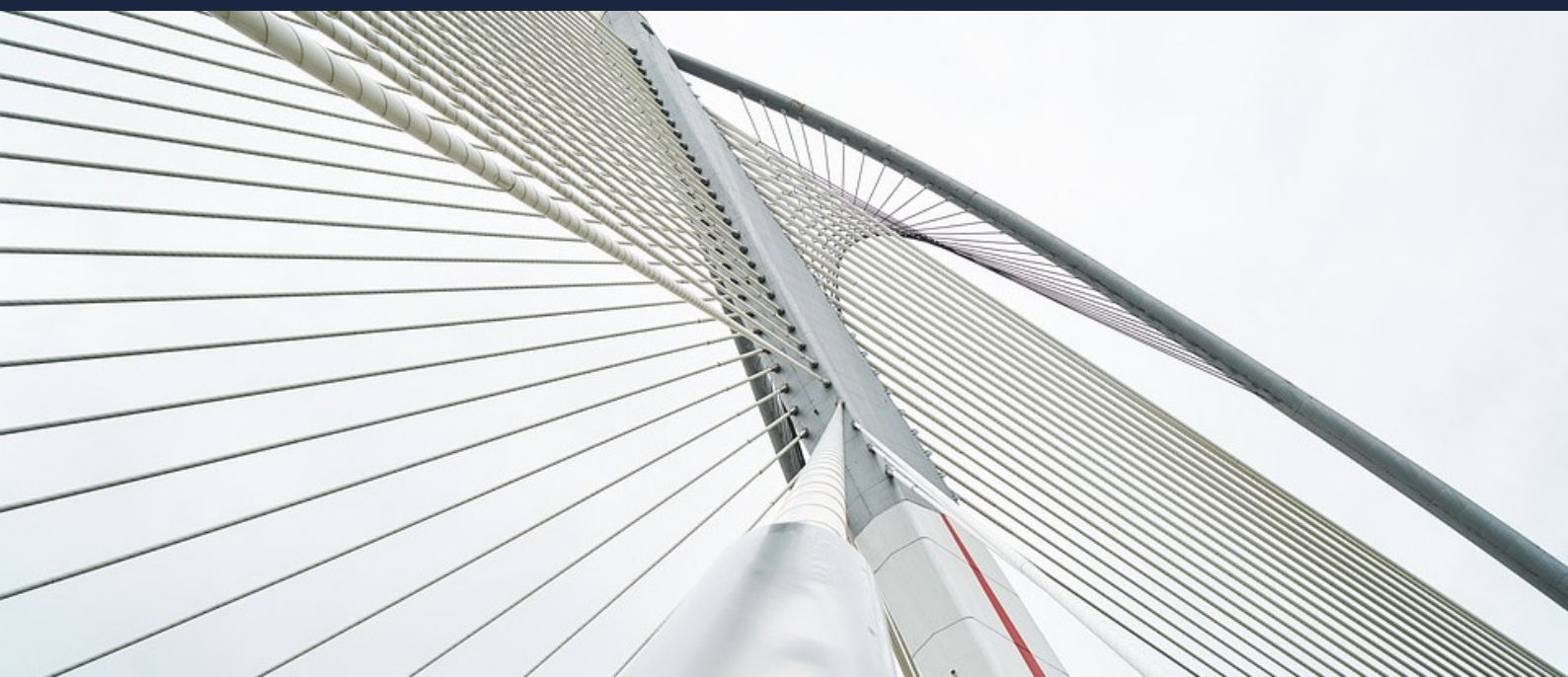


Knowing Is Not Leading: Why Leadership Development Stops at the Wrong Level

A Practitioner's Perspective on Cognitive Depth and Leadership Capability

Giovanni Leonardi

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1. The Problem Nobody Wants to Name

Organisations spend more on leadership development than almost any other learning intervention. The catalogues are thick — psychometric profiles, 360-degree feedback tools, coaching programmes, structured modules on delegation, influence, resilience, strategic thinking. And yet the complaint heard most often in senior team reviews, in succession conversations, and in post-programme evaluations is quietly consistent: we have leaders who understand leadership, but cannot fully exercise it.

The problem is not the content. Most leadership programmes contain sound thinking. The problem is the cognitive level at which that content is delivered and assessed. In the 1950s, Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues mapped a hierarchy of cognitive complexity in educational objectives — a framework later revised and refined, but fundamentally enduring. The six levels move from the simple to the complex: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyse, Evaluate, Create. Each level builds on the last. Each demands more of the learner, and produces more capable and adaptive thinking.

The quiet diagnosis most leadership development functions resist is this: their programmes operate almost entirely at the lower three levels. Leaders are taught to remember frameworks, understand models, and apply tools to familiar situations. The upper three levels — Analyse, Evaluate, Create — where genuine leadership judgment is actually formed, are rarely designed for, rarely assessed, and rarely achieved.

This is not a training problem. It is a design problem masquerading as a content problem. And until organisations name it clearly, they will continue to produce leaders who can articulate what good leadership looks like, but struggle to produce it under pressure.

2. Why It Happens — Three Structural Reasons

The first structural reason is that knowledge is far easier to measure than judgment. A programme that teaches situational leadership theory can test whether a participant can describe the four quadrants, recognise which style applies to a given scenario, and reproduce the model under exam conditions. These are Remember and Understand operations. They are clean, they produce gradable outputs, and they give programme

sponsors a satisfying sense of measurable return. Judgment — the ability to Analyse a genuinely ambiguous situation, Evaluate competing courses of action against values and context, and Create a response that is neither textbook nor instinct — produces no such clean output. It is slow, it is uncertain, and it resists the standardised rubric. Organisations default to measuring what is easy, not what is important.

The second structural reason is that leadership development programme design has inherited the architecture of academic education rather than professional formation. Academic education moves from concepts to application. It is built to produce understanding, and it does so efficiently. Professional formation — the kind that produces surgeons, barristers, architects — works differently. It begins with supervised practice in high-stakes environments, builds through increasingly autonomous judgment calls, and treats theoretical frameworks as interpretive tools rather than destinations. Leadership requires formation, not education. Most leadership programmes deliver education, call it development, and wonder why the transfer to practice is so thin.

The third structural reason is the assumption that exposure is equivalent to development. Organisations book leaders onto programmes, measure attendance and satisfaction, and record completion as evidence of growth. Bloom's framework makes this assumption visible and uncomfortable. Exposure to a concept produces Remember at best. Understanding requires the learner to engage with it, explain it, connect it to existing knowledge. Application requires a real situation with real stakes. Analyse, Evaluate, and Create require repeated practice, feedback, and reflection in conditions of genuine uncertainty. A three-day programme with a workbook and a group exercise reaches, at best, the top of Apply. The distance between Apply and Evaluate — the level at which leaders are actually tested when the situation is novel, the data is incomplete, and the team is watching — is where most development investment runs out of road.

3. What Good Looks Like — The Three-Level Fix

At the governance and structural level, the intervention is to redesign programme commissioning around cognitive level outcomes rather than topic coverage. Most learning briefs specify what participants will know and understand by the end. The brief should instead specify what participants will be able to Evaluate and Create. This is not semantics. It changes everything downstream — the design, the facilitation approach, the assessment, the time required, and the conditions under which the programme can credibly claim success. Organisations willing to rewrite their learning objectives at this level of precision tend to discover quickly that many of their existing programmes cannot deliver against the new standard. That discovery is the beginning of real progress.

At the data and measurement level, the shift is from completion metrics to demonstrated judgment. This means deliberately designing moments — case reviews, live decision post-mortems, structured stretch assignments with embedded reflection — where participants are required to operate at the upper cognitive levels under observation. It means tolerating the messiness of outputs that cannot be scored on a five-point scale. Some of the most powerful development data available to an organisation is a recording of a senior leader working through a genuinely novel problem: what did they reach for first, where did their thinking stall, what assumptions did they not examine? That data tells an organisation far more about development gaps than any post-programme satisfaction survey.

At the people and culture level, the most underused lever is the behaviour of senior leaders in everyday settings. When senior leaders publicly model the upper levels of Bloom's — when they reason transparently through difficult decisions, name the values they are weighing, acknowledge what they are uncertain about, and invite genuine challenge — they signal to the organisation what advanced leadership thinking actually looks and sounds like. When they instead project certainty, close down dissent, and demand execution over deliberation, they compress the cognitive environment downward toward Apply and below. Culture shapes the ceiling of cognitive development faster than any programme can raise it.

4. The Sector-Specific Complication

In environments where compliance and regulation set the dominant tone, the pressure to keep leadership development at the lower cognitive levels is acute and largely invisible. Compliance cultures prize correct recall over nuanced judgment. The framework must be followed. The procedure must be known. The right answer must be given. These are Remember and Understand as professional virtues — and for regulatory conformity, they genuinely are. But leadership in a regulated environment still requires Analyse, Evaluate, and Create. The regulated leader who can only Remember the rule will perform exactly as expected under normal operating conditions, and will fail exactly when conditions change, when the rule does not cover the situation, and when judgment is the only available instrument.

In fast-moving and digitally oriented environments, a different compression occurs. Apply is celebrated as the highest virtue. Bias toward action, ship early, iterate fast, learn by doing. These are genuinely valuable orientations. But they tend to shortcut Analyse and skip Evaluate entirely. The result is leaders who apply rapidly and reflect rarely — who accumulate experience without accumulating wisdom, because experience without reflective analysis does not reliably produce the upper cognitive levels. Speed without

judgment produces confident mistakes at pace.

Both compressions — the compliance culture's reverence for correct recall, and the action culture's impatience with deliberation — produce the same gap. Leaders who cannot perform reliably at the levels that matter most when the situation is hardest.

5. Conclusion

The six levels of Bloom's taxonomy were never intended as a leadership development framework. They were a tool for clarifying educational objectives in schools. Their application here is diagnostic, not prescriptive — a lens for identifying why well-intentioned, well-resourced leadership development programmes so often produce less than they promise.

The argument is not that organisations should abandon the lower levels. Remember, Understand, and Apply are necessary. They are not sufficient. And the uncomfortable truth that Bloom's surfaces is that most organisations are investing at the level of the necessary and calling it sufficient.

The provocation worth sitting with is this: if you placed your most senior leaders in a room with a genuinely novel strategic challenge — one that their frameworks do not map onto cleanly, their past experience does not resolve neatly, and their instincts cannot carry alone — how many of them could Analyse the situation with rigour, Evaluate the options with clarity, and Create a response with confidence? That is not a theoretical test of Bloom's taxonomy. That is Tuesday morning.

About the Author

Giovanni Leonardi is a senior transformation and leadership practitioner with experience across regulated industries, large-scale programmes, and executive team development. He holds an MSc, PgDip, and is a PRINCE2 Practitioner.