How Do We Grow Leaders Now?

A perfect advisor in the boardroom does not build instinct. It borrows against it.

RUSS MICHAELS · JULY 2026 · 6 MIN READ

Picture a new chief executive. Forty-one or sixty-three, it doesn't matter. Just promoted, or just hired from outside, or just handed the keys to the family company. Capable, serious, and — as every honest new leader is — not yet fluent in every facet of the business they now run. Twenty years ago that gap was closed the slow way: by asking, by being wrong in small ways, by walking the floor, by the long apprenticeship of judgment.

Now put the most capable AI ever built in the boardroom with them. It knows the industry cold. It has read every filing, every competitor, every case study. It models the market faster than the CFO can open a spreadsheet. Ask it anything and the answer is instant, confident, and usually right.

Here is the question I cannot stop turning over: does that advisor grow the leader — or does it quietly replace the part of the leader that was supposed to grow?

THE STEER

Notice what the perfect advisor is tuned for. Speed. Efficiency. The defensible answer. Growth, margin, the number that goes up. It is not tuned for the things a company exists to do for the humans inside it and around it, because those things are slower to measure and harder to optimize. So the steer is never dramatic. It is a thousand small nudges, each reasonable, all in the same direction: faster, leaner, more perfect, more profitable.

The new leader, unsure of the terrain, takes the nudges. Why wouldn't she? The advisor has been right every time. And the decisions that would have required her to stop and consult her own sense of what the company is *for* — the layoff that makes the quarter, the product that makes the money but not the world, the mission line that is easier to delete than defend — those get made on the advisor's axis, because on the advisor's axis they are obvious.

No one steered her away from her values. She just never got asked about them. The question didn't come up, because the machine doesn't ask it.

WHAT INSTINCT ACTUALLY IS

We use soft words for it — gut, intuition, feel — and that makes it sound mystical. It isn't. Instinct is compressed experience: thousands of small decisions, their consequences felt personally, folded into a sense that fires before the analysis does. You grow it by making decisions and living with them. There is no other way. It cannot be downloaded, and it cannot be borrowed.

So here is the mechanism of the harm. Every time the new leader takes the advisor's answer instead of forming her own first, she skips the rep. The company may get a better decision that day. The leader gets nothing. Do it for three years and you have a company with an excellent record and a chief executive who has never once been tested — who has, in the old sense, never *decided*.

> *A perfect advisor in the room does not build instinct. It borrows against it, and the note comes due the first time the advisor is wrong and no one in the chair knows what to do.*

That is not a hypothetical. Every model is wrong sometimes, usually at the edges — the novel situation, the unprecedented competitor, the moment the market does something no training set contains. That is exactly the moment instinct was for. And it is exactly the moment a leader who has been deferring for three years has nothing to reach for.

THE OLD WAY WASN'T BETTER. IT WAS JUST SLOWER.

I am not nostalgic for the apprenticeship. It was inefficient, it was gated by who you knew, and it let a great deal of bad judgment harden into tradition. The answer is not to take the advisor out of the room. The answer is to change what the room is for.

Three moves — none of them expensive.

The leader speaks first. In every material decision, the chief executive writes her call and her reason before the advisor is consulted. One line. Then the advisor. The gap between her line and the recommendation is the most valuable document the company produces that week, because it is the only place her judgment is visible — to her board, to her team, and to herself.

Own the axis, not just the answer. The advisor optimizes what it is pointed at. The leader's job is the pointing. Before any recommendation: what is this optimized for? Growth, speed, margin — fine. And what is it *not* weighing? The people, the mission, the decade after. Name the missing axis out loud. Most bad decisions made with excellent advice were good decisions on the wrong axis.

Apprentice to consequences, not to answers. Keep a decision journal. What did I decide, what did the advisor say, what happened, what did I feel when it happened. Six months of that and instinct is growing again — not in spite of the advisor, but because the advisor is finally being used as a sparring partner instead of a substitute.

HOW WE GROW LEADERS NOW

The same way we always did — by letting them decide and letting them carry it — with one addition that no previous generation had: a partner that can show them, instantly, every way their decision might be wrong, *after* they have made it theirs.

Used that way, the perfect advisor is the best mentor a young leader has ever had. Used the other way, it is the end of mentorship, because there is nothing left to mentor. The difference is not in the tool. It is in who speaks first.

— **Russ Michaels** · Founder, Vault Human · www.vaulthuman.com/writing