

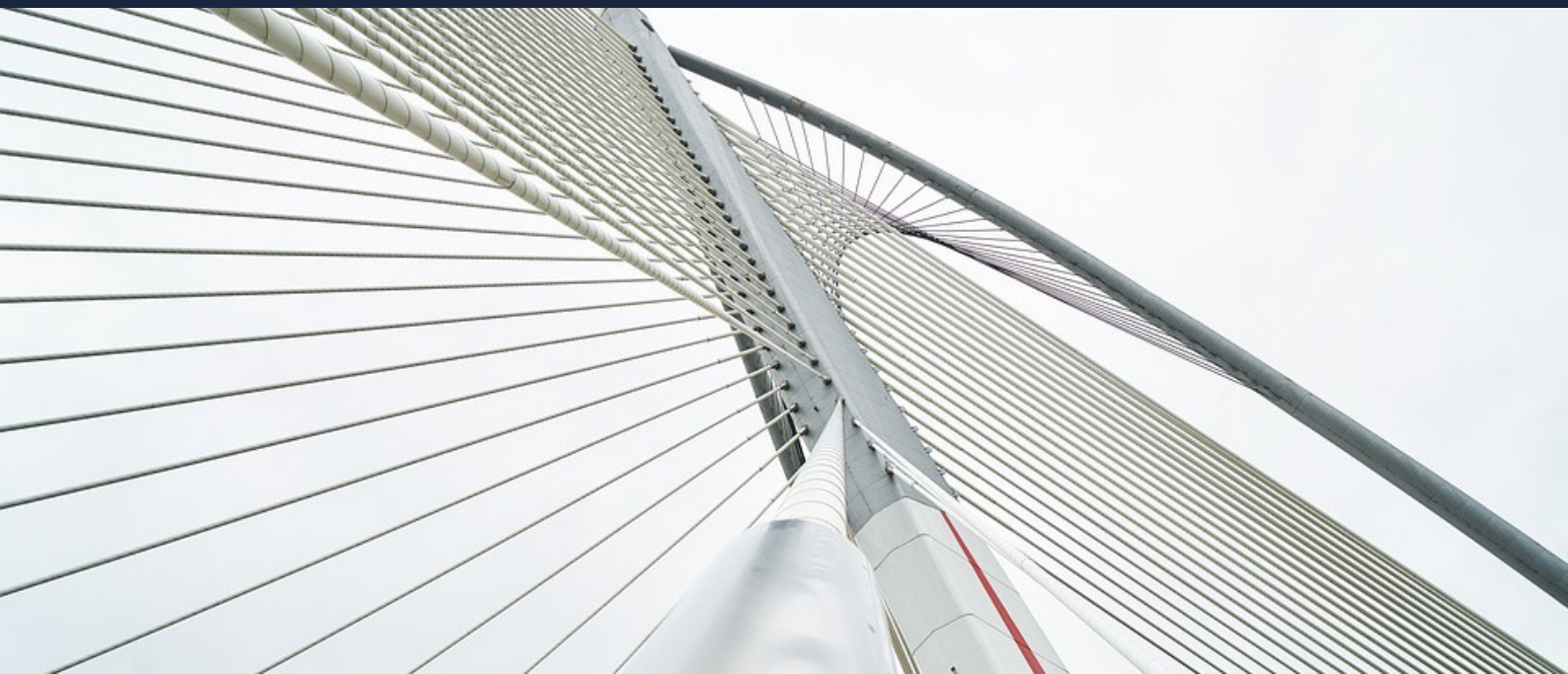
BEYOND OPERATIONAL MASTERY

Why Leadership Promotions Rarely Produce Strategic Thinkers

A Practitioner's Perspective on Crossing the Cognitive Threshold in Leadership

Giovanni Leonardi

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“Leaders operating at the upper levels can articulate purpose that draws voluntary commitment; those confined to lower levels rely on monitoring and correction.”

1. Executive Summary

Organisations continue to promote individuals into leadership roles on the basis of operational mastery, yet the most durable forms of leadership emerge only when cognitive activity moves into evaluation and creation. Bloom's taxonomy provides a useful lens: levels one through four centre on recall, comprehension, application and analysis, all of which remain tethered to existing structures. Levels five and six require judgement against criteria and the construction of new possibilities. The distinction is not merely academic. Leaders operating at the upper levels can articulate purpose that draws voluntary commitment; those confined to lower levels rely on monitoring and correction. The difference manifests in retention, strategic coherence and the capacity to absorb disruption without loss of direction. This essay examines why the threshold is rarely crossed, identifies the structural conditions that keep leaders at lower cognitive registers, and outlines the adjustments required at governance, measurement and cultural levels. Across complex organisations the pattern is consistent: operational excellence is rewarded while the capacity for independent judgement remains underdeveloped.

2. The Problem Nobody Wants to Name

The core difficulty is that promotion systems reward fluency within existing frameworks rather than the ability to redefine them. Individuals rise because they execute reliably, resolve operational friction and maintain performance against known metrics. Once in senior roles they continue to apply the same cognitive habits. They analyse variance, optimise processes and enforce compliance. What they rarely do is step outside the inherited logic to ask whether the underlying objectives remain valid or whether entirely different possibilities exist. This leaves organisations with leaders who are highly effective at preserving the status quo but poorly equipped to navigate genuine strategic ambiguity. The result is visible in repeated cycles of initiative fatigue, where new programmes are launched with enthusiasm yet fail to alter underlying trajectories because the cognitive

register has not shifted.

3. Why It Happens — Three Structural Reasons

3.1 2.1 Selection mechanisms that privilege demonstrated delivery

Organisations select for what they can observe and measure. Operational mastery produces visible outputs: projects completed, costs contained, risks mitigated. These outputs are easy to document in promotion cases. In contrast, the capacity to evaluate purpose or construct new strategic options produces less immediate evidence. It often appears as hesitation or questioning rather than decisive action. Selection panels therefore default to candidates who have already solved problems inside the current model. Over time this creates a self-reinforcing cohort whose shared strength is optimisation rather than reinvention.

3.2 2.2 Measurement systems that penalise deviation

Performance frameworks continue to emphasise efficiency, predictability and short-cycle delivery. Leaders are assessed on whether targets are met, not on whether the targets themselves warrant reconsideration. When evaluation and creation are attempted they frequently register as variance or delay. Budget cycles, reporting rhythms and incentive structures all reinforce the lower cognitive registers. Leaders quickly learn that questioning the frame carries career risk while executing within it carries reward. The measurement regime therefore actively discourages the very behaviours required at senior levels.

3.3 2.3 Cultural norms that equate leadership with control

Many organisational cultures still treat leadership as an extension of operational oversight. The admired leader is the one who stays close to detail, resolves escalations and provides clear direction. This model leaves little space for leaders who deliberately create distance from day-to-day operations in order to exercise judgement. Colleagues and boards interpret such distance as detachment rather than necessary cognitive reorientation. The norm persists because it feels protective: control reduces immediate risk. Yet it systematically prevents the development of leaders who can operate at the higher levels of evaluation and creation.

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

4.1 3.1 Governance / structural level

Boards and executive teams must redesign selection criteria to include explicit assessment of evaluative and creative capacity. This requires structured exercises that present leaders with ambiguous strategic dilemmas rather than operational problems. Promotion decisions should incorporate evidence of purpose articulation that has

secured voluntary commitment from others, not merely compliance. Governance bodies also need to adjust the frequency and nature of strategic reviews so that questioning of objectives is scheduled and protected rather than treated as an exception.

4.2 3.2 Data / insight / measurement level

Organisations require new indicators that track whether leaders are operating at higher cognitive levels. Useful measures include the proportion of strategic discussions that result in reframed objectives, the frequency with which existing targets are retired rather than merely adjusted, and the extent to which teams report clarity of purpose independent of direct supervision. These indicators must carry equivalent weight to traditional delivery metrics if behaviour is to shift.

4.3 3.3 People / stakeholder / culture level

Cultural change begins with visible role modelling. Senior leaders must demonstrate the shift from monitoring to evaluation by publicly retiring initiatives that no longer serve strategic intent. Development programmes should move beyond skill acquisition toward deliberate practice in constructing new possibilities under uncertainty. Peer forums that reward rigorous questioning rather than rapid answers can gradually normalise the higher cognitive registers. Over time the organisation learns to value leaders who create direction rather than merely enforce it.

5. The Sector-Specific Complication

In large, complex organisations the complication is scale. The volume of operational activity generates constant demand for attention at lower cognitive levels. Leaders who attempt to operate at evaluation and creation find their time quickly consumed by the very monitoring activities they seek to transcend. Without deliberate structural protection, the higher registers remain aspirational rather than operational. The size and interdependence of these organisations also mean that any shift in purpose requires coordination across multiple layers, increasing the perceived risk of deviation.

6. What This Means in Practice

Leaders who have crossed the threshold begin to treat existing structures as hypotheses rather than givens. They allocate time explicitly for evaluation before committing resources to execution. They measure success partly by the quality of questions their teams are asking rather than solely by the answers delivered. Boards that recognise this pattern adjust their own oversight to reward strategic coherence over short-term variance reduction. The practical effect is slower but more durable progress, with fewer cycles of initiative that consume energy without altering trajectory. Organisations that make this shift report improved retention among those who seek meaningful work and greater resilience when external conditions change.

7. Conclusion

The threshold between operational mastery and strategic leadership is crossed only when organisations deliberately redesign the conditions that currently keep leaders at lower cognitive registers. The question that remains is whether boards and executive teams are prepared to accept the short-term discomfort of reduced control in exchange for the longer-term capacity to create direction rather than merely enforce it.