

Leadership Recovery Is Not Executive Coaching

When Development Is No Longer the Right Starting Point

There is a moment in a leader's career when the question shifts from *"How do we help her grow?"* to *"Do we still have time?"*

That shift marks the difference between leadership development and leadership recovery. They may look similar from the outside, but the circumstances are very different, and so are the decisions that need to be made.

What Leadership Recovery Is

Leadership Recovery is a structured, time-sensitive intervention for capable women leaders whose performance, credibility, relationships, or trajectory have become compromised. It begins when there is enough concern that development alone may no longer be the right response, but while there are still meaningful options for recovery.

Unlike traditional leadership development, recovery begins by figuring out what is actually happening. That means looking beyond the leader's behaviour to understand perceptions, relationships, power, politics, sponsorship, expectations, and the organizational context around her. It also means being clear about risk rather than reassuring everyone too quickly.

The question at this stage is no longer simply, *"How do we develop this leader?"* It is *"Is this situation recoverable, and under what conditions?"*

How It Differs From Coaching and Other Interventions

Most organizations already use three broad intervention types with senior leaders:

Executive coaching works when the leader is fundamentally viewed as an asset. Trust is intact, performance is broadly solid, and there is enough time and organizational goodwill to invest in development.

Leadership Recovery is appropriate when something important has changed. Confidence, credibility, relationships, performance, or trajectory may be at risk, and the organization needs to understand what is happening while there is still time to do something about it.

Performance management is appropriate when performance expectations need to be formally documented, along with the consequences if the required improvement does not occur.

Transition becomes the appropriate path when the organization has concluded that the current role or employment relationship is no longer viable.

The difference among these interventions is not their quality. It is the situation in which each is being used.

The Three Windows of Leadership Intervention

In practice, leadership situations tend to fall into one of three windows:

1. Development Window

The leader is fundamentally viewed as an asset. Trust remains intact, performance is broadly solid, and there is time and goodwill available for growth. Coaching, targeted feedback, and role clarification can be effective here.

2. Recovery Window

The leader remains in role, but confidence is beginning to erode and questions are being raised about whether the situation can continue. Feedback may be becoming more serious, relationships may be deteriorating, or HR may be becoming increasingly involved.

Recovery may be very possible, but the organization no longer has unlimited time. It requires a clear diagnosis, aligned sponsorship, and a focused plan for change.

3. Decision Window

By this point, alternatives are being actively considered and options have narrowed. Recovery may still be possible, but it becomes increasingly difficult once key stakeholders have concluded that a change is necessary.

That is why recognizing the Recovery Window matters. The earlier the organization acts, the more options it retains.

What Leadership Recovery Work Looks Like

Leadership Recovery starts by understanding the situation before deciding what intervention is required.

That matters because similar symptoms can have very different causes. What looks like a performance problem, for example, may actually be a capability issue, a behaviour issue, a difficult transition, a mismatch with the current environment, or some combination of these. Different causes require different remedies.

The work typically includes:

Multi-sided diagnosis. Establishing what is actually happening rather than relying on a single perspective. This may include stakeholder input, performance information, assessments, and the leader's own account of the situation.

Root-cause analysis. Determining whether the primary issue is capability, behaviour, transition, context, or a combination of factors, and identifying what has changed.

Risk and recovery assessment. Clarifying what is at stake, how much time remains, whether recovery is viable, and what conditions would need to be present for it to succeed.

A focused recovery plan. Identifying what needs to change, what evidence of improvement must become visible, what support or sponsorship is required, and within what timeframe.

Clear decision points. Establishing how progress will be evaluated and what happens if recovery conditions are met, partially met, or not met.

Leadership Recovery is not something done to the leader, nor can the leader carry the entire recovery herself. She is responsible for engaging honestly with the evidence and changing what needs to change. Her sponsors need to provide clear expectations, genuine sponsorship, and transparent decision criteria, while HR ensures that the process is structured, fair, and time-bound. Recovery is a shared organizational process, even though the leader remains accountable for how she responds and changes.

Why This Is Often More Complex for Women Leaders

Leadership recovery affects all leaders, but women frequently face additional constraints.

Common patterns include:

- Higher visibility and harsher scrutiny for missteps
- Less tolerance for experimentation or visible learning on the job
- Feedback that is vague, relational, or contradictory (e.g., "too strong" and "not decisive enough")

- Pressure to self-correct without explicit sponsorship or structural change

Bias may be part of the problem, but Leadership Recovery does not begin with that assumption. Nor does it begin by assuming that the problem resides entirely with the leader. Both individual and organizational factors need to be examined so that capability, behaviour, context, and bias can be separated rather than conflated.

Why Clarity Must Come Before Action

Organizations sometimes move too quickly from concern to solution: “Let’s send her to coaching” or “Let’s start a PIP.” The problem is that neither response tells us whether we have correctly understood the situation in the first place.

Leadership Recovery requires clarity on:

- What is actually happening versus what is assumed or informally interpreted
- Which issues are recoverable, and which are structural or systemic
- Whether timing is still on your side, and for how long
- What outcomes are acceptable (recovery in role, re-scoping, or dignified transition)

Without that clarity, even a well-intended intervention can make matters worse. An organization may tell a leader it is investing in her while key decision-makers have already lost confidence. Or the leader may be held solely responsible for a problem that is partly created by an unrealistic role, unclear expectations, or organizational conditions around her.

Leadership Recovery is not about saving every role. It is about making a well-informed decision while there is still time for that decision to matter.

The Athena Leadership Recovery System™

The Athena Leadership Recovery System™ provides a three-stage framework for doing this work:

Diagnose what has changed and determine whether recovery is viable.

Recover by addressing what needs to change and restoring leadership effectiveness.

Sustain the changes so that the recovery holds.

There are two ways to enter the System. When the organization first needs to understand what is happening, it can begin with The Athena Leadership Recovery

Assessment™. When the need for intervention is already clear, it can move directly into The Athena Leadership Recovery Sprint™, with the necessary diagnostic work incorporated into the Sprint.

The Right Intervention at the Right Moment

Executive coaching is valuable when a leader has trust, time, and room to develop. Performance management has a role when expectations and consequences need to be formalized, and transition becomes necessary when continued role viability is no longer realistic.

Leadership Recovery occupies the window between development and decision, when something important has changed but meaningful options still remain.

The mistake is not choosing coaching, performance management, or transition. The mistake is choosing an intervention before understanding the situation.

When a good leader gets into trouble, the earlier you understand what has changed, the more options you have for what comes next.