



BEFORE *the* MARK

LEADERSHIP
as
FORMATION
at the
THRESHOLD

DAVID S. MORGAN

Before the Mark

Leadership as Formation at the Threshold

“There is a moment before the brush touches the canvas.”

David S. Morgan

CEO (Retired) | Doctoral Candidate, Walden University | Practitioner-Scholar

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There is a moment before the brush touches the canvas. A moment before the bow meets the string. A moment before the decision is made.

It is easy to overlook this moment. It produces no output, leaves no trace, and resists measurement. And yet it is here, precisely here, that leadership is not expressed but formed.

Most of what we teach about leadership lives on the other side of this moment: the decision, the directive, the move. We coach for clarity, speed, and conviction. We measure outcomes, not intervals. The interval itself, the small window in which a person is becoming capable of what comes next, has no line on the dashboard.

That absence is the problem. In a period when organizations face signals arriving faster than meaning can form around them, the leaders who survive are not the ones who decide fastest. They are the ones who learn to hold the interval long enough for a viable response to take shape.

The Moment That Doesn't Show Up

In the Banijay Art footage, there is a moment that passes in less than three seconds (Banijay Art, 2026).

Callum stands in front of the canvas. His brush is raised, but not moving. His eyes are not scanning broadly. They fix on a narrow region of Benedetti's face, just above the cheekbone, where the light shifts as she turns slightly.

The brush moves forward, then stops. Not dramatically. Almost imperceptibly.

His wrist tightens, then relaxes. His head tilts a fraction to the left. The expression on his face changes. Not confusion, not certainty, but something closer to recalibration.

The brush withdraws. Nothing has been painted.

And yet, something has changed.

When the brush finally makes contact, the stroke is not exploratory. It lands with quiet precision, as if the decision had already been made somewhere else.

A similar pattern appears in Benedetti's playing. In one phrase, her bow slows just before a transition. The note does not break, but the pressure shifts. The sound thins slightly, then deepens. The movement is continuous, but the decision inside it is not.

To the audience, the phrase flows. To the practitioner, the phrase forms.

This is not hesitation. It is formation under tension. Both Callum and Benedetti are operating inside an interval where perception, identity, and action have not yet aligned. They are not waiting for clarity. They are letting the next move become possible.

The same pattern shows up in any setting where consequence is high and the next move cannot be scripted. A surgeon reading a patient's response on the table. A negotiator reading a room before naming the term. An executive reading a board before answering the question that has just been asked. The competent ones do not move faster than the situation. They move precisely when the situation has become readable inside them.

What the System Feels Before It Knows

When we analyze these moments, frame by frame, decision by decision, a consistent signal appears.

The body registers before cognition resolves. The system senses before it can articulate. The next move is felt before it is known.

This is consistent with a broader body of work suggesting that perception and action are not strictly sequential. They are intertwined. Karl Weick's work on sensemaking describes how organizations and individuals often act in order to understand, rather than waiting for full clarity before acting (Weick, 1995).

But even sensemaking begins too late to fully capture what is happening here. What we are observing occurs before action is taken. It is the interval in which the system is still becoming capable of response.

That interval has a structure. It is not empty waiting. It is active formation: the gathering of signal, the loosening of prior interpretation, the slow reshaping of the self that will, in a moment, act. Miss the structure and the moment looks like inaction. See the structure and it becomes the most consequential phase of the entire decision.

Elsewhere I have specified this structurally: holding is the active preservation of the conditions under which a situation becomes decidable, the conditions under which differential response becomes possible at all (Morgan, 2026c). Without those conditions, a response may still occur, but it has not been formed as a choice.

The Hidden Constraint: When Signal Outpaces Capacity

This is where leadership enters, and where most leadership models begin to break down.

In recent work, I describe a condition called Acceleration Without Metabolization (AWM): a state in which the velocity of incoming signals exceeds the system's capacity to interpret, integrate, and respond effectively (Morgan, 2026a).

Under these conditions, decisions become reactive or overly centralized. Interpretation narrows. Systems appear functional, until they fracture.

This builds on a long-standing view of organizations as information-processing systems (Galbraith, 1974), but extends it in a critical way. It is not just the volume of information that matters. It is the rate at which meaning must be formed.

Cohen and Levinthal (1990) describe absorptive capacity as the ability to recognize, assimilate, and apply new external knowledge. AWM names a different failure mode. Not the absence of knowledge, but the inability to metabolize it under time pressure. The signals arrive. They are even read. But there is no interval in which they can become coherent action.

When systems lose the capacity to metabolize signal at speed, the burden does not disappear. It shifts. The leader becomes, in effect, the metabolizing organ of the system, holding what the organization cannot yet process.

This is not an organizational problem alone. It is a human one. The leader who appears decisive while operating in AWM is often producing motion without metabolization.

Under load, systems don't fail because they stop moving. They fail because they keep moving without becoming.

The Leadership Error: Collapsing the Interval

Under pressure, leaders are often taught, implicitly or explicitly, to collapse this interval. Decide faster. Move decisively. Reduce ambiguity.

These instincts are understandable. They produce a predictable pattern of failure.

When the interval between signal and action is collapsed prematurely, the decision may be directionally correct, but it does not hold. It requires repeated intervention. From the outside, this looks like strong leadership. From within the system, it feels like drift, rework, and quiet instability.

The decision has been made. The system has not yet become capable of sustaining it.

Elsewhere I have argued that leadership is fundamentally a formation discipline rather than a performance discipline (Morgan, 2026b). The implication for decisions made under load is direct. A decision becomes durable only when the leader and the surrounding system have been formed, even briefly, into the shape required to sustain it. Without that formation, the act of deciding produces a decision-shaped object, not a decision. The shape is there. The structure is not. And so the decision must be made again, often by someone else, often later, almost always at higher cost.

This is the structural account of why such decisions fail to hold. When the interval collapses, the conditions of decidability never form. The selection is rendered, the outcome produced, but no choice was made in the structural sense; the response passed through as behavior and was narrated as decision afterward (Morgan, 2026c). The narration supplies, after the fact, what the forming did not provide.

This is the quiet pathology of high-performing organizations under load. Activity is high. Visibility is high. Decisions are constant. But durability is declining, and no one is yet measuring it.

Consider a scene I have watched, in some form, dozens of times. A CEO sits in a quarterly review. Margin compression has accelerated. A major customer has signaled they may be exiting. The board chair, three minutes in, asks the question everyone has been waiting on. “What are we going to do?”

The CEO has thirty seconds to answer. There is a version of the answer that is technically correct: restructure the affected line, reassign the account team, accelerate the new platform. The CEO knows this answer. It will be received well in the room. It will produce action by Friday.

But the CEO also senses something else, something not yet articulable. The customer’s signal does not match the published reasons. The margin compression is not evenly distributed across the segments the deck shows. There is a pattern underneath the pattern, and it has not yet resolved.

Two leaders, in this moment, will produce visibly identical behavior. One will give the technically correct answer at the thirty-second mark and watch the room nod. The other will say, with quiet authority, “I want to come back to that with a sharper read by next Tuesday. Here is what I see right now, and here is what I do not yet see.”

The first leader has performed decisiveness. The second has held the interval. Six months later, only one of those decisions will still be in place, and only one of those organizations will have learned anything.

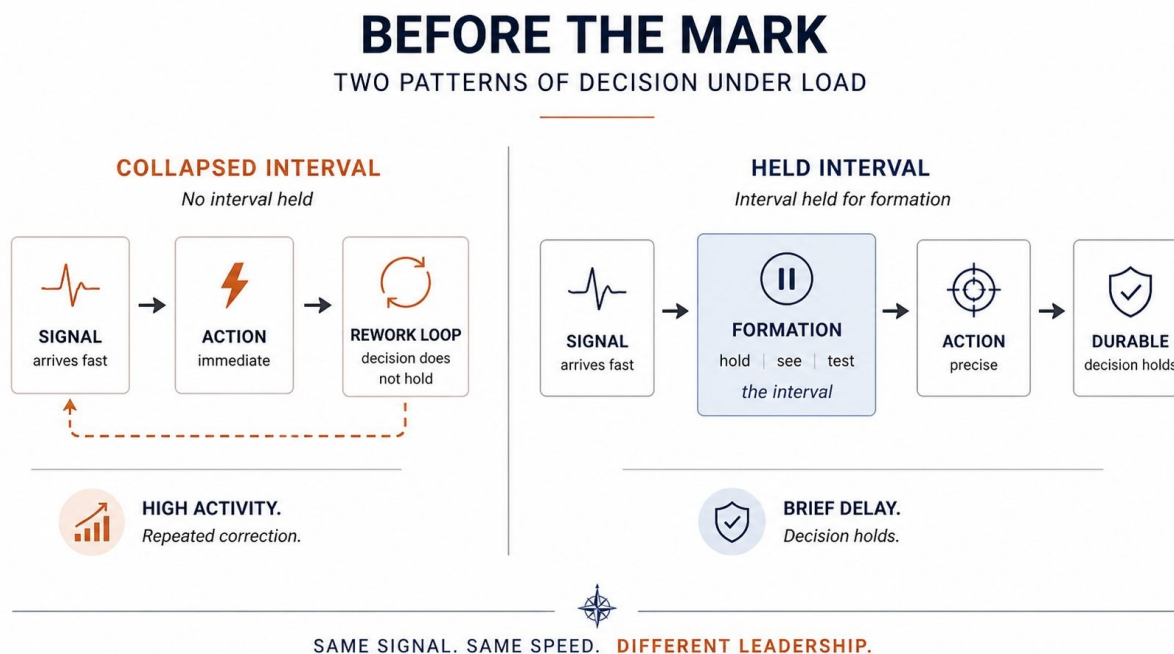


Figure 1. Two patterns of decision under load.

Holding the Interval

What the artist and the musician demonstrate, quietly and repeatedly, is a different capacity. They hold.

Not indefinitely. Not passively. But deliberately.

They remain in contact with the signal: the shifting light across a face, the subtle feedback of tone and pressure, the emerging shape of what is not yet fully formed. Until something changes. Not externally. Internally.

Only then does the brush move. Only then does the note land.

This suggests a different definition of leadership: the capacity to hold the interval between signal and action long enough for a viable response to form.

This is not inaction. It is disciplined restraint. And it requires three interdependent capabilities.

1. Containment

The ability to remain present under pressure without collapsing into premature action or avoidance. Containment is not stoicism. It is the working capacity to feel the pressure of the unresolved, accurately, while remaining capable of perception. Most leaders confuse containment with composure. Composure manages appearance. Containment maintains contact with reality.

2. Decentered Authority

Resisting the pull to centralize control when the situation requires distributed interpretation. In an accelerated environment, the leader is rarely the highest-resolution sensor in the system. Decentered authority is the discipline of listening longer to those who are, and acting on what they reveal, rather than on what one already believed.

3. Epistemic Discipline

Maintaining clarity about what is known, what is assumed, and what is still forming. Premature certainty is the most common failure of leadership under load. Epistemic discipline is the willingness to keep an open status on what is not yet decidable, even while acting confidently on what is.

These capacities are consistent with emerging work in complexity leadership, which emphasizes adaptability through distributed intelligence and adaptive space (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). But the emphasis here is more specific. Not just adapting, but holding long enough for adaptation to become possible.

The Threshold: Where Identity Shifts

There is a point in every meaningful decision where the old way of seeing no longer works, and the new way has not yet stabilized. This is the threshold. It is not a place of clarity. It is a place of tension. And it cannot be bypassed.

At the threshold, signal intensity increases, interpretive capacity is strained, and identity itself begins to shift. This is why the moment feels difficult. Not because the answer is unknown, but because the self capable of acting on that answer is still forming.

The threshold is not the moment of choice. It is the moment in which the chooser changes.

Leaders who recognize this stop asking the wrong question. The question is not, what should I decide? The question is, who am I becoming such that the decision becomes possible? This reframing is small in language and large in consequence. It moves the work from the decision back into the interval, where the work actually lives.

The Risk of Being Right Too Soon

One of the most subtle failure modes in leadership is premature coherence. The leader sees a pattern, interprets it quickly, and acts decisively. And often, they are initially right.

But because the system has not metabolized the underlying signals, the decision does not hold. The pattern re-emerges. Intervention is required again. This creates the illusion of leadership effectiveness, high activity and visible control, while masking a deeper instability.

The system is moving. It is not becoming.

Premature coherence is rewarded by most performance systems. Speed is visible. Metabolization is not. The leader who decides in three minutes looks more capable than the leader who decides in thirty, even when the thirty-minute decision holds for a year and the three-minute decision is reversed within a quarter. Until organizations learn to measure decision durability, they will continue to select against the very capability they most need.

Formation, Not Performance

The artist is not trying to produce a perfect portrait. The musician is not trying to execute a flawless performance. They are engaged in something more fundamental: the act of becoming capable of what the moment requires.

This is not mastery as repetition. It is mastery as formation under constraint.

Work on optimal experience, often described as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), captures the state in which action and awareness merge. But what we are observing here occurs just before that state stabilizes. It is the moment where alignment is not yet achieved but is actively forming.

Performance language, the dominant language of contemporary leadership, cannot reach this layer. Performance asks: did the act succeed? Formation asks: was the actor present, in contact, and shaped by what was actually there? An organization that develops only performers will, in time, run out of the capacity to form the next set. An organization that develops formation produces performers as a byproduct.

Four Instruments for the Threshold

This is not abstract. It can be practiced. Below are four instruments leaders can carry into the next high-stakes moment. Each is small enough to remember, specific enough to use, and sharp enough to teach.

1. The Twenty-Minute Return

The signature phrase: “We will come back to this in twenty minutes.” In high-stakes moments, this single sentence creates structured pause. Not delay. Disciplined space. The interval it opens is rarely about gathering more information. It is about letting interpretation reach the depth at which a durable decision becomes possible. Across many years of board work, I have noticed that the decisions made twenty minutes after the question are almost never the decisions reached for in the first thirty seconds, and they hold longer.

2. The Disconfirming Question

The signature phrase: “What do I not yet see that would change this decision?” This is the leader’s job at the threshold, asked of oneself first and then aloud. It is not the question of someone seeking reassurance. It is the question of someone stress-testing the emerging interpretation against the parts of the situation that do not yet fit. The leaders who ask this consistently make fewer reversible decisions because they reverse them inside their own heads first.

3. The Interpretation Window

The signature phrase: “Whose view would change mine?” Decentered authority is not a posture. It is a working practice. The leader at the threshold is rarely the highest-resolution sensor in the room, and the question is not who has an opinion but whose vantage would actually move the answer if it were heard. Naming that person is half the discipline. Listening to them in a way that lets the answer change is the other half. Most leaders do the first and skip the second.

4. The Durability Test

The signature question: “Will this decision hold when I’m not in the room?” After acting, this is the only honest measure of whether the interval was held long enough. Durability is the lagging indicator that reveals what the moment cost. If decisions in a given domain require repeated rework, the failure is rarely in the decision itself. It is in the interval that preceded it. Track this over months, not days, and the pattern becomes unmistakable.

Durability is also the diagnostic for whether decidability formed at all. If the structural conditions for choice were present, the decision was actually made; it carries forward without you. If those conditions were not present, what looked like a decision was a response narrated as one, and it will require the same forming to be done again, by someone, somewhere downstream (Morgan, 2026c).

Held together, these four instruments do something that no single one accomplishes alone. They convert leadership from a performance discipline, judged at the moment of action, into a formation discipline, judged at the moment the system either sustains the action or does not. What they give the leader is not technique. It is language for the moment before they act.

Before the Mark

Leadership is often judged at the moment of action. The decision. The directive. The move.

But the real work, the work that determines whether any of it holds, happens before that. In the quiet, often invisible interval where signal is present, identity is in motion, and action has not yet been taken.

It is here that leaders are not expressing who they are. They are becoming who they must be.

This is the wager underneath the argument. An organization led by those who cannot hold the interval cannot become anything new. It will move. It will act. It may even perform. But it will not transform. The decisions will accumulate, the dashboards will fill, and the underlying form will remain what it always was. To choose acceleration without metabolization is to choose motion without becoming. And the cost of that choice is paid not in the next quarter but in the next decade, when the organization discovers that everything was changing except the one capacity required to change anything.

The artist understands this. The musician understands this. They do not refuse the moment. They form themselves inside it.

So, like the artist with brush hovering, like the musician with bow in motion, the leader stands, briefly, at the threshold.

| *Not waiting. Not hesitating. But holding, just long enough, for the mark to matter.*

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About the Author

David S. Morgan is a CEO (Retired), Doctoral Candidate at Walden University, and practitioner-scholar whose work centers on organizational theory, leadership formation, and the conditions under which complex systems metabolize change. He is the author of more than a dozen books across leadership, innovation, creativity, and human development, including *The Joy of Discontent* and *Art Is Leadership: Formation, Not Performance*. His scholarly work develops the Morgan Working Paper Series, anchored by the AWM theory of organizational metabolization and the structural account of decidability. Web: davidsmorgan.com.