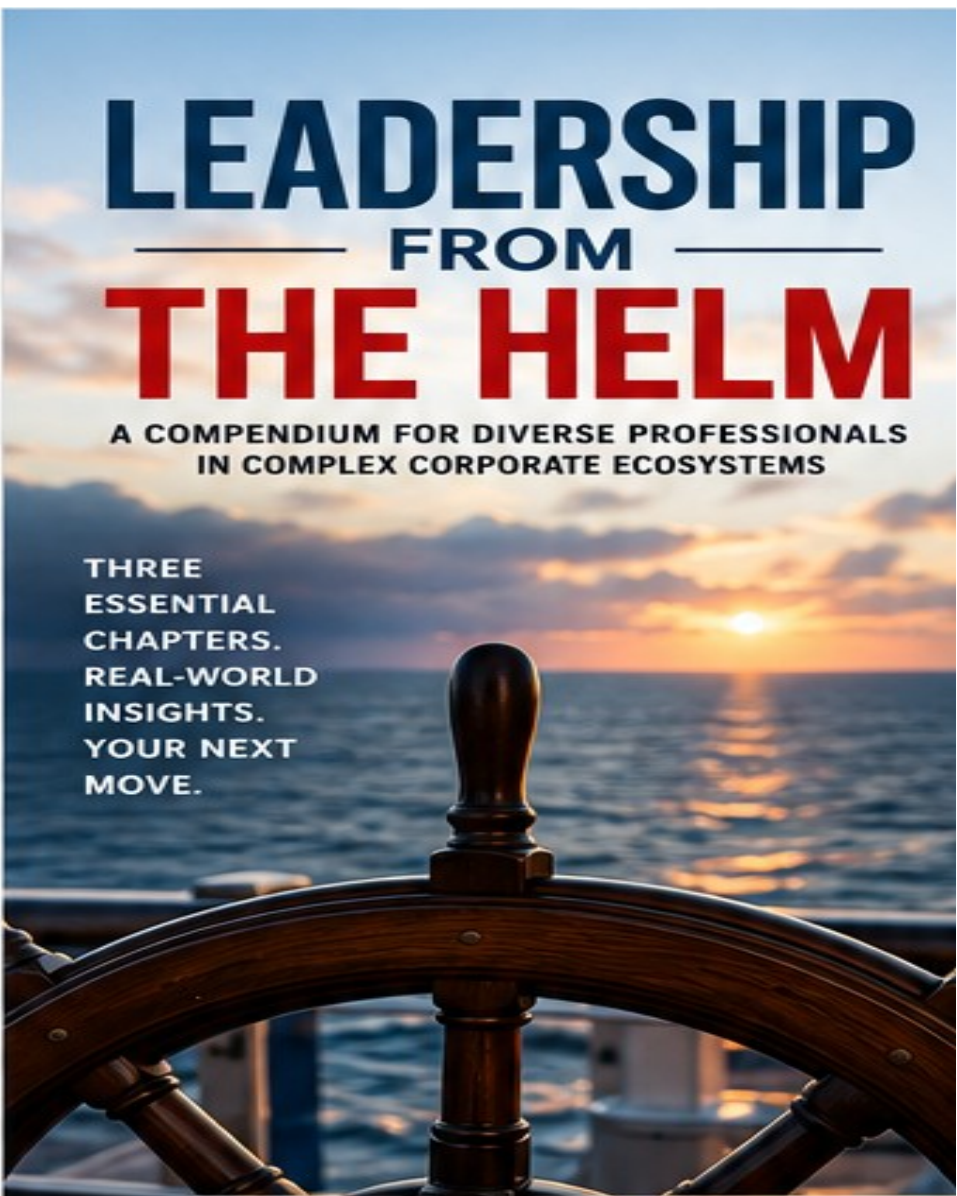




LEADERSHIP FROM THE HELM

A COMPENDIUM FOR DIVERSE PROFESSIONALS
IN COMPLEX CORPORATE ECOSYSTEMS

THREE
ESSENTIAL
CHAPTERS.
REAL-WORLD
INSIGHTS.
YOUR NEXT
MOVE.

A SAMPLE CHAPTER BOOKLET

PERSPECTIVE | STRATEGY | PROGRESS

KEITH L. MAJOR SR

LEADERSHIP FROM THE HELM

THE INSIDE GAME

A Three-Chapter Sample Booklet

Performance • Perception • Organizational Power

*Three strategic lessons for professionals who know
that doing excellent work and building a successful
career are not always the same thing.*

KEITH L. MAJOR SR.

www.keithlmajor.com

FOREWORD

A Note Before You Begin

*“You were taught how to do the job.
Nobody taught you the inside game.”*

This booklet is a glimpse into the larger conversation at the heart of Leadership from the Helm: what does it take to build a meaningful career when excellent performance is necessary, but not always sufficient?

I spent much of my professional life in institutions that valued discipline, competence, preparation, and results. Those experiences taught me that performance matters deeply. But they also taught me something most leadership manuals tend to soften: organizations are human systems. They are shaped by relationships, perceptions, access, informal influence, culture, timing, and the unwritten rules that determine how opportunity actually moves.

For Black professionals, those dynamics can carry an added layer of complexity. We are often taught to work harder, be better prepared, make fewer mistakes, and trust that excellence will eventually speak for itself. That advice comes from a place of survival and love. But it is incomplete. Your work cannot speak. Your reputation can. Your relationships can. Your visibility can. Your ability to read the terrain can.

The three selections in this booklet were chosen because they form a natural progression. The Curse of Competence examines what happens when being reliable becomes a trap. P.I.E. challenges the assumption that performance alone determines advancement and introduces the importance of image and

exposure. Organizational Reconnaissance then shifts the lens outward and asks you to study the environment itself: who holds influence, what gets rewarded, how decisions are really made, and what you need to know before making your next move.

None of this is an argument for abandoning authenticity or becoming someone you are not. Quite the opposite. Strategy is not surrender. Awareness is not cynicism. Learning how an organization works gives you more freedom to decide how you want to operate within it - and when it may be time to leave it.

My hope is that these pages cause you to stop at least once and say, "That has happened to me." But recognition is only the beginning. The larger goal is to help you replace frustration with diagnosis, diagnosis with strategy, and strategy with deliberate action.

You were taught how to do the job. These pages begin the conversation about the inside game.

- Keith L. Major Sr.

SAMPLE BOOKLET

Table of Contents

FOREWORD	3
A Note Before You Begin	
CHAPTER 1	6
The Curse of Competence	
CHAPTER 2	13
P.I.E.	
CHAPTER 3	20
Organizational Reconnaissance	
CONTINUE THE JOURNEY	28
Explore Leadership from the Helm	

*“You can’t control the seas, but you
can learn how to navigate them.”*

CHAPTER 1

The Curse of Competence

When Being Good at Your Job Starts Working Against You

There is a strange thing that happens to highly competent people in the workplace.

You become the person everybody can depend on.

Something goes wrong? Call Keith.

A project is behind schedule? Give it to the person who always delivers.

Someone else drops the ball? Don't worry—the reliable employee will clean it up.

At first, this feels like a compliment. Leadership trusts you. Your coworkers respect your abilities. You become indispensable.

And then one day you look around and realize something:

Everybody else's career is moving while you're still standing there holding the organization together.

Welcome to the **curse of competence**.

The curse of competence describes the phenomenon in which excessive work burdens disproportionately fall upon highly skilled people precisely because they are capable of handling them. Their competence becomes the reason they receive more work, more responsibility, and more expectations.

But not necessarily more money.

Not necessarily more recognition.

And certainly not always more opportunity.

For Black professionals, this phenomenon can take on an even more complicated dimension.

Overburdened but Under-Recognized

Highly competent Black employees can quickly become the people organizations depend upon to "keep things running."

You solve problems.

You take the difficult assignments.

You rescue projects.

You answer questions nobody else seems to know how to answer.

Eventually, exceptional performance becomes your normal performance.

That's when the danger begins.

Because once excellence becomes expected, people sometimes stop treating it as exceptional.

What once generated praise becomes merely the price of admission.

Meanwhile, another employee completes one highly visible project and suddenly everyone is talking about their "leadership potential."

You may be thinking:

Wait a minute. I've been doing that for three years.

Exactly.

Too Valuable to Promote

One of the most frustrating manifestations of the curse of competence occurs when your very effectiveness becomes an argument for keeping you exactly where you are.

Think about the irony.

You become extraordinarily good at your job.

Your supervisor depends on you.

The organization depends on you.

Nobody wants to imagine the department without you.

Then a promotion or developmental assignment becomes available.

Instead of leadership saying:

"This person has clearly demonstrated the ability to operate at the next level."

someone says:

"But we really need them where they are."

Read that again.

The thing you thought would earn your promotion—becoming indispensable—may become the thing keeping you from it.

Your manager's operational comfort can quietly become more important than your professional development.

And because you're competent, you keep delivering.

Which makes them need you even more.

The trap reinforces itself.

The Recognition–Responsibility Gap

One of the easiest ways to identify the curse of competence is to examine the distance between your **responsibility** and your **recognition**.

Ask yourself:

Are you routinely performing responsibilities above your pay grade?

Are you solving problems normally handled by more senior employees?

Are people constantly coming to you for answers?

Are you training coworkers who hold the same title—or a higher one?

Are you trusted with important work but somehow overlooked when awards, promotions, developmental assignments, or leadership opportunities appear?

If so, you may have a recognition–responsibility gap.

And that gap matters.

Because organizations can become very comfortable receiving executive-level performance at employee-level prices.

Higher Standards of Proof

There is another dimension Black professionals should watch carefully: continually having to prove what has already been proven.

You succeed once.

Prove it again.

You succeed twice.

Let's see whether you can do it consistently.

You succeed repeatedly.

Well, perhaps the circumstances were favorable.

Meanwhile, someone else demonstrates "potential" and receives an opportunity to grow into a position.

You were required to demonstrate competence before receiving the opportunity.

They received the opportunity so they could demonstrate competence.

Those are two entirely different career paths.

This is why simply telling Black professionals to "work hard" is incomplete career advice.

Hard work matters.

Competence matters.

Performance absolutely matters.

But professional advancement involves considerably more than being the person who performs the most work.

When Being the Go-To Person Becomes a Warning Sign

There is nothing inherently wrong with being the person people trust.

You *want* to have a reputation for excellence.

But you should start paying attention when being the "go-to person" becomes a permanent organizational role instead of a steppingstone.

Look for patterns.

You repeatedly receive extra assignments because you "always deliver."

Your work expands beyond your position description, but your compensation and authority do not.

You receive praise for getting things done but little discussion about your future.

Your contributions are quietly accepted while someone else's are publicly celebrated.

You're considered too important to lose from your current position but apparently not important enough to promote.

You receive more responsibility without corresponding visibility.

And perhaps the most dangerous sign of all:

You have become so busy proving how valuable you are in your current job that you have no time to position yourself for the next one.

That's the curse.

Competence should create leverage.

It should create opportunity.

It should expand your career.

It should never become a cage.

So if you're the person everybody calls when something absolutely, positively has to get done, congratulations.

That's a powerful reputation to have.

But you need to ask yourself a second question:

Is my competence moving my career forward—or simply making everybody else's job easier?

Because recognizing the curse of competence is only the beginning.

Breaking it requires an entirely different strategy.

CHAPTER 2

P.I.E.

Why Doing Your Job Well May Not Be Enough

Newsflash:

How well you do your job may have far less to do with your professional success than you think.

That statement bothers people.

It bothered me.

Most of us were raised believing that professional advancement followed a relatively simple formula:

Work hard.

Become exceptionally good at what you do.

Let your work speak for itself.

Get rewarded.

Sounds perfectly reasonable.

Unfortunately, organizations don't always work that way.

Harvey Coleman explains this reality through a framework called **P.I.E.—Performance, Image, and Exposure.**

The concept is simple:

Performance is what you actually do.

Image is what people think about you.

Exposure is who knows who you are and what you do.

Coleman's provocative weighting of those factors is what gets your attention:

Performance: 10%

Image: 30%

Exposure: 60%

Think about that for a moment.

According to this model, the thing most professionals spend almost all of their time worrying about—doing the actual job—represents only a fraction of the equation governing professional advancement.

Now think about what Black professionals have traditionally been taught.

Things you will probably never hear a White parent tell their children:

"Hard work is its own reward."

"You have to work twice as hard to get half as much."

"You can't do what those other kids can do."

Those messages come from love.

They're survival instructions.

Black parents have historically understood that their children may enter institutions where mistakes aren't judged equally and competence isn't automatically assumed. So the natural response is to emphasize performance.

Be better.

Work harder.

Know more.

Make fewer mistakes.

Give them absolutely no reason to question whether you belong there.

There's just one problem.

Performance alone isn't the organizational game.

Performance

Performance is the easiest part of P.I.E. to understand.

Can you do the job?

Do you deliver?

Are you technically competent?

Can people depend on you?

Those things absolutely matter. If you cannot perform, very little else will save you for long.

But Black professionals can fall into a trap here.

Because many of us have internalized the idea that undeniable performance will eventually force an organization to recognize us.

Sometimes it does.

Sometimes it doesn't.

You can become the hardest-working person in the department and remain the hardest-working person in the department for ten years.

Performance proves that you can do the job you already have.

It does not automatically convince people that you should receive the job you want next.

That's where the other pieces of P.I.E. enter the picture.

Image

Image is your professional reputation.

When your name comes up in a room you're not sitting in, what do people say?

That's your image.

Are you viewed as competent?

Reliable?

Strategic?

Difficult?

Innovative?

Negative?

Calm under pressure?

Leadership material?

Do people see you as someone who solves problems—or someone who merely identifies them?

Image doesn't necessarily mean reality.

That's precisely why it matters.

People make decisions based upon perception every day.

And for Black professionals, perception can become especially complicated because traditional standards of "professionalism" often reflect cultural expectations that were established long before we entered the workplace.

Communication style.

Clothing.

Hairstyles.

Confidence.

Assertiveness.

Even tone of voice.

Behaviors considered "leadership presence" in one employee can sometimes be interpreted differently in another.

You cannot control every perception people have of you.

But pretending those perceptions don't matter isn't a strategy.

Exposure

Then we get to the biggest piece of Coleman's model.

Exposure.

Who knows you?

Not who *knows of* you.

Who actually knows what you do?

Does your supervisor know your accomplishments?

Does your supervisor's boss?

Do leaders in other departments know you?

Have decision-makers seen you present?

Have they read something you've written?

Have you participated in high-visibility projects?

If someone mentioned your name during a succession-planning meeting tomorrow, how many people sitting at the table could say:

"Yes. I know them. They're good."

That's exposure.

And this is where the idea that your work should "speak for itself" becomes dangerous.

Your work cannot speak.

You have to make sure the right people know that the work happened—and that you were responsible for it.

I've participated in management discussions involving promotions and succession planning. Typically, somebody puts a candidate's name forward.

My first thought usually isn't:

"Can this person perform their current job?"

I generally assume they can. Otherwise, why are we discussing them?

Instead, my mind immediately starts searching for something else.

Do I know them?

Have I interacted with them?

Have I seen them brief?

Have I read their work?

Have other respected people talked about them?

In a nutshell:

Are they visible?

If the answer is no, that's a problem.

Not necessarily because the candidate lacks talent.

The people making the decision simply don't have enough information.

And therein lies one of the most important lessons in this entire book:

Being excellent and being known for excellence are not the same thing.

Black professionals are frequently taught how to achieve the first.

Far fewer of us are deliberately taught how to achieve the second.

So take a hard look at your career.

If Performance is only one piece of the equation, ask yourself:

Where are you spending 90 percent of your professional energy?

Because if your entire career strategy is "do great work and hope somebody notices," you may be playing only one-third of the game.

CHAPTER 3

Organizational Reconnaissance

Never Walk Into an Organization Blind

One of the most important things the military taught me was this:

Never enter unfamiliar territory without conducting reconnaissance.

You don't just walk into an environment and hope you figure things out once you get there.

You study the terrain.

You identify the key players.

You determine where decisions are made.

You look for threats.

You look for opportunities.

You figure out how things actually work.

Then you move.

Why should your professional career be any different?

Navigating organizational culture is one of the most underappreciated elements of career advancement. For Black professionals in particular, understanding how an organization really operates can mean the difference between simply having a job there and learning how to thrive there.

Every organization has an official structure.

Then it has the **real** structure.

Those two are not always the same.

There is an organizational chart telling you who technically has authority.

Then there are the people everyone actually listens to.

There are written policies.

Then there are unwritten rules.

There are stated corporate values.

Then there are the behaviors the organization actually rewards.

Your job is to figure out the difference.

That's organizational reconnaissance.

Culture Is How Things Get Done

When I talk about assessing office culture, I'm not talking about whether everybody wears jeans on Friday or what kind of snacks they keep in the break room.

I'm talking about understanding **how things get done**.

Who influences decisions?

How are disagreements handled?

Does the organization reward risk-taking or punish mistakes?

Who gets promoted?

Who gets high-visibility assignments?

What characteristics do successful leaders appear to have in common?

Who can walk into the boss's office without an appointment?

Whose email gets answered immediately?

Whose opinion can change the direction of a meeting?

Those things tell you considerably more about an organization than its mission statement.

Formal job titles do not always correspond to actual organizational power. If you pay close attention, you'll begin to identify the informal hierarchy.

And once you understand the informal hierarchy, the battlefield looks completely different.

I Treated a Job Interview Like an Intelligence Operation

A while back, shortly after completing graduate school, I applied for a position with Booz Allen Hamilton.

I wasn't too far removed from the military at the time, so I approached the interview exactly the way an intelligence officer might approach a new operational problem.

I made reconnaissance.

Remember BAMCIS?

Begin planning. Arrange for reconnaissance. Make reconnaissance.

I wasn't going into that interview cold.

I wanted an advantage.

So before I ever sat down in front of the interview panel, I started collecting information.

First, I researched the company itself.

Where was headquarters?

Who were the senior officers?

Who was the chairman?

Who was the CEO?

How had the company evolved from its founding to its current position?

What services did it provide?

Who were its major competitors?

Where did the company make money?

What did its compensation structure look like?

What kind of organization was I actually trying to join?

Most applicants prepare to answer interview questions.

I wanted to understand the battlefield on which those questions would be asked.

Then I started looking at the people.

One of the senior leaders at the time was a 24-year Naval Intelligence Officer.

Now my ears perked up.

I started researching his professional background and noticed that we had some common duty stations and experiences.

That mattered.

Why?

Because now I understood part of the professional language through which he viewed the world.

We had common reference points.

Common organizations.

Common experiences.

That gave me an opportunity to establish rapport that another applicant might never recognize existed.

That's reconnaissance.

I wasn't changing who I was to impress anybody.

I was identifying authentic points of connection that were already there.

Then I Turned the Lens Around

Good intelligence analysis never examines something from only one perspective.

So I didn't limit myself to what Booz Allen said about Booz Allen.

I looked at the workforce.

How large was it?

What did leadership look like?

What were the demographics?

What benefits did employees receive?

What kind of policies did the organization maintain?

What did outsiders say about working there?

Then I looked at the company from the perspective of its critics and competitors.

Where had it faced controversy?

What criticism had appeared publicly?

What potential weaknesses would someone on the outside identify?

Why do this before a job interview?

Because I wasn't merely trying to convince Booz Allen to hire me.

I was assessing Booz Allen too.

That's another mistake professionals make.

They enter interviews believing they're the only people being evaluated.

No.

You should be evaluating them just as aggressively.

Is this a place where you can succeed?

Does its culture align with how you operate?

Do people like you advance there?

What does the organization actually reward?

Remember: getting hired into the wrong organizational culture isn't necessarily a victory.

Know How the Other Side Is Going to Fight

During my reconnaissance, I also learned that the company used behavioral interviewing.

So what did I do?

I studied behavioral interviewing.

If I knew the interviewers were going to use a particular method, why would I wait until the interview to encounter it for the first time?

That's like knowing the other team runs a particular offense and refusing to watch game film.

I learned the STAR framework:

Situation. Task. Action. Result.

Now I knew the structure through which I needed to organize my experiences.

I wasn't going to walk into the room and try to remember a good story after somebody asked the question.

I wanted relevant examples already loaded.

Professional accomplishments.

Leadership challenges.

Problems I'd solved.

Situations that started badly but ended successfully.

Examples showing measurable impact.

The first time I heard the question wasn't going to be the first time I thought about the answer.

That's preparation.

That's reconnaissance.

And there's a larger lesson here that goes far beyond interviewing.

Whether you're joining a new company, moving into a new department, taking over a team, or trying to advance within an

organization you've worked in for years, you should constantly be collecting information.

Observe.

Listen.

Study.

Learn who has influence.

Learn what gets rewarded.

Learn what gets punished.

Learn which skills are becoming important.

Learn where the organization is going before everybody else figures out that it has moved.

Because your career does not exist on an empty playing field.

It exists inside an organizational environment with terrain, personalities, alliances, incentives, history, and culture.

And if you don't understand that terrain, someone else probably does.

Never enter the battlespace blind.

The question is not simply whether you can do the job.

The question is whether you understand the environment well enough to position yourself to succeed once you're there.

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

You've Seen the Terrain. Now Build the Playbook.

These three chapters introduce only part of the inside game. Leadership from the Helm goes deeper into the unwritten rules that shape careers: meritocracy and bias, visibility, sponsorship, personal branding, organizational culture, resilience, strategic career movement, and knowing when it is time to change course.

The central idea is simple: performance gets you noticed. Strategy moves you forward.

Use what you have read here as a diagnostic. Where are you indispensable but invisible? What does your professional image communicate when you are not in the room? Who knows the value you create? What have you learned about the real culture of the organization around you?

Your next move should not be accidental.

EXPLORE THE FULL BOOK
www.keithlmajor.com