WHITE PAPER · LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The Leadership *Ownership* Gap

> Why Executives Keep Getting Pulled Back Into Operations — and the Framework That Closes the Gap

John Bentley

Founder & CEO, I Lead Me, a Division of Power 2 Transform

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The gap isn't strategy. It isn't resources. It's leaders who were never trained to lead.

$10 trillion in lost productivity globally — driven by manager engagement falling nine points since 2022. Global engagement hasn't been this low since 2020.

Executives are pulled back into operations because their leaders were **promoted on performance, not prepared to lead** — especially under pressure.

US organizations spend an estimated **$166 billion annually** on leadership development — yet most programs fail because they never equip leaders to lead themselves first.

When leaders are developed from the **inside-out** — self-awareness first, ownership second, team leadership third — executives get their time back and organizations grow.

WHAT THE RESEARCH CONFIRMS

70%

of the variance in team engagement traces to the manager

Gallup Who's Responsible for Employee Engagement, 2024

20%

of organizations have successors ready for critical roles, though 75% prioritize internal promotion

DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025

29%

of employees trust their immediate manager, a 37% decline since 2022

DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025

01

THE PROBLEM

The Problem No One Names Out Loud

There is a conversation that happens behind closed doors in many organizations. An executive realizes they have spent the better part of their week solving problems that belonged to someone else. A decision their director should have made. A conflict a frontline leader should have resolved. A deadline their team lead should have owned.

This is not a time management problem. It is not a communication problem. And it is not a strategy problem.

It is a **leadership ownership gap.** Gallup attributes $10 trillion in lost global productivity primarily to disengaged managers. Organizations also lose the hours and strategic capacity of their most senior leaders. who end up absorbing work their managers should be owning.

> *"Frontline leaders are the backbone of every organization, yet are often given the least amount of attention and leadership training — causing anxiety for leaders who feel unprepared and paralyzing organizations from achieving critical business goals."*
>
> DDI FRONTLINE LEADER PROJECT

The Center for Creative Leadership has spent more than 15 years documenting the gap between the skills leaders need and the skills they have — and concluded that little progress has been made in closing it.

The gap is real. It is well-documented. And without deliberate intervention, it compounds.

02

ROOT CAUSE

The Gap Has Three Dimensions

The ownership gap isn't a single failure. It shows up in three interconnected ways — each feeding the others, and each ultimately landing on the executive's desk.

The Ownership Gap

Leaders are not taking accountability for decisions and results at their level — and most can't see it. Gallup finds leaders rate themselves 46% on creating accountability; the people they lead say 30%. So problems escalate, and executives become the permanent safety net.

The Engagement Gap

Leaders who haven't developed self-awareness cannot build engaged teams. Gallup is conclusive: 70% of the variance in team engagement traces to whether the manager is a coach or a boss — and manager engagement has fallen from 31% to 22% since 2022.

The Readiness Gap

Leaders were developed to perform, not to lead. DDI found roughly 60% of frontline leaders say they were never prepared for the role — and only 19% of managers delegate well. So the skills to manage themselves under pressure were never deliberately developed.

All three gaps start in the same place: the leader was never taught to lead themselves before they were asked to lead others. McKinsey & Company found the same thing.

> *"The essential prerequisites for this journey are self-awareness and self-reflection, which enable leaders to engage and inspire their colleagues and teams. Only then can they jointly navigate competing views and choices and find the confidence and clarity to make the right decisions."*
>
> MCKINSEY & COMPANY, THE INSIDE-OUT LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

But self-leadership is only the foundation. Ownership also requires clear authority to act, and executives who stop rescuing, because every rescue trains the very escalation they want to end.

03

A STORY FROM THE FIELD

From Siloed and Stuck to 40% Growth

In 2019, Alabama Farm Credit's incoming CEO arrived with a clear vision: build a team-oriented culture that broke down silos and created genuine collaboration. What he encountered was a leadership layer that was resistant, worked in silos, and largely unaware of how their own behavior was affecting the people around them.

The leaders were capable people. They had simply been promoted on performance — and their emotional responses under pressure, their assumptions about teammates, and their habits around accountability had never been examined. Let alone challegned.

John was brought in to begin with the middle managers — the exact group whose ownership gap was forcing the CEO back into operations. The work had to start with how they led themselves. Only then could they own the decisions and results at their level. From there, they began building that same ownership in the people they led.

40%+

Growth during the partnership — double the industry average

"John entered the scene and immediately helped leaders gain perspective. They became self-aware about how their actions affected teammates. Next came learning empathy — and realizing the narratives we write in our heads are not representative of the truth. The building block skills John brought to our team led us to promoting many of the initial leadership class he led."

MEL KOLLER, PRESIDENT & CEO — ALABAMA FARM CREDIT

Four years later, John returned to develop the next generation of leaders coming up through the organization — proof that when self-leadership takes root, it becomes a repeatable, scalable culture, not a one-time training event.

04

THE APPROACH

The Framework: Closing the Gap

Closing the leadership ownership gap requires a sequential approach. Skills trained in the wrong order produce the wrong results. The sequence matters.

1

Self-Leadership Foundation

Before a leader can lead others, they must lead themselves. This means developing self-awareness under pressure, understanding how their default behaviors affect others, and building emotional regulation to make sound decisions when conditions are difficult. This is the work most programs skip — and the work that determines everything else.

2

Ownership at the Right Level

Leaders must understand what they're accountable for — and practice actually owning it. Decision-making within their lane. Follow-through without being chased. Conflict resolution without escalation. Honest communication about results. This is where accountability moves from a value on a poster to a behavior that shows up in every meeting.

3

Leading Through and With Others

Once a leader leads themselves and owns their results, they can develop the capacity to lead their team — not by doing the work for them, but by creating conditions where the team takes ownership at their level, including the safety to make a call and be wrong. This phase builds coaching skills, trust, team cohesion, and the culture of accountability that sustains performance without constant executive oversight.

05

THE RESULTS

What Changes When the Gap Closes

When leaders build the self-leadership foundation, take ownership at their level, and lead their teams to do the same, the effect is immediate and tangible — for the executive and the organization.

Problems Solved Where They Belong

Decisions stop escalating. Issues get handled by the people closest to the work. Your desk clears.

Executives Get Their Time Back

Less time fighting operational fires. More time available for strategy, culture, and growth.

Engagement Rises Measurably

Engaged teams deliver better results across key business metrics — retention, productivity, and customer satisfaction.

Growth Becomes Sustainable

When leadership is shared across levels, organizations no longer depend on a handful of executives to hold everything together.

Promotions Become Possible

Leaders who own their decisions and results become ready for the next role — the bench strength 80% of organizations lack.

Culture Compounds Over Time

Self-leadership becomes the standard. New leaders inherit a culture of accountability rather than a culture of escalation.

READY TO CLOSE THE GAP?

Stop solving problems your leaders should own.

John Bentley partners with executives across healthcare, banking, government, nonprofits, and business to close the leadership ownership gap from the inside out. It starts with self-leadership, builds to team ownership, and measures the results.

The first step is seeing where ownership is breaking down in your organization.

Start the Free 6-Day Email Course →

The five mistakes that keep problems landing on your desk — one short lesson a day for five days, 5 to 10 minutes each. On day 6, see what they all have in common and where to begin.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Bentley



John Bentley is the founder and CEO of I Lead Me, a Division of Power 2 Transform, and the author of *I Lead Me: Choose Your Action, Earn Their Trust, Lead With Purpose*. A 21-year Air Force veteran, he has spent more than two decades developing leaders across complex organizations. His clients include NASA, U.S. Army, Hyundai MOBIS, and Baptist Health.

His work rests on a simple conviction: before you can lead anyone else, you must lead yourself first. Every engagement starts there, with self-awareness under pressure, and builds toward a culture of ownership that outlasts the training itself.

That approach transformed a siloed leadership culture into one built on trust and accountability, and helped Alabama Farm Credit grow more than 40%, double the industry average. *I Lead Me* is endorsed by Stephen M. R. Covey, bestselling author of *The Speed of Trust*.

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