

"The organizations that succeed in uncertain environments are not those with the most detailed plans—they are those that can adapt fastest while remaining aligned around a shared purpose."

—Stanley McChrystal

Retired U.S. Army General and author of *Team of Teams*

THE MAP VS. THE TERRAIN

A LEADER'S FIELD GUIDE TO
NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

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PREVIEW

Praise for *The Map vs. the Terrain*

“The organizations that succeed in uncertain environments are not those with the most detailed plans—they are those that can adapt fastest while remaining aligned around a shared purpose. Bill Fournet captures that reality with clarity and practicality. *The Map vs. the Terrain* reminds us that leadership is ultimately about creating the conditions for teams to think, learn, and act effectively amid constant change. Leaders looking for practical guidance in a complex world will find it here.”

—**Stanley McChrystal**

Retired U.S. Army General and Author of *Team of Teams*

“Innovation and exploration require leaders who can navigate uncertainty without losing sight of purpose. Bill Fournet combines practical experience with actionable tools that help leaders adapt, align teams, and make better decisions when the path ahead isn’t obvious. *The Map vs. the Terrain* is both timely and useful.”

—**Jim Bridenstine**

Former NASA Administrator and CEO, Quantum Space

“Strategy is important, but leadership is what carries an organization through uncertainty. Bill Fournet has a unique ability to help leaders find clarity when the path ahead isn’t obvious. *The Map vs. the Terrain* brings that practical wisdom to life and is a valuable resource for leaders in any field.”

—**Sean Cahill**

President & CEO, True Sky Federal Credit Union

“In a world shaped by AI and continuous transformation, leaders need more than better plans—they need better ways of thinking. *The Map vs. the Terrain* offers practical insights for leaders who want to adapt, innovate, and lead with confidence when the future is anything but certain.”

—**Sean Alexander**

Senior Vice President, Lumen Technologies;
Founding Member, Microsoft AI

“The most effective leaders are not those with perfect plans, but those who can adapt, learn, and move forward when circumstances change. Bill has spent his career helping leaders develop that capability. *The Map vs. the Terrain* provides practical tools and insights that leaders can immediately apply in any organization or community.”

—**Julie Bisbee**

Former Executive Director,
Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust (TSET)

“The best leadership ideas are simple enough to remember and practical enough to implement. Bill’s passion for navigation and leadership merge in this creative approach to recognizing and solving challenges we all face in business and in life.”

—**Sid McAnnally**

CEO and Board Member

“I’ve worked with Bill for more than 15 years and thought I knew many of the concepts in this book. What surprised me was how often I found myself taking notes and discovering new ways to apply them. *The Map vs. the Terrain* is filled with practical leadership tools that remain relevant long after you’ve turned the last page.”

—**Ronnie Stephens**

Senior Project Manager and Leadership Practitioner,
Williams Companies

“The best leadership tools are the ones with actionable items that seamlessly integrate into your work. Working with Bill helped me understand leadership frameworks and how I can blend them into my own approach to leading people and navigating complex challenges. *The Map vs. the Terrain* brings those practical lessons together into a guide that every leader can benefit from.”

—**Lance Thomas**

Executive Leader and Public Health Advocate

“I’ve had the privilege of watching Bill Fournet grow as a leader, a husband, a father, and a Scoutmaster. The same values that have guided him through those roles—service, integrity, and helping others find their way—are the foundation of *The Map vs. the Terrain*. I believe leaders of every age will benefit from reading it.”

—**Bill Shaffer**

Troop 26 Scoutmaster since 1969 and
mentor to more than 800 Eagle Scouts

John Wiley & Sons Inc.

THE MAP VS. THE TERRAIN

A LEADER'S FIELD GUIDE TO
NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

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Why This Book Now

We are leading amid continuous change, where technology reshapes how we work, connect, and define success in every part of the organization. Teams are more diverse—in generations, culture, working styles, motivations, and worldviews—than at any point in modern history.

Trust is harder to earn and easier to lose. Attention is fractured. Burnout is common. Alignment is fragile.

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Introduction: Unfolding the Map

The systems we built in the last century, such as performance reviews, planning cycles, rigid hierarchies, and communication cascades, were built for a slower world. A more predictable world. A world where stability was the baseline, not the exception.

But stability is gone. And we are left with maps drawn for a landscape that no longer exists.

Most leaders I work with are not struggling because they're incapable. They're struggling because the demands of leadership have changed faster than the definitions of leadership.

They feel pulled between depth and speed, between people and results, between clarity and constant change. They sense their teams have far more potential than the systems allow them to show. They feel the weight of decisions that come faster than their organizations can absorb.

This book is not about creating superhero leaders. It is about creating grounded ones—leaders who know how to read the environment, stay oriented in the unknown, and guide their teams without pretending the trail is something it isn't.

The Route Ahead

The journey of this book mirrors a real expedition. You wouldn't put on a pack and walk into the wilderness without orienting yourself, preparing your team, and understanding what you're heading into. You also wouldn't expect your original plan to survive first contact with weather, elevation, and whatever else the trail decides to throw your way.

We're going to move through leadership the same way.

In **Part I**, "Prepare the Expedition: Mapping Your Route," we'll start with the steps that leaders often skip in their rush to execute: aligning your purpose, people, and priorities before you depart.

- Defining True North and Leader's Intent
- Clarifying Guiding Principles
- Identifying assumptions and "Known Knowns"
- Protecting time, focus, and energy

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Introduction: Unfolding the Map

- Designing meetings and communications that actually support the mission
- Assembling and aligning the team before you hit the trail

This part is about what happens before the crisis, before the storm, before the pivot. It's where you build the foundation that determines whether your team moves with purpose or gets blown around by events. It prepares your team for success no matter what challenge confronts them.

In **Part II**, “Lead on the Trail: Navigating the Terrain,” we'll navigate decisions, communication, and team dynamics amid constant change.

Once you're moving, leadership shifts. You can't stay in planning mode. You're making decisions with incomplete information and communicating through noise. And you're reading the environment, managing risks, and keeping your team engaged when the climb gets steep.

Here we'll dig into:

- Situational awareness and foresight
- Decision-making under pressure
- Clear, concise communication (including the 5Cs)
- High-performing team rhythms and rituals
- Using reflection and After-Action Reviews as force multipliers

This part is about how you behave in motion—keeping your team aligned, informed, and performing when conditions change.

No matter how good your preparation on the trail, there will be times when the map simply fails. The market shifts. A key person leaves. A strategy collapses under new information. A technology rewrites the rules. This is where adaptive leadership matters most.

In **Part III**, “When the Map Fails: Adaptive Leadership in Unknown Terrain,” we'll explore:

- Pivoting in real time without losing your people
- Leading diverse, multigenerational, mission-driven teams
- Creating playbooks and trail guides for others
- Sustaining energy and resilience over the long haul
- Leaving legacy that goes beyond your tenure

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Introduction: Unfolding the Map

This part is about leading when you're off-trail and doing it in a way that not only survives the moment but leaves your team stronger.

Each part builds upon the last, equipping you to lead not just with plans, but with presence. The goal is not more answers. It's sharper awareness and steadier leadership when certainty fades.

About This Book: The Leadership Trail System

This isn't a traditional leadership book built around one central model repeated for 250 pages. It's a **field guide**: a collection of tools, stories, and practices designed to help you lead in real time.

You can read it straight through, or you can jump to the chapters that speak to what you're facing right now. Either way, **I encourage you not just to read it, but to use it.**

Every leader will experience this journey differently. The tools, principles, and actions in this book are meant to be combined, adapted, and used in your own context. To help with that, most chapters will include four recurring elements:

- **PowerPlays™**—Practical tools and frameworks you can apply quickly in your work: meeting structures, decision prompts, communication checklists, and more. Think of these as your gear: specific, tactical, and built to be used. All the complete PowerPlays are available for download at billfournet.com/powerplays.
- **Trail Fundamentals**—Core principles and mental models that anchor the chapter. These are your compass: the things you come back to when you're unsure what to do next.
- **Field Actions**—Short exercises, prompts, or real-world challenges to help you and your team practice the concepts. These are your steps on the trail: the reps that turn ideas into habits.
- You'll also find **Reflection Questions** at the end of many chapters. Use them for your own journaling or bring them into a team conversation. Leadership does not become real until it is discussed, challenged, and practiced with others.

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Introduction: Unfolding the Map

Use them to build a rhythm of awareness, practice, and reflection. Over time, they become habits—the marks of a seasoned leader.

Leadership ideas are useful only when they translate into action. That is why each chapter includes a **PowerPlay™**: a practical leadership tool you can apply immediately with your team. Some take only a few minutes. Others may shape how you run meetings, make decisions, or reflect on performance. Think of PowerPlays as the gear in your leadership pack: simple, durable tools designed for real terrain. You don't need to use all of them at once. Start with the ones that address the challenges directly in front of you and add others as your leadership practice evolves.

Experienced leaders rarely rely on a single technique. They build a toolkit and learn which tool to reach for as conditions change.

How to Use This Book

This book is meant to be used, not simply read. The more you apply it, the clearer your leadership trail becomes. A few suggestions as you start:

- **Read with a pen.** Mark what stings, what aligns, and what you disagree with. Your reactions are data.
- **Start small.** Pick one PowerPlay or Field Action and commit to using it for two weeks before adding another.
- **Involve your team.** Share excerpts. Run an exercise together. Ask them what they see in the terrain that you might be missing.
- **Keep a trail log.** Capture what you try, what works, what fails, and what you *learn*. Over time, that becomes your own leadership map, updated for your terrain.

You don't have to become someone else to use this book. In fact, I hope you don't. The goal is to help you become a **more practiced version of the leader you already are**. The one who can operate with clarity and calm when others are losing their footing. The one who can say, "The map has changed, but we still know where we're going."

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The Trailhead: Your Starting-Off Point

Every expedition has a trailhead—a starting point where you shoulder the pack, look at the route, and decide to step forward.

You're at that point now.

The terrain you're leading in will not get simpler. The storms will not stop. But you can become the kind of leader who doesn't panic when the trail disappears. You can build teams that don't wait to be rescued. You can lead in a way that aligns your map with the reality under your feet.

That work begins with orientation.

Before you can lead anyone else, you have to be clear about where you're going and why it matters. That is your True North.

In Chapter 1, we'll start there: defining Leader's Intent in a way that gives your team confidence to move, even when the route changes.

Ready? Let's unfold the map.

Notes

1. McKinsey Global Institute, *The Economic Potential of Generative AI: The Next Productivity Frontier* (New York: McKinsey & Company, 2023), <https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/the-economic-potential-of-generative-ai-the-next-productivity-frontier>.
2. Deloitte, *2024 Well-Being at Work Survey* (New York: Deloitte Insights, 2024), <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/workplace-well-being-research.html>.

Chapter 1

Find Your True North

Establishing Leader's Intent

"No plan survives first contact with the enemy."

—Helmuth von Moltke the Elder

On uncertain terrain, whether on a battlefield, a mountain trail, or inside an organization, leaders eventually discover the same truth: **The plan rarely survives contact with reality.**

Helmuth von Moltke was not dismissing planning when he wrote those words. He was naming a reality leaders still struggle to accept: In complex environments, certainty is temporary, and control is an illusion.

Moltke, chief of the Prussian General Staff in the mid-1800s, led armies across terrain that changed daily—weather, morale, supply lines, and human behavior all interacting in unpredictable ways. He learned that issuing detailed instructions created fragility. When conditions shifted, those instructions became liabilities.

His answer was not looser discipline. It was *better leadership*.

Moltke emphasized clarity of intent over rigid orders. Leaders were responsible for defining *why* a mission mattered, *what success looked like*, and *what boundaries could not be crossed*. Subordinate leaders were then trusted—and expected—to adapt in real time. This philosophy evolved into what modern militaries call *Commander's Intent*, a concept designed specifically for uncertainty.

That idea did not stay on the battlefield.

Today's leaders operate in environments just as dynamic: shifting markets, evolving technologies, regulatory uncertainty, workforce expectations, and constant information flow. The setting has moved from the battlefield to the boardroom, but the terrain behaves the same way: Conditions change faster than plans can keep up.

That is why modern organizations rely not on a Commander's Intent forged in war, but on a Leader's Intent designed for complexity and collaboration. This book begins where Moltke began—only now, it is Leader's Intent that guides the way.

Lesson from the Trail: Redefining Success at the Grand Canyon

Several years ago, I led a trek through the Grand Canyon on the Rim-to-Rim route—nearly 50 miles through one of the most demanding landscapes in North America.

Anyone who has hiked the canyon knows the strange physics of it. You descend first. The trail drops steeply into the canyon before the long climb out begins.

For younger hikers, the downhill is a warm-up. For older knees, it's punishment.

Before we started, I thought carefully about what success meant for me personally.

Finishing the trek wasn't enough. If success was simply completing 48 miles, I might push too hard early, punish my knees on the descent, and spend the next day barely able to move.

I would complete the task—but miss the experience.

So I defined success differently. Success would be this: *"I finish the trek and can still walk comfortably the next morning."*

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Part I: Prepare the Expedition

That definition changed how I approached the entire hike. Instead of chasing speed on the descent, I paced carefully. I protected my knees. I conserved energy early so I could enjoy the climb later.

The route didn't change. The distance didn't change. But the way I moved did.

On the trail, **how you define success determines how you hike.**

In leadership, the same principle holds true.

Boardroom Lesson: When the Date Becomes the Goal

Several years ago, my firm was asked to take over a call center technology implementation that had gone sideways. The previous consulting team had been focused on one thing: hitting the implementation date. Every meeting centered on timelines, deliverables, and technical milestones.

Yet the call center staff were exhausted. They had seen multiple "improvements" come through before. Each one promised efficiency, but each one disrupted operations. Phones rang while systems lagged. Agents struggled with new workflows. Customers waited longer.

From the perspective of the implementation team, progress looked good. From the perspective of the call center, it looked like chaos.

As my team stepped in, I gathered them together before we began. I told them our success would *not* be measured by the go-live date. Success would be this: *"We implement the new software with no disruption to the call center's daily operations or their customers."*

That definition of success changed everything.

Instead of focusing only on system configuration, my team focused on understanding the environment. We spent time on the call center floor listening to agents, observing call flow, and learning where friction actually occurred.

When deployment arrived, we placed our team directly in the call center for two weeks. If an agent had a question or hit a snag, someone was standing there to help immediately.

They didn't have to submit a help-desk ticket or wait for support. They simply turned their chair.

The launch date still mattered. But the outcome mattered more. And because we defined success clearly, the team made decisions differently every step of the way.

When success is unclear, teams begin measuring effort instead of outcomes. Meetings multiply. Progress appears uneven. Leaders push harder without realizing the problem is not effort—it is clarity.

That is why defining success is the leader's first responsibility.

Whether on a trail or in an organization, **the way a leader defines success determines how the team moves.**

Reading the Terrain: Clarity Before Control

One of the most consistent patterns I've observed across industries, organizations, and teams is this: **They fail from lack of clarity about what success actually means.**

Teams are busy. Calendars are full. Initiatives are launched with enthusiasm. And still, leaders find themselves asking the same questions:

- *Why are we working this hard without seeing proportional results?*
- *Why does alignment feel fragile?*
- *Why does execution slow down the moment conditions change?*

On the trail, confusion rarely begins with bad effort. It begins with unclear direction.

Activity creates motion. Intent creates progress.

You can have a strong crew. You can have a detailed map. You can have good intentions. But if the destination isn't defined clearly, movement

becomes fragmented. Some hikers push ahead. Others conserve energy. Small misalignments compound. Energy leaks quietly.

In stable environments, detailed plans can carry a team forward. Procedures, checklists, and defined roles create predictability and reduce variability. But those systems assume something dangerous: that tomorrow will resemble today.

When the terrain shifts—weather changes, routes close, conditions deteriorate—detailed instructions can slow adaptation. Frontline teams pause. They wait for direction. Decisions escalate upward. Leaders become bottlenecks because clarity was never transferred.

Without intent, people default to activity. They optimize what they can control. They protect their lane. They measure progress by motion instead of impact.

None of this is malicious. It is human. In ambiguous terrain, people search for certainty wherever they can find it.

The terrain most leaders are operating in today has several defining characteristics: Change now arrives continuously rather than episodically. Decisions are made farther from the top than ever before. Information is abundant, yet meaning is scarce.

In that environment, leaders cannot rely on proximity, hierarchy, or detailed plans to keep teams aligned. By the time instructions travel down and approvals travel back up, the terrain has already shifted again.

What teams need instead is a *shared sense of direction*—something stable enough to anchor decisions even as conditions change, like a ridgeline that remains visible even when the trail disappears.

That's where a strategy called Leader's Intent becomes essential.

Leader's Intent defines the leader's desired end state clearly enough that others can adapt their steps intelligently. It's important not to think of this as control. Without intent, teams measure motion. With intent, they measure impact.

For example, on the trail, we don't tell every hiker exactly how to place their feet. We tell them where we're going, what conditions to expect, what

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Find Your True North

risks matter most, and what success looks like by nightfall. When the unexpected happens—and it always does—they adjust without freezing.

In a similar way, **Leader's Intent transfers judgment—not just tasks.**

Leader's Intent answers three fundamental questions:

- *Why are we doing this?*
- *What does success look like?*
- *What must remain true no matter what changes?*

If people cannot recognize success without asking you, your intent is not clear enough.

When the answers to those questions are clear, autonomy with your team increases. Alignment strengthens. Adaptation accelerates.

While having this clarity does not remove uncertainty, it does anchor judgment inside it. And that anchor is what shifts leadership from command and control to engage and empower. Which brings us to the Leader's First Responsibility.

The Leader's First Responsibility

If leadership was reduced to a single responsibility, I believe it would be this: Define success clearly enough that others can recognize it without asking permission.

Most leaders underestimate how rarely they do this. They talk about goals, initiatives, deliverables, and timelines. They explain what needs to be done and how quickly it needs to happen. But when you ask team members what success actually looks like—how they would know they were “winning”—answers vary widely.

That gap creates drift from our aligned understanding of the desired outcome. The Leader's Intent technique exists to close the gap.

It's important to clarify that **Leader's Intent is not a plan**. It is not a vision statement. And it is not a motivational speech. **It is a decision filter:** a shared

understanding of the desired end state that allows people to choose wisely when the path forward is unclear.

In my work, I often introduce Leader's Intent with a simple sentence starter: *"Success to me looks like . . ."*

That sentence is harder than it sounds. It forces leaders to move beyond activity and into outcomes. It requires specificity without overprescription. And it exposes assumptions leaders may not realize they're making.

When intent is clear, alignment becomes durable. When it is vague, alignment is temporary at best.

Intent Creates Freedom, Not Control

One of the most common objections leaders raise is concern about losing control. "If I don't give clear instructions," they worry, "won't people make the wrong decisions?"

The opposite is usually true.

Control through instruction works only in stable environments. In dynamic terrain, it creates delay, dependence, and risk aversion. People wait to be told what to do because deviation feels dangerous.

Clear intent, on the other hand, creates freedom within boundaries. When teams understand the destination, they can adjust the route. When they know what matters most, they can make trade-offs intelligently. When success is defined, autonomy increases rather than decreases.

This is why militaries operating in high-consequence environments rely heavily on intent. Leaders cannot micromanage in combat. They cannot anticipate every variable. What they *can* do is ensure that everyone understands the mission well enough to adapt without losing alignment.

From Command and Control to Engage and Empower

For most of the 20th century, organizations borrowed heavily from military command structures forged in World War II. As a history major, I've studied

these approaches closely and you'll see several referenced in this book. Command and control worked in that era because the environment rewarded consistency. Information traveled slowly. Roles were clearly defined. Hierarchy ensured accountability. Procedures reduced error. Titles defined authority.

In stable terrain, this model created scale. But it also assumed something critical: that headquarters could see the battlefield clearly enough to issue the right instructions.

In today's environment, that assumption no longer holds. Frontlines encounter change before leaders do. Customers shift expectations before strategy decks are updated and technology evolves faster than approval cycles.

The contrast between these two models becomes clear when you visualize how direction flows.

On the left is the traditional command-and-control structure. Authority sits at the top. Decisions cascade downward. Information flows upward in filtered fragments. The people closest to the work wait for instructions. The leader owns the flags (i.e. the goals) and distributes assignments accordingly.

It is directive-based. Control sits at the center.

On the right is an engage-and-empower structure. The hierarchy still exists and clarity of authority does not disappear, but the dynamic shifts. The leader defines the objective—the flag—and pushes it outward. Those closest to the terrain carry it forward. Decisions happen nearer to the work. Ownership expands. Accountability becomes mutual rather than positional.

It is outcome-based. Clarity sits at the center (see Figure 1.1).

Think about it this way. **When you command and control, you optimize consistency. When you engage and empower, you optimize adaptability.**

In a command-and-control model, leaders push detailed instructions down the chain. In an engage-and-empower model, leaders push clarity of outcomes—the “flag”—and trust teams to navigate toward it. The flag represents the objective, but the route is negotiable. The leader's role shifts from directing every movement to ensuring everyone knows where the hill is.

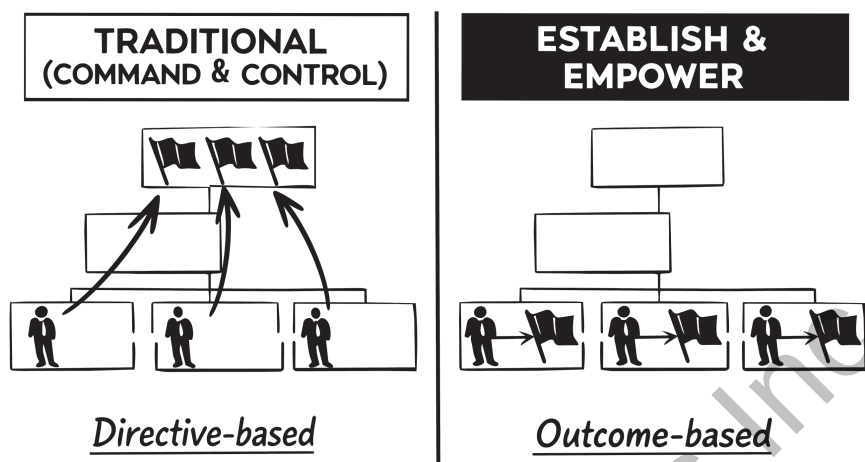


Figure 1.1 Comparing organizational command models.

Trail Fundamentals: Clarifying the End State So Others Can Adapt

This brings us back to Leader's Intent. Leader's Intent is not a motivational sentence framed on a wall. It is a discipline that governs how decisions are made when the terrain shifts. In uncertain environments, leaders often compensate for ambiguity with control.

Control does not scale. Clarity does.

Intent transfers judgment without transferring chaos. It defines the outcome clearly enough that capable people can move even when conditions evolve.

The next sections explain the four fundamentals that distinguish true Leader's Intent from every other leadership artifact.

Intent Describes an End State, Not an Action

If your intent begins with "Launch," "Build," or "Complete," you are describing activity. Intent clarifies the outcome teams must protect when conditions change. It answers: *What will be different if we win?*

When leaders confuse the two, teams optimize for motion instead of impact.

Intent Allows for Multiple Paths

If only one decision can possibly be correct, you are issuing instructions, not leading with intent. True intent enables two capable leaders to make different decisions and still move toward the same destination. That flexibility is what makes intent durable under pressure.

Instructions control steps.

Intent protects direction.

Intent Must Be Observable

If they cannot see it, they cannot steer toward it. When you communicate with vague language, it creates fragile alignment.

- **Weak:** Improve engagement.
- **Better:** Success looks like 80% of employees saying they understand how their work connects to our mission in the next engagement survey.
- **Weak:** Be more strategic.
- **Better:** Success looks like leadership spending 30% of meeting time discussing future opportunities rather than only operational updates.
- **Weak:** Drive efficiency.
- **Better:** Success looks like reducing customer onboarding time from 12 days to 5 days without increasing support tickets.
- **Weak:** Improve customer service.
- **Better:** Success looks like customers resolving their issue in a single call 90% of the time.

Intent Must Be Repeated, Especially When Conditions Change

Leaders often assume clarity once declared is clarity retained. It is not. As terrain shifts, people reinterpret direction through new pressures and constraints. Repetition anchors meaning.

- Intent is not something you announce once.
- Intent is something you reference continually.

- When practiced well, Leader's Intent becomes a decision filter.
- When practiced poorly, it becomes a forgotten paragraph in a project plan.

The difference is discipline.

Those fundamentals describe how intent behaves. The next question is what intent contains.

The Three Elements of Leader's Intent

Every effective Leader's Intent statement contains three elements. When one is missing, teams default to activity. When all three are clear, judgment transfers.

1. End State: What Success Looks Like

This is the anchor. The End State describes what the world looks like when the effort succeeds. It is observable. It is concrete. It can be recognized without asking permission.

- *What does success look like?*
- *What does it feel like?*
- *How does it behave?*
- *What would a third party see that tells them we won?*

Most leaders struggle here. They default to activity:

- *"Launch the initiative."*
- *"Improve customer engagement."*
- *"Complete the rollout."*

Those are actions.

An End State answers: *What is different because we did this?*

If you removed the activity and described only the result, would your team know what they are steering toward?

The End State is what you control. And it is the element most often underdeveloped.

2. Purpose: Why It Matters

Purpose answers the why.

- *Why does this effort matter now?*
- *Why does it matter to the organization?*
- *Why does it matter to the customer?*
- *Why does it matter to the team?*

Purpose fuels discretionary effort. Without it, work becomes transactional. With it, work becomes meaningful.

Purpose is what you influence. It connects effort to consequence.

3. Method: The Guardrails, Not the Blueprint

Method is not a detailed “how-to.” It is the general approach, constraints, or principles that should guide execution. It answers:

- *What must remain true?*
- *What boundaries cannot be crossed?*
- *What approach aligns with our values?*

This is where many leaders feel most comfortable—because it feels like control.

- But method without End State becomes micromanagement.
- End State without Method can create chaos.

Method is what you guide.

Why the End State Is the Hardest—and Most Important

In my experience, leaders move quickly to method. They enjoy problem-solving. They default to solutions. But when method dominates the conversation, teams execute steps instead of protecting outcomes. Under pressure, they follow the blueprint instead of protecting the destination.

That is why I teach leaders to spend disproportionate time refining the End State. If your End State is clear enough, capable people can adjust their

method when conditions shift. If your End State is vague, no amount of method will compensate.

When I review intent statements in organizations, I almost always find one of the three elements missing. Most often, the End State is implied but not articulated. Leaders assume their teams “know what good looks like.” But assumptions are fragile in dynamic terrain.

Intent Operates at Every Altitude

Leader’s Intent is not reserved for major initiatives. It operates at every altitude: strategic, tactical, and developmental.

- The scale changes.
- The clarity does not.

You can (and should) use intent to guide:

- Enterprise direction
- Project outcomes
- Meeting expectations
- Individual development

Most leaders think they’re communicating intent when they’re actually communicating activity. Table 1.1 illustrates the difference.

Intent as a Living Discipline

Leader’s Intent is not something you write and move past. It shapes how priorities are set, how trade-offs are made, and how feedback is delivered.

In stable conditions, leaders can get away without explicit intent. In uncertain terrain, they cannot. Every other discipline in this book you’ll read about later—such as Guiding Principles, P.O.P. (Purpose, Outcome, Plan), decision-making, execution, reflection—rests on this foundation.

Without intent, they become techniques. With intent, they become leadership.

Table 1.1 Examples of How Leader’s Intent May Be Applied to Various Situations

Level	Typical Action or Goal-Directed Statement	Example Intent Statement	What It Guides
Strategic	We submitted 100 candidates per month for placement.	Job seekers become advocates for us because the process was efficient, and we placed them into the right spot at the right organization.	Quality of who and how the organization focuses instead of just completing the activity.
	Complete this customer project no later than June 30, 20XX.	This is our first project with Customer ALPHA. In order to establish them as a key customer, success is that Customer ALPHA requests an additional project within 6 months of completion. Customer ALPHA always changes scope in our project and overruns our estimate. We must maintain a 25% gross margin for this project, regardless of whether it affects our relationship with them.	These two intent statements could sit beneath the same goal, yet they would drive very different decisions.

Typical Action or Goal-Directed Statement			
Level	Statement	Example Intent Statement	What It Guides
Tactical (for a Task)	Create the monthly status slide.	Success is that the monthly status slide is submitted 1 day prior to the due date and has no content or data mistakes.	The quality of the output the person creates (vs. sending up a lot of data without quality and/or analysis).
	Discuss our technical recommendation for the project.	Success is that we agree on a primary technical recommendation for leadership's review, with alternate options documented with reasons why not selected. There will be pre-read materials sent prior to the meeting, and each option will be presented for decision.	The expectation of what should come from the meeting (a recommendation instead of brainstorming, review, etc.) so attendees are aligned and can assess if they should attend or if any key stakeholder is missing.
Developmental	Take a Supervisor & Management class by June 30, 20XX.	Success is that by June 30, 20XX, you can lead this shift without my involvement, unless there is a critical personnel or customer relationship issue.	A bi-directional coaching conversation that engages the employee and leader to determine what the employee needs to achieve the outcome (vs. just taking a class).

Intent Replaces Micromanagement

Most leaders recognize that micromanagement erodes trust and slows teams down. In many cases, it stems from insecurity rather than a desire for control.

When success lacks clear definition, leaders compensate by prescribing steps instead of outcomes.

Clear intent transfers judgment, reducing the need for constant supervision.

▲ PowerPlay™—Leader’s Intent

Align Action to Mission

What does success look like, sound like, and feel like? By when?

When to Use It

When launching a project, initiative, or meeting where multiple people must make decisions without constant direction from the leader.

Purpose

Create shared clarity about what success looks like so teams can make aligned decisions without constant direction.

Leader’s Intent is a statement that establishes the desired *outcome* for a project, effort, or meeting. The outcome is the *end state*, which describes what success looks like, feels like and acts like after you have completed the project. An example end state might be, “*Success to me looks like the customer calling to hire us for another project in six months.*”

Approach

Begin with the phrase ‘*Success to me looks like . . .*’ and describe an observable end state. Focus on outcomes, conditions, and impact rather than tasks.

Test your intent by asking:

- *Would we recognize success if we saw it?*
- *How would you know if you achieved it”?*
- *Could different people make different decisions and still succeed?*
- *Does this intent help prioritize when trade-offs are required?*

Share Leader’s Intent early, reinforce it often, and revisit it whenever the terrain shifts. Intent is not something you announce. It is something you use.

To practice Leader’s Intent:

1. Write your current Leader’s Intent in one paragraph. Do not describe activities—describe the end state.
2. Share it with your team and ask a simple question: *“If conditions change, would this help you decide what to do?”*
3. Listen for gaps, assumptions, and misalignment.
4. Revise until the intent creates clarity without prescribing behavior.
5. Revisit it whenever priorities shift, new constraints emerge, or decisions start to drift.

This is not about perfection. It is about alignment.

Leader Tip

If your team cannot finish the sentence *“Success looks like . . .”* the same way you do, your intent is not clear enough.

To download the complete PowerPlay, visit <https://billfournet.com/powerplays>.

Field Action: Declare Your True North

We’ve established that teams lose momentum when the destination is unclear, even when effort is high. Clear intent enables people to navigate change without waiting for permission.

Start implementing a Leader's Intent approach by taking these steps:

1. Identify one initiative currently in motion.
2. At your next team meeting, write the following on a whiteboard:
 - “*Our purpose* is . . .”
 - “*Our end state* looks or sounds like . . .”
 - “*Our method* to achieve this is . . .”
3. Align everyone to those statements and share the guardrails that cannot be crossed.
4. Ask your team: “*If the terrain changes tomorrow, would this help you decide what to do?*” Then pause. If answers vary widely, clarity is missing.

Closing Thought

Plans will fail. Assumptions will be challenged. The terrain will change.

The leaders who succeed are not the ones who predict the future most accurately. They are the ones who make the destination clear enough that others can adapt along the way.

Before you focus on how to lead or what tools to use, pause and answer the most important question a leader ever faces: **What does success look like? Before you ask your team to move, make sure they can see the flag.**

Reflection Questions

- *How well does your team consistently state the Why, Outcome, and What for your project?*
- *Can they state it in an elevator pitch (30 seconds or less)?*
- *Have the team validated what is In Scope and Out of Scope?*
- *Do the team and stakeholders believe the current plan will achieve the desired value?*

YOU'VE READ THE OPENING MOVE. THERE'S MORE TRAIL AHEAD.

Chapter 1 gave you the starting point — True North, and why orientation comes before action. The rest of the book gives you the tools for what happens when the terrain shifts anyway: decisions made without full certainty, communication that holds under pressure, leadership when the map fails outright.

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