



Leadership Success Pattern #1

Make Reflection a Recurring Practice

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Make Reflection a Recurring Practice

Successful leaders do not rely on speed alone; they create moments to think before acting and to learn after acting.

Yet experience can easily turn into autopilot if leaders stop testing whether their assumptions still hold in a changing situation. A deliberate reflection practice improves judgement by challenging familiar responses, interpreting weak signals and learning from reactions after interventions. That strengthens focus, improves decision quality, and ensures stronger execution.

We have identified eight research-verified leadership success patterns, and this article dives into the first of these success pattern. The patterns are also incorporated into CLAI – the Contextual Leadership AI Co-Thinker.

Leaders use CLAI to build structured pre- and post-decision reflection into their leadership rhythm to handle shifting priorities, leadership dilemmas, performance issues, and transformation, and to ensure critical thinking in their decision-making.

When leaders stop thinking, performance quietly plateaus

Julie was under pressure to restore efficiency and quality. Her operation was struggling. The quality level was not where it needed to be, timelines were under strain, and too much energy was being wasted on recurring friction. An experienced leader could easily have responded the usual way: tighten control, increase follow-up, push people harder, and insist on better compliance.

Julie did something more useful.

In *The Contextual Leader*, I describe how she and her leadership team stepped back and carefully mapped the situation. They looked at the maturity of the processes affecting quality and delivery time. They assessed whether their systems were actually set up to handle the amount of information flowing through the operation. They examined the organisation's expertise and the habits around discipline, collaboration, and continuous learning. Only then did they decide where to intervene.

That is worth noticing.

Many leadership mistakes do not come from a lack of experience. They come from relying on experience too automatically. Leaders see a familiar performance problem and move quickly to the response that worked last time. But they do not stop to test whether the assumptions behind that response still hold. They recognise the symptom and assume they understand the cause.

That is where decisiveness starts getting confused with judgment.



Experience matters. It gives speed, pattern recognition, and the confidence to act under pressure. Some decisions should absolutely be made on the spot. But in more ambiguous situations, or where performance has stalled without an obvious explanation, experience is not the full answer. It should be the starting point for critical thinking. The leader still has to ask: Are we dealing with the same problem as before? What assumptions are we making? What in the situation has changed? What are we not seeing?

When that discipline is missing, performance does not collapse. It plateaus.

The organisation keeps producing acceptable results, but it loses something important in the process. Focus becomes diluted because too many interventions are launched before the real issue is understood. Energy is wasted because people work hard on responses that only partly fit the problem. Trust weakens when priorities and messages shift without a clear line of authority. And the business misses the small 2–3% improvements that come from better diagnosis, better decisions, and better follow-through over time.

Julie's case shows another path. Her team chose to formalise key processes and retrain people where needed. They involved leaders and teams in clarifying what good discipline and collaboration should look like in daily work. They also strengthened the organisation's continuous learning practices. In other words, they did not only fix what was immediate and visible. They improved the organisation's ability to think and learn about its own performance.

Deliberate critical thinking is a central leadership task.

The leader's job is not only to decide. It is to ensure that decisions are well qualified so the organisation can learn from them afterwards. If the assumptions behind an intervention are never made explicit, post-decision learning becomes shallow.



People can see whether results moved, but not whether the original thinking was sound, what reactions mattered, or which weak signals deserve attention next time.

What matters is that leaders build focused reflection into an ongoing practice. Before decisions, leaders and leadership teams should make the context explicit: what is changing, where coordination is weak, where expertise is insufficient, and where culture may be distorting judgment. After decisions, they should review not only outcomes, but also whether they understood the situation correctly in the first place. That kind of structured reflection supports more disciplined thinking before action and better learning after action. The real value lies in making this a recurring leadership practice rather than relying on intuition alone.

Strong leaders do not prove themselves by always making faster decisions. They prove themselves by knowing when experience is enough, and when better performance depends on stopping to think. And it is not always incident-triggered. From time to time, we as leaders should ask ourselves where acceptable performance prevents a deliberate, critical-thinking revisit that could produce better results.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Torben Noerby

Torben is an expert in contextual leadership with more than 30 years of leadership experience. Since 2007, he has been a leadership consultant and the CEO of People & Performance, www.pphr.com. He is a Doctor of Business Administration from Henley Business School in the United Kingdom.

This article is part of a series addressing Eight Leadership Success Patterns identified in the research behind the book *The Contextual Leader*. The patterns are further confirmed in the work with the Contextual Leadership AI Co-Thinker, CLAI, which is built on the research behind the book and a range of subsequent studies. Learn more about the research, book and CLAI at www.drnoerby.com