

Are You Leading, Rescuing, or Absorbing?

A 20-minute reflection for managers who are holding too much together

This reflection is for capable, conscientious managers who are carrying pressure at work and are not sure whether they are leading well, rescuing a broken situation, or privately absorbing too much of the cost.

You may be dealing with an executive-visible deadline, a client promise, a messy cross-functional project, a team under pressure, or a decision that keeps getting delayed because the real trade-offs are hard to name.

The goal is not to solve the whole situation in 20 minutes.

The goal is to see what you are carrying more clearly and identify one move that increases visibility instead of increasing private effort.

The basic distinction

When pressure rises, capable people often do three things at once.

They lead.
They rescue.
They absorb.

The difference is not always obvious from the outside. It may look like the same calendar: more meetings, more translation, more follow-up, more careful language, more effort to keep the work moving.

The difference is what happens to visibility.

Leading

You are leading when your actions make reality more visible so the right people can make better choices.

Leading does not always feel calm or easy. It may create discomfort because clearer information often forces trade-offs into the open. But the discomfort is connected to reality.

You may be leading when:

- ownership, authority, or trade-offs become more explicit
- the system has better information after your involvement
- risk, capacity, or dependency becomes easier for others to see
- people are better able to make a responsible decision
- your effort reduces confusion rather than hiding it

Reflection questions:

- Where am I helping others see the real situation more clearly?
- What information is now more available because of my involvement?
- What decision, trade-off, or constraint has become easier to name?



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Rescuing

You are rescuing when you step in to prevent discomfort, failure, conflict, or consequence, but the underlying condition remains mostly unchanged.

Rescuing often creates genuine short-term relief. That is why it is so seductive. The client calms down. The executive feels reassured. The team gets through the week. The visible failure is delayed.

The problem is that the pattern often repeats because the system never had to face the condition that created the pressure.

You may be rescuing when:

- people feel relieved, but the pattern keeps coming back
- you become the person who makes ambiguity manageable
- others do not have to face the trade-off yet
- the system learns that you will catch the problem
- your effort keeps the commitment alive without changing the conditions

Reflection questions:

- What discomfort or consequence am I preventing?
- Who feels relieved because I am stepping in?
- What pattern keeps repeating after I help?
- What does the system not have to face as long as I keep rescuing?

Absorbing

You are absorbing when you privately metabolize pressure, confusion, urgency, or emotional fallout that should become shared information.

Absorbing is often less visible than rescuing. It may happen in your body, your calendar, your sleep, your private rumination, or the way you translate pressure downward to your team.

You may be absorbing when:

- the pressure lives mostly inside you
- you are doing more interpretation than anyone sees
- you feel responsible for keeping everyone calm
- you are carrying ambiguity that should be shared
- the system looks more functional because you are quietly paying the cost

Reflection questions:

- What pressure am I carrying privately?
- Where does this show up in my body, calendar, mood, or relationships?
- What am I interpreting, translating, or softening that others do not see?
- What would become visible if I stopped absorbing this alone?

Step 1: Choose one live situation

Pick one situation you are currently holding together. Keep it specific. For example:

- a client promise
- an executive-visible deadline
- a struggling project
- a cross-functional tension
- a team pressure you keep buffering
- a decision that keeps moving forward without enough clarity

Write a few sentences:

What is the situation?

Who is involved?

What pressure is increasing?

What are you doing to keep it moving?

Step 2: Notice what your extra effort makes possible

Before diagnosing the pattern, appreciate why your effort makes sense.

Over-functioning often works in the short term. It creates relief. It protects relationships. It keeps delivery moving. It may prevent blame or escalation before the organization is ready to deal with the real issue.

Ask:

- What does my extra effort prevent, delay, soothe, or make possible?
- Who benefits because I am carrying this?
- What would become harder or more visible if I stopped compensating?
- What do I get from being the person who can hold this together?

This is not a shame exercise. You are looking for the reason the pattern has been useful.

Step 3: Mark the mode

Look at the actions you are taking in the situation.

For each one, ask:

- Does this make reality more visible? If yes, it may be leading.
- Does this prevent discomfort without changing the condition? If yes, it may be rescuing.
- Does this keep pressure inside me instead of moving it into shared awareness? If yes, it may be absorbing.

You do not need a perfect answer. Most real situations contain all three.

Use this simple sentence:

In this situation, I am leading when I...

I may be rescuing when I...

I may be absorbing when I...

Step 4: Sort the burden

Now separate the layers.

Some burdens are yours to own. These may include your judgment, your communication, your standards, your role clarity, your technical guidance, or your participation in the pattern.

Some burdens belong to relationship or stakeholder dynamics. These may include trust, influence, competing priorities, political pressure, or tension between groups.

Some burdens belong to the system. These may include unclear authority, insufficient capacity, missing decision rights, unrealistic timelines, weak escalation paths, broken coordination, or incentives that reward the wrong behavior.

Some burdens become personal because your own responsibility pattern gets hooked.

Ask:

- What is genuinely mine to own?
- What belongs to relationship or stakeholder dynamics?
- What belongs to the system?
- What am I making personal because I feel responsible for making this work?

Step 5: Make it visible enough to decide

Systems do not respond to what remains private. They respond to signals, patterns, metrics, stories, reports, and conversations that become visible enough for others to act on.

That does not mean you need a dramatic escalation. Often the better move is smaller and earlier. The point is to turn private absorption into shared information while the system still has room to respond and while someone still has room to make a decision.

Ways to make a hidden condition visible enough to decide:

- a short framing note
- a risk summary
- a capacity signal
- a repeated-pattern summary
- a decision log
- a stakeholder map
- a timeline showing where assumptions changed
- a trade-off table
- a meeting question
- a metric that shows overload, delay, rework, or dependency

Ask:

- What condition needs to become visible?
- Who needs to see it?
- What form would make it easiest to engage without blame?
- What is the smallest signal I could send before this becomes a crisis?

A simple message structure:

- Here is what has changed:
- Here is the assumption that no longer holds:
- Here is the decision we need:
- Here are the options I can see:
- Here is the risk if we keep moving without deciding:

You do not need to use all five lines. The point is to make the real condition visible enough that the next conversation can move from reassurance to choice.

Step 6: Think in stake, influence, and leverage

Before you act, look at the situation through three lenses.

Stake: Who pays a price if this remains hidden?

This may include you, your team, the client, another department, the business, or a senior leader whose promise depends on incomplete information.

Influence: Who can change the condition?

This may not be the same person who feels the pain. Look for formal authority, informal influence, sponsorship, decision rights, and people who already sense the problem.

Leverage: Where could one clearer signal or conversation shift the pattern?

Leverage is not always dramatic. It may be the right memo, the right meeting question, the right metric, the right ally, or the right moment to name a trade-off.

Ask:

- Who has the most at stake?
- Who has formal authority?
- Who has informal influence?
- Who already senses the problem but has not named it?
- Where would a small amount of clarity change the next decision?

Step 7: Choose one cleaner move

Choose one move that would increase visibility without turning the situation into blame.

Possible moves:

- own something
- ask for clarification
- surface a risk
- make a trade-off visible
- request a decision
- stop translating privately
- stop absorbing a recurring pressure
- escalate with evidence
- run a small visibility experiment

Complete this sentence:

One cleaner move I can make is...
This would make visible...
The person or group who needs to see it is...
The risk I need to tolerate is...

Optional AI-guided reflection

You can use AI to help you think through the situation, not to give away your judgment. Copy and paste the prompt below into the AI chat of your choice. Keep confidential details out of it. Use general labels like "a client," "a senior leader," "another department," or "the product team."

Copy this prompt:

Help me look at this situation through three modes: leading, rescuing, and absorbing.

Here is the situation:

[Briefly describe the situation, the stakeholders, the pressure, and what I am doing to keep things moving.]

First, identify where my actions may be making reality more visible.

Second, identify where I may be creating temporary relief while hiding the underlying condition.

Third, identify where I may be privately absorbing pressure, ambiguity, or emotional fallout.

Then help me sort:

1. what is mine to own,
2. what belongs to relationship or stakeholder dynamics,
3. what belongs to the system,
4. what I may be making personal.

Do not give broad advice yet. Help me identify one small move that would make the real condition visible enough for the right people to make a decision, without turning it into blame.

Reflection

After you complete the exercise, notice what changed.

- What became clearer?
- What felt relieving to separate?
- What still feels hard to name?
- Where did you notice your own pull to rescue or absorb?
- What is one signal, conversation, or artifact that could help the system see what you have been carrying?

You may not solve the situation in 20 minutes.

But if you can see what you are carrying more clearly, and identify one move that increases visibility instead of increasing private effort, you are already in a better position than when you started.

One qualifier:

This exercise works in systems where clearer signals can still be received. The organization does not have to like what you surface, but it needs some capacity to engage with reality.

If repeated attempts to make the real condition visible are punished, ignored, or turned back on you, the cleaner move may be different. It may be to get support, protect your judgment, and consider whether this is still a system you can influence.

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