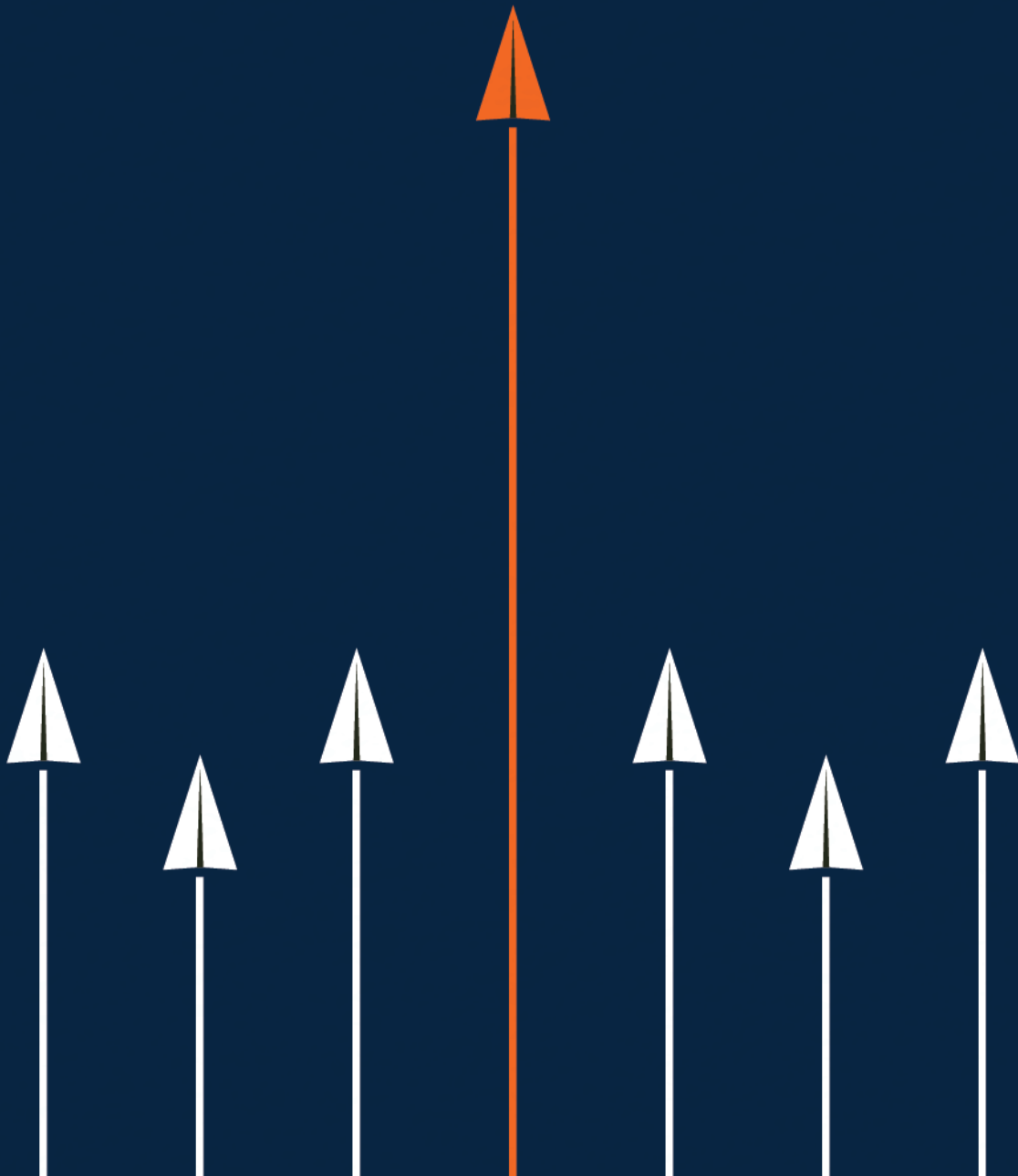


# Leading When Tension Won't Go Away

*A Practical Framework for Modern Leadership*



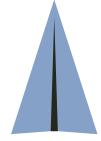
# Introduction

Leaders today operate in conditions of constant change. Economic volatility, technological disruption, shifting workforce expectations, and increasing organizational complexity have made leadership less about reaching stable conclusions and more about navigating ongoing uncertainty.

Many traditional leadership models assume that problems can be solved, tradeoffs resolved, and clarity restored. That assumption no longer holds. Leaders increasingly face situations where competing priorities persist over time and cannot be permanently resolved.

Research on paradoxical leadership suggests that effective leaders do not attempt to eliminate these tensions. Instead, they learn to manage them productively. Paradoxical leadership refers to behaviors that address competing yet interdependent demands simultaneously over time rather than choosing one at the expense of the other. This capability has been linked to improved adaptability, innovation, engagement, and performance across industries and organizational contexts.

This paper introduces a practical framework, **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift**, that translates established research into observable leadership behaviors. The framework is designed to be accessible, memorable, and applicable across leadership roles, spans of control, and industries.



# The Core Leadership Challenge

Leaders today operate in environments defined by volatility, complexity, and continual change. Markets shift faster than planning cycles. Technology evolves faster than policies. Workforce expectations change faster than organizational norms. As a result, many leadership challenges no longer present themselves as discrete problems with clear solutions.

Instead, leaders face persistent tensions that must be navigated over time.

## These tensions show up in familiar forms:

- Speed and quality
- Innovation and stability
- Autonomy and alignment
- Short-term results and long-term health
- Control and trust

Each side of these tensions is legitimate. Each is necessary. And each becomes a liability when over-emphasized. This is what makes them difficult. Leaders cannot choose one without creating predictable consequences elsewhere in the system.

**The problem is not that leaders encounter tension. The problem is how tension is interpreted.**



# Why Tension is Often Misdiagnosed

Many leaders were developed in environments that rewarded problem-solving, decisiveness, and clarity.

## They were trained to:

- identify root causes
- make decisions quickly
- reduce ambiguity
- restore stability

In those environments, tension often signaled a gap in information, alignment, or capability. If leaders worked hard enough or analyzed deeply enough, the tension could be resolved.

In today's environment, that mental model no longer holds.

When leaders apply a “problem-solving” mindset to situations that are fundamentally tension-based, several patterns emerge:

- Pressure to decide replaces pressure to understand
- False clarity is valued over honest complexity
- One side of the tension is elevated while the other is minimized or ignored
- Leaders experience chronic frustration, fatigue, or self-doubt

**The tension does not go away. It simply reappears later, often with greater cost.**



# Tension as a Structural Condition, **NOT** a Personal Failure

In complex systems, tension is not a sign that leadership is failing. It is a signal that leadership is required.

Research on paradox and complexity consistently shows that many organizational challenges are not solvable in the traditional sense. They are ongoing conditions created by interdependent demands that must be managed simultaneously over time.

## Examples include:

- Pursuing growth while maintaining culture
- Enabling innovation while protecting core operations
- Empowering teams while ensuring consistency and fairness

Attempting to eliminate these tensions leads to oscillation between extremes. Leaders push hard in one direction, experience negative consequences, then overcorrect in the opposite direction. This cycle creates instability, confusion, and erosion of trust.

**The alternative is not indecision. It is a different form of leadership work.**



# The Emotional Weight of Leadership Tension

Tension is not only cognitive. It is emotional.

## Leaders often feel pressure to:

- appear confident even when certainty is unavailable
- protect others from discomfort
- provide answers before the system is ready for them

As a result, leaders may internalize tension as personal inadequacy. They assume that if they were more capable, more experienced, or more decisive, the tension would disappear.

This belief is both inaccurate and costly.

## When leaders treat tension as failure, they are more likely to:

- rush decisions to relieve pressure
- shut down dissent to maintain control
- defend choices rather than learn from them
- experience burnout and disengagement

The leadership challenge is not removing tension, but **remaining effective while it persists.**



# A Shift in How Leadership Is Understood

The most significant leadership shift required today is moving from a mindset of resolution to a mindset of navigation.

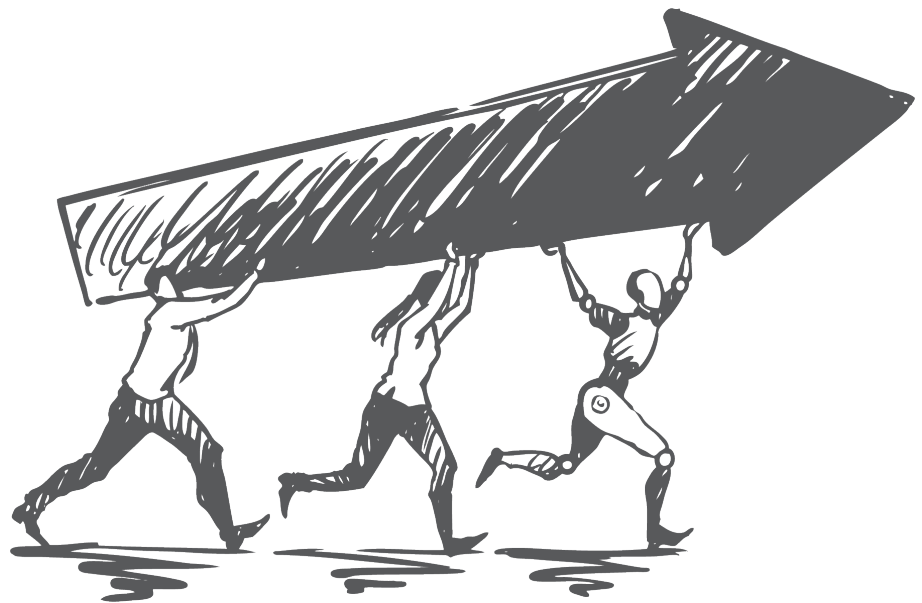
This does not mean abandoning decisiveness or accountability.

## It means recognizing that:

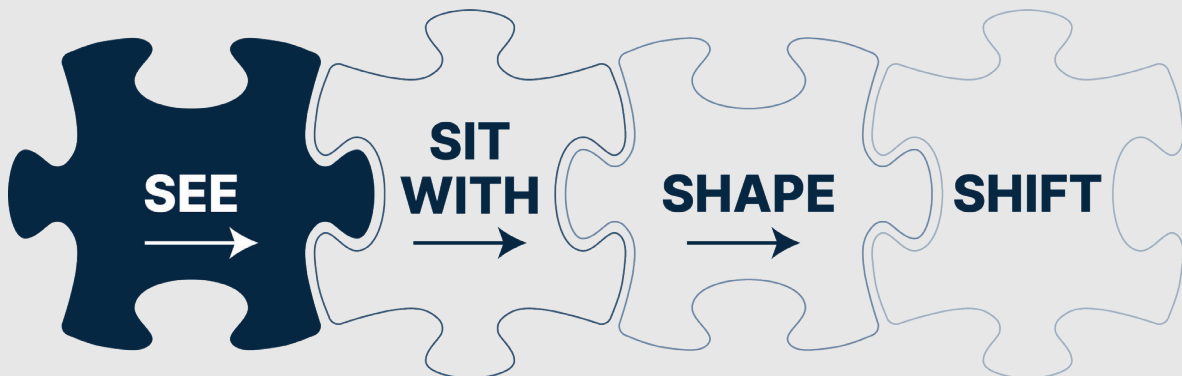
- some tensions must be carried forward, not closed
- some decisions must remain provisional
- some clarity emerges only through action and learning

Leadership, in this context, is less about eliminating discomfort and more about **creating the conditions for sound judgment under pressure.**

This is the challenge the **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework is designed to address.



# A Practical Leadership Framework



The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework simplifies paradox research into four practical leadership practices that leaders can apply in real time.

## SEE THE TENSION

**Purpose:** Recognize and name competing priorities clearly.

Effective leaders surface tensions rather than allowing them to remain implicit. Seeing the tension creates shared understanding and prevents unspoken conflict from undermining performance.

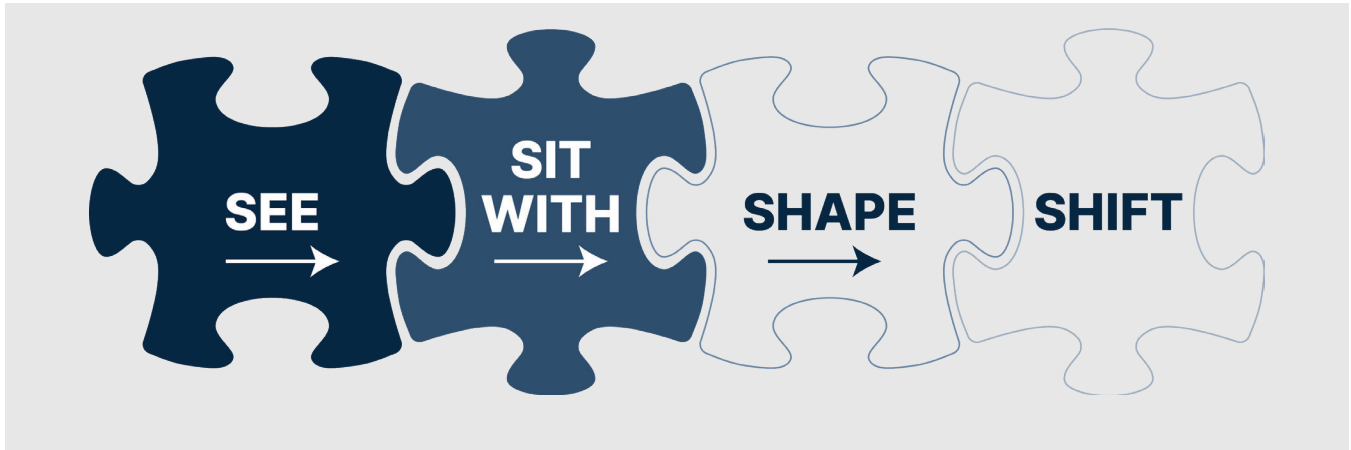
### What this looks like in practice:

- Naming competing priorities openly
- Describing tradeoffs without assigning blame
- Clarifying what is being balanced and why it matters

### Example leader language:

“We are trying to increase speed while protecting quality. Both matter, and prioritizing one without acknowledging the other creates risk.”

Seeing the tension aligns with research on sense-making, which emphasizes the importance of articulating competing demands to support collective understanding and coordination.



# SIT WITH THE TENSION

**Purpose:** Resist premature closure.

Sitting with the tension means staying present with discomfort long enough to think clearly. It requires leaders to regulate their own urgency so the organization does not default to false certainty.

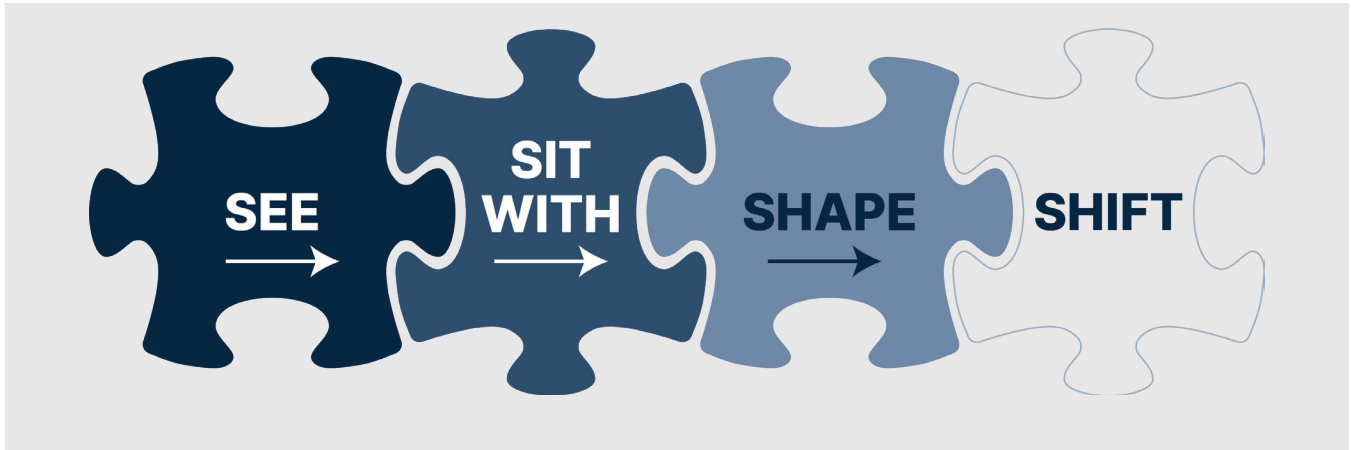
## What this looks like in practice:

- Slowing decisions just enough to explore implications
- Inviting dissent and alternative perspectives
- Normalizing uncertainty as part of leadership work

## Common failure mode:

Collapsing the tension too quickly to reduce pressure rather than improve judgment.

Leaders who can sit with tension create space for better decisions, stronger alignment, and deeper learning.



## SHAPE A RESPONSE

**Purpose:** Move forward without denying tradeoffs.

Shaping a response means designing an approach that accounts for both sides of the tension rather than optimizing one and absorbing predictable consequences later.

By “both sides of the tension,” we mean competing priorities that are each valid, necessary, and costly when over-emphasized.

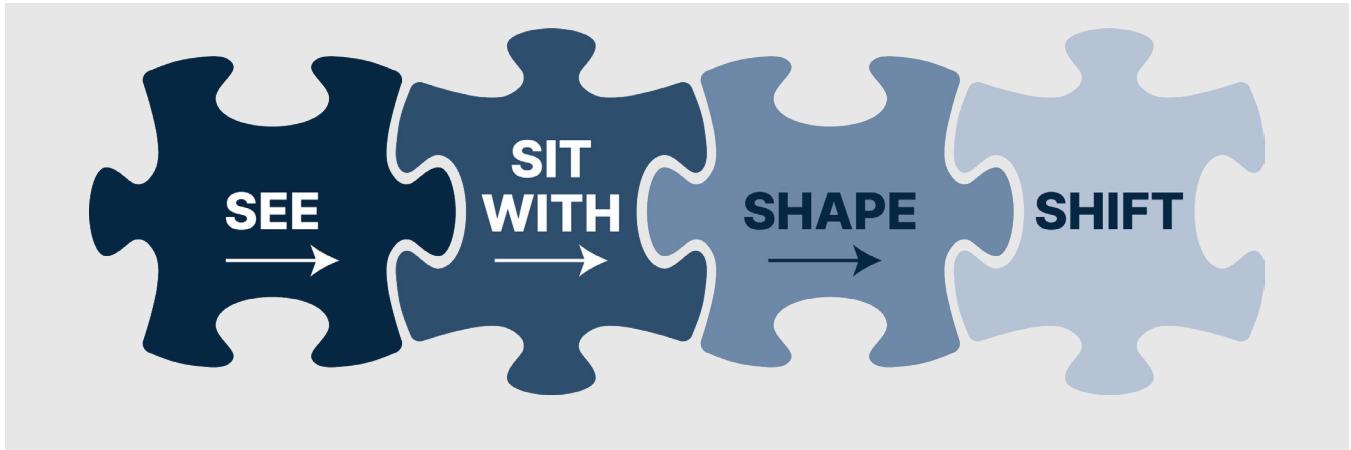
### What this looks like in practice:

- Creating guardrails rather than absolute rules
- Piloting or phasing initiatives to support learning
- Clarifying non-negotiables alongside areas of flexibility

### Example leader language:

“We will move quickly with a limited rollout, while setting quality thresholds that trigger review.”

This approach reflects research on ambidextrous and paradoxical leadership, which emphasizes designing systems that support competing demands simultaneously.



## SHIFT AS CONDITIONS CHANGE

**Purpose:** Treat decisions as hypotheses.

In dynamic environments, decisions must be revisited as conditions evolve. Shifting is not a sign of weakness or indecision. It is a disciplined learning practice.

Shifting reflects principles of double-loop learning, where leaders examine underlying assumptions rather than only adjusting actions.

### **What this looks like in practice:**

- Establishing review points and success indicators
- Naming what evidence would prompt a change
- Encouraging learning rather than defensiveness

# Applying the Framework Across Leadership Roles

The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework applies across leadership levels, not because leaders face the same decisions, but because they face the same type of challenge: persistent tension without clean resolution.

What changes by role is the **scale of impact**, the **time horizon**, and the **number of stakeholders involved**, not the nature of the work itself.

## Frontline Leaders: Managing Operational Tradeoffs

Frontline leaders often operate closest to the work, where tensions are immediate and visible.

### These leaders regularly balance:

- Speed and accuracy
- Productivity and safety
- Consistency and individual needs

For frontline leaders, tension often shows up as daily pressure to “just make it work.” The risk is collapsing tension too quickly in order to keep things moving.

### In this context:

- **See** helps leaders name the real tradeoff instead of framing it as a performance failure
- **Sit with** helps them resist reactive decisions driven by urgency or frustration
- **Shape** allows for practical adjustments such as sequencing work, clarifying priorities, or setting short-term guardrails
- **Shift** enables course correction as conditions change throughout the day or week

**Here, leadership shows up in moment-to-moment judgment, not grand strategy.**

## Mid-Level Leaders: Balancing Competing Stakeholder Demands

Mid-level leaders operate at the intersection of strategy and execution.

**They often absorb tension from multiple directions, balancing:**

- Direction from senior leaders and realities on the ground
- Competing priorities across teams or functions
- Short-term delivery and long-term capability building

These leaders are especially vulnerable to tension overload. They are often expected to translate ambiguity into clarity for others while having limited authority to eliminate the tension themselves.

### In this context:

- **See** helps leaders articulate tensions that are often felt but not acknowledged
- **Sit with** prevents premature alignment that silences valid concerns
- **Shape** supports designing approaches that work across functions, not just within silos
- **Shift** allows leaders to recalibrate as priorities, resources, or constraints evolve

**For mid-level leaders, the framework legitimizes tension as part of the role rather than a personal failure.**

## Senior Leaders: Navigating Strategy, Culture, and Enterprise Risk

Senior leaders face tensions that are broader, slower-moving, and more consequential.

**Common tensions include:**

- Growth and sustainability
- Centralization and empowerment
- Performance pressure and cultural health

At this level, tension often becomes politicized. Decisions carry symbolic weight, and the pressure to appear decisive can discourage leaders from sitting with uncertainty.

### In this context:

- **See** ensures that strategic tradeoffs are named explicitly rather than buried in rhetoric
- **Sit with** allows leaders to resist false certainty and model disciplined patience
- **Shape** supports designing systems, structures, and policies that account for competing priorities
- **Shift** reinforces learning at the enterprise level and signals that adaptation is expected, not punished

**Senior leaders set the tone for whether tension is treated as a leadership responsibility or an organizational flaw.**

## WHAT REMAINS CONSTANT ACROSS ROLES

While the context changes, the leadership work remains the same:

- Tensions persist rather than resolve
- Decisions carry consequences
- Oversimplification creates downstream risk

Leadership is exercised wherever people must make decisions in the presence of competing priorities. Authority may increase with role, but the requirement to engage tension productively does not.

The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework provides a shared language that allows leaders at all levels to approach this work with greater clarity, discipline, and confidence.



# Using DiSC to Understand How Leaders Experience Tension

The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework applies regardless of personality or leadership style. However, how leaders experience, interpret, and respond to tension is strongly influenced by their natural tendencies.

DiSC provides a useful lens for understanding why capable leaders often struggle in predictable ways when tensions persist. Under pressure, most leaders instinctively protect one side of a tension while unintentionally neglecting the other. This is not a character flaw. It is a stress response shaped by preference, experience, and reinforcement.

Understanding these patterns helps leaders build self-awareness and apply the framework more intentionally.

## Dominance (D): Urgency and Decisiveness Under Tension

Leaders with a Dominance orientation tend to value speed, results, and forward momentum. Under tension, they often experience discomfort with delay and ambiguity.

### Common tension response:

- Move quickly to a decision to regain control
- Frame hesitation as inefficiency or weakness
- Prioritize action over exploration

### Typical risk:

Collapsing the tension too quickly. One side of the tension, often speed or results, is protected at the expense of quality, buy-in, or long-term consequences.

### How the framework helps:

- **See** helps D-style leaders slow down enough to name the real tradeoff rather than framing the issue as a lack of execution
- **Sit with** creates space to test assumptions before committing
- **Shape** supports designing guardrails that protect the side of the tension they might otherwise overlook
- **Shift** legitimizes changing course without framing it as failure



**For D-style leaders, effectiveness grows when decisiveness is paired with discipline.**

## Influence (I): Optimism and Connection Under Tension

Leaders with an Influence orientation often value energy, relationships, and momentum. Under tension, they may prioritize harmony and enthusiasm over confronting difficult tradeoffs.

### Common tension response:

- Minimize or reframe tension to keep morale high
- Avoid conversations that introduce discomfort or conflict
- Emphasize possibilities while downplaying risk

### Typical risk:

Failing to fully **See** the tension. One side of the tension is softened or ignored in the interest of maintaining positivity.

### How the framework helps:

- **See** legitimizes naming hard realities without undermining relationships
- **Sit with** encourages staying present when conversations become uncomfortable
- **Shape** helps translate vision into structures that account for constraints
- **Shift** supports learning without personalizing course corrections



**For I-style leaders, effectiveness increases when optimism is grounded in honest acknowledgment of tradeoffs.**

## Steadiness (S): Stability and Support Under Tension

Leaders with a Steadiness orientation tend to value consistency, collaboration, and stability. Under tension, they often experience stress when change disrupts people or systems.

### Common tensions include:

- Delay decisions to preserve harmony
- Absorb pressure personally rather than surface it
- Prefer familiar approaches even when conditions change

### Typical risk:

Over-protecting stability. Necessary change is postponed, allowing tension to intensify rather than resolve productively.

### How the framework helps:

- **See** helps externalize tension instead of internalizing it as personal strain
- **Sit with** legitimizes discomfort as part of responsible leadership
- **Shape** supports gradual, people-centered design rather than abrupt change
- **Shift** reframes adaptation as care for the system rather than disruption



**For S-style leaders, effectiveness grows when stability and progress are treated as complementary, not competing.**

## Conscientiousness (C): Accuracy and Caution Under Tension

Leaders with a Conscientiousness orientation value accuracy, logic, and risk mitigation. Under tension, they often feel pressure to resolve uncertainty through analysis.

### Common tension response:

- Delay action while seeking more data
- Attempt to eliminate ambiguity before moving forward
- Focus on avoiding error over enabling learning

### Typical risk:

Becoming stuck between **Sit with** and **Shape**. The tension is understood, but action is postponed until certainty feels sufficient.

### How the framework helps:

- **See** helps distinguish between necessary clarity and false precision
- **Sit with** normalizes uncertainty as unavoidable rather than unacceptable
- **Shape** encourages small, testable actions rather than perfect designs
- **Shift** legitimizes updating decisions as learning improves



**For C-style leaders, effectiveness increases when rigor is paired with experimentation.**

## What DiSC Reveals About Tension

### Across styles, the pattern is consistent:

- Leaders are not uncomfortable with tension because they lack skill
- They are uncomfortable because tension threatens their preferred way of leading

The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework does not ask leaders to change who they are. It asks them to recognize which part of the process they are most likely to skip under pressure and to lead more deliberately as a result.

When teams share this language, tension becomes easier to discuss without blame. Leaders can say:

- “I am moving too fast. I need to sit with this longer.”
- “We are seeing this differently. Let’s slow down and name the tradeoffs.”
- “We shaped a solution, but we need to shift based on what we are learning.”



This shared language increases trust, clarity, and learning across styles.

# Implications for Leadership Development

If leadership today requires the ability to work productively in sustained tension, then leadership development must be aligned with that reality. Many development efforts struggle not because they are poorly designed, but because they are built on assumptions that no longer match the work leaders are being asked to do.

**These misalignments show up most clearly in five interconnected areas:** how leaders are promoted, how performance is evaluated, how development is funded and designed, and how long organizations expect capability to take to develop.

## 1

### PROMOTION CRITERIA VS. ROLE REQUIREMENTS

One of the most consequential misalignments in leadership development occurs before development even begins.

#### **Leaders are commonly promoted based on:**

- technical expertise
- individual performance
- decisiveness and reliability
- the ability to solve problems quickly

#### **Once promoted, they are expected to:**

- lead through ambiguity
- manage competing priorities that do not resolve
- influence without direct authority
- remain effective while tension persists

This represents a fundamental shift in the nature of the work.

When this transition is not explicitly acknowledged, newly promoted leaders often interpret tension as personal failure. They respond by over-controlling, avoiding difficult tradeoffs, or reverting to the behaviors that previously earned success.

The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework helps reframe leadership success for these roles. It clarifies that effectiveness is no longer measured by how quickly tension is eliminated, but by how well it is navigated over time.

Without this reframing, leadership development programs risk reinforcing outdated success models rather than preparing leaders for the reality of their roles.

# 2

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY VS. PERFORMANCE PRESSURE

A second, equally critical misalignment exists at the cultural level.

Organizations frequently promote values such as openness, learning, and psychological safety, while simultaneously rewarding speed, certainty, and flawless execution. Leaders are encouraged to invite dissent and adapt, but are evaluated on decisiveness and consistency.

This creates a double bind.

Leaders quickly learn that sitting with uncertainty or revisiting decisions carries reputational risk.

### As a result:

- tension is collapsed prematurely
- dissent is invited but not protected
- decisions are defended rather than examined
- learning slows despite stated intentions

The **Sit with** and **Shift** steps of the framework are especially vulnerable in these environments. Leaders cannot sit with tension if doing so signals weakness. They cannot shift course if adaptation is interpreted as inconsistency.

Until performance systems and leadership narratives align with the realities of learning under uncertainty, leadership development efforts will continue to produce insight without sustained behavior change.

# 3

## FUNDING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN A TENSION-BASED REALITY

Leadership development is often funded with an expectation of predictability. Programs are approved based on timelines, deliverables, and near-term outcomes. This funding logic assumes leadership capability can be installed quickly through discrete interventions.

The development of judgment, however, does not follow that pattern.

Capabilities such as navigating tradeoffs, regulating urgency, and leading through unresolved tension develop through:

- repeated exposure to real challenges
- reflection and feedback
- guided practice over time

Short-term programs may raise awareness, but rarely build durable capability on their own. When organizations underfund sustained development while expecting leaders to perform in increasingly complex environments, frustration grows on all sides.

A tension-aware approach reframes investment decisions. **The question shifts from “What program will fix this?” to “What sustained development will strengthen leadership judgment over time?”**

# 4

## FRICITION BETWEEN L&D DESIGN AND EXECUTIVE EXPECTATIONS

Another predictable misalignment exists between Learning and Development functions and executive leadership.

Executives, under pressure for results, often prioritize speed, scale, and visible impact. L&D professionals understand that meaningful behavior change requires sequencing, practice, and reinforcement. This difference in perspective frequently leads to compressed programs, reduced reflection, and over-promised outcomes.

The See, Sit with, Shape, Shift framework provides a shared language to navigate this tension:

- See names the tradeoff between speed and depth
- Sit with legitimizes the discomfort of slower developmental work
- Shape supports blended solutions that balance urgency with effectiveness
- Shift reinforces learning as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event

When executives and L&D partners share this language, development becomes a strategic dialogue rather than a transactional negotiation.

# 5

## TIME REQUIRED TO DEVELOP LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY

Finally, there is a persistent gap between how long leadership capability takes to develop and how quickly results are expected.

Leadership skills such as judgment under pressure, tolerance for ambiguity, and the ability to manage competing priorities mature over years, not weeks. Participants often expect confidence and clarity at the end of a program. Organizations often expect immediate behavior change.

When those expectations are unmet, development efforts are labeled ineffective.

- In reality, early indicators of growth are often subtle:
- leaders notice tensions sooner
- decisions slow slightly but improve in quality
- assumptions are questioned rather than defended

The framework helps reset expectations by positioning leadership development as progressive rather than episodic. Leaders learn to see tension earlier, sit with it more effectively, shape more thoughtful responses, and shift with greater discipline over time.



## A Necessary Reframe for Leadership Development

Leadership development should not promise certainty. It should build capacity.

Organizations that align promotion criteria, performance expectations, funding models, and development design with the realities of leadership work are far better positioned to develop leaders who can operate effectively under pressure, ambiguity, and competing demands.

The goal is not to remove tension from leadership roles. It is to prepare leaders to lead well when tension does not go away.



# CONCLUSION: Leading Where the Work Actually Is

The most persistent leadership challenges today are not failures of intelligence, effort, or intent. They are failures of alignment between how leadership is understood and how leadership is actually practiced.

Tension is no longer an occasional disruption to be eliminated. It is a structural condition of modern leadership. Leaders are expected to make decisions where competing priorities remain unresolved, where certainty is unavailable, and where consequences unfold over time.

When organizations continue to treat tension as a problem to solve rather than a condition to lead through, predictable patterns follow. Leaders rush decisions to relieve pressure. Development programs promise clarity they cannot deliver. Learning and Development functions struggle to defend depth in environments that reward speed. High-potential leaders burn out when the skills that earned promotion no longer match the work they are asked to do.

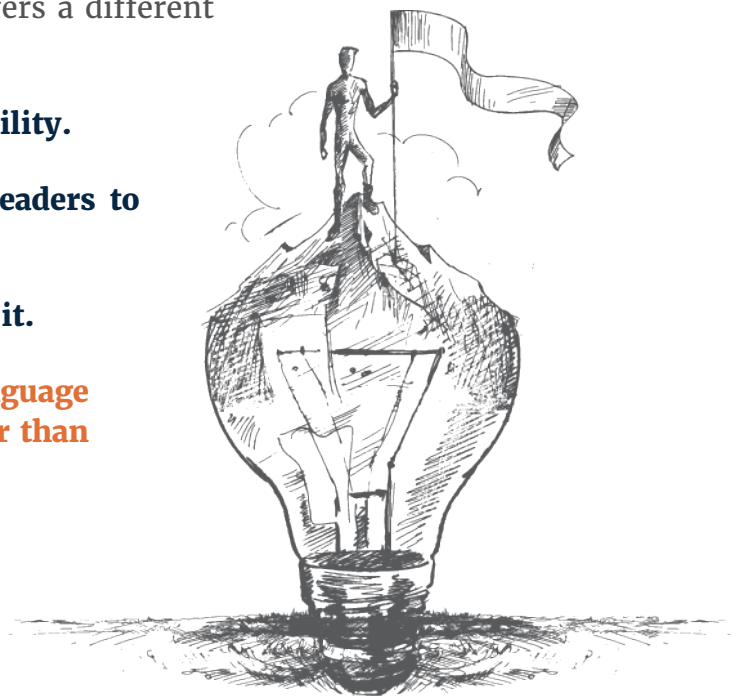
The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework offers a different path.

It does not promise resolution. **It builds capability.**

It does not eliminate discomfort. **It teaches leaders to remain effective within it.**

It does not replace decisiveness. **It disciplines it.**

**Most importantly, it provides a shared language for leadership work that reflects reality rather than nostalgia.**



# What This Means for Leaders

**If you are a leader, the call to action is personal.**

- Stop interpreting tension as a sign you are failing
- Start asking which part of the tension you are avoiding or over-protecting
- Practice sitting with uncertainty long enough to improve judgment, not just relieve pressure
- Treat decisions as provisional where conditions demand it, not as reflections of your competence

Leadership strength today is not measured by how quickly tension disappears. It is measured by how well you lead while it remains.



# What This Means for Senior Leaders and Executives

**If you shape strategy, culture, or performance systems, the call to action is structural.**

- Reexamine promotion criteria to ensure leaders are rewarded for the work they are expected to do next, not the work they did previously
- Align performance expectations with the realities of learning, adaptation, and uncertainty
- Make it safe for leaders to sit with tension and shift course without reputational penalty
- Model disciplined patience and visible learning at the top

Organizations get the leadership behaviors they reward. If certainty is prized over judgment, leaders will perform confidence rather than exercise leadership.



# What This Means for Learning and Development

**If you design leadership development, the call to action is strategic.**

- Stop over-promising resolution and start building navigation capacity
- Design development as a sustained process, not a one-time intervention
- Integrate learning into real, unresolved leadership challenges
- Use shared frameworks to reduce friction between development depth and executive urgency

Leadership development fails when it promises certainty in environments defined by complexity. It succeeds when it equips leaders to operate effectively without it.



# A Final Word

**Leadership does not happen where answers are clear. It happens where tensions persist and decisions matter.**

The **See, Sit with, Shape, Shift** framework does not simplify leadership by denying complexity. It simplifies leadership by giving leaders a way to work within it.

**The question for organizations is no longer whether tension will exist.**

The question is whether leaders will be equipped to lead well when it does.

**The work of leadership has changed.**

It is time for our language, expectations, and development approaches to change with it.



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# About the Author



**Pete Premenko** is a leadership consultant, facilitator, and author who helps leaders navigate complexity, tension, and change without oversimplifying the work or burning themselves out in the process.

As the founder of Phronesis Group LLC, Pete partners with organizations to design and deliver practical, research-informed leadership development grounded in how leadership actually shows up day to day. His work focuses on building judgment, self-awareness, and leadership discipline in environments where competing priorities persist and certainty is rarely available.

Pete brings more than two decades of experience across leadership development, organizational effectiveness, and people strategy. He works with leaders at all levels from frontline managers to senior executives, across a range of industries, helping them move beyond performative decisiveness toward more thoughtful, sustainable leadership practices.

He is the author of *Elevating Potential: A Guide for Developing Emerging Leaders* and *Stop Telling Me to Get Over It*, and his writing consistently challenges common leadership assumptions while offering grounded, usable frameworks leaders can apply under real pressure.

Pete's approach is shaped by deep experience with assessment-based development, team effectiveness frameworks, and coaching methodologies. His work is known for combining intellectual rigor with plainspoken language, making complex ideas accessible without diluting their substance.

## Work With Pete

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Pete works with organizations and individual leaders through consulting, facilitation, training, and coaching engagements tailored to real leadership challenges...not off-the-shelf solutions.

**To learn more about Pete's work or explore a potential engagement, visit:**

- [petepremenko.com](http://petepremenko.com)
- [phronesisgroupllc.com](http://phronesisgroupllc.com)

You can also connect with Pete on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/peter-premenko](https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-premenko), where he shares insights on leadership, decision-making, and development in today's complex environments.

