

Meet the 3rd Leader





Wendy was about to meet her team for the first time.

They had actually met before, but never in-person. The pharmaceutical company Wendy works for promoted and relocated her during the pandemic. Now, as she prepared to host a two-day strategic off-site with them she asked us if we'd interview her team.

"She's wonderful. One of the kindest people you'll ever come across," one of her directs told us. The rest of the team poured on similar praise. After listening to their appreciative feedback we asked how Wendy could be even more effective.

"We have no idea what her vision is," one person said. Another told us, "it's time for her to make some decisions about our strategic direction." A theme started to emerge. "We need her to decide where we're headed and to communicate her priorities," another team member said.

Wendy is what we call The 1st Leader. You might be too. Or, perhaps you're The 2nd Leader. If you're going to create a high performing team you'd better start leaning into becoming The 3rd Leader.

Accidental Leadership Development

Occasionally you learn something that profoundly influences your career. This could be one of those times. As you understand and progress toward becoming The 3rd Leader, how you lead others will change.

Let's start with some important context. Organizations like Gallup, Pew Research, SHRM, etc. have for decades been studying why employees are engaged, satisfied and retained by their current employers. The findings of these studies are remarkably consistent regardless of industry, timing (pre-pandemic vs post-pandemic) or geography. Their findings consistently show that the primary contributor to workplace dissatisfaction and turnover can be attributed to ineffective leadership. Employees who don't feel supported or engaged by their managers are inevitably disengaged and dissatisfied.

Your company culture matters. But even more important is how leaders of teams across your organization are showing up. Teams either flourish or they flounder based on the effectiveness of one person -- their leader.

Distributing employee engagement, pulse survey, or retention statistics doesn't solve the problem. It just highlights what team leaders already know: they're struggling to lead their team in a way that delivers results and keeps team members satisfied with their jobs.

What people leaders need is a definition of what effective leadership looks like and a way to measure themselves against it. That's why this framework we're about to introduce to you is so transformative. How do we know? We've been showing it to leaders across the globe and watching its impact on them and their outcomes.

"Teams either flourish or they flounder based on the effectiveness of one person, their leader."

There are two ways of evolving as a leader: deliberately or accidentally. You can either decide what kind of leader you want to become and intentionally work toward that end, or you can go with the flow and become whatever circumstances make of you. As consolidation and acquisitions have dramatically increased the size of organizations there's been a huge demand to expand the leadership ranks. Far too many individual contributors have been elevated to leadership with minimal, if any, training. Whatever they become accidentally will not be nearly the full measure of their leadership potential. They will become just another leader, somewhere in the middle. They'll be left wondering why it's so difficult to lead others and retain quality people.

The framework we're introducing to you is a simple blueprint to help leaders evolve deliberately. This approach is intended to help them become a very specific kind of a leader. After decades of helping leaders around the world define and manage their culture, we've seen our share of poor to average leaders. And we've heard more than a few senior executives lament about "the forgotten middle." This is part of our effort to change that.



The Three Leaders

Most leaders are driven by a desire to be successful. They want to hit their numbers. They want to grow their careers, their income, and their impact. They think often about those things. Unfortunately, they don't spend as much time thinking about what kind of leader they want to become. The reality is they have a choice. They get to decide how they will lead. What they need is a way of framing up that decision. They need a map to follow. They need options to consider. Each leader has crossed paths with bosses they want to emulate and others they'd desperately like to forget. Informally, we all develop lists of things we want to avoid doing or to make sure we embody as leaders. But, most of us have never defined what leadership that can "scale" looks like. The question we have begun asking leaders of teams is, "Do you want to be The 1st Leader? The 2nd Leader? Or, The 3rd Leader?"

"As you understand and progress toward becoming the 3rd Leader, how you lead others will change."

1st Leader

We worked several years ago with a man we'll call "David" who ran the marketing team of a pharmaceutical company. David was extremely well liked by his team. He was described as easygoing and someone who created a "safe work environment." One of his direct reports told us, "I've never met someone with greater integrity than David. When he retires, they should put a statue of him in the lobby." Yet the complaints with David's leadership were remarkably consistent. His problem was he hated making decisions. His meetings ran forever. It was rumored that the record for most slides in a deck presented in one of his meetings was 191. David leaned hard into discussion and collaboration but away from decision and vision. For three years revenue plateaued. Senior leader after senior leader exited. Investors demanded greater clarity around the future vision of the company. David's answer to the question seemed to change daily.

All of this is classic behavior from The 1st Leader. The 1st Leader struggles to create vision, to identify and communicate clear priorities, and to make decisions. The 1st Leader does everything in their power to avoid conflict. They desperately want to make everyone happy, all of the time. Because they lack anchors, The 1st Leader is always swayed by the last person who talks to them, so you'd better be in their ear if you want to get your way.

Ultimately, the team that is led by the 1st Leader moves slowly and, over time, becomes increasingly frustrated by the lack of urgency and pace of change.

Nearly 40% of the leaders we come across fall into this category.

2nd Leader

We first met Susan when she was leading the manufacturing team of a defense contractor. On the morning of our first in-person meeting with her, she couldn't wait to walk us into the conference room. She beamed with pride as she pointed to the dry erase board covered with ideas and projects from her team's meeting in the room the day before. We asked, "So what priorities did you land on coming out of the meeting?" Susan looked confused. "It's all important. We have to do it all," she said. The 2nd Leader views themselves as an evolution of The 1st Leader. They have a vision and have set priorities for their team. The problem is everything is a priority. Their balanced scorecard reads like a Broadway Playbill.

The 2nd Leader had your same job years ago and can't wait to tell you how to do it more effectively. They micromanage everything. While The 1st Leader avoids conflict, The 2nd Leader creates it.

They don't wake up in the morning seeking to stir up friction in the team; it's just a natural by-product of asking the team to deliver 150 deliverables. Their lack of creating alignment is also what leads to the conflict, which they view as a necessary side-effect of strong leadership.

The 2nd Leader views themselves as decisive. The problem is they make decisions in isolation and then struggle to create ownership on their team and in other departments.

Ultimately, the team that is led by the 2nd Leader gets worn down by the internal fight for resources and the lack of alignment around deliverables. The burnout leads to quiet quitting and eventually seeking other employment opportunities.

Roughly 50% of leaders fall into this category.

Matt was recently promoted to the executive leadership team of a Fortune 10 company. We've known Matt for years. We first started working with him when he led a team of 3,000. Now, 35,000 people are on the org chart under his name. We've watched Matt be promoted over and over again as the company he works for has grown. It's come as no surprise to us. Matt's not perfect, of course. But, he does three things exceptionally well. He creates clarity, builds alignment, and generates movement. Ask anyone on his team for the top 3 deliverables and they all know them. Ask his team if they feel heard before decisions are made, and they'll tell you Matt doesn't just create awareness of what he needs done. He builds alignment. Matt manages culture before it can manage him. In other words, he knows how to generate movement when it comes to the mindset and behavior needed to accelerate delivering results.

We want that 10% number to stick in your craw for a minute. Our experience is that only 10% of leaders fit The 3rd Leader description. It shouldn't be that way! When you come across The 3rd Leader, you know it. You know it because of the loyalty they engender and the impact they have. The culture on their team is different. The levels of trust, inclusion, and belonging are different. There's less blame and more ownership. The 3rd Leader embodies our definition of leadership: The ability to create clarity, alignment, and movement in the needed direction. Their teams are never confused as to what their top priorities are; they are genuinely aligned around those priorities, and the way people think and act within the culture is aligned to deliver on those priorities. Creating clarity, alignment, and movement are the skills you need leaders throughout your organization to develop. You can hope they get there accidentally, or you can create a plan to get intentional about it.

About 10% of leaders fall into this category.

1st Leader

No Focus or Vision

Slow Decisions

Avoids Conflict

2nd Leader

It's All Important

Micromanager

Creates Conflict

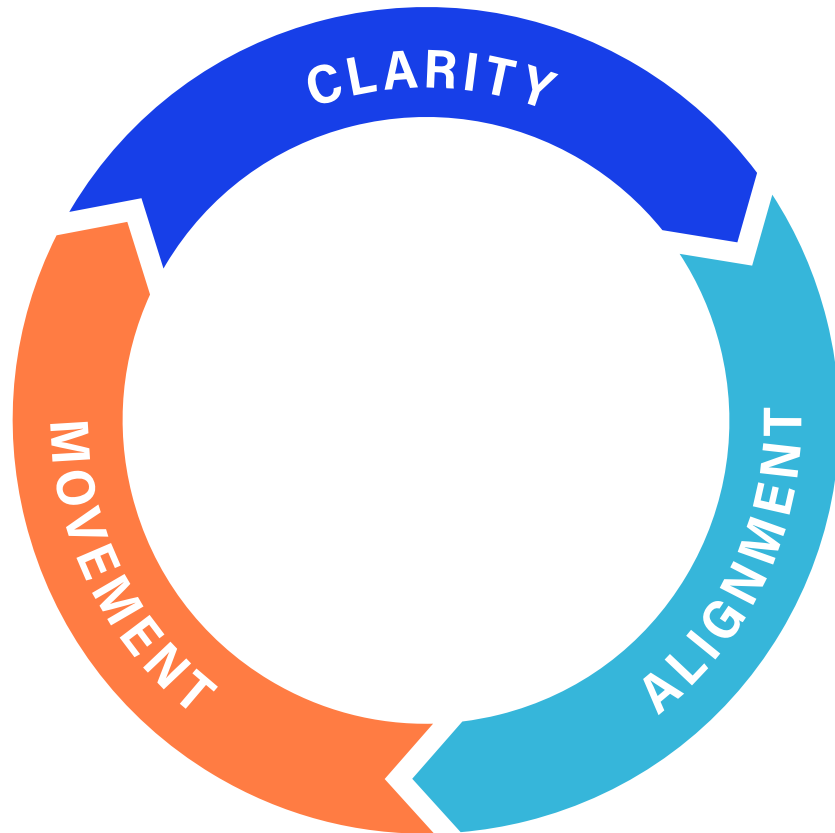
3rd Leader

Creates Clarity

Builds Alignment

Generates Movement

The Leadership System



Create Clarity

The 3rd Leader believes in the remarkable power of simplicity. She knows that simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication. She knows that if you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it. She applies that to the first aspect of leadership: defining the destination. Google Maps becomes a much more valuable app when you input a destination. The same is true for leaders. Where are you leading us? What does success look like? Of all the things we're measuring, what matters most?

The 3rd Leader creates clarity by defining Key Results that are so simple and portable that they sound something like this: 5-10-1. Or, The Three Zeroes. Those phrases and numbers have significant meaning in the Fortune 100 companies where they represent the Key Results. The 3rd Leader doesn't just define the Key Results; she reinforces them in every meeting. It's the One° Habit she's developed around Creating Clarity.

Build Alignment

The 1st and 2nd Leaders often think they have an execution or accountability problem when what they really have is an alignment problem. They confuse awareness for alignment. The 1st Leader leans too far into discussion. The 2nd Leader simply demands compliance. The 3rd Leader understands that alignment, or taking ownership, is a process that happens out loud and is often messy. They never assume alignment.

They work to build alignment with three simple steps:

1. They **Make the Case** in a compelling, memorable way.
2. They **Gauge** alignment and **Discuss** roadblocks.
3. They ensure everyone knows how to **Get Involved**.



Generate Movement

There are certain “scripts” that exist in every human brain, similar to the script that fuels Hollywood blockbusters. Scripts determine our mindset, choices, and behavior. What’s more, your leaders and teams aren’t immune to the positive and negative power of scripts.

The 1st and 2nd Leaders don’t see the humanity driving scripts. The 3rd Leader knows that alignment can be neutralized by the script inside and outside of their team. The 3rd Leader carefully looks for certain types of scripts so they can work to rewrite them.

Let’s look at the most common scripts:

Team

We are naturally territorial as human beings. We protect the interests of our own families (e.g., we build fences around our yards), our own communities (think the cross-town rival to your high school), our own teams (think sales vs. marketing in most organizations). This bias shows up organizationally in silos and “Us vs. Them” dynamics.

Negativity

As human beings, we are drawn to the negative. Our brains are attracted to bad news. The entire news media is designed around this bias – bad news sells.

Narrative

We love to draw conclusions and then validate those conclusions. Teams are no different. "Our product portfolio isn't competitive enough..." Or "No one is buying our product during COVID." These narratives are powerfully consistent within most teams, and they license and justify inaction and poor performance.

Blame

We naturally externalize the need for change. We see the need for change in others far in advance of seeing it in ourselves. This leads to blaming and focusing our energy on things we can't control.

Distance

Our brains don't tend to trust things and people we don't see or interact with frequently. You might consider a time in your career when you went without interacting with a peer or boss. The void created between infrequent interactions tends to be filled with distrust, negativity, and suspicion rather than trust, positivity, and benefit of the doubt.

Status Quo

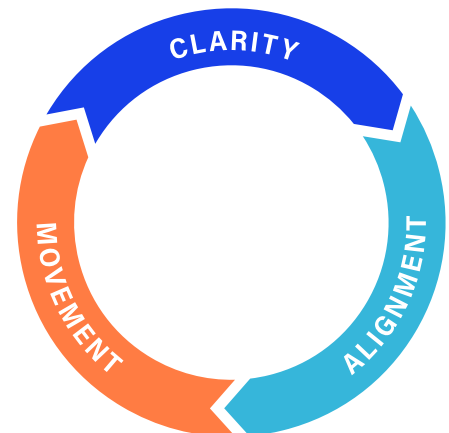
We naturally resist anything new. We have a bias to not change. We do this because not changing is less risky than changing.

The 3rd Leader understands each of these scripts and builds experiences and habits into her team to rewrite them. She knows that generating movement means monitoring the mindset and behavior of her team to accelerate the Key Results.



A New System

The relationship between Clarity, Alignment, and Movement creates a system for the 3rd Leader to use consistently as she imbues her team with a sense of ownership. Yes, there are other skills and processes that are uniquely suited to her organization. However, with the shifts and changes of initiatives, executive teams, industry disruptions, regulations, and more, the 3rd Leader can always rely on these essential principles as an operating system for her work and team to flow through.





THE 3RD LEADER

The Wrap-Up



We all sometimes show up as The 1st or 2nd Leader. We demonstrate some of the biases we just discussed. The competencies and characteristics of The 3rd Leader aren't genetic gifts some receive. They are skills that can be developed. To determine what kind of leader you'll become, you must believe in "the dynamic process of life." You not only can change, but you do change all of the time. Some people don't believe this or don't want to believe it.

To determine what kind of leader you'll become, you must believe in "the dynamic process of life."

They excuse their personal failures and weaknesses by saying: "That's just the way I am." "I am just a short-tempered, impatient person." "I can't get up in the morning. That's just the way I am." "That's my nature." Or, "I'm just unorganized. That's all. That's just who I am." "I am not really someone who does feedback well."

For decades, we've scoffed at the axiom that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." We've seen "old dogs" learn new tricks throughout our entire careers coaching leaders around the globe!

Leaders throughout your organization have that potential as well. They just need help. The demands they face are arguably greater than at any point in our lifetimes. The battle for attracting and retaining talent, changes in where and how we work, supply-chain issues, concerns about protecting the physical and emotional health of their workforce, disruptive competitors, and shifting demands from customers with more options than ever are just a few of the things your leaders are trying to manage. No wonder they – and you – are exhausted. Your leaders need help leading.

They need help becoming the 3rd Leader.

