



ORGANIZATIONAL TALENT CONSULTING

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Where Coaching and Consulting Come Together

The more responsibility you carry, the more consequential your decisions become—and the greater the risk when good decisions fail to become good results.

AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING LEADERSHIP RISK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Risk Is the Better Question

Executives rarely suffer from a shortage of information. Dashboards, reports, consultants, board members, employees, peers, and increasingly artificial intelligence supply more analysis than most leaders could possibly consume. Yet more information does not necessarily produce better decisions. **And even good decisions do not guarantee performance.**

Organizations hire talented leaders. They develop thoughtful strategies. They restructure teams. They invest in growth. They launch change initiatives. Then something happens between the decision and the result. Expectations become unclear. Alignment weakens. Decisions slow. People hesitate to speak candidly. Leadership behavior becomes inconsistent. Teams struggle to execute.

The decision may have been right. The risk emerges in what happens next.

THE RISK ZONE – OUR MODEL

We use the term Risk Zone to describe the period between a consequential leadership decision and the organizational performance it is meant to enable.

It is an integrative model—informed by research on execution, psychological safety, advice-taking, coaching, and behavior change—rather than a tested academic construct.

Value is created, or eroded, after the decision, through alignment, expectations, decision friction, candor, and behavior.

The decision creates the opportunity. What happens next determines the return.

Evidence-based management research supports the point. Denise Rousseau (2020) argues that better organizational decisions come not from intuition or experience alone, but from deliberately integrating multiple forms of evidence into judgment—scientific findings, organizational information, professional expertise, and stakeholder perspectives—rather than treating any one source as sufficient.

Executives therefore need more than information. They need a way to think well, decide well, and translate decisions into action. Sometimes that requires coaching. Sometimes it requires consulting. And sometimes it requires moving between the two.

That movement—disciplined, deliberate, and driven by where the risk actually sits—is Executive Advisory.

What follows sets out the advisory model, the evidence behind it, the six forms of leadership risk it addresses, and the engagements built to reduce each one.

SECTION ONE

What Is Executive Advisory?

I think of Executive Advisory as riding a wave between coaching and consulting with clients.

On one side of the wave is executive coaching. The advisor becomes a creative thought partner asking questions, challenging assumptions, facilitating reflection, increasing self-awareness, strengthening accountability, and helping the executive discover the best path forward.

There is substantial evidence behind this side of the model. A meta-analysis of workplace coaching found positive effects on learning and performance outcomes, supporting coaching as an effective organizational development intervention (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016). A randomized controlled study of executives found that coaching improved goal attainment, resilience, and workplace well-being relative to a control condition (Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009). A systematic review concluded that coaching produces meaningful outcomes while emphasizing that the organizational and relational context surrounding coaching matters (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018).

On the other side of the wave is organizational consulting. The advisor brings experience, organizational diagnosis, research, frameworks, recommendations, and practical solutions to the problem.

FIGURE 01 – THE ADVISORY CONTINUUM

THE VALUE IS NOT STAYING IN THE MIDDLE – IT IS KNOWING WHEN TO MOVE



Executive advisory intentionally moves between the two. Sometimes the greatest contribution an advisor can make is asking, “What do you think is really happening here?” At another point the executive needs, “Here is what the evidence suggests,” or “I see three viable options,” or even, “Based on what I know, I would not recommend that.”

The executive retains responsibility for the decision. The advisor improves the thinking behind it—the thinking that elevates people, profit, and purpose.

SECTION TWO

Why Both Coaching and Consulting Matter

The evidence suggests there is good reason not to force complex leadership problems into a single approach.

Consulting brings expertise an organization may not have internally. But advice alone has limits. A consultant can tell an executive what to do without changing how that executive thinks, behaves, communicates, or makes the next decision. Coaching has the opposite strength: it builds awareness, judgment, and behavioral capacity—but there are situations where asking one more question, when relevant expertise is available, adds little value.

A DELIBERATE INTEGRATION

Executive Advisory is not a 50/50 blend of coaching and consulting.

One conversation might be 90% coaching. Another might be substantially organizational diagnosis and consultation. The skill is recognizing what the executive and the organization need most.

The method follows the risk.

How Executive Advisory Works

The flexibility is disciplined by a consistent sequence.

1. Clarify leader and organizational strengths, motivations, and paradigms.
2. Diagnose the constraint—decision, system, relationship, or behavior.
3. Clarify the desired performance, how it will be reinforced, and how progress will be measured.
4. Deliver through coaching, consulting, or both: recommendations, design, or character work.
5. Experiment in live work—real decisions, meetings, conversations, and operating mechanisms.
6. Review evidence, results, feedback—and adapt.

Leadership Risk Rarely Has a Single Cause

Imagine a CEO frustrated with a member of the executive team. The CEO believes that leader may no longer be capable of operating at the level the organization requires. An advisor could immediately recommend replacing the executive. That would be premature.

A coaching conversation might begin with:

What would you need to see from this leader over the next 90 days to regain confidence that they can succeed at the level the organization now requires?

What specifically are you seeing?

What does the organization require from this role today that it did not require two years ago?

Have those expectations been explicitly communicated?

What feedback has the leader received?

What assumptions might be influencing your judgment?

How might your own leadership be contributing to what you are seeing?

Now the problem may look different. Perhaps the leader isn't the fundamental issue. The organization may have outgrown the role. Decision authority may be unclear. Growth may have created complexity the structure cannot support. Or the CEO may have avoided a difficult conversation for too long.

That is why our delivery philosophy emphasizes appreciative inquiry in performance diagnosis—locating the constraint at the right level before prescribing a solution, rather than treating the loudest symptom as the problem.

Once the problem becomes clearer, however, another powerful question may not be enough. The advisor moves along the wave:

Here is the organizational pattern I see.

Here are three alternatives, and the risks associated with each.

Here is what the evidence tells us.

Based on your circumstances, here is what I recommend.

Then the conversation returns to coaching:

What are you prepared to do?

What is keeping you from doing it?

Who needs to be involved?

What conversation needs to happen this week?

That movement is Executive Advisory.

SECTION THREE

The Inner Game and the Outer Game

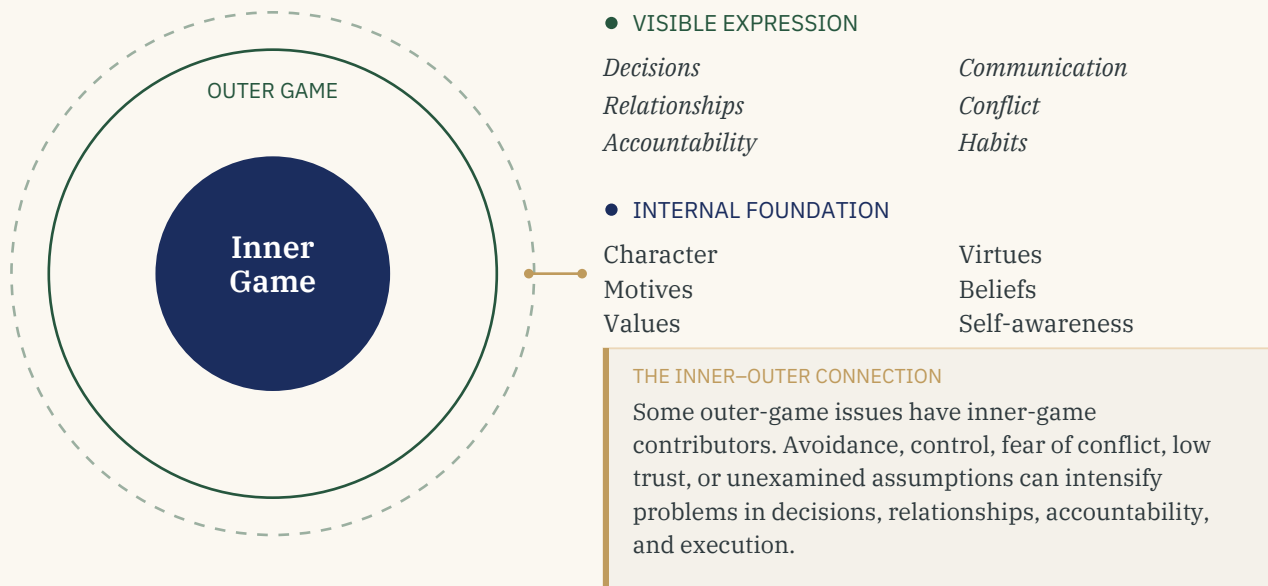
This approach connects directly with a central idea in Life-Changing Leadership Habits (Doolittle, 2023). Leadership involves an inner game and an outer game. The inner game includes the less visible forces beneath leadership—character, motives, values, assumptions, and how a leader interprets the world. The outer game is what others experience—decisions, communication, relationships, conflict, accountability, and leadership habits. The inner game is like the operating system on your phone. It quietly shapes and constrains the outer game—the apps everyone else sees.

A leader may have a strategy problem, a structure problem, or a decision-rights problem—issues that often require consulting. But what appears to be an organizational problem may also have inner-game contributors: avoidance, control, fear of conflict, need for approval, overconfidence, lack of humility, or unexamined assumptions. That may require a different intervention—one that addresses the leader, the system, or both. Executive Advisory is designed to work across those levels.

FIGURE 02 – TWO GAMES, ONE LEADER

The Architecture of Leadership

MAPPING THE INNER AND OUTER GAMES



SECTION FOUR

Trust Changes the Quality of Information Leaders Receive

There is another form of executive risk that receives considerable research attention: whether people are willing to speak up.

Amy Edmondson's foundational work on psychological safety demonstrated that people are more likely to engage in learning behaviors—asking questions, seeking feedback, discussing mistakes, experimenting—when they believe interpersonal risk is safe (Edmondson, 1999). A major review concluded that psychological safety is important to employee voice, teamwork, learning, and organizational learning (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). A recent review of employee voice and silence likewise highlights the role leadership plays in whether employees communicate concerns upward (Morrison, 2023).

This becomes particularly consequential for senior executives. Authority can unintentionally filter information. The question is not whether employees are honest. The question is whether the organizational environment makes candor easier or harder.

TRUST AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Trust and psychological safety are related but distinct. Both influence whether people raise concerns, disclose mistakes, and offer candid feedback.

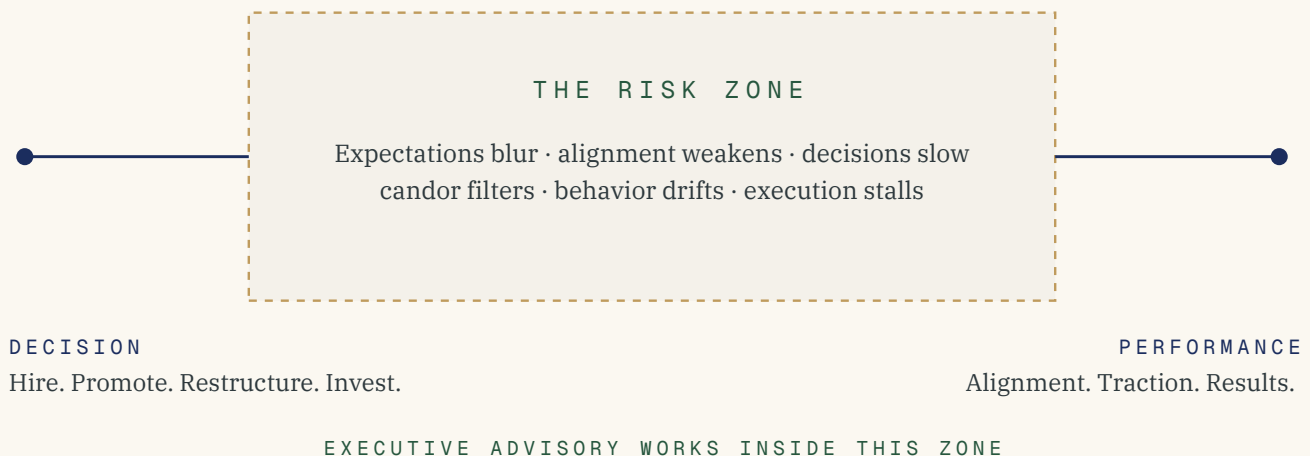
In our experience, where trust is low, candor narrows, feedback becomes filtered, and performance conversations become political.

For an executive, filtered information is not merely a relationship issue. It is a decision risk.

A contracted external advisor can provide a confidential perspective outside normal reporting lines and internal political dynamics, making it easier to test assumptions and explore options. That position may allow the advisor to offer challenge and perspective without direct competition for budget, promotion, status, or formal authority. Research on advice taking suggests that how advice is sought, weighted, and integrated shapes decision quality (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006).

FIGURE 03 – WHERE LEADERSHIP VALUE IS WON OR LOST

*“Decisions create the opportunity.
The Risk Zone determines the return.”*



SECTION FIVE

Six Forms of Leadership Risk

Drawing on research and client experience, we organize leadership risk into six recurring patterns rather than generic leadership topics. The question is where value is most likely to be lost.

FIGURE 04 – SIX FORMS OF LEADERSHIP RISK



Governance and ownership risks may sit within scaling risk. Enterprise change risk often sits within strategic and leadership-team risk. Derailment may be an inner-game driver beneath several categories, while culture is treated as a cross-cutting condition rather than a standalone engagement.

01 – TRANSITION RISK

Hiring the Right Executive Is Only the Beginning

New leaders must simultaneously understand culture, establish credibility, build relationships, clarify expectations, make decisions, read political dynamics, and begin producing results. Research on CEO succession shows that leadership changes can affect strategy, governance, stakeholder relationships, and organizational performance (Berns & Klarner, 2017).

Signals to watch: conflicting expectations of the new leader; the mandate is unclear; early decisions stall; key stakeholder relationships have not yet formed.

Executive Transition is designed as a 180-day integration engagement combining coaching with stakeholder and organizational integration. The objective is faster traction, stronger alignment, and reduced transition risk—not simply a better onboarding experience. For managers and directors, Transition Essentials provides a focused six-month structure around credibility, expectations, stakeholder relationships, culture, execution, and sustainable leadership habits. The risk determines the depth of the intervention.

02 – PERFORMANCE RISK

Sometimes Leadership Is Not Failing. Something Is Stuck.

A decision keeps getting delayed. Accountability has weakened. An executive conflict remains unresolved. Communication is breaking down. Priorities compete. Execution slows. In our experience, these situations create organizational risk because delay can compound costs, uncertainty, and execution friction.

Signals to watch: a critical decision keeps resurfacing; accountability is diffuse; an important conflict is unresolved; priorities change but commitments do not.

Executive Momentum Sprint is built for that targeted risk: one identifiable leadership, alignment, or execution constraint over a focused 60- to 90-day period. Here advisory moves rapidly across the wave. We may coach to surface the assumptions or behaviors sustaining the problem; consult to redesign an accountability mechanism or decision process; then coach again to ensure the executive actually has the conversation or changes the behavior.

03 – SCALING RISK

Organizations Outgrow Leadership Systems Before They Outgrow Markets

For example, processes that worked at one stage of growth (say, \$10 million and 50 employees) often become constraints at the next (say, \$50 million and 250 employees). A founder who once needed to influence every important decision may eventually limit organizational capacity by continuing to do so. The resulting risks include leadership bottlenecks, poor delegation, inconsistent decisions, reduced agility, and slowing growth. Governance and ownership questions—boards, family enterprises, and ownership groups—belong here as well.

Signals to watch: the founder or executive remains a bottleneck for many decisions; escalation is common; decision rights are unclear; cross-functional friction is increasing.

Our experience shows that even theoretically sound interventions fail when leaders ignore context, implementation, stakeholders, and actual behavior in the system. Leadership Breakthrough creates a longer strategic thought partnership around executive leverage, strategic clarity, organizational alignment, governance, culture, succession, and sustainable performance.

04 – DECISION & ISOLATION RISK

The Least Visible Category

The more senior the executive becomes, the fewer people may feel able to speak candidly to them.

Signals to watch: few people push back on executive decisions; dissent happens after the meeting; bad news arrives late; major decisions are revisited frequently.

Executive Care+ provides ongoing advisory access and a confidential sounding board for executives navigating decisions, strategic priorities, organizational complexity, difficult conversations, and change. Sometimes there is no program to complete. There is simply a leader carrying consequential responsibility who benefits from someone trustworthy enough to ask: What are you missing?

05 – STRATEGIC & LEADERSHIP-TEAM RISK

A Sound Strategy Still Requires an Aligned Senior Team

The strategy may be sound, but the executive team is not sufficiently aligned to make the trade-offs, decisions, and coordinated commitments that turn it into execution. In our experience, unclear strategy and fragmented executive-team alignment frequently precede the symptoms described as performance risk. Enterprise change initiatives belong here as well: large-scale change tends to fail at the level of leadership alignment before it fails at the level of implementation.

Signals to watch: leaders leave the room agreeing and then act differently; the same trade-off is debated repeatedly; decision rights are contested; conflict is avoided in the meeting and continued afterward; functional priorities outrank enterprise priorities.

Executive Team Alignment is a 90-day to six-month engagement working directly with the senior team on strategic clarity and trade-offs, executive-team operating norms, decision rights, peer accountability, productive conflict, and leadership-team cadence and meeting effectiveness. Coaching surfaces what the team is avoiding; consulting redesigns the mechanisms through which the team decides.

06 – TALENT & SUCCESSION RISK

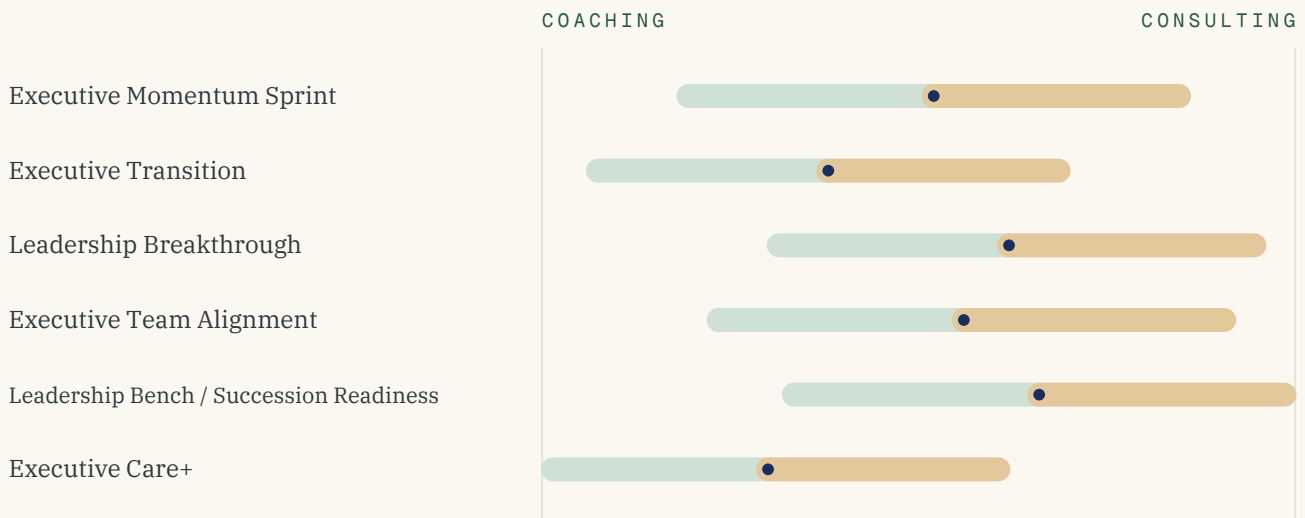
The Bench You Need Before the Role Comes Open

The organization's future depends on leaders it has not yet identified, developed, retained, or prepared to take critical roles. This is meaningfully different from transition risk. Transition risk asks: a leader has entered a new role—how do we create traction? Talent and succession risk asks: do we have the leaders, criteria, and systems needed before a critical role becomes vacant? Research and governance practice consistently treat succession as an organizational continuity issue rather than an individual promotion or onboarding event, and boards have long been critical of how well organizations prepare leadership bench strength (Groysberg & Bell, 2014).

Signals to watch: critical roles have no ready successor; readiness is judged by opinion rather than criteria; high-potential leaders lack exposure to enterprise work; retention risk is concentrated in a few people; there is no emergency succession plan.

Leadership Bench / Succession Readiness is a 6- to 12-month engagement covering critical-role and successor identification, leadership-readiness criteria, development plans and exposure opportunities, the succession decision process, retention risk among key talent, and both emergency and planned succession.

FIGURE 05 – RANGE OF MOVEMENT BY ENGAGEMENT



Bands show the working range, not a fixed blend. The risk determines the position.

SECTION SIX

Insight Is Not the Finish Line

Knowing is not the same as doing. Leadership development frequently fails when insight remains insight.

Another central principle behind Life-Changing Leadership Habits: leadership ultimately becomes visible through repeated behavior. Habits are applied daily leadership rather than abstract knowledge, and our delivery standard emphasizes practice, reflection, feedback, and reapplication in real work.

The behavioral science is consistent. Habit research shows that repetition in stable contexts gradually strengthens automatic behavior (Wood, Mazar, & Neal, 2022). In our work, leadership development is more effective when it is linked to clear goals, practice, reinforcement, and application in real work.

So an advisory conversation should not end with “That was insightful.” It should reach:

What are you going to do differently?

What conversation will you have?

What decision will you make?

What behavior will you practice—and what will you stop doing?

What will we measure, and what will we learn from what happens next?

That is how insight becomes traction.

SECTION SEVEN

From Risk to Performance

The business case for Executive Advisory is not about coaching sessions or consulting hours. It is about protecting the value of leadership decisions.

Organizations hire executives. Promote leaders. Launch strategies. Restructure teams. Pursue growth. Navigate succession. Every one of those decisions creates opportunity. But the value of the decision is realized only when leadership behavior and organizational execution convert that opportunity into performance.

Decisions create the opportunity. The Risk Zone determines the return.

Executive Advisory works inside that zone—sometimes through coaching, sometimes through consulting, sometimes through evidence, sometimes through experience, sometimes through a question the executive has been avoiding, and sometimes through a recommendation they need to hear.

We evaluate success through agreed leading and lagging indicators—such as decision cycle time, role clarity, stakeholder alignment, behavior follow-through, execution milestones, retention, and, where attribution is reasonable, relevant business outcomes—rather than the number of sessions completed.

Coaching, Consulting, or Executive Advisory?

The question is not which service is better. Each has a legitimate purpose.

If the primary need is individual leadership development, self-awareness, behavioral change, or discovering one's own solutions, executive coaching may be the best fit. If the organization has a defined problem requiring specialized expertise, analysis, design, or implementation, consulting may be the better fit. But when the challenge exists simultaneously within the leader and within the organizational system, Executive Advisory provides another option. It moves with the risk.

THREE POSTURES

Coaching — Ask. Listen. Challenge. Reflect. Discover.

Consulting — Diagnose. Advise. Recommend. Equip. Solve.

Executive Advisory — Know when the situation requires each.

CLOSING

The Best Leaders Don't Need to Have All the Answers

There is a persistent myth about senior leadership: that reaching the top means becoming the person with the answers. The evidence points toward something more nuanced.

Effective leaders need the capacity to learn, seek feedback, access evidence, invite challenge, consider advice, reflect on assumptions, and adapt behavior as circumstances change. Research on coaching, psychological safety, employee voice, evidence-based decision-making, advice-seeking, and behavioral change all point toward different dimensions of that same conclusion.

In Life-Changing Leadership Habits, the premise is that leadership becomes life-changing not through a single insight, but through the repeated interaction of who we are and how we lead—the inner game shaping the outer game. Executive Advisory extends that idea to the enterprise level: better thinking, better decisions, better habits, and better organizational conditions for execution.

Sometimes you need a coach. Sometimes you need a consultant. And sometimes you need a trusted advisor who knows when to be each.

The decisions still belong to you. But you don't have to make the biggest ones alone.

START WITH THE RISK, NOT THE SERVICE

Where is your greatest leadership risk right now?

TRANSITION

PERFORMANCE

SCALING

DECISION

STRATEGIC

SUCCESSION

A short strategic conversation helps identify where the risk may sit—and which engagement is proportionate to it.

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