

INSTITUTE OF PROFESSIONAL READINESS
CASE STUDY

IPR Executive Circle Resource

SAMPLE

Case Study

When Leaders Become the System

Overview & Directions

This case study and associated discussion questions help executives and leadership team members examine:

- How leadership presence influences decision quality and pace
- Where over-involvement quietly limits organizational capacity
- The difference between staying informed and staying essential
- How executive behavior shapes escalation patterns
- What it takes to strengthen systems rather than substitute for them

By the end of the discussion, leaders should be able to:

- Explain how executive involvement can unintentionally create dependency
- Identify where decisions are escalated by habit rather than necessity
- Distinguish between value-added leadership and personal substitution
- Determine where clarity, structure, or trust must be reinforced
- Define one leadership shift that strengthens organizational resilience

Directions:

Step 1: Gather executives / leadership team members to read the case study (individually or as a group).

Step 2: Talk through the discussion questions in small groups (no more than 4 people per group to ensure all participants have the opportunity to provide meaningful input).

Step 3: Debrief as a collective group, sharing key insights and takeaways applicable to your own organization.

Step 4 (OPTIONAL): Create an action plan to address areas of opportunity discussed.

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Background

Jordan Ellis was widely regarded as a strong, steady executive. Responsive. Knowledgeable. Deeply trusted. When issues arose, Jordan stepped in quickly, resolving questions, removing blockers, and keeping work moving.

The organization was performing well, but leaders often commented that progress felt heavier than it should. Decisions took longer than expected. Teams waited for confirmation even when direction seemed clear. Meetings frequently included senior leaders “just in case.”

Jordan noticed the pattern but struggled to pinpoint the cause. On the surface, everything appeared functional. Escalations were polite. Deadlines were met. Yet the organization felt increasingly dependent on a small group of executives to maintain momentum.

Over time, Jordan realized that accessibility had become expectation. Leaders and teams had learned that bringing decisions upward resulted in faster resolution and less risk. While intended to be supportive, executive involvement had quietly replaced ownership rather than reinforcing it.

Instead of pulling back abruptly, Jordan chose a more deliberate approach. Decision thresholds were clarified. Leaders were encouraged to resolve issues within defined boundaries. Executives stayed informed, but resisted the urge to intervene prematurely.

At first, the shift felt uncomfortable. Silence replaced constant updates. Some decisions moved more slowly before they moved better. Gradually, confidence grew. Leaders took ownership. Teams escalated with intention rather than reflex.

The organization didn't lose control.
It gained capacity.

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Leadership Discussion Questions

- Where in your organization do decisions escalate upward by default rather than design?
- Which leadership behaviors in the case feel most familiar in your own context?
- How does executive accessibility show up as a strength, and where does it create dependency?
- Where might leaders be solving problems that should instead be shaped or clarified?
- How clear are decision boundaries across your leadership team today?
- In what ways might stepping back improve decision quality, not just autonomy?
- How do leaders in your organization signal trust without disengaging?
- What risks are leaders trying to prevent by staying closely involved, and what risks might that create?
- What would it look like to strengthen the system rather than personally carry it?
- If you stepped back today, what is one decision, behavior, or pattern you would intentionally shift?