

The Five Pillars of Workforce Readiness

THE CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP STUDIES®
THE GLOBAL HOME OF SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP®

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Contents

Introduction	3
Pillar One: Competence	4
Pillar Two: Capacity	7
Pillar Three: Commitment	10
Pillar Four: Confidence	13
Pillar Five: Conditions for Success	16
Bringing the Five Pillars Together	19
Building a Workforce That Stays Ready	20

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Introduction

Every organization wants stronger performance, yet few stop to ask what makes high performance possible in the first place. Before goals are achieved, problems are solved or strategies are executed, organizations must first establish the foundation that allows employees to perform effectively. This foundation is known as workforce readiness.

At The Center for Leadership Studies (CLS), we define workforce readiness as the possession of necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes—including the technical ability and "soft skills"—required to successfully enter, navigate and contribute to the workplace.

Workforce readiness consists of five interconnected pillars:

1. Competence

2. Capacity

3. Commitment

4. Confidence

5. Conditions for success.

Each pillar represents a critical component of employee performance, from having the necessary skills and resources to having the mindset and support needed to apply them successfully. When all five pillars are present, employees are best positioned to turn their effort and expertise into effective, meaningful performance.

Unfortunately, today's complex, fast-paced work environments make building and maintaining these pillars increasingly challenging. Expectations rise faster. Priorities shift more abruptly. Skills lose relevance more quickly. In fact, recent research from Gallup's 2026 State of Global Workplace Report reveals that approximately **77% of employees believe they're not working at their full potential.**

The issue isn't a lack of drive. It's the growing gap between what organization are asking for and what employees are equipped to realistically deliver.

The good news is, out of everyone in an organization, leaders are uniquely positioned to help close this gap as they sit at the intersection of organizations expectations and employee capability. Through the behaviors they model, the support they provide and the culture they reinforce, leaders can influence the conditions that determine whether employees can consistently perform with confidence and quality.

Translating this influence into action, however, requires an elevated leadership approach, one that recognizes that workforce readiness isn't static but rather evolves with experience. Effective leadership, therefore, requires the ability to adjust direction and support as circumstances change. The Situational Leadership® Model can serve as a powerful tool that enables leaders to make those adjustments intentionally, helping them meet employees where they are and strengthen the conditions that allow workforce readiness to grow.

In the end, the question of workforce readiness is a question of leadership influence. Whether a team is prepared to perform is ultimately shaped by the quality of influence leaders exert across every level of the organization: the discipline they bring to their own work, the way they develop and empower others as well as the systems and culture they help create. Understanding how to apply that influence to strengthen the five pillars of workforce readiness is essential to creating an environment where people are equipped, confident and ready to deliver sustained, high-quality performance.

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Pillar One: Competence

Workforce readiness starts with competence. Before employees can consistently perform, adapt and contribute at a high level, they must first possess the knowledge and skills required to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

What Is Competence?

Competence is the knowledge, skills and ability required to successfully perform a task. It reflects not only what an employee knows but how effectively they can apply that knowledge in real world situations.

Competence includes:

- **Technical knowledge:** Understanding the concepts, information and requirements needed to perform the work
- **Role-specific skills:** Possessing the skills and mindset necessary to perform role-specific tasks effectively
- **Process understanding:** Knowing how work gets done, including expectations, procedures and standards.
- **Application ability:** Translating knowledge into consistent action

The key question leaders must ask is: *Can this person perform the task as required?*

Why Competence Matters

Competence is the foundation of reliable execution. When employees understand what's expected of them and have the skills to meet those expectations, their effort becomes more focused, their decisions become more assured and their execution becomes more consistent.

This is not just an individual advantage but an organizational one. Research from Brandon Hall Group found that **organizations with strong learning cultures achieve 37% higher productivity and 34% greater ability to respond to market changes** compared to organizations without those systems. That level of responsiveness is only possible when employees have the knowledge and skills to absorb new information, adapt to evolving expectations and apply their expertise effectively in real situations.

In today's fast-paced, high-change workplace, yesterday's skills can quickly become tomorrow's gaps. As work becomes more complex, organizations cannot rely on effort alone to keep their teams effective and competitive. They need employees who can apply the right knowledge and skills to deliver quality work, even as expectations evolve.



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When Competence Falters

Competence tends to slip when the work changes faster than employees are prepared for. Left unchecked, evolving tools, shifting expectations and growing complexity can surpass an employee's abilities, turning small gaps into major performance risks.

Common causes of competence gaps include:

- **Outdated training:** Learning materials no longer match current processes or tools
- **Inconsistent onboarding:** New hires start without a clear understanding of expectations, priorities or workflows
- **Limited access to learning:** Employees want to grow but lack the time, resources or opportunities to practice new skills
- **Skills that lag behind evolving responsibilities:** The role expands, but development does not

When these gaps accumulate, employees begin operating without the clarity or skill foundation needed to perform consistently, and routine work becomes harder than it should be

Key indicators of competence gaps include:

- **Increased errors and rework:** Tasks require correction that should have been completed accurately
- **Slower execution or hesitation:** Employees pause or take longer to complete routine work
- **Difficulty applying skills without guidance:** Skills are there, but employees lack the confidence to use them
- **Inconsistent performance on routine tasks:** Work quality varies more than expected
- **Overreliance on peers for basic support:** Employees seek help for tasks they should be able to complete alone

These patterns signal that the team might be relying on workarounds instead of building actual skill, and that leaders need to restore the clarity, training and support required for reliable execution.

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The Leader's Role

Leaders play a critical role in strengthening competence by setting clear expectations and ensuring employees understand the standards their work must meet. Their ability to define what "good" looks like and to reinforce it consistently remains foundational to how employees develop the skills required for their work and apply them over time. As employees build those skills, the type of support they need evolves, making it important for leaders to adjust how they guide and coach employees throughout the learning process.

The Situational Leadership® Model supports this by helping leaders match their guidance to an employee's current level of demonstrated ability. Early in development, employees benefit from clear instruction and structured support. As their knowledge and skills grow, leaders shift toward coaching and eventually toward greater autonomy. This progression keeps expectations aligned with skill level, prevents employees from being pushed into independence too soon and ensures they receive the right type of support as they advance.

Strategies to Build Competence

To build competence in their employees, leaders should:

- **Model continuous skill development:** Demonstrate that learning is normal, not remedial
- **Provide structured instruction:** Offer step-by-step guidance during early learning and reduce oversight as competence increases
- **Ensure access to practice and resources:** Create opportunities for employees to apply skills and access up-to-date training

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Pillar Two: Capacity

Capacity is the practical backbone of performance. Even highly skilled employees struggle when the demands of the role exceed the time, tools or support available to meet them. Capacity determines whether people can bring their best thinking to the work or whether they are forced to operate in a constant state of strain.

What Is Capacity?

Capacity reflects the tangible elements that make performance possible. It's the combination of time, resources and support that allows employees to engage fully with their responsibilities without chronic strain or avoidable obstacles.

Capacity includes:

- **Time resources:** Having enough space in the day to complete work with care and accuracy
- **Tools and systems:** Access to functional tools, efficient processes and reliable information
- **Staffing support:** Adequate coverage and balanced workload across the team that prevents constant triage.
- **Access to help:** The ability to seek guidance or escalate issues when challenges arise.

The key question leaders must ask is: *Do they have what they need to deliver?*

Why Capacity Matters

When people have the time, tools and support they need, their attention stays on the work itself rather than on navigating barriers. When capacity is stretched too thin, even routine tasks slow down and teams begin to operate with strain that affects consistency and quality.

This is not just an operational issue but a human one. CIPD research shows that **workload is the leading source of workplace stress, responsible for 60% of employee strain.** When employees are consistently overloaded, they lose the cognitive bandwidth for planning and problem solving. The organization feels this in slower decision cycles, reduced accuracy and a growing reliance on short-term fixes.

As expectations rise and work becomes more interdependent, capacity sets the boundary for what employees can realistically deliver. Ensuring people have the time, tools and support to think clearly is essential for maintaining consistent performance as demands evolve.



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When Capacity Falters

Capacity breaks down when the pace and pressure of the work begin to exceed the practical resources available to support it, leaving employees stretched thin.

Common causes of capacity gaps include:

- **Overload or unclear priorities:** Employees are asked to do too much without clarity on what matters most
- **Missing tools or inefficient processes:** Work slows because employees must troubleshoot, improvise or create workarounds to get things done
- **Insufficient staffing:** Responsibilities outpace available people, forcing constant trade-offs and short-term fixes
- **Limited access to support:** Employees cannot easily escalate issues or get timely help when they encounter obstacles

As these constraints compound, employees shift from purposeful execution to survival mode, where the goal becomes getting through the day rather than moving the work forward.

Key indicators of capacity gaps include:

- **Work piling up despite strong effort:** Output slows even though employees are working hard and staying engaged
- **Delays caused by missing tools or unclear priorities:** Tasks stall because foundational elements are not in place
- **Signs of overload or cognitive fatigue:** Employees show reduced focus, slower thinking or diminished stamina throughout the day
- **Employees spending more time troubleshooting than executing:** Energy is spent navigating obstacles instead of completing meaningful work

These signals reveal that the environment is demanding more than the system can support, and performance will continue to strain until capacity is restored.

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The Leader's Role

Leaders protect capacity by shaping the conditions that allow work to move forward. Their ability to clarify priorities, remove obstacles and advocate for resources directly influences how effectively the team can operate.

The Situational Leadership® Model helps leaders determine whether a capacity issue requires clearer direction, increased support or recalibrated expectations. When priorities are unclear, directive behaviors restore focus. When employees are overwhelmed, supportive behaviors help them navigate workload without losing momentum.

Strategies to Build Capacity

To strengthen capacity, leaders should:

- **Maintain clarity:** Reinforce what matters most so employees can focus with confidence
- **Balance workload:** Distribute tasks based on complexity and demonstrated Performance Readiness® Levels
- **Advocate for resources:** Escalate needs when constraints exceed what the team can solve

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Pillar Three: Commitment

Commitment is the engine that drives effort. It reflects the degree to which employees feel connected to their work, invested in their goals and willing to bring energy and initiative to their responsibilities. When commitment is strong, performance becomes more resilient and more self-directed.

What Is Commitment?

Commitment is the internal motivation that shapes how employees engage with their work. It reflects their belief in the value of their contributions and their willingness to invest discretionary effort when needed.

Commitment includes:

- **Purpose alignment:** Understanding how one's work contributes to meaningful outcomes
- **Emotional investment:** Feeling connected to the team, goals and overall direction of the work
- **Ownership mindset:** Willingness to take initiative and follow through without excessive prompting or oversight
- **Goal clarity:** Knowing the intended results of the work and the pathway to achieving them

The key question leaders must ask is: *Will they do the work?*

Why Commitment Matters

When people feel connected to the purpose of their role and understand how their contributions matter, they engage with tasks more fully. Their performance becomes a reflection of their sense of ownership rather than an obligation.

Research from The Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) illustrates just how powerful this is. CLC found that **highly committed employees are 57% more likely to put in discretionary effort, experience a 20% lift in performance from that effort and are 87% less likely to leave.** Together, these findings show that commitment influences both the intensity and the continuity of performance.

In a workplace where priorities shift on a dime, that combination matters. When people feel anchored to the work and motivated by its purpose, they're able to deliver consistent performance even as expectations and conditions evolve.



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When Commitment Falters

Commitment begins to waver when the emotional and motivational anchors that keep employees connected to their work start to loosen, often subtly at first.

Common causes of commitment gaps include:

- **Shifts in priorities, workload or role clarity:** Employees lose connection to the work when direction changes without explanation
- **Team dynamics or interpersonal friction:** Tension within the group reduces enthusiasm and willingness to contribute
- **Lack of recognition or purpose:** Employees struggle to see the impact or value of their efforts
- **Misalignment with goals or values:** Work feels disconnected from what matters most to the individual

When these disconnects build, employees begin to conserve their energy, offering only what is required rather than the initiative and engagement that once came naturally.

Key indicators of commitment gaps include:

- **Declining enthusiasm or visible disengagement:** Employees appear less energized, curious and present in day to day interactions
- **Minimal initiative or reluctance to take ownership:** Individuals wait for direction rather than stepping forward to solve problems
- **Reduced follow-through:** Tasks stall or remain incomplete without constant reminders or prompting
- **Withdrawal from team discussions:** Employees participate less, share fewer ideas or avoid collaborative conversations altogether

These signs suggest that employees may be losing connection to the work or to the purpose behind it, and without intervention, engaging will continue to erode.

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The Leader's Role

Leaders strengthen commitment by reinforcing purpose, recognizing progress and maintaining alignment. Their consistency, communication and ability to address barriers directly influence how invested employees feel.

The Situational Leadership® Model supports commitment by helping leaders calibrate the level of support employees need. When motivation drops, leaders clarify expectations and provide the encouragement required to rebuild momentum. When commitment is high, leaders maintain support that reinforces ownership and sustains engagement.

Strategies to Build Commitment

To strengthen commitment, leaders should:

- **Model consistency:** Align what you say with what you do and what you reinforce to build trust with your team
- **Connect work to impact:** Help employees see the value of their contributions by connecting tasks to meaningful outcomes
- **Address systemic barriers:** Identify and resolve issues, like unclear career paths, that may be diminishing motivation

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Pillar Four: Confidence

Confidence shapes how employees approach challenges, make decisions and take initiative. It reflects their belief in their ability to succeed and their comfort navigating new or complex responsibilities.

What Is Confidence?

Confidence is the internal assurance that one can perform effectively. It influences how employees interpret setbacks, how quickly they act and how willing they are to take on new responsibilities.

Confidence includes:

- **Self-belief:** Trusting one's ability to perform effectively within the role
- **Decision comfort:** Feeling capable of making choices without undue hesitation
- **Initiative readiness:** Stepping forward when challenges or opportunities arise
- **Recovery strength:** Regaining momentum after mistakes

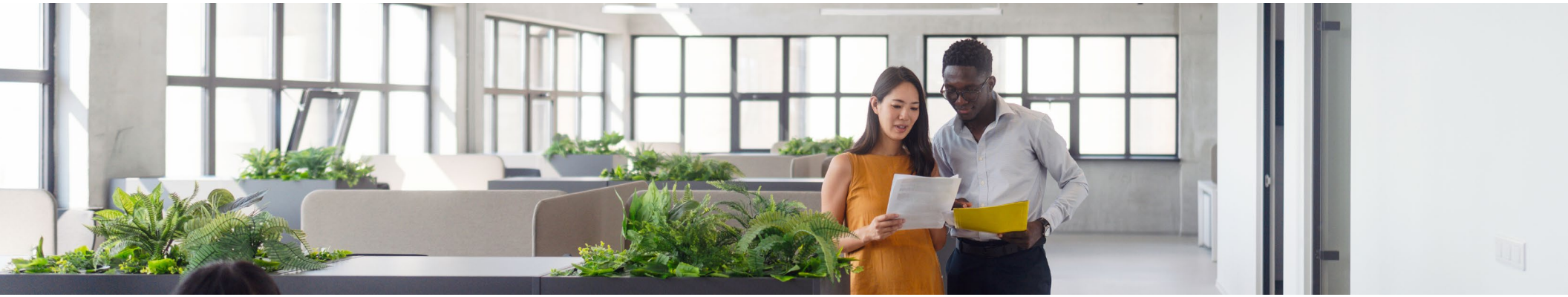
The key question leaders must ask is: *Do they believe they can succeed?*

Why Confidence Matters

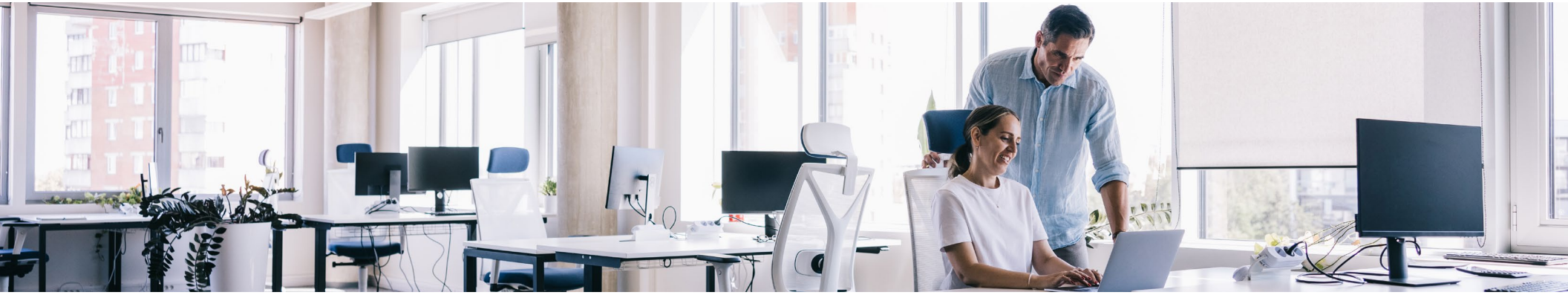
When people have a realistic belief in themselves and their ability to deliver results, they approach challenges directly, make decisions with appropriate speed and remain unafraid to offer ideas that could move the work forward.

The impact of employee confidence is well documented. Recent research from Fida found that **confident employees are 45% more likely to go above and beyond at work.** Studies published in Frontiers in Psychology highlight the opposite dynamic: **individuals with low confidence demonstrate poorer achievement and higher inhibition,** leading to hesitation, avoidance and slower decision-making. These behaviors limit responsiveness in environments where ambiguity is common.

As roles expand and decision making becomes more distributed, confidence becomes a practical requirement for effective performance. It gives employees the conviction to make decisions, the courage to contribute and the ownership to move work forward all on their own.



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When Confidence Falters

Confidence falters when employees begin to question their ability to perform consistently and navigate challenges, often because recent experiences have made success feel less attainable than it once did.

Common causes of confidence gaps include:

- **Past failures or negative experiences:** Previous setbacks shape current hesitation and self-doubt
- **Lack of early wins:** Employees have not yet experienced success that reinforces belief in their ability
- **Overly directive leadership:** Excessive control limits opportunities to build skills independently
- **Limited opportunities to practice judgment:** Employees rarely make decisions that stretch and strengthen their confidence

These experiences can cause employees to shrink their contributions, choosing safety over initiative and certainty over growth.

Key indicators of confidence gaps include:

- **Avoiding decisions or deferring to others:** Employees hesitate to act without validation from someone else
- **Overchecking work or seeking excessive reassurance:** Individuals repeatedly confirm details they already know or ask for frequent approval
- **Hesitation during new or complex tasks:** Employees pause or move slowly when facing unfamiliar responsibilities
- **Visible discomfort when taking on unfamiliar responsibilities:** Body language, tone or behavior signals uncertainty and unease
- **Difficulty recovering from mistakes:** Setbacks linger and influence future performance more than they should

These signs indicate that employees are operating from caution rather than conviction, and their performance will remain constrained until confidence is rebuilt.

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The Leader's Role

Leaders build confidence by reinforcing strengths, creating opportunities for success and providing the right level of support during new or challenging tasks. Their ability to encourage autonomy while offering steady guidance shapes how employees perceive their own potential.

The Situational Leadership® Model helps leaders calibrate direction and support so employees feel challenged but not overwhelmed. Too much direction can undermine confidence while too little support can create uncertainty. The model helps leaders strike the right balance.

Strategies to Build Confidence

To strengthen confidence, leaders should:

- **Model healthy confidence:** Make decisions transparently and acknowledge learning curves without defensiveness
- **Create opportunity for progressive responsibility:** Offer tasks that help employees build judgment and reduce hesitation gradually
- **Create decision-making frameworks:** Clarify authority levels, so employees know where they can act independently

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Pillar Five: Conditions for Success

Conditions for success determine whether employees can perform at their best. They reflect the clarity, stability and cultural support that allow people to engage fully with their work and collaborate effectively with others.

What Are Conditions for Success?

Conditions for success are the environmental and cultural elements that shape how work gets done. They include clear expectations, psychological safety and consistent leadership behaviors that reinforce trust and alignment.

Conditions include:

- **Clear expectations:** Knowing what's required, how decisions are made and what good performance looks like
- **Psychological safety:** Feeling safe to speak up, ask questions, raise concerns and share ideas without risk
- **Consistent leadership:** Receiving steady, predictable guidance and communication
- **Supportive culture:** Working within norms that reinforce collaboration and constructive behavior

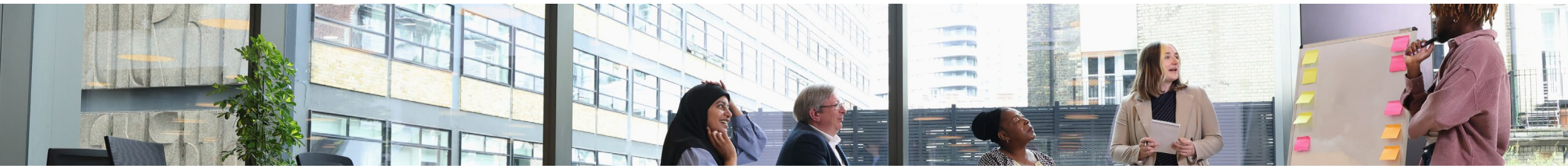
The key question leaders must ask is: *Does the environment support success?*

Why Conditions Matter

Conditions for success shape the environment in which performance takes place. When expectations are clear, communication is reliable and people feel safe to raise concerns or share ideas, the day-to-day flow of work is smoother. Teams coordinate more effectively, problems surface earlier and employees can focus on the substance of their responsibilities rather than navigating interpersonal risk or ambiguity.

The research underscores how consequential these conditions are. Google's Project Aristotle found that **psychological safety** accounted for **43% of the variance in team performance,** with teams demonstrating **19% higher productivity, 31% more innovation, 27% lower turnover, and 3.6× greater engagement** when it was present. Research from Harvard Business School adds another dimension: Employees who feel safe speaking up are **67% more likely to share ideas and 35% more likely to collaborate effectively,** strengthening both problem-solving and team cohesion. Together, these findings show that supportive conditions don't simply make work more pleasant. They directly influence how well teams think, communicate and execute.

Modern work relies on coordination across roles, functions and shifting priorities, which means the environment surrounding the work matters as much as the work itself. When employees operate in conditions that support clarity, trust and open dialogue, they're better able to contribute fully, adapt quickly and sustain strong performance even as expectations evolve.



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When Conditions Falter

Conditions for success deteriorate when the environment becomes unpredictable or unclear, making it difficult for employees to understand how to operate or what to expect.

Common causes of condition gaps include:

- **Ambiguous expectations:** Employees are unsure what is expected or how decisions are made
- **Inconsistent communication:** Information varies by leader, meeting or moment, creating confusion
- **Limited feedback:** Employees lack insight into how they are doing or how to improve
- **Cultural friction:** Team norms or behaviors create tension that disrupts collaboration and trust

When these environmental cracks widen, employees begin to navigate their work with caution, unsure whether their decisions will be supported or second-guessed.

Key indicators of condition gaps include:

- **Confusion about expectations or decision rights:** Employees do not know who owns what or how decisions are made
- **Limited psychological safety:** Individuals hesitate to speak up, ask questions or admit mistakes
- **Inconsistent communication:** Messages conflict, arrive late or change without context
- **Cultural friction or interpersonal tension:** Collaboration slows due to unresolved dynamics between people or groups
- **Barriers created by processes or culture:** Systems, rules or norms make work harder than it needs to be

These patterns show that the environment is working against performance, and until clarity and stability are restored, workforce readiness will remain fragile.

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The Leader's Role

Leaders shape the conditions for success through their behavior, communication and consistency. Their ability to set expectations, model constructive dialogue and reinforce clarity contributes to how supported employees feel and how conducive their environment is to performance.

The Situational Leadership® Model strengthens these conditions by creating a shared language for performance. When leaders use the model consistently, employees know what to expect, how to communicate their needs and how to ask for the right type of support.

Strategies to Build Conditions for Success

To strengthen the conditions for success, leaders should:

- **Build psychological safety:** Encourage transparency, open dialogue and constructive feedback
- **Create communication rhythms:** Establish consistent touchpoints that reduce ambiguity and build trust
- **Address cultural friction:** Resolve underlying issues with the team that may be undermining collaboration

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Bringing the Five Pillars Together

High performance isn't driven by a single factor. It's driven by a combination of elements that shape how employees show up and how the work gets done. Each of the five pillars of workforce readiness—competence, capacity, commitment, confidence and conditions for success—strengthens a different part of the performance picture, and together they create the foundation that allows employees to contribute at their highest level. When these pillars are present, people have what they need to bring their best thinking and their best effort to the work that matters most.

Because the pillars shape different aspects of performance, they naturally influence one another. Competence improves when people have the capacity to practice and apply their skills. More capacity creates more chances to build confidence. Confidence strengthens commitment. Commitment supports better conditions for success. Strong conditions make it easier to build competence and maintain capacity. Each pillar feeds the others, and each one benefits from the strength of the whole, helping leaders see performance as an interconnected system rather than a collection of isolated issues.

The Situational Leadership® Model makes that system usable in everyday work, helping leaders identify what people need to perform at their best. The pillars add clarity by showing what may be shaping those needs behind the scenes. Competence and confidence reveal how much direction someone needs. Commitment and capacity reveal how much support they need. Conditions for success determine whether the environment is helping or hurting progress. When leaders use the Situational Leadership® Model with the five pillars in mind, their approach reflects the real conditions people are working in, allowing their leadership to become more accurate and effective.

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Building a Workforce That Stays Ready

Workforce readiness isn't a destination an organization reaches and maintains indefinitely. It's an ongoing condition that must be continuously cultivated, reinforced and adapted as people, priorities and environments evolve over time. Achieving this requires leaders who intentionally shape the conditions that enable people to succeed, evolve and contribute at their highest level.

The five pillars of workforce readiness give leaders a practical framework for understanding what employees need to perform consistently, adapt effectively and contribute meaningfully. As leaders learn to strengthen competence, capacity, commitment, confidence and the conditions for success, performance becomes less dependent on individual effort alone and more supported by the systems, relationships and leadership practices surrounding the work.

This is where leadership influence becomes decisive. Leaders have the opportunity to shape workforce readiness through how they operate at every level: the discipline they bring to their own work, the way they diagnose and support others and the environment they reinforce across the organization. Every interaction, decision and expectation either strengthens or weakens the conditions employees rely on to perform.

As such, building and sustaining workforce readiness requires leaders to embrace a few key shifts:

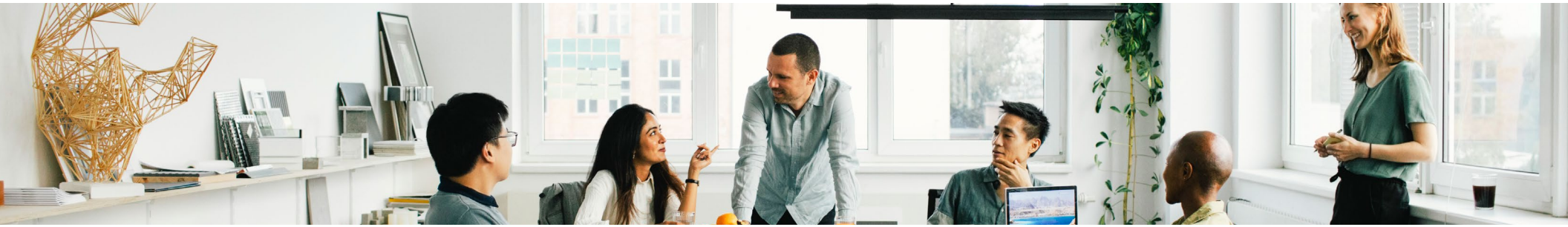
Adaptive communication: Effective leaders recognize that people need different information, levels of guidance and forms of support depending on the task and the situation. They communicate in ways that create clarity without creating dependency.

Consistent diagnosis: Strong performance begins with understanding what's actually limiting progress. Leaders look beyond visible behaviors to identify whether an individual needs skill development, clearer priorities, additional resources, renewed motivation or a more supportive environment.

Flexible leadership: A single leadership approach cannot meet the needs of every employee, task or situation. Leaders who adjust their style create more opportunities for people to grow while still maintaining accountability.

Balanced support: Workforce readiness grows when employees experience the appropriate level of support and direction. Too much oversight can limit growth. Too little involvement can leave employees without the guidance they need to succeed.

Clear expectations: People perform best when they understand what success looks like, why the work matters and how decisions should be made. Clarity reduces uncertainty and gives employees the foundation to take ownership.



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As the future of work accelerates—roles shifting, skills evolving and pressures intensifying—leaders need a practical way to apply this influence with precision. The Situational Leadership® Model provides that bridge. By helping leaders assess Performance Readiness® Levels accurately and match their leadership style to what individuals need, the model transforms the pillars from conceptual insights into actionable leadership behaviors. It equips leaders to meet people where they are, support them as they grow and reinforce the conditions that make sustained performance possible.

At The Center for Leadership Studies (CLS), our Situational Leadership® programs help leaders build the adaptive, context-aware skills required to strengthen workforce readiness across their teams. If you're ready to develop leaders who can create a workforce that stays ready to perform with consistency, confidence and resilience, explore our course offerings.

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About Us

The Center for Leadership Studies

At The Center for Leadership Studies (CLS), we are committed to enabling leaders at all levels to achieve their highest potential through innovative, impactful leadership training that is grounded in research and application. As the global home of the Situational Leadership® Model, the most successful and widely adopted leadership model available, our award-winning solutions and coaching services enable leaders to engage in effective performance conversations that build trust, increase productivity and drive behavior change.

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