



Participant Workbook

Decision-Thinking for Senior Management
Enabling Data-Capable Leadership

NAME

DIVISION / FUNCTION

Using This Workbook

This workbook is built around one real decision or OKR from your division. Choose something that matters, and use it throughout the day. Each module gives you a different way to examine it, challenge it, and think about how you lead the conversations around it.

The day goes deep on two behaviours your teams learned in March:

Spot Blind Spots

Notice where a decision rests on missing information, assumptions, or evidence that may not tell the whole story.

Ask Better Questions

Turn goals and topics into decisions, test what you think you know, and ask questions that sharpen the evidence.

The other three behaviours remain important, but they are not the focus today. Your role as a leader is to create the conditions in which your teams can use all five well.

The Leader's Loop

NOTICE → ASK → RESPOND → SUSTAIN

- **Notice** where assumptions, uncertainty, or missing perspectives may be shaping a decision
- **Ask** questions that turn uncertainty into better thinking and better evidence
- **Respond** in ways that make it safe for people to surface what you need to hear
- **Sustain** the behaviours by building them into the way your team works

After Today

This workbook is not only for today's decision. Use the same prompts with another OKR, strategic choice, or important team decision. Go to the section that fits the situation:

- Not sure what you may be missing? Use the **Module 1** prompts
- Working through an OKR or unclear decision? Use the **Module 2** prompts
- Preparing for a difficult team conversation? Use the **Module 3** questions and Four Moves
- Using AI to support your thinking? Use the **Module 4** prompts and leadership questions
- Need a question in the moment? Use the **quick-reference pages** at the back

A Real Conversation

Mid-year review. A programme manager brings a recommendation to her director. Read it once, then answer the three questions below for yourself. We will come back to your answers at the end of the day.

PROGRAMME MANAGER

The after-school reading programme is doing well. Participation is up 18%. We'd like to expand it to three more branches.

DIRECTOR

18% is strong. What's driving it?

PROGRAMME MANAGER

The new evening slots, mostly. Though participation counts sign-ups, not whether the children actually read more.

DIRECTOR

Noted. Let's keep it simple for the board paper.

PROGRAMME MANAGER

...Of course.

A BEAT LATER

DIRECTOR

Hold on. You said something about sign-ups. Say that again.

PROGRAMME MANAGER

Participation counts sign-ups. It doesn't tell us whether the children kept reading afterwards.

DIRECTOR

Then what would tell us it's actually working? The board meets Friday, so I need it tomorrow.

THE NEXT DAY

PROGRAMME MANAGER

Repeat attendance is strong at two branches, weak at the third. We have nothing yet on borrowing after the programme ends.

DIRECTOR

Then let's expand the two that are working, hold the third, and start tracking repeat borrowing before we go any further.

What Did You Notice?

Nothing to share out loud yet. Write for yourself. We will return to these at the close of the day, and you may find your answers have changed.

What did this leader do well?

Where did this leader fall short?

At each moment, what did the leader teach the team about what to bring next time?

Think about each reply in turn. What would the manager be more, or less, likely to say the next time?

At the end of the day

Come back to this page. With the four moves and the leader's loop in mind, what would you now add to your answers?

Data Is Evidence About Reality

Core behaviour: Foundation for Spot Blind Spots and Ask Better Questions

Every metric is a partial view of something real, not reality itself. The gap between the number and the reality it points to is where your judgment lives. Note the one decision you will carry through today.

The metric you are working with

Choose one: Reach Index / physical visitorship / digital visitorship / active member retention rate / programme participation

What does it actually count?

What has to be true for something to be included in this number? Who decided that, and when?

What can't it tell us alone?

What is it a proxy for?

What am I assuming when I read it?

What would have to be true for this number to mean what I think it means?

What other evidence would you want?

If the outcome you care about takes time to appear, what could you look for earlier?

What might give you an early signal that you are moving in the right direction?

The Blind Spot Puzzle

Core behaviour: Spot Blind Spots

Where did your confidence run ahead of the evidence? Noticing that gap is the first act of leadership this day asks of you.

The moment I was more confident than the evidence justified

What I want to remember about that feeling

Recognising and Naming Blind Spots

Core behaviour: Spot Blind Spots

A blind spot is anything a decision rests on that we have not seen, have not checked, or are treating as more solid than it is. Work the decision you chose this morning.

The decision

One thing I know

What evidence am I reasonably confident in?

Two things I am assuming

What am I treating as true without having checked?

One thing I may not have thought to ask

What perspective, question, or evidence might be missing?

Which of these could actually change the decision?

If we are wrong or missing something, what matters enough to investigate before acting?

One Decision, Mapped

What the three zones look like on a real decision, and how you tell them apart. Yours will be messier. That is normal.

The decision

Should we expand the after-school reading programme from two branches to five?

What we know

Participation is up 18% at the two pilot branches, and the rise tracks with the new evening slots.

The tell: verifiable. We can point to the record.

What we assume

That participation means the children are reading more. That what worked in two branches will transfer to three more.

The tell: we have not checked either one. Both are doing real work in the plan.

What we have not asked

Do the children come back after the programme ends? Why is the third branch weaker than the other two?

The tell: nobody in the room had raised these until we looked.

Which of these could actually change the decision?

Whether the children come back. If participation is a hollow signal, expanding multiplies the mistake. The other gaps are real, but we would proceed anyway.

Another shape worth recognising

A programme counts unique volunteers. One hour and thirty hours count the same. A first-timer and a ten-year volunteer count the same. The number is accurate, and it cannot tell you whether engagement is rising or falling. That is a measure standing in for something it cannot see.

The distinction people find hardest

An assumption is something you believe and have not checked. An unasked question is something nobody raised at all. The second is harder to see, and usually worth more.

From Goals to Better Questions

Core behaviour: Ask Better Questions

A topic describes an area; a decision names a choice evidence can settle. Take one OKR, or the decision you have been working with, and run it through the four leadership moves.

Name the decision

What choice does this OKR require? What are the 2–3 real options?

Test the line of sight

What outcome are we trying to influence? What does the key result tell us, and what doesn't it?

Write the better question

What assumption are we testing? What evidence could change the choice?

Calibrate the rigor

How consequential is this? How reversible? What would be enough evidence to act?

The Four Moves in Practice

One real decision through all four moves. Yours will be messier; the moves make the mess workable, not absent.

Starting point: the OKR as written

Objective: Strengthen digital engagement across the network.

Key result: Increase digital platform sign-ups by 20% this financial year.

1. Name the decision

“Grow digital engagement” is a direction, not a choice. The decision underneath it is where the next block of effort and budget goes.

The decision: where do we concentrate digital investment for the next two quarters?

Options: (a) acquisition, push sign-ups through campaigns; (b) depth, help already-registered users do more; (c) reach, target residents who are not online with us at all.

2. Test the line of sight

Outcome we actually care about: more residents genuinely using library services, including those we have not reached.

What the key result tells us: that more accounts were created.

What it does not tell us: whether anyone used the account twice, whether these are new residents or existing borrowers switching channel, or whether we reached anyone excluded. A 20% rise is achievable entirely from people we already serve.

3. Write the better question

The question: “Of the engagement we would add, how much is new reach and how much is the already-engaged doing more?”

Assumption it tests: that a rise in sign-ups means broader reach.

Evidence that would change the choice: a split of new versus returning users. If most growth is existing patrons, option (c) matters far more than (a).

4. Calibrate the rigor

Consequence: moderate. A year of investment direction rides on it.

Reversibility: reasonably high. We can shift emphasis next quarter.

Enough evidence to act: a new-versus-returning split, not a full segmentation study. Not certainty, just which option the number is hiding.

Ways to Ask Each Move

The same move lands differently depending on what is in front of you. Use whichever phrasing fits the conversation you are actually in.

1. Name the decision · when you are handed a topic or a goal

- What choice does this actually require us to make?
- If two sensible colleagues disagreed about this, what would they be disagreeing about?
- What are the two or three real options on the table, including doing nothing?
- What would we stop doing if we said yes to this?

2. Test the line of sight · when a metric is presented as progress

- What outcome is this number standing in for?
- Is this measuring what we did, or what changed for the person we serve?
- If this number moved 20%, what would we still not know?
- Could this rise entirely from people we already serve?
- What would we look for earlier if the real outcome takes a year to appear?

3. Write the better question · when you need to sharpen what the team investigates

- What question, if answered, would most improve this decision?
- What assumption are we leaning on that we have not checked?
- What evidence would cause us to choose the other option?
- What would have to be true for this to be a mistake?

4. Calibrate the rigor · before you ask the team for more work

- How consequential is this if we get it wrong?
- How reversible is it? What would it cost to change course later?
- What would be enough evidence to act, rather than enough to feel certain?
- Is the work I am about to ask for proportionate to the decision?

A test for move three

If no possible answer to your question would change what you do, it is not a decision question. It is curiosity, and it will cost your team a week.

Leading, Lagging, and the Proxy in Between

Two questions about any measure: when the signal arrives, and how closely it reflects the outcome. A measure can be early and still a poor stand-in, or late and accurate.

Dimension 1

Timing: when the signal shows up relative to the outcome.

Type	What it does	Library examples
Leading	Moves early enough to guide action	Repeat visits, progression into new genres, programme sign-ups
Contemporaneous	Shows what is happening now	Active readers this month, time spent reading, new card registrations
Lagging	Confirms results only after the fact	Sustained reading a year on, annual reading survey, lifelong reader rate

Dimension 2

Relationship to the outcome: how directly the measure reflects what we care about.

Type	What it is	Library examples
Direct measure	Close to the outcome itself	Sustained reading a year on
Proxy	Stands in because it is easier to measure	Loans, attendance, sign-ups
Instrumental	Operational output that supports the work	Programmes delivered, staff hours

How the two combine

- A **leading** measure can still be a **proxy**.
- A **lagging** measure can be **direct**.
- And a **proxy** can sit anywhere on the timing axis.

The executive question: which evidence would you manage against today, and what could it fool you into believing?

When It Arrives as a Topic

More often than you commission a topic, one lands on your desk. One question sends it back sharper, and shows the team what you wanted. Say thank you first: any of these can land as a rebuff if it arrives cold.

What lands on your desk	The question that sharpens it
A paper titled "Review of digital engagement"	"Before we go further, what choice is this paper helping us make?"
An OKR whose key result counts activity: 200 sessions delivered	"What would we see change if this worked? And what could we look at earlier?"
A recommendation with one option in it	"What were the other two, and why did those lose?"
A dashboard, and "what do you think?"	"What decision were you hoping this would settle? And if we stopped producing this, what would break?"
A report that has always been produced	"Who uses this, and what action follows from it?"

Why this is the half that matters

Writing better requests is a personal habit. Coaching a topic into a decision is a leadership skill, because the team learns what you wanted by watching you ask. Do it in front of them, and next time it arrives as a decision.

If you are short of time

You are paying either way. Either one question now, or a week of your team's effort on the wrong analysis.

Leading the Conversations That Matter

Core behaviour: Spot Blind Spots and Ask Better Questions

Whether the thinking survives is decided in how you respond the first time a team member brings it to you. The four moments are listed in order of how much courage each takes to say. Reflect on your own default.

The moment my partner brought

"We don't know." / "This is our best proxy." / "I think that assumption is wrong." / "The evidence changed."

How I responded in real time

What did my response teach them?

What would they be more, or less, likely to tell me next time?

How could I have opened the conversation further?

What could I ask next without automatically demanding more data, dismissing the concern, or agreeing with it?

The move I want to practice

Acknowledge / Ask rather than rule / Test whether it changes the decision / Make the next step shared

Things You Can Actually Say

The four moves, with wording you can borrow. Under pressure, having a sentence ready is the difference between opening a conversation and closing it.

1. Acknowledge before you evaluate · answer the person before the problem

- “Thanks for flagging that before we committed.”
- “I am glad you said that rather than sitting on it.”
- “That is exactly the kind of thing I want to hear early.”
- “Say more. I would rather know now.”

2. Turn it into a question, not a verdict · ask rather than rule

- “What would we need to know for that to be good enough?”
- “What would tell us whether that holds?”
- “If you are right, what follows?”
- “What is the one thing we could look at that would settle it?”

3. Probe whether it changes the decision · not all flaws matter

- “How wrong could it be, and does that change what we do?”
- “If we assume the worst case here, do we still choose the same option?”
- “Is this a reason to pause, or something to watch as we go?”
- “Does this change the decision, or the confidence we describe it with?”

4. Make the next step shared · own the follow-through together

- “Let us find out, together, before Friday.”
- “Do we investigate, mitigate, monitor, or move?”
- “What do you need from me to close that gap?”
- “I will take that question to the steering group. You look at the data side.”

What to avoid, and why

- “Get me a number that works” teaches the team to hide caveats.
- “Are we sure about this?” asked sharply teaches them to manufacture certainty.
- “Bring me solutions, not problems” teaches them to conceal problems.

One Exchange, All Four Moves

A team member raises an imperfect measure. Watch how the four moves keep the thinking open without accepting the flawed number and without demanding more data by reflex.

TEAM MEMBER

"This is our best proxy for reach, but it misses seniors who use a family member's account. So the number probably understates how many older residents we are serving."

LEADER · MOVE 1, ACKNOWLEDGE

"Thank you for saying that now, rather than after we had taken it to the board."

Answers the person first. Two seconds, and it decides whether the next caveat ever surfaces.

LEADER · MOVE 2, ASK RATHER THAN RULE

"What would tell us how big that gap is? Is there anything we already collect that would give us a sense of it?"

A real question, not a verdict dressed as one. Note what was not said: "then it is not a good measure."

TEAM MEMBER

"We could look at whether household accounts show borrowing patterns typical of older readers. It would be rough."

LEADER · MOVE 3, PROBE THE CONSEQUENCE

"Rough is fine. If the gap turned out to be large, would we make a different decision about where to put the outreach budget?"

The judgement step. A flaw that does not change the decision does not need to derail it.

TEAM MEMBER

"Probably yes. If we are already reaching them, the case for the seniors campaign weakens."

LEADER · MOVE 4, MAKE IT SHARED

"Then it matters. Take a rough look this week, and I will hold the outreach decision until we have it. If it is inconclusive, we proceed and track it as we go."

Shared next step, a deadline, and a decision rule for the case where the evidence stays murky.

What the team member learned

Naming a limitation was useful, not costly. It changed what the leader did. Next time, the caveat arrives with the number, which is exactly what a leader needs.

AI as a Thinking Partner

Core behaviour: Spot Blind Spots and Ask Better Questions

AI reads evidence faster than any of us, but it does not escape the evidence problem. Take the decision you carried through the day: let AI challenge your thinking, then judge what actually matters.

1. Challenge the decision

Choose one: What are we assuming that we haven't stated? / Make the strongest case against the direction I favour. / Who could be worse off if this works as planned?

2. Sharpen the question

"Given those possibilities, what question should I be asking before making this decision?"

3. Judge what AI gave you

What actually matters? / What sounds plausible but needs investigation? / What could actually change the decision?

4. Name what you still own

What judgment or decision remains yours, regardless of what AI suggested?

Prompts You Can Use As Written

Give the tool your decision, your options, and which way you are leaning. Then use one of these. You do not need special phrasing or technical skill; you need a clear decision and a willingness to be argued with.

SET THE CONTEXT FIRST

"I am deciding [decision]. The options are [A, B, C]. I am currently leaning towards [X], for these reasons: [reasons]. Here is the evidence I have: [evidence]."

1. Challenge the decision

- "What am I assuming here that I have not stated?"
- "Make the strongest case against the direction I favour."
- "Who could be worse off if this works exactly as planned?"
- "What would a thoughtful critic of this plan say first?"

2. Sharpen the question

- "Given those possibilities, what question should I be asking before I decide?"
- "What single question, if answered, would most improve this decision?"
- "Turn this broad goal into three specific, testable decisions I could make."

3. Judge what it gave you

- "Which of these points rests on evidence, and which is plausible-sounding inference?"
- "State the assumptions behind your answer."
- "What context about my organisation might you be missing that would change this?"

4. Name what you still own

- "What parts of this decision should not be delegated to a tool, and why?"
- Then answer for yourself: what judgment stays mine, whatever the output said?

Judging the output: a quick worked pass

It said: "Expanding to three branches risks diluting volunteer quality."

Verdict: plausible, unverified. It has no data on our volunteers. Worth a question to the branch leads, not a reason to stop.

It said: "Participation may not indicate reading gains."

Verdict: matters, and testable. This could change the decision. Follow it up.

It said: a confident paragraph of generic scaling best practice.

Verdict: set aside. Fluent, but it ignores our context entirely.

What an Exchange Actually Looks Like

A real sequence: what you type, roughly what comes back, and how you judge it. The output below is condensed, but the shape is typical.

YOU: SET THE CONTEXT AND ASK FOR CHALLENGE

"I am deciding whether to expand an after-school reading programme from two branches to five. Participation is up 18% at the current sites. I am leaning towards expanding. Make the strongest case against this direction."

IT RETURNED

- Participation measures sign-ups, not reading outcomes. Growth may reflect convenience of new time slots rather than demand for reading.
- The two current branches may have conditions the others lack: committed staff, a supportive school nearby, an established volunteer base.
- Expanding could dilute the volunteer pool that makes the programme work.
- Families already engaged with the library may be absorbing most of the growth, leaving the least-served communities untouched.

YOU: SHARPEN THE QUESTION

"Given those possibilities, what question should I be asking before I decide?"

IT RETURNED

"Are the conditions that made the two pilot branches succeed present in the branches you would expand to, and is participation tracking the reading outcome you actually care about?"

Now the part that is yours: judging it

Matters, and testable. The local-conditions point. We can check staffing, school proximity, and volunteer base at the candidate branches this week. This could genuinely change the plan.

Plausible, needs checking. Volunteer dilution. It has no data on our volunteers; it is inferring. Worth one question to the branch leads, not a reason to stop.

Set aside. The claim that engaged families absorb the growth. Possible, but we have no way to test it in the timeframe, and it would not change this quarter's decision.

What stayed mine: whether the evidence is good enough to commit public money and staff, and the accountability to the board if it underdelivers. The tool widened my view. It did not make the call.

When AI Moves From Your Desk Into a Service

Using AI to challenge your own thinking is private and reversible. Putting it into a service that touches residents is neither. These are the questions for that decision.

1. Decision and role

- What decision is this system making, informing, or recommending?
- Is a person reviewing each output, or only a sample, or none?
- What happens when it is wrong, and who notices?

2. Data and provenance

- What data was it trained or grounded on, and are we permitted to use it this way?
- Does it hold personal data, and under what basis?

3. Who is served well, and who is not

- Which groups are well represented in the data, and which are thin or absent?
- Could it work less well for the residents we most need to reach?

4. Explainability and defensibility

- Could we explain a specific outcome to the resident it affected?
- Could we defend the approach to a board, a minister, or the press?

5. Oversight and ownership

- Who owns this after it goes live, by name, not by team?
- What are we monitoring, how often, and what triggers a review?
- What is the plan if we need to turn it off?

The line worth holding

Good governance is not about saying no. It is about asking the right questions early enough that the answer can still be yes.

Five Questions for What Comes Back

You have asked it to challenge you and to sharpen the question. These are for the part that is yours: judging what it handed back. None of them needs you to be technical.

1. What is this resting on?

- Is this reasoning from what I gave it, or a plausible pattern filling a gap?
- You can ask the tool directly which of its points are grounded and which are inference. It will usually tell you.

2. Whose view is still missing?

- It answers from what has been written down.
- Who would disagree with this, and were they ever recorded anywhere?

3. Could I argue this myself?

- If I act on it, can I explain why in my own words?
- If the only reason I can give is that the tool said so, I have adopted it rather than judged it.

4. What is it assuming?

- Which of its assumptions would I need to test before this changes what I do?

5. What stays mine?

- It can widen the options. The call, and the accountability for it, do not transfer.

These are not AI skills

They are the same questions you have asked all day, pointed at a different source. What is this based on, and whose view is missing, are Module 1. Could I argue it myself is Module 2.

30-Day Division Action Plan

Core behaviour: Commitment and application

Draft your thinking here, then transfer it to the one-page plan template you will submit.
Use what you captured on the pages above.

Our priority behaviour

Which of the two would make the biggest difference right now, and why?

Where we will practise it

One live decision, OKR, meeting, or leadership routine.

What I will do

Two or three specific leadership moves over the next 30 days.

Early signals I will look for

What should I notice my team doing or saying differently within 30 days?

30-Day Division Action Plan

The last three sections, then the peer stress-test.

My commitment as sponsor

What will I personally start, stop, or change?

30-day check-in

When will I review progress, and what will I bring to that conversation?

What I need from the CE

What support or decision would unlock progress?

My peer challenged me on:

Take This Back to Your Team

A companion for the conversations you will have back at work. Glance at it before a one-on-one or a team review.

The Five Behaviours and What to Ask Your Team

The day went deep on the first two. Your team learned all five in March. You do not need to master the other three, but you should know enough to ask about them.

Behaviour	The question to ask your team
Spot Blind Spots ★	What are we assuming here that we have not said out loud? What have we not thought to ask?
Ask Better Questions ★	Is this a topic or a decision? What would actually change our mind?
Find Relevant Data	What evidence would genuinely help us decide, and do we have it, or a proxy for it?
Justify with Value & Risk	What is the value if we are right, and the cost if we are wrong? How reversible is this?
Communicate & Escalate	Who else needs to know, and what would make them act on it?

Questions to Ask by Situation

When a team member brings you a number

- What does this number ladder up to? Does movement here tell us the strategy is working?
- What does it capture well, and what does it miss entirely?
- Is this measuring what we did, or what changed for the person we serve?

When the room seems certain

- What would have to be true for us to be wrong?
- What evidence would change our mind?
- Whose perspective are we not hearing?

When something feels off but you cannot name it

- What are we assuming that we have not stated?
- What have we not thought to ask?
- What is the one question we are avoiding?

When someone brings you an OKR or key result

- What outcome is this really meant to influence?
- Is this measuring what we did, or what changed?
- What does this key result tell us about the outcome, and what doesn't it?
- What would we look for earlier if the real outcome takes time to appear?

When analysis comes from AI or another tool

- What data did this draw on, and are we allowed to use it this way?
- Who is served well by this, and who is served poorly?
- Could we explain the basis of this decision to a citizen or a board?

When the Plan Is Not Ready

A worked conversation. The plan below is typical: the thinking is sound, it just has not landed as a decision. Treat it as a failure and you will get compliance rather than better plans.

What arrived

Title: Improving engagement with our digital collection.

Approach: Analyse usage data across channels, identify patterns and segments, and recommend improvements.

Success measure: Deliver analysis by end of Q2 and present findings to the divisional meeting.

What is actually missing

No decision, so no analysis ends in a choice. No options, so nothing trades off. The success measure is a delivery date, so the plan cannot be wrong, and cannot be learned from.

Three of the five parts of a decision brief are absent. That is the diagnosis, and it is not a criticism of the person.

YOU · ACKNOWLEDGE FIRST

"Thanks, this is a real problem and you have clearly thought about it. Before we commit the time, a few questions."

YOU · FIND THE DECISION

"What choice will this help us make? If it came back tomorrow, what would we do differently?"

Do not tell them it is a topic. The question makes them find it.

THEM

"I suppose whether we keep investing in the app or put the effort into the web experience."

YOU · GET THE OPTIONS AND THE TRADE-OFF

"Good. So what are the realistic options, and what would we give up with each one?"

YOU · NAME THE ASSUMPTION TO TEST

"What are we assuming that, if wrong, would change the answer? Let us commission that specifically rather than a general analysis."

YOU · FIX THE MEASURE, AND MAKE THE NEXT STEP SHARED

"Last one. Delivering the analysis is not success. What would we see change if we got this right? Send me a paragraph, not a redraft, and we will look on Thursday."

A paragraph, not a rewrite. The thinking is the point.

What just happened

Six questions, no verdict. The plan is now a decision with options, a tested assumption and an outcome measure. They did the work; next time they will supply the questions too.

Four Moments: Open It Up or Shut It Down

The most damaging responses are rarely mean. They usually show impatience or reflexive problem-solving. Catch the reflex and choose the response that keeps the truth coming.

When they say...	Shuts it down	Opens it up
"We don't know"	Why didn't we already know this?	Thanks for flagging that before we committed. What would we need to find out?
"I think that assumption is wrong"	That's the plan. Let's not relitigate it.	Good, say more. If it is wrong, I want to know now, not later.
"This is our best proxy"	Then it's not a good measure. Get me one that works.	Good, you know its limits. How wrong could it be, and does that change the decision?
"The evidence changed"	We already decided. Stay the course.	Say more. What changed, and what would it mean if we adjusted now?

Four Moves That Open a Conversation

- 1 Acknowledge before you evaluate.** Respond to the person before the problem.
- 2 Turn it into a question, not a verdict.** Ask rather than rule.
- 3 Probe whether it changes the decision.** Not all flaws matter.
- 4 Make the next step shared.** "Let's find out," not "go fix it." Own the follow-through together.

Example: sharpening a question

Before (a topic): "Let's look into why visitor numbers are down."

After (a decision): "Are visits down because fewer people came, or because more people now use us digitally instead? If it is the second, is that a problem or a success we are mismeasuring?"

Your 30-Day Check-In

Before you review progress with the CE, take a few minutes here.

What has actually shifted in how my team works?

Where is the behaviour taking hold, and where is it harder than I expected?

What will I do differently for the next 30 days?

The Questions Behind the Numbers

Six ideas for leading when the evidence arrives
already polished.

Six Things to Remember When the Numbers Arrive

- 01 Data is evidence about reality, not reality itself.
- 02 Ask what the evidence gives you the right to believe.
- 03 Aim for confidence appropriate to the consequence, not certainty.
- 04 The team holds the blind spots. You hold the key to surfacing them.
- 05 Your response is the real training.
- 06 AI expands the thinking. It does not own the decision.

Your teams learned the behaviours. Your job is to create the conditions where those behaviours happen and survive.

Leadership gets harder as the evidence gets better

The more senior you become, the more numbers arrive already analysed, summarised, and polished. Dashboards tell you what moved. Teams bring recommendations. AI can now produce an interpretation before you have finished reading the underlying evidence.

None of that removes the leader's job. In some ways, it makes the job more important.

The work of leadership is not simply to receive the answer. It is to judge what the evidence gives you the right to believe, notice what may be missing, ask the question that sharpens the decision, and create the conditions where people can tell you when something does not add up.

Those were the disciplines behind our day together. What follows are six ideas worth carrying into the meetings where the real work happens.

NLB already reaches more than eight in ten residents. Over the next three to five years, you will make decisions that shape what that reach actually means: the future of the physical library, how far to go with AI-enabled citizen services, where to place collection investment, how to grow digital engagement without leaving people behind, and how to transform your workforce's capability. Every one of those decisions will arrive wrapped in data. These six ideas are about what you do with it.

Data is evidence about reality, not reality itself

01

The moment you treat a metric as the thing itself, you have stopped leading and started following the number.

This is the idea everything else hangs on. A number is not the world; it is a partial view of the world, captured in a way that was convenient to measure.

When loans rise six percent, transactions rose. That is real, and it is worth knowing. But it is not the same as “more Singaporeans are becoming readers for life.” It could be the same devoted borrowers taking out more. When programme attendance climbs, seats were filled. Whether anyone left changed, whether a child kept reading after the holiday programme ended, whether a senior returned to the library on their own the following month, the attendance figure cannot tell you. It was never built to.

None of this makes the data bad. It makes it evidence, and evidence is exactly what a leader is supposed to interrogate rather than simply receive.

So the first move, every time, is to separate the measure from the mission it stands in for. Digital engagement is a metric. Getting credible content to people who need it is the mission. The gap between them is where your judgment earns its keep.

Ask what the evidence gives you the right to believe

02

Once you accept that data is evidence, the useful question changes.

Start by naming the decision. A topic can send a team searching indefinitely; a decision gives the evidence a job to do. “Understand digital engagement” will produce dashboards. “Should we concentrate learning investment in branches, in homes, or through partners?” will produce something you can act on.

Then the question is no longer “do we have data on this?” You almost always do. It becomes: what does this evidence actually give us the right to believe?

That single question reframes a strategy conversation. If someone proposes expanding a service because a usage metric is up, it forces the room to say out loud whether the metric tracks the outcome you care about or merely correlates with activity. It is the difference between “sign-ups on the new digital platform are strong, so we are reaching new people” and the sharper, more honest “sign-ups are strong, which tells us existing patrons are adopting a new channel, and tells us almost nothing yet about whether we have reached anyone new.”

For the decisions ahead of you, this is not academic. When you weigh how much to invest in AI-enabled citizen services, the evidence you will be shown, pilot results, satisfaction scores, adoption curves, will each give you the right to believe something narrow and specific. Your job is to know exactly what that is, and to refuse to let a strong-looking number carry more weight than it has earned.

Aim for confidence appropriate to the consequence, not certainty

03

More evidence is not always better. The right evidence, at the right time, is better.

Leaders are often told to be “data-driven,” as though the goal were to remove all doubt before acting. That is neither possible nor wise. You will never eliminate every blind spot before a decision, and trying to would paralyse you, and exhaust your teams.

The goal is not certainty. It is confidence appropriate to the consequence. How much evidence a decision deserves depends on two things: how bad it would be to get it wrong, and how easily you could reverse it if you did.

A reversible, low-cost experiment, a small pilot at three branches, a new format tried for one school holiday, deserves to move on lighter evidence, because you will learn as you go and can adjust. A decision about the future of physical libraries, or a major, long-horizon collection investment, is costly and hard to undo, and deserves far more rigour before you commit. The discipline is matching the two.

And every request you make for more evidence spends your team’s finite capacity. Spend it where being wrong would actually hurt.

The team holds the blind spots, You hold the key to surfacing them

04

The team holds the blind spots. You hold the key.

Blind spots are rarely one leader's personal failing. They belong to the decision, and the clues to them are usually distributed across your team. The people closest to the work are the ones who suspect the proxy is imperfect or the assumption is shaky, often without being able to name the whole problem themselves.

What your seniority determines is whether those doubts ever reach you. As information travels up, it gets filtered and polished. A caveat becomes a rounded number. "I'm not sure this will hold" becomes "this looks on track." By the time it reaches the top, the picture is cleaner and more certain than anything that exists on the ground, not because anyone lied, but because the system quietly rewards confidence over honesty on the way up.

That means uncertainty will not reach you on its own. If you do not ask for the blind spot, rank will keep it buried. So you have to pull for it deliberately, and make it safe to bring you. Your questions turn the key. So does your reaction when someone dares to use it.

Your response is the real training

05

Your response is the real training

This is the one I would most like you to remember, because it operates in seconds and compounds for years.

Every time a team member surfaces uncertainty, names a limitation, or challenges a direction, they are running a quiet experiment on you. What happens to me when I bring the hard thing? Your response in that moment teaches them what to do next time, and it teaches everyone watching.

Picture the two futures. A steward says, “this is our best proxy, but it misses the seniors who use a family member’s account.” One leader says, “then it’s not a good measure, get me one that works.” The lesson learned, instantly and permanently: do not bring caveats, present the number clean, bury the doubt. Another leader says, “good, you know its limits, how wrong could it be, and does that change our decision?” The lesson learned: naming the flaw is valued here.

Neither leader is cruel. The damaging response is usually impatience, not malice, which is precisely why it is worth catching in yourself. Four small moves keep the thinking open: acknowledge the person before you evaluate the point, turn your reaction into a question rather than a verdict, probe whether the flaw actually changes the decision, and make the next step a shared one. None of them takes longer than shutting the conversation down. They simply point the other way.

AI expands the thinking, It does not own the decision

06

You will spend the next few years deciding how deeply AI runs through NLB's services, and how you and your teams use it in your own work. Two ideas will keep you steady.

First: AI does not escape the evidence problem. It can process more evidence, faster and from more angles than any of us, but it still works from representations of the world, not the world itself, and no amount of processing speed changes that. Everything in the first idea still applies. A fluent, confident answer from a model is not the truth; it is an interpretation generated from evidence, and mistaking its fluency for accuracy is the newest kind of blind spot. Generation is not discovery. What AI produces is something to investigate and judge, not something it has found.

Second, and this is where it becomes genuinely useful: AI is good at the thing organisations are worst at, generating challenge without social risk. It will make the strongest case against your favoured direction, name the assumption no one wanted to state, and surface who might be worse off if a plan works exactly as intended, and it will do so without fear of the room. Used that way, it sharpens your questions and widens what you consider.

But the judgment about what matters, and the accountability if it goes wrong, never leave you. Good governance here is not about saying no. It is about asking the right questions, whose evidence, whose blind spots, can we explain it, who owns the call, so you can use AI confidently and responsibly.

Your teams learned the behaviours. Your job is to create the conditions where those behaviours happen and survive.

That is what ties these six together. Every one of them is really about protecting good thinking, from the pull of a clean number, from the filtering of rank, from the pressure of the calendar, from the seductive fluency of a machine.

NLB's purpose, championing reading and holding the Singapore story, reaching the eight in ten and reaching harder for the other two, will not be secured by better dashboards. It will be secured by leaders who ask better questions of the evidence in front of them, and who make it safe for their people to tell them the truth.

The tools will keep changing. The pressure will never go away. But the leadership discipline remains remarkably stable.

Lead the conditions
Ask better questions
Make stronger decisions