



A COMPLIMENTARY GUIDE FOR SENIOR LEADERS

The Executive Navigation Framework.

A leader's compass for the five challenges that define senior careers.

Michael David Harms, Founder & Principal, AZMTH LLC

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Five challenges. Five tools. Roughly twelve minutes.

Every senior leadership career is shaped by the same five challenges — not because leadership is simple, but because these particular five recur across industry, function, and personality. This guide names them plainly, cites the research that documents them, and gives you one practical tool for each. You should be able to read it in one sitting and use at least one of the tools before Monday.

01 The Transition

The first eighteen months of any new role — and why the habits that got you promoted are the ones now working against you.

02 The Isolation

Why direct feedback disappears the higher you climb — and how to rebuild an honest signal loop deliberately.

03 The Weight

A decision-triage framework for a role where not every call deserves the same time or care.

04 The Reach

You are now measured on the performance of people who do not report to you. Direct authority stops working. What replaces it.

05 The Tempo

Yesterday's monthly review cycle cannot survive today's weekly disruption cycle. How to reset the operating rhythm.

This guide is deliberately unbranded. No frameworks, no proprietary vocabulary, no coaching methodology. Just the five challenges — and one thing you can do about each of them. If you find yourself wanting to go deeper on any of the five, the final page tells you how.

01

THE FIRST CHALLENGE

The Transition.

The habits that got you promoted are the very habits now working against you — and the first eighteen months is when that shows up.

Most senior-leader failures do not occur late in a tenure. They concentrate in the first year and a half of a new role. The mechanism is well-documented: the leader was promoted for performing well in the role they were leaving. The behaviors that produced that performance — personal execution, direct problem-solving, being the person with the answer — are precisely the behaviors that fail at the next altitude. The role now requires the leader to work through people, over longer time horizons, at levels of ambiguity that do not tolerate the old operating rhythm.

The transition is not a period of adjustment. It is a period of active substitution — deliberately replacing one working style with another, before the failure to do so becomes a résumé line.

50%

of newly promoted executives fail within their first 18 months in the role.

Corporate Executive Board (now Gartner), 2013 · based on 30,000 leaders

THE TOOL · USE ONCE

The 30-60-90 Substitution Ledger.

On a single page, list the ten behaviors that produced your promotion. Beside each, name the equivalent behavior your new role now demands. This is your substitution list — the specific working habits you are trying to trade one-for-one.

1. **Day 30:** Circle the three substitutions that feel most unnatural. Those are your priority.
2. **Day 60:** Ask two trusted colleagues which old behaviors they still see you defaulting to. Do not defend. Just note.
3. **Day 90:** Rewrite the list. What has actually substituted? What has not? Repeat quarterly for the first year.

The point is not to be perfect at ninety days. The point is that the substitution is tracked. Untracked, it does not happen.

02

THE SECOND CHALLENGE

The Isolation.

The higher you climb, the less direct feedback you receive — and the people best positioned to help you see yourself are the ones least incentivized to name what they see.

This one is structural, not personal. Peers become subordinates. Subordinates become deferential. Boards become polite. Executive coaches sometimes make it worse by being paid to be encouraging. The result is a slow, quiet reduction in the volume and honesty of the signal a leader gets about their own performance. The leader continues to make decisions using an increasingly stale model of themselves.

The solution is not more feedback in general. It is a small, deliberately-cultivated set of people who will tell you the truth when nobody else will. Building that set is not automatic. It has to be done on purpose, and it has to be renewed as the leader's role changes.

29%

of employees currently trust their immediate manager — a 37-percentage-point drop since 2022.

DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025

THE TOOL • REPEAT ANNUALLY

The Three Who Tell You The Truth.

Name three people in your professional life who will reliably tell you what nobody else will. Not friends. Not mentors, necessarily. People who have watched you work and who owe you nothing.

1. **One who works at your altitude** — a peer inside or outside your organization who has seen you make senior-level calls under pressure.
2. **One who works below your altitude** — a former direct report or team member who no longer has anything to lose by naming what they saw.
3. **One who works above your altitude** — a board member, executive sponsor, or former boss whose experience already surpasses your current role.

If you cannot list three names in three minutes, that answer is the diagnostic. Building the list is Priority One. Renewing it is a quarterly commitment.

03

THE THIRD CHALLENGE

The Weight.

Senior roles concentrate decisions that are ambiguous, irreversible, and consequential for many. There is no manual, rarely clean data, and often not enough time.

A common failure mode is treating every decision as if it deserves the same level of care. It does not. Some decisions are two-way doors — reversible, low-risk, and can be corrected in a week if wrong. Others are one-way doors — irreversible, high-consequence, and cannot be walked back without significant cost. The two categories require entirely different levels of investment.

Senior leaders who fail at decision-making usually fail in one of two directions: spending disproportionate time on reversible decisions that could have been made in five minutes, or moving too quickly through irreversible ones that deserved a week of consideration. The first exhausts the leader. The second exhausts the organization.

THE TOOL · USE ON EVERY MAJOR DECISION

The Decision Triage Matrix.

Before investing time in a decision, place it in one of four quadrants. The quadrant tells you how much time it deserves.

	REVERSIBLE (TWO-WAY DOOR)	IRREVERSIBLE (ONE-WAY DOOR)
LOW IMPACT	Just decide. Delegate or make the call in under five minutes. Do not build a committee.	Sleep on it. One night. Then decide. The consequences are permanent but bounded.
HIGH IMPACT	Move quickly. You can course-correct if wrong. Get the decision made and observe the result.	Slow deliberately. Consult widely. Sleep on it multiple nights. Consider what you will say if wrong.

The two-way / one-way door distinction is drawn from Jeff Bezos' 1997 shareholder letter. It has survived twenty-five years because the underlying insight is right: most decisions are reversible, and treating them as if they are not is a form of leadership fatigue no organization can afford.

04

THE FOURTH CHALLENGE

The Reach.

Your outcomes are now produced by people who do not report to you. Direct authority stops working. Influence starts, and influence is a different skill.

At the senior level, the leader's span of influence exceeds their span of authority. Success on any meaningful initiative depends on the cooperation of matrix peers, cross-functional teams, executive sponsors, and boards — none of whom the leader can direct. The old operating model (make a decision, communicate it, expect execution) breaks. The new operating model requires the leader to identify, cultivate, and maintain the specific relationships that make execution possible.

A useful test: for the most important initiative you are currently accountable for, can you name every specific person whose active support the initiative requires? Not their role — their name. If the answer is no, that initiative is at higher risk than it looks.

79%

of major change initiatives meet their goals when executive sponsors are effective — compared to only 27% when sponsors are ineffective.

Prosci · Best Practices in Change Management

THE TOOL · USE PER MAJOR INITIATIVE

The Three-Degrees Map.

For your top current initiative, list nine specific names across three concentric circles of support. If any of the nine slots is empty, that is where the plan needs work — before the execution starts, not after.

1. **The Three Direct:** Three people who report to you and are executing pieces of the work.
2. **The Three Adjacent:** Three matrix or cross-functional colleagues whose active cooperation the work requires.
3. **The Three Above:** Three executive-sponsor, board, or external stakeholders whose visible support the work needs to survive.

Blank slots are not gaps in the map. They are gaps in the plan. Fill them before the work begins — not when it stalls.

05

THE FIFTH CHALLENGE

The Tempo.

Yesterday's monthly review cycle cannot survive today's weekly disruption cycle. Leaders who do not reset the operating rhythm get overtaken.

Artificial intelligence disruption, workforce transformation, faster restructuring, and rising stakeholder expectations are compressing the decision cycle for senior leaders. A cadence that worked five years ago — monthly reviews, quarterly plans, annual strategy — is now colliding with a landscape that moves in weeks. The consequence is not that the leader falls behind on any single decision. It is that the leader loses the pattern-recognition that comes from sustained personal calibration.

The response is not to accelerate everything, which produces exhaustion without improving judgment. It is to install a short, high-frequency personal cadence that keeps the leader's own signal current — regardless of what the organization's formal review cycle is doing.

71%

of leaders report increased stress at work; 40% are actively considering leaving their current jobs.

DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025

THE TOOL · FIFTEEN MINUTES, EVERY FRIDAY

The Weekly Bearing Check.

On Friday afternoon, before you close the week, answer three questions in a private journal or note. Do not share the answers. The exercise is calibration, not communication.

1. **Question 1:** What did I decide this week that I want to be right about in ninety days? (Name the decision, one line.)
2. **Question 2:** What is the single most important thing I will do next week? (Not a to-do list. One item.)
3. **Question 3:** What signal from the environment am I currently ignoring? (There is always one. Name it.)

Fifteen minutes a week, protected on the calendar. The purpose is not documentation. The purpose is keeping the leader's own model of the leader current, faster than the environment can render the old model obsolete.

Five challenges. One shared cause.

Notice the pattern. Every one of the five challenges is about how a leader operates at a level of responsibility they were not previously working at. The transition is about behavioral substitution. The isolation is about signal loss. The weight is about decision architecture. The reach is about relational strategy. The tempo is about personal calibration.

Each of the five requires something different from the leader — a new practice, a new relationship, a new rhythm, a new decision protocol.

None of them are solved by generic training. And none of them are solved by working harder at the old operating model. They are solved by trading one working model for another — deliberately, on a timeline, with feedback.

That trade is the actual work of senior leadership development. The tools in this guide are useful, and they are enough for a leader who is essentially on-track and just needs sharpening. If you are working through a genuine transition — new role, new organization, new environment — the tools are a starting point, not a solution.

The next page tells you what to do if you want to go further — and what you get if you do.

Three paths. Pick the one that fits.

AZMTH is a boutique leadership training and development firm built for senior leaders working through exactly the transitions this guide names. If any of the five challenges are alive in your current role — or in the leaders you are responsible for developing — the paths below are how you engage.

01

Read the theory.

A long-form essay on the underlying leadership theory the AZMTH engagements are built around. No email required, no gate.

02

Apply to the cohort.

A twelve-week cohort program for eight senior leaders. Structured assessment, cohort learning, individual coaching. Q1 2028 start.

03

Book a discovery call.

Forty-five minutes with the Principal. Either produces a plan for you or for your organization — or does not.

Everything AZMTH does rests on a proprietary framework and a specific theory of what senior leadership is. Neither is described in this guide — deliberately. This guide is what we give away. The framework, the theory, the assessment, and the coaching are what we do. If the tools in these pages were useful, the deeper work is where the transitions actually close.

*Start at **azmth.co**.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Built by an operator, not a career coach.

Michael Harms

CW4 (Ret.) · Doctoral Candidate, Strategic Leadership · ICF PCC

Founder and Principal of AZMTH. Retired U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 4. Former AH-64 Apache pilot. Doctoral Candidate in Strategic Leadership. Certified through the International Coaching Federation as a Professional Certified Coach (PCC), plus the leadership assessment credentials the work demands: Hogan, EQ-i 2.0, CliftonStrengths, and Prosci Change Practitioner certification.

Two decades operating in environments where decisions had real consequences. A doctoral candidate in how leaders make those decisions when the stakes are real. AZMTH is his work — a boutique leadership training and development firm built for senior leaders at defense contractors, Alaska Native Corporations, and mission-driven organizations where the cost of poor leadership shows up as more than one bad quarter.

AZMTH is deliberately small. Results, not testimonials. Not every applicant is admitted.

CONTACT

Email: mike@azmth.co

Web: azmth.co

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/mdharms](https://www.linkedin.com/in/mdharms)

The research behind the challenges.

Every statistic in this guide is drawn from a publicly-accessible research source. If a claim in the guide matters to you or to a decision you are making, the primary source is below.

[1] Corporate Executive Board / Gartner (2013). Executive transition failure rates, dataset of 30,000+ leaders. Cited via Forbes Coaches Council public article. Referenced in Challenge 01.

[2] DDI Global Leadership Forecast (2025). Trust in immediate managers — 37-percentage-point decline since 2022. Publicly accessible via DDI press release. Referenced in Challenge 02.

[3] Bezos, J. (1997). Amazon Shareholder Letter. Introduced the “one-way door / two-way door” decision distinction. Publicly available in Amazon’s SEC filings. Referenced in Challenge 03.

[4] Prosci. Best Practices in Change Management. Executive sponsor effectiveness and objective attainment. Publicly accessible via Prosci research pages. Referenced in Challenge 04.

[5] DDI Global Leadership Forecast (2025). Leader stress and attrition intent. Publicly accessible via DDI press release. Referenced in Challenge 05.

This guide is provided for informational and reflective purposes. It is not a substitute for personalized coaching, professional development, or the specific consulting engagements AZMTH LLC provides.



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*“When the stakes are highest,
the bearing must be clear.”*

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