SCALED, AND EXITED

82
PORTFOLIO COMPANIES SERVED AT SHORE

100+
CEOs I HAVE COACHED ON LEADERSHIP & GROWTH

LEADERSHIP PARADOX

Between a rock and a hard place



The Rock

- Profitability
- Process
- Humility
- Empathy

Trade-offs and paradoxes are central to growing a business. Weigh the costs carefully, then own the choice.

The Hard Place



- Growth
- Innovation
- Confidence
- Performance

Instinct picks a side. Discipline makes it work.

THE PREMISE

The hardest decisions in leadership are not between right and wrong.

They are between right and right. And they never stop coming.

A QUICK DIAGNOSTIC

Are you ever pulled by two truths at once?

“If I push the team harder, I will lose them.”

“If I hold the standard, I will lose the person.”

“Every time I delegate, something slips.”

“My boss wants both. We cannot do both.”

“We flip priorities every quarter.”

“Every fix we make creates the next problem.”

THE ANCHOR

The two people who matter most



8-year-old me



80-year-old me



Would 8-year-old me and 80-year-old me approve?

Apply it to career, leadership, and how you treat people.

- Curiosity
- Courage
- Optimism
- Possibility

Make both proud.
That is a life that matters.

- Wisdom
- Perspective
- Character
- Legacy

YOUR LEADERSHIP COMPASS

Identity anchors you. Judgment guides every decision.



THE ANCHOR

Identity is the tiebreaker

8-year-old you

Curiosity. Still asks why before asking who to blame.

Courage. Has not yet learned to fear looking foolish.

Optimism. Assumes the thing can be done.

Possibility. Sees the game, not the risk.

80-year-old you

Wisdom. Knows which of this actually mattered.

Perspective. Knows how little of it was the quarter.

Character. Remembers which promises you kept.

Legacy. Counts what outlived the job title.

Before the hardest calls, ask: would 8-year-old me and 80-year-old me both approve?

THE PARADOX OF LEADERSHIP

01

The tension is the job

What the pull between two rights feels like, and why the instinct to resolve it is the trap.

Four tensions. Two operating systems. The pendulum.

THE FRAMEWORK

Four tensions

1 Performing

Growth vs profitability. This quarter vs the three-year number. Which one do you protect when they collide?

2 Organizing

Control vs empowerment. Process vs flexibility. Who really decides? What does all this cost you?

3 Belonging

The individual vs the team. Your stars vs your standards. Whose needs win when they diverge? How do you risk eroding your values for the sake of money?

4 Learning

Innovation vs discipline. The new thing vs the thing that pays for it. How do you fund tomorrow without starving today?

TWO OPERATING SYSTEMS

Either/or feels decisive. It is expensive.

EITHER/OR THINKING	BOTH/AND THINKING
Pick a pole. Lose the other, and its believers.	Hold both. Let the friction sharpen the answer.
Or compromise: split the difference, starve both.	A higher standard: find the move that serves both.
Teams form camps and argue positions.	Teams argue the tension, not each other.
Relief now, pendulum later.	Harder now, compounding later.

Instinct picks a side. Discipline holds both.

THE FAILURE MODE · THE SWING

The pendulum: Pay for both poles, profit from neither.

01 **The cost-cutting year.** Margin recovers, and the growth pipeline starves. Slightly better margin, same revenue.

02 **The panic-growth year.** Revenue returns, and bad revenue with it. Margin leaks all over again.

03 **The lesson your people learn.** Wait out the current priority. Nothing compounds, and the organization will shift again.

THE PENDULUM TAX

Every swing buys relief today and pays double tomorrow.

Overcorrection breaks companies. Tension does not.

If your last three annual themes each reversed the one before, you are not steering. You are swinging.

STORY ONE · MISSION AND MARGIN

Narus Health: care that had to cash flow

WHAT THE MISSION DEMANDED	WHAT THE BUSINESS DEMANDED
Time with patients and families that no billing code rewards	Unit economics that survived contact with the payer community
Nurses hired for empathy first, then trained for everything else	Discipline: utilization, documentation, a real cost model
Answering the 2 a.m. call, because that is the promise	Scale, because a model that cannot spread cannot matter
A culture where caring was the product, not the slogan	Margin, because when the margin ends, the mission ends

We refused to choose. Better care lowered the total cost of care, and the margin funded more of the mission.

ACT TWO · THE PARADOX OF LEADERSHIP

02

The leader's response

How you personally hold tension under pressure: the plan, the people, the momentum.

See clearly. Decide anyway. Build momentum.

THE LEADERSHIP RESPONSE

Four steps that hold under pressure

1

See Clearly

Read the hard moment as a challenge, not a threat. Your appraisal decides which brain arrives.

2

Decide Anyway

Move toward the uncertainty. Act at seventy percent. Guard the one-way doors.

3

Lead Both High

High standards and high belief, together. Support alone coddles. Pressure alone burns out.

4

Build Momentum

Engineer the first win. Name the loop out loud. Let confidence compound.

“Tension does not break leaders. Unmanaged tension does.”

STEP ONE · SEE CLEARLY

Threat shrinks you. Challenge sharpens you.

Same situation, two readings. The reading, not the situation, decides your chemistry and your options.

THREAT	CHALLENGE
The demands loom larger than your resources	You count your resources against the demands
Anxiety rises and thinking narrows	Focus rises and learning switches on
You protect, delay, and avoid the risk	You move toward the problem with intent
Performance drops exactly when it matters most	Performance climbs under the same pressure

Before hard moments, ask: do I have what I need? The answer is usually yes.

STEP TWO · DECIDE ANYWAY

Great leaders move toward uncertainty

PASSIVE COPING	ACTIVE COPING
Wait until it is easier, or clearer, or later	Ask: what moves us forward right now?
Worry, blame, and ego protection	Get curious, own it, run the experiment
Demand certainty before motion	Act at seventy percent; guard the one-way doors
Comfort today, fewer options tomorrow	Discomfort today, compounding options tomorrow

Reversible calls deserve speed. Irreversible calls deserve rigor. Know which door you are standing at.

STEP THREE · LEAD BOTH HIGH

Great leaders push hardest on those they believe in most.

THE MENTOR MINDSET

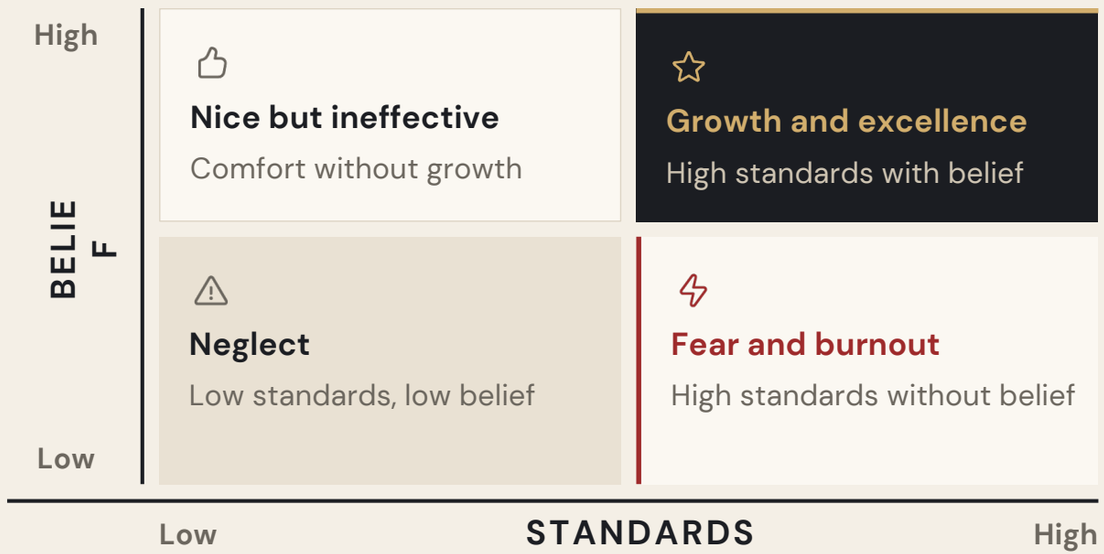
The mentor mindset: high standards AND high belief, at the same time.

Most leaders collapse to one extreme: all support, or all pressure.

High standards alone feel like criticism. High belief alone feels like low expectations.

The pairing requires trust and courage: tell hard truths to people you're invested in.

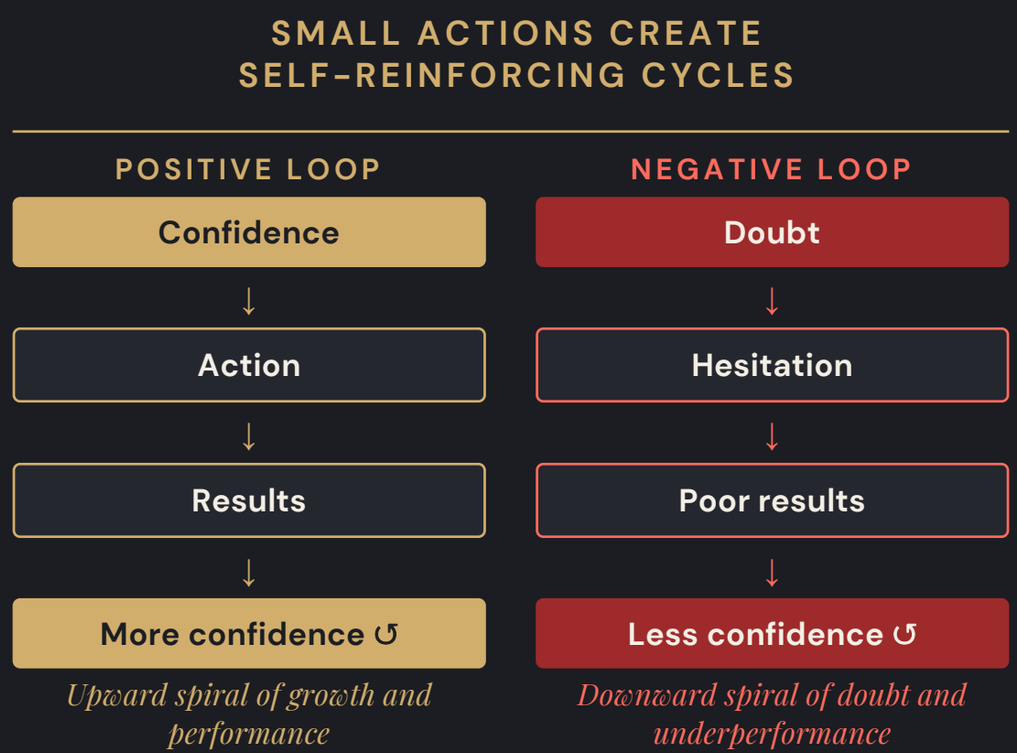
Practice it deliberately until it becomes how you lead.



Sweet spot: high standards + high belief

STEP FOUR · BUILD MOMENTUM

Leaders don't wait for confidence. They engineer it.



- **The first win matters most:** design early work for a visible success.
- **Formulate & share the plan:** “We're building evidence that we can do this.”
- **Build execution at the team level:** shared wins beat individual praise.
- **In a turnaround:** build a sequence. Don’t try to fix everything at once.

“Confidence is a product of action, not a prerequisite for it.”

THE LEADERSHIP RESPONSE FRAMEWORK

From hard moments to momentum

1

Hard things just happen



Every leader faces uncertainty, setbacks, conflict, and pressure.

Leadership Reality

2

How do you interpret it?



Do I have the resources to handle this?

Challenge vs. Threat

3

Now what are you going to do?



Lean in or pull back? Curious or defensive? Experiment or wait?

Active Coping

4

How do you lead other people?



High belief with high standards.

Mentor Mindset

5

How do you create momentum?



Small wins build confidence. Confidence drives bigger actions.

Confidence Loops

STORY TWO · THE TURNAROUND

Onlife Health: the approach that turned it around

A turnaround is every paradox at once, on a clock: candor and hope, cuts and investment, standards and belief.

01 · STABILIZE

State clearly the reality of the situation. Stop the bleeding without cutting the muscle you will need for the climb back.

02 · REBUILD

Pick the one win the whole company can see and get it fast. Raise both: Standards up and belief up, together.

03 · COMPOUND

Stack the wins into rhythm: scoreboard, owners, cadence. Performance becomes a path to the future.

We did not cut our way out, and we did not grow our way out. We did both, in sequence, on purpose.

THE PARADOX OF LEADERSHIP

03

Lead a team that does both

The tension you hold personally must become a system your team can run without you.

Three moves. The calendar. Your next seat. The anchor.

THE PRACTICE

You do not resolve a paradox. You manage it.

1

Accept the tension

Stop trying to solve it. Address it with your team and expect it to be permanent. A named tension becomes workable. An unnamed one becomes politics.

2

Separate the efforts

Give each seeming opposing initiative real time, real owners, and real money. Protect the weaker one in bad quarters.

3

Recalibrate constantly

Lean toward one initiative on purpose, for a season, and then adjust to the other. Set the review date the same day you lean.

“Balance is not standing still. Balance is the discipline of correcting early.”

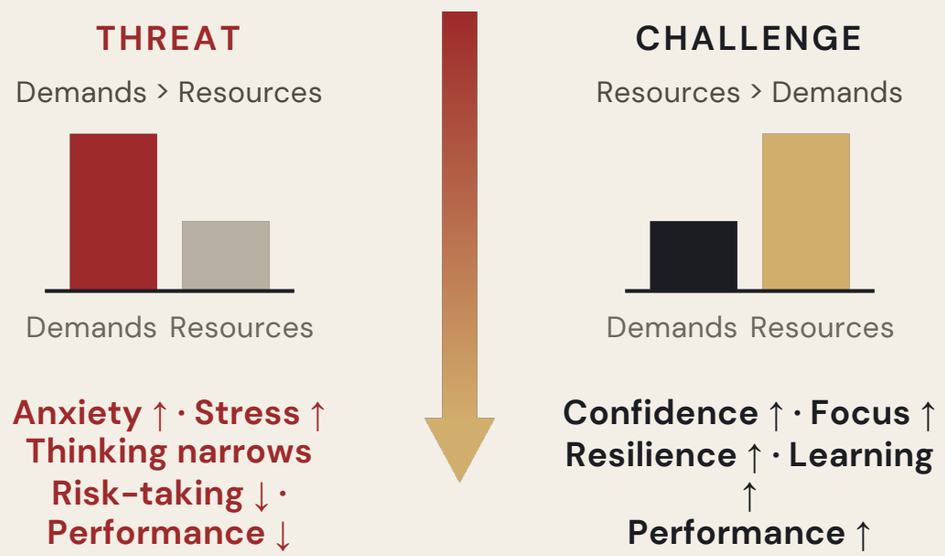
CHALLENGE VS. THREAT

Threat shrinks you. Challenge sharpens you. Train the difference.

WHY IT MATTERS

- **Challenge vs. threat:** same situation, different response.
- **Challenge-default leaders win:** they enter hard moments in a better mental state.
- **Trainable:** reframe demands as chances to deploy resources.
- **Ask before hard moments:** "Do I have what I need?" Usually, yes, you do.
- **Appraisal unlocks resources:** how you read it decides what's available to you.
- **Build a challenge culture:** normalize hard things as expected, not exceptional.

COGNITIVE APPRAISAL THEORY



Same situation. Different appraisal. Different outcome.

FOR THE LEADER ON THE RISE

The paradoxes of your next seat

Deliver results yourself	AND	*Build people who deliver without you*
Be the expert in the room	AND	*Stay the most curious person in it*
Be loyal to your boss	AND	*Advocate hard for your team*
Project confidence	AND	*Admit what you do not know*

The more your team depends on you, the smaller it will stay.

STORY THREE · BE RICH OR BE KING

The founder who could not let go

WHAT HE WOULD NOT RELEASE	WHAT IT WAS COSTING HIM
Final say on every hire, every price, every exception	A team that had stopped deciding and started waiting
The identity: he was the company, and the company was him	Growth stalled at the ceiling of his own calendar
The pace: eighty-hour weeks worn as proof of commitment	The exit he kept saying he wanted for his family
The fear underneath: control lost once, long ago. Never again.	The joy. He had built a prison with his name on the door.

He did not lose the company when he finally let go. He released it.

The curse of discipline is that every day looks the same.

*The curse of indiscipline is that **every year does.***

EVERY DAY

EVERY YEAR

Discipline

Ordinary days. Extraordinary years.



Indiscipline

Exciting days. The same year, again.



MY FINAL WORD

The tension never goes away.

And the great leaders stop wishing it would.

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