

# The Captain's Playbook: Team Leads

THE 50 FACTOR — GROWTH FACTOR #37

## The Captain's Playbook: Developing Your Most Important Leaders

The Complete Implementation Guide

BY SCOTT SCULLY



## Growth Factor #37: The Captain's Playbook: Developing Your Most Important Leaders

### The Complete Implementation Guide

*This white paper is a companion to Chapter 37 of The 50 Factor by Scott Scully.*

### Why This Growth Factor Matters

A founder sat in his office staring at an org chart that looked nothing like the one he'd drawn eighteen months ago. Ninety-one employees. Five delivery pods. Two sales teams. Marketing. Client success. Operations. Finance. HR. And beneath every department head, a layer of people he was starting to realize mattered more than anyone else in the company.

Team leads. Pod leads. Captains. Whatever you called them — the people who ran teams of five to eight, who held the daily huddles and the weekly 1:1s, who delivered the recognition and the feedback, who determined what it actually felt like to work at the company on a Tuesday afternoon.

Not the CEO. Not the VPs. The captains.

When people leave a company, they're usually leaving their captain, not the company. The captain determines whether a team member feels coached or ignored, recognized or invisible, supported or abandoned. A great captain with a mediocre strategy outperforms a mediocre captain with a great strategy — because strategy is executed through people, and people perform through the relationship with their direct leader.

Developing captains isn't optional. It's the highest-leverage leadership investment you'll make — because every improvement in captain quality propagates immediately to 5-15 people on their team.

# The Six Captain Skills

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## Skill 1: Running Effective 1:1s

Structured, weekly, 30 minutes. Using the MAP format (Principle #18). The captain's 1:1 quality is the #1 predictor of team performance — teams whose captains run consistent, structured 1:1s outperform those who don't by 35%.

## Skill 2: Giving Feedback in Real Time

Within 24 hours. Behavior-focused, not person-focused. Future-oriented ("next time, try X") not backward-looking ("you should have done X"). Three sentences maximum. The captain who gives daily feedback builds skills 5x faster than the captain who waits for the quarterly review.

## Skill 3: Coaching to the Scorecard

Using A-Player Scores (Principle #6) and quality scores (Principle #5) as coaching tools, not weapons. "Your conversations metric dropped this week. What happened? What can we adjust?" The score creates objectivity. The coaching creates growth.

## Skill 4: Running the Huddle

5-15 minutes. Daily or weekly depending on the function. Three questions: what did you accomplish, what are you focused on today, what's blocking you. The captain keeps it tight — no tangents, no deep dives, no lectures. Blockers go to follow-up conversations.

## Skill 5: Recognizing Daily

Specific, timely, public. Person + Action + Impact (Principle #1). Measured as part of the captain's own scorecard. Minimum 4 recognitions per week. The captain who recognizes daily builds a team that stays.

## Skill 6: Escalating Properly

Knowing what to handle independently vs. what to escalate. Clear authority boundaries (from the Decision Map, Principle #21). The captain who escalates everything is a traffic cop. The captain who handles everything is a maverick. The captain who knows the line is a leader.

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# The Four Development Mechanisms

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**Monthly captain cohort:** 90 minutes, all captains together, one skill focus per session. Not a lecture — practice. Role-play 1:1s. Practice giving feedback. Run mock huddles. Score each other's recognition posts. Skill-building through repetition.

**Peer coaching pairs:** One strong captain paired with one developing captain. Biweekly 30-minute conversations. "How did your 1:1s go? What was hard? What worked?" Peer learning is often more effective than top-down training because it's judgment-free.

**Captain scorecard:** Track the behaviors that matter: 1:1 completion rate, feedback frequency, huddle consistency, recognition count, team quality score trends, team retention. The scorecard tells you which captains are developing and which need intervention.

**Quarterly skip-level 1:1s:** Department head or CEO meets directly with the captain's reports — bypassing the captain for ground truth. "How's your experience with your captain? What's working? What could be better?" This surfaces coaching opportunities that the captain can't see from inside the relationship.

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# Quick-Start Checklist

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✓ ☐ Read the full white paper

- ✓ ☐ Identify the most relevant action items for your stage
  - ✓ ☐ Pick the single most impactful first move and implement it this week
  - ✓ ☐ Review progress in your next leadership meeting
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*This is Growth Factor #37 of 50. Part IV: The Machine (\$25M-\$50M).*

*Get the book: The 50 Factor by Scott Scully*

## The Four Development Mechanisms

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### Monthly Captain Cohort

90 minutes, all captains together, one skill focus per session. Not a lecture — practice. Role-play 1:1s. Practice giving feedback. Run mock huddles. Score each other's recognition posts. Skill-building through repetition. Rotate through all six skills over 6 months, then repeat.

### Peer Coaching Pairs

One strong captain paired with one developing captain. Biweekly 30-minute conversations. "How did your 1:1s go? What was hard? What worked?" Peer learning is often more effective than top-down training because it's judgment-free and grounded in shared experience.

### Captain Scorecard

Track the behaviors that predict team performance: 1:1 completion rate (100% target — zero cancellations), real-time feedback frequency (daily during ramp, weekly at steady state), huddle consistency, recognition count (minimum 4 per week), and team quality score trends.

### Quarterly Skip-Level 1:1s

Department head or CEO meets directly with the captain's reports — bypassing the captain for ground truth. "How's your experience with your captain? What's working? What could be better?" This surfaces coaching opportunities that the captain can't see from inside the relationship.

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## The Data

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The #1 predictor of team performance is captain 1:1 consistency — teams whose captains run consistent, structured 1:1s outperform those who don't by 35%. The #2 predictor is real-time feedback frequency — 22% performance gap. Everything else is noise. Focus development on these two skills first.

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## Warning Signs Your Captains Need Development

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- 1:1s are inconsistent or feel like status updates, not coaching conversations.
- Feedback reaches team members quarterly, not weekly.
- Huddles are skipped, too long, or turn into lectures.
- New captains are "figuring it out" with no structured support.
- Team performance varies wildly between captains with similar tools and playbooks.

## The 35% Performance Gap

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The data is clear and consistent: the #1 predictor of team performance is captain 1:1 consistency. Teams whose captains run structured, weekly 1:1s outperform teams whose captains run inconsistent or unstructured 1:1s by 35%. Not 5%. Not 10%. Thirty-five percent.

The #2 predictor is real-time feedback frequency — teams whose captains give feedback within 24 hours outperform teams whose captains wait for weekly or monthly reviews by 22%.

Everything else — the tools, the technology, the office layout, the compensation structure — is noise compared to these two factors. If you could only develop two skills in your captains, develop 1:1 consistency and real-time feedback. Everything else is optimization. These two are foundation.

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## The Monthly Captain Cohort: How It Works

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90 minutes. All captains together. One skill focus per session. Six-month rotation through all six skills:

**Month 1: Running 1:1s.** Role-play a full MAP-format 1:1 (Principle #18). One captain plays the manager, another plays the direct report. The rest observe and give feedback. Practice the hard parts: the P section, the defensive response trap, the follow-through.

**Month 2: Real-time feedback.** Practice giving behavior-focused, future-oriented feedback in 3 sentences. Present scenarios ("your team member showed up late to a client call"). Each captain delivers their feedback. Group discusses what worked.

**Month 3: Coaching to the scorecard.** Bring a real scorecard with a real dip. Practice the coaching conversation: "Your conversations metric dropped this week. Walk me through what happened." The captain learns to use the score as a conversation starter, not a judgment.

**Month 4: Running the huddle.** Simulate a 10-minute daily huddle. One captain facilitates while others play team members — including one who rambles and one who has nothing to share. Practice keeping it tight.

**Month 5: Daily recognition.** Each captain writes 3 recognition posts live in the session. Group scores them for specificity (Person + Action + Impact). Rewrite the weak ones together.

**Month 6: Escalation judgment.** Present 10 scenarios. For each one: handle it yourself or escalate? The group discusses the gray areas. The Decision Map from Principle #21 provides the framework.

After six months, restart. The repetition matters — the second time through each skill is deeper because the captains have been practicing between sessions.

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## The Captain Scorecard

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What gets measured gets done. Track the behaviors that predict team performance:

- **1:1 completion rate.** Target: 100%. Zero cancellations. Rescheduled within the same week if a conflict arises.
- **Real-time feedback frequency.** Target: daily during ramp (Phase 2 of Principle #39), weekly at steady state.
- **Huddle consistency.** Target: 5 huddles per week for daily-huddle teams, 1 per week for weekly-huddle teams.
- **Recognition count.** Target: minimum 4 public recognitions per week, using Person + Action + Impact.
- **Team quality score trend.** Not the absolute number — the trend. Is quality improving, holding, or declining under this captain?
- **Team retention.** 90-day voluntary turnover on the captain's team. The captain who loses people is the captain who needs development (or replacement).

Review the captain scorecard monthly in the skip-level 1:1 or in the department head's review. The scorecard turns captain development from "I think they're doing okay" into "here are the specific metrics that show where they're strong and where they need coaching."

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## When a Captain Isn't Working

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Not every captain will develop. The monthly cohort, the peer coaching, and the scorecard will identify who's growing and who's plateauing. For the captains who aren't developing:

**First:** Coach directly. Use the accountability framework from Principle #2. Name the gap. Offer support. Set a timeline.

**Second:** If coaching doesn't work after 60-90 days, consider whether the person is in the right role. Not every strong IC is a strong captain. Some of your best individual contributors will make mediocre managers — not because they lack ability, but because the skills that made them great ICs (deep focus, independent execution, technical mastery) are different from the skills that make great captains (coaching, communication, emotional intelligence).

**Third:** If the fit is wrong, move them back to an IC role with dignity — using the framework from Principle #43. The team will be better served by a captain who's developing, even if they're less technically skilled, than by a reluctant captain who's going through the motions.

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## Quick-Start Checklist

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- ✓ ☐ Audit your current captains on the six skills (self-assessment + manager assessment)
  - ✓ ☐ Launch the monthly captain cohort — schedule the first 6 sessions with skill assignments
  - ✓ ☐ Pair captains for peer coaching (one strong + one developing, biweekly 30 minutes)
  - ✓ ☐ Build the captain scorecard: 1:1 completion, feedback frequency, huddle consistency, recognition, quality trend, retention
  - ✓ ☐ Start quarterly skip-level 1:1s: CEO or department head meets directly with the captain's reports
  - ✓ ☐ Identify captains who need development and start coaching immediately
  - ✓ ☐ After 6 months: evaluate which captains have grown and which need a different role
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## Implementation Tools

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Ready-to-use templates for this Growth Factor

PDF

### Captain Skills Assessment

Self-assessment and manager assessment across all six skills

PDF

### Monthly Cohort Session Plans

Detailed agendas for all 6 monthly skill sessions

XLSX

### Captain Scorecard Template

Columns: Dimension, Weight, Interviewer 1, Interviewer 2, Interviewer 3, Avg, +1 more

PDF

### Peer Coaching Conversation Guide

Biweekly format with reflection questions

PDF

### Skip-Level 1:1 Question Guide

Questions to ask the captain's direct reports

The captain investment compounds over time. A captain who's been developing for 12 months through monthly cohorts, peer coaching, and scorecard feedback operates at a fundamentally different level than a captain who was promoted and left to figure it out. After two years of development, your best captains are ready for the next level — director roles, department leadership, cross-functional management. The captain pipeline becomes your leadership pipeline, producing internally-promoted leaders who arrive in senior roles with credibility, cultural fluency, and proven management skills (Principle #22).

## The Most Leveraged Investment

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Captain development is the most leveraged leadership investment because captains touch more people more frequently than any other level of management. A CEO's 1:1s reach 5-8 people. A VP's 1:1s reach 8-12. A captain's 1:1s plus daily huddles plus daily feedback plus recognition reach 5-15 people every single day.

When a captain improves — runs better 1:1s, gives more specific feedback, recognizes more consistently — the improvement propagates to everyone on their team immediately. One captain development session that improves their feedback quality produces measurable performance gains across 5-15 people within 30 days. No other leadership investment produces returns at that speed and scale.

The companies with the strongest cultures at OM are the companies that invested in captain development at 5M. The captains they developed became the directors and VPs who carry the culture forward. The investment compounds across careers, not just quarters.