FOR SENIOR PROJECT & PROGRAMME LEADERS

FIELD GUIDE



YOU'VE FELT IT. NOW NAME IT.

The Authority Gap.

You carry a director's accountability with a coordinator's authority. **The leaders who get promoted aren't closing that gap. They're doing something else entirely.**

Anthony Francis
30 years · £300M+ delivered

FROM DELIVERY
TO THE EXECUTIVE FLOOR

You Were Sold a Lie About Authority

> *Most senior managers have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that authority arrives with the next job title. It does not. And the longer you wait for it, the longer someone else occupies the director-level space that should be yours.*

At some point in your career, someone handed you a programme, a team, or a transformation mandate and said words to the effect of: 'You're accountable for this.' What they did not hand you was the power to compel the people who actually determine whether it succeeds.

The sponsor who controls funding sits two levels above you. The business unit heads whose teams you depend on report to someone else entirely. The subject matter experts you need are on loan from departments with other priorities.

The senior stakeholders who will ultimately judge your performance? They may not know your name yet.

And here is the painful truth for anyone making the move from senior manager to director: the gap between accountability and authority does not close when you get promoted. It gets bigger.

Directors carry more accountability, operate across larger political landscapes, and are judged not just on delivery but on the strategic influence they exercise. If you are waiting until you have the title before you start closing the gap, you will arrive underprepared.

THE CORE REALITY

The Authority Gap is the distance between what you are held accountable for and the authority you actually have to make it happen. It is not a management failure. It is a structural feature of every serious leadership role, and it is the primary terrain you must learn to navigate before the promotion arrives, not after.

The mistake most senior managers make is treating this as a process problem. They seek out tighter governance, clearer RACI matrices, better reporting structures. None of these tools close the gap. They describe it. Closing it requires something entirely different: political intelligence.

Political intelligence is not manipulation. It is not playing games or working around people. It is the deliberate, skilled practice of understanding who holds real power in a system, what they care about, and how to align your agenda with theirs in a way that moves outcomes.

It is the skill nobody teaches in a management development programme, and the one that separates managers who get promoted to director from those who get told they are 'not quite ready yet' without ever being told what ready actually looks like.

THE CRITICAL DISTINCTION

Formal authority means people must comply. Influence means they choose to. At senior management level, compliance gets you minimum engagement. Choice gets you genuine commitment. When you reach director level, only one of those actually leads.

This guide is built on thirty years of delivering transformation programmes across corporate and public sector environments, including Tesco, Reuters, British Airways, Diabetes UK and Mind, and on coaching the senior managers and programme directors who are doing that same work now.

Every insight here has been earned under real pressure, with real consequences. What follows is a practical framework for building the kind of authority that does not depend on a job title and that, by the time your promotion arrives, has already been doing its work for months.

Why the Director Role Demands a Different Kind of Influence

> *The transition from senior manager to director is not a continuation of the same role with a bigger budget. It is a qualitative shift in how authority is exercised, and most people who struggle with it have never been told what that shift actually requires.*

At senior manager level, your credibility is largely built on delivery. You execute well. You hit milestones. You manage complexity within defined parameters. Those capabilities are real and they matter, but they are the entrance requirement for director level, not the differentiator.

Directors are assessed on three things that have very little to do with delivery mechanics:

- **Strategic influence:** Can you shape decisions above and across your immediate scope? Do people at executive level factor in your perspective before making consequential calls?
- **Organisational navigation:** Do you understand the political landscape well enough to move your agenda through it, without creating unnecessary resistance or burning relationships?
- **Leadership presence:** When you walk into a room without a title advantage, do people follow your lead? Do they give you credibility that has not been formally assigned?

Most senior managers who fail to make the director transition are not failing on competence. They are failing on visibility. They are not being seen doing director-level things. They are waiting to be given the platform, rather than building it themselves.

The Three Zones — Where Authority Ends and Influence Begins

Before you can close the Authority Gap, you need to see it clearly. The gap is not uniform. It has specific pressure points, places where your accountability is highest and your formal power is lowest. These are the exact locations where the move to director-level authority pays off most.

01

Your Zone of Control

People and decisions directly within your team structure. Genuine authority here, but limited scope. What happens here is rarely what determines a director's reputation.

02

Your Zone of Influence

Stakeholders, sponsors, cross-functional peers you depend on but do not manage. This is where most outcomes are actually determined, and where formal authority runs out. This is the director's primary workspace.

03

Your Zone of Concern

External factors, exec-level decisions, and organisational politics you cannot directly touch. Knowing this zone exists protects you from being blindsided by decisions made without you.

04

The Gap Itself

The overlap between Zone 2 and Zone 3, high accountability, limited formal power. Learning to operate here deliberately, not reactively, is the single most important move in the transition to director.

> **DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION**
>
> *Name the five people whose decisions most directly determine your success. How much formal authority do you have over any of them? Whatever the gap across those five relationships is your Authority Gap. That is where this work begins.*

What Prevents the Transition: The Competence Trap

There is a specific failure pattern that catches technically capable senior managers repeatedly. They solve the wrong version of the problem. They see stakeholder resistance as a communication problem, so they send more updates.

They see slow decisions as a governance problem, so they add more process. They see lack of buy-in as a persuasion problem, so they build better business cases.

All of this activity is directed at the surface. The real problem sits underneath, they have not established the relational credibility required to move people who are not obliged to be moved.

No report, no process, and no business case replaces that credibility. It must be built deliberately, and the best time to start building it is while you are still a senior manager, not after the promotion.

The Five Moves That Close the Gap

> *These are not soft skills. They are strategic decisions that require deliberate execution. Each one targets a specific mechanism through which director-level authority is built before the title arrives.*

Move 1 — Translate Your Work Into Commercial Language

Senior managers talk about milestones, RAG status, and delivery risk. Directors talk about business risk, strategic dependency, and commercial value.

The moment you reframe your work in the language of the people above you, like cost, revenue, risk, strategic opportunity, you shift from a manager who needs things from senior stakeholders to an advisor who manages something they already care about. That shift changes the nature of every conversation you have.

In practice, this means that every significant piece of communication you produce should answer the question: 'So what does this mean for the business?' before the reader has to ask it. Not as an appendix. As the lead.

> THE DIRECTOR'S REFRAME
>
> *When preparing any communication upwards, ask yourself: if the CFO or COO read only the first paragraph, would they understand the business significance? If not, rewrite the first paragraph. Then the rest follows naturally.*

Move 2 — Build Relationships Before You Need Them

The single biggest mistake senior managers make is treating relationship-building as a crisis response. They attempt to engage a senior stakeholder when they need a decision, a resource, or rescue from an escalation. At that point, the relationship starts at zero and the stakes are already high.

Leaders who close the Authority Gap systematically invest in stakeholder relationships during stable periods, not as a networking exercise, but as a practice. When pressure comes, the channel is already open. When you need a decision made quickly, you are asking someone who already trusts your judgment.

The director-level lesson here is simple: the relationships you build six months before you need them are the ones that carry you through the moments that define your leadership reputation.

Move 3 — Understand What Each Stakeholder Is Actually Optimising For

Most senior managers ask: 'How do I get this person on board?' The more productive question is: 'What problem are they trying to solve, and how does my programme either help or threaten that?'

Every influential stakeholder has a personal agenda beneath their organisational role. They are protecting a budget, building a legacy, managing a political relationship, or positioning for their own next move.

When you understand that agenda, you can frame your requests as aligned with what they already want. When you do not, you will always be competing for attention against things that feel more relevant to them than your programme.

Move 4 — Name the Undiscussables

In every programme with a serious Authority Gap, there are things everyone knows but nobody says in formal meetings. The scope is unrealistic. The sponsor is disengaged. The critical dependency is 12 months behind. The assumption the business case rests on was optimistic when it was written.

Senior managers who avoid these conversations protect short-term comfort at the cost of long-term programme health.

Leaders moving into director-level territory who name them carefully, credibly, and at the right moment build a reputation for intellectual honesty that is worth more than any qualification or title.

People give authority to those they trust to tell them the truth. That trust is built one honest conversation at a time.

Move 5 — Manage Upwards With Precision, Not Just Frequency

Managing upwards is not the same as keeping your sponsor informed. Informed sponsors are passive. Engaged sponsors are active. The difference is whether you are making it easy for them to take the action you need, or simply reporting on what happened.

Every interaction with a senior stakeholder should have a clear intended outcome, a decision, a commitment, a signal, or a conversation that advances something tangible. If you leave every meeting having updated them, you have done communications work.

If you leave having moved the programme forward, you have done leadership work. Directors are measured on the latter. Getting into that habit now is how you demonstrate readiness before the promotion is offered.

Political Intelligence: The Skill Nobody Teaches

> *Political intelligence is not a personality type. It is a learnable set of reading and navigation skills, and it is the most consistently under-discussed capability in every senior management to director transition.*

The word 'political' makes people uncomfortable in professional contexts. It carries connotations of manipulation and self-interest. That discomfort is one of the main reasons capable senior managers hit a ceiling they cannot name. They are being outmanoeuvred not by less talented people, but by more politically aware ones.

Here is the reframe: politics is simply the process by which competing interests get resolved in human systems. When you have multiple stakeholders with different priorities, limited resources, and shared dependencies, which describes every director-level environment, politics is not optional.

It is the operating environment. You can pretend it does not exist, in which case others will navigate it without you. Or you can develop the skills to navigate it deliberately.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

Politically naive senior managers are not more ethical than politically intelligent ones. They are just less effective, and less promotable. They still have their work shaped by organisational politics. They simply have no say in how.

Reading the Room: Four Things a Director Always Knows

WHAT TO READ	WHY IT MATTERS FOR DIRECTORS	HOW TO FIND IT
Who actually decides	Formal governance rarely reflects real decision power. The person who signs off may not be the one who shapes the decision.	Watch who gets consulted before major decisions. That is where power sits.
Whose support unlocks others	Some stakeholders are connectors whose endorsement shifts six others. One relationship well-managed is worth six separate conversations.	Map who speaks first in meetings and who others look to before responding.

What is being protected	Resistance almost always comes from self-interest, not obstruction. Understanding what is being protected tells you how to respond without triggering defensiveness.	Ask 'What does success look like for you here?' Listen for what they don't say.
Where the informal coalitions are	Groups who share interests or history will move together. Winning one without understanding the coalition can cost three.	Track who socialises together, coordinates outside meetings, and cc's each other unnecessarily.

The Navigation Principle

Political navigation is not about working around people. It is about making it easy for them to do what you need them to do. This means structuring decisions so that the outcome you need is also the path of least resistance for the person deciding.

Creating visibility for stakeholders whose support of your agenda represents a genuine contribution to their goals. Managing the sequence of conversations so that the right people have formed their view before the formal meeting, rather than discovering the issue in the room.

> **THE SEQUENCING RULE**
>
> *Never surprise a senior stakeholder in a meeting. If a conversation might be difficult, have it privately first. The formal meeting should confirm what has already been understood, not be the place where understanding is attempted for the first time. Directors who rely on governance meetings to create alignment are already behind.*

Resistance Is Data, Not an Obstacle

> *The way a senior manager responds to stakeholder resistance tells you everything about whether they are ready for director-level leadership. Managers escalate. Directors diagnose, and then act.*

When someone is slow to respond, pushes back on scope, withholds resources, or questions your approach, the instinctive reaction is to treat it as an obstacle to overcome.

The more productive reading is to treat it as information to decode. Most resistance falls into four categories, each of which calls for a distinctly different response:

A

Rational Disagreement

They genuinely believe your approach is wrong, your timeline is unrealistic, or your assumptions are flawed. Easiest to address if you're willing to hear it before defending against it.

B

Political Resistance

Your programme threatens something they are protecting: headcount, budget, territory, influence. The stated concern is a proxy. The real concern sits beneath it and will not move until acknowledged.

C

Capacity Resistance

They don't have bandwidth to engage, not because they disagree, but because you are one of twelve competing demands. The solution is not persuasion. It is reducing the cost of their involvement.

D

Historical Resistance

A previous programme like this failed and they were burned. The resistance is about scar tissue, not you. It needs acknowledgment before it can be moved.

THE MOST EXPENSIVE MISTAKE

Treating B as if it were A. Bringing more evidence and logic to a political resistance that has nothing to do with logic. This wastes time, erodes credibility, and signals to the resistant stakeholder that you do not understand what is actually happening, which is precisely why they will not follow your lead.

Three Questions Before Every Difficult Conversation

- **What category is this resistance in?** Decide before the meeting. If you are wrong, you will find out in the first two minutes. But entering without a hypothesis means you are reactive from the start — which is the junior position.
- **What does this person need to feel safe enough to move?** Every resistant stakeholder has a condition under which their resistance softens. Find it before the conversation, not during it.
- **What is the one thing that would change if this conversation goes well?** Not winning the argument. Not achieving full alignment. The one concrete thing that advances your position. Define it before you enter the room.

Leaders who close the Authority Gap approach resistance as a problem of understanding, not persuasion. Persuasion says: 'I will change your mind.' Understanding says: 'I will find out what it would take for you to be genuinely on board, and address that thing directly.'

The first builds compliance at best. The second builds advocates, and at director level, advocates are the currency that funds your leadership.

The 30-Day Influence Audit

> *Reading frameworks is not the same as applying them. This chapter is a structured practice for your live work, something you do in the next 30 days, not a theoretical exercise.*

The following sequence is designed to move you from insight to visible change in your programme relationships within one month. It is deliberately incremental, wholesale change signals to stakeholders that something is off. These moves compound.

Week One: Diagnose Without Acting

Spend the first week in observation mode. Resist the urge to fix or change anything. Your job this week is data collection only.

- **Map your actual influence network** — not your org chart. Identify the ten people who most affect your outcomes. For each, rate your current relational capital on a scale of 1 to 5.
- **Identify your two biggest gaps** — the relationships where your accountability is highest and your relational capital is lowest. These are the Authority Gap's sharpest edges.
- **List three undiscussables** — things everyone in your programme knows but nobody says out loud in formal meetings. Write them down. You will need them in Week Three.

Week Two: Invest Before You Need To

Target your two biggest relationship gaps. The goal is not to progress a deliverable. The goal is to understand what they are optimising for.

1. **Request an informal 20-minute conversation.** Not a programme update. Frame it explicitly as a check-in: 'I wanted to get your perspective on how things are sitting for you, separate from the formal governance.' This signals that you want their view, not just their sign-off.
2. **Ask the question most senior managers never ask:** 'What would need to be different about this programme for you to feel genuinely confident in it?' Then listen without defending. The answer is more valuable than anything on your risk register.
3. **Follow up with one concrete action.** Whatever they told you, find the smallest visible thing you can do in response and do it within a week. Not to fix everything, to demonstrate that the conversation was not performative.

Week Three: Name One Undiscussable

Choose the most impactful item from your Week One list. Find the right context not a governance meeting, but a one-to-one with the person most affected, and name it directly. Not as a crisis. As an honest observation from someone who is accountable for the outcome.

> **HOW TO FRAME IT**
>
> *'I want to raise something I think we both know is sitting underneath the programme, but that we haven't addressed directly. I'd rather name it now than manage around it for another six months.' Then say the thing. Briefly. Specifically. Without drama.*

Week Four: Reframe One Upward Conversation

Identify the next scheduled interaction with your sponsor or a senior stakeholder. Instead of preparing to update them, prepare to advance something. Go in with one decision you need, one commitment you want locked, or one signal you need them to send. Make that the purpose. The update is background. The outcome is the point.

> **THE 30-DAY MARKER**
>
> *At the end of 30 days, revisit your influence map. Re-rate the two relationships you targeted. If the scores have moved even slightly you have begun to close the gap. The question is no longer whether this works. The question is how consistently you will apply it, and whether you are ready to do it at director scale.*

The Identity Shift That Makes the Promotion Inevitable

> *Every framework in this guide will underperform if the identity behind it does not shift. Closing the Authority Gap is ultimately not a set of tactics. It is a decision about who you are in the room before anyone has given you permission to be that person.*

There is a particular posture that comes with being an excellent senior manager. It is built around delivery precision, preparation, and the quiet confidence that comes from being operationally reliable.

This posture serves you well up to a point. It is the posture of someone who executes within a system. It is not the posture of someone who leads the system.

The shift to director-level identity requires a specific and uncomfortable move: you stop thinking of yourself as the person responsible for making delivery happen, and start thinking of yourself as the person responsible for the conditions under which delivery can happen.

That includes the human conditions, relationships, alignment, trust, political clarity, the willingness to have conversations others avoid, as much as it includes governance and process.

THE IDENTITY STATEMENT

I do not need the title yet to lead at that level. I need a clear understanding of the system I am operating in, the relationships that determine its outcomes, and the confidence to act on both, even when the formal structure does not yet support me.

Three Signs You Have Made the Shift

- ☐ **You stop waiting for permission to have difficult conversations.** You recognise that naming a risk, a misalignment, or an undiscussable is part of your leadership responsibility, not something that requires someone above you to open the door first.
- ☐ **You invest in relationships with no immediate return.** You are building influence during calm periods, not just when the programme is in trouble. This is how you ensure the channel is open before you need it.
- ☐ **You translate everything into the language of the people above you.** Your thinking is still operationally grounded, but your communication is commercial, strategic, and outcome-focused. You have stopped reporting on activity and started advising on value, risk, and decision.

What the Promotion Decision Actually Turns On

Directors are not promoted from senior managers because they are the most technically proficient people in the room. They are promoted because the people making the decision can already picture them operating at the next level.

They have seen them handle a difficult conversation with a senior stakeholder and not flinch. They have seen them name a problem the team was avoiding. They have seen them bring commercial thinking to a programme meeting that usually lives at the operational level.

All of those moments are available to you now, in your current role. You do not need to wait for the promotion to start demonstrating director-level leadership. In fact, the promotion will not come until you have. The Authority Gap is closed not by the title, but by the behaviour that makes the title feel inevitable to the people who hold it.

> THE CLOSING THOUGHT
>
> *The Authority Gap will always exist. It is built into every significant leadership role. What changes is not the gap, it is your ability to operate within it, across it, and despite it. That ability is not issued with a job title. It is built. Deliberately. Over time. Starting now.*

Ready to Make the Transition?

If you are a senior manager, project manager, or PMO Head who is serious about moving into a director-level role, and you want a structured, direct path to get there this is exactly what the work I do addresses.

My coaching is built around your live programmes and your specific stakeholder landscape. We close the Authority Gap in real time, on real work, with measurable shifts in how you are perceived, engaged, and promoted.

If you would like to know more, email me at **anthonyffrancis@hotmail.com** with the subject '**Director Readiness',** and I will send you further details.

Alternatively, book your discovery call by clicking this link **Discovery Call**

Anthony Francis | Programme Director & Senior Leadership Coach

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