

CHAPTER ONE

DEVELOPMENTAL AGILITY: LEARNING FASTER FROM EVERY EXPERIENCE

JUAN CARLOS'S LONG BUS RIDE HOME

I was 18 when I began training at the Olympic Center in Madrid. The Spanish indoor championship was fast approaching. My first coach, Eduardo Jimenez, wasn't an archery expert. He came from the worlds of handball and gymnastics, but he understood biomechanics and what it took to develop athletes. Together, we worked on technique and physical conditioning. I felt stronger than I'd ever been. Technically, I was shooting better than ever. The previous

year, as a junior competing in the senior division, I'd finished third. This year, my expectation was simple: I would win.

I arrived at the tournament carrying more than just my equipment, however. There had been intense criticism about my training with a coach who wasn't part of the archery establishment. People found it "offensive to the community." They questioned why the only archer with a scholarship at the Olympic Center was training with someone who "had no clue about archery." They mocked my fitness and strength training, saying archery was about technique and concentration, not physical preparation. I competed feeling I had to defend my coach and prove our approach worked. I was young and alone. Eduardo wasn't there with me. And that burden was too much to handle.

From the first arrow in warm-up, I tried too hard. I didn't let the shot happen naturally. Instead, I tried to force perfection from the first moment. When I made small mistakes, I didn't accept them. I was too hard on myself. Instead of focusing on executing the next shot well, I became fixated on the points, on the rankings, on where I stood, on what others were thinking. I imagined I could hear other people's comments: "You're having a bad day," "You're not training properly." In archery, you have time between arrows to think, to hear, to feel everything around you. By the halfway point of the first round, I was in survival mode, hitting the same wall over and over, harder and harder, but the wall wasn't opening. I finished near last. One archer retired, so technically I wasn't last, but I was close enough. It was a complete failure.

I took the public bus home alone. No team bus, no other athletes. Just regular passengers. I went straight to the back, as far as I could get from everyone. As it started to get dark, everything I'd been holding in came out. I cried for three hours. All the tension and

frustration came out. I felt like a fool. I'd failed my coach and I'd failed myself. In public, you try to hide it. You don't want people to see you suffering. But alone in the back of that bus, I couldn't hold it anymore.

Eventually, I calmed down and when I did, something shifted. "I have to fix this," I thought, "Now." I had to take the first step toward a solution. I started analyzing what had happened, and what came to me wasn't about technique. It was about what went on in my mind. I had focused so much on the future outcome, it had prevented me from staying in the present. It was about emotions. I hadn't known how to handle them when they hit me. And it was about self-sabotage. I hadn't realized how powerfully my inner voice was working against me.

When the bus arrived in Madrid at 10 PM, Eduardo was waiting at the station. "We need to practice," I told him. "Now." We went to his school's gym and shot some arrows. Technically, I was fine. The arrows went where I wanted. But Eduardo saw what I couldn't yet fully see. "You need a sports psychologist," he said. I didn't even know what that was.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THAT BUS

Think about what Juan Carlos did in those three hours. He didn't just suffer; he moved through the suffering and into something else entirely.

First came the devastation, the raw emotional response that any of us would feel after public failure. That part lasted a long time. But then something changed. While the experience was still raw, while

his body still carried the physical weight of it, he started extracting lessons. He wasn't dealing in diffuse insights like "I need to be mentally tougher." The lessons he extracted were specific. He identified three specific breakdowns: outcome fixation that prevented present-moment execution, emotional responses he had no tools to manage, and negative self-talk he hadn't been aware of before.

Many people would have spent the entire ride in pure self-criticism without progressing to this next step. "I'm not good enough. I don't have what it takes. Maybe I should quit." That kind of cycling feels like reflection, but it is rumination: the mind turning through the same judgment without advancing toward anything useful. Frustration and disappointment after failure are natural. But self-criticism without diagnosis produces nothing except more self-criticism.

Juan Carlos did something different. He diagnosed what had broken down while the experience was still vivid enough to learn from. He still didn't know what to do about any of it. But he knew, with precision, that things needed to change. And he acted on that knowledge within hours.

This was also Juan Carlos's first encounter with the archer's paradox: the harder he tried to prove himself, the worse he did. Focusing on the outcome, on defending his coach, on silencing the critics, meant he couldn't relax enough to perform. In the years to come, he would learn to work with this paradox rather than against it. But the inner work began in earnest on that bus ride.

What Juan Carlos demonstrated that night is the quality that most determines how quickly you will develop every other capability in this book: the ability to extract actionable lessons from experience and apply them.

We call this developmental agility, and you can build it.

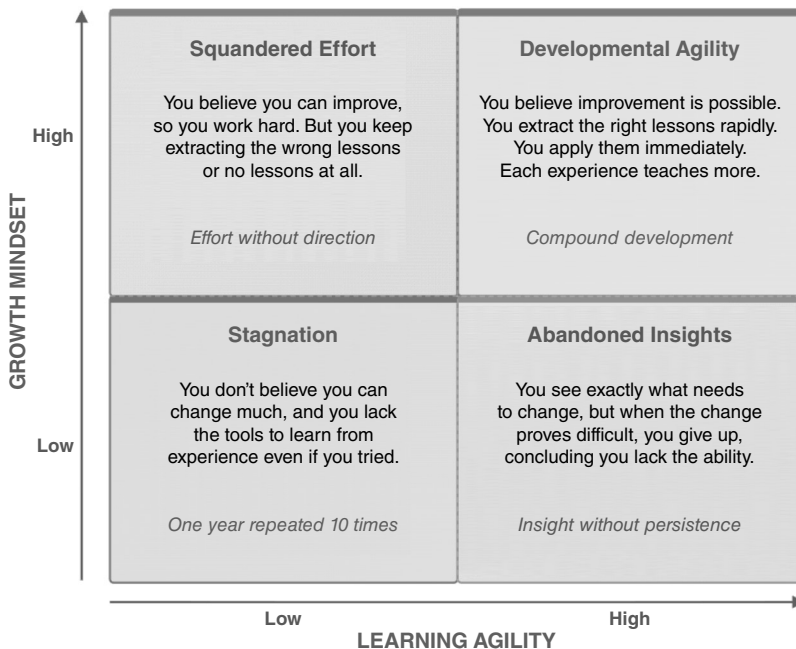
WHAT DEVELOPMENTAL AGILITY ACTUALLY IS

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, developmental agility is the combination of two things: growth mindset and learning agility.

Growth mindset, a term coined by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, captures the idea that skills can expand through deliberate effort rather than being fixed at birth.¹

Learning agility, which is the ability to extract lessons from one experience and apply them to another, has been shown by researchers

Figure 1.1 The Developmental Agility Matrix



at the Center for Creative Leadership to predict leadership success more reliably than raw intelligence or past performance.²

Developmental agility integrates both.

Without learning agility, a growth mindset is simply squandered effort. You believe you can improve, so you work hard. But you keep extracting the wrong lessons or no lessons at all. You pour energy into approaches that aren't working, unable to diagnose why.

Learning agility without a growth mindset yields insights that you end up abandoning. You see exactly what needs to change, but when the change proves difficult or slow, you give up, concluding you simply don't have what it takes to succeed.

Together, they create compound development. You believe improvement is possible, so you extract the right lessons rapidly and apply them immediately. Each experience teaches more than the last, and over time the gap between you and leaders without this capability widens steadily.

Consider what this looks like in practice. Imagine you have been tasked with merging two product teams. You send a detailed email explaining the rationale, certain that clarity will help. But by the next morning, three team members have asked to meet privately, each convinced their role is being eliminated. Hallway conversations go quiet when you approach. Instead of the transparency you hoped for, you've triggered fear.

A leader with a growth mindset but weak learning agility pushes harder, sending out another email. More detail this time. A longer explanation of why the merger makes sense. "They just need to understand the rationale better."

A leader with learning agility but a weak growth mindset diagnoses what went wrong: the email came too late. People needed

involvement in the design. Fear filled the vacuum that should have held communication. This leader involves people more in the next phase. But when the revised approach still meets resistance three weeks later, there's an obvious conclusion: "Maybe I'm just not cut out for leading this type of work." The project is handed off to someone else.

A leader with developmental agility sees that explanation was inadequate: people needed involvement, not just information. She adjusts, bringing team members into planning the integration. Resistance continues, though less intensely. She adjusts again, this time restructuring the planning sessions based on what she learned from the first round. Six months later, the merger is complete. She wasn't a natural at organizational change. But she is measurably better than when she started, because she stayed in the room long enough to learn.

You need developmental agility to build the other five capabilities in this book. Without it, the rest won't take hold. The good news is that it can be built by doing three practices: extracting the lessons, creating systems that provide feedback (that leadership naturally lacks), and embedding habits that sustain the other two over time.

PRACTICE 1: EXTRACT LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

Two leaders believe development is possible. But one develops three times faster because she is more skilled at extracting the right lessons and applying them rapidly. This is the difference learning agility makes.

Elite archers don't just shoot and hope they improve. They review. They analyze missed shots as data. The arrow that landed left reveals something about release timing or bow-arm position. The pattern of misses across 50 arrows tells them which element of technique needs attention. This systematic extraction is why they improve faster than archers who simply accumulate arrows without reflection.

Conduct Structured Reflection

After your next significant decision or action, stop for 15 minutes and answer five questions:

1. What was I trying to accomplish?
2. What actually happened?
3. What caused the gap between intended and actual?
4. What will I do differently next time?
5. What does this teach me about my leadership?

The first four questions extract tactical lessons for similar situations. The fifth is where learning agility truly develops. It forces you to extract transferable principles that apply across entirely different contexts.

Write your answers down. Writing forces precision that mental review allows you to skip. After doing this consistently, patterns emerge. In six months, you will have dozens of structured reflections. That is extraordinary learning density, if you capture it.

Seek Multiple Perspectives

Your interpretation of what happened is always incomplete. You have limited visibility into how others experience you, and you are biased toward information that confirms what you already believe.

Six months ago, you inherited a product team at a consumer products company that had missed deadlines for three consecutive quarters. Your diagnosis is insufficient focus, competing priorities, and weak accountability. And your solution is an upgraded project management system, weekly check-ins, and transparent metrics. Four months in, deadlines are being met.

Then a senior engineer resigns. In the exit interview: “We’re hitting your deadlines by cutting corners. The real problems haven’t changed.”

Your first instinct: this is one unhappy employee. You have seen the metrics and the system seems to be working.

But “your deadlines” bothers you.

In your regular one-on-one, your boss mentions she has heard the team has been working late. “Just something to watch.” Two days later, your peer in sales complains that product isn’t giving them anything new to talk about with customers. “All execution, no innovation.” You ask a mid-level engineer how things are going. They hesitate. “We’re meeting the numbers.” You wait. “But we’ve stopped pursuing new ideas. There’s no room.”

Four conversations with the same signal underneath. But none of it showed up in your metrics. You were tracking deadlines while engagement eroded. You had built compliance but lost commitment.

Wherever you rely on a single feedback channel, you make yourself vulnerable to exactly this kind of blind spot. Metrics reveal what they measure. They conceal everything else. Any system that tells you only one dimension of reality will eventually mislead you about the others. And the same principle applies to customer relationships, strategic initiatives, and organizational culture.

After significant situations, pay attention to signals from different levels and different angles. Ask “What have you noticed?”

Extract Transferable Patterns

The skill that separates exceptional from average learners is the ability to pull principles from one context and apply them across completely different scenarios.

You are three weeks into leading a cross-functional team on a product launch. You call a strategic planning session. You come in with a structured framework you have used successfully before.

Fifteen minutes in, the energy in the room has flattened. People are giving one-word answers with their arms crossed. When you ask for strategic options, someone says, “We already know our strategy. We’re here to figure out how to prioritize.”

After the session, one of the more senior members of the team stops you. “This group has been working together for four months. They don’t need help figuring out where to go. They need space to argue about what to do first. Different problem.”

Your framework worked before because the strategy was unclear. But this team has clarity. They needed debate, not structure. You applied what worked before without diagnosing whether it fit.

That is a useful tactical lesson. But the transferable principle underneath it is more powerful: solutions that succeed in one context can fail in another because they solve the wrong problem.

Where else could you make this mistake? The hiring profile that worked in your last role might not fit this one. Or the organizational structure that succeeded in a stable environment might fail in a volatile one. Perhaps the communication style that worked with your previous boss might irritate your current one. Every success carries the risk of being over-applied.

Practice this. After every significant lesson, identify the deeper pattern, then list three contexts where it applies. Over time, your brain begins doing this automatically. You will naturally start thinking in transferable principles rather than isolated tactics.

Separate Process from Outcome

When Juan Carlos arrived at the Spanish indoor championship, he was hyper-focused on winning. In his mind, what mattered most was the outcome: defending his coach, silencing the critics, coming first.

After your next important presentation, difficult conversation, or major decision, notice what you evaluate first. Most leaders ask: “Did I get the result I wanted?” That is natural. It is also problematic if it is the only question you ask.

Instead, ask a different question first: “Did I execute my intended approach?”

Of course, outcomes are partially outside your control. You can execute brilliantly and still not get the result you wanted. Markets shift or competitors change. Other people make decisions

you cannot influence. Focus on the processes that you control: your preparation, your execution, your learning.

Let's say you are a sales executive at a manufacturing company leading a high-stakes client presentation. Your plan is to open with what you believe is their most pressing challenge: present three options with clear tradeoffs, address budget concerns upfront. You execute all three elements clearly. The company's CEO responds: "We appreciate the thorough analysis. We need to discuss internally." You walk to your car feeling deflated.

Three weeks roll by and finally, the CEO calls. They are moving forward. Great, but even if they hadn't, budget cycles, internal politics, or a competing priority could have killed the deal, regardless of your performance. When you evaluate process separately from outcome, a "no" becomes information, not a verdict on your capability.

This distinction matters most during setbacks. If your process was sound and the outcome was poor, you have learned something about the environment, not about your ability. If your process was flawed, you have a specific target for improvement regardless of the outcome. Leaders who conflate process and outcome oscillate between unearned confidence when luck runs their way and unwarranted self-doubt when it doesn't.

PRACTICE 2: ENGINEER THE FEEDBACK LEADERSHIP NATURALLY LACKS

When an archer shoots, the arrow either hits the target or it doesn't. The result is unambiguous and feedback is immediate.

When you lead a meeting, how do you know if it was effective? Did you make the right decision? Were you communicating clearly? The feedback is ambiguous, delayed, and filtered through other people's interpretations and agendas. This is the fundamental feedback problem of leadership. Without clear signals, you can practice for months without knowing whether your practice is working. You might be reinforcing errors rather than correcting them.

The point is that you must ensure you get good process feedback.

Observe Yourself

A video or audio recording of your next presentation, important meeting, or difficult conversation provides feedback you cannot rationalize away.

Most leaders are startled when they first watch themselves. "I interrupted constantly." "My body language was completely closed off." "I said 'um' 43 times in 10 minutes." The recording reveals gaps between intention and execution that self-perception completely misses. You think you are listening attentively. The video shows you checking your phone three times during someone's explanation.

Record your next three important presentations or meetings, with participants' permission. Watch each within 24 hours. Observe without judgment. Simply notice. What do you see? What surprises you? What is the gap between how you think you are showing up and how you actually are?

Then record again three months later after focused practice and compare. The improvement becomes visible and measurable.

Track Specific Behaviors

The key is to make abstract capabilities concrete through measurement.

Are you working on listening? Then count the ratio of speaking to asking questions in meetings. Try to speak less than 40% of the time in team meetings. Track it for four weeks, calculate the weekly average, and observe the trend.

Do you want to work on developing your decision speed? Try tracking days from identifying the need for a decision to making it. Create a simple log: date decision needed, date decision made, and elapsed time. Look at what it tells you monthly.

Have you decided you want to change how you delegate? Experiment with measuring how many decisions your team makes without escalating to you, counting weekly. At baseline, they may escalate eight decisions per week. After three months of deliberate delegation practice, that number will drop.

The specifics matter less than simply having metrics. Without measurement, you can't tell if you're improving or just feeling like you are. And the act of measuring shifts your attention. You start noticing the very behaviors you are tracking, which is itself a form of practice.

Create Comparison Points

Measurement becomes powerful when you can compare current performance to past performance. This requires baselines.

Before you start developing any capability, measure your current state. If you are working on meeting facilitation, attend three

of your own meetings with a simple tracking sheet. Count: How many times did I interrupt? How long did I speak versus others? How many decisions got made? How many agenda items got addressed?

These numbers are your baseline, which is your starting point. Without it, three months from now, when you are speaking 40% of the time instead of 60%, you will not recognize the improvement. You will feel the same because improvement happened gradually. The baseline proves the change.

Now let's say you are developing your strategic communication ability. Your baseline measurement is that your presentations average eight main points, run 15 minutes over time, and generate 12 clarifying questions. You practice regularly for two months, forcing yourself to identify the three most important points before each presentation, timing yourself during rehearsals, anticipating questions and addressing them proactively. After two months, you measure again. Your presentations now average four main points, finish on time, and generate four clarifying questions.

Create comparison points for every capability you develop. Establish a baseline before practice begins, and measure again after sustained practice over time. This discipline transforms vague development intentions into concrete evidence of growth.

Seek Immediate Micro-feedback

After practicing specific capabilities, ask someone who observed you what they noticed. Do this within hours, while memory is fresh.

“I was working on asking more questions before offering solutions in today’s meeting. What did you observe?” Avoid vague questions like “How did I do?” which invite polite generalities rather than useful specifics.

Keep it brief. One observation. One suggestion. You aren’t seeking a comprehensive performance review; you are getting rapid feedback on one specific capability you practiced.

Identify three people who will give you this ongoing feedback: someone senior, someone at your level, someone junior. Tell them explicitly: “I’m working on [specific capability] for the next month. I’ll ask you for quick feedback after situations where you observe me. Your input matters to my development.”

The explicit request changes what happens. Now they will observe more carefully because they know you are going to ask. And they are prepared to give specific feedback rather than scrambling for something to say. Importantly, the request itself signals something about you as a leader: that you take your own development seriously enough to ask for help with it.

These four feedback systems (recorded self-observation, behavioral metrics, comparison points, and immediate micro-feedback) answer the question that determines whether your development effort succeeds: “Is my approach working?”

Without these systems, you are relying on hope. With them, you have evidence. That difference determines whether you invest months in approaches that work or waste months on approaches that don’t.

PRACTICE 3: BUILD THE HABITS THAT SUSTAIN DEVELOPMENT

Extracting lessons from experience and engineering feedback are skills. But as any elite archer will tell you, skills require continuous and consistent practice to produce results. What matters is whether you will still be doing this six months from now.

Knowledge alone won't change your behavior. You can understand everything in this chapter perfectly and still operate from old patterns under pressure. You can memorize the five reflection questions and never ask them. The gap between knowing and doing is where most development efforts die.

What closes that gap is habit, and not habit in the casual sense of “things you do regularly.” The habits that sustain development are behaviors so ingrained they are triggered automatically by specific cues, requiring little willpower to execute.

Charles Duhigg, an early writer about habits, described the basic loop: a cue triggers a routine, and the routine produces a reward that reinforces the loop.³ MIT neuroscientist Ann Graybiel has shown what's happening underneath. New behaviors initially require your prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for deliberate thought. With enough repetition, the balance of control shifts toward the basal ganglia, which stores automatic routines. That migration is why a habit that once required willpower eventually requires little or none.⁴

Monday morning intention-setting works this way. After six weeks of consistent execution, you find yourself thinking about your developmental intention at the start of each week without having to remember to. The routine has stopped being something you do and started being something that happens.

James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits*, identified three principles for making habit formation reliable.⁵ First, use what Clear calls “habit stacking”: attach new behaviors to existing routines. Your Monday planning session already exists, right? Stack your developmental intention on top of it. Second, make the behavior small enough to execute even on your worst day. Your Friday review takes a few minutes. Even when you are exhausted and behind on everything, you can still commit to five minutes. Third, create visible evidence of completion. Write your intention down. Check it off. The visible record reinforces the loop and makes skipping feel costly.

Here is the weekly structure. It takes 15 minutes total, plus a 30-minute monthly review.

- **Monday morning:** Set one developmental intention for the week. “This week I’m practicing asking three questions before offering solutions in team discussions.” Write it down. Put it where you will see it daily.
- **Each day:** Before important situations, remind yourself of your intention. After the situation, take two minutes to note what happened. Did you execute your intention? What did you notice?
- **Friday afternoon:** Do a five-minute review. Write down three specific behavioral improvements you noticed that week.

Make them concrete: “Interrupted less in Tuesday’s meeting. Caught myself twice and let others finish.” Avoid vague entries like “Got better at listening,” which don’t give you anything to build on. Answer the five reflection questions for your most significant situation of the week.

- **Monthly:** Review your weekly entries and look for patterns. What is working and what isn’t? Where has improvement been strongest and where has it stalled? Adjust your approach for the coming month.

You may struggle with this at first. You will forget the Friday review some weeks. Or you will set Monday intentions and lose them by Wednesday. This is normal. The question isn’t whether you will skip, because you will. The real question is whether you restart when you notice.

After a few months, the rhythms will feel natural. By month six, you will notice when you skip them because something feels missing. That missing feeling is the habit working. You are no longer relying on willpower. As described above, the behavior has migrated from prefrontal cortex to basal ganglia. Development has become self-sustaining.

The Weekly Practice Planner in Appendix B consolidates these practices into a single, reproducible format. Use it.

Start With Early Wins

Don’t start with your hardest capability challenge. You’re building a system you’ll use for years, and you need early evidence that the system works.

Choose a capability where focused effort will produce visible results quickly. Meeting facilitation will probably improve faster than strategic thinking. Communication clarity will move faster than organizational change leadership. Pick something where you get multiple repetitions per week and the feedback is relatively clear.

Say you start with meeting facilitation. Your baseline assessment is that your meetings regularly run over, cover maybe half the agenda, and end without clear decisions. After three weeks of focused practice setting process intentions before each meeting, tracking specific behaviors, making micro-adjustments, your meetings start finishing closer to on time. More agenda items get addressed. Decisions get documented. The improvement won't be dramatic across every dimension. You might find that ending on time means cutting discussion short on the last agenda item, and someone on your team tells you the meetings feel rushed. That's useful feedback, not a sign that the practice isn't working. It tells you which element to focus on next.

What matters about the early win is simpler than it sounds: you tried a systematic approach and it produced a visible change. That experience is what carries you into harder capabilities later, when the work feels less rewarding and the evidence less obvious.

The Choice Ahead

Juan Carlos stewed in self-criticism on the bus ride to central Madrid. But after three hours, he stopped ruminating and did something different. Within hours he started diagnosing and then converting experience into lessons and actions.

You also face a choice about how you will approach that development.

Some leaders accumulate 20 years of experience. Others have one year of experience repeated 20 times. The difference is whether they extract lessons from those experiences, seek honest feedback about their performance, and keep doing both over time.

Developmental agility is what determines which path you follow. Build it and the compound effect will surprise you. It likely will take some time, but you will look back and see development that seemed impossible when you started. If you are patient, you will develop new capabilities and achieve better results.

MICHAEL ON DEVELOPMENTAL AGILITY

From our earliest conversations, it was clear that Juan Carlos and I shared the belief that developmental agility is an essential foundation for improvement, whether you are striving to become a great archer or a great leader. If you don't believe you can improve substantially and you aren't effective at learning from experience, then nothing else will help.

When my IMD colleagues and I designed the Transition to Business Leadership program, we embedded developmental agility into the structure itself. The program assumes that capable senior leaders still have significant room to grow, and that growth accelerates when reflection becomes systematic rather than occasional.

I apply the same principles to my own development. When generative AI emerged as a transformative technology, I committed to spending time with it every day, learning through direct experimentation rather than just studying it theoretically. Each session taught me something. Early frustrations helped me see what I needed to learn next. The daily practice compounded in ways that occasional study never could.

CONNECTING TO PURPOSEFUL PRACTICE

Everything else in this book builds on this foundation. The purposeful practice techniques in Chapter 2 require the belief that practice works and the ability to learn from each repetition. So, build the foundation first and everything else becomes possible.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Developmental agility combines a growth mindset with learning agility. Together, they create compound development, where each experience teaches more and each lesson applies broadly.
- Evaluate process before outcome. This sustains development during setbacks and helps you distinguish what you control from what you don't.
- Conduct 15-minute after-action reviews using five questions. The fifth question, "What does this teach me about

leadership more broadly?” transforms tactical lessons into transferable principles.

- Get the feedback you need. Record yourself, track specific behavioral metrics, and establish baselines to measure change. Seek immediate micro-feedback from three identified observers.
- Build weekly habits through stacking, small actions, and visible tracking. Keep behaviors small enough to execute under pressure.
- Start with an early win to prove the system works. Use the evidence to build confidence before tackling harder, longer-term development challenges.

START HERE

Do Now. Think of a recent leadership situation that did not go as you intended. Answer the five reflection questions in writing. Right now, before you continue reading. The act of writing forces the precision that converts experience into learning.

Do Next. For two weeks, build the weekly rhythm. Monday: set one developmental intention in writing. Each day: two-minute notes after important situations. Friday: write down three specific improvements you noticed and answer the five reflection questions for your most significant situation. Track your observations in the Weekly Practice Planner in Appendix B. At the end of two weeks, review what you have captured. You will see patterns that were invisible before you started writing them down.

