

BLACKRIDGE ARENA TRANSITION GUIDE • 2026

Leading Through Leaders

The manager-of-managers transition: how strategy becomes operating intent, managers become the unit of leadership, and execution moves without the senior leader becoming the system.



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Leadership system to build

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ARENA operating passages

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Manager conditions to protect

90

Days to test the transition

The work is no longer to manage every team better. It is to build managers who can carry judgment, translate intent, coordinate interdependence, and produce accountability without waiting for the senior leader to enter every room.



► INSIDE THE GUIDE

The ARENA transition

00	Executive Summary	Why the manager-of-managers passage changes the unit, altitude, and evidence of leadership.
01	The Passage	From managing work through contributors to building leadership capacity through managers.
02	Translate Strategy	Turn enterprise direction into operating intent managers can use.
03	Build the Manager System	Create clarity, authority, accountability, and learning around every manager.
04	Stop the Bypass	Protect the manager layer from direct intervention that erodes legitimacy.
05	Coach Judgment	Strengthen decisions without becoming the permanent answer source.
06	Coordinate the System	Lead across teams, dependencies, trade-offs, and competing priorities.
07	Accountability & Climate	Make performance visible while preserving manager ownership.
08	Signal Upward	Convert operating reality into decision-useful intelligence for senior leadership.
09	90-Day Passage	A practical evidence plan for moving from direct control to leadership architecture.

► EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The organization cannot scale through one leader's direct reach.

The manager-of-managers transition begins when personal access, direct intervention, and superior problem solving stop being reliable leadership strategies. The senior leader must now create a system in which managers can interpret intent, make decisions, coordinate work, develop people, and remain accountable without surrendering every consequential question upward.

Research positions middle managers as more than a transmission layer. They shape implementation climate, translate strategic direction, coordinate interdependent work, and influence whether change becomes operational practice.^{1,2} Their capability develops through personal processes that are enabled—or constrained—by organizational context.³ The leader above them therefore has two responsibilities at once: strengthen each manager and design the conditions in which management can function.

Altitude

Lead the system of work.

Move from solving within one team to shaping priorities, capacity, interfaces, standards, and decision conditions across teams.

Unit

Make managers the work.

The question becomes less “How is every contributor performing?” and more “Can each manager create reliable performance through others?”

Evidence

Look for distributed judgment.

Readiness appears when decisions, accountability, coordination, and learning remain strong without the senior leader's direct presence.

BLACKRIDGE FINDING

Leading through leaders is not distance from the work. It is the disciplined redesign of how the work receives direction, judgment, coordination, and consequence.

► 01 • CHANGE THE UNIT OF LEADERSHIP

ARENA

The next role is not a larger version of the last one.

At ARENA, the leader stops treating every team as a larger group of direct reports. Managers become the primary leadership interface, and the senior leader becomes responsible for the architecture that connects them.

Translate Convert strategy into usable operating intent.	Equip Give managers clarity, authority, capacity, and standards.	Coach Develop judgment without reclaiming decisions.	Coordinate Resolve dependencies and protect enterprise priorities.	Signal Carry operating intelligence upward before surprise arrives.
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Earlier success pattern	ARENA demand	Failure if unchanged
Know the details personally	Create an information system that reveals what requires attention	Every issue must travel through the leader's memory and availability
Coach individual contributors	Coach managers on how they lead, decide, and build capacity	The leader becomes an alternative manager for every team
Set priorities for one team	Integrate priorities across teams and manage shared constraints	Local success produces enterprise friction
Intervene to protect performance	Strengthen the manager's authority and correction capability	Managers retain titles while the senior leader retains the role

TRANSITION STANDARD

The passage is working when managers become more capable and more accountable at the same time—and execution does not weaken when the senior leader steps out of the operating conversation.

► 02 • MAKE DIRECTION OPERABLE

01

Strategy must arrive as intent—not as a slogan or a task list.

TRANSLATION

The senior leader converts enterprise direction into outcomes, boundaries, trade-offs, decision logic, and learning questions that managers can adapt to local conditions.

Middle managers sit at the point where abstract direction meets operating reality. Research links middle-manager leadership and coordination to strategy-implementation effectiveness, including both direct effects and indirect effects through team coordination.² Translation is therefore not message repetition. It is the work of making strategy usable without stripping managers of judgment.

Strategic statement	Operating intent managers need	Evidence of translation
“Improve the customer experience.”	Which customer, which friction, what outcome, what cannot be traded away, and what evidence will matter?	Managers can explain different local actions using the same enterprise logic.
“Move faster.”	Where speed matters, which controls remain, what decisions move downward, and what risks require escalation?	Cycle time improves without hidden quality or workforce costs.
“Operate as one team.”	Which dependencies, shared measures, decision rights, and conflict rules must change?	Cross-team choices reflect enterprise priority rather than local protection.

WEAK TRANSLATION

The leader supplies initiatives, talking points, and deadlines. Managers comply differently because the intended outcome, decision logic, and trade-offs remain implicit.

STRONGER TRANSLATION

Managers can make different decisions in different contexts while explaining how each decision serves the same strategic intent.

02

A manager cannot carry responsibility the organization has not actually transferred.

Every manager operates inside a system of expectations, authority, capacity, relationships, information, and consequence. If those conditions contradict one another, the senior leader will misread structural failure as individual weakness.

Clarity

What must become true?

Outcomes, priorities, standards, role boundaries, stakeholders, and the few measures that reveal progress or exposure.

Authority

Which decisions are truly theirs?

Explicit decision rights, resource discretion, escalation thresholds, and senior-leader commitments not to quietly reclaim control.

Capacity

What can the system absorb?

Span, workload, management time, capability mix, operating rhythm, and protection from permanent crisis conditions.

Accountability

How will ownership remain visible?

Named outcomes, review cadence, consequences, correction expectations, and evidence recorded before the narrative hardens.

Learning

How will judgment improve?

Real work, observation, feedback, reflection, and repeated opportunity rather than training separated from operating conditions.

Legitimacy

Will others honor the role?

Public sponsorship, clear interfaces, consistent escalation, and senior leaders who redirect bypass attempts back through the manager.

CONTEXT FINDING

Capability is personal, but its expression is conditional. Meta-synthesis evidence describes middle-manager development as a personal process empowered by context.³

► 04 • PROTECT MANAGER LEGITIMACY

03

Every bypass solves today's problem by weakening tomorrow's manager.

THE BYPASS

A contributor or stakeholder skips the manager, the senior leader answers directly, and the organization learns that the real authority still sits one level higher.

The bypass is seductive because it is efficient, flattering, and often requested by people who trust the senior leader's judgment. But repeated bypass behavior creates a shadow structure: managers remain accountable for outcomes while decisions, relationships, and credibility migrate upward.

Moment	Direct-control response	Leader-building response
A contributor asks for a decision	Answer because the issue is easy	Clarify whether the manager owns it; redirect and coach only if necessary
A stakeholder dislikes a manager's answer	Reopen the decision privately	Review the decision logic with the manager and resolve through the agreed interface
Performance falls	Enter the team and direct recovery	Require the manager's diagnosis, plan, support request, and review cadence
The manager is genuinely out of depth	Quietly take over while preserving the title	Name the gap, bound the intervention, protect the work, and establish a development or role decision

Exception: Urgent legal, safety, ethical, or material business exposure can require direct intervention. The senior leader must still explain the intervention, restore the management boundary, and address the capability or authority failure that made it necessary.

BOUNDARY RULE

Do not protect the manager from accountability. Protect the management role from being made fictional.

04

Do not coach the answer. Coach the architecture of the decision.

The senior leader's expertise can improve a manager's decision—or prevent the manager from ever developing one. The distinction is whether the conversation transfers reasoning capacity or merely supplies a superior conclusion.

Frame What outcome, decision, and stakeholder consequence are actually at issue?

Separate What is known, assumed, uncertain, reversible, and reserved?

Choose What trade-off is being made, and why is it responsible under the circumstances?

Learn What result, signal, or consequence would cause the manager to revise?

Questions that develop judgment

- What decision are you avoiding by continuing to analyze?
- Which assumption carries the most exposure?
- What belongs to you, and what genuinely requires escalation?
- What would make the opposite decision reasonable?
- How will you know early that the choice needs correction?

Questions that quietly reclaim it

- “Have you thought about doing what I would do?”
- Questions with one visibly preferred answer.
- Repeated requests for detail unrelated to the decision threshold.
- Public correction before the manager has presented the reasoning.
- Approval requirements created after authority was already delegated.

READINESS EVIDENCE

The coaching has transferred when the manager frames, decides, communicates, reviews, and revises well in the next situation—without reproducing the senior leader's exact style.

05

Local excellence can still create enterprise failure.

Managers naturally protect the outcomes they own. The leader above them must make dependencies, shared constraints, and enterprise trade-offs visible enough that local accountability does not become local optimization.

Research on strategy implementation identifies coordination as a mechanism through which middle-manager leadership affects implementation effectiveness.² The operating challenge is not to centralize every cross-team decision. It is to build a repeatable interface for the decisions that cannot be solved inside one team.

Coordination element	Question	Operating artifact	Failure signal
Shared outcome	What must become true across teams?	One outcome statement with joint measures	Each team reports success while the enterprise result misses
Dependency	Who needs what from whom, by when?	Dependency map with owners and timing	Repeated surprise at predictable handoffs
Decision right	Who decides when local interests conflict?	Defined owner, input roles, threshold, and escalation	Consensus theater or authority shopping
Constraint	Which resource or capacity is shared?	Visible allocation logic and trade-offs	Work enters faster than the system can absorb
Learning loop	What signal changes the operating choice?	Review cadence tied to evidence	Status reporting without decision or adaptation

COORDINATION FINDING

The senior leader adds value at the interfaces—where authority, information, capacity, and consequence cross the boundaries managers can solve alone.

Accountability must reveal ownership—not transfer it upward.

A strong operating review is not a performance recital for the senior leader. It is a decision forum in which managers show outcomes, reasoning, exposure, correction, and the support only the next level can provide.

Review field	Manager owns	Senior leader examines	What stays out
Outcome	Result, trajectory, and consequence	Alignment to enterprise intent	Activity volume without outcome meaning
Reasoning	Assumptions, trade-offs, and chosen path	Decision quality and threshold	Retrospective certainty and blame
Exposure	Risk, constraint, dependency, and early signal	Cross-system implications and reserved decisions	Red status hidden until rescue is required
Correction	What changes, who owns it, and by when	Whether the correction addresses the operating cause	Senior leader prescribing every action
Support	Specific authority, resource, interface, or decision required	What only the next level can resolve	General requests for “more support”

CONTROL MASQUERADING AS RIGOR

The leader asks for more data, more meetings, and more approval points until the manager’s discretion disappears. Visibility rises while ownership falls.

RIGOR THAT PRESERVES OWNERSHIP

The review makes performance and reasoning visible, names consequence, and leaves the manager responsible for the correction unless a defined boundary is crossed.

OPERATING RULE

If every review ends with the senior leader assigning the manager’s next actions, the organization has reporting—but not management.

► 08 • MAKE CHANGE LIVABLE

Managers do not merely deliver change. They shape whether change can survive.

Systematic-review evidence suggests middle managers shape implementation climate in addition to performing specific implementation roles.¹ They influence what receives attention, what behavior is rewarded, how contradictions are interpreted, and whether people believe a change is temporary theater or a real operating commitment.

Meaning

Why this change?

Connects enterprise direction to the work, values, risks, and consequences people can recognize locally.

Model

What must change here?

Translates the initiative into routines, decisions, capabilities, measures, and behavior—not just communication.

Momentum

What keeps it credible?

Removes obstacles, recognizes use, confronts contradictory incentives, and closes visible feedback loops.

Research across 17 Veterans Affairs medical centers found differences in how middle-manager activities and interactions appeared in higher- and lower-change-potential sites, including efforts to facilitate innovation and garner staff buy-in.⁴ The implication for the leader above them is practical: do not treat implementation as a communication cascade. Equip managers to interpret, adapt, coordinate, reinforce, and surface operating contradictions.

Leadership risk: Senior leaders often announce a change while leaving measures, incentives, workload, authority, and legacy commitments untouched. Managers are then required to reconcile contradictions they did not create and cannot resolve.

CLIMATE FINDING

People decide whether change is real by watching what their manager can authorize, protect, reinforce, and stop—not by counting how often the strategy is repeated.

► 09 • CONVERT REALITY INTO INTELLIGENCE

The middle should not be a message pipe. It should be an intelligence layer.

Leading through leaders requires two-directional translation. Strategy moves downward as operating intent; reality moves upward as evidence, consequence, emerging risk, and decision need.

Weak upward signal	Decision-useful intelligence	Senior-leader response
“The teams are overwhelmed.”	Demand exceeds capacity in two workflows; cycle time and error exposure are rising; three priorities compete for the same specialist group.	Clarify priority, change capacity, or accept the consequence explicitly.
“People are resisting.”	The change conflicts with the current performance measure and removes local discretion without replacing decision guidance.	Repair the operating contradiction before escalating communication.
“We need more resources.”	Current capacity supports X; the requested outcome requires Y; without change, the likely trade-off is Z.	Choose the trade-off, not just the budget question.
“Implementation is on track.”	Milestones are complete, but adoption varies; managers report two unresolved dependencies and one behavior has not transferred.	Examine use, outcome, and sustainability—not completion alone.

Protect candor

If bad news is punished, managers will optimize the story. Require early exposure, separate responsible escalation from poor ownership, and respond to signal with decisions rather than theater.

Protect synthesis

If every detail travels upward, the senior leader becomes the operating analyst. Require managers to distinguish pattern from anecdote and decision need from information.

INTELLIGENCE STANDARD

A strong manager does not simply carry the message. The manager changes its resolution so the next level can decide responsibly.

► 10 • DIAGNOSE THE STALLED PASSAGE

Five patterns reveal that the senior leader is still managing beneath the role.

01

The answer source

Managers arrive with problems because the fastest path remains the leader's judgment, approval, and relationships.

02

The bypass network

Contributors and stakeholders treat managers as optional because direct senior access consistently changes outcomes.

03

The meeting architecture

Managers report upward but rarely decide together; every cross-team issue becomes a senior-leader integration task.

04

The invisible trade-off

Every team is told to deliver its priority, while shared capacity and incompatible commitments remain unresolved.

05

The capability fiction

Weak managers keep titles while the senior leader quietly performs the work, postponing development or role decisions.

RESET

Make the system visible

Map decision flow, bypasses, recurring escalations, shared constraints, and where the senior leader repeatedly becomes necessary.

Diagnostic caution: High involvement is not automatically a failure. A new, high-risk, or destabilized function may require temporary proximity. The question is whether the intervention has a boundary, a capability-transfer objective, and an exit condition.

PASSAGE TEST

If the senior leader took two weeks away, which decisions, relationships, and coordination processes would stop—and what does that reveal about the system?

► 11 • TEST ARENA READINESS

Build evidence by moving leadership into the manager system.

Period	Senior-leader shift	Manager experience	Evidence captured
Days 1-30 Map	Identify recurring bypasses, escalations, dependencies, hidden decisions, and where personal intervention holds the system together.	Clarify outcomes, authority, interfaces, support, and what will no longer travel upward by default.	Decision map; manager-condition baseline; recurring escalation analysis; system constraints.
Days 31-60 Transfer	Redirect bypasses, coach decision architecture, and move integration into a manager operating forum.	Own live decisions, coordinate across teams, conduct performance correction, and surface intelligence upward.	Decision quality; ownership retention; cross-team resolution; correction follow-through; support dependence.
Days 61-90 Prove	Reduce direct presence while preserving review, consequence, and reserved authority.	Apply operating intent across a new situation, resolve a dependency, and adapt after evidence without senior rescue.	Distributed judgment; manager legitimacy; implementation climate; enterprise outcome; remaining exposure.

ARENA evidence review

Translation

Can managers explain intent, trade-offs, and decision logic—and adapt responsibly without waiting for instructions?

Management system

Are clarity, authority, capacity, accountability, learning, and legitimacy aligned around each manager?

Coordination

Can managers resolve dependencies and make enterprise trade-offs through a defined operating interface?

Distributed leadership

Do decisions, correction, learning, and execution remain reliable without the senior leader entering every layer?

90-DAY STANDARD

The goal is not less leadership. It is more leadership occurring at the right levels, with clearer authority and stronger evidence.

► RESEARCH FOUNDATION

ARENA is an evidence-informed transition architecture.

This guide integrates BlackRidge transition-readiness work with research on leader-role transitions, middle-manager strategy contribution, implementation, coordination, identity, capability development, and organizational context.

- ¹ Birken, S. A., Clary, A., Tabriz, A. A., et al. (2018). "Middle managers' role in implementing evidence-based practices in healthcare: a systematic review." *Implementation Science*, 13. Review of 105 records. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-018-0843-5>
- ² Tawse, A., Atwater, L., Vera, D., & Werner, S. (2023). "Strategy implementation: the role of middle manager leadership and coordination." *Journal of Strategy and Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/J SMA-01-2023-0007>
- ³ Hartviksen, T. A., Aspors, J., & Uhrenfeldt, L. (2019). "Healthcare middle managers' experiences of developing capacity and capability: a systematic review and meta-synthesis." *BMC Health Services Research*, 19. Synthesis of 23 studies involving 482 managers.
- ⁴ Engle, R. L., Lopez, E. R., Gormley, K. E., et al. (2017). "What roles do middle managers play in implementation of innovative practices?" *Health Care Management Review*, 42(1), 14-27.
- ⁵ Currie, G., & Procter, S. J. (2005). "The antecedents of middle managers' strategic contribution: The case of a professional bureaucracy." *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(7). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00546.x>
- ⁶ Harding, N., Lee, H., & Ford, J. (2014). "Who is 'the middle manager'?" *Human Relations*, 67(10). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713516654>
- ⁷ Gjerde, S., & Alvesson, M. (2020). "Sandwiched: Exploring role and identity of middle managers in the genuine middle." *Human Relations*, 73(1), 124-151.
- ⁸ Letierce, C., Mills, C. E., & Arnaud, N. (2023). "Empowering middle managers to free their strategic capabilities." *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.
- ⁹ Jiang, X., Agolli, A., & Harold, C. M. (2025). "Leader Role Transition: A Systematic Review and Agenda for Future Research." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Synthesis of 136 articles.
- ¹⁰ Kaiser, R. B. (2011). "The Leadership Pipeline: Fad, Fashion, or Empirical Fact?" *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10887156.2011.570126>
- ¹¹ Stoutamire, D. (2026). *The ARENA Readiness Gap*. BlackRidge Systems, LLC. Working research framework on the manager-of-managers transition.
- ¹² Huy, Q. N. (2011). "How middle managers' group-focus emotions and social identities influence strategy implementation." *Strategic Management Journal*, 32(13). <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.961>

Boundary: ARENA is not a validated selection instrument, performance score, or substitute for job analysis, structured assessment, employment law, and accountable human judgment. Evidence from middle-management research is context-sensitive and cannot establish deterministic prediction for one individual.

EVIDENCE STANDARD

Use the architecture to make the transition observable, developable, and reviewable—not to convert a complex leadership passage into false certainty.

► THE MANAGER-OF-MANAGERS PASSAGE

The leader is no longer the answer. The leader builds the system that can answer.

Leading through leaders means strategy can travel, judgment can distribute, managers can remain legitimate, and execution can adapt—without requiring the senior leader to become the permanent point of integration.

Explore ARENA

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Build the passage

ARENA Intensive · Leadership Readiness Diagnostic ·
Transition Evidence Design