

Why You Need To Build First-Level Leadership Skills From Day One

Written by: Dr. Nanette Miner, Managing Consultant/Succession Strategist, The Training Doctor

Most construction firms say they want strong leaders. Unfortunately, few are intentional about building them.

Instead, leadership development often begins at the moment of promotion – when a strong technical performer is suddenly responsible for people, projects, and decisions that affect the entire business. That’s a risky place to start.

By the time someone is promoted into their first supervisory role, it’s already too late to begin teaching the fundamentals.

If you want a stronger leadership bench, the work must start earlier – much earlier. It must start from the day someone joins your organization.

That’s where what I call first-level leadership skills come in.

These are not advanced executive capabilities. They are the baseline skills that every future leader – and frankly, every employee – should develop early in their career. When you build these consistently across your organization, you’re not just developing individuals. You’re creating a culture of capable and ready future leaders.

WHAT ARE FIRST-LEVEL LEADERSHIP SKILLS?

First-level leadership skills fall into three broad categories: communication, business acumen, and thinking skills.

Communication is the most visible – and often the most underestimated.



In construction environments, where timelines are tight and margins can be thin, communication breakdowns are costly. Yet most professionals are never formally taught how to listen to understand, how to ask better questions, or how to give feedback that actually improves performance.

Instead, they learn by watching others – some of whom are excellent communicators, and some of whom are not.

First-level leadership means being explicit about expectations. It means, for example, teaching employees how to participate effectively in meetings, how to raise concerns without creating conflict, and how to address issues directly rather than letting them fester. These are not “soft skills.” These are operational skills that directly affect project outcomes.

The second category is understanding the business.

Many employees – even high performers – operate within the boundaries of their role without ever fully understanding how the company makes money, who the real competition is, or why certain decisions are made at the leadership level.

Without this knowledge, you're literally leaving money on the table.

When people don't understand the business, they can't make decisions that support it. They may optimize for their department or their project, but not for the company as a whole.

First-level leadership development closes that gap early. It ensures employees know who your customers are, what differentiates your firm in the market, and how their work contributes to profitability and long-term growth. Over time, this builds better judgment – and reduces the need for constant oversight.

The third category is thinking skills.

This is where many organizations struggle the most.

We assume people will “figure out” how to solve problems, make decisions, and analyze complex situations. Some do. Many don't – not because they lack capability, but because no one has ever shown them how.

First-level leadership means teaching people how to approach a problem, not just how to execute a task. It means helping them break down issues, evaluate options, and make decisions with incomplete information – because that's the reality of leadership.

It also means teaching them how to synthesize information from multiple sources – jobsite data, client feedback, financial constraints – and know how it applies to their work.

These are the building blocks of leadership. When you don't teach them early, you're wasting valuable intellectual capital.

WHY WAITING FOR “POTENTIAL” DOESN'T WORK

Many wait until someone “shows potential.” They wait until someone is promoted. They wait until there's a need to fill a vacancy.

At that point, development becomes reactive. The individual is already in a leadership role, already making decisions, already influencing others, and only then do we begin trying to teach them the fundamentals that are so critical.

That's backwards.

By delaying development, you narrow your pipeline. You create unnecessary risk. And you reinforce a pattern where leadership is something reserved for a few, rather than something that can be built broadly across the organization.

Worse, you miss the opportunity to shape how people think and operate early in their careers – when habits are still forming. See this recent [Vistage article](#) for more on how to build leaders before you “need them.”

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU START EARLIER

When first-level leadership skills are developed from day one, several things begin to shift.

Employees become more effective contributors, even before they have formal authority. They communicate more clearly, think more critically, and make better day-to-day decisions about their role/responsibilities because they have an organizational outlook.

Managers spend less time correcting avoidable mistakes and more time focusing on higher-value work.

And perhaps most importantly, when it is time to promote someone, you are not starting from zero. You are building on a foundation that has already been laid.

This doesn't eliminate the need for “executive” leadership development at higher levels. But it changes the trajectory. Instead of trying to teach basic skills under pressure, you are refining and expanding capabilities that already exist.


A DIFFERENT WAY TO THINK ABOUT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

If your goal is to build a strong leadership bench, the question is not, “Who has potential?” The better question is, “What are we doing to build leadership capability across the organization?”

First-level leadership skills provide a practical answer.

They shift development from an event to a system. From a selective process to a consistent one. From something that begins at promotion to something that starts at entry.

And over time, that shift compounds.

Because leadership doesn't appear at the moment of promotion. In fact, it's more likely that is when people hold tight to their proven (functional) skill set. If their technical ability is what got them the promotion, why would they change tack and suddenly become the leader you really need? 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is an expert in building ready and capable leadership teams for succession and exit.

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