

David Nelson

LEARNING SCIENTIST · CANDIDATE, LEARNVECTOR

A learning scientist
who ships: I work
from the primary
literature, build
the instruments,
and collect the data.

Fifteen years in adult behavior change. Fourteen years at Crucial Learning, the company behind Crucial Conversations, working directly with the authors and facilitating for Google, NASA, and American Express. And I teach 5,000+ people a year, which is where the questions come from: watching thousands of adults practice new skills is what pushed me into the transfer literature, and **the gap between what people can do in the room and what they still do on Monday**. As Head of Product at Lone Rock Leadership since October 2023, I've built the doctrine, the instruments, and the AI-native production systems to close it.

01 At a glance

Rigorous measurement	Authored a 63-citation evidence review of skills transfer in adult and workplace learning, from Baldwin & Ford (1988) through the 2025 literature, with a formal measurement doctrine, transfer criteria at seven levels (from planned application to business result), and an honest audit of my own company's flagship course against the research. It now governs everything we design.
Instruments, shipped as software	Designed and built the Core Four assessment: 56 behaviorally anchored items covering the four leadership skills our courses teach, each measured twice: how proficient the leader is, and how much their organization needs it. The gap between those two numbers tells a leader where to start. Shipped as a production web application with individualized reporting.
Data at scale, graded honestly	Designed and ran a two-wave measurement system across 1,081 learners in 33 organizations. 68% reported using the skills in their real role within the first week, and 880 wrote down exactly where.
Retention deployed, not just cited	Spacing, retrieval practice, and implementation intentions running in real enterprise programs, including a multi-week post-training reinforcement roadmap built for LinkedIn.
Agentic AI, daily	I build and operate multi-stage, stateful, tool-using systems for instructional work: content pipelines, an agent-run video stack, MCP tooling, and course IP maintained as an agent-readable knowledge graph.

02 Experience

Lone Rock Leadership

HEAD OF PRODUCT · OCT 2023 – PRESENT

Leadership development firm serving LinkedIn, Costco, Steelcase, Sutter Health, ezCater, Kumon, CommonSpirit Health, and 25+ other organizations.

- Wrote the **skills-transfer evidence review** that governs our course design: the seven-level transfer criteria, running from planned application to business result, and a measurement doctrine with one rule at its center: do not collapse the evidence chain: liking a course, using a skill once, and keeping it for months are different claims that need different evidence
- Designed and shipped the **Core Four assessment**, the instrument above: behaviorally anchored frequency items, gap scoring between leader proficiency and organizational need, edge-case interpretation logic, and individualized PDF reports. Built solo, from psychometric design through production deployment (Next.js, Supabase)
- Ran the **two-wave measurement system** described above and graded the results against my own transfer criteria rather than overclaiming them
- Designed **reinforcement programs from the retention literature**: spaced weekly modules, retrieval prompts, and implementation-intention field assignments, deployed with LinkedIn and other enterprise clients
- Designed **original methods now in production**: the gap assessment above; a diagnostic that maps six recurring team behaviors to the named cognitive biases behind them; and competency models aligned to ATD, SHRM, and AMA frameworks
- Teach and speak to thousands of people a year, on stage and on camera, across live classes, virtual cohorts, executive sessions, and keynotes and webinars for audiences of **1,000 or more**
- Built **four complete leadership courses end to end**, governed by a 100-point production standard with hard gates for learning transfer and learner psychology, plus the style guides that make the quality reproducible
- Built **agentic AI systems for instructional work**: a content pipeline with five specialized writing modes, persistent structured state, and source-integrity rules enforced at the system level; an agent-operated video production stack; and course content restructured into a knowledge graph agents can query

§ Against my own criteria, the learner data above is application evidence, not efficacy evidence. The maintenance wave is the instrument I want a first-party platform to finally make possible.

The maintenance wave is the survey of what is still in use months later. Here is the wall I keep hitting: a vendor's access to learners ends when the engagement ends, so the data that matters most stays out of reach no matter how good the instruments are. A first-party platform is where that loop finally closes. That is the job I'm applying for.

02 Experience, continued

Crucial Learning

2011 – 2024 · 14 YEARS · OVERLAPS LONE ROCK

The company behind Crucial Conversations. Formerly VitalSmarts. The dates overlap on purpose: I stayed on the Senior Faculty through 2024 while building Lone Rock’s product function.

2015 – 2024	Senior Faculty. Lead facilitator for the company’s highest-priority customers, including Google, Facebook, NASA, American Express, Gap, and Applied Materials . Also the trainer of the trainers: taught the rest of the Faculty to deliver Crucial Learning content to brand standard, and have certified 1,300+ trainers since 2011 .
MAY – DEC 2015	Manager, Customer Success. Led a team of 4 managing a pool of 9,000+ Certified Trainers ; built trainer- and customer-enablement content; and curated content for REACH, the annual customer conference of 400+ customers.
2011 – 2015	Master Trainer, Development & Delivery. Internal content creator alongside the authors (Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, David Maxfield, and Al Switzler) on the development of Crucial Conversations, Crucial Influence, Change Anything, and Power of Habit ; also delivered courses to clients and supported Sales. First on the team to take the courses virtual (Adobe Connect, 2014), ahead of the industry.

03 Education & skills

EDUCATION	B.A., Political Science · Brigham Young University
CRAFT	Research synthesis & evidence review (primary sources, APA 7) · assessment & survey design · applied behavior-change science (transfer, spacing, retrieval practice, implementation intentions) · facilitation & keynote speaking
AI & AGENTIC	Claude (agents, skills, MCP) · Codex · Cursor
MEASUREMENT & DATA	Typeform, Tally · Supabase · Zapier · Apollo · Firecrawl
BUILD & DESIGN	Next.js/React · Vercel · Figma · Pen.dev · OpenDesign · Adobe InDesign & Illustrator · LearnUpon LMS · Articulate Rise & Reach 360
VIDEO	Final Cut Pro · Descript · agent-operated pipelines (Runway, Remotion, FFmpeg) · Vimeo