



Making The Shift:

From Passive to Active Leadership

Playing It Safe Is No Longer Safe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For years, playing it safe worked. Leaders could protect the current process, wait for more information, keep decisions close, and avoid unnecessary disruption — and in many organizations, that approach was rewarded.

But today, the operating environment moves faster. Resources are tighter. Teams expect more clarity. Partners have less patience. Talent has more choice.

“The leadership behaviours that once protected organizations are now the same behaviours putting them at risk.”

The old instinct to wait, protect, and control may still feel responsible, but it now creates a different kind of risk: stalled progress.

This is passive leadership. It often looks responsible on the surface: waiting for more information, staying close to key work, protecting the team, avoiding disruption, or trying to get the decision exactly right.

But when the environment requires movement, staying low becomes its own risk.

Active leadership requires leaders to move forward through five practical shifts:

<u>PASSIVE LEADERSHIP</u>		<u>ACTIVE LEADERSHIP</u>
From Waiting	➔	To Deciding
From Controlling	➔	To Deploying
From Withholding	➔	To Sharing
From Protecting	➔	To Improving
From Distancing	➔	To Owning

INTRODUCTION: WHEN LEADERSHIP DRIFTS

Leadership doesn't stall all at once. It drifts.

It starts with a decision delayed because the timing doesn't feel right. Then a conversation avoided because it might create tension. Then a process preserved because changing it feels like too much. None of these moments feel like failure.

They feel like patience. Like prudence. Like professionalism.

But over time, they accumulate. The team slows down. Decisions stack up. People stop raising ideas because nothing seems to move. The organization doesn't collapse — it just quietly underperforms.

This is what passive leadership looks like. Not dramatic failure, but gradual drift. Passive leadership is not about personality. It's not introversion or thoughtfulness or humility. It's a pattern of behaviour: avoiding decisions, holding information too close, over-managing instead of deploying, protecting what exists instead of improving it, and stepping back from accountability when things get hard.



These behaviours often develop for understandable reasons. Early in a career, caution is rewarded. Consensus feels safe. Staying close to the work feels responsible. But what works at one level becomes a liability at the next.

The shift from passive to active leadership is not about becoming louder or more aggressive. It's about choosing movement over maintenance. It's about leading forward — even when the path isn't perfectly clear.

This white paper outlines what active leadership looks like in practice, why it matters now more than ever, and how leaders can begin making the shift.

PASSIVE VS. ACTIVE LEADERSHIP

The difference is not personality. It's behaviour.

Passive leaders are not lazy or disengaged. They are often deeply committed, but their default patterns keep the work from advancing. Active leaders are not reckless or impulsive. They simply choose movement over maintenance, even when the path forward is uncertain.

Below is a comparison of passive versus active leadership across five key leadership behaviours:

PASSIVE LEADERSHIP	ACTIVE LEADERSHIP
Waiting Delays decisions until conditions feel perfect.	Deciding → Chooses what matters and acts with available information.
Controlling Holds work close; manages every detail.	Deploying → Puts people and resources to work; empowers others.
Withholding Keeps information limited to a few.	Sharing → Says what's really going on; creates clarity.
Protecting Preserves current systems and processes.	Improving → Changes what no longer works; challenges the status quo.
Distancing Steps back when outcomes are uncertain.	Owning → Embraces accountability; stands behind outcomes.

PASSIVE Leadership
MAINTAINS



ACTIVE Leadership
MOVES



THE ACTIVE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: 5 ACTIONS

1. **DECIDING:** Move from waiting to choosing what matters.



Passive leaders wait for more data, more consensus, more certainty. They believe they're being thoughtful, but their hesitation costs everyone.

Active leaders don't wait seek certainty or perfection. They take action.

Former U.S. Secretary of State and four-star general Colin Powell coined the 40–70 rule for managing decision-making and risk:

**If you have less than 40% of the required information, don't act.
If you have more than 70%, you've waited too long.**

As Powell says, “Once the information is in the 40 to 70 range, go with your gut.” The goal is not to always get it right. The goal is forward movement with enough information to be responsible.

This means making difficult choices like effectively prioritizing. It also means sometimes leaders will get it wrong. But progress rarely comes from waiting. It comes from deciding, learning, and adjusting along the way.

The greater risk is failing to move at all.

Ask Yourself:

- *What decision am I avoiding, and what is the cost of waiting?*
- *What are my key priorities (maximum 3) and ‘non-negotiables’?*
- *Who is waiting on me to move?*

“If you are not *anxious* about what you have purposely selected *not to do*, you are not sufficiently focused as a leader.” – Darren Entwistle, Telus CEO

2. **DEPLOYING:** Put people and resources to work.

Passive leaders hold work close. They review everything, approve everything, and insert themselves into every decision. It's not quality control. It's a bottleneck.

Active leaders deploy. They place skilled people in key positions, give them what they need to be successful, and allow them the autonomy to get results.



But deployment is more than delegation. Active leaders create accountability by first creating clarity. They define expectations, establish ownership, and trust their people to make decisions. They reinforce positive behaviours, provide timely feedback, and create opportunities for people to learn through both successes and mistakes.

**Leaders do not create more value by doing more.
Leaders create value by enabling more to happen without them.**

Deployment also applies to resources – which too often sit idly while important work waits. For instance, a vacant position creates available budget that can be used immediately to leverage specialized expertise, accelerate a critical initiative, reduce pressure on the team, or solve a lingering problem.

Active leaders also invest in systems that allow work to happen consistently and at scale. They improve processes, clarify decision rights, and create structures that enable performance.

Ask Yourself:

- What am I holding that someone else could own?
- Where is my involvement slowing things down?
- What idle resources could be leveraged or redeployed?

3. SHARING: Give the information, context and clarity people need.

Passive leaders filter information, delay updates, and share selectively. They believe they are protecting people from complexity, uncertainty, or unnecessary concern.

But when people do not have context, they become uncertain about how to move forward. They fill in the gaps themselves – often with assumptions, biases, and incomplete information. The result is confusion, distraction, and misaligned action.

Active leaders share the information, context, and clarity others need to understand what is happening, why it matters, and how they best contribute.



Active leaders explain the why behind decisions, not just the decision itself. They communicate priorities, trade-offs, risks, and expectations. They create understanding before expecting alignment.

**Just because it is clear to you does
not mean it is clear to others.**

Sharing is not about telling everyone everything. It is a bias toward sharing more rather than less, and specifics rather than generalities. Leaders see decisions, priorities, and pressures their teams do not. When they fail to share that context, people are left trying to connect dots they cannot see.

Ask Yourself:

- What do I know that my team doesn't — and should?
- Where am I assuming clarity that doesn't exist?
- What context would help my team make better decisions on their own?

4. IMPROVING: Keep what works. Change what doesn't.

Passive leaders accept existing systems, processes, and ways of working without questioning whether they still serve the work. They avoid disruption, tolerate inefficiencies, and assume improving the system is someone else's responsibility.

Most leaders do not maintain outdated processes because they believe they are effective. They maintain them because they are familiar. Over time, workarounds become normal, the system becomes harder to navigate, and people spend more energy navigating it than improving it.

The result? Productivity slows, frustration increases, and resources are wasted.

If you wouldn't build it this way today — change it.

Active leaders improve. They challenge the systems, processes, meetings, and structures around them. They look for opportunities to simplify, remove barriers, and improve the way work gets done.

"Keep. Fix. Stop."

Apply quarterly to every system, meeting, and process you own.

Active leaders recognize that it's not about changing everything, but maintaining the status quo is not neutral—it is a decision. They **keep** what works, **fix** what slows the work down, and **stop** what no longer creates value.

Ask Yourself:

- What am I tolerating because it's easier than changing it?
- What system, process, or habit is slowing the work down?
- What would I do differently if I were building this from scratch today?

5. **OWNING:** Step forward and embrace accountability.

Passive leaders create distance between themselves and negative or unplanned outcomes. When results fall short, they explain, justify, blame, or point to circumstances outside their control. The distance may be subtle, but passive leaders attempt to separate themselves from any negativity.



Active leaders step forward and own decisions, risks, and results. They acknowledge what happened, identify what can be learned, and focus on what comes next.

Consider a high-profile project that misses its target. The common response is to focus on why it happened. The active response is to stand behind it, learn from it, and lead the forward response.

Ownership does not mean leaders will be happy with the result or agree with every decision that led to it. It means they stand behind the outcome and focus on what needs to happen next. And when leaders take ownership, people notice. It creates trust, builds credibility, and gives others permission to be honest about mistakes, challenges, and learning. Ownership also reinforces accountability and creates the conditions for continuous improvement.

When leaders step forward and own outcomes, trust and credibility grow.

When outcomes are uncertain, active leaders choose **courage** over **comfort**. They take calculated risks, make and stand behind difficult decisions, and quickly adjust as necessary.

Ask Yourself:

- What outcome am I explaining instead of owning?
- What lesson am I missing because I'm focused on the explanation?
- Where am I choosing comfort over leadership?

CONCLUSION: The case for movement.

Organizations do not drift into excellence. They are led there by leaders who make decisions, put people and resources to work, share what others need to know, improve what no longer works, and embrace accountability for the outcome.

Active leadership is not about doing more. It is about moving the right work forward, through people, systems, clarity, continuous improvement, and accountability.

The five shifts in this white paper are not theoretical. They are practical, observable, and immediately applicable. They do not require a reorganization or a new strategy. They require a decision: to lead actively.

Active Leadership Means:

- ✓ Choose what matters — and move.
- ✓ Put people and resources to work.
- ✓ Give people the clarity and context they need.
- ✓ Improve what no longer serves the work.
- ✓ Step forward and embrace accountability.



FINAL THOUGHTS: What now?

Start with one shift. The one that resonates most. The one where you know you have been passive. Make the decision you have been avoiding. Put someone to work who is ready for more. Share what others need to know. Improve what no longer serves the work. Own the outcome you have been distancing from.

The shift from passive to active leadership does not happen all at once. It happens one decision, one conversation, and one act of ownership at a time.

The difference between passive and active leadership is movement. It's time to start moving.

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