

BLACKRIDGE SIGNAL FIELD GUIDE • 2026

Signs Someone Is Not Ready to Be a Manager

Six observable patterns, one organizational reality check, and a responsible path from “not yet” to stronger evidence.



6 Behavior signals to examine	1 Context check before judgment	3 Evidence tests over 90 days	0 Permanent labels required
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“Not ready” should describe the current evidence for a particular transition—not a person’s value, ambition, or permanent leadership potential.



► INSIDE THE FIELD GUIDE

Read the pattern. Test the interpretation.

00	Executive Summary	Why hesitation becomes useful only when converted into observable evidence.
01	The Boundary	“Not ready” is a developmental condition, not a fixed identity.
02	Personal Output	When individual execution remains the primary source of value and control.
03	Delegation	When ownership is dumped, blurred, or repeatedly reclaimed.
04	Judgment	When decisions stop until certainty or permission arrives.
05	Peer Contract	When preserving the old relationship prevents standards and accountability.
06	Pressure Response	When urgency triggers rescue, control, or reactive execution.
07	Learning Response	When feedback is heard but behavior does not change.
08	Context Check	When the organization—not the candidate—has failed to prepare the transition.
09	Evidence Plan	A 30–60–90 day path for testing readiness without staging a hidden trial.

► EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The signal is not the verdict. It is the start of the inquiry.

Organizations often know that a high performer is “not ready” before they can explain what the concern means. Unstructured hesitation is vulnerable to bias. A responsible decision translates concern into role-specific behavior, tests alternative explanations, and creates a fair opportunity to produce new evidence.

Leader transition research describes the move as a dynamic process of adjustment, identity transformation, and social construction—not a one-time reveal of latent leadership capacity.¹ First-time managers are learning new responsibilities while renegotiating who they are and how others relate to them.² Temporary tension is therefore not automatic proof of poor fit; longitudinal evidence suggests the transition can create short-term strain while later strengthening wellbeing and self-concept.³

Observe

Name behavior, not personality.

Replace “not strategic,” “too nice,” or “not leadership material” with a behavior that occurred in a consequential situation.

Compare

Connect it to the next-role demand.

Evidence matters only in relation to work that will actually change: responsibility, decisions, relationships, and pressure.

Test

Create a bounded evidence opportunity.

Give authority, clarity, feedback, and time. Then examine whether behavior changes across more than one occasion.

BLACKRIDGE FINDING

The responsible conclusion is rarely “this person cannot lead.” It is “we do not yet have sufficient evidence that this person can reorganize behavior for this transition under these conditions.”



► 01 • INTERPRET CAREFULLY

NOT YET

Readiness is relational to the transition—not resident inside the person.

A behavior becomes a readiness concern only when it is connected to a consequential demand in the role ahead, repeated or corroborated, and not better explained by missing authority, unclear expectations, workload, or support.

Weak interpretation	Evidence-safe interpretation	Question that follows
“She is not leadership material.”	In two cross-functional decisions, she deferred after receiving defined authority.	Does judgment improve when assumptions, decision rights, and consequences are made explicit?
“He cannot delegate.”	He transferred tasks but retained all decisions and corrected work without feedback.	Can he transfer an outcome with guardrails and allow another person to own the method?
“They are too close to the team.”	They avoided addressing a repeated standards gap with a former peer.	Can they reset expectations respectfully when relationship and responsibility conflict?
“She is defensive.”	After specific feedback, the same behavior continued across three occasions without a revised approach.	What does she understand, dispute, need, or fear—and what behavior changes next?

Do not confuse exposure with readiness. Lack of experience may create missing evidence; it does not prove inability. The remedy is a realistic, supported opportunity—not unsupported promotion or permanent exclusion.

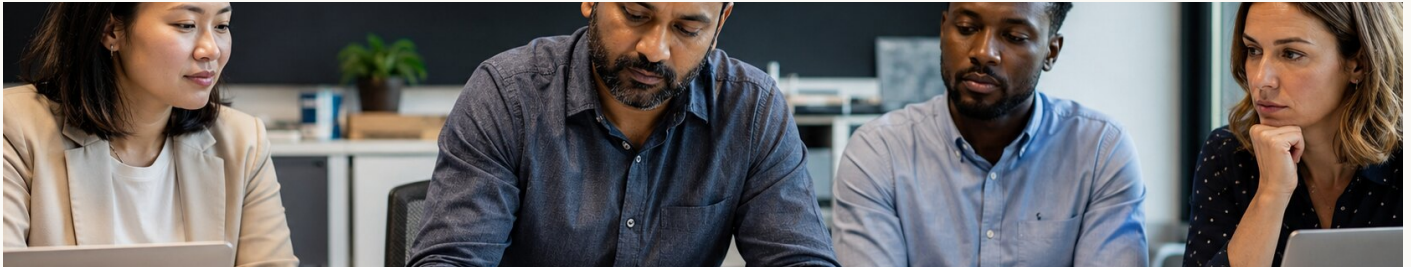
BOUNDARY RULE

A signal deserves weight when it is observable, role-relevant, repeated, contextualized, and open to disconfirming evidence.

► **02 • SOURCE OF VALUE**

01

Personal output remains the only credible proof of value.



WHAT CHANGES

The manager's contribution moves from producing the answer personally to creating the conditions in which other people can produce, coordinate, learn, and deliver.

Strong individual contributors are often rewarded for speed, expertise, accuracy, and personal reliability. The first manager transition does not make those strengths irrelevant; it changes where and how they should be applied. Identity research shows that becoming a manager involves ongoing negotiation between continuity and change, knowing and not knowing, and progress and standstill.² Difficulty releasing the former identity is therefore understandable—but it becomes consequential when team ownership never grows.

SIGNALS TO OBSERVE

- Measures a good day by tasks personally completed.
- Joins every technical problem, even when others can solve it.
- Becomes anxious when the team's method differs from their own.
- Uses expertise to close discussion rather than improve thinking.

EVIDENCE TEST

- Assign a meaningful outcome that cannot be completed alone.
- Require a clear ownership map and decision boundaries.
- Observe whether the candidate creates capacity or becomes the bottleneck.
- Review both result quality and growth in team independence.

DO NOT OVERREAD

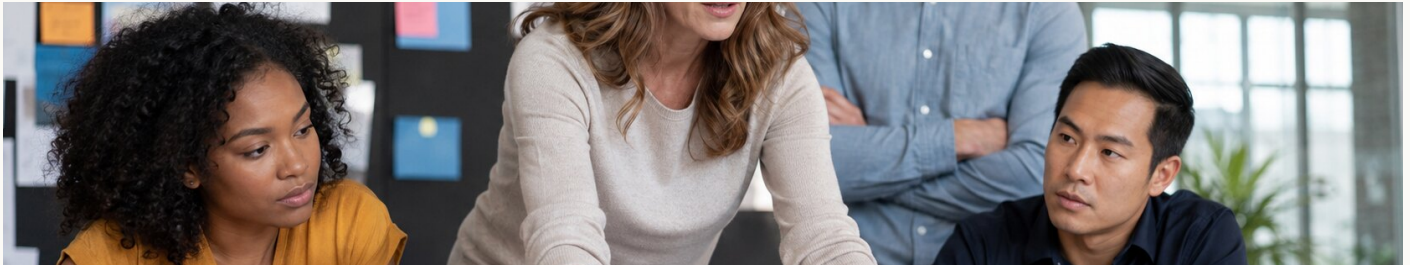
Stepping in during a true emergency is not the signal. The signal is a recurring inability to create value without becoming the center of execution.

► 03 • TRANSFER OWNERSHIP

02

Delegation means dumping tasks —or taking the work back.

Delegation is not workload disposal. It is a negotiated transfer of outcome ownership, authority, constraints, support, and accountability.



Outcome What must become true, for whom, by when, and why does it matter?

Authority Which decisions move with the work, and which remain reserved?

Guardrails What standards, resources, risks, and escalation points apply?

Learning How will progress be reviewed without reclaiming the work?

The rescue loop

The candidate delegates, discomfort rises, the candidate intervenes, and the team learns that ownership is temporary. Each rescue appears efficient in the moment while making the manager more necessary over time.

Watch for corrections made without explanation, parallel work created “just in case,” or high-visibility assignments assigned while all meaningful decisions remain centralized.

The abandonment loop

The candidate hands over an underdefined task, provides little authority or context, and later treats failure as evidence that the person was unreliable. This is not empowerment; it is ambiguity with transferred blame.

Newcomer research consistently identifies role clarity and social acceptance as central adjustment mechanisms.⁴

EVIDENCE TEST

Observe whether another person can explain the outcome, boundaries, decisions they own, when to escalate, and how feedback will occur—without the candidate answering for them.

► 04 · ACT BEFORE CERTAINTY

03

Decisions stop until certainty—or permission—arrives.



THE DISTINCTION

Good judgment is not fast certainty. It is the disciplined ability to decide, escalate, or learn while making assumptions, trade-offs, exposure, and reversibility visible.

Observable pattern	Possible interpretation	Alternative explanation to test
Requests repeated approval after authority is defined	Low tolerance for accountable judgment	Past punishment for reasonable decisions; contradictory sponsorship
Extends analysis after the decision threshold is met	Certainty dependence	Unclear consequence, stakeholder, or risk boundary
Escalates the problem without a recommendation	Responsibility transfer	Insufficient information or legitimate reserved authority
Acts quickly but cannot explain the trade-off	Impulse mistaken for decisiveness	Time-critical condition with an accepted operating rule

SCENARIO PROMPT

Provide incomplete, conflicting information and a decision deadline. Ask the candidate to decide, defer, or escalate—and to state assumptions, affected stakeholders, downside exposure, and what evidence would trigger revision.

WHAT STRONG EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

The candidate separates facts from assumptions, defines a threshold, distinguishes reversible from irreversible moves, owns a recommendation, and revises without defending ego.

BLACKRIDGE FINDING

The signal is not caution. It is the repeated transfer of judgment upward after the role requires the person to carry it.

► 05 • RELATIONSHIP CHANGE

04

The old peer contract remains more important than the new responsibility.

Promotion from within changes the social contract. The new manager must preserve dignity and trust while becoming willing to clarify standards, distribute opportunity, address performance, protect confidence, and make decisions that former peers may dislike.



Leader-role transition is socially constructed: the person claims a leader identity while others grant, resist, or renegotiate it.¹ That makes former-peer leadership a relational passage—not merely a communication challenge.

Belonging

Avoids necessary tension

Withholds feedback, makes exceptions, or keeps information informal to preserve the old sense of equality.

Distance

Overcorrects into authority

Becomes rigid, secretive, or performatively decisive to prove the role has changed.

Boundary

Fails to reset the contract

Never explains what will remain, what must change, how decisions will work, or how fairness will be protected.

EVIDENCE CONVERSATION

Ask the candidate to conduct a real or simulated conversation with a former peer whose performance no longer meets a defined standard. Observe respect, directness, listening, consequences, and follow-through.

DISCONFIRMING EVIDENCE

Look for an occasion when the candidate protected a relationship by making the standard clearer—not by lowering it—and remained available after the difficult moment.

INTERPRETATION RULE

Warmth is not weakness, and discomfort is not unreadiness. The concern is whether the candidate can carry responsibility when belonging and accountability pull in different directions.

► 06 • BEHAVIOR UNDER LOAD

05

Pressure pulls the candidate back into rescue, control, or reactivity.

WHY IT MATTERS

Readiness is not demonstrated only in calm conditions. The transition changes workload, visibility, emotional labor, and the number of outcomes that can fail at once.

Entry stressors—including role ambiguity, conflict, overload, and unmet expectations—have been linked to adjustment outcomes.⁵ First-time leadership can also produce a temporary increase in tension at the point of transition.³ The question is not whether pressure exists. It is what pressure reorganizes—and whether the candidate can recover deliberately.

Pressure pattern	Immediate effect	Compounding consequence	Recovery evidence
Rescue	Manager completes the work	Team waits; capacity does not grow	Re-establishes ownership and turns intervention into learning
Control	Decisions and information centralize	Speed drops; escalation rises	Restores bounded authority and decision rules
Reactivity	Urgent signal becomes top priority	Trade-offs remain invisible	Re-prioritizes against outcomes and communicates consequences
Withdrawal	Hard conversations and decisions wait	Ambiguity spreads through the team	Names capacity limits and re-engages with a concrete plan

EVIDENCE TEST

Observe more than the pressure moment. Readiness appears in the recovery: naming the pattern, restoring ownership, repairing effects, and changing the operating rule before the next test.

07 • RESPONSE TO EVIDENCE

06

Feedback is acknowledged, but behavior does not change.

A candidate does not need finished manager behavior before promotion. They do need evidence that experience, feedback, and consequences can alter how they think and act.

Listening can imitate learning

Agreement, gratitude, fluent reflection, and a compelling explanation are not themselves evidence of change. The stronger indicator is a revised behavior in the next relevant situation—followed by reflection on what worked, what did not, and what will change again.

Proactive feedback seeking and relationship building have been associated with role clarity and social integration during organizational entry.⁶

Defensiveness has multiple sources

A candidate may dispute feedback because it is vague, biased, contradictory, or disconnected from authority. Before interpreting resistance as low coachability, make the behavior, consequence, standard, and next evidence opportunity concrete.

The assessor must remain open to the possibility that the feedback—not the candidate—is weak.

Learning evidence	Weak signal	Stronger signal
Sensemaking	Repeats the feedback accurately	Connects behavior to consequence and identifies the operating assumption
Experiment	Promises to “do better”	Defines a different behavior, situation, support, and observation point
Transfer	Changes once while being watched	Applies the learning across situations without reproducing the original problem elsewhere
Revision	Defends the first adjustment	Uses the result to refine the approach again

READINESS SIGNAL

The most useful predictor available to a development system may be neither polish nor confidence, but the speed and quality with which evidence changes behavior.

► 08 • EXAMINE THE SYSTEM

Sometimes the organization is not ready for the manager.

Before labeling a person, test whether the organization has transferred the authority, clarity, workload, sponsorship, and social permission required to perform the new role.

Systematic and scoping reviews of first-line transitions emphasize identity, role clarity, structured learning, organizational alignment, mentoring, and workload management.^{1,7,8} Research on management-learning transfer also identifies support, reinforcement, opportunity, relevance, and time pressure as conditions that affect whether learning reaches the workplace.⁹

System failure	What it can look like	Readiness distortion	Required correction
Shadow management	Former manager keeps decisions and relationships	Candidate appears hesitant or lacks authority	Publish decision rights and stop bypass behavior
Full IC workload	Candidate retains previous output while adding people responsibility	Delegation looks weak because time and capacity are impossible	Remove work; redefine contribution and priorities
Ambiguous mandate	Stakeholders expect incompatible outcomes	Judgment appears inconsistent	Clarify outcomes, trade-offs, escalation, and sponsor
Unsupported peer reset	Senior leaders privately preserve the old hierarchy	Former peers do not grant legitimacy	Publicly establish role, standards, and reporting boundary
Training without transfer	Workshop ends; operating conditions remain unchanged	Candidate is blamed for non-use	Create practice, observation, reinforcement, and feedback

CONTEXT RULE

Do not use individual assessment to explain performance that the system has made structurally unlikely.

► 09 • AVOID FALSE CONFIDENCE

Six ways a “not ready” decision becomes unreliable.

01

Trait language

Ambiguous labels replace behavior: presence, gravitas, fit, confidence, maturity.

02

Single incident

One mistake becomes a stable conclusion without comparable demands or occasions.

03

Style preference

The assessor rewards familiarity with their own communication or leadership pattern.

04

Exposure penalty

No prior opportunity is interpreted as inability rather than missing evidence.

05

Context blindness

Unclear authority and impossible workload are assigned to individual deficit.

06

Moving standard

Criteria change after the candidate responds, protecting the original impression.

Control: Before discussion, each reviewer records the role demand, observed behavior, source, consequence, alternative explanation, confidence, and next evidence action. This makes the inference challengeable.

DECISION INTEGRITY

If the organization cannot describe what would change its conclusion, “not ready” has become a protected belief rather than a developmental judgment.

Turn “not yet” into a time-bounded evidence plan.

Period	Purpose	Candidate experience	Organization responsibility	Evidence captured
Days 1-30 Define	Translate concern into a future-role demand	Reviews the signal, supplies context, and co-defines the behavior experiment	Clarifies authority, workload, support, standard, and decision owner	Baseline examples; role delta; alternative explanations; success indicators
Days 31-60 Practice	Create repeated, realistic opportunities	Leads a bounded assignment involving ownership, judgment, relationships, or pressure	Provides sponsor access, observation, feedback, and protection from shadow management	Behavior across occasions; work artifacts; stakeholder effects; candidate reflection
Days 61-90 Transfer	Test whether learning generalizes	Applies the revised behavior in a different setting with less prompting	Maintains comparable expectations and reviews system conditions	Pattern strength; contradictions; support dependence; remaining uncertainty

A fair plan includes

- A demand the role actually requires.
- Behavior the candidate can understand and influence.
- Authority and resources sufficient to act.
- Multiple observations and named observers.
- A fixed review date and possible decision paths.

A hidden trial includes

- Unspoken standards and surprise evaluation.
- Work added without workload removal.
- Responsibility without authority.
- Selective observation after the conclusion is formed.
- No development support or disconfirming evidence.

DEVELOPMENT RULE

The plan should generate evidence and capability at the same time. Assessment without development wastes the transition.

► 11 • MAKE A RESPONSIBLE DECISION

End with a pathway—not a personality judgment.

Ready with conditions

Evidence matches the demands sufficiently, while named risks require sponsor support, workload change, or early checkpoints. Conditions belong in the transition plan.

Extend the evidence period

Promising behavior is visible but coverage, repetition, or context remains weak. Define exactly what is missing, why it matters, and when the decision will return.

Develop before movement

The signal is repeated and role-relevant, but appears learnable. Keep the candidate in a developmental passage with real work, feedback, and a new review date.

Redirect the pathway

The role's demands or conditions do not fit the person's desired contribution at this time. Preserve dignity, reward expertise, and provide an alternative route rather than treating management as the only advancement.

The review conversation

Say	Show	Own
"The concern is about this transition demand—not your value or long-term potential."	The observed behavior, source, consequence, uncertainty, and alternative explanation.	The organization's role in authority, exposure, sponsorship, workload, and feedback.
"Here is the evidence that would change the conclusion."	The experience, standard, observers, review date, and possible paths.	A fair opportunity and a decision that does not move the goalposts.

FINAL QUESTION

What would we expect to observe if our current interpretation were wrong—and have we created a fair chance for that evidence to appear?

► RESEARCH FOUNDATION

This field guide structures judgment. It does not predict destiny.

The six signals synthesize BlackRidge transition-readiness research with literature on leader-role transition, managerial identity, newcomer adjustment, feedback seeking, wellbeing, learning transfer, and first-line manager development.

- ¹ Jiang, X., Agolli, A., & Harold, C. M. (2025). "Leader Role Transition: A Systematic Review and Agenda for Future Research." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Systematic review of 136 articles.
- ² Bolander, P., Holmberg, I., & Fellbom, E. (2019). "Learning to become manager: The identity work of first-time managers." *Management Learning*, 50, 282–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507618820711>
- ³ Fletcher, K., & French, K. A. (2021). "Longitudinal effects of transitioning into a first-time leadership position on wellbeing and self-concept." *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000302>
- ⁴ Bauer, T. N., Bodner, T., Erdogan, B., Truxillo, D. M., & Tucker, J. S. (2007). "Newcomer adjustment during organizational socialization." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), 707–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.3.707>
- ⁵ Saks, A. M., & Ashforth, B. E. (2000). "The role of dispositions, entry stressors, and behavioral plasticity theory in predicting newcomers' adjustment to work." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21(1), 43–62. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-1379\(200002\)21:1<43::AID-JOB985>3.0.CO;2-W](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(200002)21:1<43::AID-JOB985>3.0.CO;2-W)
- ⁶ Wanberg, C. R., & Kammeyer-Mueller, J. D. (2000). "Predictors and outcomes of proactivity in the socialization process." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(3), 373–385. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.85.3.373>
- ⁷ Westen, W., & Graça, M. (2024). "Managerial identity work: a systematic literature review with a conceptual model." *Management Review Quarterly*. PRISMA synthesis of 61 empirical studies.
- ⁸ Esquisábel-Soteras, B., Olano-Lizarraga, M., Pardavila-Belio, M., & Vázquez-Calatayud, M. (2025). "Developing effective transition programmes for first-line nurse managers." *Nurse Education in Practice*, 88, 104537.
- ⁹ Belling, R., James, K., & Ladkin, D. (2004). "Back to the workplace: How organisations can improve their support for management learning and development." *Journal of Management Development*, 23(3), 234–255. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710410524104>
- ¹⁰ Stoutamire, D. (2026). *The SHIFT Readiness Gap*. BlackRidge Systems, LLC. SSRN 6545619. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6545619>
- ¹¹ Plakhotnik, M. S., Rocco, T. S., & Roberts, N. A. (2011). "Increasing retention and success of first-time managers." *Human Resource Development Review*, 10, 26–45.
- ¹² Hammond, M. M., Thrasher, G., & Lester, G. V. (2025). "A Systematic Review of the Leader Identity Research." *Organizational Psychology Review*, 15, 321–357.

Boundary: This report is not a validated diagnostic instrument, employment test, clinical assessment, or substitute for job analysis, legal review, structured selection practice, and human judgment. Signals must not be used as proxies for protected characteristics, cultural conformity, disability, or a preferred leadership style.

EVIDENCE STANDARD

Use the guide to make reasoning visible, generate better evidence, and preserve uncertainty—not to manufacture a scientific-looking score.



► THE FIRST TRANSITION

Do not promote the résumé. Prepare the passage.

Readiness is the evidence that a person can reorganize behavior for different responsibility—and that the organization is prepared to let the transition become real.

Explore the research

blackridgeinstitute.com/leadership-readiness
blackridgeinstitute.com/first-time-managers

Build the evidence passage

SHIFT Intensive · Leadership Readiness Diagnostic ·
Transition Evidence Design