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The Standards Gap

How leadership standards quietly shape accountability, succession, and performance.

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Why leadership demonstrated standards shape accountability, ownership, succession, and team performance more than many leaders realise

WHO THIS INSIGHT IS FOR

Partners, Directors, and senior leaders in professional services firms who want to strengthen accountability, ownership, succession, and team performance without everything continuing to flow back to a few key people.

INSIDE THIS INSIGHT

- Why the real standards in a firm are taught through behaviour rather than policy
- Practitioner examples show how standard gaps quietly drive performance problems
- A practical standards audit to use with your leadership team this week
- Reflection questions to strengthen accountability, ownership, and delivery

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INSIGHT

The Standards Gap

THE CORE ARGUMENT

When leaders make the standards visible, specific, and model them consistently, accountability becomes clearer, fairer, and far easier to strengthen.

Most professional services firms do not have a people problem. They have a standards gap. And it starts at the leadership level.

You walk out of a client meeting frustrated.

Your senior managers presented well. Technically, the work was excellent. But they deferred the commercial decisions back to you, hedged on the timelines, and left without clearly confirming next steps with the client.

You have seen it before. And unless something changes, you will see it again.

So, you do what many Partners and senior leaders do. You stay back, pick up the loose ends, and fix what needs fixing because the client cannot wait and, in the moment, it feels faster to do it yourself, than explain again.

That may solve the immediate issue. But it also reinforces the pattern. The Partner becomes the closer, the fixer, the safety net. While it might protect the client in the moment, it quietly slows succession, weakens ownership, and keeps too much of the firm dependent on a few key people.

Not a people problem. A standards problem.

Most firms do not have a people problem. They have a standards problem.

More specifically, leadership standards are often not being set, communicated, and modelled consistently.

When a leader steps in to fix the work rather than returning it, the team member does not advance. The problem recurs. The next piece of work comes back at the same level, or below, because the unspoken message is clear: when pressure rises, someone else will take over.

Most firms do not have a people problem. They have a standards problem.



We teach people how to operate

When pressure builds, leaders often focus on the deadline rather than the development. They are compelled to step in and fix the work themselves. No hard conversation. No redirection. Just quiet correction in the background, because the client cannot wait and it feels faster to handle it personally.

The cost is not just repeated frustration. It is Partner dependency, slower development, reduced decision confidence, and a leadership pipeline that never fully forms.

We teach people how to operate, what standards really apply, and whether ownership is expected or quietly optional. It is not through what we say, rather through what we do especially when pressure rises.

I have discussed the situation with Partners and Leaders who are genuinely surprised by the significant impact this has. Their usual response: I know it would be better to send it back, but it is so much faster to fix it myself. Unfortunately, the so called shortcut keeps repeating itself.

The strategy is not to lower the standards. It is to hold them by returning the work, naming the gap, and giving the person the opportunity to close it. Slower in the moment. Dramatically faster over time.

It is also one of the best ways a technically brilliant senior professional learns to lead effectively. Instead of disappearing into the work because it feels easier, they must focus on developing the people around them.

The leaders I see most trapped are technically exceptional. That excellence becomes the ceiling for everyone below them.

The standards they carry internally is high. But it is invisible to the team because it has never been explicitly observable, and too often they demonstrate that undelivered standards will be rescued rather than expected.

29%

of employees trust their immediate manager, down from 46% three years earlier.

DDI Global Leadership Forecast 2025

Trust matters because it affects what gets delegated, and escalated, how confidently people act, and how much still flows back to the Partner. In professional services, this is not just a people issue. It is a leadership effectiveness issue with commercial consequences.

What the team already knows, but leaders often miss

A few years ago, I worked with a business owner who had a team member creating wonderful energy in the office. Warm, enthusiastic, likeable. The kind of person who made the workplace feel alive.

She was also arriving late, taking extended breaks, and consistently not completing her work to the required standard.



The owner knew but hesitated to address it directly. He did not want to damage the culture he valued. So, the behaviour continued, and a different standard was quietly set for everyone watching.

After a coaching conversation challenged him to look at the full picture, the true cultural impact, he chose to not renew her contract. What happened next was telling.

The rest of the team came forward. They had been carrying her for months. The late arrivals, the unfinished work, the distractions. All of it had been landing on them. They were not upset because the culture had become too hard. They were exhausted because the standards had become too low. They had simply learned to say nothing, because the standards being modelled at the top was that this behaviour was acceptable.

Once that standard was addressed, something shifted. Within six months, alongside other focused business interventions, profitability trebled.

Not because the team suddenly became more capable. Because the invisible ceiling created by tolerated behaviour had been lifted.

This is what I mean when I say standards are always being taught. The team already knows what the real standard is. They are watching leaders demonstrate it every day. The question is whether the standards you set with your actions are the ones you actually want to see.

4x

more likely to leave when high-potential employees are not actively developed by their manager.

When standards are uneven, your strongest people often notice first.

DDI Global Leadership Forecast 2025

The problem is never the problem

When a Managing Partner or business owner first reaches out, the opening line is usually one of two things: *I need you to fix my team.* Or: *We have invested in this person, and can see their potential, but they are still not where they need to be, and we don't want this to keep dragging on.*

What I usually unearth is something quite different: exasperated leaders, technically strong people with limited leadership capability, and Partners who blame the team member without recognising the pattern their own leadership is reinforcing.

I have seen this play out in firms where a senior manager can successfully run the technical side of a meeting, but still defers pricing, scope, or client risk upward every time pressure rises. The issue is rarely capability alone. More often, the real standard being taught is that: when it matters most, someone else will make the commercial call.

More often, what looks like a people problem is a leadership standards problem. The expectation exists. The communication has happened. What is missing is consistent, visible modelling, and the willingness to have the conversation when the standard is not being met rather than quietly absorbing the shortfall.



Most firms do not have a people problem. They have standard gaps. And it starts at the top.

Make the standards observable, not assumed

Capable senior leaders often get stuck here. They know what good looks like. They have been doing excellent work for years. But they have not translated it into something the team can see, understand, or replicate.

Words like ownership, accountability, and proactivity sound strong, however without behavioural definition, they remain vague and make performance gaps harder to address.

Ask five people in the same team what take ownership means in practice and you will get five different answers. The Partner who used the phrase is often expecting something completely different, something they have never articulated. This is where performance conversations start to break down.

Strong leaders make standards behavioural. They define what the expectation looks like in action, not just in principle.

In practice, that sounds like this:

- Raise risks with the client before they become problems, not after pressure is already mounting
- Confirm next steps, deliverables, and owners before meetings conclude
- Escalate at-risk deadlines instead of waiting to be asked
- Follow through on commitments without requiring a reminder
- Own the outcome, not just the task assigned

If the standards cannot be described behaviourally, it cannot be reinforced consistently. The team will fill the gap with their own interpretation.

Where standards quietly break down

In most firms, standards do not fail loudly at first. They erode quietly. A deadline is missed, but no one names the pattern. A senior manager hesitates commercially, so the Partner steps in again. A piece of work comes back below standard, gets fixed in the background, and moves on without the learning ever becoming visible.

That is why standard problems are often misread as people problems. What looks like inconsistency in capability is often inconsistency in what is being reinforced.



STANDARDS AUDIT

Area	Weak standard	Strong standard
Delegation	Incomplete work is corrected quietly because it feels faster to fix than explain.	The gap is named, the work is returned, and the person is expected to close it.
Client risk	Risk is raised late, after the window to act has already narrowed.	Risk is raised early, before it becomes a client problem.
Commercial judgement	Scope and pricing questions are deferred upward every time pressure rises.	Issues are raised early, options considered, and the leader guides rather than rescues.
Accountability	Follow-through depends on reminders, checking in, and informal chasing.	Commitments are owned, tracked, and closed without someone above carrying the load.
Congruence	Leaders ask for ownership and initiative, but model urgency, takeover, and inconsistency under pressure.	Leaders demonstrate the pace, communication, and accountability they expect from others, especially when things get difficult.

If you want to know where a standards problem is sitting in your firm, do not begin with what people say the standard is. Begin with what happens repeatedly under pressure. That is where the real standard is being taught.

Before you ask the team to lift, look at what you are modelling

The leaders who build the strongest cultures in professional services do something that requires self-honesty. Before raising the bar for the team, they examine what they are already demonstrating. Not only during performance reviews, consistently. And especially under pressure, which is precisely when the team is watching most closely.

- Am I making this standard visible, or assuming it is understood?
- Am I reinforcing standards consistently, or only when something goes wrong?
- Where am I asking for ownership but stepping in before people have the chance to deliver?
- Am I modelling the pace, clarity, and accountability I want others to demonstrate?

This is not about perfection. It is about congruence. When that alignment is present, accountability feels fair because the team has watched you live the standard. When that alignment is missing, even the most justified performance conversation can feel like a double standard. And more often than leaders realise, teams already know.

Use this with your leadership team this week.

- Where am I still rescuing instead of developing?
- What standard do I expect internally that I have not yet made behaviourally visible?



The Mirato perspective

Quality management standards now require firms to address how leadership behaviours shape culture, not just process and policy. Senior leaders are held accountable not only for outcomes, but for the environment they create. Leadership standards are no longer only a development conversation. They are a governance conversation.

But beyond regulation, the commercial case is compelling. Firms with clear, visible, consistently modelled leadership standards retain better, develop stronger successors, and build the kind of culture where excellent people choose to stay and grow.

At Mirato, this is the work. Not abstract leadership language. Behavioural clarity. Commercial confidence. Standards that are visible, reinforced, and lived under pressure. That is what our Acusurge™ system is designed to deliver.

Decide today. Ask yourself: what is one standard you have been carrying internally that your team has yet to see you demonstrate clearly? Name it. Define what it looks like in practice. Then live it in front of them.

Is your leadership standard clear enough to follow?

If your firm wants stronger accountability, clearer expectations and a leadership culture that holds under pressure, Mirato can help.

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REFLECTION FOR YOUR FIRM

Four questions to take into your firm this week

These are not gentle questions. Sit with each one. Answer honestly, not as you wish things were, but as they actually are.

1.

Where in your firm is a standard being set by default rather than by design?

What behaviour is being tolerated that you have not addressed directly yet?

2.

If you asked your senior team what the real standard is for ownership, would their answer match yours?

Not the answer they think you want. The answer based on what they observe happening every week.

3.

In the last month, where did you step in and fix something rather than return it and hold the standard?

What did that cost in your time, the team member's development, and in the standards that were quietly set as a result?

4.

What is one standard you carry internally that your team has not yet seen you demonstrate clearly?

Name it. Define what it looks like in practice. Decide how you will make it visible this week, not next quarter.

If too much still comes back to you, the issue may not be capability alone. It may be the standards your leaders are seeing you live.



WORKING WITH MIRATO

If this Insight raised questions you want to work through

We work with Partners, Directors, and senior leaders across accounting, advisory, and professional services who want stronger accountability, clearer expectations, and leadership that holds under pressure.

Our Acusurge™ system helps turn internal leadership standards into visible, behavioural expectations that can be modelled, reinforced, and sustained across the firm.

Leadership Performance Consult

A focused conversation to determine whether leadership development or executive coaching will lift performance in your firm.

Leadership Thinking Profile

A short diagnostic that explores how your thinking patterns drive or derail performance under pressure, and what to adjust now.

Start the conversation

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