

# Paths Unseen: Leadership Lessons from Middle Earth

A Journey Through Leadership with J.R.R. Tolkien

Garth Henson, Director of Engineering

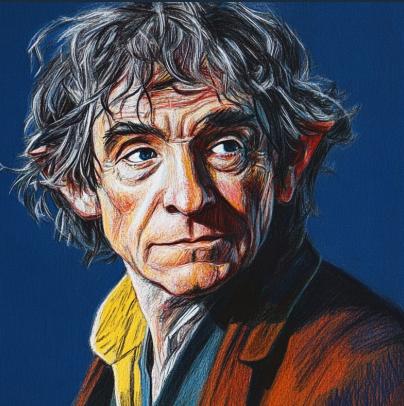
A faint, watermark-like map of Middle-earth is visible in the background. It shows the Two Towers, the Misty Mountains, the Anduin River, and various regions of Rohan and Gondor. The map is rendered in a light blue-grey color.

It's a dangerous business, Frodo,  
going out your door. You step onto  
the road, and if you don't keep your  
feet, there's no knowing where you  
might be swept off to.

- Bilbo Baggins to Frodo

# Unexpected Heroes

Bilbo:  
Respectable  
hobbit

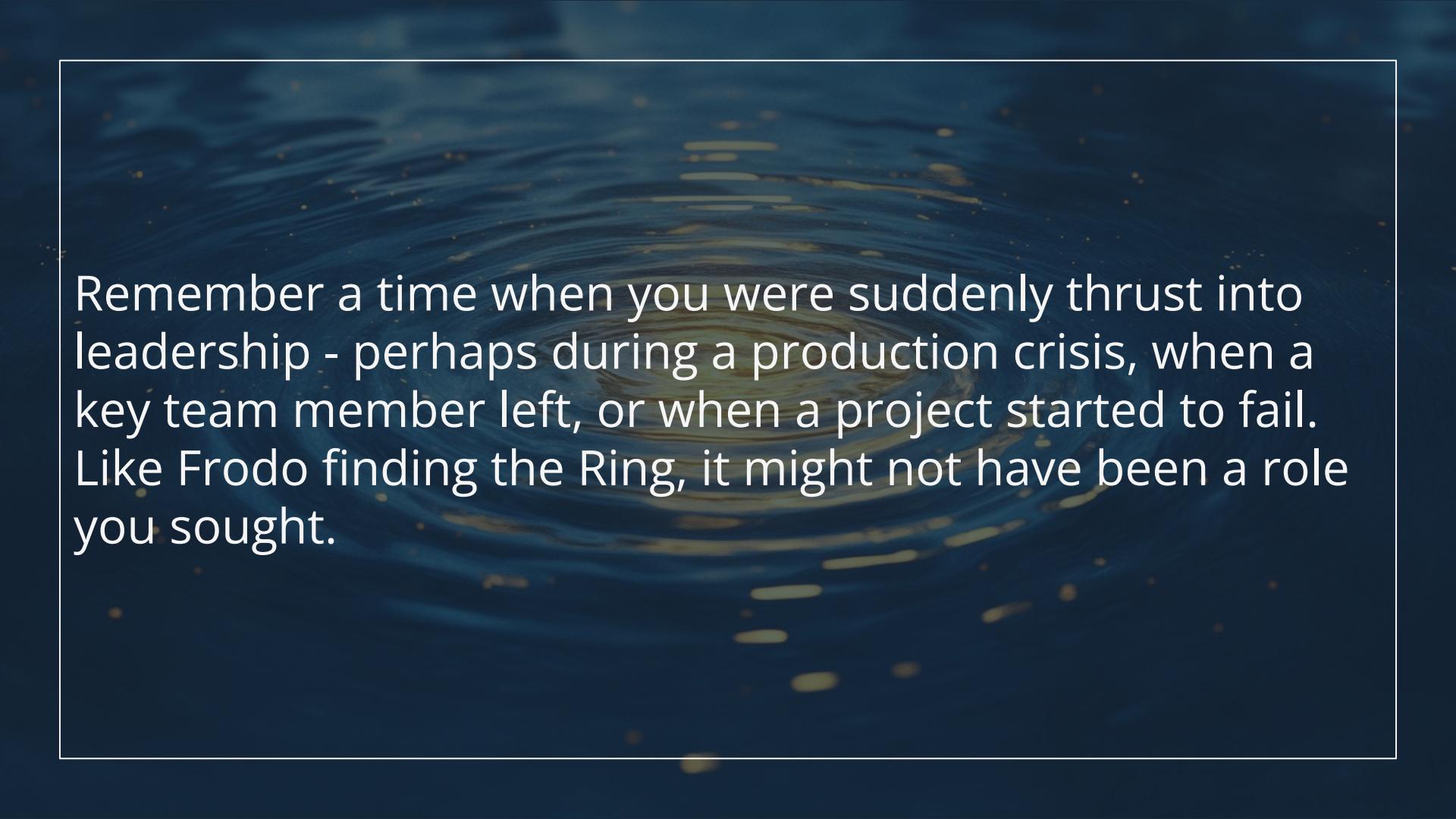


Sam:  
Gardener  
turned leader



Merry and Pippin: Mischief makers turned military leaders





Remember a time when you were suddenly thrust into leadership - perhaps during a production crisis, when a key team member left, or when a project started to fail. Like Frodo finding the Ring, it might not have been a role you sought.

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- Leadership's power and responsibility
  - Fellowship's transformation
  - Finding strength in challenges

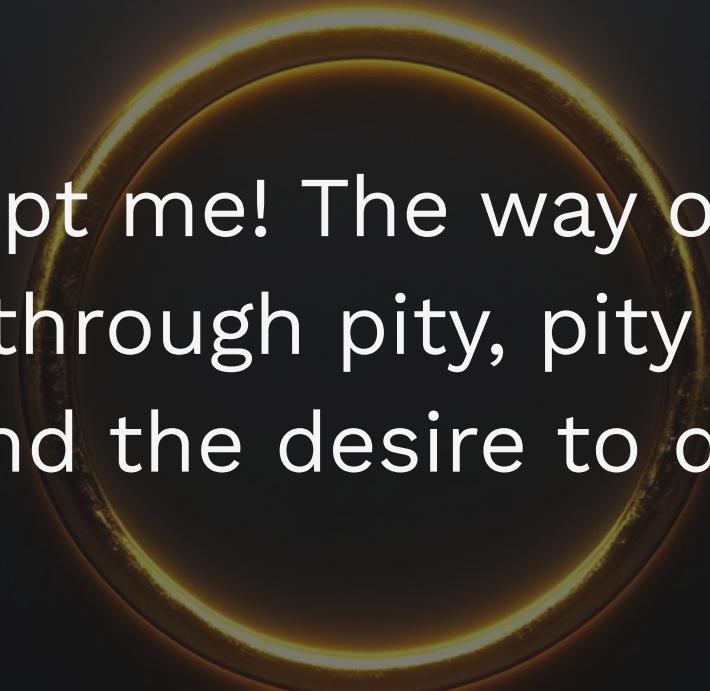
The Road goes ever on and on,  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can...

Part I

# The Weight of the Ring

Understanding Leadership's True Nature

# The Nature of Power



“Do not tempt me! The way of the Ring to my heart is through pity, pity for weakness and the desire to do good.”



We must join with Him... We can bide our time, we can  
keep what we need...

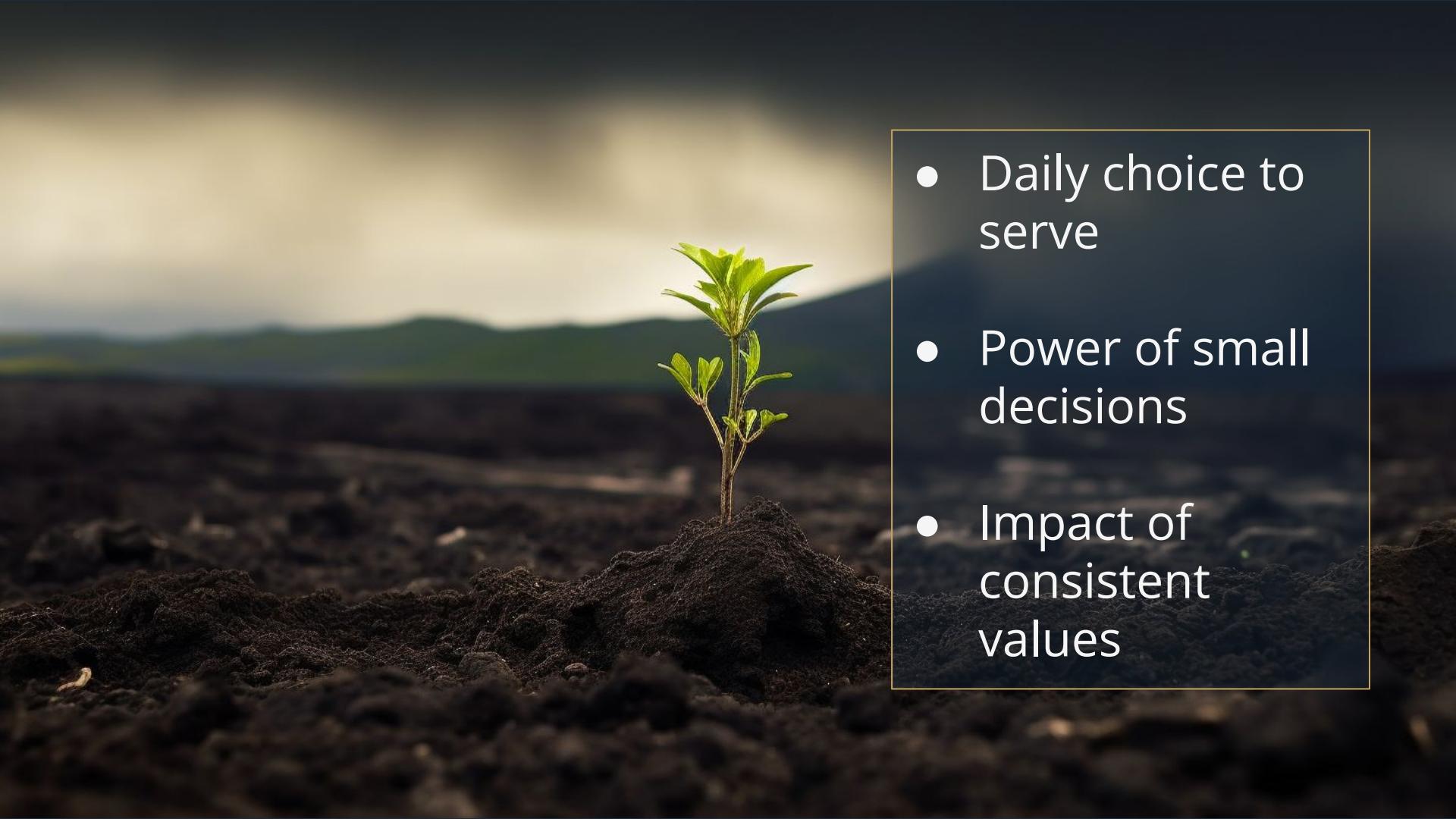
Even the wise cannot see all ends.

- Technical Architecture Decisions
- Legacy System Decisions
- Technology Stack Selections
- Technical Debt Choices



The praise of the  
praiseworthy is above all  
rewards

"I would see the White Tree flower again"

- 
- Daily choice to serve
  - Power of small decisions
  - Impact of consistent values

# Nine Companions

Gandalf

Using wisdom to guide rather than command

Aragorn

Leading through example, not birthright

Boromir

Learning to value protection over power

Legolas & Gimli

Setting aside ancient pride

The Hobbits

Serving through steadfast loyalty



# Diverse Strengths

- Technical Backgrounds
- Experience Levels
- Work Styles
- Cultural Perspectives

There is no doubt that she is the Lady of Lorien, and yet I claim that there walks or has walked no fairer lady upon this earth.

Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens

Gandalf's lore

Merry's riddle-solving

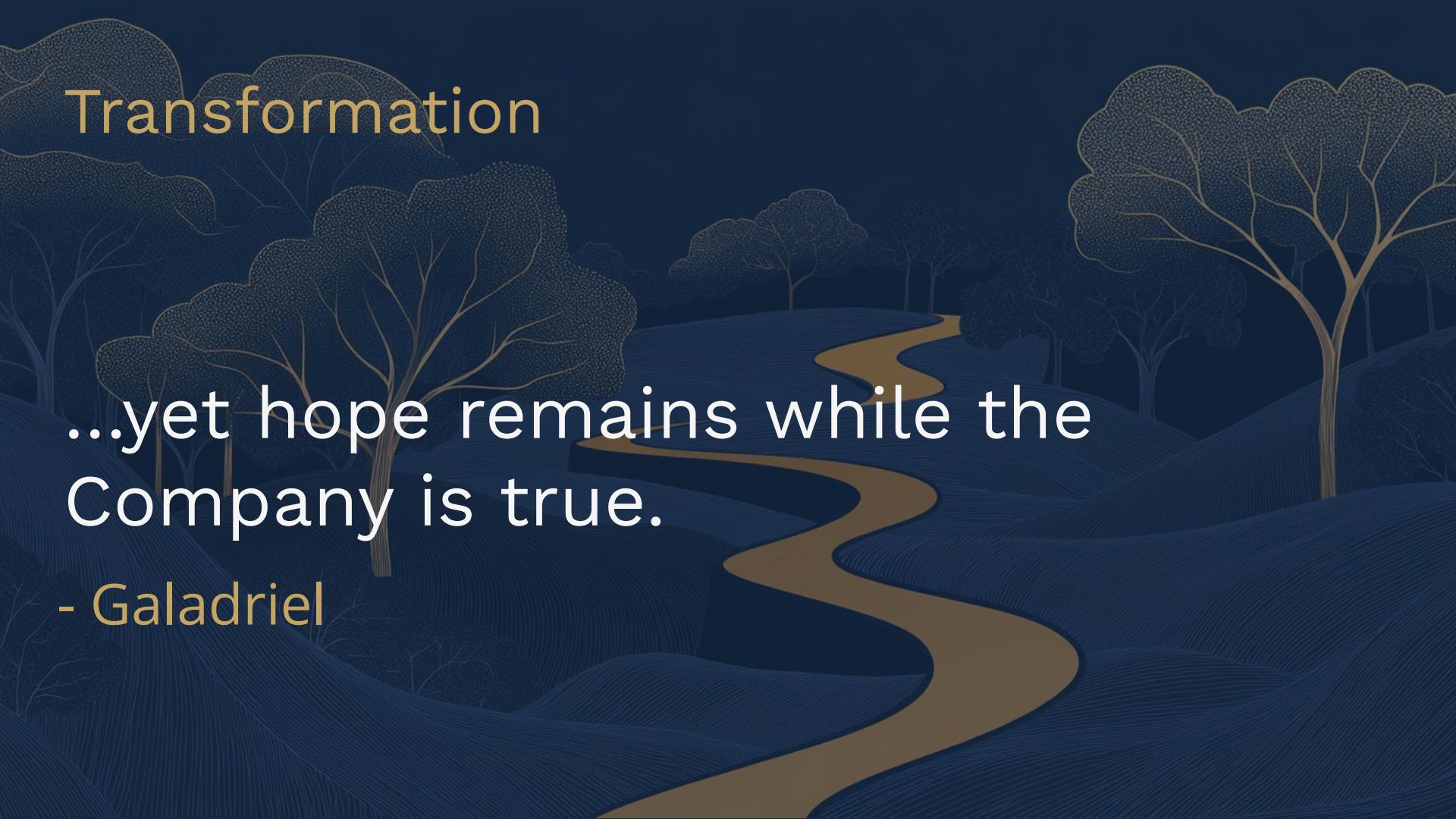
Sam's practical care

Boromir & Aragorn's protection

# The Breaking Point

The Quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail...

- Galadriel



# Transformation

...yet hope remains while the  
Company is true.

- Galadriel

# Modern Leadership Challenges

- "The coming of dragons to the north"
- "The weariness on the borders of Mordor"
- "The machines of Isengard"
- "The Ring's corruption"

- Market disruption
- Team burnout
- Technology shifts
- Trust breakdowns

"What my heart tells me"



Emergency production issues

"I fear I have made the wrong choice"



Project prioritization

"Where is the horse and the rider?"



Team turnarounds

# Endurance Through Uncertainty

(The path to Mount Doom)

Long-term technical  
migrations

# Supporting Others

(Sam carrying Frodo)

Team support during  
challenges

# Maintaining Vision

(Remembering the Shire)

Keeping sight of  
project goals

# Sources of Strength

## Values and Principles

- Code quality standards
- Team trust fundamentals
- Technical excellence

## Team Support

- One-on-one connections
- Code reviews culture
- Retrospective honesty

## Personal Resilience

- Learning from failures
- Growing through challenges
- Adapting to change

## Clear Purpose

- Team development
- Product impact
- Organizational values

- Challenges reveal true leadership
- Growth through adversity
- Hope as a practical tool

# The Journey's Impact

Frodo: from Reluctant Ringbearer to Wisdom Figure

Sam: from Simple Gardener to Mayor of the Shire

Merry & Pippin: from Mischief Makers to Military Leaders

# Your Leadership Journey

## Identify Your Ring

*All we have to decide is  
what to do with the  
time that is given us*

Gandalf

## Build Your Fellowship

*Faithless is he that says  
farewell when the road  
darkens*

Gimli

## Choose Daily Service

*I tried to save the Shire,  
and it has been saved,  
but not for me*

Frodo

- Leadership never truly ends
- Growth continues
- Service remains central

*Well, I'm back*

**-Sam**

- Leadership starts with a single step
- Growth through service
- The ongoing journey



# Thank You!



Please leave feedback.