A WHITE PAPER

Strategic Planning: The Next State of the Art

Kent E. Frese, Ph.D. — TeamLMI · 2026

ABSTRACT

In 2017, Wallis and Frese published *Strategic Planning: A New State of the Art*, surveying a century of strategic planning practice and proposing that a research-grounded mapping method — Strategic Knowledge Mapping (then framed as the ASK MATT process) — could resolve the long-standing tension between rigor and feasibility in organizational planning (Wallis & Frese, 2017). In the nine years since, the operating environment for organizations has shifted markedly: a global pandemic, persistent supply-chain volatility, the diffusion of generative artificial intelligence, accelerating regulatory turbulence, and a fundamental rebalancing of labor markets. The discipline of strategic planning has also matured, with renewed attention to dynamic capabilities, scenario methods, and adaptive governance. This paper revisits and extends the earlier argument. It retains the original's diagnosis of why traditional planning fails and its core claim that *the structure of strategic understanding* — not the volume of strategic data — is the lever for organizational success. The argument is updated in three ways: (a) by integrating the literature on adaptive and dynamic strategic capability that has matured since 2017; (b) by replacing the "one best method" framing with a *methodological-fit* model that selects among five complementary planning approaches; and (c) by presenting an updated, four-phase formulation of Strategic Knowledge Mapping suitable for use in conditions of deep uncertainty. The paper is intended for academic readers and reflective practitioners working at the intersection of organization development, industrial-organizational psychology, and strategic management.

Keywords: strategic planning, strategic knowledge mapping, adaptive strategy, dynamic capabilities, scenario planning, organizational sensemaking, shared mental models, small- and mid-sized enterprise.

1. Introduction: The Planning Paradox Persists

Most leaders agree that strategic planning matters. Most who have endured the process also agree that it costs more than it returns. The earlier paper opened by noting that "while science has mapped a billion stars in our universe, it has not provided a reliable map for guiding our businesses" (Wallis & Frese, 2017, p. 1). A decade later, that observation is, if anything, sharper. Mankins and Steele's (2005) classic estimate — that organizations realize only about 63 percent of the financial performance their strategies promised — continues to be cited widely, and more recent surveys place full-implementation rates between 10 and 40 percent depending on industry and method (Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Sull, Homkes, & Sull, 2015). Strategy consulting revenues have grown; strategy execution has not visibly improved. Mintzberg's (1994) early diagnosis — that the formalization of planning had displaced the practice of strategic thinking — remains, after three decades, the most parsimonious explanation of the gap.

The earlier paper diagnosed this as a *structural* problem rather than a motivational or analytical one. Plans fail not because leaders lack intelligence, data, or commitment, but because the cognitive architecture connecting those resources is impoverished. Teams cannot execute what they have not collectively understood. The argument here, as then, is that the route forward lies in making the structure of strategic understanding visible, measurable, and improvable.

What has changed since 2017 is not the underlying diagnosis but the environment in which any cure must operate. The plan-and-execute model — annual cycle, fixed targets, top-down cascade — has been visibly outpaced by a sequence of shocks for which no annual plan could have prepared an organization. Strategic planning has, in effect, been asked to do two things simultaneously: provide enough direction that an organization is not merely reactive, and remain pliable enough that direction can be revised when reality contradicts it. This is the planning paradox of the present moment, and the literature has begun to converge on what an answer must contain.

This paper proceeds in five movements. Section 2 briefly revisits the historical survey of the earlier paper, retaining its taxonomy but updating each branch with subsequent research. Section 3 describes what has changed in the operating environment and in the strategy literature since 2017. Section 4 presents the central reframing of this paper: that no single planning method is universally appropriate, and that practitioners should instead select among a small portfolio of methodologies on the basis of fit to the strategic situation. Section 5 presents the updated formulation of Strategic Knowledge Mapping. Section 6 addresses the adaptive infrastructure — environmental scanning, scenario work, agility, and iterative review — that any of these methods now requires to remain useful between planning events. Section 7 acknowledges limitations and outlines a research agenda. The paper closes with a brief discussion of implications for academic teaching and practitioner training.

2. Where We Have Been: A Brief Survey Revisited

The earlier paper organized the history of strategic planning into five overlapping traditions: intuitive, data-driven, collaborative, systems-based, and visual mapping (Wallis & Frese, 2017). That taxonomy holds, but each branch has continued to develop, and the criticisms of each have sharpened.

2.1 Intuition

The intuitive tradition predates formal planning and has never fully receded. Roughly half of new ventures still close within five years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), a figure that has barely moved in three decades. Kahneman’s (2011) distinction between System 1 and System 2 reasoning provides a now-canonical account of why intuition fails predictably in novel or low-feedback environments; Klein’s (2008) complementary work on naturalistic decision-making clarifies the narrower conditions under which intuition is reliable. The synthesis is that intuition is a capability rather than a method — useful when seasoned by valid, rapid feedback, and dangerous when extrapolated from it. Few strategic situations meet the conditions for valid intuitive judgment.

2.2 Data-Driven Analysis

The decade since 2017 has been a decade of data. Global data creation grew from roughly 16 zettabytes in 2016 to an estimated 180 zettabytes in 2025 (International Data Corporation, 2024). The marginal value of an additional terabyte for most strategic decisions is, plausibly, near zero. The critique articulated by Hill and Westbrook (1997) of SWOT analysis — that it produces lists rather than judgments — applies equally to dashboards rich in measures and poor in inferential structure. Recent work on the "data paradox" finds that organizations with more dashboards do not, on average, make better strategic decisions, and may make worse ones because the data illusion crowds out genuine deliberation (Davenport & Bean, 2022). The promise of generative artificial intelligence has reset this conversation but not, so far, resolved it: large language models can summarize evidence and generate alternatives at scale, but they cannot, on their own, repair the structural deficiencies of the mental models in which evidence is interpreted (Bommasani et al., 2022; Dell'Acqua et al., 2023).

2.3 Collaboration and Consensus

The collaborative tradition continues to produce mixed results. Edmondson's program of research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) has clarified one important condition — collaboration improves outcomes when the group's norms permit candid dissent — and one important boundary, namely that simply gathering people together does not produce shared understanding. Reviews of cultural and organizational change initiatives continue to find success rates in the 20-to-30-percent range (Bucy et al., 2023; Kotter, 2012). Collaboration is necessary; it is not sufficient.

2.4 Systems Thinking

Systems thinking has retained its conceptual power and continues to suffer from the practical limitation noted in 2017: the apparatus required to model a system formally is forbidding for working executives. Meadows's posthumous *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Meadows, 2008) remains the most accessible entry point and provides what is still the single most useful actionable principle in the literature, namely that the highest-leverage interventions in a complex system are typically structural rather than symptomatic. The challenge for strategic planning is to deliver this insight without requiring the planning team to first complete a graduate seminar in stock-and-flow dynamics.

2.5 Visual Mapping

Visual mapping has matured into a distinct sub-discipline. The work of Bryson and colleagues on causal mapping for public-sector strategy (Bryson, 2018; Bryson, Ackermann, Eden, & Finn, 2004) now sits alongside Novak and Cañas's (2008) concept-mapping research, extensive empirical work on the cognitive advantages of externalized representations for ill-structured problems (Larkin & Simon, 1987), and a growing literature on visual sensemaking in management (Comi & Whyte, 2018; Eppler & Platts, 2009). The methodological refinement most relevant to the present paper is the increasing rigor with which mapped representations can be evaluated. The structural-properties approach pioneered by Wallis (2016) — assessing maps by the density, breadth, and depth of their causal connections — has continued to develop empirically and now offers a defensible basis for the claim that one strategic map is better-formed than another (Wallis, 2020; Wallis & Wright, 2019).

2.6 The Honest Summary

The honest summary of the last century of strategic planning is that no single method has produced reliably superior outcomes across organizational types, and the methods have not converged. The next state of the art, in this view, is not the discovery of a single superior method; it is the principled selection among methods on the basis of fit, anchored by a shared underlying architecture of strategic understanding.

3. What Has Changed Since 2017

Three changes warrant explicit attention.

First, the environment. The pandemic of 2020–2022, the sustained inflationary period that followed, the visible fragility of global supply chains, and the rapid diffusion of generative artificial intelligence have together produced what Bennett and Lemoine (2014) and others have described as a regime change in operating conditions. The vocabulary of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity), already familiar in 2017, has been joined by BANI (brittle, anxious, nonlinear, incomprehensible) (Cascio, 2020) and similar attempts to characterize a world in which low-probability events arrive in clusters. The empirical observation underlying these labels is that the half-life of a strategic assumption has shortened.

Second, the strategy literature. Teece's program on dynamic capabilities — the firm's ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure (Teece, 2007, 2018) — has displaced positioning-based strategy as the dominant theoretical frame in the strategy field. Doz and Kosonen's (2010) work on strategic agility, with its triad of strategic sensitivity, leadership unity, and resource fluidity, has provided an operational vocabulary for what dynamic capability looks like inside the firm. Schwartz's (1991) scenario method and the related practitioner tradition exemplified by Day and Schoemaker's (2006) research on peripheral vision have moved from periphery to mainstream. The cumulative effect is a strategy literature that, more than at any earlier point, treats strategic planning as a *continuous capability* rather than an episodic event.

Third, the team-cognition literature. Research on shared mental models has accumulated steadily since the meta-analytic synthesis by DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus (2010). The empirical finding is robust: teams with more overlapping representations of their task, environment, and strategy outperform teams with equivalent talent and resources but more divergent representations. This is, for present purposes, the strongest available empirical support for the central proposition of the 2017 paper. The structure of shared understanding is not an aesthetic preference; it is a measurable predictor of execution.

The three changes converge on a single implication. Strategic planning in the present period must produce *plans that are robust under uncertainty*, *teams that share a model precise enough to execute and pliable enough to revise*, and *organizational infrastructure that connects the planning event to the day-to-day work between events*. No single method surveyed in 2017 was designed to do all three. The path forward is one of integration.

4. From One Best Method to Methodological Fit

The central reframing of this paper is the following: *the process chosen to build the plan is as important as the plan itself.* Strategic situations differ along several dimensions — the degree of environmental turbulence, the depth of leadership consensus already present, the complexity of internal interdependencies, the strength of the client- or stakeholder-facing logic, the maturity of the organization's strategic narrative — and the method most likely to produce a successful plan is the method that matches those dimensions.

Five methodologies are proposed as a working portfolio. They are not exhaustive, and they are not mutually exclusive: most engagements combine elements of two or three. But the five together cover the great majority of small- and mid-sized organizational situations.

1. The Strategic Foundation Approach. A traditional vision-to-action methodology, in which an organization works sequentially from mission and values through long-range vision, strategic goals, annual objectives, and operating plans. The Strategic Foundation Approach is appropriate when the environment is comparatively stable, the leadership team is well-aligned, and the organization's primary need is a clearer line of sight from purpose to execution. Its strength is rigor; its weakness is brittleness under turbulence.

2. Client-Centric Journey Design. An "outside-in" methodology, drawing on service-design thinking (Stickdorn, Hormess, Lawrence, & Schneider, 2018), that maps the current and ideal experience of the organization's clients or constituents and builds strategy backward from desired moments of value. Appropriate when the organization's competitive position depends substantially on the quality of a relationship or experience, and when internal silos have obscured the integrated view of the client.

3. Resilient Future Planning. A scenario-based methodology (Day & Schoemaker, 2006; Schwartz, 1991) in which the team develops two to four coherent narratives of how the external environment might evolve and stress-tests strategic commitments against each. Appropriate when uncertainty is high, when a small number of identifiable external drivers will materially shape the organization's prospects, and when leadership needs to enlarge its sense of what is possible.

4. The Strategic Narrative Approach. A story-based methodology that organizes the strategy around an explicit narrative arc — protagonist, challenge, transformation — to produce a plan that is communicable, memorable, and emotionally resonant. Appropriate when the organization's challenge is one of alignment and motivation rather than analysis, when external communication of strategy is a critical lever, and when the leadership team needs an integrative frame that cuts across functional language.

5. Strategic Knowledge Mapping. The methodology developed in the 2017 paper (Wallis & Frese, 2017) and updated here. Appropriate when the strategic situation is genuinely complex and interconnected; when the leadership team is collectively knowledgeable but individually fragmented; when prior planning efforts have produced documents but not understanding; and when the goal is both a plan and a team that can think strategically together.

The selection among methods is itself a diagnostic act. Experience has shown that an explicit one-hour conversation with leadership about the fit of method to situation — before any planning work begins — materially improves the outcome of the engagement, and that the conversation often surfaces strategic information that would otherwise have remained latent until much later.

5. Strategic Knowledge Mapping: An Updated Formulation

Strategic Knowledge Mapping (SKM) is the methodology to which I have devoted the largest share of my practitioner research, and it remains the approach most directly continuous with the 2017 paper. The original paper described a single integrated process and made the case that visualization, when disciplined by structural analysis, could resolve weaknesses inherent to each of the older planning traditions (Wallis & Frese, 2017). In the intervening years, practitioner experience has clarified that the process is most usefully described as four overlapping phases. Each phase is collaborative, visual, and iterative.

5.1 Phase 1 — Elicitation: Surfacing What the Team Already Knows

The first phase systematically draws out the strategic knowledge that already resides — usually unevenly and usually implicitly — across members of the leadership team. Methods include pre-session interviews, structured reflection exercises, and facilitated discussion. The aim is to populate the eventual map with the full range of perspectives present in the team before any premature consensus is reached. Operations leaders tend to surface constraints and capacities; sales leaders surface market dynamics and customer behavior; finance leaders surface resource flows and risk; founders and senior leaders surface history and unwritten strategic intent.

The single most consequential technique in this phase is the disciplined surfacing of causal assumptions. For each substantive strategic claim a leader makes, the facilitator asks: *What is driving that belief? What would have to be true for that belief to hold? What evidence would change your mind?* The underlying assumptions are typically the most valuable strategic data in the room. They are also the data most likely to remain invisible in a conventional planning session.

5.2 Phase 2 — Mapping: Making the Invisible Visible

In the second phase, the team builds an explicit visual representation of the strategic landscape, using large-format displays — physical whiteboards and sticky notes, or a digital collaboration platform — that allow all participants to see and revise the emerging structure together. The map identifies key entities (markets, competitors, capabilities, resources, stakeholders), the relationships among them (causal, temporal, conditional), and the regions of disagreement or uncertainty.

Drawing on concept-mapping (Novak & Cañas, 2008) and causal-loop diagramming traditions (Meadows, 2008; Sterman, 2000), the mapping process forces a level of precision that purely verbal discussion does not. When a team draws an arrow from “employee turnover” to “customer satisfaction” and labels the arrow “reduces,” it has made an implicit belief explicit and, for the first time, testable. When the team then traces the consequence forward — reduced satisfaction leads to contract losses, which leads to revenue decline, which leads to compensation pressure, which leads back to more turnover — the reinforcing loop driving the strategic reality becomes visible to everyone in the room simultaneously.

5.3 Phase 3 — Analysis: Finding Leverage Points

Once the map is built, the team analyzes it. The principal questions are: Where are the reinforcing loops driving growth or decline? Where are the bottlenecks, single points of failure, hidden dependencies? Where are the structural leverage points at which a small, well-placed intervention can shift the behavior of the whole system?

This phase draws explicitly on the systems-thinking literature (Meadows, 2008; Sterman, 2000) and, when the map is sufficiently developed, on the structural-properties research that allows for an objective evaluation of the map itself (Wallis, 2016, 2020; Wallis & Wright, 2019). The most common practitioner finding is that the highest-leverage point in the system is not the one the team had been focused on. A team that arrived convinced its central challenge was an external market threat will, with disconcerting frequency, leave the analysis recognizing that the external threat is being amplified by an internal capability gap that has remained beneath the surface of executive conversation for years. The discovery of such structural insights — what the literature calls "second-order" strategic understanding — is the hallmark of genuine strategic thinking, and it emerges with reliable regularity from the SKM process.

5.4 Phase 4 — Translation: From Map to Action

The final phase translates the strategic map into concrete priorities, measurable objectives, owners, timelines, and accountability structures. This is the discipline of traditional strategic planning, and the new paper does not displace it. What changes is the speed and depth with which the translation phase proceeds, because the leadership team is now operating from a shared, structured understanding of the strategic landscape rather than from a set of individually held and divergently sequenced beliefs.

Crucially, the map itself becomes a persistent artifact of the engagement. When external conditions shift, when new information arrives, when a strategic priority unexpectedly stalls or accelerates, the team returns to the map, revises the relevant region of it, and adjusts the strategy accordingly. The map converts strategic planning from an annual event into a continuous practice — without requiring the organization to continuously rebuild its plan from scratch.

5.5 An Illustrative Engagement

A regional manufacturer with approximately 150 employees and twenty-two million dollars in revenue retained TeamLMI three years after a national consulting firm had developed a polished strategic plan for the company. The previous plan was not without merit; its market analysis was reasonable and its recommendations defensible. It had not, however, been implemented in any meaningful sense.

Pre-session interviews revealed that each member of the senior team possessed sophisticated and largely accurate strategic knowledge. The operations vice president understood why capacity utilization was declining. The sales director understood why key accounts were consolidating vendors. The human resources manager understood why supervisory talent was turning over. None of them had connected these realities into a single coherent picture, and none of them — including the chief executive — had been able to articulate why the previous strategic plan had failed to take hold.

Two facilitated sessions produced a visual map of the company's strategic landscape. The map made visible an interconnection that, once seen, was obvious to everyone. The three challenges the team had been treating as independent — customer consolidation pressure, production inefficiency, and supervisory talent loss — were symptoms of a common underlying dynamic. The company had grown through opportunistic diversification without building the leadership infrastructure and operational systems required to manage the resulting complexity. The previous plan's recommendation — pursuit of new market segments — had treated symptoms rather than structure, and had been quietly resisted by a team that knew, without quite being able to say, that the company was not ready to execute it.

The revised strategy focused on operational simplification, supervisory leadership development, and strategic customer segmentation over a two-year horizon. Eighteen months later, margins had improved by approximately four points and supervisory turnover had declined by more than forty percent. Of equal importance, every member of the senior team could articulate the strategy and explain why each priority mattered, because each of them had participated in building the map from which the strategy had been derived.

6. The Adaptive Infrastructure

A plan, however well-formed, is not a strategy. A strategy is the ongoing capability to interpret and respond to a changing environment in service of an organizational purpose. The literature on dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007, 2018), strategic agility (Doz & Kosonen, 2010), and scenario method (Day & Schoemaker, 2006; Schwartz, 1991) has converged on four infrastructural elements without which any plan will degrade rapidly between events. The empirical question of whether formal planning still helps in turbulent environments has, at this point, been settled in the affirmative: Miller and Cardinal's (1994) synthesis of two decades of research found that firms engaging in formal strategic planning outperformed those that did not, and the more recent dynamic-capabilities literature has elaborated *which* planning behaviors generate that advantage.

Environmental scanning. The systematic monitoring of external developments across, at minimum, four domains: market and customer dynamics, technological capability, regulatory and political conditions, and labor and workforce trends. Day and Schoemaker (2006) describe this capacity as *peripheral vision* — the discipline of looking deliberately at the edges of the environment where strategic surprises typically originate. For small and mid-sized organizations, the practical implementation is rarely a formal intelligence function; it is a quarterly review with a defined agenda and explicit ownership.

Scenario work. Following Schwartz (1991) and the tradition originating in Royal Dutch Shell, scenario work develops two to four internally coherent narratives about how the environment may evolve. The purpose is not predictive accuracy. It is the expansion of the team's repertoire of imaginable futures, so that an unexpected development is recognizable rather than disorienting when it arrives. Scenarios are particularly valuable when small leadership teams are at risk of mistaking the most familiar future for the most likely one.

Strategic agility. Following Doz and Kosonen (2010), strategic agility comprises three meta-capabilities: *strategic sensitivity* (the ability to perceive change early), *leadership unity* (the ability to make and revise commitments quickly without fracturing the team), and *resource fluidity* (the ability to redeploy people and capital from one strategic priority to another without prolonged organizational friction). Of the three, leadership unity is the most often constrained in small organizations — not because leaders are in conflict, but because clear decision rights and delegation frameworks have not been articulated.

Iterative review. A formal rhythm — typically quarterly, occasionally monthly — at which the leadership team revisits the plan against current conditions. The review is not a status update; it is a deliberate revisiting of strategic assumptions. Did the things expected to happen, happen? If not, what is being learned, and what part of the plan needs to change? Iterative review converts the plan from a static document into the artifact around which a continuous strategic conversation is organized.

These four elements are infrastructural in the literal sense: they are the operating system on which any of the five planning methodologies of Section 4 must run. A Strategic Foundation Approach without iterative review degenerates within a year into the binder on the shelf. A Strategic Knowledge Map without environmental scanning becomes a sophisticated representation of an environment that no longer exists. A Resilient Future Plan without strategic agility produces awareness of scenarios but no capacity to act on them. The methods of planning and the infrastructure of adaptation are complements, not substitutes.

7. Limitations and a Research Agenda

The argument advanced here has limits that are worth stating directly.

First, the empirical evidence for the structural-properties evaluation of strategic knowledge maps (Wallis, 2016, 2020; Wallis & Wright, 2019), while encouraging, remains thinner than is desirable. The available studies are predominantly single-case or small-N, and the field would benefit from larger comparative studies with pre-registered designs.

Second, the methodological-fit framework of Section 4 is, at this point, a practitioner heuristic rather than an empirically validated decision rule. The criteria for matching method to situation derive from accumulated consulting experience and from the underlying logic of each method; they have not been subjected to controlled comparison. A productive research direction would be the development of a brief diagnostic instrument that maps observable organizational features to recommended method, and the empirical assessment of whether method-selection congruence predicts implementation outcomes.

Third, the role of generative artificial intelligence in strategic planning remains genuinely open. Early evidence suggests that large language models can usefully accelerate environmental scanning, scenario drafting, and the documentation of mapping sessions, but that they degrade the quality of strategic thinking when used as substitutes for the elicitation phase rather than supports for it (Bommasani et al., 2022; Dell’Acqua et al., 2023). This is likely to be a particularly active research area in the next five years, and the durable contribution of AI to strategic planning will probably not be the generation of plans but the augmentation of the team-cognition processes that good plans require.

Finally, the literature on strategic planning continues to be dominated by studies of large publicly traded firms. Small and mid-sized organizations — the population this work most directly serves, and the population in which most economic activity occurs — remain under-represented in the empirical base. The translation of large-firm strategy research to the small- and mid-sized context is not always straightforward, and additional research focused specifically on planning in organizations with fewer than five hundred employees would be welcome.

8. Conclusion

The 2017 paper closed with the claim that the authors were "striving to support the efforts of leaders reaching for a new future in strategic planning and organizational success" (Wallis & Frese, 2017, p. 4). That ambition is unchanged. What is different in 2026 is the operating environment, the maturity of the supporting literature, and a clearer sense that no single method — including the one most thoroughly developed here — is universally appropriate. The next state of the art in strategic planning is not the discovery of a final method. It is the principled selection among methods, supported by an adaptive infrastructure that keeps the plan alive in the period between planning events, and grounded in a discipline of shared, structured understanding that any of the methods can produce if it is used well.

The most durable lesson of practitioner experience over the last decade is that the work of strategy is, in the end, work that a team does together. A plan is the residue of that work. What matters is the team's capacity to continue doing it.

In Memoriam and Author's Note

This paper is offered in memory of my friend and co-author, **Steven E. Wallis, Ph.D.** Steve's program of research on the structural properties of conceptual systems supplied the most distinctive contribution of our 2017 paper and continues to shape the methodology presented here. He was a generous colleague, a tireless interdisciplinary scholar, and a thoughtful interlocutor over many years of shared work; the field is poorer for his loss, and this paper is the better for his earlier contributions to it. The framing of the methodological-fit portfolio and the present paper's voice are mine, and the responsibility for any errors of judgment in extending the original argument rests with me. The intellectual debt to Dr. Wallis's scholarship is acknowledged here with both gratitude and respect.

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About the Author

Kent E. Frese, Ph.D. is the founder and managing partner of TeamLMI and an Industrial-Organizational Psychologist with more than twenty-five years of practical experience in leadership and organization development. He works primarily with small and mid-sized businesses — across manufacturing, technology, professional services, and family-owned enterprises — on strategic planning, leadership development, talent strategy, and long-term succession planning. He is a member of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and mentors doctoral candidates in industrial-organizational psychology. He has held leadership positions from front-line manager through the C-suite and has founded several successful organizations.

For More Information

TeamLMI
3425 Simpson Ferry Road, Suite 204
Camp Hill, PA 17011
(717) 303-3993
inquiry@TeamLMI.com
https://www.teamlmi.com