



**R**ETHINKING  
LEADERSHIP TO  
CATCH UP WITH  
THE FUTURE  
OF WORK

# Businesses are rethinking their growth strategies and operating models. People are rethinking their relationship with work. Customers are rethinking their brand choices. Investors are rethinking their portfolios. So why aren't we rethinking the role of leadership?

What it means to be an effective leader is changing as volatile events continue to reshape our world. Organizations cannot be successful for their investors, customers and people without addressing world issues. Every leader has different dynamics to make sense of, but we see digital acceleration, the environmental crisis, systemic inequities and economic volatility as the four main drivers of change for most C-suite leaders in the future of work.

Not only do leaders need to grapple with the implications of each of these drivers but how they intersect and impact one another – as they rarely show up alone. Take for example an intense period of economic instability. It may be difficult for a leader to find enough capital to fund the development of a new technology. They may have to scale back testing and source alternative materials to fit within their budget. This can lead to smaller, unrepresentative testing groups, allowing opportunity for adverse impact to creep in, and less sustainable materials or supply chain partners being used, threatening the organization's sustainability goals.

In the past, leaders lent heavily on knowledge to set direction. They then used their authority to drive execution of strategy. Now leaders need to be equipped with a new set of capabilities to solve for novel, global and interconnected challenges, whilst successfully guiding people through uncertainty.

## REDEFINING LEADERSHIP

Leaders who subscribe to the notion that world problems have now become organizational problems must redefine their role as a leader to be successful in this new and uncertain context. They have both the privilege and the burden of pursuing solutions to large, messy, global issues through the impact of their organization on people and planet. Increasingly a leader's value is realized in how they go about formulating strategy and creating the conditions for change amongst their people and through partnerships. This requires reweighting the value they place on their expertise and rethinking how they relate to those they lead and partner with. It is about being aware enough to question one's working assumptions, to think more radically about new possibilities and bring people together as these challenges cannot be solved individually.

## THINKING

**Leaders need to bring plasticity to their decision-making to reweight the value of expertise and not be over-loaded by data.**

### > Focus with flexibility

One of the toughest asks of being a leader today is having to create clarity, even when you know that disruption is lurking around the corner, inevitably causing yet more change. Organizations and executive

teams can provide focus amidst volatility by creating strategic plans that are underpinned by organizational purpose and informed by the value they are creating for their investors, customers, employees and partners. Strategy is written knowing there will be changes and with alternative pursuits in mind, but focus can still be created with defined value creation priorities.

### > Data informed and perspective rich

Data-driven decisions are table stakes for executives. However, as technology becomes smarter and data becomes more sophisticated, we are at risk of over-relying on a data-informed approach. Systemic issues require holistic thinking. Our stakeholder-rich context requires a multidimensional decision-making approach to bring in different perspectives and ethical considerations. This may sound easy, but integrating different inputs opens up possibilities and creates a bigger decision-making canvas. It can raise points of conflict across stakeholders. It requires courage to invite other views in, the ability to stand back and consider the wider implications of a business decision and conviction to make more holistic decisions.

### > Filter and find

Leaders are at risk of being swamped by a tidal wave of data. However, the majority of available data is not relevant for any given decision, whilst the information that is necessary for a decision is often not available. We often make the mistake of focusing on data that is readily available rather than taking the time to obtain the data that is actually needed. To help with data filtering,

leaders should ask “What data and insights do we need?” and guard against the trap of settling for “What data do I have?”

### > Bring the outside in

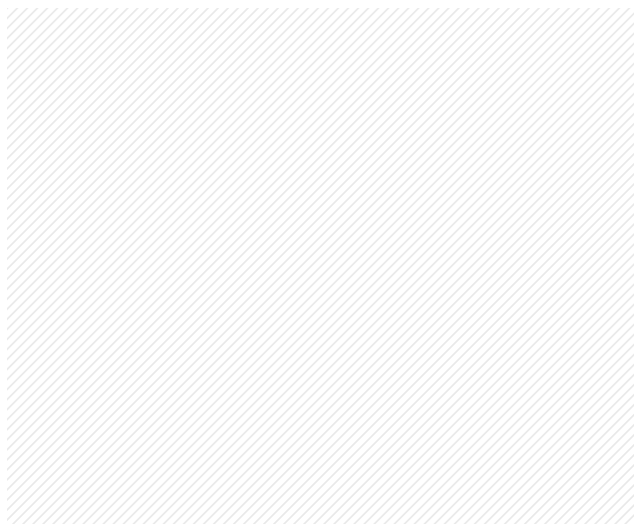
Research shows that humans are limited in their ability to predict the future. We anchor our thinking too much on past experiences and what we currently believe to be true. Leaders need to balance remaining informed with new sources of inspiration. We rarely generate breakthrough innovation by talking to people who see the world from the same vantage point. All industries and markets are experiencing interdependent disruptions to their business. Speaking to other leaders about their future in the metaverse or how they are reducing their carbon footprint may spark lateral ideas in your own organization or identify a small intervention that could have a significant impact.

## RELATING

**It almost seems odd that leaders need to rethink their working relationships. Relating is something that should come naturally to us, and yet what it means to be human has historically been dampened or outright discouraged in workplaces. We all know leaders cannot solve these immense challenges on their own. To lead collectively, a shift in how and who they connect with is needed.**

### > Vulnerability and confidence

Everyone seems to be proffering advice on being more ‘human’ as a leader. But what does that actually mean? It means that people follow people. In matrixed, boundaryless organizations, employees have greater choice as to who they choose to follow. They are looking to understand the leader’s purpose and values. And yet leaders still need to provide focus and set accountabilities. On the one hand, leaders need to create deeper personal connections with employees through vulnerable emotion sharing. They also need to remain task-oriented and role model stability, belief and consistency. Leaders need to pause and read their environment to identify when others want to see vulnerability to connect to the ‘human’ and when they need to see confidence to have something clear to follow.



### > Coach and clarify

Despite organizations investing significantly in developing coaching capabilities, many leaders still lack the ability to delegate opportunities to their team with enough clarity for them to succeed. This is in part due to difficulty in letting go of being the expert. Leaders naturally want to add value through advice and telling their people what to do. Given the pace of change and volume of novel challenges, their historic expertise won’t necessarily provide the best way forward. Leaders need to give clarity around required outcomes and impact but asking their people coaching questions to encourage new thinking and different pathways to achieve the result will help grow the individual and may lead to a more context-relevant solution.

### > Partnership pathways

Many leaders are still solely focused on leading their people, despite the need for commercial and community partnerships. Leading beyond the boundaries of your organization requires trusted partners with shared objectives. Partnerships are not an easy win; they require time and effort to form connections, as well as curiosity to explore what could be achieved together that cannot be achieved in parallel. However, partnerships are often the source of small changes that can have significant impact<sup>1</sup>. A bit like dating, the first partnership opportunity isn’t necessarily going to be the right one but invest time to explore a variety of options to find one that is generative.

## IN A NUTSHELL

Complex problems are not going away. The impact of digital acceleration, the environmental crisis, systemic inequities and economic volatility will continue to shape and reshape the future of work. Faced with an imperative to rethink business strategies and how to engage the workforce, leaders need to rethink their role in creating value too. Staying informed about new developments is a good place to start, but reshaping the focus of your leadership is essential to lead through disruption.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.newscientist.com/article/2355616-serve-vegan-burgers-in-schools-to-trigger-shift-from-meat-says-report/>

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