

# 10 Hard-Won Lessons for Leaders

As chosen by subscribers to Lessons for Leaders · 2025

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*These are the ten lessons that came up most in conversations with senior leaders in 2025. Chosen by subscribers to Lessons for Leaders. Not theory — observation. Not polished advice — hard-won experience. Each one surfaced repeatedly because it kept mattering.*

## ABOUT JUDIT PETHO

Former CEO of large businesses and Global COO. Two decades of hard-earned experience across strategy, operational transformation, and executive leadership. Judit works directly with CEOs and founders of growing businesses as a strategic partner and sounding board — someone who has sat where they sit and understands the stakes.

[judit@juditpetho.com](mailto:judit@juditpetho.com) · [www.juditpetho.com](http://www.juditpetho.com) · [linkedin.com/in/juditpetho](https://www.linkedin.com/in/juditpetho)

## LESSON 1

### Your Strategy Is Probably Failing on the Ground, Not at the Top

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*The gap between a brilliant plan and actual results is almost always an execution gap — and it starts with disconnection.*

Most strategy doesn't fail in the boardroom. It fails somewhere between the C-suite and the shop floor — in the small operational frictions that never make it up the chain, the incentive systems nobody updated, the assumptions about ground-level reality that turned out to be wrong.

The best CEOs I've observed all do one thing consistently: they spend real time on the ground. Not to micromanage, but to stay connected to what their strategy is actually colliding with. One store layout that doesn't support the new plan. One comp structure that makes the required behaviour irrational. These are the things that derail execution — and they rarely surface in a board report.

Before you conclude your strategy isn't working, ask: when did you last go and see for yourself?

#### THE TAKEAWAY

Walk the floor regularly and with purpose — especially in the run-up to finalising any new plan. The people who will execute your strategy know exactly where it will break. Ask them.

## LESSON 2

# Your Problem Is Not What You Think It Is

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*The most expensive mistake in business is solving the wrong problem with great conviction.*

When something goes wrong, the instinct is to fix the most visible thing. The thing on the surface. The symptom. This is how organisations end up pouring resources into solutions that don't move the needle — because the real, underlying problem was never properly identified.

Before jumping to solutions, slow down enough to diagnose correctly. Map the issue. Look for connections and consequences. Identify which causes have the most outsized impact — not which are the most obvious or the most urgent-feeling. Reframing is the holy grail of problem-solving, but you can only reframe once you've done the honest diagnostic work first.

The most important skill a leader can develop isn't strategy or vision. It's diagnosis.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Start every significant problem-solving effort by questioning your assumptions about what the problem actually is. The real issue is often one layer deeper than the first thing you see.

## LESSON 3

# Tough Decisions Are Yours to Make. Only Yours.

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*At the fork in the road, there is no one else.*

One of the things that separates leaders who grow from those who stall is the willingness to make consequential decisions without certainty — and to own the outcome. Gather advice, yes. Test your thinking, absolutely. But at the point of decision, the responsibility is yours alone — and it should be.

Take advice from people who have made big decisions themselves — not just those with technical expertise, but those who understand the pressure, have good instincts honed over time, and will ask you the questions that open up new perspectives rather than the ones you want to hear. Then decide. Don't list pros and cons — list the critical aspects in order of importance, be clear about what you cannot compromise on, and proceed.

The leaders who struggle most are those who keep waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Sound decision-making is a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Stop waiting for certainty or consensus before deciding. Gather the right input, be clear about your non-negotiables, then make the call. The discomfort of deciding is the job.

## LESSON 4

# Change Won't Happen Just Because You Will It

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*Culture is more powerful than any directive from the top. Work with it, not against it.*

Change is hard, and requires commitment from everyone affected by it — including adopting new technology. The CEO may be the most powerful person in the room, but there is a stronger, more resilient force that makes or breaks any change initiative: the culture of the business.

You can't turn an established organisation into a different beast overnight. Change takes time, clear process, consistent communication, and continued support for the people who have to do things differently on top of their day job. The friction of learning new ways while maintaining performance is real and too often ignored by leadership.

Your most underused asset here is your first adopters — the people who are already convinced. Deploy them deliberately. They model new behaviours, make experimentation less scary, and carry credibility with their peers that no memo from the top ever will.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Before launching any change initiative, map the cultural forces working for and against it. Then build your plan around your first adopters — they are the ones who will actually make it happen.

## LESSON 5

# Consistency Is the Underrated Edge

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*The most effective leaders aren't the most charismatic. They're the most consistent.*

Everybody wants to talk about strategy. Few people want to talk about consistency — which is exactly why it's such a competitive advantage. The leaders I've seen execute best are not the most brilliant strategists in the room. They are the ones who show up the same way every time, follow through on what they said they would do, and communicate the same priorities in the same way until people actually believe them.

In uncertain times — and we are firmly in uncertain times — flexibility in strategy is essential. But flexibility only works when everything else stays steady. People need an anchor when the environment is volatile. Consistency in how you communicate, how you hold people accountable, and how you behave under pressure is that anchor.

Consistency is boring. That's why most leaders fall down on it.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Audit how consistent you actually are — in communication, follow-through, and behaviour under pressure. The gap between what you think you project and what your organisation experiences is usually larger than you expect.

## LESSON 6

# Numbers Don't Move People. Stories Do.

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*You can present the most compelling financial case in the room and still fail to get buy-in.*

Numbers are necessary. They are not sufficient. When you need people to change their behaviour, redouble their efforts, or commit to a direction under uncertainty, data alone will not get you there. What shifts behaviour is narrative — a story that makes people feel part of something larger than a transaction, that connects their contribution to a purpose they can see themselves in.

This applies equally to driving change internally, negotiating externally, and rallying a team through difficulty. The same logic holds in negotiations: if you fight on numbers only, there is only one way to go — down. Build on shared values and a compelling story of what's possible, and you operate from a completely different position.

Data should be used to support and validate the story. Not to replace it.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Before any significant communication — to your team, your board, a negotiating counterpart — ask yourself: what is the story here? What does this mean for them, and how does it connect to something they care about? Build the numbers into that narrative.

## LESSON 7

# Senior Conflict Left Unaddressed Is Corrosive

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*Toxic disagreement at the top doesn't resolve itself. It spreads.*

Some of the toughest challenges in running any organisation come when two senior people have disagreements that go beyond professional difference into something personal and destructive. Left unaddressed, this doesn't stay contained — it spreads through departments, poisons cooperation, and drains management time and energy that cannot be spared.

Catch it early, intervene directly, and if it cannot be resolved internally, bring in outside help. Give the parties a joint objective if appropriate — but not your most critical project. If none of it works and the toxic behaviour is doing more damage than the cost of replacing them, part ways. The collective sigh of relief that follows is almost always confirmation you made the right call.

When the conflict involves a shareholder or board member, the rules change. Get a battle-hardened corporate lawyer and someone with serious practical experience. This is not lawyering by the book.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Don't let senior conflict fester in the hope it will resolve itself. The longer it runs, the more it costs — in management time, team performance, and culture. Intervene early and with clear intent.

## LESSON 8

# Can You Be Strategic in a Capricious World? Yes. But Differently.

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*In genuine uncertainty, strip strategy back to its essentials: clear goals, strong values, the discipline to adapt without lurching.*

The instinct in volatile conditions is either to freeze or to react — neither of which is strategy. Real strategic thinking in uncertainty means returning to fundamentals: what are we actually trying to achieve, what do we stand for, and what do we know for certain about our operations and our position?

Nothing gives you a better chance of navigating uncertainty than knowing your business inside out — not the vision, but the operations. The cashflow, the people, the assets, the skills. Ground yourself in what is real before you decide what to do next. Then look for opportunities — because when others fold or react chaotically, the field opens up.

The businesses that thrive in volatile conditions are not the ones with the most sophisticated plans. They are the ones with the clearest fundamentals and the discipline to stay the course while adapting at the edges.

### THE TAKEAWAY

In uncertain times, resist the urge to overhaul everything or do nothing. Strip back to core goals and values, know your operational reality cold, and adapt tactically without abandoning the strategic direction.

## LESSON 9

# Match Your Method to the Moment

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***A business in crisis and a business that's stuck require completely different leadership approaches. Confusing the two is a costly mistake.***

If a business needs a turnaround, there is no time for grand transformation narratives or lengthy engagement processes. You need speed, operational focus, and the clarity to make fast decisions with imperfect information. Cashflow, P&L, people, customers — fix what's broken, right the ship.

If a business has solid fundamentals but is stuck in a rut, the opposite applies. You can afford to bring people with you, build genuine buy-in, and energise the organisation around a vision. The story and the engagement are not luxuries here — they are the mechanism of change.

The mistake most leaders make is applying the wrong method to the situation in front of them — running a burning-platform approach on a business that needs inspiration, or launching a cultural transformation in a business that needs triage. Read the room before you pick your approach.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Before deciding how to lead a change, diagnose the actual condition of the business. Crisis requires speed and operational clarity. Stagnation requires energy and vision. They are not interchangeable.

LESSON 10

## Prune What Doesn't Serve You

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*Who and what you keep around you has an outsized impact on where you end up.*

This applies to your client base and to your personal circle. Review your clients regularly — not just for revenue, but for profitability and the drain on your team's time and energy. Low-margin clients who require disproportionate effort cost more than they return. Letting them go, done with care and appropriate notice, frees capacity for better work.

The same logic applies to the people you spend time with. It's an uncomfortable truth, but the circle you keep shapes who you'll be in five years. If the people closest to you cannot understand or support the path you're on, they become a drag on it — not through malice, but through the weight of their own comfort zones and risk aversion.

Build your hype squad deliberately — people who share a growth mindset, understand that setbacks are part of the process, and will push you forward rather than back toward what's familiar. They don't need to know each other. They just need to be genuinely in your corner.

### THE TAKEAWAY

Audit both your client base and your inner circle with the same discipline you'd apply to any other business resource. Keep what generates value and growth. Let go of what doesn't — with professionalism and without guilt.

## If any of this is landing close to home...

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These lessons don't require an MBA to understand. They require honesty, discipline, and the willingness to act on what you already know is true.

If there's a challenge you're circling without quite cracking — a strategy that isn't executing, a decision you keep deferring, a team that isn't performing the way it should — that's exactly where an experienced outside perspective adds the most value.

**I work with a small number of CEOs and founders of growing businesses (£1M–£50M revenue) as a strategic partner and sounding board.**

Book a focused 30-minute diagnostic call — no pitch, no obligation. Just a straight conversation about what you're dealing with and whether I can help.

**Book a call:** <https://tidycal.com/juditpetho/20-minute-meeting> · [judit@juditpetho.com](mailto:judit@juditpetho.com)