



LEADERSHIP | WORKFORCE | ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The Middle Is the Multiplier

How Guardian used a six-month leadership experience to develop individual capability while activating the judgment, relationships, and ideas already present in its middle.

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Why the middle matters now

Mid-level leaders translate strategy, absorb operational friction, support employees, and keep change moving. At the same time, their own engagement is under pressure. That makes the middle one of the most consequential—and least fully used—sources of intelligence inside an organization.

Gallup reports that only 22% of managers globally are engaged at work, down nine percentage points since 2022. Its research also attributes 70% of the variance in team engagement to the manager. These figures connect the quality of management to productivity, retention, trust, and the daily employee experience.¹

The business case for investing specifically in the middle goes beyond engagement. In a study of 119 middle managers and business units in a European financial-services firm, how middle managers enacted strategy significantly affected profit growth in their units. A separate study of 259 middle managers found that firm performance was associated with patterns of both upward and downward strategic influence. The middle matters in part because these leaders work in both directions: translating strategy into the operating organization while carrying information, interpretation, and challenge back upward.^{2 3}

More recent research points in the same direction. McKinsey matched organizational-health data with five-year total shareholder returns and found that organizations with top-quartile managers realized three to 21 times greater TSR than organizations whose managers fell into the other three quartiles. McKinsey explicitly cautions that this relationship is correlational, not causal. Research on Italian firms also found that off-the-job formal training for middle managers had a significant nonlinear effect on total factor productivity, with effectiveness varying by firm size and training method.^{4 5}

The question, then, is not whether the middle deserves investment, but what kind of investment makes the most of what these leaders can contribute. Organizations have responded with academies, workshops, assessments, and coaching. Much of that investment still flows in one direction: experts teach; leaders receive. The model can build knowledge, but it often overlooks what mid-level leaders already know. They see where strategy collides with reality, where customers struggle, where decisions slow down, and where capable people have stopped contributing their best thinking.

The Guardian Life Insurance Company of America (Guardian) began RISE with a broader view of development. The journey would help leaders strengthen their own practice, and it would give Guardian access to their cross-functional judgment. Forty leaders came together over six months through three in-person experiences, virtual coaching, peer learning, workplace experiments, and cross-functional work on real organizational questions.



The intelligence is already there

Leadership development can build individual capability and help an organization hear what its middle already knows.

An organization can have brilliant people in every seat and still produce mostly noise. Some ideas get amplified. Others become distorted by layers and handoffs. Some voices carry. Others disappear before they reach anyone with the authority to respond.

Mid-level leaders sit at the organizational mixing board. They hear strategy coming down, reality coming up, and friction moving sideways. Every day, they translate priorities, interpret uncertainty, broker relationships, and decide what deserves attention.

The familiar “frozen middle” label casts managers as an obstacle to change. Yet their skepticism may contain valuable organizational intelligence. Because they see the work up close, mid-level leaders often detect early where a strategy is losing clarity, credibility, or practical traction.

Research offers a striking counterpoint to the stereotype. In one major transformation studied by INSEAD professor Quy Huy, roughly 80% of 117 initiatives launched by senior management

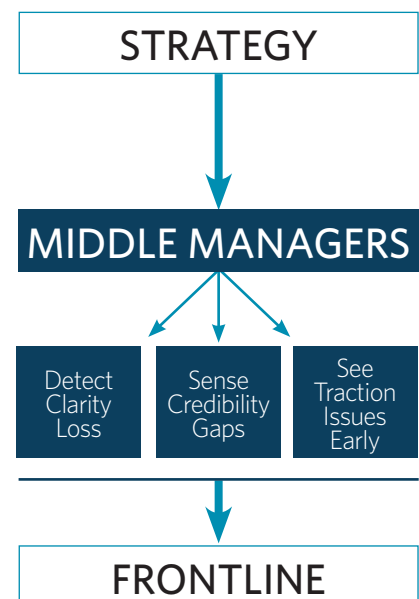
failed or fell short of expectations. By contrast, 80% of the initiatives started by middle managers succeeded, producing \$300 million in annual profits. The study is older and examined one transformation, so its findings should not be generalized mechanically. Its implication remains relevant: people closer to the work may see viable paths that senior leaders cannot.⁶

Huy’s work also points to three forms of practical intelligence held in the middle: knowledge of informal networks, sensitivity to how employees are experiencing change, and the ability to manage the tension between progress and operational continuity. RISE treated those capabilities as organizational assets to develop and connect.

The opportunity, then, extends beyond preparing these leaders for their next role. Organizations can develop them while engaging them as a network of observers, translators, experimenters, and contributors. That premise shaped RISE.

The central premise of RISE drew directly from Liz Wiseman’s

Multipliers: organizations often have more intelligence available than their leaders are using. Participants examined when they amplified that intelligence, when they accidentally diminished it, and what changed when they created more room for other people’s thinking.⁷



Designed in partnership

RISE was designed in close partnership with Guardian's learning team rather than delivered as an off-the-shelf program. That required the learning team to act less like a program administrator and more like an integrator: connecting business context, participant experience, faculty input, and emerging needs across the six months. The design evolved around the realities participants faced in their roles, with adjustments made as the experience unfolded. That partnership helped create the conditions for 40 leaders in demanding roles to work across boundaries, test new approaches, and contribute candidly.

Liz Wiseman's Multipliers framework provided the leadership backbone. A Multipliers 360 feedback process helped participants examine how their behavior affected the intelligence and contribution of others. Personal and team Multiplier experiments then moved that insight into daily work.⁷

The five Multiplier disciplines became recurring lenses throughout the journey. Leaders practiced recognizing and deploying talent, creating an environment for rigorous thinking, framing questions that stretched the group, using debate to improve decisions, and returning ownership for results. The framework supplied the shared language; the RISE architecture created repeated opportunities to use it.

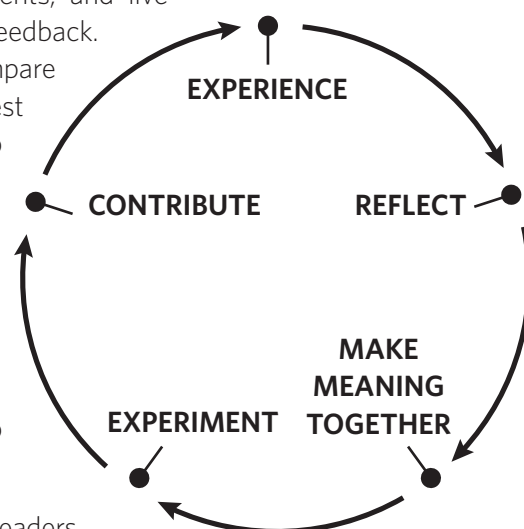
From experience to contribution

Information and experience do not automatically become learning. Reflection, feedback, dialogue, experimentation, and application help adults interpret an experience and decide what to do differently.⁸ RISE repeatedly moved leaders between formal learning and the work itself.

Participants encountered ideas through simulations, assessments, and live leadership situations. They reflected on their habits and feedback. Peer huddles and virtual team coaching helped them compare interpretations. Workplace experiments gave them a way to test new behavior. Cross-functional application work asked them to use those practices on real organizational questions where there was no predetermined answer.

The value did not come from choosing one learning method over another. It came from combining methods so that each served a different purpose: simulation surfaced instincts, coaching deepened reflection, workplace experiments supported behavior change, and real organizational questions created a place to practice collective judgment with other people.

Across the six months, the developmental demand increased. Leaders first examined how they affected others' intelligence. They then practiced creating space, asking better questions, inviting debate, and handing back ownership. Finally, they worked through uncertainty, exercised judgment, received feedback, and contributed ideas publicly.



Let leaders experience the culture you want

Guardian's choice of Multipliers as the leadership foundation carried an important design implication. At its heart, the framework asks leaders to draw out the intelligence and contribution of the people around them. A program built on that philosophy could not simply teach participants to multiply others while treating them primarily as recipients of someone else's expertise.

RISE therefore had to model the same premise it was asking leaders to practice. Participants brought their own judgment, questions, experience, and ideas into the learning. They made room for other voices, challenged assumptions, worked across boundaries, experimented in the workplace, sought feedback, and contributed thinking on real organizational questions.

In that sense, RISE became a temporary prototype of a different way of working. Participants did not only learn about Multiplier leadership; for six months, they experienced what it felt like to work in an environment designed to draw out more intelligence and contribution from everyone in it.

That experience gave leaders a lived point of comparison. They could feel what changed when curiosity replaced certainty, contribution crossed boundaries, and leaders created space for others to think. Returning to their everyday roles made the contrast visible: which habits supported this way of working, which routines worked against it, and what each participant could begin changing.

Participant reflections suggest that many began carrying elements of the experience into their daily leadership. Their examples repeatedly described movement from answering, directing, and rescuing toward asking, listening, delegating, and creating space for others. As one RISE Participant described it:

“I spent more time listening to others’ ideas and allowed them space to pursue those ideas—even when I did not think theirs was the most efficient solution—because it would help them grow.”

RISE Participant¹²

The design challenge, then, was not simply how to teach Multipliers. It was how to build a development experience that behaved like a Multiplier itself—drawing out participants’ intelligence, giving them meaningful opportunities to use it, and creating conditions in which they could draw out more from one another.



Six design choices behind RISE

The six design choices below show how RISE carried that premise through the architecture of the experience: If leaders are expected to draw out the intelligence and contribution of others, the development experience should do the same.

1 TREAT LEADERS AS CONTRIBUTORS

Leadership development often begins with a content question: What do leaders need to know? RISE added an organizational question: What do these leaders already know that Guardian needs? Participants made decisions, examined their behavior, coached one another, ran experiments, and developed ideas in response to real organizational questions.

“I brought all the key stakeholders into the decision and the brainstorming, including those closest to the customer. The result was greater alignment and buy-in around the solution.”

RISE Participant¹²

This reflects the generation effect: people retain and use ideas more effectively when they generate an answer or application rather than receive one fully formed.⁹ The framework supplied a starting point. Capability grew through use.

2 BUILD PRACTICE INTO THE WORK

Leadership requires people to challenge a popular idea, receive difficult feedback, draw out a quiet colleague, and decide with incomplete information. Yet leaders often encounter those moments for the first time when the consequences are real.

The Multipliers Simulation at the opening event created a practice field where leaders could observe their instincts under pressure and understand how others experienced them. It established the language and behavioral foundation for the journey. Back at work, participants selected small personal and team experiments. They tried a behavior, noticed the response, discussed what happened, and adjusted. The unit of change was deliberately manageable: one behavior in a real situation rather than a broad promise to become a different leader.

“I realized that silence is okay. It allows people to think and feel empowered to voice their opinions without being told the answer.”

RISE Participant¹²

3 MAKE THE COHORT NECESSARY

Many programs assemble a cohort without giving its members a reason to depend on one another. RISE brought together leaders from across Guardian and asked them to work on questions that no single function could answer. They had to explain local assumptions, learn unfamiliar parts of the business, and allow another person's experience to change the direction of an idea.

The differences created useful friction and collective sensemaking: leaders made sense of uncertainty together rather than waiting for a senior executive to settle the question.¹⁰ The cohort became a cross-functional thinking network, not simply a class moving through the same calendar.

4 DESIGN THE SPACE BETWEEN SESSIONS

The three in-person experiences mattered. In the room, people could read one another, test disagreement, and build trust quickly. The periods between those gatherings did different work. Participants ran experiments, met in peer-coaching huddles, worked in cross-functional teams, and received virtual coaching from lead facilitator Rob Cordova.

Workplace experiments need a return path. An assignment may carry an idea into the work, but the learning remains individual unless participants bring the experience back for reflection and comparison. RISE used virtual touchpoints to harvest what leaders were seeing, challenge their interpretations, and send them back with a more informed next move.¹¹

5 USE REAL ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS TO BUILD JUDGMENT

RISE asked leaders to work on real organizational questions that could not be answered by one function, one perspective, or a facilitator with the "right" solution. That mattered because the work required the same behaviors Guardian wanted leaders to strengthen: drawing out other people's intelligence, challenging assumptions, working through disagreement, and making choices with incomplete information.

The process was deliberately expansive before it became selective. Leaders generated possibilities without judging them too quickly, looked for patterns and connections, sought out perspectives they did not already have, tested assumptions, and gradually decided which ideas deserved deeper attention.

The ideas were important, but so was the way leaders had to produce them. They practiced thinking with other people rather than simply

presenting their own answers. They had to communicate thinking that was still taking shape, invite challenge without becoming defensive, make sense of competing information, and decide when to keep exploring and when to make a call.

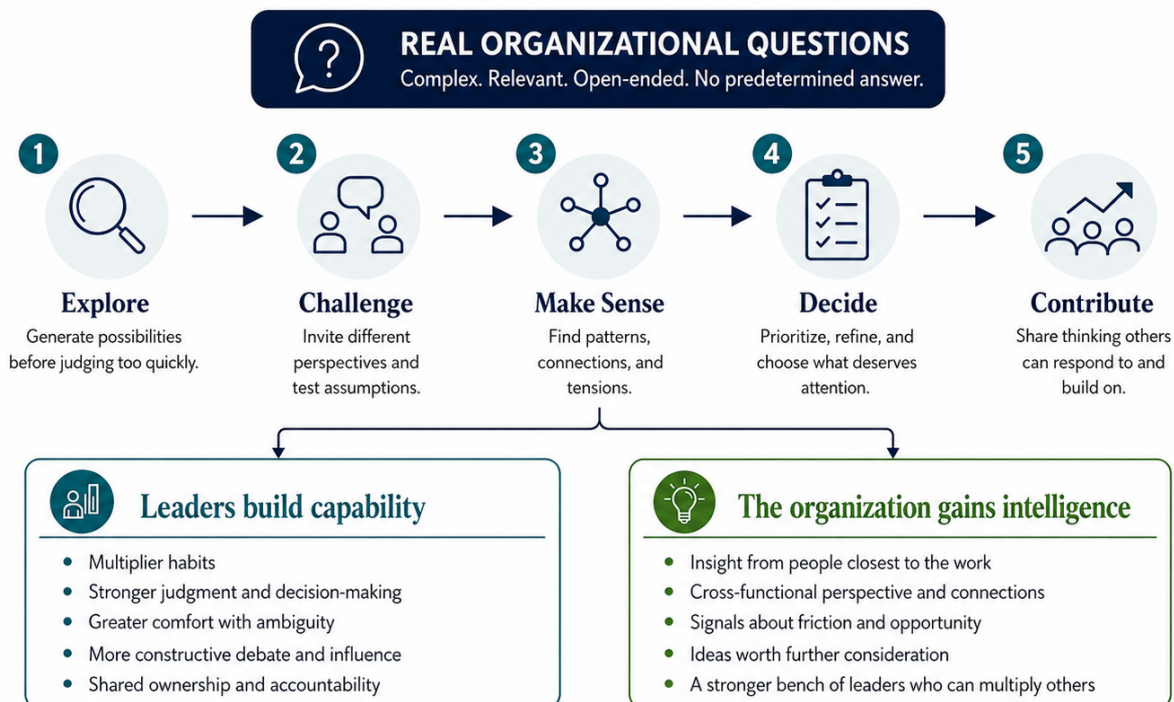
That made ambiguity part of the learning design. It was productive when it concerned the route: how to investigate, connect, challenge, and choose. It was less productive when participants were unclear about the audience, purpose, or form of the final contribution. The design team clarified the destination while leaving the path open. Freedom works best inside a visible frame.

Cordova often invited leaders to say some version of: “I’m not sure. Here is what I’m thinking. What are you seeing? What might be possible?” That posture models a different kind of leadership confidence. Leaders can invite others into the thinking without pretending to have the answer.

For RISE, the organizational questions served two purposes at once. They gave leaders a place to practice Multiplier behaviors and leadership judgment, while giving Guardian access to cross-functional insight and ideas from people close to the work.

Real Organizational Questions as a Practice Field

One experience. Two forms of value: development for leaders and intelligence for the organization.



The questions provide the work. The process develops the leaders.
The organization learns from both.

6 CREATE A RESPONSE PATH FOR CONTRIBUTION

When leaders are asked to work on real organizational questions, the work begins to matter beyond the learning experience itself. They are no longer completing an exercise solely for their own development; they are contributing thinking that may be useful to the organization.

That changes the design responsibility. The design does not need to promise that every idea will advance. It does need to make clear how contributions will be considered. An idea may connect to work already underway, spark further exploration, be redirected, or stop. What matters is that participants understand how their thinking will be considered.

There is a leadership lesson in that process as well. Leaders learn to contribute without assuming ownership of the outcome. They have to put forward thinking that may still be incomplete, invite questions and challenge, revise their ideas, and accept that contribution does not always mean adoption.

For L&D teams, that means deciding in advance what happens after participants contribute. Who will hear the thinking? How will it be considered? What feedback will participants receive? A credible response path signals that the organization values the intelligence it has asked leaders to bring forward.



What changes when leaders go back to work?

A development experience matters when leaders make different choices back at work. After six months of practicing a different way of leading, RISE Participants faced a practical question: What would they actually do differently?

For some, the change was small but consequential. One leader resisted the instinct to step in and answer on an analyst's behalf, creating room for the analyst to lead a conversation with senior stakeholders. Others described asking questions instead of filling silence, giving team members greater ownership with less oversight, and deliberately inviting quieter voices into discussions.

“I made sure not to be a ‘rescuer’ and stood back and let him take center stage. I was amazed at how strong his contributions were. Allowing space for others to contribute made a huge difference.”

RISE Participant¹²

These examples matter because they move the evaluation question closer to the work itself. Attendance can show who participated, and satisfaction can describe the experience. Neither tells you much about what leaders actually did differently afterward.

RISE therefore looked for evidence of application in everyday leadership: Were participants creating more space before offering their own answers? Asking questions that helped others think through problems? Giving people greater ownership? Bringing in perspectives that might otherwise have remained unheard? Recognizing habits that could unintentionally diminish contribution?

Participant feedback suggested a recurring pattern in those areas. Leaders described shifts from answering, directing, and rescuing toward asking, listening, delegating, and creating more room for others to contribute.

These accounts do not establish causation or long-term business impact. They do provide evidence that participants were applying RISE practices in real leadership situations and noticing changes in how people participated, contributed, and took ownership.

WHAT OTHER ORGANIZATIONS CAN TAKE FROM RISE

The Guardian case does not offer a universal recipe. It does suggest a different role for leadership development in the middle of an organization. The most valuable experiences connect development to real work, create repeated opportunities for practice, and give leaders a contribution worth making. The broader lesson is to design development around contribution as well as learning. Leaders should have opportunities to bring their own intelligence into the experience, not only absorb someone else's.

8 Practical Takeaways for L&D Leaders

1

START WITH AN ENTERPRISE QUESTION AS WELL AS A CAPABILITY QUESTION.

Ask what the organization needs leaders to notice, interpret, or help solve, not only which competencies they should acquire. That makes the work more relevant and gives leaders a reason to use their judgment.

2

DESIGN THE EXPERIENCE TO MODEL THE LEADERSHIP YOU WANT LEADERS TO PRACTICE.

If leaders are expected to draw out others' intelligence, exercise judgment, and create space for contribution, the development experience should ask the same of them. The design itself becomes part of the learning.

3

USE FORMAL EXPERIENCES FOR CHALLENGE, FEEDBACK, AND SHARED MEANING—NOT CONTENT VOLUME.

Time together is most valuable when leaders can do things that are harder to replicate alone: test assumptions, experience consequences, receive feedback, and make meaning with peers.

4

GIVE PARTICIPANTS SMALL WORKPLACE EXPERIMENTS AND A PLACE TO BRING THE LEARNING BACK.

Keep the experiments small enough to try in ordinary work, then build in a return path so participants can compare what happened and adjust.

5

BUILD COHORTS ACROSS BOUNDARIES SO DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES BECOME NECESSARY TO THE WORK.

Cross-functional cohorts create value when the work actually requires different business perspectives; otherwise, they are simply groups of people taking the same program at the same time.

6

CLARIFY THE DESTINATION WHILE LEAVING PARTICIPANTS ROOM TO EXERCISE JUDGMENT.

Be explicit about the purpose, audience, and expected form of the work, while leaving the route open enough for leaders to make choices and work through ambiguity.

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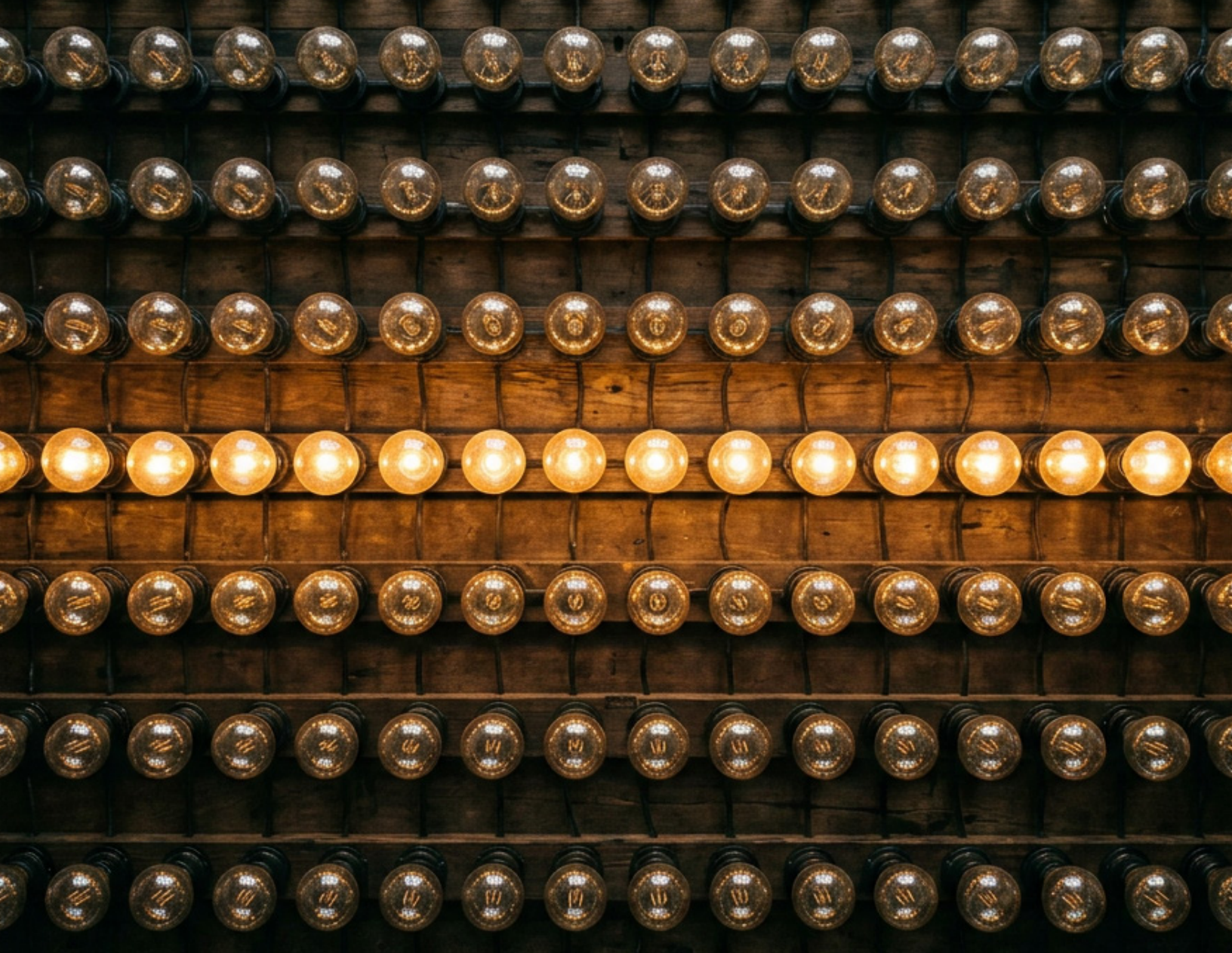
DECIDE HOW ORGANIZATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS WILL BE CONSIDERED BEFORE ASKING LEADERS TO PRODUCE THEM.

Leaders do not need a promise that every idea will advance, but they should understand who will consider the thinking, what may happen next, and how they will hear back.

8

MEASURE CHANGED BEHAVIOR, APPLICATION CONDITIONS, AND EVIDENCE FROM THE WORK.

Look for evidence that leaders are using the practices in real situations, what conditions help or hinder application, and what changes others can actually observe in the work.



The middle already hears where an organization is out of tune. Its leaders know which signals are getting lost, which voices are too faint, and which ideas deserve attention. A well-designed leadership journey can help those leaders become better managers. It can also help the organization listen to itself.

Multipliers gave participants a personal leadership question: Am I increasing or reducing the intelligence around me? RISE extended that question across boundaries.

The next question for leadership development is not only what leaders should learn. It is what the organization could learn from them.

ENDNOTES

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