

Leaders of Leaders Training

Kindel Leadership Development

Revision 1.6, June 2026

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Introduction

Everyone's a Leader

The word **leader** is not a synonym for **manager**.

An individual contributor who ships great code, closes a critical deal, or writes a policy that changes how the company operates: that person is leading. A people manager who holds a team accountable, develops careers, and creates clarity amid chaos: also leading. A CEO who sets direction for thousands: leading. An intern who sees a broken process and fixes it without being asked: leading.

Everyone can be a leader. The only question is how well.

This course is not about becoming a manager. It is about becoming a better leader; specifically, a better leader of leaders. The skills in this handbook apply whether you have two direct reports or two thousand. They apply whether your title says "Director" or "Principal Engineer." They apply because leadership is a craft, not a job title, and craft improves only through deliberate practice.

Thirty Years of Leading (Well and Poorly)

I have been leading teams and building products for over thirty years. Some of those years were spent at enormous scale; Microsoft, where I helped ship Windows, Internet Explorer, and Windows Phone to hundreds of millions of customers; Amazon, where I built the Alexa Smart Home organization from 7 people to 150 in under a year and helped define how voice-first computing would work in people's homes. At Control4/SnapOne I was CTO of a 4,500-SKU smart home company navigating a merger and a public-to-private transition. I've also founded startups including FreeBusy and Holy Grail Labs, where building from zero means every decision is a one-way door with real consequences.

Across all of these (big and small, small and successful and not), I have learned one thing with certainty: the skills that make leaders effective do not change with scale. What changes is the cost of getting them wrong. At 20 people, a bad decision about priorities wastes a sprint. At 2,000 people, that same bad decision wastes a quarter and erodes trust across an organization. The principles are the same. The stakes are not.

I have also learned that no one gets it right all the time. I have been the exec who "randomized" his teams with half-baked ideas on a Monday morning. I have been the leader who avoided hard conversations for too long and watched a performance problem metastasize. I have been the person who confused being busy with being effective. Every failure taught me something; usually that I had relied on good intentions when what I needed was a mechanism, a principle, or the courage to be direct.

This handbook is the distillation of those lessons: the ones I learned by doing, the ones I learned by failing, and the ones I learned by watching other great leaders operate; often in ways I initially disagreed with, until the results proved me wrong.

The Essence of Leading

Here is a truth that makes some people uncomfortable:

Leadership is getting others to do what you believe is the right; and having them believe it was their idea.

Read that again. It sounds manipulative. It sounds political. That's because it is.

Influence and **politics** are synonyms. Every act of leadership is an act of influence. Every time you persuade someone to change direction, adopt a new process, or prioritize differently, you are engaged in politics. The word has a bad reputation, but the activity is inescapable. If you work with other humans, you are doing politics. The only question is whether you are doing it well or poorly, and whether it is principled or self-serving.

"You do not lead by hitting people over the head; that's assault, not leadership." - Dwight D. Eisenhower

The difference between a great leader and a manipulative one is not that the great leader avoids influence. It is that the great leader operates from principles; written, debated, shared principles that constrain self-interest and orient influence toward outcomes that serve customers, the business, and the people doing the work.

When influence is anchored in principles, extraordinary things happen:

- People follow because the direction makes sense, not because the boss said so.
- Decisions stick because they were debated honestly, not imposed quietly.
- Teams move fast because trust is high and trust is high because the leader's motives are transparent.
- The leader can be wrong without losing credibility, because "strong opinions, weakly held" is a lived value, not a slogan.

When influence is unprincipled, the opposite happens. People comply but do not commit. Decisions get relitigated behind closed doors. Trust erodes. The leader's agenda becomes the team's open secret. Mediocrity creeps in.

Leading Without Authority

The most important form of influence is the kind that does not rely on authority at all.

There are two forms of influence in the world: influence by authority and influence without authority. When a boss attempts to drive change using only their title, it is rarely successful in the short term and never in the long term. "Because I said so" may work on a kindergartner. It does not inspire confidence or lasting results in an organization of adults.

The best leaders (whether or not they have positional authority) learn to influence through:

- **Diving deep** - Staying connected to the data and the details so they can propose solutions grounded in facts. Facts trump opinions.
- **Earning trust** - Listening attentively, speaking candidly, treating others respectfully. When a leader does not do these things, people lose trust, and influence evaporates.
- **Thinking big** - Bold ideas, clearly articulated, motivate people. Leaders who can paint a compelling vision of the future attract followers without needing to order them.
- **High Standards** - Teaching by example; not just doing the work, but how the work is done. Leaders who hold themselves to extraordinarily high standards inspire others to do the same. Leaders who are ok with "good enough" are actively encouraging mediocrity.
- **Building coalitions** - One leader, alone, will never create enough dissatisfaction with the status quo, a powerful enough vision, or effective enough first steps to overcome real resistance. Great change agents build coalitions; starting with the people who are already hungry for change and expanding outward.
- **Making it "their" idea** - Involving people in the solution design. If it is "their plan" instead of "your plan," the vision will be stronger, the first steps will be more effective, and you will have an army of communicators instead of a single voice.

This is why "getting others to do what you think is right and having them think it was their idea" is not cynicism. It is craft. The leader who involves people in shaping direction creates genuine ownership. The direction may have started in the leader's head, but by the time the team has debated it, refined it, and committed to it, it belongs to everyone. That is the goal.

The Secret: Be Principled

If influence is the engine of leadership, principles are the steering. Without them, influence becomes self-serving. With them, influence becomes something people trust, follow, and eventually replicate.

In over thirty years of building companies and organizations, I have concluded that most leadership books are great examples of survivorship bias. None of them clued me into the real secret of what distinguishes teams that consistently deliver outsized results from teams that are just mediocre.

The secret is **principles**.

Principled leaders have a set of strongly held beliefs about the **how** (not just the what, why, when, or whom) they strive to live those principles every day. Even better, organizations that have a written-down set of rules for the how, combined with mechanisms that reinforce the living of those principles, sing.

It does not even matter what the specific principles are. What matters is that the organization is principled; that there is a shared, debated, living set of commitments about how people will behave, how decisions will be made, and how accountability will work.

This handbook is built on that foundation. Every chapter that follows—Tenets, SBI, Mechanisms, Dates, Meetings, Operating Systems; is a specific skill or system for translating principles into daily action at scale.

What This Course Is (and Is Not)

This course is about leading leaders, not managing tasks.

At small scale, leadership can succeed through proximity, heroics, and individual effort. At scale, those fail. What replaces them are principles, mechanisms, cadence, and discipline. Leaders of leaders do not personally solve every problem; they design systems that solve problems repeatedly.

This handbook is grounded in a few core beliefs:

- **Leadership is a craft, not a personality trait.** It is a set of learnable skills, not magic or charisma.
- **Everyone is a leader.** The question is not whether you lead, but how well.
- **People management is real work and deserves rigor.** It is a profession, not a hobby.
- **Influence is the job.** Politics is not a dirty word; it is the daily work of alignment. The key is to be principled about it.
- **Clarity beats charisma.** Write things down. Debate them. Make them specific.
- **Good intentions never scale; mechanisms do.** Hope is not a strategy.
- **Accountability without dates is theater.** A plan without dates is fantasy.
- **Organizations behave exactly as their systems allow.** If you don't like the behavior, change the system.

The goal of this training is not inspiration. It is capability. By the end of this course, you will have practiced specific skills, built specific artifacts, and committed to specific actions; with dates, with owners, and with the principles to guide you when the path gets hard.

This course is focused on growing leaders. I have other courses on

- Product Development (Product Management, Engineering Management, and Operational Excellence)
- Hiring Excellence

See www.kindel.com for more information.

Let's get to work.

