



Why It's Time to Standardize Leader Processes

The Leader Operating System:

A practical guide for founders, CEOs, and senior executive teams

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For distribution to senior leadership teams

Executive Summary

Every senior leader knows how the business runs. QBRs, OKR cycles, pipeline reviews, budget processes — these are carefully designed, consistently followed, and consume significant time. What almost no organization has designed with the same intentionality is how its leaders actually lead. This paper argues that the most powerful lever for improving both business performance and human outcomes is not another culture initiative or reorganization. It is standardizing a small set of leader processes: the repeatable routines that define how your senior team makes decisions, aligns priorities, solves challenges, and develops people. When those processes are designed well, business performance and human needs reinforce each other. When they are absent, no amount of strategy, perks, or inspiration closes the gap.

The evidence for this approach comes from three decades of direct advisory and coaching work with c-suite leaders and leadership teams — including 15 years coaching CEOs and their teams and several years at Great Place to Work analyzing culture and engagement data across hundreds of organizations. The failure patterns described here, and the alternative approach, are drawn directly from that body of work.

The Problem: Operating Models Without a Leadership Operating System

While most organizations have structured operating models for how work gets done, almost none have an operating system for how leaders actually lead.

QBRs, OKR cycles, budget processes, org charts, and pipeline reviews are carefully designed and consume significant time. Project plans are tracked with precision. Yet outside these processes, how senior leaders run their weeks, make decisions, collaborate, align on priorities, and develop their people is largely left to personal preference and habit.

The result is a quiet performance and engagement tax across the organization:

- Senior leaders are too busy updating their own leaders to have a pulse on what is happening at the front lines
- Cross-functional projects become bottlenecked
- People are overwhelmed because everything feels like a priority
- Core challenges and blockers linger for weeks or months
- Employees experience wildly different quality of one-on-ones and feedback depending on their manager
- Skills stagnate; motivated people do the same work year after year and eventually leave

After three decades working with founders, CEOs, and executive teams across growth-stage and large organizations, one pattern repeats consistently: organizations invest heavily in redesigning the business, technology, or their operating model, but almost never redesign their own routines and leader processes. They assume that at a certain level, executives should simply know how to lead.

Paradoxically, the more overwhelming and siloed the existing operating model, the more likely the concept of explicit leader processes triggers resistance: “No, not another thing!” Yet the absence of explicit leader processes is at the root of many performance gaps and much of the lack of organizational agility.

What Leader Processes Are — and Are Not

“Leader processes” are the repeatable routines senior leaders use to:

- Make and communicate decisions
- Align and realign priorities
- Surface and resolve challenges and blockers
- Coach, develop, and give feedback to their people
- Cascade these routines throughout the organization

These are the patterns that shape the day-to-day experience of working in your organization. They are not your strategy, your structure, or your formal performance system. They are the lived operating system underneath all of that — the leader behaviors and routines that either translate your operating model into reality or quietly undermine it.

Standardizing leader processes does not mean turning leaders into interchangeable robots. It means agreeing on a small set of shared routines that improve execution and performance, while leaving room for individual style.

The goal is not to add more structure on top of everything leaders already do. It is to replace low-yield, ad hoc habits with a small number of high-yield routines. Done well, a leader operating system simplifies leaders’ weeks rather than complicating them.

The Four Core Leader Processes

Below are four processes that, when defined explicitly and adopted consistently, can transform how a senior team operates. Each can be implemented with minimal overhead. Together they form the foundation of a leader operating system.

1 Clear decision process and log

Agree on who decides what, how input is gathered and by when, and how decisions are recorded and communicated. A lightweight shared decision log — capturing owner, options considered, choice made, rationale, and date — reduces bottlenecks and prevents relitigating settled questions. *Example log entry:* Owner: CFO | Decision: Move to quarterly board reporting | Options considered: monthly, quarterly, annual | Rationale: Reduces prep burden while maintaining oversight | Date: June 2

2 Weekly priority and challenge snapshot

Each senior leader identifies and shares their top three to five priorities against key initiatives and their top one or two challenges, using a common template. When every leader uses the same frame, the full executive team can instantly see the range of commitments and obstacles — and the team leader can determine what needs a 1:1 versus what requires cross-team collaboration.

3 Alignment and problem-solving process

Standardize how priorities are adjusted and how key challenges and blockers are addressed — including when to work asynchronously versus in a meeting, how to frame a problem for the group, where it goes and by when, and how to vet ideas so the best ones are selected. With a clear process, teams spend less time circling issues and more time resolving them. *One effective format: a brief written problem framing — background, options, recommendation — shared asynchronously 24 hours before a meeting, followed by a focused discussion with a clear decision rule. This separates thinking from deciding, and deciding from debating.*

4 Deliberate skill-building routine

Agree on what skill each leader will work on and why, who is best positioned to coach them, and how the coach will directly observe the skill and provide regular feedback. When every leader is working on a specific, observable skill — and someone is accountable for coaching them — development becomes a weekly practice rather than an annual conversation.

These four processes are designed to work as a system — but that does not mean implementing all four at once. The right entry point depends on where your team is most constrained. Some organizations begin with a single routine and find that one change creates enough clarity and momentum to build from there. Others benefit from a more comprehensive redesign from the start. The case studies that follow illustrate both paths.

What High-Performing Organizations Do Differently

There is a better playbook hiding in plain sight — across quality experts like W. Edwards Deming, what Toyota built into its production system, and decades of motivation research from Richard Ryan and Edward Deci.

Deming argued that management quality comes from improving the system itself rather than relying on slogans or inspection after the fact, emphasizing constancy of purpose, continuous improvement, and breaking down barriers between departments. Toyota’s production system pairs efficiency with human-centered design, aiming to eliminate waste and improve quality while making work easier for the people doing it. Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory shows that people are more motivated and more likely to sustain high-quality performance when work supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

All three traditions converge on the same conclusion: the lever is the system, not the slogan. Organizations that perform over the long-term design their leader processes so that:

- People are aligned on priorities, with very little wasted work and more effective cross-functional collaboration
- It is easier for people to do high-quality work, with real empowerment and clear guardrails
- People get better at what matters, feel progress in their careers, and regularly learn what is working and what is not
- People are not blamed when things go wrong; they are supported to fix the system
- People naturally think like owners and can turn ideas into experiments to make things better
- Teams build genuine trust and connection by solving real problems together

In other words, they deliberately align the business-centric and human-centric agenda instead of pretending the two are in conflict.

Outcomes when it works

When leader processes are well-designed and consistently practiced, the results compound across both business performance and human experience:

Business outcomes	Human outcomes
Better cross-functional alignment	People experience clarity and are less overwhelmed
Faster execution on strategic priorities	Trust and psychological safety increase
Reduced organizational friction and waste	Employees grow in their roles
Culture becomes teachable and scalable	Motivated people stay

Resilience through leadership transitions	Leaders develop, not just manage
Improved customer experience	People spend more time functioning in the top quartile of their skill set

Evidence: Two Organizations in Practice

National insurer: Unlocking innovation at scale

The North American division of a global insurance company — a 2,000-person operation — came to this work with a familiar but painful set of symptoms. Frontline employees felt disempowered and burned out. Command-and-control patterns dominated. The people closest to the work — processing claims, serving customers, spotting inefficiencies — were not innovating, because the operating environment did not invite it. Senior leaders wanted to build a culture of genuine innovation and unlock the potential of their people. But previous culture initiatives had failed to move the needle.

Before this work, front line teams typically did not meet. When they did meet, it was to be informed. With this work, a pilot group of approximately 60 people started meeting every week with not only their leader but their leader's leader. Each week teams focused on a core challenge — whether reducing their backlog or lowering the friction in how quickly they disbursed benefits. They gathered ideas from the entire team and decided what to try the following week, ensuring all ideas and next steps were captured. The following week they would reflect on how the change worked, consider further ideas, and determine if it was time to focus on a different challenge. Having the leader's leader present was critical for the team to feel confident they had air cover to test their ideas.

As this pilot group was beginning to make these changes, COVID hit. These teams and their leadership teams needed to immediately shift to remote work — and they didn't miss a beat. The leader processes that had been designed for in-room collaboration translated directly to a distributed environment, because they were built around clarity and shared routines rather than physical presence. Given the results from the 12-week pilot, the executive team decided to scale to the rest of the organization.

50%

more employees
reporting clarity on
priorities

40%

more citing effective
problem solving

+16 pts

Net Promoter Score
increase

+11 pts

reported motivation
increase

33%

reported reduction in waste

25%

reported improvement in
directness

\$3M+

saved through productivity gains

The business impact extended beyond engagement. By reducing bureaucratic friction and empowering frontline leaders to make faster decisions, the organization saved millions of dollars through improved productivity and accelerated approval of qualified claims — turning what had been a source of organizational drag into a competitive advantage.

Scaling tech firm: How simply it can start

Getting started does not require a large program or significant investment of time. A CEO at a scaling tech firm began with a single template — asking each executive to spend no more than ten minutes a week documenting their top strategic priorities, their conviction level for success on each, and their top current challenge. Nothing more.

The CEO's response to what he learned set the tone. He didn't judge or blame. He either asked the right questions — "What are your plans to get this back on track?" — or initiated constructive problem solving across the executive team. That behavior modeled exactly what the process was designed to enable.

Within two months, executives reported feeling significantly more aligned, and cross-team conflicts over competing priorities had noticeably decreased. The insurer's results took six months to materialize at scale. This CEO saw early signal in weeks — because the barrier to entry was deliberately low.

The lesson: you do not need to redesign everything at once. A single shared routine — ten minutes, one template, weekly — can begin to shift how a senior team experiences its own work. That shift is the foundation everything else builds on.

A Practical Roadmap for Getting Started

If you are responsible for culture and performance in a growing organization, here is a practical sequence for building your leader operating system.

1 Start with the team at the top

Begin with the executive team — the group that sets the tone and controls the resources. Align on a core principle: when you design leader processes well, business-centric and human-centric goals are not in conflict. Commit to doing 360s and acting on the themes before asking anyone else to change.

2 Diagnose how the executive team works

Where is the executive team working well? What patterns are getting in the way? Treat these as design problems, not personality problems. Then identify two or three critical processes the executive team will improve together.

If your team is unsure where to start, use this as a guide:

If your team struggles with...

Start with...

Relitigating decisions or unclear ownership	Process 1: Decision log
Competing priorities or chronic misalignment	Process 2: Weekly snapshot
Problems that linger without resolution	Process 3: Alignment and problem solving process
Talent stagnation or motivated people leaving	Process 4: Skill-building routine

3 **Change real leader processes, in public view**

Redesign how the executive team actually runs its work — decision-making, priority alignment, problem-solving, development — and do it visibly. The signal that this is different from every prior culture initiative is that the senior team goes first and does the work themselves.

4 **Pilot in one part of the business**

Once the executive team has changed how it works, pick one business unit or function to roll out the new ways of working. Ensure executive sponsors are visibly modeling the behavior. Measure impact and refine before assuming you got it right.

5 **Scale only after it works**

After proving the approach in one area — and with the top team having lived it — then scale. The culture work is anchored in how the business runs, not in a separate people program. It's slower than launching a big initiative, but it sticks, and it scales with growth.

The Deeper Payoff: Culture, Succession, and Resilience

Standardizing leader processes delivers benefits far beyond execution efficiency.

Culture becomes teachable

When you can describe on a single page how leaders in your organization make decisions, prioritize work, resolve blockers, and develop people, you have turned “how we lead here” from folklore into practice. New leaders can onboard faster. Internal talent can see a clear path for growing into larger roles.

Succession becomes more reliable

You are not just promoting individuals into bigger jobs; you are promoting them into a shared operating system. That reduces the risk that a change in leadership completely changes how things work, and it gives aspiring leaders a concrete sense of what will be expected of them.

Resilience is built in

When key leaders leave, the way the leadership team functions does not disappear with them. The processes remain, providing continuity through transition and turbulence.

Human outcomes improve

Employees experience more predictable communication and clearer expectations. Psychological safety and trust increase when people know what to expect from their leaders and see those expectations lived consistently. People feel a sense of greater ownership and confidence. Burnout decreases. Perceptions of senior leaders improve.

A question for your senior team: *Could you describe your leader operating system on a single page — and would every member of your senior team say the same thing?* If the answer is no, you are almost certainly leaving performance, culture, and resilience on the table. Your operating model is only as strong as the leader processes that translate it into daily behavior.

About the Author

Rich Dec is the founder of Peak Stride Advisors. He advises founders, CEOs, and executive teams on leadership effectiveness, operating models, and culture change. For more than 30 years, he has worked with growth-stage, mid-sized, and large organizations to improve alignment, reduce cross-functional friction, and build management systems that strengthen both performance and engagement. Dec's work focuses on helping leadership teams redesign how the business runs so that human needs and business results reinforce each other.

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