

DESIGN YOURSELF OUT

**Why Structure Scales
What Hard Work Can't
in the Green Industry**

PAUL LUKERT

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WHY STRUCTURE SCALES WHAT HARD WORK
CAN'T IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY

PAUL LUKERT

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CHAPTER ONE

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THE \$6M CEILING

THE PHONE THAT NEVER STOPS RINGING

“The first time someone told me I was the problem with my own company; I almost fired them. Turns out they were the only person telling me the truth.”

- Owner of a \$7M landscape company, two years after breaking through

Let me describe your Tuesday morning and tell me if I’m close.

It’s 6:47 AM. You haven’t finished your coffee. Your phone has already buzzed eleven times. Your ops manager wants to know if they should move the Henderson crew to the commercial job on Route 9 because rain is forecast for Thursday. Your account manager is asking whether to match a competitor’s bid on a renewal. A crew leader texted a photo of a busted mower deck with a question mark and nothing else. No words, just a photo and a question mark, like some kind of landscaping riddle.

You answer all three before you’ve put on your boots.

By 9 AM, you’ve made fourteen decisions. By lunch, twenty-six. By the time you finally sit down to work on the business (the strategic stuff, the growth planning, the reason you started this company in the first place), it’s 7 PM, and you’re running on fumes and whatever gas station sandwich you grabbed between site visits.

Here's what nobody tells you: this isn't a time management problem. It's not a delegation problem. It's not even a people problem. It's an infrastructure problem. And it's the reason your company has been hovering around the same revenue number for the last two or three years, give or take a good snow season.

Welcome to the ceiling. You built it yourself, one answered question at a time.

The Plateau Pattern: \$3M, \$6M, and the Graveyard at \$10M

Every landscape company hits walls. Not market walls or talent walls. Structural walls. And they show up at predictable revenue levels like clockwork. I've seen it dozens of times for the past thirty years in this industry, and the pattern is so consistent it's almost boring. Almost.

The \$3M Wall: The Solo Pilot Problem

At \$3M, you're usually running three to five crews (or more in maintenance-heavy operations). You probably know every client by name. You're selling, scheduling, managing, and occasionally still jumping on a mower or a skid steer, because honestly, it's faster if you just do it yourself. Your brain is the org chart, the CRM, the operations manual, and the employee handbook all rolled into one.

This works. Until it doesn't.

At \$3M, you hit the limit of what one brain can coordinate. Adding a sixth crew doesn't just add 20% more work. It adds exponential complexity. Scheduling conflicts multiply. Client communication gaps appear. Things start falling through cracks you didn't even know existed. So, you hire an ops manager or a foreman, and for about four months, you feel like a genius. Then you realize they come to you for every decision anyway, and now you're managing the manager while still managing everything else.

You didn't add capacity. You added a layer between yourself and the same bottleneck.

The \$6M Wall: The Delegation Mirage

Companies that push through \$3M often stall again around \$6M. At this point, you've got a real team. Maybe an ops manager, a couple of account managers, and eight to twelve crews. On paper, it looks like a real company. You've got titles and roles and maybe even an organizational chart pinned to the wall in your office.

But here's the dirty secret: the org chart is decorative. When the account manager has an upset client, who do they call? You. When the ops manager isn't sure whether to rent a skid steer or buy a used one, who decides? You. When a crew leader wants to know if overtime is approved for a job that's running behind, who gets the text?

You. Always you.

I call this the Delegation Mirage. You've technically delegated tasks, but you haven't delegated decisions. Your people have titles and responsibilities, but they don't have authority. They have jobs but no decision-making rights. And there's an enormous difference between the two.

Think of it this way: you gave your ops manager the steering wheel, but you kept the keys in your pocket. Every time they need to actually go somewhere, they have to come find you first.

The \$10M Graveyard: Where Good Companies Go to Stall

If you're lucky and stubborn enough to push through \$6M, the wall at \$10M is where things get genuinely dangerous. At this scale, you're typically running multiple divisions. Maybe maintenance, construction, and irrigation. You might have twenty-plus crews, a back office, a fleet, and a real payroll.

The math gets ruthless. At \$10M with 80 to 100 employees, if each person wastes just 27 minutes a day waiting for a decision, looking for an answer, or redoing something because nobody was clear on the standard, that's over 36,000 hours of lost productivity per year. At an average cost of \$35 per hour, that's \$1.26 million evaporating into thin air. Every year. On decisions that should have been made at 7 AM by the person standing in front of the problem.

I'll break that 27-minute number down in detail in Chapter 2. For now, just let it sit there and make you uncomfortable.

Companies at \$10M also face what I call the Complexity Cliff. Below \$10M, you can compensate for bad infrastructure with hustle. You can outwork the disorganization. Above \$10M, the physics change. The owner literally cannot be in enough places, make enough decisions, or hold enough context in their head to keep the machine running through sheer willpower. Something must give, and usually it's quality, margin, or the owner's health. Sometimes all three.

It's Not What You Think It Is

When owners hit these walls, they almost always diagnose the wrong problem. I've heard every version:

- "I just can't find good people."
- "The labor market is impossible right now."
- "We need better software."
- "I need to work on my leadership skills."
- "We just need to push harder this season."

None of these is the real problem. They're symptoms. Every single one.

Let me tell you about a company I have worked with. I'll call them GreenLine Landscapes. When I first met the owner, let's call him Dave, he was running a \$5.8M operation with 65 employees. Good reputation, solid client base, nice equipment. On the surface, a healthy company.

Dave was working 70 hour weeks and hadn't taken a real vacation in three years. His ops manager, who was talented and experienced, had "manager" in his title but functioned more like a very expensive relay switch. Information went in, information went to Dave, decisions came back from

Dave, information went out. The ops manager was basically a human email forward.

Dave had hired well. His people weren't the problem. His market wasn't the problem. His pricing was fine. His equipment was good. The problem was that nobody in his entire organization, from the account managers to the crew leaders to the ops manager himself, knew what they were allowed to decide on their own.

Not because Dave was a control freak. He wasn't. He'd have loved for people to make more decisions. He said so constantly. He'd tell his ops manager, "Just handle it!" But "handle it" without decision criteria is like telling someone to "drive somewhere nice" without giving them a destination. Sure, they could go somewhere. But they're not going to risk picking the wrong place, so they come back and ask you where you want to go.

Dave didn't have a people problem. He had a decision rights problem. He had never defined, in clear and specific terms, which decisions belonged to which roles, what criteria should guide those decisions, and what the boundaries of "good enough" looked like.

So, everything flowed uphill to Dave. Every. Single. Day.

The Word Nobody Wants to Hear

I'm going to use a word that makes most landscape company owners' eyes glaze over:

Infrastructure.

I get it. It sounds like something a consultant says right before handing you a \$50,000 invoice and a binder you'll never open. It sounds corporate and boring and completely disconnected from the reality of running crews, managing routes, and dealing with a client who's furious because someone scalped their front lawn.

But infrastructure is just a fancy way of saying "the invisible stuff that makes the visible stuff work." Your truck runs because of an engine you never see.

Your phone works because of networks you never think about. Your company should work the same way. Decisions are getting made, problems are getting solved, quality is being maintained, all without you personally touching every piece.

The kind of infrastructure I'm talking about isn't software. It's not an app. It's not a new CRM or a project management tool or whatever AI solution someone's trying to sell you at the next trade show. Those things are useful, but they're tools. And tools without a framework are just expensive shelf decorations.

The infrastructure that breaks through ceilings is clarity about decision rights. It's a simple, documented, trained answer to one question that gets asked a thousand times a day across your organization:

Who decides this, and based on what criteria?

That's it. That's the whole game. When every person in your company knows what they own, what they escalate, and what "good" looks like, you stop being the bottleneck and start being the leader. Your phone stops buzzing at 6:47 AM. Your ops manager starts operating. Your crew leaders start leading.

And your company starts growing past whatever ceiling it's stuck under.

Are You the Ceiling? (A Ruthlessly Honest Self-Assessment)

Before we go any further, let's figure out where you truly stand. Answer these ten questions honestly. Nobody's grading you. This is between you and whatever's left of your coffee.

If you disappeared for two weeks, what would happen?

1. Operations run smoothly. No disruption.
2. Minor hiccups, but nothing significant.
3. Several issues surface, but the team manages.
4. Daily calls and escalations.

5. Things stall or spiral quickly.

How many decisions hit your phone daily that someone else should own?

1. Almost none.

2. A few minor ones.

3. 5–10 per day.

4. 10–20 per day.

5. Constant interruptions all day long.

Are decision thresholds clearly documented?

1. Yes. Dollar limits and authority levels are written and known.

2. Mostly documented, minor gray areas.

3. Some verbal clarity, not formalized.

4. Vague. It depends on the situation.

5. No defined thresholds. Everything comes to me.

When problems escalate, why?

1. They are truly strategic or high-risk.

2. Mostly strategic, occasional clarity gap.

3. About half are avoidable.

4. Most are due to unclear authority.

5. Nearly all are because no one knows the rules.

Could your ops manager explain your standards without you present?

1. Clearly and confidently.

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2. Mostly, with minor uncertainty.
3. Partially.
4. Only in limited areas.
5. No. They rely on you for judgment.

When margins dip, can you trace it to behavior?

1. Yes. We track decision behavior and KPIs.
2. Usually.
3. Sometimes, after digging.
4. Rarely.
5. We find out too late.

Are you the default problem-solver?

1. Rarely. The system handles most issues.
2. Occasionally.
3. Often.
4. Almost always.
5. Always. Everything routes through me.

Why do people escalate decisions?

1. Clear authority and strong confidence.
2. Authority clear, confidence improving.
3. Mixed clarity.
4. Authority unclear.

5. Both authority and confidence are unclear.

How many hours per week do you spend on decisions someone else should make?

1. 0–3 hours.
2. 3–5 hours.
3. 5–10 hours.
4. 10–20 hours.
5. 20+ hours.

If growth stalled tomorrow, what would be the real reason?

1. Market conditions or capacity strategy.
2. Some market, some internal.
3. Execution inconsistency.
4. Leadership bottlenecks.
5. Everything still flows through me.

Scoring

10 to 20: You're in good shape. You've probably already built some version of decision rights, even if you didn't call it that. This book will help you formalize and scale what's already working.

21 to 35: You're at the tipping point. You've got some infrastructure, but the cracks are showing. You can feel the ceiling above you. This book is exactly what you need right now, before those cracks become craters.

36 to 50: You are the ceiling. I don't say that to be harsh. I say it because I've been there, and I've watched dozens of owners in your exact position. The good news? The fix is clear, it's concrete, and it doesn't require blowing up

your company. It requires building the infrastructure that should have been there three revenue milestones ago.

Whatever you scored, here's what I want you to understand: this isn't a character flaw. Being the bottleneck isn't a sign of poor leadership. It's the natural consequence of building a company the way every landscape owner builds a company. By being the hardest worker in the room, saying yes to everything, and solving every problem through sheer force of will. That approach got you to where you are. It just can't get you to where you want to go.

What This Book Will Do For You

This book is not a manifesto. It's not a memoir. It's not going to spend 200 pages inspiring you to "work on your business, not in it" and then leave you wondering how.

This is a playbook. A field guide. A tactical manual for building the decision rights infrastructure that lets your company operate and grow without you in the middle of every conversation.

Here's what you're going to walk away with:

A clear framework for identifying which decisions belong to which roles in your company

Fifteen ready-to-use decision rights templates built specifically for landscape operations. Not generic business concepts translated to your industry, but scenarios you face every week.

Role-specific playbooks for crew leaders, ops managers, account managers, and branch managers that you can hand them on Monday morning

A 90-day implementation roadmap that tells you exactly what to do in what order, including how to handle the resistance you'll inevitably get

Math. Real numbers show you exactly how much organizational ambiguity is costing you, so you can stop guessing and start fixing.

In Chapter 2, we're going to dig into the 27 Minute Problem and put a dollar figure on the chaos. You're going to see exactly what unclear decision rights cost your company every single day. Fair warning: you might need something stronger than coffee for that one.

But first, do me a favor. Go back to that self-assessment. Look at your score. And ask yourself one question:

If I got hit by a bus tomorrow, or better yet, if I just wanted to take my family to Hawaii for three weeks, would my company run without me?

If the honest answer is no, you're in the right place. Let's build something that changes that answer.

CHAPTER TWO



THE 27-MINUTE PROBLEM

THE MOST EXPENSIVE THING YOU CAN'T SEE

“We don’t have a revenue problem. We have a leaking bucket problem. And the holes are invisible.”

-Owner of a \$9M landscape company, after completing a
decision audit

If I walked into your shop right now and stole \$4,700 out of the cash register, you’d notice. You’d call the police. You’d probably install cameras by the end of the week.

But that’s roughly what organizational ambiguity is stealing from you every single day. And you don’t notice because it doesn’t look like theft. It looks like normal operations. It looks like your crew leader is waiting in a parking lot for a callback. It looks like your ops manager is walking down the hall to ask you a question he should already know the answer to. It looks like a job that takes six hours instead of five because nobody was sure whose call it was to make a change.

It doesn’t feel like bleeding money. It feels like Tuesday.

In this chapter, I’m going to show you exactly how much this is costing you. Not in theory, not in vague business school concepts, but in dollars. Real, calculable, checkbook dollars that you could redirect to growth, to equipment, to better pay for your best people, or to your own pocket. By the

end of this chapter, you'll have a number. Your number. And I'll bet you it's a lot bigger than you think.

Where 27 Minutes Comes From

Let me be upfront: 27 minutes is not a number I pulled from thin air. It's a conservative composite based on what I've observed across dozens of landscape operations over thirty years. And here's what's important: it's not 27 minutes of someone sitting in a chair doing nothing. It's scattered across the day in small, almost invisible chunks that nobody tracks and nobody questions.

Here's how it typically breaks down:

The Waiting Tax (8 to 12 minutes per day)

This is the time your people spend waiting for answers they shouldn't need to wait for. The crew leader who texts you at 6:30 AM about a schedule change and doesn't hear back until 7:15. The account manager who needs pricing approval, but you're in the truck between sites. The ops manager who has three decisions stacked up, but you're on a call with a client.

Your people aren't lazy during these gaps. They're doing other things. But the thing that needed to happen isn't happening. And every minute of waiting creates a ripple. A crew that should have left at 7:00 leaves at 7:15. Fifteen minutes times four guys on the crew times five days a week. It adds up fast.

The Confusion Tax (6 to 10 minutes per day)

This is time spent figuring out what to do when the answer isn't clear. A crew shows up to a job, and the scope has changed, but nobody communicated it. An account manager gets a complaint and isn't sure if they can offer a discount or if they need to check first. A crew leader sees a safety issue but doesn't know if he has the authority to stop work or if that's going to get him in trouble.

The confusion tax is sneaky because it doesn't look like confusion. It looks like caution. It looks like your people are being "careful." But what they're really

doing is protecting themselves from making a decision that might be wrong, because nobody ever told them what “right” looks like.

The Rework Tax (5 to 8 minutes per day)

This is time spent fixing things that were done wrong because the standard wasn't clear. And I don't mean your people did bad work. I mean, they made a judgment call, did what they thought was right, and it turned out you wanted something different. So, it gets redone.

The classic example: a crew leader decides to skip edging on a property because they're running behind. It makes sense to him. He's trying to stay on schedule. Then the account manager drives the property, sees it, and sends the crew back. Two hours of rework that could have been avoided with one simple rule: edging is never optional on a full-service contract. Period.

Or the ops manager approves a subcontractor for a job, picks someone based on availability, and you find out later that the pricing was \$2,000 more than your preferred vendor. It wasn't a mistake. It was an information gap dressed up as a decision.

The Hesitation Tax (3 to 5 minutes per day)

This one is the hardest to see, but it might be the most expensive. It's the time your people spend doing nothing because they've learned that taking initiative can backfire. They've been burned before. They made a call, it was the wrong call (in your eyes), and they got corrected. So now they wait. They check. They ask.

The hesitation tax is the organizational equivalent of a dog that's been shocked by an invisible fence. They don't know exactly where the boundary is, so they stop well short of it. Your best people start playing it safe. And playing it safe in a landscape operation means playing it slow.

Add it all up: 8 to 12 minutes waiting. 6 to 10 confused. 5 to 8 redoing. 3 to 5 hesitating. That's 22 to 35 minutes per person per day, with 27 as a reasonable

midpoint. And I'll say it again: that's conservative. In companies with no decision rights infrastructure at all, I've seen it north of 45 minutes.

Let's Do the Math (This Is Going to Hurt)

I promised you a number. Let's build one.

Here's the formula. It's not complicated, which is part of what makes it so painful:

THE 27-MINUTE COST FORMULA

Number of employees × 27 minutes per day × working days per year × average cost per minute = Annual Cost of Ambiguity

Average cost per minute = (average hourly labor cost including burden) ÷ 60

"Burden" includes wages, payroll taxes, workers' comp, health insurance, and other employment costs. For most landscape companies, labor burden costs run 1.25x to 1.4x the base wage.

Now let's plug in some real numbers across different company sizes:

If you're running a \$6M company with 65 employees, organizational ambiguity is costing you roughly \$225,000 per year. That's not a rounding error. That's a branch manager's salary, then some. That's three new trucks. That's the difference between an 8% net margin and a 12% net margin.

And if you're at \$10M? You're looking at \$378,000 per year. Walking out the door. Invisibly. While you're busy answering the phone for the fourteenth time before lunch.

Now here's the part that really stings: these numbers assume everyone in your company loses 27 minutes. In reality, the loss isn't distributed evenly. Your most expensive people (account managers, ops managers, project managers) are often the ones losing the most time because they're the ones most frequently stuck in the decision queue. So, the actual cost per wasted minute is higher for the roles that hurt the most.

The Costs That Don't Show Up in the Formula

The 27-minute math is damning enough. But it only captures the direct cost of wasted time. There are at least four other costs that the formula doesn't touch, and every one of them is real.

The Turnover Cost

Good people leave organizations where they feel powerless. Not always loudly. Not always dramatically. They just start looking. When a talented ops manager or a strong crew leader realizes they have responsibility without authority, that their title is decorative, and their judgment doesn't matter, they check out emotionally long before they check out physically.

Replacing a crew leader costs you roughly \$8,000 to \$12,000 when you factor in recruiting, training, lost productivity during the ramp-up, and the quality dips that always come with a new person learning your clients' properties. Replacing an ops manager or account manager? \$15,000 to \$25,000 or more. And that doesn't include the institutional knowledge that leaves with them.

I've watched companies lose their best people and blame it on the labor market. "Nobody wants to work anymore." Maybe. Or maybe your best people want to work somewhere they're trusted to make decisions.

The Opportunity Cost

Every hour you spend answering questions your team should handle is an hour you're not spending on growth. You're not meeting with that potential client. You're not negotiating that equipment deal. You're not building a relationship with the property manager who controls \$400,000 in contracts.

I once asked a landscape owner to track his time for one week. Not roughly. Actually track it in fifteen-minute increments. At the end of the week, he found that he'd spent 22 hours on decisions that should have been made by someone else. Twenty-two hours. That's almost three full working days. In one week. Spent on things like approving overtime, deciding whether to send

a crew back to redo a mulch bed, and confirming which truck to assign to a new project.

What would you do with 22 extra hours a week? I'm guessing you wouldn't spend them approving purchase orders.

The Quality Cost

When your people are hesitant or confused, quality suffers. Not because they don't care, but because ambiguity breeds inconsistency. One crew leader makes the call to go above and beyond on a problem property. Another crew leader on the same account plays it safe and does the minimum. The client gets two different experiences and wonders why the service is inconsistent.

Quality issues lead to client complaints. Client complaints lead to concessions, credits, and sometimes lost accounts. Every account you lose because of inconsistent service is a direct, traceable cost of not having clear decision standards. But it never shows up as a line item labeled "lost due to ambiguity." It just shows up as churn. And you blame the market, or the client, or the crew.

The Growth Ceiling Cost

This is the big one, and it circles back to Chapter 1. Every dollar your company doesn't earn because it can't scale past the owner's capacity is a cost. It's invisible because it's a negative: revenue you never generated, clients you never landed, markets you never entered.

If your company has been stuck between \$5M and \$7M for three years, and you believe the market could support \$10M or more, then the difference between where you are and where you could be is the growth ceiling cost. For many of the owners I work with, that number is measured in the millions. Not thousands. Millions in revenue they're leaving on the table because their infrastructure can't keep up with the growth their market is driving.

A Tale of Two Companies

Let me give you a picture of what this looks like in practice. Two landscape companies, same metro area, same services, roughly the same revenue. Around \$6M each. But radically different results.

Company A: Precision Landscapes

The owner of Precision Landscapes (not the real name, but the real story) was working 65 hours a week. His phone was the central nervous system of the entire operation.

Nothing meaningful happened without his input. His ops manager called him the “Human Router” behind his back, and honestly, it was an accurate description.

Margins were thin. Turnover was high. The company had been stuck between \$5.5M and \$6.2M for four years. He’d tried adding salespeople. He’d tried new software. He’d tried a leadership retreat (his words: “four thousand dollars for a ropes course and trust falls”). Nothing moved the needle because the core problem was untouched: nobody in the company knew what they were allowed to decide without calling the boss.

When we ran the numbers, organizational ambiguity was costing Precision roughly

\$210,000 a year in direct productivity loss. Add in the turnover costs (they’d lost three crew leaders and an account manager in the previous eighteen months) and the opportunity cost of the owner’s time, and the real number was closer to \$400,000.

Company B: Ridgeline Property Services

Ridgeline (also not the real name) was run by an owner who, almost by accident, had built a basic version of decision rights. She’d come from a hospitality management background before entering the landscape industry, and she brought with her a simple habit: every time someone asked her a question, she’d answer it, then write down the rule so nobody had to ask again.

Over three years, she'd built a growing collection of "if this, then that" guidelines. It wasn't fancy. It lived in a shared Google Doc that was frankly a mess. But it existed, and her team used it. Her crew leaders knew they could approve overtime for up to two hours without calling anyone. Her account managers knew they could offer a service credit up to \$200 for a legitimate complaint. Her ops manager knew the budget thresholds for equipment decisions.

The result? Ridgeline was running at roughly the same revenue as Precision, but the owner was working 45 hours a week. Turnover was half of Precision's. Margins were three points higher. And here's the kicker: Ridgeline grew to \$8.5M the following year while Precision stayed flat.

Same market. Same labor pool. Same types of clients. Completely different infrastructure. Completely different outcomes.

Calculate Your Number

I've shown you the formula, the table, and the stories. Now it's your turn. I want you to calculate your company's annual cost of ambiguity. Don't overthink it. Use the best numbers you have. This doesn't need to be audited. It just needs to be honest.

YOUR COST OF AMBIGUITY WORKSHEET

- Step 1: How many total employees do you have?
- Step 2: What is your average burdened hourly labor cost?
 - (If you're not sure, take your average wage and multiply by 1.3.)
- Step 3: Multiply:
 - $\text{Employees} \times 27 \text{ minutes} \times 250 \text{ working days} = \text{total wasted minutes per year}$
 - $\text{Total wasted minutes} \div 60 = \text{total wasted hours per year}$
 - $\text{Total wasted hours} \times \text{burdened hourly rate} = \text{YOUR ANNUAL}$

COST OF AMBIGUITY

- Step 4: Write that number down.
- Step 5: Now answer honestly:

What would you do with that money if you could recover even half of it?

If you want a shortcut, here's the quick version: take your employee count, multiply by \$3,500, and you'll be in the right neighborhood. Fifty employees? Roughly \$175,000. A hundred employees? Roughly \$350,000. It's not precise, but it's close enough to make the point.

Why This Matters More in 2026 Than Ever Before

You might be reading this and thinking, "Okay, so I'm losing money to ambiguity. But I've always been losing money to ambiguity. We're doing fine. Why should I care now?"

Because the margin for error is shrinking. Fast.

Five years ago, you could absorb \$200,000 in hidden waste because margins were healthier, labor was more available, and clients weren't as price sensitive. The math forgave sloppiness. Not anymore.

Material costs are elevated and are not coming back down. Insurance premiums have climbed for three consecutive years. The labor pool is tighter than it's been in two decades because you're not just competing with other landscape companies for workers. You're competing with Amazon warehouses, UPS delivery routes, and construction companies that can offer climate-controlled work for comparable pay.

In this environment, the companies that win are the ones that squeeze waste out of their operations. Not by working people harder, not by cutting corners on quality, but by eliminating the organizational friction that turns a five-hour job into six hours and a clear decision into a twenty-minute phone tag session.

The 27-minute problem isn't a nice-to-fix. It's a have-to-fix. And the companies that fix it first are going to pull ahead while everyone else wonders why they're falling behind.

The Good News

Here's the part I enjoy telling people: this is fixable. All of it. The waiting, the confusion, the rework, the hesitation. Every one of those minutes can be recovered. Not all at once, and not overnight, but systematically, predictably, and permanently.

The solution isn't complicated. It's not a six-figure software purchase. It's not a leadership overhaul. It's not a consultants-in-every-meeting kind of transformation. It's a framework. A clear, documented, trained-on set of decision rights that tells every person in your organization what they own, what they don't, and what "good" looks like.

In Chapter 3, I'm going to show you why the things you've probably already tried (hiring more people, buying software, working harder) haven't solved this problem, and what actually does. Then in Part 2, we'll build the framework together, step by step.

But before you turn the page, go back to that worksheet. Write down your number. Put a circle around it. Maybe tape it to your desk, your dashboard, or your bathroom mirror.

Because that number isn't just what you're losing. It's what you're about to get back.

CHAPTER THREE



WHY TRADITIONAL SOLUTIONS FAIL

THE EXPENSIVE DETOURS

“We spent \$40,000 on software, hired two new managers, and I started waking up at 4:30 AM. A year later, nothing had changed except I was more tired and more broke.”

-Owner of a \$7.5M landscape company

By now, you know the problem. Your company is leaking time, money, and momentum because nobody knows who decides what. The 27-minute problem is real, and it’s expensive. So naturally, your instinct is to fix it.

Good. That instinct is right. The problem is that most landscape owners reach for the same four or five solutions, and every single one of them misses the actual issue. They’re not bad ideas. They’re just incomplete ideas. They treat symptoms while the disease continues to spread.

I’ve watched owners spend years cycling through these solutions, convinced that the next one will be the breakthrough. It’s like trying to fix a leaky roof by buying nicer furniture. The furniture is fine, but the water’s still coming in.

Let’s walk through the usual suspects, one by one, and I’ll show you exactly why each one falls short on its own.

Solution #1: “We Just Need to Hire More People”

This is the most common response to feeling overwhelmed, and it makes intuitive sense. You're drowning in work, your people are stretched thin, and the logical move is to add capacity. Hire another crew leader. Bring on an assistant ops manager. Add a project coordinator.

So, you do. And for a few weeks, things feel better. The new person absorbs some of the workload. Fires get put out a little faster. You breathe for the first time in months.

Then the honeymoon ends.

The new hire starts asking the same questions everyone else asks. "Should I approve this?" "What do we do when the client wants X?" "Is this my call or should I check with you?" Because you haven't defined the decision boundaries, the new person does what every rational human does in an unclear environment: they escalate. They come to you. Just like everyone else.

Now you have the same bottleneck, but with one more person feeding into it. You didn't reduce the load on yourself. You increased the number of people who depend on you.

You went from being the bottleneck for 65 people to being the bottleneck for 66.

I worked with a company outside of Charlotte that had hired three "managers" in eighteen months, trying to solve this exact problem. An operations manager, a client services manager, and a fleet manager. Combined salary cost: roughly \$210,000. But the owner was still making the same decisions he'd been making before the hires. The managers had titles and desks but lacked decision-making authority. They were expensive messengers.

When I asked one of the managers what he was empowered to decide without calling the owner, he laughed. "Technically? What to have for lunch?"

Hiring isn't the wrong move. But hiring without decision-making authority is like adding more lanes to a highway with a toll booth in the middle. You can

widen the road all you want. If every car still must stop at the same booth, traffic doesn't improve.

Solution #2: "I Just Need to Work Harder"

This one is personal because I've lived it and I've watched hundreds of owners live in it, too. You got where you are by outworking everyone else. You were the first one on the job and the last one to leave. You answered every call, solved every problem, and made every sacrifice. Hard work is in your DNA. It's your identity.

So, when the company stalls, your first instinct is to push harder. Wake up earlier. Stay later. Answer emails at 10 PM. Work Saturdays. Skip vacations. Just grind through it.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: working harder is how you got to this ceiling in the first place. The same trait that built your company is now the thing holding it back. And no amount of extra hours will fix a structural problem.

Think about it mathematically. There are 168 hours a week. Let's say you're already working 65. You sleep 6 hours a night (which is less than you should, by the way). That's 42 hours for sleep. You're left with 61 hours for everything else: family, health, eating, driving, basic human existence. If you push to 75 hours a week, you gain 10 more hours of work capacity, but you lose them from an already thin slice of life.

And what do those 10 extra hours get you? More time being the bottleneck. More decisions are flowing through you. More texts answered, more approvals granted, more fires extinguished. You haven't fixed the system. You've just extended your shift inside a broken one.

I once met a landscape owner at a trade show who told me, with genuine pride, that he hadn't taken a day off in fourteen months. I didn't congratulate him. I asked him what his company would look like in five years if he kept that pace. He didn't have an answer. He just stared at his coffee for a long time.

The “work harder” solution has its own ceiling: your physical and mental capacity. And when you hit it (not if, when), the failure isn’t gradual. It’s sudden. A health scare. A family crisis. Burnout that turns you from a driven operator into someone who can barely get through Monday morning. I’ve seen all three.

Your company doesn’t need more of your hours. It needs less of your involvement in decisions that should be made by others.

Solution #3: “We Need Better Software”

Go to any landscape industry trade show, and you’ll be surrounded by software companies promising to transform your operations. CRMs, project management platforms, scheduling tools, GPS fleet tracking, proposal software, and time-tracking apps. The booths are shiny. The demos are impressive. The sales reps are convincing.

So, you buy one. Maybe two. Maybe you’ve bought four different platforms in the last five years, each time believing this is the one that will finally bring order to the chaos.

And each time, the same thing happens. You implement it with great enthusiasm. There are training sessions. There’s an onboarding period. For a few weeks, everyone uses it. Then adoption starts to fade. Your crew leaders go back to texting. Your ops manager builds workarounds. The account managers use half the features and ignore the rest. Six months later, you’re paying \$1,200 a month for software that’s basically an expensive address book.

I’m not anti-software. Let me be very clear about that. Good software is valuable. But software is a tool, and a tool is only as useful as the system it operates within. If you buy a state-of-the-art GPS tracking system but nobody knows who’s responsible for reviewing the data and making routing decisions based on it, what have you actually bought? An expensive dashboard that nobody looks at.

Software can't tell your crew leader what he's allowed to decide. Software can't define the threshold at which your account manager should offer a credit rather than escalate a complaint. Software can't replace the conversation where you tell your ops manager, "Here's what you own, here's what you escalate, and here's what good looks like."

Software automates processes. But if the underlying process is "everyone asks the owner," then you've just automated the bottleneck. You've made it faster for people to reach you with questions they shouldn't be asking. Congratulations, your team can now interrupt you in real time instead of waiting for a callback.

I worked with a Midwest company that had implemented a well-known landscape management platform. Beautiful system. Powerful features. The whole team had licenses. When I asked the ops manager how he used it, he said, "Mostly I put notes in there so when the owner calls me asking about a job, I can pull up the details faster." The software hadn't changed the decision flow. It had just made the broken decision flow slightly more efficient.

The right sequence is: define decision rights first, then buy software that supports those decisions. Not the other way around. Software should enforce and enable a clear decision structure. It should never be asked to create one.

Solution #4: "We Need Leadership Development"

This one sounds really smart, which is part of why it's dangerous. The logic goes like this: if your managers aren't making decisions, they must not know how. So, send them to training. Buy them books. Bring in a leadership coach. Invest in their development so they can step up.

Noble idea. I'm all for developing your people. But leadership training without decision rights is like teaching someone to swim and then never letting them near the water. You can train your ops manager in conflict resolution, strategic thinking, time management, and emotional intelligence. All excellent skills. But if he still must call you before approving a \$500 equipment repair, what exactly did the training accomplish?

The issue in most landscape companies isn't that managers lack the ability to make decisions. It's because they lack permission. They're not unskilled. They're unclarified. They don't know what's theirs to own. And no leadership seminar in the world teaches that, because it's not a leadership problem. It's an infrastructure problem.

I've sat in meetings where an owner criticized his managers for not "stepping up" and "taking ownership." Meanwhile, the week before, that same owner had overruled a decision one of those managers made about crew assignments. The manager had made a reasonable call. It wasn't the call the owner would have made, so the owner changed it. Then he wondered why that manager stopped making calls.

You can't train initiative into someone while simultaneously punishing initiative. That's not a leadership gap. That's a trust gap created by unclear boundaries.

Leadership development works brilliantly, but only after you've established decision rights. Once your managers know what they own, training helps them own it better. The sequence matters.

Solution #5: "We Need to Reorganize"

When all else fails, the instinct is to restructure. Move the org chart around. Create new reporting lines. Combine departments. Split departments. Promote someone. Create a new title. Add a layer between you and the front lines.

Reorganizing feels productive because it's visible. There are announcements. There are new org charts. People move desks. It feels like progress.

But most landscape company reorganizations are just rearranging deck chairs. If the fundamental question ("who decides what?") hasn't been answered, moving people around on a chart doesn't change anything. You've just given the same confusion a new mailing address.

I've seen companies reorganize three times in two years. Each time, the owner was convinced that the structure was the problem. "If I just put the account managers under operations instead of sales, things will work better." They didn't. Because the account managers still didn't know what they were empowered to decide, regardless of who they reported to.

Reorganization can be useful, but only as a consequence of defining decision rights, not as a substitute for it. Sometimes, once you've clarified who owns which decisions, the right structure becomes obvious. The structure should serve the decision framework.

When you flip that order and try to solve decision problems with structural changes, you just create a different-shaped mess.

The Common Thread

Every one of these solutions has the same blind spot. They all assume the problem is a resource problem (not enough people, not enough effort, not enough technology, not enough skill, not enough structure) when it's actually a clarity problem.

Your company doesn't need more resources. It needs more clarity about how existing resources are allowed to operate.

Let me put it another way. Imagine you're coaching a football team. Your players are talented. Your playbook is thick. Your facilities are great. But you never told the quarterback which plays he's allowed to audible and which ones need to come from the sideline. You never told the cornerback whether to play man or zone on third down without a signal from the coordinator. You never told the punt team whether they're allowed to fake it if the formation is right.

What happens? The quarterback checks the sideline on every play. The cornerback hesitates at the snap. The punt team plays it safe every single time. And you, standing on the sideline, are making 50 real-time decisions per game that your players should be making on the field.

Now imagine someone suggests the fix is to recruit better players. Or to yell louder from the sideline. Or to buy a better headset system. Those aren't wrong ideas. They're just not the right ones for this problem.

The right fix is to define, clearly and specifically, what each player is authorized to do on their own and what requires a call to the sideline. Then practice it. Then trust it.

That's decision rights. And it's what makes all the other solutions actually work.

What Actually Works

I'm not telling you to stop hiring good people. I'm not telling you to cancel your software subscriptions. I'm not saying leadership development is a waste, or that organizational structure doesn't matter. All of those things are valuable.

But they only have value after you've built the foundation. And the foundation is clarity about decision rights. Here's what changes when you build it:

Hiring becomes effective because new people join a system that tells them what they own from day one instead of spending six months trying to figure out what they're allowed to do

Your effort gets redirected because you stop spending 22 hours a week on decisions that belong to other people and start spending that time on growth, strategy, and the work only you can do

Software becomes powerful because it supports a clear decision structure instead of automating a broken one

Leadership training sticks, because your managers have actual authority to practice what they've learned

Structure makes sense because the org chart reflects real decision ownership instead of just reporting lines on paper.

Decision rights aren't a replacement for these other solutions. They're the prerequisite. They're the operating system that everything else runs on. Without them, every other investment underperforms. With them, every other investment multiplies.

The Right Sequence

If I could tattoo one thing on every landscape owner's forearm (besides their company's mission statement, which wouldn't fit), it would be this:

Clarity first. Resources second. Tools third.

First, define who decides what and based on what criteria. Second, make sure you have the right people in the right roles to make those decisions. Third, give them the tools (software, training, processes) to execute effectively.

Most companies run this sequence in reverse. They buy tools, then hire people, then vaguely hope clarity emerges on its own. It never does. Clarity doesn't emerge. It's built. Deliberately. On purpose. With intention.

That's what Part 2 of this book is about. We're going to build your decision rights framework from the ground up. Chapter by chapter. Starting with mapping every decision in your organization, then building the matrix that assigns ownership, and then defining what "good" looks like for each one.

You've seen the problem. You've calculated the cost. You understand why the usual fixes haven't worked. Now it's time to build the thing that actually does.

Turn the page. Let's get to work.

CHAPTER FOUR



MAPPING YOUR DECISION UNIVERSE

YOU CAN'T FIX WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE

“The first step to fixing anything is seeing everything. Once we mapped every decision in the company, it was like turning on the lights in a room we’d been stumbling through for years.”

-Operations manager at a \$12M landscape company

Before we build anything, we need to understand what we’re building for. And that starts with a question that sounds simple but almost nobody can answer completely:

How many decisions get made in your company on a typical day?

Go ahead and guess. Pick a number.

If you said twenty or thirty, you’re off by a factor of ten. A \$6M landscape company with 65 employees makes somewhere between 200 and 400 decisions on a typical operating day. That’s not a typo. Everything from “which crew goes to which route” to “do we edge this property today” to “should I call the client about this dead shrub or just replace it” to “is this mower worth repairing or should we pull the backup” counts as a decision.

Most of these decisions are small. Individually, they barely register. But collectively, they are your company. The sum of every decision made (or not made, or made badly, or made too late) on every job site, in every truck, at

every desk, every single day is what determines your quality, your margins, your reputation, and your growth.

And right now, you probably couldn't list even a third of them. That's normal. That's also the problem.

In this chapter, we're going to turn on the lights. We're going to map your entire decision universe, identify the ten major decision categories that drive landscape operations, and give you a practical audit tool to capture what's actually happening in your company over the course of one week.

This is the foundation. Everything we build in Chapters 5 through 8 depends on getting this right.

The 10 Decision Categories in Landscape Operations

After working with dozens of landscape companies at every revenue level from \$2M to \$20M, I've found that virtually every decision falls into one of ten categories. The specific decisions within each category will vary by company size, service mix, and market, but the categories themselves are remarkably consistent.

Understanding these categories is the first step toward building your decision rights matrix in Chapter 5. Think of this as creating the filing system before you start filing.

Scheduling and Routing Decisions

These are the decisions that determine who goes where, when, and in what order. They happen before the first truck rolls in the morning, and they keep happening throughout the day as conditions change.

Examples: Which crew handles which route today? Whether to shuffle assignments when someone calls out sick. How to adjust the schedule when rain pushes Tuesday's work to Wednesday. Whether to send a crew to a priority callback or keep them on the scheduled route. When to split a crew between two smaller jobs versus keeping them together on a larger one.

These decisions are high-volume and time-sensitive. If they don't get made quickly, trucks sit idle. And trucks sitting idle are money evaporating in real time.

Client Relationship Decisions

Anything that touches the client experience falls here. These are decisions about how you interact with the people who pay you, and they have an outsized impact on retention and reputation.

Examples: How to respond to a client complaint. Whether to offer credit or a redo. When to proactively communicate about a service issue. How to handle a request that falls outside the contract scope. Whether to accommodate a last-minute add-on or push it to the next visit. How to manage expectations when weather delays a scheduled service.

Client relationship decisions are emotionally charged, which is exactly why they tend to get escalated to the owner. Your account manager doesn't want to be the one who gives away too much or the one who loses the account by being too rigid. So they call you.

Every time.

Pricing and Estimating Decisions

These decisions directly affect your revenue and margins. They're the ones owners tend to hold onto longest, and for understandable reasons. Pricing feels like the one thing you can't afford to get wrong.

Examples: Whether to match a competitor's bid. How to price an enhancement or add-on. What discount (if any) to offer for multi-year contracts? How to handle a renewal when costs have gone up, but the client is pushing back. When to walk away from a job that doesn't meet margin thresholds. How to price change orders on construction projects.

The challenge here is that most owners are the only ones who understand the full margin picture. They haven't shared the logic behind their pricing

decisions, so nobody else can replicate them. We'll address exactly how to solve this when we build the decision rights matrix in Chapter 5.

People and Staffing Decisions

Anything related to your workforce: hiring, firing, disciplining, promoting, assigning, training, and managing performance. These are the decisions that shape your team culture, and they're often the most uncomfortable ones to delegate.

Examples: Whether to hire a candidate after an interview. When to issue a written warning versus a verbal conversation. How to handle chronic tardiness. Whether to promote a crew member to crew leader. How to manage a conflict between two employees. When to let someone go and when to invest in coaching them.

People decisions carry legal and cultural weight. That makes owners nervous about handing them off, which is understandable. But the solution isn't to make every people decision yourself. It's to define clear guardrails and escalation triggers so your managers can handle the day-to-day while you stay involved in the decisions that truly require your judgment.

Equipment and Fleet Decisions

Anything involving your machines, trucks, trailers, and tools. These decisions affect both your daily productivity and your capital allocation.

Examples: Whether to repair or replace a piece of equipment. When to rent instead of buy. Which vendor to use for parts? Whether to pull the backup mower or send a crew home short-handed. When to take a truck out of service for maintenance versus running it one more week. How to handle a breakdown on a job site.

Equipment decisions have clear dollar thresholds, which make them among the easiest to delegate. Your ops manager should be able to approve repairs up to a defined amount without calling you. We'll set those thresholds in Chapter 5.

Quality and Standards Decisions

These are decisions about what “good work” looks like and what to do when it doesn’t meet the standard. They directly affect your reputation and your client retention rate.

Examples: Whether a property meets your quality standard before the crew leaves. What to do when the weather prevents a complete service. How to handle a crew that’s consistently underperforming on quality checks. Whether to send a crew back to redo the work. How to define “acceptable” on a rainy day versus a perfect day.

Quality decisions are interesting because they’re the ones your crew leaders make dozens of times daily, whether you want them to or not. Every time a crew pulls off a property, someone is making a judgment call about whether the work is done. The question isn’t whether these decisions are being made. The question is whether anyone defined what “done right” actually means.

Safety Decisions

Anything involving the physical safety of your people, your clients’ property, and the public. These decisions carry the highest stakes and the least room for ambiguity.

Examples: Whether to stop work when conditions are unsafe. How to handle a near miss or minor injury. When to shut down operations due to weather (lightning, extreme heat, ice). Whether a crew member is fit to operate equipment. How to manage a situation where a client’s property presents a safety hazard.

Safety is the one category in which decision rights should be the simplest and most absolute. Any employee, at any level, should have the unquestionable authority to stop work when they see a safety concern. Period. No call required. No approval needed. If your people feel like they need permission to be safe, you have a problem that goes beyond organizational efficiency.

Vendor and Subcontractor Decisions

Decisions about who you buy from, who you partner with, and how you manage those relationships. These affect your cost structure and your supply chain reliability.

Examples: Which supplier to use for a material order? Whether to bring in a subcontractor for specialized work. How to handle a vendor who delivered late or delivered the wrong product. When to negotiate pricing versus accepting the quoted rate. Whether to use your preferred vendor at a higher price or a new vendor at a lower price.

Vendor decisions are another category where clear dollar thresholds make delegation straightforward. Your ops manager or project manager should be able to make vendor selections within defined parameters without running it up the chain.

Financial and Budget Decisions

Decisions about spending money, tracking money, and managing financial performance. These range from small daily expenditures to major capital commitments.

Examples: Whether to approve overtime for a crew running behind. How much to spend on a repair before it needs approval? When to invest in a new piece of equipment versus making do with what you have. How to handle a job that's running over budget.

Whether to offer a payment plan to a client who's behind on invoices.

Financial decisions are where owners tend to draw the tightest boundaries, and that's not entirely wrong. Money decisions deserve careful guardrails. But there's a difference between smart guardrails and a chokehold. If your ops manager can't approve a \$75 fuel purchase without your sign-off, you've gone too far.

Communication and Escalation Decisions

The meta-category. These are decisions about when to communicate, who to communicate with, and when to escalate. In some ways, this is the most important category because it governs how all the other categories flow.

Examples: When to inform a client about a delay versus just handling it internally. When a crew leader should call the ops manager versus resolving something on site. When should the ops manager loop in the owner versus making the call? How to handle a situation that falls between two people's areas of responsibility. When to document an issue formally versus addressing it verbally.

If you only fix one category in this entire book, make it this one. Clear escalation paths eliminate more ambiguity than any other single change. When your people know exactly when to handle it, when to inform, and when to escalate, 80% of your bottlenecks disappear.

The Decision Audit: Your One-Week X-Ray

Now that you know the ten categories, it's time to see what's actually happening in your company. Not what you think is happening. Not what should be happening. What is actually happening, right now, every day.

I'm going to ask you to do something that feels tedious but will be one of the most revealing exercises you've ever done as a business owner. For one week, I want you to track every decision you make.

Every. Single. One. The big ones and the small ones. The texts, the phone calls, the hallway conversations, the emails, the questions shouted across the shop. Every time someone asks you to make a call, approve something, weigh in on a choice, or resolve an ambiguity, write it down.

I know what you're thinking. "That sounds like a lot of extra work for a guy who's already drowning." You're right. It is extra work. For one week. And the data you'll gather in that one week will show you exactly where your time is going, which decisions you should never be touching, and where the biggest gaps in your decision infrastructure exist.

Think of it as a doctor ordering blood work. It's a small inconvenience that reveals the real diagnosis.

How to Run the Audit

Keep it simple. You don't need fancy software for this. A notebook, a note on your phone, or a simple spreadsheet will work. For every decision that comes to you, capture five things:

WHAT TO CAPTURE

1. The decision

- Example: Should we send the crew back to redo edging on the Miller property?
- Why it matters: Identifies the actual question being asked

2. Who brought it to you?

- Example: Account manager
- Why it matters: Shows who is escalating and how often

3. The category (1 through 10)

- Example: Category 6 – Quality and Standards
- Why it matters: Reveals which categories are clogging your day

4. How long did it take?

- Example: 4 minutes, including the callback
- Why it matters: Quantifies your personal time drain

5. Should it have come to you?

- Example: No. The crew leader should own quality standards.

- Why it matters: Identifies decisions ready to delegate

Number 5 is the money question. Be honest with yourself. For each decision, ask: was there a legitimate reason this needed my involvement, or did it come to me because nobody knew who else was supposed to handle it?

What You'll Find

I've guided dozens of owners through this exercise. The results are remarkably consistent. Here's what you're almost certainly going to discover:

60 to 70% of the decisions that reach you don't need to. They're routine operational questions that could be handled by a crew leader, an ops manager, or an account manager, with clear guidelines. The crew that needs overtime approval. The account manager is asking about a discount. The equipment question has an obvious answer if someone just had a spending threshold.

One or two categories will dominate. For most owners, scheduling and client relationship decisions eat the biggest share of their time. These are the high-volume, emotionally charged categories where people default to "ask the boss." If you can build clear decision rights for just these two categories, you'll free up a massive chunk of your day.

The same types of decisions repeat constantly. You'll notice you're answering the same question, or close variations of the same question, repeatedly. "Can I approve overtime?" "Should we send a crew back?" "What do I tell this client?" Each repeating question is a decision right waiting to be defined. If you're answering the same question for the third time this week, that's not a decision anymore. That's a policy you haven't written yet.

Your most expensive people are the biggest escalators. Account managers and ops managers tend to escalate more than crew leaders, which means your highest-cost employees are spending the most time in the decision queue. This is where the 27-minute problem hits the hardest.

The Decision Inventory Worksheet

After your one-week audit, you'll organize what you found into a decision inventory. This is the master list of every recurring decision in your company, organized by category. It becomes the raw material for building your decision rights matrix in Chapter 5.

Here's a simplified version to get you started. I've pre-loaded it with common decisions I see in most landscape operations. Check off the ones that apply to your company and add any that are missing.

DECISION INVENTORY (Partial List)

SCHEDULING AND ROUTING

- Daily crew assignments and route adjustments
- Rain day rescheduling
- Handling call-outs and no-shows
- Priority callback assignments
- Splitting or combining crews for efficiency

CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

- Responding to complaints (minor)
- Responding to complaints (major / risk of losing account)
- Offering service credits or redos
- Handling out-of-scope requests
- Proactive communication about delays or issues

PRICING AND ESTIMATING

- Pricing enhancements and add-ons
- Matching or responding to competitor bids

- Renewal pricing when costs have changed
- Change order pricing on construction jobs
- Discount approval for volume or multi-year

PEOPLE AND STAFFING

- Approving overtime
- Issuing verbal or written warnings
- Hiring decisions (crew level)
- Hiring decisions (management level)
- Handling interpersonal conflicts

EQUIPMENT AND FLEET

- Repair vs. replace decisions
- Renting equipment for a specific job
- Pulling backup equipment
- Taking equipment out of service
- Emergency breakdown response

QUALITY AND STANDARDS

- Determining if a property meets quality standards
- Sending crews back for rework
- Adjusting standards for weather conditions
- Handling underperforming crews

SAFETY

- Stopping work for unsafe conditions
- Responding to injuries or near misses
- Weather-related shutdowns
- Equipment fitness decisions
- VENDORS AND SUBCONTRACTORS• Selecting vendors for material orders• Bringing in subcontractors• Handling vendor delivery issues• Negotiating vendor pricing

FINANCIAL AND BUDGET

- Approving purchases under \$____
- Approving purchases over \$____
- Managing jobs running over budget
- Client payment and collections decisions

COMMUNICATION AND ESCALATION

- When to inform vs. escalate to owner
- When to contact client vs. handle internally
- How to handle situations between two roles
- Documentation and formal reporting triggers

This isn't meant to be exhaustive. Your company will have decisions that don't appear on this list, and some of these may not apply to your operation. The goal is to get every recurring decision written down in one place so you can see the full picture.

Add your own. Be specific. "Client complaints" is a category. "What to do when a residential client says the mowing height is wrong" is a decision. The

more specific you get, the easier it will be to assign clear ownership in the next chapter.

What This Reveals (And Why It Matters)

By the time you've completed your audit and filled out your decision inventory, you're going to have something most landscape companies never build: a clear, honest picture of how decisions actually flow through your organization.

You'll see where the bottlenecks are. You'll see which categories are consuming your time. You'll see which people are escalating the most. And most importantly, you'll see the pattern: dozens, maybe hundreds, of decisions that have been flowing to you by default simply because nobody ever defined where they should go instead.

This is your raw material. This is the foundation for everything we build in the rest of Part 2. Without it, decision rights are theoretical. With it, they're surgical. You're not guessing about what to delegate. You're working from data.

I had an owner tell me after completing his audit that it was the most "sick to my stomach and simultaneously relieved" he'd ever felt about his business. Sick because he could finally see how much of his time was being consumed by decisions that didn't require his brain. Relieved because he could also see, clearly, that the fix was achievable. The decisions weren't complicated. They just needed an owner.

Not him. An owner at the right level, with the right criteria, and the right authority.

In Chapter 5, that's exactly what we're going to build. The Decision Rights Matrix. The tool that takes every decision in your inventory and assigns it a clear home. Who owns it, what the criteria are, when to escalate, and what "good" looks like.

But first, go do the audit. One week. Write everything down. I promise you, the effort is worth it. You can't build a house without knowing the size of the lot. And you can't build decision rights without knowing the size of your decision universe.

Get a notebook. Start Monday. I'll be here when you're ready.

CHAPTER FIVE

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THE DECISION RIGHTS MATRIX

THE TOOL THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

“The matrix didn’t just change how we operate. It changed how my people think. For the first time, they stopped asking permission and started owning outcomes.”

-Owner of a \$9M landscape company, six months after implementation

You’ve done the hard work. You mapped your decision universe. You ran the audit. You’ve got a decision inventory sitting in front of you with dozens (maybe hundreds) of decisions that currently flow through your company with no clear owner.

Now we’re going to give every single one of those decisions a home.

The Decision Rights Matrix is, at its core, a simple tool. For every recurring decision in your organization, it answers five questions:

1. What is the decision?
2. Who owns it? (Who has the authority to make this call?)
3. What are the criteria? (What does a good decision look like?)
4. When does it escalate? (Under what conditions should it move up?)
5. Who gets informed? (Who needs to know after the decision is made?)

Five columns. That's all it is. And those five columns will do more to free your time, empower your team, and unlock your company's growth than any software platform, leadership retreat, or new hire you've ever invested in.

I know that sounds like a bold claim. I've watched it prove true in company after company. Let me show you how to build yours.

Building Your Matrix: Step by Step

Step 1: Start With Your Top 20

Don't try to build the matrix for every decision at once. That's a recipe for overwhelm and a project that never gets finished. Instead, go back to your decision audit and pull out the top 20 decisions by frequency. The ones that showed up every day or multiple times per day. The ones that consume most of your time. The ones you found yourself answering repeatedly.

These 20 decisions probably represent 70 to 80% of the decision traffic that reaches you. If you only ever build the matrix for these 20 and nothing else, you'll still transform your operation. Start here. Expand later.

Step 2: Assign Ownership

For each of those 20 decisions, answer one question: who is the right person to own this decision?

Not who currently makes it. Not who you wish would make it. Who should make it, based on proximity to the problem, knowledge of the context, and ability to act quickly?

Here's a useful rule of thumb I call the *Closest Capable Person* principle. The best person to decide is the person closest to where the decision happens, who has enough context and competence to make a good call. Not the smartest person. Not the most senior person. The closest capable person.

A crew leader standing on a property looking at a quality issue is closer to that decision than you are sitting in your truck three miles away. An account manager who just got off the phone with a frustrated client has more

real-time context than you'll have when they relay the story an hour later. Your ops manager, who is staring at tomorrow's weather forecast and today's crew availability, has better data for a scheduling call than you do.

The Closest Capable Person principle will challenge you. Your gut will resist it. You'll think, "But I make better decisions than they do." Maybe. But a good decision made immediately by the person on the ground beats a great decision made two hours later by the person who wasn't there. Speed and proximity matter more than perfection in 90% of daily operational decisions.

Step 3: Define the Criteria

This is where most delegation efforts fail and where the matrix succeeds. You're not just telling someone, "You own this decision." You're telling them how to make it well.

For each decision, write out the criteria that define a good outcome. Be specific. Be concrete. Use numbers where you can.

Bad criteria: "Use good judgment on overtime."

Good criteria: "Approve overtime up to 2 hours per crew per day if the job can be completed in that timeframe and the client is a Tier 1 account. For anything beyond 2 hours, get ops manager approval."

Bad criteria: "Handle client complaints appropriately."

Good criteria: "For service quality complaints, offer a redo within 48 hours or a service credit up to \$200, whichever the client prefers. If the client requests more than

\$200 in credit or threatens to cancel, escalate to the owner."

See the difference? The first version sounds nice, but it gives your people nothing to work with. The second version gives them a clear lane, a clear limit, and a clear trigger for when to pass it up. They can act with confidence because they know exactly where the boundaries are.

Step 4: Set the Escalation Triggers

Every decision right needs a fence. Not to restrict people, but to protect them. Escalation triggers are the conditions under which a decision should move up the chain. They answer the question your people are always silently asking: “At what point is this too big for me?”

Good escalation triggers are specific and objective. They’re based on dollar amounts, risk levels, or specific conditions, not on feelings or instincts.

Examples of good escalation triggers:

- Equipment repair cost exceeds \$1,500
- The client is a top-10 revenue account and is threatening to leave
- A safety incident involves an injury requiring medical attention
- Budget variance on a job exceeds 15%
- The decision involves terminating an employee
- Subcontractor cost exceeds \$5,000 on a single job

The goal is to make escalation trigger automatic and judgment-free. Your crew leader shouldn’t have to wonder whether a repair cost is “high enough” to escalate. If it’s over

\$1,500, it goes up. Under \$1,500, it’s his call. Simple. Clear. No ambiguity.

Step 5: Define the Information Flow

The last column answers: who needs to know after this decision is made? This is different from escalation. Escalation means “I need approval before acting.” Information flow means “I’ve already acted, and here’s what you should know.”

This distinction matters enormously. One of the biggest fears owners have about delegating decisions is losing visibility. They’re afraid that if they don’t make the decision, they won’t know what’s happening. The information flow

column solves that. Your people make the call, then they inform the right people afterward.

For example, your ops manager approves a \$900 equipment repair (within his authority). He doesn't need your approval, but you want to know about it. So, the information flow says: "Inform owner via end-of-day summary." You stay informed without being the bottleneck. You see what's happening without slowing it down.

Some decisions need real-time information flow ("Text the owner immediately"). Some only need periodic updates ("Include in weekly ops report"). Match the urgency of the information flow to the decision's impact.

The Matrix in Action: A Complete Example

Let me show you what information is included in a finished matrix for one category. Here's a sample for Equipment and Fleet decisions at a \$6M to \$8M landscape company:

Equipment & Fleet Decision Matrix

1. Repair vs. Replace (Under \$1,500)

- Owner: Ops Manager
- Criteria: Repair if the cost is less than 40 percent of the replacement value and the equipment is under 5 years old.
- Escalation Trigger: Repair estimate exceeds \$1,500, or equipment is critical to next-day operations.
- Information Flow: Owner receives summary in weekly equipment report.

2. Repair vs. Replace (Over \$1,500)

- Owner: Owner
- Criteria: Review repair history, remaining useful life, and budget

availability.

- Escalation Trigger: Not applicable. This is an Owner-level decision.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager and Controller informed after the decision.

3. Rent Equipment for a Job

- Owner: Ops Manager
- Criteria: Rent if owned equipment is unavailable and job revenue exceeds three times the rental cost.
- Escalation Trigger: Rental exceeds \$2,000, or commitment extends beyond two weeks.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via end-of-day summary.

4. Emergency Breakdown on Site

- Owner: Crew Leader
- Criteria: Contact Ops Manager immediately.
 - Pull backup equipment if available within thirty minutes.
 - If no backup is available, redistribute the crew to other jobs.
- Escalation Trigger: Any breakdown that could result in a missed client commitment.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager notified immediately.
 - The owner is notified only if there is a client-facing impact.

5. Take a Truck Out of Service

- Owner: Ops Manager

- Criteria: Remove from rotation if safety inspection fails or repair is scheduled within forty-eight hours.
- Escalation Trigger: Removal impacts next-day crew deployment.
- Information Flow: Owner and affected Crew Leaders notified.

Five decisions. Each one has a clear owner, specific criteria, an objective escalation trigger, and a defined information flow. No ambiguity. No “use your judgment.” No need to call anyone unless the trigger conditions are met.

Now imagine your ops manager has this matrix printed out, laminated, and pinned to the wall next to his desk. Monday morning, a crew leader calls about a mower with a blown engine. The estimate comes back at \$1,100. Your ops manager glances at the matrix. Under \$1,500? His call. The equipment is three years old, and the repair is 30% of the replacement value. Repair it. Done. Decision made in two minutes. No phone call to you. No waiting. No bottleneck.

That’s the matrix at work. Multiply those times 20 decisions a day, and you start to see how everything changes.

The 15 Decision Rights Templates

You should not have to invent this framework from scratch.

Below are 15 core decision categories that cover nearly every recurring decision inside a landscape operation.

Each template follows the same five-part structure:

Decision/ Owner/ Criteria/ Escalation Trigger/ Information Flow

You’ll see one fully illustrated example first (the actual template should be more of a table for easy reference). The remaining templates are explained so you understand the logic behind each one.

Full editable versions of all 15 templates are available in the Companion Template Package.

Template Example: Equipment Purchases

This template defines who has the authority to spend company money on tools, repairs, rentals, and equipment.

- Decision: Approval of equipment purchases, rentals, and repair expenses.
- **Owner:**
 - Crew Leader: Field supplies and minor materials up to a defined daily limit.
 - Operations Manager: Repairs and rentals within established thresholds.
 - Owner: Capital purchases or expenses exceeding threshold limits.
- **Criteria**
 - Must support an active job or operational need
 - Must fall within budget
 - Must use approved vendors
 - Must meet safety and quality standards
- **Escalation Trigger**
 - Single purchase exceeding threshold
 - Repeat repair of the same asset
 - Capital equipment replacement decision
- **Information Flow**
 - Weekly summary of equipment spends in the Monday operations

review

- Escalated items documented in the shared tracking sheet

This template prevents two common problems: overspending without oversight and unnecessary approval bottlenecks.

Template 2: Hiring and Firing

- Defines who can hire seasonal crew members, who can approve management hires, and who handles terminations.
- The logic: Hiring authority should match budget responsibility. Terminations require clarity and documentation standards to protect culture and legal exposure.

Template 3: Client Pricing

- Defines authority for enhancement pricing, renewals, discounts, and competitive bids.
- The logic: Margin guardrails must be objective. Account managers should operate inside clear profitability bands without needing daily approval.

Template 4: Change Orders

- Clarifies who can approve scope changes based on dollar value and contract impact.
- The logic: Small operational adjustments stay in operations. Contract-altering changes escalate.

Template 5: Crew Assignments

- Defines ownership of daily routing, crew swaps, and priority adjustments.
- The logic: Routing is an operations function. Owner involvement

here signals structural weakness.

Template 6: Schedule Changes

- Establishes authority for rain delays, call-out coverage, and route rebuilds.
- The logic: Weather and attendance disruptions should not create daily executive escalation.

Template 7: Vendor Selection

- Defines authority to select vendors and approve vendor commitments.
- The logic: Preferred vendor lists reduce chaos. Long-term commitments require oversight.

Template 8: Safety Incidents

- Defines stop-work authority and reporting requirements.
- The logic: Safety decisions must prioritize immediacy over hierarchy. Escalation triggers protect the company from major exposure.

Template 9: Client Complaints

- Clarifies credit limits, redo authority, and escalation triggers for at-risk accounts.
- The logic: Fast resolution builds trust. Pattern-level issues require leadership review.

Template 10: Budget Variances

- Defines tolerance thresholds for jobs running over budget.
- The logic: Variance inside a defined range is management. Beyond that is strategic correction.

Template 11: Quality Issues

- Assigns rework authority and defines when systemic issues escalate.
- The logic: Field-level quality should be corrected immediately. Patterns require management intervention.

Template 12: Equipment Breakdown Decisions

- Clarifies repair versus replace authority and downtime management.
- The logic: Operational repairs stay in operations. Recurring capital decisions escalate.

Template 13: Subcontractor Use

- Defines spending authority and approval requirements for subcontractors.
- The logic: Short-term subcontracting is tactical. Long-term commitments affect margin structure.

Template 14: Weather Calls

- Establishes delay authority and schedule rebuild triggers.
- The logic: Daily delays stay in operations. Multi-day disruptions require structured planning.

Template 15: Overtime Approval

- Defines overtime thresholds and weekend work escalation rules.
- The logic: Overtime should be controlled by proximity to production, not by executive bottleneck.

How to Customize These Templates

These templates are starting points, not gospel. Your company has its own context, its own risk tolerance, and its own people. Here are the variables you should adjust:

Dollar thresholds. A \$3M company and a \$15M company need different spending limits. The thresholds I've used here are calibrated for a \$6M to \$8M operation. If you're smaller, tighten them. If you're larger, loosen them. The principle stays the same: define a number, make it objective, and make it known.

Role titles. If you don't have a "Project Manager" but your ops manager handles that function, swap the titles. The matrix cares about the role, not the name on the business card.

Escalation levels. Some owners want a tighter escalation structure, especially in the first 90 days of implementation. That's fine. Start tight, then loosen as trust builds. It's much easier to expand someone's authority over time than to pull it back after a mistake.

Client tiering. You'll notice several templates reference "Tier 1 accounts." If you don't have a formal client tiering system, now is the time to build one. It doesn't need to be complicated. Your top 10 to 15 clients by revenue or strategic value are Tier 1. Everyone else is Tier 2. Some companies add a Tier 3 for smaller or higher-maintenance accounts. The point is that not all clients deserve the same escalation treatment, and your team needs to know the difference.

Information flow frequency. I've used a mix of "immediately," "end of day," and "weekly report." Adjust these based on your comfort level. If you're early in the delegation process, lean toward more frequent updates. As trust builds, dial them back. The goal is to move from "real-time oversight" to "periodic visibility" over the first 90 days.

The One Thing That Makes the Matrix Work

I've given you the structure, the steps, and the templates. But none of it matters if you skip the one ingredient that makes the matrix actually function in the real world:

You have to mean it.

When your ops manager makes a decision that falls within his authority on the matrix, and that decision isn't the one you would have made, you must let it stand. If it met the criteria, if it didn't hit an escalation trigger, and if it was within the defined boundaries, it's a good decision even if you would have done it differently.

This is the hardest part of the entire book. Harder than the audit. Harder than building the matrix. Harder than any conversation you'll have with your team. Because it requires you to accept that "different than mine" is not the same as "wrong."

The moment you override a decision that was made within the matrix's guidelines, you've told your entire organization that the matrix is decorative, just like the org chart was decorative. Just like the manager titles were decorative, and your people will go right back to asking you everything, because they'll learn that the matrix is just one more thing the boss says he wants but doesn't actually honor.

So, before you roll this out, look yourself in the mirror and ask: Am I willing to let my team make decisions I wouldn't make, if they're within the boundaries we agreed on?

If the answer is yes, you're ready. If the answer is "mostly," we've got some work to do on your boundaries before you go live.

In Chapter 6, we'll tackle exactly that: how to define "good" versus "wrong" in a way that gives you confidence in the outcomes without requiring you to be in the middle of every call. It's the difference between trust and hope, and we're going to make sure you're operating on trust.

CHAPTER SIX

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DEFINING “GOOD” VS “WRONG”

THE GAP BETWEEN “JUST HANDLE IT” AND
ACTUALLY HANDLING IT

“The problem was never that my people couldn’t make decisions. The problem was that I’d never told them what a good decision looked like. I just expected them to read my mind.”

-Owner of a \$6.5M landscape company

You’ve built your matrix. You’ve assigned ownership. You’ve set escalation triggers. On paper, your decision rights framework looks clean and logical and ready to deploy.

But here’s where theory meets reality: your ops manager is staring at a situation that falls squarely within his authority on the matrix, and he’s still hesitating. Not because he doesn’t know it’s his call. He knows that. He’s hesitating because he doesn’t know if you’ll think his decision was good enough.

This is the gap that kills most delegation efforts. You told him what to decide. You didn’t tell him what a good decision looks like. And in the absence of clear criteria for success, your people will default to one of two behaviors: they’ll play it so safe that nothing changes, or they’ll make a bold call and spend the next week wondering if they’re going to get corrected for it.

Neither of those is what you want. What you want is confident decision-making within defined parameters. And that requires you to do something most landscape owners have never done: articulate the invisible standards that live in your head.

This chapter is about getting those standards out of your head and onto paper, in a way that's specific enough to be useful and flexible enough to survive the real world.

The Mind Reader Problem

Every landscape owner I've worked with has a version of this story. You hire a good person. You put them in a role. You tell them to "make it their own." They make a decision. And you correct it. Not because it was wrong, exactly, but because it wasn't how you would have done it.

The account manager offers a \$150 service credit for a legitimate complaint. You would have offered \$100 and a redo. Was the \$150 wrong? Not really. The client was happy.

The problem was solved. But it wasn't your number, so it felt wrong.

The ops manager schedules a crew to work on Saturday to catch up after a rainy week. You would have pushed the work to Monday and juggled the schedule. Was Saturday wrong? The work got done. The clients were served. The crew got overtime, which they were happy to have. But it wasn't your approach, so it felt wrong.

I call this the Mind Reader Problem. Your people aren't failing to make decisions. They're failing to make your decisions. And since they can't read your mind, the only safe move is to ask you every time.

The solution isn't to lower your standards. The solution is to define them. Explicitly. In writing. In terms that are specific enough for someone other than you to apply.

The Three Layers of Decision Criteria

Good decision criteria operate on three layers. Most owners only think about the first one and wonder why their people still can't get it right.

Layer 1: The Boundary (What You're Allowed to Do)

This is the most basic layer, and it's what the matrix already provides. It's the “yes or no” of decision rights. Can the crew leader approve overtime for up to two hours? Yes. Can the account manager issue a credit up to \$200? Yes. Can the ops manager approve a repair up to \$1,500? Yes.

Boundaries define the playing field. They tell your people where the lines are. But they don't tell them how to play the game. A crew leader who knows he can approve overtime up to two hours still doesn't know when he should. Every time? Only for Tier 1 clients? Only when the job is more than 75% complete? The boundary alone isn't enough.

Layer 2: The Guideline (How to Think About It)

This layer provides decision-making logic. It's the “if this, then that” that turns a boundary into an actionable standard.

Examples:

Overtime: “Approve up to 2 hours when the job is at least 75% complete and finishing today avoids a return trip. For Tier 1 accounts, approve up to 2 hours regardless of completion percentage to avoid visible service gaps.”

Client credits: “For valid quality complaints on the most recent visit, offer a redo first. If the client prefers a credit, approve up to \$200. For complaints about visits more than 7 days old, offer redo only (no credit) unless the client has photographic documentation.”

Equipment repair: “Repair if the cost is under 40% of replacement value AND the equipment is under 5 years old AND there's no history of the same repair in the past 12 months. If any of those three conditions fail, flag for replacement review.”

See how much richer these are than just the boundary? They give your people a way to think, not just a limit to stay within. They transform “use your judgment” into “here’s how to exercise judgment in this specific situation.”

Layer 3: The Principle (What We Optimize For)

This is the layer most owners never articulate, but it’s the one that holds everything together when situations don’t fit neatly into the guidelines. It answers the question: when in doubt, what should we prioritize?

Every company has implicit principles. You just haven’t said them out loud. Maybe your company prioritizes client retention over short-term margin. Maybe you prioritize crew safety over schedule. Maybe you prioritize quality over speed, or speed over perfection, depending on the service type.

When your ops manager faces a situation the guideline doesn’t cover (and he will, because real life is messy), the principle gives him a compass. If your company’s principle is “when in doubt, protect the client relationship,” he knows that in ambiguous situations, he should lean toward the client-friendly option. If your principle is “when in doubt, protect the margin,” he’ll lean the other way.

Neither is wrong. But he needs to know which one applies in your company.

Writing Criteria That Actually Work

Now that you understand the three layers, let’s talk about how to write criteria that your people will use. Because I’ve seen plenty of companies create beautiful decision documents that nobody follows. The criteria live in a binder or a shared drive somewhere, and everyone ignores them.

That happens when the criteria are written for the wrong audience. You’re not writing for consultants or for a board of directors. You’re writing for a crew leader who’s standing in 95-degree heat, trying to figure out whether to send his crew back to redo a mulch bed or move on to the next property. He needs clarity in 30 seconds, not a policy manual.

Here are the rules for writing criteria that work in the field:

Rule 1: Use Numbers, Not Adjectives

Every time you’re tempted to use words like “reasonable,” “significant,” “appropriate,” or “carefully,” stop. Those words mean something different to every person who reads them. Replace them with a number, a timeframe, a dollar amount, or a specific condition. If you can’t put a number on it, you haven’t defined it yet.

Rule 2: Write for the Worst Day, Not the Best Day

Your criteria need to work on a Tuesday in July when it’s 97 degrees, two guys called out, a truck broke down, and your biggest client just called with a complaint. That’s the day your criteria will be tested. Don’t write for a calm Monday in October when everything is running smoothly, and everyone has time to think.

This means your criteria should be simple enough to recall under stress. If a guideline takes more than two sentences to express, it’s too complicated for the field. Break it into simpler rules or create a quick-reference version.

I worked with a company that had built a beautiful decision guide. Twenty pages, color-coded, professionally designed. Completely useless in the field because nobody could remember what was on page 14 when they needed it at 7:15 AM. We replaced it with a single laminated card per role with the top 10 decisions and their criteria. That card lived in the visor of every truck. Usage went from zero to daily overnight.

Rule 3: Include the “What If”

For every criterion you write, ask yourself: what happens when reality doesn’t match? Because it won’t, regularly.

If the criterion says “Offer a redo within 48 hours,” what happens when you don’t have crew availability for 72 hours? If the criterion says “Repair if under \$1,500,” what happens when the estimate is \$1,600 but the equipment is essential for tomorrow’s route?

The “what if” doesn’t have to cover every possible scenario. That’s impossible. But it should cover the most likely exceptions. A good format:

“Standard: [the rule]. Exception: [the most common situation where the rule doesn’t apply and what to do instead]. Gray area: [if none of the above fits, escalate to (name/role)].”

That three-part structure handles 95% of real-world scenarios. The standard covers normal operations. The exception covers the most common deviation. The gray area gives a clear escape path without requiring your people to freeze up or improvise dangerously.

Rule 4: Separate “Wrong” From “Different”

This is the rule that will require the most honesty from you as an owner. You need to define, clearly, what a genuinely wrong decision looks like versus what a different-but-acceptable decision looks like.

Wrong means the decision violated the criteria, broke a policy, created a safety risk, or caused measurable harm to the company or a client. Wrong decisions should be corrected and used as learning opportunities.

Different means the decision was within the boundaries, met the criteria, and produced an acceptable outcome, but it wasn’t the call you would have made. Different decisions should be left alone. Full stop.

The moment you start correcting “different” decisions, you’ve undermined the entire framework. Your people will learn, quickly, that the criteria on paper are less important than the preferences in your head. And they’ll go back to asking you everything.

Common Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)

I’ve watched enough companies implement decision criteria to know where the wheels tend to come off. Here are the five most common mistakes and how to steer around them.

Mistake 1: Writing Criteria You Don’t Actually Believe In

This happens when owners write what they think they should want instead of what they actually want. You write that your account manager can approve credits up to \$200, but in your gut, you don’t want them approving anything over \$50 without checking with you first.

If you don’t believe in the boundary you set, don’t set it. Start with a number you’re comfortable with. It’s better to set a tight boundary you’ll honor than a generous one you’ll override. You can always expand it later as trust builds. You can’t rebuild trust after you’ve broken it by overruling a decision that was within the stated guidelines.

Mistake 2: Making Criteria Too Complicated

If your decision criterion has more than three conditions, it’s too complex for the field. Remember: crew leaders and account managers need to apply these in real time, often under pressure. They’re not sitting at a desk with a flowchart.

A good test: can you explain the criterion in one breath? If you need to pause and take a second breath, simplify it. Break complex decisions into two simpler ones if needed. “If A, do X. If B, do Y” is almost always better than “If A and B but not C, unless D applies, then do X unless Y, in which case Z.”

Mistake 3: Writing Criteria Without Input From the People Using Them

I’ve seen owners lock themselves in their office for a weekend, write out every decision criterion for every role, and then hand the finished product to their team on Monday morning. The team nods politely. And then nothing changes.

Your people need to be part of building the criteria, not just receiving them. When your crew leader helps define what “quality standard” means for a residential mow, he owns that standard differently than if you handed it to him. When your account manager helps set the credit threshold, she

understands the reasoning behind it and is more likely to honor the spirit of the rule, not just the letter.

The best criteria come from a conversation, not a memo. We'll cover exactly how to have that conversation in Chapter 7.

Mistake 4: Setting Criteria and Never Revisiting Them

Decision criteria are not set-and-forget. Your business changes. Your clients change. Your costs are changing. Material prices shift. New services are being added. People develop and grow in their roles.

Build in a quarterly review of your decision rights matrix. Look at which criteria are working well, which ones are causing friction, and which ones need updating. Are your dollar thresholds still appropriate? Are the escalation triggers catching the right things? Are there new decisions that have emerged since the original build?

A living document is a useful document. A static document is a forgotten document.

Mistake 5: Punishing Good-Faith Mistakes

When someone decides within the criteria, and it doesn't turn out well, your response defines the future of the entire framework. If you punish the outcome even though the process was right, you've just taught your entire organization that the criteria don't matter. Results are all that count. And since results are unpredictable, the only safe move is to ask the boss.

Good-faith mistakes made within the criteria should be treated as learning opportunities, not discipline issues. Your account manager approved a \$175 credit, and the client still left? That's not a discipline issue. That's a data point. Maybe the criteria need updating. Maybe the credit threshold should be higher, so the account manager has room to fight for the account. Maybe this client was going to leave regardless.

The conversation should be: “You followed the criteria. The outcome wasn’t what we wanted. What can we learn, and do we need to adjust the criteria?”
 Not: “You lost the account. Why didn’t you call me?”

The first response builds a culture of ownership. The second destroys it.

Real Examples From Real Companies

Let me give you a few examples of decision criteria from landscape companies I’ve worked with. These are simplified and anonymized, but the logic is real.

Example 1: The “80/20 Quality Rule”

A \$7M maintenance company struggled with consistency because every crew leader had a different definition of “done.” Some crews were spending 20% longer than necessary on residential properties because they were chasing perfection. Others were rushing and leaving visible quality gaps.

The owner and his crew leaders built what they called the 80/20 Quality Rule. It had two parts. First, they created a 10-point quality checklist for residential maintenance (mowing lines straight and uniform, edging crisp on all hard surfaces, clippings blown off all surfaces, beds weeded and defined, and so on). Second, they defined the standard: 8 out of 10 items completed to the standard means the property is done. Scoring below 8 means the crew stays until they hit 8. Scoring 10 out of 10 is great, but not required for a standard residential property.

Tier 1 accounts had a different standard: 9 out of 10. Commercial accounts with HOA visibility requirements: 10 out of 10.

The result: crew time per property dropped 12% because crews stopped over-servicing standard accounts, and quality complaints dropped 35% because the floor was clearly defined. Every crew leader knew exactly what “done” meant. No phone calls to the boss are required.

Example 2: The “Two-Call Rule” for Client Complaints

An \$8M company had an account management team that escalated every complaint to the owner, no matter how small. The owner was spending three to four hours a week on client complaints, most of which were straightforward quality issues.

They implemented what they called the Two-Call Rule. On the first call from an unhappy client, the account manager owns the resolution entirely (redo, credit up to

\$200, accelerated next-visit schedule). The account manager logs the complaint and resolution in the CRM, but does not need approval.

If the same client calls a second time within 60 days with a related complaint, the account manager still owns it, but adds a root cause meeting with the crew leader to the resolution. The account manager also informs the owner within 24 hours.

Only if the same client reaches a third complaint in 90 days, or if any single complaint involves a client threatening to cancel, does it escalate to the owner.

Result: the owner's weekly complaint time dropped from three to four hours to about 45 minutes. Account managers felt empowered, and clients reported higher satisfaction because their issues were resolved faster, without the delay of waiting for the owner to get back to them.

Example 3: The Equipment Decision Tree

A \$5.5M company was bleeding money on equipment decisions because nobody had clear authority. Crew leaders would nurse broken equipment for weeks because they didn't want to spend money. Or they'd rent equipment at premium rates without checking if repair was cheaper.

They built a simple three-question decision tree:

- **Question 1:** Is the equipment safe to operate? If not, take it out of service immediately. No approval needed.

- **Question 2:** Can it be repaired for under \$500 with same-day turnaround? If yes, the crew leader approves the repair and notifies the ops manager.
- **Question 3:** If repair is over \$500, or turnaround is more than 24 hours, the ops manager decides. Repair up to \$1,500 is his call. Over \$1,500 goes to the owner.

Three questions. Three clear paths. The result: equipment downtime dropped by about 40% because decisions were being made at the point of failure instead of bouncing up through two levels of management.

Building Your Company’s Decision Principles

Before we close this chapter, I want you to write down your company’s core decision principles. These are the tiebreakers. The compass headings that guide your people when the criteria and guidelines don’t perfectly fit the situation.

You don’t need many. Three to five is plenty. And they should be honest, not aspirational. Write what you believe, not what sounds good in a mission statement.

Print these. Post them. Reference them in meetings. Make them part of how you talk about decisions. Over time, they become the cultural shorthand that keeps your organization aligned even when the specific criteria don’t cover a situation perfectly.

You’ve now got the matrix (Chapter 5) and the criteria philosophy (this chapter). The framework is built. But the framework sitting on paper doesn’t change anything. It has to be communicated, trained, and handed off in a way that your people trust and adopt.

That’s Chapter 7: The Handoff Conversation. We’re going to cover exactly what to say, how to say it, and how to handle the pushback that’s inevitably coming.

CHAPTER SEVEN



THE HANDOFF CONVERSATION

THE CONVERSATION THAT CHANGES THE CULTURE

“I was so afraid they’d see it as me dumping more work on them. Turns out, they’d been waiting for this conversation for years.”

-Owner of a \$6M landscape company, after rolling out decision rights to his team

You’ve built the matrix. You’ve defined the criteria. You’ve written the principles. Everything is on paper and ready to go.

Now comes the part that scares most owners more than any spreadsheet or framework ever could: sitting down with your people, looking them in the eye, and saying, “I’m giving you the authority to make these decisions. For real. Starting now.”

This conversation is not a formality. It’s not an email announcement. It’s not a bullet point in a team meeting between schedule updates and safety reminders. This is the single most important conversation you will have with your leadership team this year, and how you handle it determines whether the matrix becomes a living tool or another binder on the shelf.

I’ve watched owners nail this conversation and transform their companies in 90 days. I’ve also watched owners fumble it and wonder six months later

why nothing changed. The difference is almost always in how the handoff was framed, delivered, and followed up on.

Let's make sure you nail it.

Why This Conversation Is Harder Than You Think

Before we get into the scripts and the structure, let's talk about why this moment feels so heavy, because understanding the emotional weight of the handoff is the first step to handling it well.

For You (The Owner)

Handing over decision authority feels like handing over control. And for someone who built a company from nothing by controlling everything, that's terrifying. There's a voice in your head saying, "What if they mess it up? What if they give away too much? What if they make a call that costs me a client?"

That voice is normal. It's also the same voice that got you to the ceiling in the first place. Acknowledge it, but DON'T let it drive your actions.

Here's something that might be of help: you're not giving away control. You're redesigning it. The matrix, the criteria, the escalation triggers, the information flow, all of that is your control mechanism. It's just a different kind of control than personally making every decision. Instead of controlling every output, you're controlling the system that produces outputs. That's what leaders do. That's what you're becoming.

For Your Team

Your team has a different set of fears. Understanding them is critical to getting the conversation right.

Fear 1: “This is more work.” Some of your people will hear “you now own these decisions” and translate it to “you now have more responsibility with no more pay.” This is especially true if past delegation efforts came with extra work but no real authority.

You need to frame this as empowerment, not a workload dump.

Fear 2: “What if I get it wrong?” Your ops manager has been operating in a system where the safe move was always to check with you. Now you’re telling him to make the call. If he’s been corrected in the past for making decisions without your input, he’s going to be cautious. You need to explicitly address the safety net.

Fear 3: “This won’t last.” If you’ve tried delegation before and pulled it back (and be honest, you probably have), your team is going to be skeptical. They’ve heard the speech before. They need to see that this time is different, and they need to see it in the specifics, not just the sentiment.

Fear 4: “Is he trying to step back from the business?” Some team members, especially long-tenured ones, may interpret the handoff as a sign that you’re checking out, planning to sell, or losing interest. Address this directly. This isn’t about you doing less. It’s about the company being able to do more.

The Four-Part Handoff Framework

I’ve refined this framework over dozens of implementations. It works because it addresses both the logical and emotional components of the handoff. Skip any of the four parts, and you’ll leave a gap that undermines the whole effort.

Part 1: The Why (Set the Context)

Before you show anyone the matrix, they need to understand why it exists. Not in theory. In specifics that connect to their daily experience.

Start by sharing what you learned from the decision audit. Real numbers from your company, not hypotheticals. Tell them how many decisions flowed to you last week. Tell them what it costs in time and money. Tell them what it means for the company’s ability to grow.

Then connect it to their experience. They already know the problem. They're the ones waiting for callbacks. They're the ones frustrated because they can't get an answer fast enough to solve a problem in the field. They know the bottleneck exists. They just didn't know you knew.

Part 2: The What (Show the Matrix)

Now introduce the matrix. Walk through it decision by decision for their role. Not all 15 templates at once. Just the ones that apply to the person (or people) in the room.

For each decision, explain:

1. What the decision is and why it matters
2. Why are you assigning it to them specifically (tie it to their strengths and proximity)
3. What the criteria are and how you arrived at them
4. When to escalate and what the triggers look like in practice
5. How the information flows back to you

Go slowly here. This is a lot for someone to absorb, especially if they've been operating in a "check with the boss" mode for years. Use real examples from recent weeks. "Remember when you called me about the equipment repair on the Miller crew truck? Under this framework, that's your call. Here's how you'd make it."

Concrete, recent examples make the abstract framework feel real and achievable.

Part 3: The Safety Net (Address the Fear)

This is the part most owners skip, and it's the part that matters most. Your people need to hear, explicitly, what happens when they make a decision that doesn't turn out well.

Tell them the difference between “wrong” and “different.” Tell them that decisions made within the criteria, even if they produce imperfect outcomes, are protected. Tell them that good-faith mistakes are learning opportunities, not discipline events. Tell them you will not override decisions that fall within their authority on the matrix.

And then tell them the hardest part: you might struggle with this too. Being honest about your own challenge builds trust faster than any speech about empowerment ever could.

Part 4: The Ask (Get Their Buy-In)

Don’t end the conversation with a handshake and a “sound good?” That’s a closed-ended question that invites a polite nod, not real engagement.

Instead, ask open-ended questions that invite them into the process:

- Which of these decisions feels most comfortable to you right now?
- Which one are you most nervous about?
- Are there any criteria that don’t make sense or that you’d adjust?
- What support do you need from me to feel confident making these calls?
- Is there anything on this list that you think should stay with me?

These questions do two things. First, they give you real information about where confidence is high and where it’s low, so you know where to invest your coaching time in the first 30 days. Second, they give your team member ownership of the framework.

When they help shape it, they’re not just receiving instructions. They’re co-building the system they’ll operate in.

If they suggest adjustments to the criteria, listen seriously. They might be right. They’re closer to the decisions than you are. If their suggestions are

reasonable, incorporate them on the spot. That single act of listening and adapting will do more for adoption than any motivational speech.

Who Gets the Conversation First

Don't try to roll this out to your entire organization at once. Start with your direct reports, one at a time. Private, focused conversations where you can go deep on their specific decisions.

The sequence matters. I recommend this order:

First: Your operations manager. This person has the most decisions to make and the most daily impact. They're also the ones who will cascade the framework to crew leaders. If you get this conversation right with your ops manager, the rest gets easier.

Second: Your account manager(s). Client-facing decisions carry emotional weight and revenue risk. Account managers need dedicated time to process the criteria around complaints, credits, and pricing authority.

Third: Your crew leaders (as a group, with your ops manager present). Crew leaders can receive their decision rights together because their decisions are more standardized. Having your ops manager present for this conversation signals that the matrix is the real system, not a side project. It also lets the ops manager start exercising his new authority in real time by co-leading the rollout.

Fourth: Support roles (office manager, fleet manager, controller, etc.) as applicable. These conversations tend to be shorter because the decision volume is lower, but they're still important.

Spread these conversations over one to two weeks. Don't rush them. A 30-minute conversation that goes deep is worth more than a 90-minute team meeting where everyone nods, and nobody absorbs.

Handling Pushback

You're going to get pushback. Not necessarily hostile, but real. Here are the most common forms and how to handle them.

Pushback 1: "I don't want that responsibility."

This usually comes from crew leaders or newer managers who are comfortable in a follower role. They like having someone else make the calls because it means they can't be blamed when things go wrong.

How to handle it: Don't force it. Start with a smaller set of decisions and expand over time. "You don't have to own all of these right away. Let's start with these three. They're decisions you're already making in practice; we're just making them official. We'll add more as you get comfortable."

Pushback 2: "What if the owner changes his mind?"

This is the skepticism pushback, and it's the most legitimate one. If you've pulled back delegation before, your team has reason to doubt. They're protecting themselves.

How to handle it: Acknowledge it directly. "You're right to be cautious. I've tried versions of this before and pulled it back. Here's what's different this time: it's written down. The criteria are specific. The boundaries are clear. And I'm asking you to hold me accountable if I start overriding you." The written matrix is your credibility. A verbal promise is forgettable. A laminated card with specific criteria is a commitment.

Pushback 3: "The criteria don't fit my reality."

This is the best pushback you can get because it means someone is engaging with the framework seriously enough to find its gaps.

How to handle it: Treat it as a collaboration opportunity. "Walk me through a specific situation where this doesn't work. Let's adjust it together." Then actually adjust it. If the crew leader tells you the \$150 daily fuel threshold doesn't account for the crews that run diesel equipment on commercial sites, raise it to \$200 for those crews. Adapting the criteria in real time shows your team that this is a working document, not a decree.

Pushback 4: “Are you selling the company?”

Loyalty-based pushbacks usually come from your longest-tenured people. They’ve been with you since the early days. They see the handoff as a sign that something bigger is happening.

How to handle it: Be direct and honest. If you’re not planning an exit, say so. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m building this so the company can grow past what I can manage alone. I need you to step into more authority because the company needs it, not because I’m stepping out.” If you are building toward an exit (and some readers of this book will be), you can still frame it honestly: “I’m building a company that doesn’t depend on any one person, including me. That makes everyone’s job more secure, not less.”

Pushback 5: “I want more money if I’m taking on more.”

Fair question. And it deserves a fair answer.

How to handle it: If the decision rights you’re handing off represent a genuine increase in scope and authority, a compensation conversation is appropriate. Not necessarily right now, but on a defined timeline. “Let’s implement this over the next 90 days. If you’re consistently making these decisions well and the company is seeing the benefit, we’ll revisit your compensation at the 90-day mark.” Tie the increase to demonstrated performance within the new framework, not to the handoff itself.

The First Week After the Handoff

The conversation itself is only the beginning. What you do in the seven days after the handoff determines whether the framework sticks or fades.

Expect the Bounceback

In the first week, your people will still come to you with decisions that now belong to them. Not because they forgot. Because they’re testing, they want to see if you really mean it.

When this happens (and it will, probably within 24 hours), resist the urge to answer the question. Instead, use what I call the Redirect Response:

This exchange takes 30 seconds. More importantly, it reinforces the framework without making the person feel stupid for asking. You're coaching them through the decision process, not just rejecting their question.

After three or four of these redirects, most people stop asking. They start going straight to the matrix. And that's the moment the culture starts to shift.

Catch Them Doing It Right

This is just as important as the redirect. When you see someone make a decision within the matrix without coming to you, acknowledge it. Not in a big, performative way. Just a quick, sincere acknowledgment.

"I saw you handled the Ridgeline Equipment rental on your own yesterday. Good call. Exactly how the framework is supposed to work."

Positive reinforcement in the first week is rocket fuel for adoption. Your people are looking for signals about whether this is real or just another management initiative that will fade by next month. Every time you acknowledge a decision made without your involvement, you send the signal: this is real.

Check In, Don't Check Up

At the end of the first week, have a brief check-in with each person who received decision rights. Not to review their decisions. To ask how it felt.

Questions like:

- Which decisions felt natural?
- Which ones still felt uncomfortable?
- Did you hit any situations that the criteria didn't cover?
- Is there anything you'd change about the framework?

Listen more than you talk. Adjust the criteria if their feedback is valid. This check-in isn't performance management. It's framework refinement. And it signals that you're invested in making this work for them, not just for you.

The Cascade: From Manager to Crew Leader

Once your direct reports have internalized their decision rights, they need to cascade the framework to their teams. Your ops manager should have a handoff conversation with crew leaders. Your account manager should walk through the client-facing criteria with any junior account managers or coordinators.

The cascade serves two purposes. First, it gets the framework into the hands of the people who make the most daily decisions (crew leaders). Second, and just as important, it gives your managers practice exercising their new authority. When your ops manager leads the handoff conversation with crew leaders, he's not just delivering information. He's stepping into his role as the operational decision-maker. He owns the framework.

Support your managers in this cascade, but don't lead for them. If you stand up in front of the crew leaders and deliver the matrix yourself, you've just undermined your ops manager's authority. Let him lead. Coach him beforehand. Be available if he has questions. But the crew leaders need to hear this from their boss, not from the boss's boss.

What Good Looks Like After 30 Days

If you handle the handoff well, here's what you should see within the first month:

- Your phone buzzes less. Not zero, but noticeably less. The routine questions stop. The texts about overtime, equipment, and minor client issues slow to a trickle.
- Your ops manager starts sentences with "I decided" instead of "What do you think about?" That language shift is the clearest sign that the culture is moving.

- Your account managers resolve complaints faster because they're not waiting for your callback. Client satisfaction goes up, not down.
- Crew leaders make field-level decisions with more confidence. Equipment doesn't sit broken for three days waiting for approval. Routes adjust in real time when conditions change.
- You start finding time in your day you didn't know you had. Not hours at first. Maybe 30 to 45 minutes. But it's there, and it's growing.

If you don't see these changes after 30 days, one of three things is happening: the criteria need adjusting, someone doesn't trust the framework yet, or you're unconsciously undermining it by overriding decisions. Chapter 14 will help you diagnose and adjust.

But the handoff conversation is only half the equation. The other half is making sure decisions stay distributed over time. That's Chapter 8: Installing Accountability. The weekly cadences, the KPI dashboards, and the review rhythms that ensure the matrix doesn't just launch well but runs well, permanently.

CHAPTER EIGHT



INSTALLING ACCOUNTABILITY

CLARITY WITHOUT RHYTHM IS A WISH

“The matrix gave us clarity. The weekly cadence gave us rhythm. Before we did both, we’d have had a good first month and a slow slide back to the old way.”

-Operations manager at an \$8.5M landscape company

You’ve built the matrix. You’ve had the handoff conversations. Your team knows what they own, what the criteria are, and when to escalate. The first week went well. The second week goes well. By week three, a couple of decisions start drifting back to you. By week six, half of your team is checking with you again on things they’re supposed to own.

What happened? The same thing that happens to every system without a rhythm: entropy. Human organizations naturally drift toward their old patterns. Your company spent years operating with you as the central decision-maker. That muscle memory doesn’t disappear because you built a matrix and had a conversation. It fades slowly, over weeks and months, with constant reinforcement.

Accountability is that reinforcement. Not accountability in the punitive sense (though there’s a place for that). Accountability in the structural sense: regular rhythms, visible metrics, and review cadences that keep the framework active and alive.

Think of it this way. The matrix is the playbook. This chapter is the practice schedule. Without regular practice, even the best playbook gets dusty.

The Weekly Operational Cadence

Every landscape company I've worked with that successfully implemented decision rights has one thing in common: a weekly meeting rhythm that keeps the framework in motion. Not more meetings. The right meetings, structured the right way, focused on the right things.

Here's the cadence I recommend. It has three components, and the total time investment is about two hours per week. Compare that to the 22 hours per week you spent on decisions that didn't need your involvement. That's a trade you should make every time.

Meeting 1: The Monday Morning Standup (15 minutes)

Who: Owner, ops manager, account manager(s).

When: Monday morning, before the first truck rolls. Same time every week, no exceptions.

Purpose: Set the week. Surface anything unusual. Confirm that decision rights are tracking.

The Monday standup does two things for the framework. First, it gives your team a regular moment to surface decision-rights friction without making it a big deal. If your ops manager hit a situation last week where the criteria didn't quite fit, this is where he raises it. Quick fix, move on. Second, it keeps the matrix visible when you ask "who owns what this week" every Monday; you're reminding everyone that the framework is active, not archived.

Meeting 2: The Wednesday Ops Review (30 minutes)

Who: Owner and ops manager (one-on-one).

When: Wednesday, midday. The week is half done, and you have real data to discuss.

Purpose: Review operational performance. Discuss decisions made under the matrix. Coach and calibrate.

The Wednesday ops review is where calibration happens. Over time, you'll find that your ops manager's decisions align more closely with what you would have done, not because he's reading your mind, but because you're both working from the same criteria and refining them together. This meeting is the mechanism that turns the matrix from a static document into a learning system.

Meeting 3: The Friday Close-Out (15 minutes)

Who: Same group as Monday standup.

When: Friday afternoon, after the last crew is in (or as close as possible to allow full participation)

Purpose: Close the week. Capture lessons. Set up on Monday.

The Friday close-out creates a bookend with the Monday standup. Together, they create a weekly loop: plan, execute, review, adjust. That loop is what prevents drift. It's what keeps the old patterns from creeping back in. And it gives everyone a regular, low-pressure forum to talk about how the framework works.

The KPI Dashboard for Landscape Operations

You can't manage what you can't measure, and you can't sustain decision rights without visibility into the results those decisions are producing. You need a dashboard. Not a complicated one. Not one that requires a data analyst to maintain. A simple, one-page view of the numbers that matter.

Here's the dashboard I recommend for landscape companies implementing decision rights. It tracks both operational performance and framework

adoption. Most of these numbers you already have somewhere; you just haven't put them in one place.

You don't need all twelve metrics from day one. Start with the five that matter most to your current situation. For most companies launching decision rights, I'd start with:

1. **Escalation frequency per role**
2. **Client complaints per week**
3. **Weekly overtime spend**
4. **Revenue per labor hour**
5. **Average complaint resolution time**

Those five will tell you whether the framework is working or not.

Add the rest over the first 90 days as you build the habit of reviewing them.

Keeping the Dashboard Simple

The dashboard should fit on one page. If it doesn't, it's too complicated and nobody will look at it. Use a simple spreadsheet, a whiteboard in the office, or whatever format your ops manager will update every week, without fail.

I've seen companies spend \$5,000 on business intelligence software for dashboards that nobody opens. I've also seen companies track everything they need on a whiteboard with three colored markers. The whiteboard companies always have better results because the data is visible, physical, and impossible to ignore.

Post the dashboard where your team sees it every day. The shop wall, the break room, the ops manager's office. Make the numbers public (or at least team-facing). When people can see the results of their decisions, they care more about making good ones.

Review Rhythms That Keep Decisions Distributed

Beyond the weekly cadence, you need three review rhythms that operate on longer timescales. These prevent the slow drift that kills most frameworks over months.

The Monthly Decision Review (60 minutes)

Once a month, sit down with your ops manager and account manager(s) for a structured review of how the decision rights framework is performing.

The monthly review is where the matrix evolves. The first version you built won't be the version you're using six months from now, and that's a sign of health, not failure. A framework that never changes is a framework nobody's engaging with.

The Quarterly Framework Assessment (Half Day)

Every 90 days, step back for a bigger-picture look. This is a half-day session (three to four hours) where you assess the overall health of the decision rights framework and plan the next quarter's evolution.

The quarterly assessment is also the right time to revisit the compensation conversations you deferred during the handoff. If your ops manager has consistently made good decisions within the expanded framework for 90 days, recognize it. Tangibly.

The Annual Reset (Full Day)

Once a year, do a full audit of your decision rights framework. Repeat the one-week decision audit from Chapter 4 to see how decision flow has changed. Compare the results to your original audit. Quantify the improvement.

This annual reset serves two purposes. First, it gives you hard data on how much the framework has saved you in time, money, and capacity. You'll need those numbers for your own motivation and for making the case to continue investing in the system.

Second, it catches any structural drift that the monthly and quarterly reviews missed.

The annual reset is also the right time to extend the framework to new areas of the business. Maybe you've added a construction division. Maybe you've expanded to a second location. Maybe you've grown from \$6M to \$9M, and the old thresholds need recalibration. The annual audit gives you the data to make those adjustments with confidence.

The Accountability Conversation

Let's talk about the harder side of accountability. What happens when someone isn't using the framework? When your ops manager keeps calling you for decisions that are clearly within his authority? When a crew leader ignores the quality checklist? When an account manager gives away credits without logging them?

First, diagnose before you discipline. Most framework failures aren't attitude problems. They're clarity problems or confidence problems. Ask before you correct.

Most of the time, you'll find the issue in questions one through three. The criteria weren't clear enough. The person needs more coaching. The situation didn't fit neatly into the matrix. These are solvable problems that require adjustment, not discipline.

But sometimes, rarely, the issue is genuine resistance. Someone who simply doesn't want to make decisions. Someone who prefers the old way because it was safer. In those cases, you have a different problem. That's not a framework issue. That's a fit issue. And it's a conversation for a different day, not this book.

What This Looks Like at Scale

Let me paint you a picture of what a fully functioning accountability system looks like in a \$6M to \$10M landscape company six months after implementation.

Monday morning, 6:45 AM. Your ops manager is in the office reviewing the week's schedule. Two crew members called out. He adjusts the routes, pulls a backup from another team, and notifies the affected crew leaders. All within the matrix. No call to you.

7:00 AM, the Monday standup happens. Your ops manager briefs the team on staffing and schedule adjustments. Your account manager flags a Tier 1 client who complained on Friday about edging quality. She already offered a redo and quality-checked the next visit personally. Resolved. She logs it in the CRM and moves on. You nod and ask if the criteria worked. She says yes. Fifteen minutes, done.

By 10 AM, three decisions have been made across the organization without your involvement. A crew leader approved 90 minutes of overtime to finish a commercial property. Your ops manager approved a \$900 mower repair. An account manager offered a \$150 credit to a residential client who had a legitimate complaint about a missed service area.

You find out about all three via the end-of-day summary. You agree with all three. Even the credit, which you might have set at \$100, was within the criteria, and the client is happy. Different, not wrong.

On Wednesday, you sit down with your ops manager for the weekly review. You look at the dashboard together. Revenue per labor hour is up 4% since the framework was launched. Overtime is flat (which is fine, it's in season). Escalation frequency has dropped 60% from where it was three months ago. You discuss one decision that didn't go well (a subcontractor selection that came in over budget) and adjust the criteria to require a cost comparison for subs over \$3,000.

Friday close-out. Quick recap, quick wins, one adjustment for next week. Everyone leaves at a reasonable time, including you.

That's the rhythm. That's what accountability looks like when it's built into the system, not bolted on as an afterthought. The matrix provides clarity. The cadence provides rhythm. Together, they produce a company that operates, grows, and improves without you in the middle of every conversation.

You now have the complete framework:

- *Chapter 4 mapped your decision universe and gave you the audit tool*
- *Chapter 5 built the Decision Rights Matrix with 15 ready-to-use templates*
- *Chapter 6 defined the criteria philosophy that makes the matrix work*
- *Chapter 7 gave you the handoff conversation and the scripts to deliver it*
- *Chapter 8 (this chapter) installed the accountability rhythms that keep it alive*

Now we build on this framework by making it role-specific. We're going to build detailed playbooks for the four key roles in landscape operations: crew leaders, operations managers, account managers, and branch managers. Each playbook tells that person exactly what they own, what they escalate, and how to develop into their new level of authority.

The framework is built. The rhythm is set. Now let's put it in the hands of the people who need it most.

CHAPTER NINE



THE CREW LEADER PLAYBOOK

THE MOST IMPORTANT ROLE NOBODY
DEVELOPS

“Once I knew what decisions were mine to make, I stopped being a babysitter with a mower and started being a leader. My crew noticed the difference before my boss did.”

-Crew leader at a \$4.4M landscape company

If you want to know the real health of a landscape company, don't look at the owner's calendar or the P&L statement. Watch the crew leaders. They are the frontline decision-makers of your entire operation. Every property your company touches, every client interaction at the job site, every quality judgment, every safety call, every minute of production time runs through the crew leader's hands.

And yet, in most landscape companies, the crew leader role gets the least investment in development. You take your best crew member, hand them the keys to the truck, and say, “You're in charge now.” Maybe you bump their pay by a dollar or two. Maybe you could give them a company shirt with a slightly different color. And then you wonder why they still operate like a crew member who happens to drive.

The crew leader is the role with the greatest daily impact on decision rights. If your crew leaders know what they own, they

make dozens of small, fast, correct decisions every day without calling anyone. If they don't, those dozens of decisions either don't get made (creating delays and rework) or they flow up to your ops manager, who sends them to you, and the whole system bogs down.

This playbook is designed to be handed directly to your crew leaders. You can photocopy it, laminate the key pages, or use it as the basis for a crew leader orientation. It's written to them, not about them.

What You Own

As a crew leader, you are the decision-maker on the ground. Here are the decisions that are yours. These are yours to make without calling your ops manager or the owner. Make them confidently, quickly, and using the criteria below.

Crew Leader Authority Matrix

Defined Guardrails for Field-Level Decision Ownership

1. Quality Standard Before Leaving Property

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Meets the quality checklist for the service type.
 - 8 out of 10 standard properties
 - 9 out of 10 Tier 1
 - 10 out of 10 HOA or commercial
- Escalation Trigger: Cannot complete to standard due to weather, access issues, or conditions beyond your control.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager informed same day if standard

is not met.

2. Overtime (Up to 2 Hours)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Job is at least 75 percent complete and finishing today avoids a return trip.
 - Or a Tier 1 account has a visible service gap.
- Escalation Trigger: Over 2 hours per crew per day.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager notified via text before overtime begins.

3. Field Equipment Repair (Under 30 Minutes)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Parts available.
 - The crew has skill.
 - Repair returns equipment to operational condition the same day.
- Escalation Trigger: Repair will take longer than 30 minutes, or the required parts are not on hand.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager notified via text.

4. Swap to Backup Equipment

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Backup equipment available and retrievable within 30 minutes.

- Escalation Trigger: No backup available, and the job cannot continue.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager notified immediately.

5. Fuel and Supply Purchases (Up to \$150 Per Day)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Required for current-day operations.
- Escalation Trigger: Single purchase exceeds \$150.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager informed via weekly expense review.

6. Stop Work for Safety Concern

- Authority Level: Absolute authority
- Criteria:
 - Any condition you believe is unsafe.
 - No approval required. Ever.
- Escalation Trigger: Never requires escalation to stop work.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager and Owner informed as soon as safe.

7. Minor On-Site Adjustments

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Small scope adjustments that do not change service time by more than 15 minutes.

- Examples include skipping a section due to irrigation running or adjusting the mowing pattern for wet conditions.
- Escalation Trigger: Client present and requesting changes to contract scope.
- Information Flow: The Account Manager is informed if a client-facing change occurs.

8. Crew Member Task Assignments

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Assign tasks based on skill, efficiency, and development needs.
- Escalation Trigger: Performance issue requiring formal conversation.
- Information Flow: Not applicable. This is part of daily leadership responsibility.

Read that list one more time. Those eight decisions represent the core of your daily authority. You don't need permission for any of them if you stay within the criteria. If the criteria are met and the escalation triggers aren't hit, it's your call. Make it.

What You Escalate

- Not everything is your call and knowing when to escalate is just as important as knowing when to decide. Here's what goes up to your ops manager:
- Equipment repair estimates over \$500 or repairs that will take more than one day
- Overtime beyond 2 hours per crew per day
- Any client interaction where the client is unhappy, and you can't

resolve it on-site

- Staffing issues (crew member no-shows after the route has started, interpersonal conflicts that affect work)
- Any safety incident beyond basic first aid
- Situations where the scope of work doesn't match what was communicated to you
- Any property where you cannot meet the quality standard, and the reason is systemic (not weather-related)

When you escalate, don't just send the problem. Send a recommendation. "Hey, the Walker mower has a hydraulic leak. The estimate is \$800. The machine is three years old, and this is the first time. I think we should repair. What do you think?" That's an escalation with a recommendation. That's what leaders do. It makes your ops manager's job easier, and it builds trust faster than anything else.

Your Daily Workflow

A great crew leader's day follows a rhythm. Here's what that looks like when you're operating with full decision rights:

Before the First Property (5:30 to 6:30 AM)

Review the day's route. Know every property you're hitting, the service type for each, and the expected time. Check the weather. If conditions are going to affect service (wet grass, extreme heat), plan your adjustments now, not at 10 AM when you're already behind.

Inspect your equipment. Walk the trailer. Check fuel levels, blade condition, trimmer line, and blower function. A 10-minute pre-check saves a 45-minute breakdown at the third property.

Brief your crew. Two minutes, standing at the trailer. "Here's our route today. Here's what's different from yesterday. Here's what I need from each of you."

Simple, clear, fast. Your crew should leave the shop knowing exactly what the day looks like.

At Each Property

Arrive and scan. Before anyone touches a piece of equipment, walk the property with your eyes. Any changes since last visit? Irrigation running? Cars in the driveway where you need to mow? Debris that needs clearing? Client left a note? Thirty seconds of scanning prevents thirty minutes of problems.

Assign and execute. Put the right person on the right task. Your fastest trimmer on the detail work. Your most consistent mower on the front lawn. New crew members on tasks where they're building skills, but where a mistake isn't visible to the client.

Quality check before you leave. Walk the property one more time before loading up. Run through the quality checklist mentally or physically. Hit the standard? Go. Below standard? Fix it now. It's always faster to fix it before you leave than to come back tomorrow.

Document Tier 1 properties. If the property is a Tier 1 account, take a quick photo after service. It takes five seconds and provides documentation if there's ever a dispute. Your account manager will thank you for it.

End of Day

Report your numbers. How many properties have been completed? Any rework? Any overtime used (and why)? Any equipment issues? This takes three to five minutes and feeds directly into the ops manager's weekly dashboard.

Prep for tomorrow. Fuel up. Load materials for tomorrow's route. Flag anything that needs attention before morning. A crew leader who sets up tomorrow tonight saves 15 to 20 minutes of chaos in the morning.

The Quality Standard in Detail

Quality is the area where crew leaders make the most decisions per day. Let's make sure you know exactly what "good" looks like.

Crew Leader Quality Checklist

Before leaving the property, confirm the following:

1. Mowing lines are straight and uniform, with appropriate height for turf type and season.
2. Edging is crisp on all hard surfaces, including driveways, sidewalks, curbs, and bed lines.
3. All clippings are blown off hard surfaces, beds, and mulch areas.
4. String trimming is complete around all obstacles, including trees, posts, signs, and fences.
5. Beds are weeded and defined (if included in the service contract).
6. Debris and litter are removed from visible areas.
7. No scalping, rutting, or visible mower damage.
8. Gates are closed, and items are returned to their original positions.
9. Equipment marks or tire tracks are addressed.
10. Overall curb appeal: Would you be proud to put your name on this?

Completion Standards

- Standard accounts: 8 out of 10 equals done.
- Tier 1 accounts: 9 out of 10 equals done.
- HOA or commercial visibility accounts: 10 out of 10 equals done.

Below standard? Fix it before you leave. Always.

That last line on the checklist, “Would you be proud to put your name on this?” is the tiebreaker for every judgment call the checklist doesn’t cover. It’s the crew leader’s version of the company principle. When in doubt, ask yourself that question.

Common Crew Leader Scenarios

Here are situations you’ll face regularly and how to handle them under the decision rights framework:

Scenario 1: A Client Approaches You on Site

The client walks out and says the mowing height is too short, or they want you to add something to the service, or they’re unhappy about something from the last visit.

Your move: Be professional and listen. If it’s a simple adjustment you can make right now without changing the service scope or time by more than 15 minutes (like adjusting mow height), do it. If the client is requesting something outside the contract scope, or if they’re unhappy about a recurring issue, tell them you’ll have your account manager contact them today. Then text your account manager immediately with the details. Do not promise the client anything beyond what you’re authorized to deliver.

Scenario 2: Equipment Breaks Down Mid-Route

Your primary mower goes down at the fourth property of the day. You’ve got eight more to go.

Your move: Can you fix it in under 30 minutes with parts you have? Fix it. Can you swap to a backup from the shop within 30 minutes? Send someone to get it. Neither option works? Call your ops manager immediately with the situation, your recommendation, and how urgent it is. Don’t sit in a parking lot for 45 minutes hoping someone figures it out. The matrix gives you clear steps. Follow them.

Scenario 3: Weather Changes Mid-Day

You started dry, now it's raining. Or the heat index just hit 105.

Your move: For rain, you have the authority to adjust service standards to rain-day protocol (if your company has one defined). If rain is heavy enough to prevent quality service, call your ops manager for rescheduling guidance. For extreme heat, follow the heat protocol: additional breaks, hydration, and adjusted work pace. If the heat index exceeds company-defined thresholds, you have the authority to modify the schedule or pull crews. Safety overrides schedule. Always.

Scenario 4: A Crew Member Isn't Pulling Their Weight

Someone on your crew is consistently slow, sloppy, or checked out. It's affecting the whole team's output.

Your move: Have a direct, private conversation first. "I've noticed [specific behavior]. Here's what I need to see instead. Can you commit to that?" If the behavior doesn't change after a direct conversation, escalate to your ops manager with specifics: what you observed, what you said, and what happened after. You're not authorized to issue formal warnings or termination, but you are authorized (and expected) to address performance directly as the crew's leader.

Scenario 5: You're Running Behind

It's 2 PM, and you're two properties behind schedule. You've got one Tier 1 account and three standard accounts left.

Your move: Prioritize the Tier 1 account. If overtime up to 2 hours will get you through all remaining properties, approve it (that's your call). If the gap is bigger than 2 hours, call your ops manager about the situation and your recommendation. Maybe one of the standard accounts gets pushed to tomorrow. Maybe another crew picks it up. But that's an ops manager decision because it affects other routes.

Growing Into the Role

Being a crew leader isn't a dead end. It's a development position. The decision rights you're learning here are the foundation for everything above you in the organization. Every ops manager started by leading a crew. Every branch manager started by leading a route.

Here's how to grow:

Master the current matrix first. Before you can take on more authority, demonstrate that you handle your current decisions consistently and well. That means making calls within the criteria, escalating when triggers are hit, and reporting accurately at the end of the day. Consistency builds trust, and trust is the currency that buys expanded authority.

Think beyond your crew. Start noticing how your decisions affect other crews, the account managers, and the company as a whole. When you approve overtime to finish a property, think about what that costs and whether the value justifies it. When you flag an equipment issue early, notice that it prevented a bigger problem downstream. This systems thinking is what separates a crew leader from a future ops manager.

Ask for feedback. After your ops manager reviews your decisions in the weekly cadence, ask what you could do differently. Not because you did something wrong, but because you want to get better. Crew leaders who seek feedback get expanded authority faster than anyone.

Bring solutions, not just problems. Every time you escalate with a recommendation instead of just a question, you're demonstrating that you're ready for more. The crew leaders who consistently bring good recommendations are the ones who get promoted to ops manager when the opportunity comes.

That laminated card is the entire crew leader playbook compressed into something you can reference in 15 seconds. Everything else in this chapter is

the details behind those bullets. Know the card cold, and you'll handle 95% of your day without ever picking up the phone.

The Crew Leader's Laminated Card

Laminate it. Put it in your truck visor.

I Own

- Quality standards
- Overtime up to 2 hours
- Field repairs under 30 minutes
- Backup equipment swaps
- Fuel and supply purchases up to \$150 per day
- Safety stop-work decisions
- Minor on-site adjustments
- Crew task assignments

I Escalate

- Repairs over \$500
- Over 2 hours
- Unhappy clients I cannot resolve on site
- Staffing issues
- Any injury beyond first aid
- Scope mismatches
- Systemic quality failures

I Always

- Bring a recommendation with every escalation.
- Check quality before leaving every property.
- Report my numbers at the end of the day.
- Stop work for safety — no questions asked.
- When in Doubt: Would I be proud to put my name on this? If yes, go. If no, fix it.

In Chapter 10, we'll build the same kind of playbook for your ops manager, the person you're escalating to, and the person who's responsible for making sure the framework works across all crews, not just yours.

CHAPTER TEN

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THE OPERATIONS MANAGER PLAYBOOK

THE ROLE THE OWNER NEEDS MOST (AND
DEVELOPS LEAST)

“For three years, my title said ‘Operations Manager,’ but my job was ‘let me check.’ Once the decision rights were defined, I was finally empowered to do the job I was hired for.”

-Ops manager at an \$11M landscape company

If the crew leader is the frontline of your operation, the operations manager is the engine room. This is the person who should be running the daily machine: scheduling, staffing, equipment, production, quality oversight, vendor management, and crew leader development. The ops manager is the role that, when functioning correctly, makes the owner’s phone stop buzzing.

And yet in most landscape companies, the ops manager is the most underutilized position on the payroll. Not because the person isn’t capable. Because the owner never gave them the keys. The ops manager has the title, the salary, and the responsibility, but not the authority. They’re the Human Router from Chapter 1: information goes in, information goes to the owner, decisions come back from the owner, information goes out.

This playbook changes that. It’s designed to be shared directly with your ops manager. It defines what they own, what they escalate, how their week

should be structured, and how to develop from an operational executor into an operational leader.

If there is one role in your company where getting decision rights right matters most, it's this one. Get it right here, and 60% of the owner bottleneck disappears. Get it wrong, and the matrix becomes another piece of paper that looks good but changes nothing.

What You Own

As the operations manager, you are the operational decision-maker for the company. The owner owns strategy, key client relationships, and financial commitments above defined thresholds. You own everything that makes the daily operation run. Here's your authority:

Operations Manager Authority Matrix

1. Daily Crew Assignments and Routing

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Balance drive time, crew skill match, and client tier priority.
 - Tier 1 accounts receive best-matched crews.
- Escalation Trigger: Key account requires a specific crew, and the crew is unavailable.
- Information Flow: Crew Leaders are informed by 6:00 AM daily.

2. Rain Day Rescheduling

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Push to next available day.

- Tier 1 clients receive priority.
- Notify clients of two-day delays.
- Escalation Trigger: Rain extends beyond two consecutive days (backlog management required).
- Information Flow: Account Managers and Crew Leaders informed by the end of the day.

3. Call-Out and No-Show Coverage

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Redistribute to maintain critical routes first, then by client tier.
- Escalation Trigger: More than two call-outs affecting the same day.
- Information Flow: Owner informed if Tier 1 accounts are impacted.

4. Equipment Repair (\$500 to \$1,500)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Repair if under 40 percent of replacement cost.
 - Equipment under 5 years old.
 - No repeat of the same repair within 12 months.
- Escalation Trigger: Over \$1,500 or recurring issue.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via weekly equipment report.

5. Equipment Rental (Up to \$2,000)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Rent if owned equipment is unavailable and job revenue exceeds three times the rental cost. Use preferred rental vendors.
- Escalation Trigger: Rental exceeds \$2,000, or commitment extends beyond two weeks.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via end-of-day summary.

6. Overtime Approval (2 to 4 Hours Per Crew)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Critical job completion.
 - Tier 1 client commitment.
 - Safety-related necessity.
- Escalation Trigger: Multiple crews or same-day overtime exceeding \$1,500 total.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via end-of-day summary.

7. Seasonal Crew Hiring

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Within approved headcount.
 - Background check completed.
 - Orientation completed.
- Escalation Trigger: Hiring exceeds approved headcount budget.

- Information Flow: Owner informed via weekly staffing update.

8. Written Warnings

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Documented prior verbal warning.
 - Specific policy violation cited.
- Escalation Trigger: Third written warning (termination territory).
- Information Flow: Owner informed within 24 hours.

9. Vendor Orders (Preferred List)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Use preferred vendors.
 - Best price within five percent of the order.
 - Meet timeline requirements.
- Escalation Trigger: Order outside preferred list or significant price variance.
- Information Flow: Owner is informed in the monthly vendor spend report.

10. Subcontractor Engagement (Approved List)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:

- On approved vendor list.
- Insurance current.
- Scope documented.
- Cost within 10 percent of the internal estimate.
- Escalation Trigger: Cost exceeds \$5,000 or involves a Tier 1 client.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via weekly subcontractor report.

11. Quality Management and Rework Decisions

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - If the quality check fails and rework can be done the same day, send the crew back.
 - Track rework hours by crew.
- Escalation Trigger: Rework impacts other scheduled clients.
- Information Flow: Account Manager and Crew Leader informed.

12. Weather Protocol Activation

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Follow documented heat, cold, lightning, and rain protocols.
 - Delay up to two hours based on the forecast.
- Escalation Trigger: Delay extends beyond two hours (full rain day) or two consecutive rain days.

- Information Flow: Owner, Crew Leaders, and Account Managers informed by 5:30 AM.

13. Crew Leader Coaching and Development

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Regular feedback on decision quality, service quality, and production metrics.
 - Lead the crew leader handoff and cascade.
- Escalation Trigger: Performance issue requiring formal corrective action.
- Information Flow: Owner informed in weekly operations review.

14. New Vendor Evaluation

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Minimum three references.
 - Insurance verification.
 - Trial order completed.
- Escalation Trigger: Annual spend with new vendor exceeds \$10,000.
- Information Flow: Owner informed before commitment.

That's fourteen decision categories with full ownership. Read that list carefully. If you're an ops manager and you've been operating without this level of authority, this is a significant expansion. And if you're an owner

reading this and feeling a knot in your stomach, go back and reread the “You Have to Mean It” section in Chapter 5. This only works if you let it work.

What You Escalate

Your escalation list is shorter than your authority list, and that’s by design. You should be handling 80% or more of the daily operational decisions without owner involvement. Here’s what goes up:

- Equipment purchases or repairs over \$1,500
- Termination decisions (always require owner involvement)
- Management-level hires (crew leader promotions, new managers)
- Client situations where cancellation is threatened by a Tier 1 account
- Budget variances exceeding 15% on any single job
- Subcontractor costs exceeding \$5,000 on a single job, or any non-approved subcontractor.
- Saturday or extended overtime decisions
- New vendor commitments are projected to exceed \$10,000 annually
- Any safety incident requiring medical attention beyond first aid
- Strategic decisions (new services, market expansion, pricing structure changes)

Same rule as your crew leaders: when you escalate, bring the situation, your recommendation, and the urgency level. The owner’s job is to decide, not to research. Make it easy for them to say yes or redirect.

Your Weekly Rhythm

The ops manager’s week has a shape, and if you get the shape right, the chaos that used to define your days starts to feel manageable. Here’s the rhythm:

Monday

5:30 to 6:30 AM: Review the week's schedule. Check staffing against the route plan. Review the weather for the next three days. Identify any trouble spots (short-staffed days, heavy routes, Tier 1 accounts with recent complaints).

6:30 to 6:45 AM: Brief crew leaders. Confirm assignments, flag anything unusual, and set expectations for the day.

7:00 AM: Monday standup with owner and account manager(s). Fifteen minutes. Set the week.

Remainder of the day: Site visits (at least 2 to 3 per day), resolve any morning issues, handle escalations from crew leaders, review equipment status, process vendor orders.

Tuesday through Thursday

Morning: Review overnight texts from crew leaders. Handle any schedule adjustments from callouts or weather. Confirm the day's plan.

Midday: Site visits. This is where you see the real operation. Quality checks, crew performance observation, and equipment condition. You should be touching 6 to 10 properties per week across your route structure. Don't just visit the problem sites. Visit the good ones too. Catch your crews doing things right.

Wednesday midday: Ops review with owner. Thirty minutes. Dashboard review, decision calibration, look-ahead to the rest of the week.

Afternoon: Administrative tasks, vendor management, crew leader check-ins, equipment scheduling, next-day prep.

Friday

Morning: Final push to close the week's routes. Handle any Thursday overflow.

Midday: Compile the weekly dashboard numbers. Review crew production, overtime, quality scores, rework hours, and equipment status.

Afternoon: Friday close-out meeting. Fifteen minutes. Then prep the preliminary schedule for next week.

The Ops Manager's Non-Negotiables

Every week, without exception:

1. Visit a minimum of six properties across different crews and route zones.
2. Have at least one direct coaching conversation with each crew leader.
3. Review and update the KPI dashboard before the Wednesday operations review.
4. Process all escalations within the defined timeframes — not when you “get around to it.”
5. Prep next week's schedule before you leave Friday.

These five habits are the difference between an ops manager who manages operations and one who simply reacts to them.

Managing Your Crew Leaders

Your crew leaders are the most important people in your world. If they're making good decisions, your day is manageable. If they're not, your phone never stops buzzing.

Developing them is not a side project. It's the core of your job.

The Weekly Crew Leader Check-In

Every crew leader should get 10 to 15 minutes of focused time each week. Not to micromanage. To coach. Here's a simple format:

First 3 minutes: “What went well this week? What decisions did you make that you felt good about?” Let them talk. Acknowledge the wins.

Next 3 minutes: “What was your toughest call this week? Walk me through how you handled it.” This is where coaching happens. Listen to their decision process, not just the outcome. If they followed the criteria and the process was sound, affirm it even if you would have done it differently.

Next 3 minutes: “Anything coming up next week that you want to think through in advance?” Proactive coaching is ten times more effective than reactive correction.

Final 2 minutes: “Anything you need from me?” Equipment, training, help with crew members, criteria that don’t fit. This is where you find and fix the small problems before they become big ones.

Twelve minutes per crew leader per week. If you have six crew leaders, that’s 72 minutes. Just over an hour invested in the people who make or break your operation. That’s the highest ROI hour in your entire week.

Recognizing Crew Leaders Ready for More

Part of your job is identifying which crew leaders are ready for expanded authority. Here’s what to look for:

- They consistently make decisions within the criteria without escalating unnecessarily.
- Their escalations come with clear recommendations, not just questions.
- Their quality scores are consistently at or above standard.
- Other crew members want to work on their crew (a sign of good leadership).

- They think beyond their own route and consider how their decisions affect the broader operation.

When you see these signals, expand their authority. Maybe they get approval for overtime up to three hours instead of two. Maybe they can approve equipment repairs up to \$750 instead of the standard threshold. Small expansions, earned through demonstrated competence, are how you develop future ops managers.

Common Ops Manager Scenarios

Scenario 1: Multiple Call-Outs on a Heavy Day

It's Tuesday morning. Three crew members called out across two different crews. Your routes are full and you've got two Tier 1 commercial accounts scheduled.

Your move: Redistribute to protect Tier 1 routes first. Pull from the lightest route to shore up the critical ones. If the math doesn't work (not enough people to cover the priority accounts), you have two options within your authority: approve overtime for remaining crews to pick up the slack or push lower-tier accounts to tomorrow. If more than two call-outs affect the same day, inform the owner per the escalation trigger.

Include your redistribution plan and any client-facing impacts.

Scenario 2: A Crew Leader Makes a Decision You Disagree With

Your crew leader approved 90 minutes of overtime on a standard residential route. The job was 80% done. The criteria say he can approve up to 2 hours when the job is at least 75% complete. Technically, it's within the matrix. But you would have pushed the last two properties to the next day and saved the overtime cost.

Your move: Let it stand. It's within the criteria. The crew leader made a defensible call. If this pattern repeats and you believe the criteria are too loose, bring it to the Wednesday ops review with data. "We're approving more overtime than I'd like on standard routes. I think we should tighten the

criteria to require 85% completion instead of 75% before overtime kicks in.” That’s a criteria adjustment, not a correction of the crew leader. That’s how the framework evolves.

Scenario 3: A Vendor Delivers the Wrong Material

Your mulch delivery shows up and it’s the wrong color. The crew is waiting on site. The client is a Tier 1 commercial account with high visibility.

Your move: Call the vendor and demand a same-day replacement. If they can’t deliver, go to the backup vendor on your approved list. You have authority to make vendor selections within defined parameters. If the replacement costs more than 5% above the original quote, it’s still within your criteria. Get the right material on site today.

Document the vendor failure for the monthly vendor review. If this vendor has a pattern of issues, flag it in your next owner meeting for possible removal from the preferred list.

Scenario 4: A Crew Leader Keeps Escalating Decisions He Should Own

One of your crew leaders calls you three times before lunch asking about decisions that are clearly his. Overtime approval for 90 minutes. Whether to swap backup equipment. Whether a property meets quality standard.

Your move: Use the Redirect Response from Chapter 7. “What does the matrix say? And what do you think we should do?” Walk him through it the first time. The second time, be more direct: “That’s your call. You’ve got the criteria. Make it.” If it continues, it becomes a coaching conversation in your weekly check-in. Use the diagnostic framework from Chapter 8: does he know the matrix, does he understand the criteria, does he feel confident, or is something else preventing him?

Scenario 5: You Need to Issue a Written Warning

A crew member has been chronically late. His crew leader had the verbal conversation two weeks ago. Nothing changed. It’s time for a written warning.

Your move: You have authority to issue written warnings when there's a documented prior verbal warning and a specific policy violation. Write it up: the policy, the previous verbal conversation (date and what was said), the continued violation, and the expected correction. Meet with the employee privately. Be direct, be factual, and be specific about what needs to change and the timeline. Inform the owner within 24 hours. If this will be the third written warning (which puts you in termination territory), escalate to the owner before acting.

The Transition From Executor to Leader

Here's the hardest truth for most ops managers: the job you were hired for and the job you need to become are different. Most ops managers were promoted because they excelled at execution. They knew the routes, they knew the equipment, and they could solve any field problem faster than anyone. They were the best performers in the company.

But the ops manager role isn't about doing. It's about enabling. It's about building a crew leader team that can do what you used to do, so you can focus on what only you can do: scheduling optimization, production efficiency, quality systems, equipment strategy, and people development.

The hardest part of this transition is letting go of the field work. When a crew leader calls with a problem you could solve in five minutes, the temptation is enormous to just jump in and fix it. But every time you solve a problem your crew leader should have handled, you've taken a rep away from their development and reinforced the pattern of dependency.

Your job is to build crew leaders who don't need you for daily decisions. Your success isn't measured by how many problems you solve. It's measured by how few problems reach you.

The Ops Manager's Success Metrics

You're winning when:

- Escalation frequency from crew leaders decreases month over month.
- Quality scores are consistent across all crews — not just the ones you personally oversee.
- Production efficiency (revenue per labor hour) is trending up.
- You spend more time on proactive work — schedule optimization, crew development, equipment planning — than reactive work.
- The owner stops buzzing you with operational questions.
- Your crew leaders start bringing solutions, not just problems.

Track these. They are your report card.

Growing Beyond Ops Manager

The ops manager role is the proving ground for larger leadership within the company. If you're an ops manager reading this and you're wondering where the role goes, here's the answer: it goes wherever you build it.

In companies that grow past \$10M, the ops manager role often evolves into a general manager or VP of operations position. In multi-location companies, it becomes a branch manager role (which we'll cover in Chapter 12). In some cases, the ops manager becomes a partner or eventual buyer of the business.

The path from ops manager to any of those roles runs through one thing: demonstrating that you can run the daily operation without the owner's involvement. Every decision you make well within the matrix, every crew leader you develop, every system you improve is a data point that proves you're ready for more.

The decision rights framework isn't just a management tool. For the ops manager, it's a career accelerator. The owners who see their ops manager consistently making good decisions within the framework are the owners

who start thinking about partnerships, profit sharing, and succession. And that's a conversation worth earning.

The Ops Manager's Laminated Card

Laminate it. Keep it where you can see it.

I Own

- Daily scheduling and routing
- Rain day rescheduling
- Call-out coverage
- Equipment repairs up to \$1,500
- Equipment rentals up to \$2,000
- Overtime approval up to 4 hours per crew
- Seasonal hiring within budget
- Written warnings
- Vendor orders (preferred list)
- Approved subcontractors up to \$5,000
- Quality management and rework
- Weather protocol activation
- Crew leader development
- New vendor evaluation

I Escalate

- Purchases or repairs over \$1,500

- Terminations
- Management hires
- Tier 1 cancellation threats
- Budget variances over 15 percent
- Subcontractor costs over \$5,000
- Saturday or extended overtime
- New vendor commitments over \$10,000 per year
- Medical-attention injuries
- Strategic decisions

I Always

- Visit at least six properties per week
- Coach every crew leader weekly
- Update the dashboard before Wednesday's operations review
- Process escalations within defined timeframes
- Prep next week before leaving Friday

My Measure

- Fewer escalations
- Consistent quality
- Improving production
- More proactive work than reactive

In Chapter 11, we'll build the playbook for the role that interfaces most directly with your revenue: the account manager. Their decision rights around client relationships, pricing, and complaint resolution are where margin is protected or given away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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THE ACCOUNT MANAGER PLAYBOOK

THE REVENUE PROTECTOR

“Before the matrix, I was terrified of making the wrong call on a complaint. So, I called the owner every single time. Now I resolve 90% of client issues myself, and our satisfaction scores have never been higher.”

-Account manager at a \$7.5M landscape company

If the ops manager runs the engine, the account manager protects the fuel supply. Every client relationship, every renewal, every complaint resolution, every upsell opportunity flows through this role. The account manager is the person most directly responsible for whether your revenue grows, holds steady, or leaks out through client attrition.

And yet, in most landscape companies, the account manager operates with one hand tied behind their back. They’re the face of the company to the client, but they can’t approve a \$100 credit without calling the owner. They’re responsible for retention, but they can’t make the decisions that retain clients in the moment when the client is frustrated, and the clock is ticking.

The result is predictable: slower complaint resolution, frustrated clients, frustrated account managers, and an owner who spends three to four hours a week on client issues that should have been resolved the same day they arose.

This playbook gives the account manager the authority to do what the role actually requires: protect and grow client relationships with confidence, speed, and clear boundaries.

What You Own

As the account manager, you are the decision-maker for client relationships. The owner retains authority over pricing strategy, major contract negotiations, and Tier 1 cancellation recovery. You own everything between the client's first complaint and the owner's involvement threshold.

Account Manager Authority Matrix

Defined Ownership for Client-Facing Decisions

• Minor Quality Complaint Resolution

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Acknowledge within 4 hours.
 - Offer redo within 48 hours or credit up to \$200 — client's choice.
- Escalation Trigger: Client rejects redo and demands credit over \$200.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager and Crew Leader informed.

• Service Credit (Up to \$200)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Valid complaint.

- Documented.
- Most recent visit within 7 days with photo evidence.
- Escalation Trigger: Credit exceeds \$200 or second credit to the same client within 60 days.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via weekly client report.
- **Recurring Complaint Management**
 - Authority Level: Full ownership (in collaboration with Ops Manager)
 - Criteria:
 - Root cause analysis with Ops Manager.
 - Review crew assignment, quality frequency, and service history.
 - Escalation Trigger: Three or more complaints in 90 days from the same client.
 - Information Flow: Owner informed of findings and recommendations.
- **Enhancement Pricing (Standard)**
 - Authority Level: Full ownership
 - Criteria:
 - Use the approved rate card.
 - Maintain 45 percent gross margin.
 - Escalation Trigger: Client requests a discount below the rate card.
 - Information Flow: Owner informed via weekly sales report.

- **Contract Renewal (No Price Change)**

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Renew at current rates if the client is in good standing and no cost increase is required.
- Escalation Trigger: Client disputes pricing, or the competitor is actively bidding.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via renewal tracker.

- **Out-of-Scope Request Handling**

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - If under 15 minutes of additional service, accommodate as a goodwill gesture.
 - If over 15 minutes, price as an enhancement.
- Escalation Trigger: Client pushes back on being charged for additional work.
- Information Flow: Ops Manager informed of scheduling impact.

- **Proactive Client Communication**

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Notify client of any delay exceeding 2 days.
 - Notify of any service issue before the client discovers it.
 - Communicate proactively — never reactively.

- Escalation Trigger: Communication involves admitting a significant error with legal or contract implications.
- Information Flow: Owner informed before sending.
- **Property Visit and Quality Audit**
 - Authority Level: Full ownership
 - Criteria:
 - Visit Tier 1 accounts monthly.
 - Visit Tier 2 accounts quarterly.
 - Document quality observations and share with Ops Manager.
 - Escalation Trigger: Quality pattern requires crew change or significant service adjustment.
 - Information Flow: Ops Manager was informed of documented findings.
- **Client Onboarding**
 - Authority Level: Full ownership
 - Criteria:
 - New client welcome call within 48 hours of first service.
 - Confirm expectations.
 - Provide direct contact information.
 - Set the first 30-day quality check schedule.
 - Escalation Trigger: Client has special operational requirements affecting field operations.

- Information Flow: Ops Manager informed of operational setup.
- **Upsell and Enhancement Proposals**
 - Authority Level: Full ownership
 - Criteria:
 - Identify opportunities during property visits.
 - Price using the approved rate card.
 - Present the proposal with a clear timeline.
 - Escalation Trigger: Enhancement requires significant operational resources or new equipment.
 - Information Flow:
 - Owner informed via weekly sales report.
 - Ops Manager informed for capacity planning.

Ten decision categories. Look at what's there: complaint resolution, credits, renewals, pricing (within the rate card), communication, property visits, onboarding, and upselling. This is the full scope of a functioning account manager. If you're an account manager reading this and you haven't had this level of authority before, it might feel like a lot. It is a lot. It's also exactly what your clients need you to have.

What You Escalate

Your escalation list centers on two things: financial decisions above your threshold and situations that risk losing significant revenue.

- Service credits exceeding \$200
- Second credit to the same client within 60 days
- Any client who explicitly threatens to cancel (regardless of account

size)

- Tier 1 client expressing dissatisfaction that isn't resolved by your initial offer
- Contract renewals where a price increase is needed
- Competitive bid situations where another company is actively pursuing your client
- Pricing requests that fall below the rate card or below 45% gross margin
- Any communication that involves admitting liability or significant operational failure
- Client disputes involving potential legal issues (property damage claims, injury on site)

When you escalate client situations, speed matters more than in almost any other category. A client who threatened to cancel at 10 AM and doesn't hear from anyone until 4 PM has mentally moved on. Your escalation should include the client's specific concern, what you've already offered, why it wasn't enough, and your recommendation for next steps. Give the owner everything they need to pick up the phone and have a productive conversation within the hour.

The Client Conversation Framework

Most account managers don't struggle because they lack people skills. They struggle because they don't have a framework for difficult conversations. When a client is angry, the natural response is to apologize, promise everything, and hope it goes away. That's not a strategy. Here's one that works.

The ARIA Framework for Client Conversations

A: Acknowledge. Start by acknowledging the client’s experience. Not defending, not explaining, not justifying. Acknowledging. “I understand you’re frustrated with the edging quality on your last visit. That’s not the standard we’re committed to.” The client needs to feel heard before they can hear your solution.

R: Resolve. Offer a specific, concrete resolution. Not “we’ll do better next time.” A real resolution with a timeline. “I’d like to send a crew back tomorrow to redo the edging, or if you prefer, I can apply a \$150 credit to your next invoice. Which works better for you?” Give options when possible. Options give the client control, which is what they lost when the service fell short.

I: Investigate. Commit to finding out what happened and preventing it from recurring. “I’m going to review this with our crew leader and our ops manager to make sure we understand what happened and put a fix in place.” This tells the client you’re treating it as a system issue, not just a one-time apology.

A: Assure. Close with a specific follow-up commitment. “I’ll personally check your property after the next three visits to make sure the quality is where it should be. And I’ll call you after each one to confirm you’re satisfied.” A specific assurance is worth ten vague promises.

The ARIA framework keeps you in control of the conversation. It prevents the two most common account manager mistakes: over-promising in the moment (“We’ll never let this happen again”) and under-delivering on follow-through (promising a callback and forgetting). Acknowledge, resolve, investigate, and assure. Every time.

Your Weekly Rhythm

Monday

7:00 AM: Monday standup with owner and ops manager. Bring any client situations from the weekend, upcoming renewals this week, and any escalations pending from last week.

Morning: Review your client health dashboard. Any open complaints? Any credits issued last week that need follow-up? Any renewals coming due in the next 30 days? Prioritize your week around these.

Afternoon: Property visits. Monday afternoon is ideal for visiting properties serviced that morning. You see the work fresh. If there's a quality issue, you catch it before the client does.

Tuesday through Thursday

Morning block (8 to 10 AM): Client communication window. Return calls, send follow-up emails, and make proactive touches on Tier 1 accounts. Clients are most reachable in the morning. Protect this time aggressively.

Midday: Property visits. You should be on properties 3 to 4 days per week. This is where you spot upsell opportunities, catch quality issues early, and build the face-to-face relationships that no email can replace.

Afternoon: Enhancement proposals, renewal prep, CRM updates, coordination with ops manager on any service issues flagged during property visits.

Friday

Morning: Close out any open client issues from the week. No complaint should carry over to Monday if it can be resolved on Friday.

Midday: Compile your weekly client report: complaints received, complaints resolved, credits issued, renewals processed, enhancements sold, property visits completed.

Afternoon: Friday close-out meeting. Then prep your client priorities for next week.

The Account Manager's Non-Negotiables

Every week, without exception:

1. Visit every Tier 1 account that had a complaint in the last 30 days.

2. Make at least one proactive touch — call, email, or visit — on every Tier 1 account.
3. Respond to all complaints within 4 hours during business hours.
4. Log every complaint and resolution in the CRM the same day it happens.
5. Submit the weekly client report before Friday's close-out.

These five habits are the difference between an account manager who retains clients and one who processes cancellations.

Common Account Manager Scenarios

Scenario 1: A Client Calls Angry About a Missed Service

The client says their property wasn't serviced yesterday as scheduled. They're upset and questioning the reliability of your company.

Your move: First, verify the facts. Check with the ops manager or crew leader. Was the property actually missed, or was service completed but the client didn't notice? (It happens more often than you'd think, especially with early morning service.) If the service was genuinely missed, use ARIA. Acknowledge the frustration. Resolve by scheduling a make-up visit within 24 hours (coordinate with ops manager). Investigate why it was missed (rain day shuffle? crew oversight? routing error?). Assure with a specific follow-up. If the client demands a credit, approve up to \$200 within your authority. This entire interaction should take less than 15 minutes and zero owner involvement.

Scenario 2: A Renewal Comes Due, and the Client Wants a Price Decrease

A Tier 2 client says they got a lower quote from a competitor and want you to match it, or they'll switch.

Your move: Don't panic and don't immediately discount. First, assess the account: how profitable is it, how long have they been a client, what's their

payment history, and how much does it cost to replace this revenue? If the contract is at or above your minimum 45% gross margin, you can renew at current rates without owner approval. If the client is pushing below your rate card, this is an escalation. Send it to the owner with the account details, the competitive quote (if available), your assessment of the account's value, and your recommendation on whether to match, negotiate, or walk. The owner decides the pricing strategy. You own the client relationship and the communication.

Scenario 3: You Notice a Quality Issue During a Property Visit

You're on a Tier 1 commercial property, and you see that the bed lines are sloppy, there's clipping buildup in the mulch, and the edging along the main entrance is inconsistent.

Your move: Document it. Take photos. Then contact the ops manager with the specifics: which property, what you observed, and the quality score against the checklist. This isn't about blame. It's about data. The ops manager owns the quality response (sending a crew back, coaching the crew leader, adjusting the route). You own the client communication. If the client hasn't noticed yet, you have an opportunity to get ahead of it. If the quality gap is significant enough that the client will notice, call them proactively: "I visited your property today and noticed a few areas that didn't meet our standard. I've already arranged to have a crew address them tomorrow." Proactive communication turns a potential complaint into a trust-building moment.

Scenario 4: A Client Requests Something Outside the Contract

A residential client asks your crew to trim a hedge that isn't part of the maintenance contract. Or a commercial client wants extra mulch added to a specific area between scheduled enhancement visits.

Your move: If the request is under 15 minutes of additional work, accommodate it as goodwill and log it. Goodwill services are relationship investments, and you have the authority to make them. If the request exceeds 15 minutes, it's an enhancement opportunity. Price it using your rate card, present the cost to the client, and schedule it upon approval. Don't give away

work that should be priced. But don't nickel-and-dime a good client on a five-minute favor either. The 15-minute threshold exists to help you calibrate that balance.

Scenario 5: A Tier 1 Client Threatens to Cancel

Your largest commercial client calls and says they're considering moving to another provider. They're unhappy about the inconsistent quality over the past two months.

Your move: This is an escalation. Immediately. Use ARIA to acknowledge and stabilize the conversation: "I take this very seriously. I want to understand exactly what's been falling short and make this right." Listen. Take detailed notes. Do not make promises beyond your authority. Tell the client: "I'm going to bring this to our ownership team today, and we'll come back to you within 24 hours with a specific plan to address every concern." Then escalate to the owner with the full picture: the client's specific complaints, the account's annual value, the history of issues, and your recommendation for a retention response. The owner handles the recovery conversation. You support and follow through on whatever is committed.

The Relationship Between Account Manager and Ops Manager

This is one of the most important working relationships in any landscape company, and it's one of the most common sources of friction. The account manager is the voice of the client. The ops manager is the voice of operations. When those two voices don't communicate, clients get promises operations can't keep, or operations make decisions that blindside the client.

The decision rights framework helps here because it clarifies who owns what. The account manager owns the client relationship and communication. The ops manager owns the service delivery and crew performance. Neither overrides the other. They collaborate.

In practice, this means:

When the account manager spots a quality issue, she reports it to the ops manager with documentation. The ops manager decides the operational response (rework, crew coaching, route adjustment). The account manager handles the client communication.

When the ops manager needs to reschedule a Tier 1 client due to weather or staffing, he informs the account manager first. The account manager contacts the client with the update. The ops manager doesn't call the client. The account manager doesn't adjust the schedule.

When a client requests a service change, the account manager coordinates with the ops manager on feasibility and timing before committing to the client. The account manager doesn't promise a delivery date without checking capacity.

The Monday standup is where these two roles synchronize. The Friday close-out is where they reconcile. If the AM/ops relationship is working, the owner hears about client situations in the weekly report, not in panicked phone calls.

Growing the Revenue Side

Most account managers in landscape companies are hired to retain clients and resolve problems. That's half the job. The other half, the half that separates good account managers from great ones, is growing revenue within the existing client base.

Your property visits aren't just quality checks. They're sales opportunities. Every time you walk a property, you should be looking for enhancement potential: beds that need refreshing, trees that need pruning, drainage issues, hardscape opportunities, irrigation upgrades, seasonal color installations. Most clients won't ask for these services. They don't know what's possible. You do.

The account managers who build the strongest case for promotion and compensation increases are the ones who can show a dollar figure for revenue generated, not just revenue retained. “I resolved 47 complaints and retained \$1.2M in contracts” is good. “I resolved 47 complaints, retained \$1.2M in contracts, and sold \$180,000 in enhancements” is a different conversation entirely.

Enhancement Opportunity Checklist

Use During Every Property Visit

When walking a property, look for the following:

1. Mulch beds that are faded, thin, or weed-encroached
2. Bed edges that are soft, undefined, or overgrown
3. Shrubs that are overgrown, misshapen, or contain dead material
4. Trees with low limbs, deadwood, or clearance issues
5. Turf with bare spots, disease, or areas needing overseeding
6. Irrigation issues such as dry spots, broken heads, or overspray
7. Drainage problems including standing water, erosion, or grading concerns
8. Seasonal color opportunities such as empty beds or tired annual displays
9. Hardscape issues like cracked pavers, settling, or pressure washing needs
10. Lighting problems, including broken fixtures, dark areas, or expansion opportunities

If you spot something, price it using the approved rate card and present it to the client within 48 hours.

Client Tiering: Know Who Matters Most

The decision rights matrix references “Tier 1” and “Tier 2” accounts throughout the templates. If your company doesn’t have a formal tiering system yet, now is the time to build one. It doesn’t need to be complicated.

Tiering isn’t about caring less about smaller clients. It’s about investing your time where it produces the most return. A \$50,000 commercial account deserves a different level of proactive attention than a \$2,500 residential account. Both deserve good service. They don’t both need monthly visits from the account manager.

Simple Client Tiering Model

Tier 1

- Top 10 to 15 clients by revenue and strategic value
- Monthly property visits by Account Manager
- Dedicated, best-matched crews whenever possible
- Four-hour complaint response time
- Owner involvement in cancellation threats
- Priority scheduling during rain-day recoveries
- Photo documentation after every service

Tier 2

- All other standard accounts
- Quarterly property visits by Account Manager
- Standard crew assignment
- Same-day complaint response during business hours

- Account Manager owns full resolution
- Standard scheduling priority

Optional Tier 3

- Small accounts, high-maintenance clients, or below-margin accounts
- Reactive property visits only
- Standard service with minimal customization
- Annual profitability evaluation

The Account Manager's Laminated Card

Laminate it. Keep it where you can see it.

I Own

- Complaint resolution (up to \$200 credit)
- Enhancement pricing using approved rate card (45%+ margin)
- Contract renewals with no price change
- Out-of-scope requests within 15-minute goodwill threshold
- Proactive client communication
- Property visits (Tier 1 monthly, Tier 2 quarterly)
- Client onboarding
- Upsell and enhancement proposals
- Recurring complaint management (with Ops Manager)

I Escalate

- Credits over \$200
- Second credit to the same client within 60 days
- Cancellation threats
- Renewals requiring price increase
- Competitive bid situations
- Below-rate-card pricing requests
- Liability or legal issues

I Always

- Respond to complaints within 4 hours during business hours
- Use ARIA for every difficult conversation
- Log everything in the CRM the same day
- Visit every Tier 1 account monthly
- Look for enhancement opportunities on every property visit

My Measure

- Retention rate
- Complaint resolution time
- Enhancement of revenue generated
- Client satisfaction scores

In Chapter 12, we'll build the final role-specific playbook: the branch manager. This is the role that emerges when companies grow past \$10M and need someone who can run an entire operation, combining the scope of the

ops manager with the client ownership of the account manager, across a defined territory or division.

CHAPTER TWELVE

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THE BRANCH MANAGER PLAYBOOK

THE ROLE THAT MAKES MULTI-LOCATION
POSSIBLE

“When we opened the second location, I tried to run both from my truck. That lasted about six weeks before everything started breaking. The branch manager role saved the company and saved my sanity.”

-Owner of a \$14M landscape company

Not every reader of this book needs a branch manager. If you’re running a single-location operation between \$3M and \$8M, the ops manager and account manager playbooks in Chapters 10 and 11 are your primary tools. You can skip this chapter and come back to it when growth demands it.

But if you’re at \$10M or approaching it, if you’re running multiple divisions (maintenance, construction, irrigation), if you’ve expanded to a second geographic area, or if you’re planning any of these moves in the next two to three years, this chapter is your roadmap.

The branch manager role emerges when a landscape company outgrows what a single ops manager and a single account manager can handle. It’s the person who runs an entire operation, combining the operational authority of the ops manager with the client ownership of the account manager, across a defined territory, division, or location.

Think of it this way: the branch manager is a mini-owner. They run their branch the way you used to run the whole company, except now they have the framework, the matrix, and the criteria to do it without becoming the same bottleneck you used to be. The branch manager role is where decision rights aren't just about delegation. They're about replication. You're building a second version of yourself, and the matrix is the operating system they run on.

When Do You Need a Branch Manager?

The branch manager role doesn't appear on every org chart at the same revenue level. But here are the signals that tell you it's time:

1. Your ops manager is managing more than 10-12 crews and is starting to miss things. The span of control has outgrown one person's capacity.
2. You've opened or are opening a second physical location or yard.
3. You're running distinctly different service divisions (maintenance plus construction, or residential plus commercial), and the operational demands are diverging.
4. Your account manager is responsible for more than \$4M to \$5M in contract value and can't give adequate attention to all clients.
5. You, the owner, are spending more than 20% of your time on operational issues that should be handled by a manager, but exceed the ops manager's current scope or capacity.
6. You're planning for an exit in the next three to five years and need someone who can demonstrate they can run the whole show.

If three or more of those signals are present, you need a branch manager.

The question is whether you promote from within (typically your best ops manager or your most operationally minded account manager) or hire externally. Both can work. The advantage of promoting from within is that

the person already knows your operation, your clients, and your culture. The advantage of hiring externally is that you can find someone who's already done the job at scale.

Either way, the decision rights framework makes the transition dramatically smoother because the branch manager inherits a system, not a set of tribal knowledge.

What the Branch Manager Owns

The branch manager's authority is the broadest of any role in the company, except the owner. They own everything the ops manager and account manager own within their branch, plus strategic decisions about the branch's growth, staffing structure, and financial performance.

Branch Manager Authority Matrix

Full Branch-Level Decision Ownership

1. All Operations Manager Decisions (Chapter 10)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Same criteria as the Operations Manager matrix.
 - All thresholds apply within the branch.
- Escalation Trigger: Same escalation triggers as the Operations Manager matrix.
- Information Flow: Owner informed per standard information flow.

2. All Account Manager Decisions (Chapter 11)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Same criteria as the Account Manager matrix for branch

clients.

- Escalation Trigger: Same escalation triggers as the Account Manager matrix.
- Information Flow: Owner informed per standard information flow.

3. Branch P&L Management

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Meet or exceed margin targets set with Owner.
 - Manage revenue, labor cost, materials, and overhead within the approved budget.
- Escalation Trigger: Missing margin target by more than 3 points for 2 consecutive months.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via monthly P&L review.

4. Branch Staffing Structure

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Hire, promote, and restructure within approved headcount and budget.
 - Includes crew leaders, crew members, and administrative support.
- Escalation Trigger: Management-level hires or headcount increases beyond approved budget.

- Information Flow: Owner informed via monthly staffing report.

5. Equipment Capital Allocation (Branch Budget)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Approve purchases up to \$5,000 within annual equipment budget.
- Escalation Trigger:
 - Single purchase exceeds \$5,000
 - OR cumulative year-to-date spend exceeds 90 percent of annual budget.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via monthly equipment report.

6. New Client Acquisition (Within Branch Territory)

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Price at or above 45 percent gross margin.
 - Service must be deliverable with existing or planned capacity.
- Escalation Trigger:
 - Client would represent more than 10 percent of branch revenue
 - OR contract requires commitments beyond 12 months.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via weekly pipeline report.

7. Client Retention and Recovery

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Full authority on credits, service adjustments, and retention offers up to \$500 per incident.
- Escalation Trigger:
 - Credit exceeds \$500
 - Tier 1 cancellation threat (as defined at company level)
 - Client dispute with legal implications.
- Information Flow: Owner informed within 24 hours for any client loss.

8. Vendor and Subcontractor Management

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria:
 - Manage all vendor relationships within branch.
 - Approve new vendors after standard evaluation.
- Escalation Trigger:
 - Annual vendor commitment exceeds \$25,000
 - Subcontractor engagement for branch exceeds \$10,000 on a single project.
- Information Flow: Owner informed via monthly vendor report.

9. Branch-Level Process Improvements

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Implement operational improvements, route

optimization, and workflow changes within branch.

- Escalation Trigger: Changes affect another branch or company-wide standards.
- Information Flow: Owner informed for awareness and cross-branch adoption.

10. Community and Market Presence

- Authority Level: Full ownership
- Criteria: Represent the company at local events, networking, and trade shows within branch territory.
- Escalation Trigger:
 - Commitments that financially bind the company
 - OR create company-wide marketing obligations.
- Information Flow: Owner informed for awareness.

Look at the scope of that table. The branch manager inherits the full authority of both the ops manager and the account manager roles, plus P&L ownership, staffing decisions, capital allocation, client acquisition, and process improvement. This is not a middle management position. This is a general management role with real authority and real accountability.

The key difference between a branch manager and an owner is the ceiling on financial commitments (purchases capped at \$5,000, credits capped at \$500, vendor commitments capped at \$25,000) and the requirement to operate within an approved budget and margin target. The branch manager has freedom within a defined financial box. The owner defines the size of the box.

What the Branch Manager Escalates

The branch manager's escalation list is short and strategic. Everything else is theirs.

- Terminations of branch management team members
- Single purchases or capital commitments exceeding \$5,000
- New client contracts that would represent more than 10% of branch revenue
- Client credits exceeding \$500 per incident
- Vendor commitments exceeding \$25,000 annually
- Missing margin targets for two or more consecutive months
- Any legal issue (client dispute, employee claim, property damage liability)
- Decisions that would affect the other branch or company-wide standards
- Strategic direction changes (new service lines, market repositioning, major partnerships)

Notice the pattern: the branch manager escalates financial commitments above defined thresholds, legal risk, cross-branch impact, and strategic direction. Everything else, the daily, weekly, and monthly operation of the branch, is theirs to run.

The Branch Manager's Weekly Rhythm

The branch manager runs the same Monday/Wednesday/Friday cadence within their branch that we established in Chapter 8, plus an additional owner touchpoint.

Within the Branch (Same Cadence, You Lead It)

1. **Monday standup:** You lead the 15-minute standup with your ops manager and account manager. Same agenda as Chapter 8. You're the owner's proxy in this meeting.
2. **Wednesday ops review:** You do the 30-minute review with your ops manager. You're coaching them the way the owner coached the ops manager in a single-location company. Dashboard review, decision calibration, look-ahead.
3. **Friday close-out:** You lead the wrap-up. Wins, misses, client pulse, numbers, one thing for next week.

With the Owner

1. **Weekly branch report (30 minutes, Tuesday or Thursday):**
One-on-one with the owner. This is your version of the Wednesday ops review, but at the branch level. You bring: KPI dashboard for the branch, significant decisions made this week, any escalation items, pipeline and client health update, and any resource needs.
2. **Monthly P&L review (60 to 90 minutes):** Deep dive into branch financial performance. Revenue, margins, labor cost, equipment spend, overhead. This is where the owner holds you accountable to the financial targets and where you make the case for additional resources or investments.
3. **Quarterly strategic review (half day):** Bigger-picture conversation about branch direction. Market opportunities, competitive landscape, staffing plan for next quarter, equipment needs, and growth targets. This is where the branch manager demonstrates strategic thinking, not just operational competence.

The Branch Manager's Time Allocation

How you spend your week signals what kind of manager you are.

40% Operations Management

- Oversee the Ops Manager.
- Conduct site visits.
- Protect quality systems.
- Monitor production efficiency.

This is your foundation.

25% Client Relationships

- Key account management.
- Retention conversations.
- New client acquisition.

You own the branch's revenue.

20% People Development

- Coach your Ops Manager.
- Develop Crew Leaders through your Ops Manager.
- Build bench strength.

This is how you scale.

15% Strategy and Reporting

- P&L review.
- Market analysis.
- Pipeline management.
- Owner communication.

This is where leadership lives.

If you're spending more than 50% of your time on operations, you're an Ops Manager with a bigger title.

If you're spending less than 15% on people development, your bench is thin and your branch is fragile.

Common Branch Manager Scenarios

Scenario 1: Your Ops Manager Leaves

Your ops manager gives two weeks' notice. He's been the operational backbone of the branch.

Your move: This is where the decision rights framework pays for itself. Because the matrix exists, the ops manager's knowledge isn't walking out the door. The decision criteria, the escalation triggers, the crew leader playbooks are all documented. You step into the ops role temporarily while you recruit a replacement. The crew leaders know their authority. The account manager knows hers. The system runs, imperfectly but functionally, while you fill the gap. If you didn't have the framework, this departure would be a crisis. With it, it's a significant inconvenience that's manageable.

Scenario 2: The Owner Wants You to Hit an Aggressive Growth Target

The owner sets a target for your branch to grow from \$5M to \$7M in the next 18 months. That's 40% growth.

Your move: Work backward from the number. \$2M in additional revenue means roughly 25 to 30 new clients (depending on average contract size) or significant enhancement growth from existing clients. What capacity do you need? How many additional crews? What equipment? What's the hiring timeline? Build a plan with milestones and present it to the owner with the resource requirements and the timeline. If you can deliver the growth within your current budget authority, execute. If it requires resources beyond your thresholds (equipment over \$5,000, headcount beyond approved budget), escalate with a detailed proposal. Branch managers who can translate growth targets into operational plans are the ones who eventually become partners.

Scenario 3: Two Departments in Your Branch Are in Conflict

Your maintenance ops manager and your construction project manager are fighting over shared crew resources. Construction wants to pull maintenance crew members for a big install. Maintenance says they can't afford the disruption.

Your move: This is exactly the kind of cross-functional decision a branch manager exists to make. Evaluate: What's the revenue and margin impact of the construction project? What's the client impact of pulling maintenance crew members? Is there a middle ground (temporary hire, subcontractor, partial crew share for specific days)? Make the call based on what's best for the branch's total performance, not what makes either department happiest. Document the decision and the reasoning so both managers understand the logic. If this becomes a recurring conflict, it's a structural issue that needs a longer-term solution (dedicated construction crews, clearer resource allocation rules). Bring that to your quarterly strategic review with the owner.

Scenario 4: A Competitor Is Aggressively Targeting Your Clients

You've lost two accounts in a month to the same competitor. They're undercutting your pricing and making aggressive promises to your Tier 1 accounts.

Your move: First, gather intelligence. Which accounts are being targeted? What pricing are they offering? What promises are they making? Talk to the clients you lost and learn why they switched (price, service quality, relationship, or something else?). Then build a retention strategy for your vulnerable accounts. For Tier 1 accounts being actively pursued, proactive outreach with a personal touch: site visit, performance review, and a commitment to a specific service improvement. For pricing pressure, don't get into a race to the bottom. Compete on value, consistency, and relationship. If the competitor's pricing is genuinely below your cost floor, you can't match it profitably, and clients who leave for the cheapest price will leave again when someone cheaper comes along. Focus your energy on the clients who value what you deliver. Escalate to the owner if the competitive

threat affects more than 10% of branch revenue or requires a strategic pricing response beyond your rate card authority.

Scenario 5: You're Running Hot on Labor and Thin on Margin

It's peak season. Overtime is high, temporary labor costs are up, and your branch margin has dipped two points below target for the month.

Your move: Diagnose the cause before reacting. Is it a temporary seasonal spike or a structural problem? Review route efficiency: are crews running optimally, or are there routing waste and dead-drive time that can be tightened? Review overtime patterns: which crews are consistently over and why? Is it a scheduling issue, a staffing issue, or a scope-creep issue on specific accounts? If the margin miss is seasonal and you can project recovery in the next 60 days, document it and manage it. Suppose it's a trend that won't self-correct, build a corrective plan: route optimization, overtime caps, temporary labor reduction, or a conversation with your account manager about repricing underperforming accounts. If you miss the margin target for two consecutive months, that's an escalation trigger. Bring the diagnosis and the plan to the owner before they have to ask.

Building Your Team Within the Branch

The branch manager's most important long-term responsibility is building a team that can run the branch without the branch manager being involved in every decision. Sound familiar? It should. It's the same principle that got you this book, just one level down.

Your ops manager should be making 80% of operational decisions without your involvement. Your account manager should be handling 90% of client situations without escalating. Your crew leaders should be running their routes with confidence and autonomy.

If you're the branch manager and everyone in your branch is still coming to you for every decision, you've recreated the owner bottleneck at the branch level. The decision rights framework is designed to prevent this, but only if

you use it. Hand off. Trust the matrix. Coach your team. Measure results. Adjust criteria. That's your job.

The ultimate test of a branch manager is the same as the ultimate test of an owner: can you leave for two weeks and come back to a branch that ran fine without you? If the answer is yes, you've built something real. If the answer is no, you've got more work to do on the framework.

The Path From Branch Manager to Partner

For the right person, the branch manager role is the proving ground for ownership. If you're a branch manager reading this, here's what makes the case for partnership or equity:

1. **Consistent financial performance:** hitting or exceeding margin targets for four or more consecutive quarters.
2. **Revenue growth:** demonstrating the ability to grow the branch's top line while protecting margins.
3. **Team development:** building a bench deep enough that the branch runs without you for extended periods.
4. **Strategic thinking:** bringing the owner opportunities, insights, and plans rather than just problems and updates.
5. **Framework ownership:** not just following the decision rights matrix but improving it, expanding it, and cascading it to every level of the branch.

Owners who see these five things in a branch manager start thinking about succession, equity sharing, and long-term partnership. That's not accidental. That's a branch manager demonstrating that they can do what the owner does, just as well, within a defined scope. And that's the most valuable person in any landscape company.

The Branch Manager's Laminated Card

Laminate it. Keep it visible.

I OWN

- All Ops Manager and Account Manager decisions within my branch.
- Branch P&L and margin targets.
- Staffing structure within approved headcount and budget.
- Equipment purchases up to \$5,000.
- New client acquisition at 45%+ gross margin within capacity.
- Client retention, including credits up to \$500.
- Vendor commitments up to \$25,000 per year.
- Process improvements within the branch.
- Community and market presence.

I ESCALATE

- Purchases over \$5,000.
- Management terminations.
- Credits over \$500.
- New clients exceeding 10% of branch revenue.
- Vendor commitments over \$25,000 annually.
- Missing margin by more than 3 points for two consecutive months.
- Legal issues.
- Cross-branch impacts.
- Strategic direction changes.

I ALWAYS

- Run the Monday / Wednesday / Friday cadence.
- Submit weekly branch report to owner.
- Own the branch P&L.
- Develop my Ops Manager and Account Manager.
- Build a bench that runs without me.

MY MEASURE

- Branch margin.
- Revenue growth.
- Team retention.
- Client retention.
- Escalation frequency to owner.

You now have four complete role-specific playbooks:

Chapter 9: The Crew Leader, your frontline decision-maker

Chapter 10: The Operations Manager, your operational engine

Chapter 11: The Account Manager, your revenue protector

Chapter 12: The Branch Manager, your mini-owner

Each playbook follows the same structure: what they own, what they escalate, how their week should flow, common scenarios, growth path, and a laminated card. Together, they form a complete decision rights ecosystem where every major role in your company knows exactly what they're responsible for.

Next, we take everything we've built and look ahead. How to implement the framework in the first 90 days. How to adjust when things aren't working. How to scale decision rights as your company grows. How AI and technology fit into the picture. And how the decision rights framework directly increases your company's value if and when you decide to sell.

The playbooks are in your hands. Now we show you how to play the long game.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE 90-DAY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

STOP READING. START DOING.

“The framework was only as good as the plan to install it. The 90 days were hard. But by day 91, I couldn’t imagine going back.”

-Owner of an \$11M landscape company

You’ve read twelve chapters. You understand the problem, the framework, the criteria, the handoff, the cadence, and the role-specific playbooks. You know more about decision rights than 99% of landscape company owners in the country.

None of it matters until you implement it.

This chapter is your implementation roadmap. Week by week, for 90 days. It tells you exactly what to do, in what order, and what to expect at each stage. I’ve refined this plan across dozens of implementations. The sequence is not arbitrary. Each step builds on the one before it. Skip steps and you’ll create gaps that undermine the framework.

Follow the sequence and you’ll have a functioning decision rights system by day 91. Let’s go.

Before You Start: The Pre-Work

Before day one of implementation, you need three things in place:

Your completed decision audit. If you haven't done the one-week audit from Chapter 4, stop and do it first. The 90-day plan assumes you have real data about how decisions flow in your company. Without it, you're building on guesses.

Your customized matrix. Take the 15 templates from Chapter 5, adjust the dollar thresholds, role titles, and criteria to fit your company, and have them ready in a format you can share (printed, laminated, or digital). If you're not sure about some of the thresholds, start conservative. You can expand later.

Your own commitment. Reread the "You Have to Mean It" section from Chapter 5 and the handoff scripts from Chapter 7. Be honest with yourself about where your resistance will show up. If there are decisions you're not ready to let go of yet, remove them from the matrix for now. It's better to launch with 15 decisions you'll actually honor than 25 decisions where you'll override 10 of them.

Phase 1: Foundation (Days 1 through 30)

The first 30 days are about getting the framework out of your head and into the hands of your team. This is the phase where handoff conversations happen, the cadence starts, and the culture begins to shift.

Week 1: The Owner's Week

This is the most important week of the entire 90 days. Don't rush the handoff conversations. Don't squeeze them between other meetings. Block the time, close the door, and give each person your full attention.

The 5-Day Implementation Plan

Here's how you roll this out without overwhelming the team.

Day 1 — Monday

- Handoff with Ops Manager
- Walk through their full matrix.
- Use the four-part framework from Chapter 7.
- Clarify authority. Clarify escalation. Clarify information flow.

Time required: 60 to 90 minutes.

Day 2 — Tuesday

- Handoff with Account Manager(s)
- Walk through their matrix.
- Review the ARIA framework.
- Define credits, escalation triggers, and communication standards.

Time required: 45 to 60 minutes per Account Manager.

Day 3 — Wednesday

- Make It Physical
- Print and distribute laminated cards for the Ops Manager and Account Manager(s).
- Confirm they have physical copies of their matrices.
- Visibility creates accountability.

Time required: 30 minutes.

Day 4 — Thursday

- First Cadence Review
- Run your first Wednesday-style ops review (on Thursday this week).

- Review decisions made since Monday.
- Reinforce ownership. Correct any gray areas immediately.

Time required: 30 minutes.

Day 5 — Friday

- Leadership Close-Out
- Hold a brief, focused meeting with the full leadership team.
- Reinforce the framework.
- Keep it positive. Keep it forward-looking.

Time required: 15 minutes.

Five days. That’s it. No reorganization. No org chart redesign. No six-month consulting project.

Just clarity, structure, and follow-through.

Week 2: The Cascade Week

Watch for the bounce back this week. Your team will still bring decisions to you that belong to them. Use the Redirect Response every time. Don’t answer the question. Point them to the matrix. Be patient. This is the week where habits start to form.

The second week is about behavior, not theory.

You’re reinforcing ownership in real time.

Monday

- First Standup
- Run your first Monday standup.
- Set the week.

- Confirm decision ownership.

Time required: 15 minutes.

Tuesday / Wednesday

- Crew Leader Handoff
- The Ops Manager leads the crew leader handoff.
- You observe, but you do not lead.
- Crew leaders receive their matrix and laminated cards.

Time required: 45 minutes.

Wednesday

- Midweek Review
- Meet with your Ops Manager.
- Discuss how the crew leader handoff went.
- Review any decisions made this week.
- Correct gray areas immediately.

Time required: 30 minutes.

Thursday

- Cascade to the Next Layer
- Account Manager cascades the framework to junior AMs or coordinators, if applicable.

Time required: 30 minutes.

Friday

- Close-Out Reflection
- Ask three questions:
 - What worked this week?
 - What felt uncomfortable?
 - What criteria need adjusting?

Time required: 15 minutes.

This is where most owners fall apart. They announce structure. Then they stop reinforcing it. Cadence is what makes architecture stick.

Weeks 3 and 4: The Practice Weeks

These two weeks are about repetition and reinforcement. The cadence is running. The matrix is in everyone's hands. Now the real work begins: building the muscle memory of distributed decision-making.

Weeks three and four are about discipline.

You're no longer explaining the system.

You're proving it works.

1. Protect the Cadence

- Run the Monday / Wednesday / Friday rhythm without fail.
- Consistency matters more than perfection.
- Reinforce the Right Behavior

2. Catch people doing it right.

- When you see a decision made within the matrix without your involvement, acknowledge it.
- Public reinforcement builds confidence.

3. Track the Redirect Response

- How many times per week are you redirecting someone back to their matrix?
- That number should decrease each week.
- If it isn't, you don't have clarity yet.

4. Close the Gaps

- Hold end-of-week check-ins with your Ops Manager and Account Manager(s).
- Ask:
 - Which decisions felt natural?
 - Which felt uncomfortable?
 - Where are the criteria unclear?
- Refine. Don't abandon.

5. Start Measuring What Matters

- Begin collecting data for your KPI dashboard.
- You don't need perfection.
- You need visibility.
- Start tracking:
 - Escalation frequency
 - Complaints per week
 - Overtime spend

- Revenue per labor hour
- Complaint resolution time

6. Resist the Urge to Override

- This is the hardest part.
- You will see decisions you would have handled differently.
- If they're within the criteria, let them stand.
- Structure only works when you allow it to.

This is the moment most owners either scale...or quietly take their authority back.

What you should see by Day 30: A noticeable reduction in the number of texts and calls coming to you for routine decisions. Your ops manager is using phrases like “I decided” and “I handled it.” Your account manager is resolving complaints without your involvement. Crew leaders are making field-level decisions with more confidence. The Monday/Wednesday/Friday cadence feels like a habit, not an imposition.

What you might still see: Some hesitation from longer-tenured employees. Occasional bounceback on decisions that are within the matrix. A few criteria that don't quite fit real-world situations. All normal. All is fixable in Phase 2.

Phase 2: Calibration (Days 31 through 60)

The second 30 days are about refinement. The framework is live. Your team is using it. Now you fine-tune the criteria, address the gaps, and start measuring results.

Week 5: The First Monthly Decision Review

This is the 60-minute monthly review from Chapter 8. It's your first formal opportunity to step back and assess how the framework is performing as a whole.

This isn't about perfection. It's about progress.

1. Review the Dashboard

- Review KPI trends from the first 30 days.
- Look for movement, not miracles.

2. Spotlight Wins and Lessons

- Identify two or three decisions that went well.
- Identify one that didn't.
- Discuss what can be learned from each.
- Normalize refinement.

3. Adjust the Criteria

- Be specific.
 - Which decision needs adjustment?
 - What is wrong with the current criteria?
 - What should it be instead?
 - Refine the rule. Don't abandon the system.

4. Review Escalation Patterns

- Are decisions escalating that shouldn't?
- Are decisions not escalating that should?
- Escalation data tells you where ambiguity still lives.

5. Test for Clarity

- Ask each team member:

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how clear are you about what you own?
- Anything below a 7 requires attention.
- Clarity is the leading indicator of performance.
- This is where structure turns into culture.

Weeks 5 through 8: Refinement in Motion

During Phase 2, you're doing three things simultaneously:

1. **Tightening criteria.** The first version of your matrix was a starting point. By now you've seen where the criteria are too vague ("use good judgment" language that crept in), too tight (thresholds that trigger unnecessary escalations), or missing (situations that arise regularly but weren't in the original matrix). Fix them. Update the laminated cards. Make sure every revision is communicated clearly.
2. **Building the dashboard habit.** By Week 6, your KPI dashboard should be updating weekly. Your ops manager owns the data entry. You review it in the Wednesday ops review. If the dashboard isn't updating consistently, it's a priority to fix. A dashboard that gets updated sporadically is worse than no dashboard because it creates a false sense of visibility.
3. **Expanding authority where earned.** If your ops manager has been making equipment decisions confidently within the \$1,500 threshold, consider raising it to \$2,000. If your account manager has been resolving complaints effectively within the \$200 credit limit, consider bumping it to \$250. Small expansions, earned through consistent performance, build momentum and trust. Announce them publicly: "Based on how well you've handled equipment decisions this month, I'm raising your approval threshold to \$2,000." That's a powerful message.

What you should see by Day 60: A measurable decrease in escalation frequency (most companies see 40 to 50% reduction by this point). Complaint resolution time dropping because account managers aren't waiting for your callback. The Wednesday ops review becoming genuinely productive rather than a reporting exercise. Your weekly time spent on other people's decisions dropping from 22 hours toward 10 to 12.

Phase 3: Acceleration (Days 61 through 90)

The final 30 days are where the framework stops being a project and starts being the way you operate. The cadence is ingrained. The criteria are calibrated. Your team is making decisions with confidence. Now you push for full adoption and start harvesting the results.

Week 9: Expand the Matrix

Remember: you started with the top 20 decisions. By now, those 20 are running smoothly. It's time to add the next layer. Go back to your decision inventory from Chapter 4 and identify 10 to 15 more decisions that are still flowing to you by default. Build the matrix for those decisions using the same five-column format. Hand them off using the same four-part conversation.

The second round of handoffs is always easier than the first because your team has already experienced the framework working. They've seen that the matrix is real, that you honor it, and that decisions made within it are protected. The trust is built. The expansion is just more of the same.

Weeks 10 through 12: Full Integration

By now, this should no longer feel new. It should feel normal. Here's what progress looks like:

1. Dashboard Discipline

- Your KPI dashboard is running consistently.
- You are tracking:

- The five core metrics
- At least three additional metrics from Chapter 8
- Visibility is no longer optional.

2. Second Monthly Decision Review

- Complete your second monthly decision review.
- Compare Month 1 to Month 2.
- Look for trends in:
 - Escalation frequency
 - Complaint volume
 - Overtime
 - Production efficiency
- Improvement compounds.

3. Update the Laminated Cards

- Revise all role-specific laminated cards to reflect any criteria adjustments made in the first 60 days.
- Clarity evolves. Documentation must follow.

4. Tie Compensation to the Framework

- Initiate compensation conversations if they were deferred during the rollout.
- Tie rewards to demonstrated ownership within the framework.
- Authority without accountability creates entitlement.

- Authority with accountability creates leaders.

5. Measure Your Own Time

- Track how much time you are spending on other people's decisions.
 - Target: under 8 hours per week.
 - If you're still above that, there's ambiguity somewhere.

6. Schedule the First Quarterly Assessment

- Schedule your first formal framework assessment, even if it falls slightly after Day 90.
- Structure requires maintenance.

At this point, the system should be doing something subtle but powerful.

You are no longer the default answer. You are the architect.

Day 90: The Measurement

On Day 90, run a one-day version of the decision audit you did before you started. Track every decision that comes to you for one full day. Compare it to your original audit.

If you followed the plan, here's what you should see:

- **Decisions Reaching the Owner (Per Day)**
 - Before Implementation: 25 to 40 decisions per day
 - Day 90 Target: 8 to 12 decisions per day
 - What It Means: A 60 to 70 percent reduction in owner bottleneck.
- **Owner Hours on Other People's Decisions (Per Week)**

- Before Implementation: 18 to 22 hours
 - Day 90 Target: 6 to 8 hours
 - What It Means: 10 to 14 hours per week reclaimed for strategic work.
- **Escalation Frequency (Ops Manager to Owner)**
 - Before Implementation: Daily, multiple times
 - Day 90 Target: 2 to 3 times per week
 - What It Means: Ops Manager operating with real authority.
- **Complaint Resolution Time**
 - Before Implementation: 24 to 48 hours
 - Day 90 Target: 4 to 8 hours
 - What It Means: Faster client recovery and higher satisfaction.
- **Weekly Overtime Spend Variance**
 - Before Implementation: High variability
 - Day 90 Target: Within 10 percent of target
 - What It Means: Controlled overtime within clear criteria.

These are not vanity metrics. They are evidence that structure is working.

If these numbers are moving in the right direction, the business is no longer dependent on you for momentum.

Those numbers aren't theoretical. They're the averages I've seen across companies that followed this plan. Your specific numbers will vary, but the direction should be clear and dramatic.

The hours you reclaim are not vacation hours (though you should take some of those too). They're growth hours. Strategy hours. New business hours. The time you need to work on the company instead of in it. That's the entire promise of this book, and at Day 90, you should be living it.

The Implementation Calendar at a Glance

90-DAY IMPLEMENTATION CALENDAR

PRE-WORK: Complete decision audit. Customize matrix and templates. Prepare laminated cards.

PHASE 1: FOUNDATION (Days 1 to 30)

Week 1: Handoff conversations with ops manager and account manager(s). Launch cadence.

Week 2: Cascade to crew leaders (ops manager leads). First full week of cadence.

Weeks 3 to 4: Practice and reinforcement. Redirect bounceback. Start tracking KPIs. Catch people doing it right.

PHASE 2: CALIBRATION (Days 31 to 60)

Week 5: First monthly decision review. Assess criteria, escalation patterns, team confidence.

Weeks 5 to 8: Tighten criteria. Build dashboard habit. Expand authority where earned.

PHASE 3: ACCELERATION (Days 61 to 90)

Week 9: Expand matrix to next 10 to 15 decisions.

Weeks 10 to 12: Full integration. Compensation conversations. Measure results. Day 90: Repeat decision audit. Measure improvement. Celebrate.

POST-90: Transition to ongoing rhythms (monthly review, quarterly assessment, annual reset from Chapter 8).

When to Ask for Help

This book gives you everything you need to implement the decision rights framework on your own. Most owners can and do implement it themselves. But there are situations where bringing in outside support accelerates the process and improves the outcomes.

Consider getting help if:

1. You've tried delegation before and it failed, and you're not sure you can avoid the same patterns without an outside perspective holding you accountable.
2. Your ops manager or key team members are resistant, and you need someone with credibility and experience to help facilitate the handoff conversations.
3. You're implementing across multiple locations simultaneously, and the coordination is more than you can manage while running the business.
4. You want the framework customized and calibrated by someone who has done it dozens of times in companies like yours.
5. You're building toward an exit and need a framework that's investor-grade, not just operationally functional.

A fractional COO or operations consultant who specializes in landscape companies can compress the 90-day timeline, customize the framework more precisely, and hold both the owner and the team accountable through the uncomfortable early weeks. It's not required, but for some companies, it's the difference between a framework that gets built and one that sticks.

Whether you do it yourself or bring in help, the important thing is to start. The 90-day clock begins the moment you sit down with your ops manager for that first handoff conversation. Every day you wait is another day of 27-minute problems, owner bottlenecks, and unrealized growth.

You've got the plan. You've got the tools. Pick a Monday and begin.

In Chapter 14, we'll address what to do when the plan doesn't go perfectly, because it won't. Troubleshooting the framework, diagnosing resistance, and adjusting when reality doesn't match the playbook.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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WHEN THE FRAMEWORK BREAKS

IT WILL BREAK. THAT'S NORMAL.

“We hit a wall around week four. My ops manager stopped using the matrix and started calling me again on everything. I almost gave up. Turns out, the problem wasn’t the framework. It was me.”

-Owner of a \$6M landscape company

If you’re reading this chapter because something isn’t working, it’s good. That means you implemented the framework, which puts you ahead of 80% of the people who buy business books. Implementation that hits problems is infinitely better than a perfect plan that never leaves the shelf.

Every company I’ve worked with has hit friction points during implementation. Every single one. The framework doesn’t fail because it’s flawed. It fails because it’s being installed in a real company with real people, real habits, and real history. Friction is part of the process.

The question isn’t whether you’ll hit problems. It’s about diagnosing them correctly and fixing the right thing. Most owners, when the framework stalls, reach for the wrong fix. They tighten control rather than adjust the criteria. They blame people instead of examining the system. They give up on the whole framework because one piece isn’t working.

This chapter is your troubleshooting guide. It covers the seven most common failure patterns, how to diagnose each, and exactly what to do about them.

Failure Pattern 1: The Owner Override

Symptom: Your team stopped using the matrix. Escalation frequency is back to pre-implementation levels. Your ops manager or account manager has reverted to checking with you on decisions that are clearly within their authority.

Diagnosis: In 90% of cases, this is caused by the owner. You overrode a decision that was within the matrix. Maybe it was a big one, maybe it was small. But your team noticed, and they drew the logical conclusion: the matrix is advisory, not real. The boss still wants to make the calls.

This is the most common failure pattern and the most damaging. A single public override can undo weeks of progress. Two overrides, and your team will quietly shelf the framework and go back to asking you everything.

The fix: Acknowledge it. Directly. To the person whose decision you overrode and to the broader team if the override was visible. “I made a mistake last week. I overrode a decision that was within the matrix, and that wasn’t right. The framework only works if I honor it. I’m recommitting to that, and I need you to hold me accountable.”

Then actually stop overriding. If you find yourself repeatedly wanting to override decisions within the criteria, the problem isn’t your team. The problem is your criteria. Tighten the boundaries to a level you’re genuinely comfortable with. A narrow authority you honor is worth more than a broad authority you undermine.

Owner Override Self-Check

Ask yourself honestly:

1. Have I overridden a decision that was clearly within the matrix in the last 30 days?
2. Have I expressed displeasure about a decision that met the criteria but wasn't my personal preference?
3. Have I asked, "Why didn't you check with me first?" about something that was clearly within someone's authority?
4. Have I re-decided something after my Ops Manager or Account Manager already made the call?

If the answer to any of these is yes, the framework is still coming from you.

Own it. Fix it. This is where structure either becomes culture...or becomes theater.

Failure Pattern 2: The Criteria Gap

Symptom: Your team is using the matrix but keeps hitting situations it doesn't cover. They escalate not because they want to, but because the criteria genuinely don't address the situation they're facing.

Diagnosis: The matrix isn't complete enough for your operation. This is normal in the first 60 days. No framework covers every scenario from day one. The gap isn't a failure. It's feedback.

The fix: Treat every "I didn't know what to do" escalation as a criteria-writing opportunity. When your ops manager calls with a situation the matrix doesn't cover, walk through it together, decide on the right course of action, and write the criteria for it immediately. Add it to the matrix that day. Update the laminated card within the week.

Keep a running "gap log" for the first 90 days. Every time someone escalates because the criteria didn't cover the situation, log it. Review the gap log in your monthly decision review. You'll notice patterns: most gaps cluster in one or two categories. Close those gaps, and the escalation rate drops significantly.

Failure Pattern 3: The Confidence Deficit

Symptom: A specific team member isn't using the matrix. They know what it says. They understand the criteria. They still call you anyway, usually with phrasing like "I just wanted to make sure" or "I know it's my call, but."

Diagnosis: This person has a confidence problem, not a clarity problem. They understand the framework intellectually but don't trust themselves to use it. This is especially common among people who have been corrected in the past for making independent decisions, or among those who are newer to a leadership role.

The fix: More coaching, not more criteria. This person needs reps and positive reinforcement. Every time they make a decision within the matrix, acknowledge it. When they call to "just make sure," use the Redirect Response but add encouragement: "You already know the answer. Make the call. I trust your judgment on this."

Consider pairing them with a more confident peer for the first few weeks. If your ops manager is using the matrix confidently but your account manager isn't, have the ops manager share how he approaches decisions. Peer confidence is sometimes more persuasive than boss confidence.

If the confidence deficit persists beyond 60 days despite coaching and support, it may be a role-fit issue. Some people genuinely prefer not to make decisions. That's not a character flaw, but it may mean they're in the wrong seat for a decision rights framework to work.

Failure Pattern 4: The Cadence Collapse

Symptom: The Monday standup started getting skipped. Then the Wednesday ops review became biweekly. Then the Friday close-out disappeared entirely. The framework is technically still in place, but the rhythm that keeps it alive is gone.

Diagnosis: The cadence lost priority. This usually happens because of a busy season crunch, a staffing crisis, or simply because the urgency of day-to-day

operations pushed the meetings off the calendar. Whatever the cause, the effect is the same: without the cadence, the framework drifts.

The fix: Restart the cadence immediately. Don't wait for a "good week." There will never be a good week. The whole point of the cadence is that it runs regardless of what else is happening. It's 60 minutes per week across all three meetings. If you can't protect 60 minutes a week, the problem isn't the cadence. It's the priorities.

When you restart, acknowledge the gap: "We let the cadence slip. That's on me. We're restarting today, and it's non-negotiable going forward." Then protect it. Put it on the calendar as a recurring appointment. Treat it with the same priority as a meeting with your biggest client. Because in a real sense, it is: the cadence is your meeting with the future of your company.

Failure Pattern 5: The Selective Adopter

Symptom: The framework works well for some decisions but is being ignored for others. Your ops manager uses the matrix for equipment and scheduling decisions but still calls you on every staffing and vendor decision. Your account manager handles small complaints within the matrix but escalates everything involving money, even when it's clearly within her authority.

Diagnosis: Selective adoption usually means the person is comfortable with some categories and uncomfortable with others. The categories they're avoiding are typically the ones with higher perceived risk: decisions involving money, people, or client relationships where a mistake feels more consequential.

The fix: Address the specific categories that aren't being adopted. Have a focused conversation: "I've noticed you're using the matrix well for equipment and scheduling decisions. That's great. But staffing decisions are still coming to me. What's holding you back on those?"

The answer will usually point to one of two things: the criteria for those categories need more specificity (they're too vague for the person to feel safe), or the person needs a few supervised reps before they're ready to fly solo. Both

are fixable. Tighten the criteria for the uncomfortable categories and walk through two or three real decisions together before asking them to handle the next one independently.

Failure Pattern 6: The Wrong Person

Symptom: You've done everything right. The criteria are clear. The handoff was solid. The cadence is running. And one specific person simply isn't performing. They make decisions that consistently miss the criteria. They don't escalate when they should. They escalate when they shouldn't. The framework works for everyone else but not for this person.

Diagnosis: You might have a people problem, not a framework problem. The decision rights framework assumes that the people in your key roles have the baseline competence and judgment to make good decisions within defined criteria. If someone consistently can't do that, the framework isn't the issue.

The fix: Before concluding it's a people problem, run the diagnostic conversation from Chapter 8 one more time. Make sure the criteria are genuinely clear, the person has had adequate coaching, and there's no environmental factor blocking them. If you've done all that and the performance gap persists, you're facing a role-fit decision.

This is uncomfortable, but it's important: a person who can't or won't make decisions within a clear framework is actively blocking the system for everyone around them.

Their hesitation creates bottlenecks. Their poor decisions create rework. Their inability to adopt the framework sends a signal to the rest of the team that the framework is optional.

The conversation isn't "you're bad at your job." It's "this role requires independent decision-making within defined criteria. That's the expectation going forward. If that's not a fit for you, let's talk about what is." Sometimes the answer is a role change within the company. Sometimes it's a parting of ways. But ignoring it will cost you the framework.

Failure Pattern 7: The Season Crush

Symptom: The framework was working well during the shoulder season when the pace was manageable. Then peak season hit, and everything reverted. Decisions are flying, the cadence collapsed under the weight of daily emergencies, and you're back in the middle of everything.

Diagnosis: The framework wasn't stress-tested before peak season arrived. The criteria may have been calibrated for normal operations but not for the intensity of peak season when volume doubles, call-outs increase, equipment runs harder, and client expectations are highest.

The fix: Accept that some regression during peak season is normal. The goal isn't perfection under stress. It's resilience under stress. Then make targeted adjustments for the season:

Expand overtime authority slightly during peak (crew leaders approve up to 3 hours instead of 2; ops manager approves Saturday work without escalation).

Simplify the cadence temporarily. If the Wednesday ops review can't happen during the busiest weeks, condense it to a 10-minute phone call. Don't skip it entirely.

Pre-authorize common peak-season decisions. If you know equipment rentals spike in July, give your ops manager blanket rental authority for the month with a weekly spend cap instead of per-incident approval.

Add a peak-season addendum to the matrix with adjusted thresholds and streamlined escalation for the specific conditions you face during your busiest months.

After peak season, debrief. What held up? What broke? Adjust the framework for next year. Companies that survive two peak seasons with the framework in place have a system that's genuinely durable.

The Diagnostic Flowchart

When something isn't working, use this sequence to find the root cause before you start fixing:

DIAGNOSTIC SEQUENCE (work through in order)

Step 1: Is the owner overriding decisions within the matrix?

→ If yes: Stop. Fix this first. Nothing else works until the owner honors the framework.

Step 2: Do the criteria cover the situation?

→ If no: Write the missing criteria. Add to the matrix. Update laminated cards.

Step 3: Does the person understand the criteria?

→ If no: Retrain. Walk through examples. Verify comprehension.

Step 4: Does the person have the confidence to act?

→ If no: Coach. Provide supervised reps. Pair with a confident peer. Acknowledge wins.

Step 5: Is the cadence running consistently?

→ If no: Restart it. Today. Non-negotiable.

Step 6: Is the issue specific to certain decision categories?

→ If yes: Tighten criteria for those categories. Provide focused coaching on the uncomfortable areas.

Step 7: Is the issue specific to one person, despite all of the above being in place?

→ If yes: Role-fit conversation. Compassionate but direct.

Most issues resolve at Steps 1 through 4. If you're jumping to Step 7 without exhausting the first six, you're likely misdiagnosing the problem.

The Recovery Conversation

If the framework has stalled and you need to restart, don't pretend nothing happened. Acknowledge the stall, take ownership of what went wrong, and recommit. Here's a script:

Script: The Restart

“I want to address something directly. The decision rights framework we launched a few weeks ago hasn't worked the way it should have. Some of that is on me [Be specific]. I overrode decisions. I let the cadence slip. I didn't give you enough support. Some of it is growing pains that we need to work through together. Here's what I'm committed to doing differently: [List specific actions]. Here's what I need from you: [List specific actions]. The framework is the right approach. We're not abandoning it. We're recalibrating it. Let's talk about what needs to change so this works for all of us.”

The restart conversation follows the same four-part structure as the original handoff: why, what, safety net, and ask. The difference is that now you have a real shared experience to draw from. Use it. Reference specific decisions, specific situations, specific moments where the framework worked and where it didn't. Specifics build credibility.

Generalities sound like another speech.

Most companies that stall and restart end up with a stronger framework than companies that had a smooth first 90 days. The friction forced them to examine the framework more carefully, address issues they might have glossed over, and build deeper buy-in from the team. Restart isn't a failure. It's a second draft. And second drafts are almost always better than the first ones.

In Chapter 15, we'll look at what happens after the framework is stable: how to scale decision rights as your company grows from \$6M to \$10M to \$15M and beyond, including how to adapt the matrix for new service lines, new locations, and larger teams.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



SCALING DECISION RIGHTS

THE FRAMEWORK GROWS WITH YOU

“The framework that got us from \$6M to \$10M wasn’t the same framework that got us from \$10M to \$16M. The principles stayed. The thresholds, the roles, and the structure all evolved.”

-Owner of a \$16M landscape company

Everything you’ve built so far was calibrated for a specific stage of your company. The 15 templates, the dollar thresholds, the escalation triggers, and the role-specific playbooks were all designed for a landscape company in the \$6M to \$8M range with one location, one ops manager, one or two account managers, and six to ten crews.

That’s a great starting point. But your company isn’t going to stay there. At least, it shouldn’t. If the decision rights framework is working, it’s removing the bottleneck that was preventing growth. Which means growth is coming. And when it does, the framework needs to grow with it.

This chapter covers how decision rights evolve at each major revenue stage, what changes when you add locations or service lines, and how to avoid recreating the owner bottleneck at scale.

Decision Rights by Revenue Stage

The core principles don't change as you grow. Closest Capable Person. Clear criteria. Objective escalation triggers. Information flow instead of approval flow. These hold at every size.

What changes is the structure: who the decision-makers are, what thresholds apply, and how information flows between layers. Here's how the framework evolves at each major stage:

\$3M to \$6M: The Foundation Stage

This is where most readers of this book are starting. The org structure is flat: owner, maybe an ops manager (or a working foreman acting as one), maybe an account manager (or the owner handling sales and client relationships personally), and crew leaders who are really just senior crew members.

At this stage, the framework's primary job is to get the owner out of daily operational decisions. The matrix is simple: two to three decision-makers (owner, ops manager, crew leaders) with relatively tight thresholds. The owner is still involved in most financial decisions above a low threshold and all client-facing decisions above routine.

\$3M to \$6M Framework Characteristics

At this stage, the structure is simpler — but still intentional.

Decision Layers

- Two to three layers:
 - Owner
 - Ops Manager or Foreman
 - Crew Leaders

Keep it lean. Complexity kills clarity at this size.

Equipment Threshold

- Crew Leader: up to \$300
- Ops Manager: up to \$1,000
- Owner: above \$1,000

Keep capital tight. Protect cash flow.

Client Credit Authority

- Ops Manager or Account Manager: up to \$100
- Owner: above \$100

Speed matters, but control matters more at this level.

Hiring Authority

- Owner approves all hires.

You cannot delegate what you cannot yet afford to get wrong.

Overtime Authority

- Crew Leader: up to 1 hour
- Ops Manager: up to 2 hours
- Owner: above 2 hours

Clear caps prevent margin erosion.

Cadence

- Monday standup
- Friday close-out

Skip the Wednesday review if you don't have a dedicated Ops Manager yet.

Owner Time on Others' Decisions

- Target: 10 to 12 hours per week (Down from 20+)

You're not out of operations yet — but you're trending upward.

At this size, the goal isn't sophistication. It's control without suffocation.

\$6M to \$10M: The Professionalization Stage

This is where the book's core templates are calibrated. The org structure professionalizes: a dedicated ops manager, a dedicated account manager (or two), crew leaders who genuinely lead (not just drive the truck), and possibly a fleet manager or office manager with defined responsibilities.

At this stage, the framework's primary job is to build a management layer that operates independently on daily and weekly decisions. The owner transitions from operational decision-maker to strategic decision-maker and framework coach.

\$6M to \$10M Framework Characteristics

At this stage, the structure deepens. Authority expands. Your role begins to shift upward.

Decision Layers

- Three to four layers:
 - Owner
 - Ops Manager
 - Account Manager(s)
 - Crew Leaders

Authority is no longer centralized. It's distributed.

Equipment Threshold

- Crew Leader: up to \$500

- Ops Manager: up to \$1,500
- Owner: above \$1,500

Speed increases. Guardrails stay intact.

Client Credit Authority

- Account Manager: up to \$200
- Owner: above \$200

Resolution becomes faster and more professional.

Hiring Authority

- Ops Manager owns seasonal and crew hires.
- The owner approves management hires.

Leadership depth becomes the focus.

Overtime Authority

- Crew Leader: up to 2 hours
- Ops Manager: up to 4 hours
- The owner approves Saturday or extended overtime.

Production discipline improves without micromanagement.

Cadence

- Full Monday / Wednesday / Friday cadence.

Rhythm becomes non-negotiable.

Owner Time on Others' Decisions

- Target: 6 to 8 hours per week.

You are no longer the operations engine. You are becoming the architect.

\$10M to \$15M: The Leverage Stage

This is where the branch manager role emerges or where the ops manager role splits into two (one for maintenance, one for construction/enhancements). The account management function may be split into retention and growth roles. The owner is no longer involved in daily operations at all and is focused on strategy, key relationships, and business development.

At this stage, the framework's primary job is to enable a management team to run the operation without the owner's daily involvement. The matrix becomes a multi-layer system where decisions cascade through three or four levels before reaching the owner.

\$10M to \$15M Framework Characteristics

At this level, leadership becomes layered.

You are no longer running a company. You are running leaders who run the company.

Decision Layers

- Four to five layers:
 - Owner
 - Branch Manager or General Manager
 - Ops Manager(s)
 - Account Manager(s)
 - Crew Leaders

Authority now flows through management, not around it.

Equipment Threshold

- Crew Leader: up to \$500
- Ops Manager: up to \$2,500
- Branch Manager: up to \$5,000
- Owner: above \$5,000

Capital decisions match operational maturity.

Client Credit Authority

- Account Manager: up to \$300
- Branch Manager: up to \$500
- Owner: above \$500

Client recovery is fast and controlled.

Hiring Authority

- Ops Manager owns all crew hires.
- The Branch Manager approves ops-level hires.
- The owner approves branch management hires.

You now manage leadership capacity, not labor.

Overtime Authority

- Crew Leader: up to 2 hours
- Ops Manager: up to 4 hours
- The Branch Manager approves Saturday or extended overtime.

Margin discipline is embedded at multiple levels.

Cadence

- Branch runs its own internal cadence.
- Owner receives:
 - Weekly branch report
 - Monthly P&L review

You are no longer in daily operations.

Owner Time on Others' Decisions

- Target: 3 to 5 hours per week.

You are operating strategically. If you are still fielding daily decision traffic at this level, the structure isn't complete.

\$15M to \$20M and Beyond: The Enterprise Stage

At this stage, the company may have multiple branches, multiple service divisions, and a corporate support structure (HR, finance, marketing). The owner's role has fully shifted to CEO: vision, strategy, capital allocation, key relationships, and talent development at the senior level.

The decision rights framework at this stage is a governance system, not just an operational tool. Decisions are distributed across a management team, each member with clearly defined authority, thresholds, and accountability. The owner's involvement in operational decisions is essentially zero. Their involvement is strategic and financial.

\$15M to \$20M+ Framework Characteristics

At this level, you are no longer operating a company. You are stewarding an organization.

Structure is institutional. Authority is layered. Accountability is financial.

Decision Layers

- Five or more layers:

- CEO or Owner
- VP of Operations or COO
- Branch Managers
- Ops Managers
- Account Managers
- Crew Leaders

Leadership runs through levels, not around them.

Equipment Threshold

- Branch Managers: up to \$10,000
- VP or COO: up to \$25,000
- CEO: above \$25,000

Capital allocation is strategic, not reactive.

Client Credit Authority

- Branch Managers: up to \$1,000
- CEO: above \$1,000

Client recovery authority sits where operational accountability lives.

Hiring Authority

- Branch Managers own all hires within their branch.
- CEO approves direct reports only.

You hire leaders who hire leaders.

Overtime Authority

- Fully delegated to the branch level within budget accountability.

Budget replaces permission.

Cadence

- Branch-level cadences run independently.
- CEO maintains:
 - Monthly branch reviews
 - Quarterly strategic reviews

Daily decision flow does not reach the top.

Owner Time on Others' Decisions

- Target: under 2 hours per week.

If you are still fielding daily operational decisions at this stage, the architecture is broken.

This tier now completes the progression:

Control → ***Delegation*** → ***Distributed Authority*** → ***Institutional Structure***

Scaling Trigger: When to Adjust the Thresholds

You don't adjust thresholds on a calendar schedule. You adjust them based on signals. Here are the triggers that tell you it's time to expand authority at the next level:

Signal 1: Escalation frequency is too high. If your ops manager is escalating more than three to five decisions per week that fall just above the current threshold, the threshold is too tight for your current size. Raise it. If most escalations cluster around a specific dollar amount (everything between \$1,500 and \$2,500 is coming to you), that's the exact range you need to release.

Signal 2: Decision speed is suffering. If good decisions are being delayed because they require a level of approval that adds 24 to 48 hours, the approval requirement is costing you more than the risk of delegating it. Equipment sitting idle for a day while waiting for approval costs more than the occasional imperfect repair decision.

Signal 3: Your capable people are frustrated. When a competent ops manager or branch manager starts expressing frustration about the thresholds (“I know what the right call is, but I have to wait for approval”), that frustration is a signal that the framework hasn’t kept up with the person’s development. Expand their authority before you lose them.

Signal 4: Revenue has grown 25% or more since the last threshold review. As revenue grows, the relative significance of dollar amounts changes. A \$1,500 repair decision at \$6M is a bigger deal proportionally than at \$10M. Scale the thresholds with the revenue so the framework maintains the same functional relationship to the business.

Signal 5: You’ve added a management layer. When you hire a branch manager or split the ops role, the decision matrix needs a new column. The new role needs to be defined with authority, and the existing roles need to know how their authority interacts with the new one.

Adding a Second Location

Opening a second location is the moment that tests your decision rights framework more than any other. If the framework is solid, the second location launches with a functioning operating system on day one. If the framework is weak or exists only in the owner’s head, the second location creates double the chaos and half the control.

Here’s the sequence for extending decision rights to a new location:

Step 1: Clone the matrix. Start with your existing matrix as the template for the new location. Same five columns, same criteria structure, same escalation logic. Adjust thresholds only if the new location operates at a different scale or in a different market.

Step 2: Appoint the branch manager first. Before you open the new location, the person who will run it needs to be identified, trained on the framework, and given time (ideally 30 to 60 days) to operate within the existing location's matrix. They need to learn the system before they carry it somewhere new.

Step 3: Run parallel cadences. Each location runs its own Monday/Wednesday/Friday cadence independently. The owner doesn't attend both. Each branch manager leads their own cadence. The owner gets a weekly branch report from each location and holds monthly P&L reviews with each branch manager.

Step 4: Define cross-branch decisions. Some decisions will span both locations: shared equipment, shared clients, staffing transfers between branches, company-wide vendor relationships, unified pricing strategy. These need explicit decision rules. Who decides when Branch A wants to borrow a crew from Branch B? Who decides when a client has properties in both territories? Build a short cross-branch decision matrix that both branch managers reference.

Step 5: Resist the urge to centralize. The most common mistake owners make when opening a second location is re-centralizing decisions because they're nervous about losing control. If you reinsert yourself as the decision hub between two locations, you've created a worse bottleneck than you had with one. Trust the framework. Let the branch managers run. Hold them accountable for results through the cadence and the P&L.

Adding Service Lines

Many landscape companies expand from pure maintenance into construction, irrigation, holiday lighting, arbor care, pest control, or other specialized services. Each new service line introduces decisions that don't exist in the maintenance matrix.

The approach is straightforward: build a service-line-specific decision matrix that follows the same five-column format but addresses the unique decisions of that service. Construction decisions (change order authority, material procurement, sub management) are different from maintenance decisions.

Irrigation decisions (system design approval, emergency repair authority) are different from both.

The key principle when adding service lines:

Service Line Decision Rights Principles

As your company grows, service lines add complexity. Structure must expand with them.

1. Every Service Line Has Its Own Matrix

- Each service line must have its own decision matrix.
- Criteria should be specific to that service.
- Enhancements, irrigation, maintenance, and design-build do not operate under identical risk profiles. Your authority structure should reflect that reality.

2. Cross-Service Decisions Must Be Explicit

- Shared clients.
- Shared equipment.
- Shared labor.
- These decisions follow the same logic as cross-branch decisions.
- Define clearly who owns the call. Ambiguity between departments creates friction faster than almost anything else.

3. One Final Arbiter

- The Branch Manager — or the Owner in a single-location company — resolves conflicts between service lines.
- There must be one clear tie-breaker.

- Shared authority without defined resolution equals politics.

4. New Service Lines Start Tight

- New service lines begin with tighter thresholds.
- Authority expands as the team demonstrates competence.
- Do not extend broad authority to an unproven division simply because it exists elsewhere in the company.
- Trust should follow performance.

5. Integrate the Cadence

- A new service line integrates into the existing branch cadence.
- Do not create a separate meeting rhythm unless the division grows large enough to justify independent operations.
- More meetings do not equal more structure. Alignment does.

The Owner's Evolving Role

As the decision rights scale, the owner's role fundamentally changes. This is not just an operational shift. It's an identity shift. The person who built the company by making every decision has to become the person who builds the system that makes decisions without them.

Here's what the owner's role looks like at each stage:

If you're a \$10M company and you're still spending 50% of your time on operations, the decision rights framework hasn't scaled with the business. Either the thresholds haven't expanded, the management team hasn't developed, or you're unconsciously holding on to operational involvement because it's where you feel most competent and most needed.

That last one is the hardest to admit and the most common at the \$10M to \$15M stage. The owner knows, intellectually, that they should be focused on strategy. But the strategy feels abstract, and the results are slow. Operations feel tangible, and the feedback is immediate. The temptation to stay involved in operations isn't about the company needing you there. It's about you needing to be there. And recognizing that distinction is the final step in the journey this book is designed to take you on.

The decision rights framework gives you the mechanism to let go. The scaling roadmap in this chapter gives you the progression. But the willingness to actually let go? That's yours to find. And I can tell you from 30 years of experience working with landscape companies: the owners who find it build the companies that last.

In Chapter 16, we'll look at how technology and AI are changing the decision landscape in 2026, and how the decision rights framework positions your company to adopt new tools from a place of clarity rather than chaos.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



AI AND TECHNOLOGY READINESS

TECHNOLOGY IS AN AMPLIFIER, NOT A
SOLUTION

“Every software vendor told us AI would transform our operation. None of them told us we needed to define our decisions before the software could help us make them.”

-Owner of an \$8M landscape company, after a failed software implementation

Let’s get something out of the way early: this chapter is not going to tell you which software to buy. Technology in the landscape industry is evolving so fast that any specific product recommendation would be outdated before this book hits the shelf. What I’m going to do instead is give you a framework for thinking about technology and AI that will serve you regardless of which tools come and go.

Here’s the core principle: technology amplifies the system you already have. If your decision rights are clear, technology makes them faster, more consistent, and more scalable. If your decision rights are muddy, technology makes the mess faster and more expensive.

Remember Chapter 3? “We need better software” was one of the five traditional solutions that fail. The reason it fails is that software automates

your existing system. If your existing system is “every decision funnels to the owner,” the software will help you funnel decisions to the owner more efficiently. That’s not the improvement you need.

But if you’ve built the decision rights framework from this book, you have something most landscape companies don’t: a clearly defined decision architecture. You know who decides what, under what criteria, with what escalation triggers. That architecture is exactly what technology needs to support effectively. And it’s exactly what AI needs to augment intelligently.

Where AI Is Already Showing Up in Landscape Operations

As of 2026, AI is touching landscape operations in several areas. Some of these are mature and proven. Some are emerging and experimental. All of them work better when decision rights are defined.

Routing and Scheduling Optimization

AI-powered routing tools can analyze historical data, crew capacity, weather forecasts, traffic patterns, and client priority tiers to suggest optimized daily routes. These tools are most effective when they know the decision rules: which clients get priority, the constraints on crew assignments, and the tolerance for deviation from the standard route.

If you’ve built the scheduling section of your decision rights matrix, you’ve already documented those rules. The AI doesn’t replace your ops manager’s judgment. It gives your ops manager a better starting point and frees them to focus on the exceptions and the judgment calls that the algorithm can’t handle.

Predictive Equipment Maintenance

Telematics and IoT sensors on equipment can track runtime, fuel consumption, vibration patterns, and maintenance intervals. AI systems analyze this data to predict when a piece of equipment is likely to fail, allowing you to schedule maintenance before a breakdown happens in the field.

This connects directly to your equipment decision matrix. When the AI flags a mower for preventive maintenance, your ops manager already knows the criteria: repair if the cost is under \$1,500 and the replacement value is under 40%. The AI provides the data. The decision rights framework provides the decision rules. Together, they eliminate the reactive breakdown cycle that kills productivity.

Client Communication Automation

AI tools can automate routine client communications, including service confirmations, weather-delay notifications, post-service quality reports, and renewal reminders. The best of these tools can draft personalized messages based on the client's history and preferences.

Your account manager's decision rights matrix already defines when to communicate proactively, what triggers a client notification, and the appropriate tone and content. AI handles routine communications. Your account manager handles the relationships, the complaints, and the judgment calls. Clear decision rights tell the AI what to automate and what to leave for a human.

Estimating and Pricing Assistance

AI tools can analyze property size, service history, material costs, labor rates, and competitive data to generate pricing estimates faster and more consistently than manual processes. Some tools can even analyze satellite imagery to estimate property measurements and service requirements.

This is one area where the decision rights framework is especially valuable. Your pricing matrix defines the minimum margins, the rate card, and the escalation triggers for non-standard pricing. AI can generate the estimate. The decision rights framework determines who approves it and under what conditions. The account manager approves standard estimates within the rate card. The owner approves non-standard pricing or competitive bid responses. Clear lanes for clear decisions.

Quality Monitoring

Emerging tools use drone imagery, GPS-tagged crew photos, and computer vision to assess property quality after service. These systems can compare current conditions to historical baselines and flag properties where quality may have declined.

This directly supports the quality decision matrix. When an AI system flags a property, the crew leader or ops manager already knows the criteria for rework decisions. The technology provides the data. The matrix provides the decision path. The combination is more consistent than either one alone.

The Decision Rights Framework as Your AI Readiness Layer

Here's something that most technology vendors won't tell you but that I've seen proven repeatedly: the single biggest predictor of whether a landscape company succeeds with new technology is not the quality of the software. It's the clarity of the company's decision-making structure.

Companies with clear decision rights adopt technology faster, get better results, and avoid the most common implementation failures. Here's why:

Technology Without Decision Rights vs. Technology With Decision Rights

Technology does not fix bottlenecks. Structure does.

Here's the difference.

- **Software Configuration**
 - Without Decision Rights
 - Software is configured around the owner as the central decision-maker. Everything still funnels to one person — just digitally.
 - With Decision Rights
 - Software is configured to support distributed decisions. Crew leaders, Ops Managers, and Account Managers have system

access aligned with their authority.

- **AI and Recommendations**

- Without Decision Rights

- AI recommendations go to the owner, who becomes the bottleneck for approving them.

- With Decision Rights

- AI recommendations go to the appropriate decision-maker based on the matrix.
 - Routing suggestions go to the Ops Manager.
 - Pricing suggestions go to the Account Manager.
- Authority drives technology — not the other way around.

- **Data Tracking**

- Without Decision Rights

- Nobody knows what data to track because nobody has defined which decisions require data.

- With Decision Rights

- The KPI dashboard defines exactly what data matters.
- Technology is configured to provide that data.
- Clarity determines metrics.

- **Training**

- Without Decision Rights

- Training is generic. Everyone learns the software.

- Nobody learns how to use it for their specific decisions.
- With Decision Rights
 - Training is role-specific.
 - Each person learns the features that support their authority.
 - The Crew Leader learns the quality photo tool.
 - The Ops Manager learns the scheduling optimizer.
 - Training reinforces structure.
- **Technology's Role**
 - Without Decision Rights
 - Technology becomes another system to manage instead of a tool that reduces management burden.
 - With Decision Rights
 - Technology automates routine decisions and data collection, freeing people to focus on judgment calls.
 - Technology amplifies clarity. It does not create it.

The decision rights framework you've built is, essentially, an AI implementation guide. Every decision in your matrix that has clear criteria, objective thresholds, and defined escalation triggers is a decision that technology can support or partially automate. The clearer the criteria, the more effectively technology can help.

What AI Can Decide vs What Humans Must Decide

Not every decision in your matrix should be touched by AI. Understanding which decisions benefit from technology and which ones require human judgment is critical for smart adoption.

The AI Decision Spectrum

AI is not a replacement for leadership. It is a tool, and tools must be placed inside a structure.

Here's how to think about it.

- **Automate**

- AI handles. Humans monitor.
- These are routine, rules-based decisions.
 - Routine scheduling and route optimization
 - Weather-triggered client notifications
 - Preventive maintenance scheduling based on equipment data
 - Standard invoice generation and payment reminders
 - Post-service confirmation messages
- If the criteria are clear, AI can execute consistently.

- **Assist**

- AI provides data or recommendations. Humans decide. These are judgment calls supported by analysis.
 - Pricing estimates and margin analysis
 - Quality flagging from photo or drone data
 - Crew performance trend analysis
 - Client retention risk scoring
 - Equipment repair versus replacement analysis
- AI informs. Leaders decide.

- **Human Only**

- AI has no role. These decisions require context, nuance, and values.
 - Hiring and termination decisions
 - Client relationship recovery conversations (the ARIA framework)
 - Safety judgment calls
 - Crew conflict resolution
 - Cultural and values-based decisions
 - Strategic direction and growth planning

Structure determines where AI belongs. Without decision rights, AI creates confusion. With decision rights, AI creates leverage.

Notice the pattern: the more a decision involves relationships, judgment, safety, or values, the more it belongs to humans. The more a decision involves data, patterns, repetition, or calculation, the more it benefits from AI assistance. Your decision rights matrix already categorizes decisions this way. The AI decision spectrum is just another lens on the same framework.

Technology Adoption Sequence

If you're thinking about investing in technology (and you should be, because the companies that don't will fall behind), here's the sequence I recommend. It's built on the assumption that you have a functioning decision rights framework in place.

Phase 1: Get the basics right. Before you invest in AI, make sure your fundamental technology stack is solid. You need a functioning CRM for client

management, a scheduling/routing platform, a time-tracking system, and a basic financial reporting tool. If any of these are missing or broken, fix them first. AI tools built on bad data produce bad recommendations.

Phase 2: Automate the routine. Use technology to automate the decisions that your matrix classifies as routine and criteria-based. Automated scheduling suggestions.

Automated client notifications. Automated equipment maintenance alerts. These are the decisions with clear, repeatable criteria that don't require judgment. Automate them and give your people more time for the decisions that do require judgment.

Phase 3: Add intelligence. Once the routine is automated, add AI tools that provide insights and recommendations. Pricing optimization. Client retention risk scoring. Crew productivity analysis. Equipment lifecycle forecasting. These tools don't make decisions. They inform decisions. Your ops manager still decides. The AI gives them better data to base their decisions on.

Phase 4: Integrate. As your technology stack matures, integrate the tools so that data flows seamlessly between systems. The scheduling platform talks to the CRM, which talks to the financial system, which feeds the KPI dashboard. Integration eliminates manual data entry, reduces errors, and gives your decision-makers a single source of truth.

This sequence keeps you from the most common mistake I see: buying expensive AI tools before your basic systems are in order. An AI-powered scheduling optimizer running on incomplete client data and manual crew tracking will produce garbage. A simple scheduling platform running on clean data with clear decision rights will outperform it every time.

Protecting Against the Technology Trap

A warning for 2026 and beyond: the landscape technology market is flooded with vendors promising AI will transform your business. Some of them are

right. Many of them sell solutions to problems you don't have, or solutions that require a level of data infrastructure you haven't built yet.

Before you invest in any technology, ask three questions:

1. Which decision in my matrix does this tool support? If you can't connect the tool to a specific decision in your framework, it's a nice-to-have, not a need-to-have. Every technology investment should map to a decision your team regularly makes.
2. Who in my organization will use this tool, and do they have the authority to act on its output? If a tool generates great scheduling recommendations but sends them to the owner for approval before the ops manager can act on them, the tool hasn't solved the bottleneck. It's just digitized it. The tool should serve the person who makes the decision.
3. Does this tool require clean data that I don't currently have? AI is only as good as the data it runs on. If a tool requires two years of GPS tracking data and you just started tracking last month, the tool isn't ready for you yet. Build the data foundation first.

The Technology Investment Test

Before signing any technology contract over \$500 per month, answer these questions.

If you can't answer them clearly, don't sign.

1. Which specific decisions in our matrix does this support?

- Technology should reinforce defined authority — not create new ambiguity.
- If you cannot name the decision category it strengthens, you don't need it yet.

2. Who is the primary user?

- Does that person have decision authority to act on the output?
 - If the tool produces insights but the user still has to “check with the owner,” you’ve created a bottleneck with better graphics.

3. Do we have the data quality and infrastructure to feed this tool?

- Garbage in, garbage out.
 - If your routing data, job costing, or quality documentation is inconsistent, automation will amplify errors — not fix them.

4. What does success look like at 90 days?

- Define a specific, measurable outcome.
 - Escalations reduced by 20 percent.
 - Route efficiency improved by 8 percent.
 - Complaint resolution time is cut in half.
- No metric. No purchase.

5. What happens if this tool goes down for a week?

- If the answer is “chaos,” your decision rights framework is not strong enough.
- Structure must function independently of software.

If you can’t confidently answer all five, wait.

Technology is leverage. Leverage only works when the foundation is solid.

The Future Is Clear Decisions, Not Just Smart Software

The landscape companies that will thrive in 2026 and beyond aren’t the ones with the most advanced technology. They’re the ones with the clearest

decision-making structures. Technology will come and go. Platforms will merge, fail, and be replaced. AI capabilities will expand in ways none of us can fully predict.

But the company that knows who decides what, with what criteria, and under what conditions will adopt every new tool faster, implement it more effectively, and extract more value from it than the company that's still running everything through the owner's phone.

The decision rights framework is technology-proof because it's not technology. It's architecture. And architectures outlast the tools built on top of them.

In Chapter 17, we'll close the book with the topic that every landscape owner thinks about eventually: building a company that has value beyond you. Exit planning, valuation, and how the decision rights framework directly increases your company's value to a buyer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



BUILDING A COMPANY WORTH BUYING

YOU DON'T HAVE TO SELL. BUT YOU SHOULD
BE ABLE TO.

“The buyer told me something I’ll never forget. He said, ‘I’ve looked at twelve landscape companies this year. Yours is the only one where I could see myself not being here every day.’ That’s when I knew the premium was justified.”

-Former owner of a \$12M landscape company, sold at a 5.2x
EBITDA multiple

Not every reader of this book is planning to sell their company. Some of you are building something you want to run for the next twenty years. Some of you want to pass it to the next generation. Some of you haven’t thought about it at all.

That’s fine. But here’s something I’ve learned in 30 years of working with landscape companies: the things that make a company valuable to a buyer are the same things that make a company easier to own, more profitable to operate, and more enjoyable to lead. Building a company worth buying doesn’t mean you have to sell it. It means you’ve built something that works.

And the decision rights framework you’ve built over the course of this book is the single most valuable thing you

can demonstrate to a potential buyer, because it answers the question every buyer is silently asking:

“What happens to this company when the owner leaves?”

If the answer is “it falls apart,” your company is worth a fraction of what it could be. If the answer is “it runs,” you’ve built something with real, transferable value.

How Landscape Companies Are Valued

Let’s talk numbers. Landscape companies are typically valued as a multiple of EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization). The multiple varies based on several factors, but the range for landscape companies in the \$5M to \$20M revenue range generally looks like this:

How Structure Impacts Valuation

Decision rights don’t just reduce stress. They increase enterprise value.

Here’s how the market typically views different levels of structure.

- **Owner-Dependent**
 - Single service line.
 - Minimal systems.
 - **Typical EBITDA Multiple: 2.5x to 3.5x**

The business depends heavily on the owner’s presence. Risk is high. Buyers discount accordingly.

- **Basic Management Structure**
 - Some management is in place.

- Mixed service lines.
- Basic systems.
- **Typical EBITDA Multiple: 3.5x to 4.5x**

The business is functional, but still personality-dependent in key areas.

- **Strong Management Team**

- Diversified services.
- Documented systems.
- Clear operational structure.
- **Typical EBITDA Multiple: 4.5x to 5.5x**

Risk decreases. Scalability increases. Buyers pay for stability.

- **Independent Management Operation**

- Management operates independently.
- Recurring revenue is predictable.
- Systems are scalable.
- Clear growth trajectory.
- **Typical EBITDA Multiple: 5.5x to 7x+**

The company runs without the owner at the center. That's not just operational freedom.

That's equity creation.

Look at the difference between the top and bottom of that table. A \$6M company with \$600,000 in EBITDA at a 3x multiple is worth \$1.8M. The same company with the same revenue and the same EBITDA but with a functioning

management team and documented decision systems might command a 5.5x multiple: \$3.3M. That's a \$1.5M difference in value created by building the systems in this book.

The multiple isn't random. It reflects risk. When a buyer looks at an owner-dependent company, they see risk: what happens if the owner leaves during transition? What happens if the owner's key relationships don't transfer? What happens if the company can't operate without the person who built it? Every unanswered question pushes the multiple down.

The decision rights framework answers those questions. Explicitly. In writing. With documented criteria, defined roles, and a proven track record of decisions being made without the owner's involvement.

The Five Things Buyers Pay a Premium For

After working with landscape companies through multiple acquisitions and succession events, I've identified five attributes that consistently drive premium valuations. Every single one of them is strengthened by the decision rights framework.

1. Owner Independence

- This is the big one. Can the company operate without the owner for 30 days? 60 days? 90 days? The longer the company can run without the owner, the lower the buyer's risk and the higher the multiple.
- The decision rights framework directly addresses this. If your ops manager, account managers, and crew leaders are making decisions within a documented matrix, the company doesn't need you for daily operations. The buyer can see that in the framework, in the KPI dashboard, and in the escalation data that shows how few decisions reach the owner.
- **What to demonstrate:** Your decision audit data showing the reduction in owner-dependent decisions. The matrix itself. The

cadence that runs without owner involvement. Ideally, a period where you were absent (vacation, conference, sabbatical) and the company performed normally.

2. Management Depth

- Buyers want to see a management team, not a management person. If one ops manager is the only person who can run operations, the buyer has a single point of failure. If you have a strong ops manager with developed crew leaders beneath them, the buyer sees resilience.
- The role-specific playbooks in Part 3 demonstrate management depth. They show that every role has defined authority, clear criteria, and a development path. The crew leaders aren't just workers with a different title. They're decision-makers with documented authority. The ops manager isn't just relaying your decisions. They're running the operation.
- **What to demonstrate:** Org chart with defined decision authority at each level. Role-specific playbooks for each key position. KPI data showing consistent performance across the team, not just from one star performer.

3. Recurring Revenue With Client Retention

- Buyers love recurring maintenance contracts because they provide predictable revenue. But recurring revenue only has value if clients actually stick. A company with 85% annual retention is worth significantly more than one with 70% retention, even at the same revenue level.
- The account manager's decision rights directly affect retention. When complaints are resolved in 4 hours instead of 48, when credits are approved on the spot instead of after a callback, when proactive communication happens before the client notices a problem, retention goes up. The framework makes retention a

system, not a function of whether the owner personally manages every important relationship.

- **What to demonstrate:** Rolling 12-month retention rates. Average complaint resolution time. Client tenure data. Evidence that retention is driven by the system, not by the owner's personal relationships.

4. Documented Systems and Processes

- Undocumented knowledge is worthless to a buyer. If your quality standards exist only in the crew leader's head, they leave when the crew leader leaves. If your pricing logic exists only in the owner's intuition, it evaporates on closing day.
- The decision rights matrix is itself a documentation system. The 15 templates, the criteria, the escalation triggers, the quality checklists, the ARIA framework, the cadence agendas, the KPI dashboard: all of this is documented, transferable institutional knowledge. A buyer looks at this and sees a company that runs on systems, not on people's memories.
- **What to demonstrate:** The complete decision rights matrix package. Laminated cards for each role. Cadence agendas. KPI dashboards with historical trend data. The gap between what you have and what most landscape companies have is enormous, and buyers know it.

5. Scalability

- A buyer doesn't just want to buy what you've built. They want to buy what you've built, plus the ability to grow it. Scalability means the systems you have in place can handle more volume, more crews, more locations without fundamental redesign.
- The decision rights framework is inherently scalable. Chapter 15 showed how the same principles apply from \$3M to \$20M

and beyond. The five-column matrix works at any size. The cadence works at any size. The role-specific playbooks can be replicated for new locations. A buyer who sees this framework sees a company that can grow under new ownership without having to rebuild from scratch.

- **What to demonstrate:** The scaling roadmap from Chapter 15 applied to your company. Evidence that the framework has already scaled (if you've grown during implementation). The branch manager playbook is a template for future expansion.

The Succession Alternative

Not every exit is a sale to an outside buyer. Many landscape owners want to transition the company to a family member, a long-tenured employee, or a management team buyout. The decision rights framework serves these transitions just as well, and in some ways better.

An internal successor who has been operating within the decision-making framework for 2 or 3 years has already proven they can run the company. They've been making decisions, managing a P&L, developing teams, and operating within documented criteria. The transition isn't a leap of faith. It's a natural progression.

The branch manager playbook from Chapter 12 is essentially a succession training program. A branch manager who consistently hits their financial targets, develops their team, and operates independently is demonstrating every skill they'll need as the next owner. The framework makes the invisible visible: you can see, in data, whether your successor is ready.

Succession Readiness Indicators

Your internal successor is ready when the business no longer depends on you to stabilize it.

Look for these signals.

1. Independent P&L Management

- They have managed a branch or division P&L independently for at least four consecutive quarters.
 - No shadow approval. No quiet backstopping.
- Independent ownership.
- Consistent Margin Performance
- Their branch or division meets or exceeds margin targets consistently.
 - Not one good month. Not one strong quarter. Consistently.

2. Leadership Beneath Them

- They have hired, developed, and retained a management team beneath them.
 - If they cannot build leaders, they cannot scale leadership.

3. Low Escalation Frequency

- Operational decisions in their area rarely escalate to you.
 - Target: fewer than two to three escalations per week.
- Silence is a signal.

4. Crisis Ownership

- They have handled at least one significant crisis without your direct involvement.
 - Employee departure.

- Major client issue.
- Equipment failure.
- And the business remained stable.

5. Strategic Thinking

- They bring strategic recommendations to your quarterly reviews.
 - Not just updates.
 - Ideas.
 - Initiatives.
 - Forward-looking thinking.

6. Independent Trust

- Clients and employees trust them directly.
 - Not as your extension.
 - As their leader.
- Succession isn't a title.
- It's a pattern.

When these indicators are consistently present, you don't have a dependency. You have a successor.

The Two-Year Exit Preparation Timeline

Whether you're selling externally or transitioning internally, give yourself at least two years of preparation. Here's how the decision rights framework supports each phase:

Months 1 through 6: Build and implement the framework. Follow the 90-day plan from Chapter 13, then spend the remaining three months calibrating and expanding. By month six, the framework should be running, and your direct involvement in daily decisions should be minimal.

Months 7 through 12: Document and demonstrate. Package the framework for presentation: organize the matrix, playbooks, dashboards, and historical KPI data into a format that tells the story of a company that operates on systems. Take a two-week vacation without checking in. Measure the results. That data is worth more to a buyer than any marketing pitch.

Months 13 through 18: Optimize and de-risk. Address any remaining owner dependencies. Transfer key client relationships to account managers. Ensure that every critical role has at least one backup. Build the bench so that no single person's departure creates a crisis. Clean up the financials: consistent reporting, clear P&L by division, documented revenue and cost trends.

Months 19 through 24: Position and execute. If selling externally, engage a broker or M&A advisor. Present the decision rights framework as a core asset. Show the before-and-after data from your implementation. Demonstrate owner independence. If transitioning internally, formalize the succession plan, finalize the deal structure, and begin the handoff of the remaining owner-held decisions (strategic relationships, financial commitments, brand representation) to your successor.

The Real Exit

I want to close this book with something personal, because this last chapter isn't just about money or multiples or deal structures. It's about what you've built and what it means.

You started a landscape company, maybe with a truck, a mower, and a willingness to outwork everyone around you. You built something from nothing. You hired people, served clients, survived recessions, and figured out a thousand things that nobody taught you. That's remarkable. That deserves respect.

But somewhere along the way, the thing you built started to own you instead of the other way around. The phone never stopped. The decisions that only you could make. The ceiling appeared no matter how hard you pushed. The feeling that you'd created a job you couldn't quit instead of a business you could grow.

This book was written to change that.

The decision rights framework isn't complicated. Five columns. Clear criteria. Defined escalation triggers. Information flow instead of approval flow. A cadence that keeps it alive. Role-specific playbooks that put the right authority in the right hands.

What's hard isn't the framework. What's hard is letting go. Trusting the system. Accepting that "different" isn't "wrong." Watching someone else make the call you would have made differently, and letting it stand. That's the real work. And if you've done it, or even if you're starting to do it, you're already ahead of most.

Designing yourself out doesn't mean walking away. It means building something that doesn't need you in the middle of every decision. Build something that runs.

Build something that grows. Build something that has value beyond you.

Then decide what you want to do with the time, the energy, and the freedom you've created. Run the company at a level you've never operated at before. Grow it to twice its current size. Pass it to the next generation. Sell it for a number that reflects what you've built. Take the vacation you've been postponing for fifteen years.

The choice is yours. For the first time, it really is.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Lukert has spent 30 years in the landscape industry, not as an observer, but as a builder. A 3x landscape company founder, he started his first operation at 13 and had incorporated an S corporation by 16. That foundation of hands-on experience shapes everything he teaches today.

He is the author of *Predictably Different* and *Kind of a Big Deal*, and his frameworks have helped dozens of landscape companies ranging from \$3M to \$20M in revenue break through growth ceilings by installing the operational systems that eliminate owner bottlenecks.

As a fractional Chief Operating Officer and Advisor, Paul's proprietary LeadScape™ methodology combines decision rights frameworks, operational cadences, and role-specific playbooks to build landscape companies that run without the owner in the middle of every decision.

Paul brings a rare combination of credentials to his work: he serves as an Executive Director with Maxwell Leadership and holds certifications as a Maxwell Leadership Coach, Trainer, Speaker, and Facilitator, as well as a Certified DISC Behavioral Assessment Consultant. These tools allow him to address not just the operational side of a growing company, but the leadership and people dynamics that determine whether systems actually stick.

Paul works with a limited number of landscape companies at any given time as a fractional COO or Advisor, providing hands-on implementation of the frameworks in this book. If you're interested in learning more about

working with Paul, visit dimensionalpd.com or connect on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/dimensionalpd](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dimensionalpd).

Resources

Companion Resource Package

The companion package includes editable versions of all 15 decision rights templates, printable laminated cards for all four roles, the KPI dashboard template, the decision audit worksheet, and the implementation checklists from this appendix. Available here- Companion Resources.

Connect With Paul

Website: Dimensional Performance Development

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dimensionalpd/>

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Schedule a Discovery Call:

Speaking and workshops: Paul is available for keynotes, workshops, and conference presentations on decision rights, operational scaling, and landscape company growth. Contact Paul.

For Fractional COO Engagement

If you're a landscape company owner between \$3M and \$20M in revenue and you want help implementing the frameworks in this book, Paul works with a limited number of companies as a fractional COO. Typical engagements run 6 to 12 months and include hands-on framework customization, handoff facilitation, cadence installation, and team development. Schedule a preliminary discovery call.

Thank you for reading DESIGN YOURSELF OUT...Before You Burn Yourself Out.

Now pick a Monday and begin.