

THE LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

**PART THREE**

## Implementation Begins with Understanding

**Organizations don't implement plans. People do.**



### Introduction

Organizations devote countless hours to developing strategic plans, improving practices, training employees, and communicating expectations.

Yet even the most thoughtful plans often produce very different results. Some become part of an organization's everyday culture. Others never seem to move beyond the written document. Why?

*This reflection begins with a simple onboarding conversation between a new employee and a supervisor. At first glance, it may seem like a story about helping someone understand their role. Perhaps it is. But perhaps it is also a story about something every leader eventually faces.*

## An Onboarding Experience

### From the New Employee's Perspective:

*"I've only been here three days." When my supervisor placed two documents in front of me, I remember thinking, How am I supposed to answer this? I barely know everyone's name.*

One document was my job description. The other outlined the organization's contract deliverables. Then came the question: *"Looking at these two documents, where do you think your work fits?"*

Honestly, I didn't know. I could describe the responsibilities in my job description, but I couldn't yet see how they connected to the organization's commitments or why they mattered. I had fresh eyes, but very little context.

### From the Executive Director's Perspective:

I wasn't trying to find out whether they knew the answer. I was interested in what they could already see with no background, no history, and no assumptions. I always wanted to see our organization through somebody else's eyes.

When you've lived with an organization's mission, strategic plan, and daily routines for years, it's easy to forget what isn't obvious to someone who's just arrived. A new employee's perspective helped us see where we needed to improve, what we needed to communicate more clearly, and where we needed to begin.

*We couldn't give someone understanding any more than we could give them experience. What we could do was provide the tools, ask better questions, and create experiences that help them discover where they fit and why their contribution matters.*

## Three Months Later

Three months later, my supervisor placed the same two documents in front of me and asked the same question.

*This time, my answer was completely different. The documents hadn't changed. I had.*

Now I could see where I fit. I understood how my work contributed to something much larger than my individual responsibilities. I wasn't simply completing assigned tasks anymore. I understood why my contribution mattered.

## A Board Member's Perspective

When board member Henry Tark observed this onboarding process, he remarked that in all the organizations he had worked with, he had never seen onboarding approached this way.

What caught his attention wasn't the exercise itself. It was what the exercise revealed.

The same documents. The same question. Two completely different conversations.

*The difference wasn't the documents. The difference was understanding.*

## Reflection

Three months earlier, the employee looked at the same two documents and struggled to explain where they fit. Three months later, the answer came easily. What changed? The documents didn't change. The person's understanding did.

That difference matters because every strategic initiative, policy, practice, or organizational priority is ultimately carried out by individuals who choose, every day, how they will engage with the work before them.

*When people can't see where they fit or why their contribution matters, implementation often becomes compliance. Tasks get completed, but the purpose behind them remains disconnected.*

When people begin to understand how their work contributes to something larger than themselves, something else changes. They stop simply carrying out responsibilities and begin taking ownership of them.

*Perhaps implementation doesn't begin when a plan is communicated. Perhaps implementation begins when people begin to see themselves in the plan.*

## A Different Perspective

Why do some well-designed initiatives become part of an organization's everyday practice while others, despite thoughtful planning and good intentions, struggle to gain traction?

Leaders often respond by improving the plan, providing additional training, or communicating expectations more clearly. Those are reasonable responses.

*But perhaps there is another way to look at it. What if implementation isn't determined solely by how well the plan is written or communicated? What if it is also influenced by whether people can see where*

*they fit within it?*

Every strategic initiative, policy, practice, or organizational priority eventually moves beyond the written plan and into the everyday choices people make. At that point, implementation is no longer about the document. It is about the people bringing it to life.

## Another Way to See It

Leaders cannot make people care. They cannot require understanding. They cannot assign ownership. Every person ultimately decides how they will engage with the work before them.

*So perhaps leadership is not about convincing people. Perhaps it is about extending an invitation.*

An invitation to see themselves. An invitation to see one another. An invitation to discover where they fit within the plan.

Every invitation can be accepted, ignored, or declined. Leaders cannot choose for another person. But they can choose the invitations they extend. And over time, those invitations shape the conversations, relationships, and experiences where people discover where they fit. When that happens, the plan is no longer something handed to people. It becomes something they bring to life.

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## YOUR LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Sitting with this reflection, consider these three questions:

- 1. How do people discover where they fit in your organization's plan?**
  - 2. What would change if every person could clearly see how their work contributed to your organization's success?**
  - 3. What conversations would need to change for more people to discover where they fit?**
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