

BLACKRIDGE ASCENT TRANSITION GUIDE • 2026

When Functional Success Stops Scaling

The senior-leader transition: from running the plan inside one function to setting direction, integrating competing systems, and making choices for the organization as a whole.



1

Enterprise view to construct

5

ASCENT leadership shifts

4

Competing systems to integrate

90

Days to test the passage

Functional success proves that a leader can optimize a part of the organization. ASCENT asks whether that leader can make the part serve the whole—especially when the enterprise decision makes the home function less comfortable.

► INSIDE THE GUIDE

The ASCENT transition

00	Executive Summary	Why functional excellence becomes insufficient—and sometimes counterproductive—at enterprise altitude.
01	The Passage	From running the plan to setting direction across an interdependent organizational system.
02	Release Functional Identity	Preserve expertise without treating one function’s logic as the enterprise truth.
03	Construct the Enterprise View	Integrate customer, people, operations, finance, risk, and future capability.
04	Set Direction in Ambiguity	Create usable strategic intent before certainty or full agreement exists.
05	Allocate for the Whole	Move resources toward enterprise value rather than legacy ownership or advocacy strength.
06	Integrate Across Functions	Turn constructive divergence into coordinated organizational action.
07	Hold Competing Time Horizons	Protect present performance while creating future capability.
08	Build the Senior Team	Move from a collection of advocates to an enterprise decision body.
09	90-Day Passage	A practical evidence plan for testing whether functional success can become enterprise leadership.

▶ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The senior leader must stop winning only from one chair.

Functional leaders succeed by building expertise, discipline, standards, talent, and reliable delivery within a defined domain. Senior leaders inherit a different problem. They must integrate domains whose goals, evidence, time horizons, and incentives frequently conflict—and decide what best serves the organization when no function can receive everything it reasonably wants.

This transition changes the leader's cognitive and relational work. Research on enterprise leadership describes a move from specialist to generalist, analyst to integrator, tactician to strategist, problem solver to agenda setter, and functional advocate to organizational architect.¹ Research on organizational ambidexterity adds another demand: senior leaders must help the organization exploit present strengths while exploring future possibilities, using organization design and senior-team processes to hold the tension.^{2,3}

Perspective

See the whole system.

Build a view that combines functional evidence without allowing any one function to define value, risk, or urgency alone.

Direction

Choose before certainty.

Set intent, priorities, and boundaries while preserving the ability to revise as evidence and conditions change.

Integration

Make trade-offs explicit.

Resolve competing claims on capital, talent, time, attention, and future capability at enterprise—not political—altitude.

BLACKRIDGE FINDING

Functional excellence becomes a liability when the leader continues to optimize a part after becoming responsible for the performance, adaptability, and coherence of the whole.

► 01 • CHANGE THE ALTITUDE

ASCENT

The work expands from execution to system.

ASCENT begins when a leader can no longer define success only by the performance of a function. The senior role carries direction, integration, resource consequence, stakeholder confidence, and the future capability of the organization.

Release Loosen identity dependence on one function.	Integrate Build an enterprise view from competing evidence.	Direct Set strategic intent under ambiguity.	Allocate Move scarce resources toward enterprise value.	Balance Protect the present while creating the future.
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Functional success pattern	ASCENT demand	Risk if unchanged
Advocate for the function	Represent enterprise consequence—even when the function gives something up	Senior-team decisions become negotiated protection of local interests
Master domain evidence	Integrate partial, incompatible, and differently timed evidence	What is measurable in one domain crowds out what matters elsewhere
Execute the plan	Set direction and define what should no longer be pursued	Activity scales faster than strategic coherence
Solve within boundaries	Redesign boundaries, interfaces, priorities, and resource flows	Cross-functional problems are repeatedly returned to functional solutions

TRANSITION STANDARD

The passage is working when the leader can protect functional excellence while making decisions that improve enterprise coherence, adaptability, and long-term value.

► 02 • PRESERVE EXPERTISE WITHOUT BEING CAPTURED BY IT

01

The function should inform the leader—not own the leader.

IDENTITY SHIFT

The senior leader retains functional fluency while becoming willing to challenge the assumptions, interests, measures, and preferred solutions of the domain that produced their credibility.

Promotion does not erase professional identity. It changes its authority. A finance leader may privilege economic evidence; an operations leader may prioritize reliability; a commercial leader may center customer growth; a people leader may emphasize workforce effects. Each lens reveals something important—and each can distort the whole when treated as sufficient.

FUNCTIONAL CAPTURE

- Returns to home-domain detail when enterprise discussion becomes uncertain.
- Uses one function's measures as the default definition of value.
- Protects legacy resources by reframing every trade-off as unacceptable risk.
- Builds senior-team alliances around function rather than enterprise outcome.

ENTERPRISE EVIDENCE

- Can articulate the strongest argument against the home function's position.
- Identifies where functional success produces cost or constraint elsewhere.
- Supports a decision that disadvantages the function but advances enterprise intent.
- Uses expertise to improve integration rather than dominate it.

Do not overcorrect. Enterprise leadership does not require generic leadership without expertise. It requires the disciplined use of expertise as one input in a larger decision architecture.

IDENTITY FINDING

The leader has not left the function behind. The leader has changed the function's place in the hierarchy of responsibility.

► 03 • INTEGRATE PARTIAL TRUTHS

02

No function has a complete view of the enterprise.

The enterprise view is not a larger dashboard. It is a constructed understanding of how customer value, financial capacity, people capability, operating performance, risk, and future positioning affect one another.

System lens	Question it answers	Distortion if isolated
Customer	What problem, experience, or relationship creates durable value?	Demand becomes the only proof, regardless of economics or capability
Financial	What can the organization fund, sustain, and defend?	Near-term return suppresses capability and future option value
People	What capacity, leadership, behavior, and trust can the organization realistically mobilize?	Preference is mistaken for operating feasibility
Operations	What can the system deliver reliably, safely, and at scale?	Current process becomes the boundary of strategic possibility
Risk	What exposure, obligation, or irreversible consequence must be protected?	Risk avoidance becomes strategy by default
Future	What capability, market, technology, or relationship must exist next?	Possibility is funded without execution discipline

Integration is not averaging

Enterprise judgment does not split the difference between functional positions. It identifies the governing outcome, exposes assumptions, values consequences, and makes a coherent choice.

Integration is not consensus

Different evidence can remain legitimately in tension. The senior leader must make the divergence visible enough to decide without manufacturing false agreement.

ENTERPRISE STANDARD

A strong enterprise view explains not only what the organization should do, but what each system must absorb—and what evidence could change the choice.

► 04 • DECIDE BEFORE THE MAP IS COMPLETE

03

Senior leadership begins where the plan can no longer be inherited.

DIRECTION

Strategic direction establishes the few outcomes, choices, boundaries, and trade-offs that allow multiple functions to act coherently when the future remains uncertain.

Functional leadership often begins with an established enterprise plan and asks how the function will execute it. Senior leadership must help decide what the organization will pursue, stop, protect, sequence, and learn—before every implication is visible.

Reality What has changed in the environment, system, mission, customer, or capability?

Choice What will the organization prioritize—and what will it deliberately not optimize?

Intent What must become true, why does it matter, and which boundaries remain?

Adaptation What evidence, threshold, or consequence will trigger review or revision?

False precision

The leader delays direction until forecasts appear certain, then converts assumptions into detailed commitments that make revision politically expensive.

More detail creates the appearance of control while narrowing the organization's capacity to learn.

Disciplined ambiguity

The leader names what is known, unknown, assumed, reversible, and exposed; sets intent and boundaries; and creates a decision cadence tied to evidence.

Clarity exists about how to move even when certainty does not exist about the future.

04

A budget is a strategy only when it reveals what the organization chose.

ASCENT makes resource allocation a leadership act. Capital, talent, attention, data, and management capacity must move toward the enterprise’s chosen future—not remain where history, hierarchy, or advocacy made them easiest to defend.

Allocation question	Functional response	Enterprise response
Where should scarce capacity go?	To the function with the most urgent backlog or persuasive sponsor	To the governing enterprise outcome, with explicit accepted consequences elsewhere
What should be protected?	Existing commitments and service levels	Critical performance plus the capabilities required for future viability
What should stop?	Low-visibility work that lacks an advocate	Work whose value, strategic fit, or opportunity cost no longer justifies continuation
How should uncertainty be funded?	Wait for a complete business case	Use bounded options, staged investment, learning thresholds, and exit criteria

ALLOCATION THEATER

Every priority survives, reductions are spread evenly, future work is added without stopping legacy work, and the organization is told to “be agile” inside unchanged constraints.

ALLOCATION EVIDENCE

Resources visibly move; some work stops; consequences are acknowledged; future capability has protected ownership; and review points are tied to value and learning.

RESOURCE FINDING

The senior leader’s values become observable in what receives capacity, what absorbs pain, and what the organization is finally willing to stop.

05

Integration is the work of turning legitimate conflict into coordinated action.

Functions disagree because they see different consequences, operate on different clocks, and are accountable for different failure modes. Senior leadership should not remove that divergence. It should prevent divergence from becoming fragmentation.

Research on senior-leadership teams suggests that constructive divergence can be surfaced through practices that value tensions rather than forcing premature resolution.⁴ Shared leadership and integrated decision processes have also been linked to organizational ambidexterity through cooperative conflict management and decision comprehensiveness.⁵

Integration move	Leadership question	Evidence that it worked
Expose the governing tension	What two legitimate goods cannot both be maximized?	The disagreement becomes specific enough to decide
Separate position from consequence	What is each function protecting, and why does it matter?	Teams can challenge proposals without dismissing expertise
Choose enterprise logic	Which outcome and time horizon govern this decision?	The trade-off can be explained beyond political power
Assign the absorbed cost	Who must change, stop, wait, or carry risk?	Consequences have owners, support, and review points
Preserve learning	What evidence would reopen the choice?	The organization can adapt without relitigating identity

INTEGRATION FINDING

Alignment is not everyone preferring the decision. It is every function understanding the enterprise logic, the consequences it must carry, and the coordinated action now required.

► 07 • PROTECT TODAY AND BUILD TOMORROW

The organization must exploit what works while exploring what could replace it.

Senior leaders inherit a permanent tension: current operations demand reliability, efficiency, and focus; future viability demands experimentation, variation, patience, and the willingness to challenge the system producing today's results.

A systematic review of 141 articles describes ambidextrous leadership as a multilevel challenge shaped by individual willingness and capability, team dynamics, and organizational context.⁶ Case research across thirteen organizations further suggests that successful ambidexterity depends on interrelated choices in organization design and senior-team process.²

Exploit

Perform the present

Reliability, quality, efficiency, repeatability, customer delivery, risk control, and disciplined execution.

Explore

Create the future

Experimentation, new capability, strategic options, learning, adaptation, and permission to invalidate current assumptions.

Integrate

Hold the tension

Separate where necessary, connect where valuable, allocate intentionally, and prevent the current business from automatically consuming the future.

Failure by protection

The core business controls resources and evidence standards, making future work prove itself on the current system's time horizon.

Failure by novelty

Future initiatives receive symbolic priority without operating discipline, integration, ownership, or a path to organizational value.

AMBIDEXTERITY STANDARD

ASCENT readiness appears when the leader can preserve the tension long enough to learn—without allowing tension to become indecision, fragmentation, or permanent exemption from results.

► 08 • BUILD AN ENTERPRISE DECISION BODY

A collection of strong functional leaders is not automatically a senior team.

The senior team becomes real when its members treat enterprise outcomes—not the defense of their functions—as the shared work. Functional advocacy remains necessary, but it must occur inside a decision system capable of integration, consequence, and collective ownership.

Team condition	Functional council	Enterprise team
Agenda	Updates, escalations, and requests from each function	Enterprise choices, cross-system consequences, future positioning, and collective exposure
Identity	"I represent my organization."	"I contribute my domain and own the enterprise decision."
Conflict	Positions are negotiated until each function can tolerate the result	Underlying tensions are surfaced and governed by shared enterprise logic
Decision	Power, precedent, and advocacy strength shape allocation	Outcome, consequence, evidence, and time horizon are made explicit
After the room	Members explain what "leadership decided"	Members carry collective ownership and translate consequences consistently

Senior-team trap: The leader asks for enterprise behavior while continuing to evaluate each executive almost entirely on functional performance. Incentives then make integration a personal sacrifice rather than a role expectation.

READINESS QUESTION

Can the leader enter the room with a strong functional position, change that position after hearing enterprise evidence, and return to the function as an owner of the collective decision?

SYSTEM QUESTION

Does the organization reward the leader for enterprise contribution—or punish every decision that makes the function absorb a reasonable cost?

► 09 • CHANGE THE CONDITIONS, NOT ONLY THE MESSAGE

Senior leaders create the system in which strategy becomes possible.

ASCENT moves the leader from working inside the organization's design to becoming accountable for whether structure, measures, talent, decision rights, information, and culture can support the chosen direction.

Architecture element	Question	Misalignment signal
Structure	Where must differentiation or integration change?	Cross-functional work depends on heroic relationships
Decision rights	Which choices should move, remain, or be shared?	Escalation becomes the default coordination mechanism
Measures	What behavior and trade-off do current metrics reward?	Functions optimize locally while enterprise outcomes degrade
Talent	Which capabilities and leadership passages does the direction require?	Strategy assumes people and management capacity that do not exist
Information	What evidence must cross boundaries and at what speed?	Senior decisions rely on filtered functional narratives
Culture	Which unwritten rules will reinforce or reject the choice?	Public strategy and private survival behavior diverge

Research on enterprise and ambidextrous leadership repeatedly points beyond individual style to organization design, senior-team process, structural differentiation, connectedness, and decentralization as conditions that shape whether competing demands can be integrated.^{2,5,7}

ARCHITECTURE FINDING

If the strategy requires behavior the organization systematically punishes, the senior leader has announced direction without building the conditions for movement.

► 10 • DIAGNOSE THE STALLED ASCENT

Six patterns reveal that functional success has stopped scaling.

01

Home-function gravity

Uncertainty repeatedly pulls the leader back into familiar detail, relationships, evidence, and direct control.

02

Advocacy without integration

The senior team becomes a resource contest among credible leaders protecting legitimate local interests.

03

Execution without direction

The leader drives more activity because choosing what to stop would expose strategic disagreement.

04

Consensus dependency

Direction waits until every function agrees, allowing the least comfortable stakeholder to define the pace of decision.

05

Even-spread allocation

Resources are reduced or increased proportionally so that no function must absorb the consequence of a real choice.

06

Future by addition

Exploration is layered onto current commitments without stopping legacy work or protecting different learning conditions.

Diagnostic caution: Deep functional involvement can be appropriate during crisis, succession gaps, regulatory exposure, or major capability failure. The concern is persistent role collapse without a bounded purpose, transfer plan, and exit condition.

PASSAGE TEST

When the enterprise choice conflicts with the home function's preferred outcome, what does the leader protect first—and can the reasoning withstand scrutiny from every side?

► 11 • TEST ASCENT READINESS

Build evidence in the decisions that force enterprise altitude.

Period	Leadership shift	Evidence experience	Evidence captured
Days 1-30 See	Map functional identity, enterprise stakeholders, competing measures, cross-system constraints, and inherited priorities.	Construct an enterprise view of one consequential issue using evidence from at least four systems.	Assumption map; functional bias check; stakeholder consequences; missing evidence; governing outcome.
Days 31-60 Choose	Set direction and make a trade-off that cannot be solved by adding work or satisfying every function.	Lead a senior-team decision involving resource movement, a stop decision, or a visible absorbed cost.	Decision logic; constructive divergence; consequence ownership; translation consistency; system support.
Days 61-90 Build	Align architecture and test whether the choice survives outside the decision room.	Change a measure, decision right, interface, resource flow, or talent condition required by the direction.	Behavior transfer; cross-functional execution; adaptation signal; future capability; remaining contradiction.

ASCENT evidence review

Enterprise perspective

Does the leader integrate multiple systems and identify where functional success creates enterprise cost?

Strategic direction

Can the leader choose, stop, sequence, and revise under ambiguity without hiding behind analysis or consensus?

Integration

Can the leader surface legitimate conflict, establish enterprise logic, and coordinate the absorbed consequences?

Organizational architecture

Can the leader change conditions—rather than repeatedly demanding behavior the existing system prevents?

90-DAY STANDARD

The goal is not to sound more strategic. It is to produce evidence that the leader can carry the organization's whole system when the functions cannot all win.

► RESEARCH FOUNDATION

ASCENT is an evidence-informed transition architecture.

This guide integrates BlackRidge transition-readiness work with research on enterprise leadership, organizational ambidexterity, cross-functional integration, senior-team processes, strategic direction, and role transition.

- ¹ Watkins, M. D. (2012). "How Managers Become Leaders: The Seven Seismic Shifts of Perspective and Responsibility." *Harvard Business Review*, 90(6), 64–72.
- ² O'Reilly, C. A., & Tushman, M. L. (2011). "Organizational Ambidexterity in Action: How Managers Explore and Exploit." *California Management Review*, 53(4), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1525/cmvr.2011.53.4.5>
- ³ O'Reilly, C. A., & Tushman, M. L. (2008). "Ambidexterity as a Dynamic Capability: Resolving the Innovator's Dilemma." *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 28, 185–206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2008.06.002>
- ⁴ Knight, E., & Cuganesan, S. (2020). "Enabling organizational ambidexterity: Valuation practices and the senior-leadership team." *Human Relations*, 73(2), 190–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718823247>
- ⁵ Mihalache, O. R., Jansen, J. J. P., Van den Bosch, F. A. J., & Volberda, H. W. (2014). "Top Management Team Shared Leadership and Organizational Ambidexterity." *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/sej.1168>
- ⁶ Gianzina, O., & Paroutis, S. (2025). "Ambidextrous leadership: A systematic review and roadmap for future research." *Journal of Business Research*. Systematic review of 141 articles.
- ⁷ Jansen, J. J. P., George, G., Van den Bosch, F. A. J., & Volberda, H. W. (2008). "Senior Team Attributes and Organizational Ambidexterity." *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2008.00775.x>
- ⁸ Tempelaar, M. P., & Rosenkranz, N. A. (2019). "Switching Hats: The Effect of Role Transition on Individual Ambidexterity." *Journal of Management*, 45(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206317714312>
- ⁹ Ready, D. A., & Peebles, M. E. (2015). "Developing the Next Generation of Enterprise Leaders." *MIT Sloan Management Review*.
- ¹⁰ Ready, D. A. (2004). "Leading at the Enterprise Level." *MIT Sloan Management Review*.
- ¹¹ Jiang, X., Agolli, A., & Harold, C. M. (2025). "Leader Role Transition: A Systematic Review and Agenda for Future Research." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Review of 136 articles.
- ¹² Stoutamire, D. (2026). *The ASCENT Readiness Gap*. BlackRidge Systems, LLC. SSRN 6733581. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6733581>

Boundary: ASCENT is not a validated selection instrument, performance score, or substitute for job analysis, structured assessment, employment law, and accountable human judgment. Research on enterprise leadership and ambidexterity is context-sensitive and cannot establish deterministic prediction for one individual.

EVIDENCE STANDARD

Use the architecture to make the passage observable, developable, and reviewable—not to convert complex enterprise judgment into a universal competency checklist.

► THE SENIOR-LEADER PASSAGE

The function proves expertise. The enterprise tests judgment.

ASCENT readiness is the evidence that a leader can integrate competing systems, set direction before certainty, allocate for enterprise value, and build the organizational conditions in which the whole can move.

Explore ASCENT

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Build the passage

ASCENT Intensive · Leadership Readiness Diagnostic ·
Transition Evidence Design