



HOUZAN
MAKE IT MATTER

Leadership in uncertain times



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navigating uncertainty – but
today's business environment is
testing leaders like never before

Introduction: A Test of Leadership

Leadership has always been about navigating uncertainty – but today’s business environment is testing leaders like never before.

When we spoke to **27 senior executives across industries**, they described a world where the challenges keep coming:

“Brexit, COVID, supply chain issues, economic downturn – there’s no ‘new normal.’ This is just how business is now.”

What struck us wasn’t just the scale of the challenges, but how **leaders are rethinking leadership itself**. They told us **traditional models of stability no longer apply** – long-term plans can become obsolete overnight, workforce expectations are shifting fast, and decision-making feels like an endless balancing act between risk and opportunity.

“We used to rely on five-year strategies. Now we’re lucky if our plans hold for five months.”

Despite this, **leaders are not in despair**. Many see opportunity in the chaos. As one executive put it:

“The leaders who thrive aren’t the ones who predict the future; they’re the ones who prepare their people for anything.”



This paper is about what those leaders are focusing on. It’s not a **‘how-to guide’ or another leadership model claiming to solve everything**. Instead, it’s a **lens for thinking about leadership in unpredictable times**, shaped by those leading at the sharp end.

We’ll explore:

- **What’s keeping senior leaders up at night** – the biggest challenges they see now and ahead
- **How confident they feel about the future** – and whether they think their businesses are ready
- **The leadership focus areas that make the biggest difference** – not theories, but what actually works.

At the heart of this is the **CORE leadership lens – Clarity, Ownership, Resilience, and Engagement**. Not as a formula, but as the four areas that leaders say **matter most when navigating uncertainty**.

One leader summed it up best:

“You can’t control what’s happening out there. But you can control how you lead through it.”

Executive Summary: Leadership in Uncertain Times

What's Keeping Leaders Up at Night?

Senior executives told us that **leading today is harder than ever** because of:

- **Economic turbulence** – Markets are unpredictable, long-term planning is harder, and leaders are constantly adjusting.
- **Technological change** – AI and automation are transforming industries at speed, creating both opportunity and disruption.
- **Workforce shifts** – Employees expect more from leadership, and engagement is critical to performance.
- **Unexpected events** – Whether it's big political changes, market disruptions or black-swan events, organisations need to expect the unexpected.

Are Leaders Confident?

Despite these challenges, **leaders remain optimistic** – but with caution.

"We've been through tough times before. The difference now is the pace of change."

A confidence scale from 1-10 showed most leaders sitting between **6 and 8** – **cautiously optimistic, but clear-eyed about the way ahead**. In terms of **their organisations' ability to adapt**, they were slightly less optimistic, scoring in a range of 5-7.

"I feel good about where we're going – but we still have a hell of a lot of work to do."



What Leadership Focus Areas Matter Most?

From our conversations, four **key leadership priorities** emerged – reflecting the **core areas that help leaders navigate uncertainty**:

Clarity – Cut through the noise and give people focus.

Ownership – Empower teams to act, rather than wait.

Resilience – Build adaptability, not just endurance.

Engagement – Keep people connected and motivated.

These **aren't new ideas**, but leaders told us they are **what matter most in today's environment**.

"Leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about creating the conditions where your people can succeed – no matter what's happening around them."

This paper isn't about theory. **It's about playing back what senior leaders are actually doing to lead through complexity.**

One executive summed it up best:

"Uncertainty isn't the problem. How we respond to it is."

Understanding the Context: What's Changing?

When asked what's making leadership harder, senior executives pointed to four interlinked challenges:

1. Economic Uncertainty: No More Predictability

Uncertainty has always been part of business – but leaders said today's **economic turbulence is different**.

"The pace of disruption has accelerated. We've had crisis after crisis with no breathing room in between."

High inflation, rising interest rates, supply chain instability, and changing consumer demand have made it **harder than ever to plan ahead**. One CFO shared:

"We've moved from long-term certainty to short-term survival. We're constantly adjusting."

And while some industries have seen recovery, many leaders are **preparing for continued volatility**. A retail leader put it bluntly:

"We're not waiting for things to 'settle down'. We're assuming this is the landscape from now on."



2. Technological Disruption: Innovate or Be Left Behind

The **AI revolution and digital transformation** are reshaping industries faster than many companies can adapt. Leaders acknowledged both **the opportunity and the risk**.

"AI is the biggest enabler and the biggest threat at the same time."

The challenge isn't just adopting new technologies – it's **upskilling teams, shifting mindsets, and staying competitive** as the landscape changes. An infrastructure executive shared:

"We know we need to embrace digital, but the real challenge is keeping up. If we don't, a smaller, more agile competitor will."

Understanding the Context: What's Changing?

3. Workforce Transformation: The Leadership Shift

Leaders told us the **employer-employee relationship has changed forever.**

"People don't just work for a paycheck anymore. They want purpose, flexibility, and leadership they believe in."

The pandemic **accelerated the shift in expectations – hybrid work is here to stay**, younger employees demand **authentic leadership**, and talent is harder to attract and retain.

A senior HR leader summed it up:

"You can't lead like it's 2019. If you're not listening to your people, you'll lose them."

And it's not just about retention – **engaged employees drive performance.** Leaders agreed:

"Your strategy means nothing if your people aren't motivated to execute it."



4. The Crisis Era: Leading Through the Unexpected

Leaders today don't just manage businesses – they manage crises.

From **geopolitical instability and supply chain shocks to black swan events like pandemics and cybersecurity threats**, leaders must build resilience into their core strategy.

A financial services CEO put it bluntly:

"We're not just competing anymore – we're firefighting constantly. We've had to rebuild crisis leadership into our DNA."

Many leaders no longer expect stability – they assume uncertainty. A global COO shared:

"We can't always predict what's next. But we can prepare for agility and make resilience part of our culture."

Conclusion: How Are Leaders Adapting?

These four forces – **economic uncertainty, technological disruption, workforce transformation, and the rise of constant crisis leadership** – are **reshaping the fundamentals of leadership.**

And leaders agree: the old playbook no longer applies.

"This isn't just about adapting to change anymore. It's about thriving in uncertainty."

CORE Leadership Model: A Lens for Leading Through Uncertainty

Throughout our conversations with senior executives, one message came through clearly: **there is no perfect leadership model for uncertain times**. Every leader approaches change differently, shaped by their experiences, industries, and the unique challenges they face. However, despite these differences, four critical themes consistently emerged as the **leadership qualities that matter most** when navigating complexity.

The **CORE leadership model – Clarity, Ownership, Resilience, and Engagement** – is not a formula or a new framework. Instead, it is a **lens** through which leaders can assess how they lead in uncertain times.

One senior executive put it this way:

“Leadership today isn’t about predicting the future; it’s about preparing for multiple futures and inspiring people to move forward with confidence.”

This section reflects what leaders told us about the mindsets and behaviours that **enable organisations to move forward when the future is unclear**.



1. Clarity: What Leaders Told Us

Executives repeatedly highlighted **the need for clarity in times of uncertainty**. When conditions are volatile, people **look to their leaders for reassurance, direction, and focus**.

One CEO reflected on this responsibility:

"When the world outside is chaotic, our job as leaders is to create calm inside the organisation. That starts with a clear and shared understanding of where we're going and why."

But clarity isn't just about setting a vision – it's about ensuring people truly **understand, believe, and act on it**. A senior HR leader spoke about the importance of **tone from the top**:

"People need a clear direction, but more than that, they need to hear it consistently and see it reinforced in leaders' action and behaviours. That's how trust is built."

Leaders told us that **overcomplicating strategies can slow down progress**. One executive advised against long, rigid plans:

"The five-year strategy is largely dead. Now, it's about having a clear north star, but building flexibility into how we get there."

Clarity is also about honesty. Leaders acknowledged that people don't expect them to have all the answers – but they do expect transparency. A financial services leader explained:

"The worst thing you can do is pretend you know what's coming next. Your people know when you're bluffing. Be honest about what's uncertain and what's in your control."

How Leaders Put This into Practice

- **Being ruthless with prioritisation**. Not everything is a priority. Be clear and consistent on what matters most.
- **Breaking complexity into simple, tangible steps**. Teams often benefit from working in sprints, and building momentum on what really works.
- **Communicating frequently, even when there's no new information**. Silence breeds speculation. Over communicate and be visible.
- **Sharing perspective**. One Finance leader described frequent reflective conversations on what people are observing – often leading to a joining of the dots and greater clarity
- **Using scenario planning to prepare for multiple outcomes**. Leaders emphasised that it's better to **be ready for change than to predict it**.

A global FMCG company demonstrated this by **using real-time data dashboards** to align teams during supply chain disruptions. Employees didn't need to guess what was happening – they could **see the impact in real time**.

Research Findings: Transparent Communication Enhances Trust

Leaders who communicate transparently during uncertainty are perceived as more competent. A study found that leaders who express external uncertainty (e.g., "It is uncertain") are viewed more favourably than those who express internal uncertainty (e.g., "I am uncertain"). This approach fosters trust and confidence among team members. (Gallup, 2022, The True Impact of Leadership's Engagement).

2. Ownership: What Leaders Told Us

A common challenge leaders described was **balancing empowerment with accountability**. Many acknowledged that uncertainty **can lead to hesitation**, with employees waiting for **top-down direction rather than taking ownership**.

One executive leader addressed this directly:

"Leaders often think empowerment means stepping away. But real empowerment requires presence – it means being there when your team needs support, without interfering with their autonomy."

Another executive, stressed the role of **one-on-one time with employees** to build ownership:

"If you want people to take responsibility, you need to be there. Regular one-on-ones are crucial – it's where alignment happens, where people feel heard, and where accountability is reinforced."

While another leaders reflected on how ownership is built:

"People don't take ownership because they're told to – they take ownership when they see that their decisions matter and their leaders trust them."



How Leaders Put This into Practice

- **Giving people responsibility**, but staying close enough to support them.
- **Demonstrating you 'have their backs'**, by supporting actions that may not always deliver.
- **Encouraging a mindset shift** from waiting for instructions **to driving solutions**.
- **Modeling accountability at the top**. Leaders who own their mistakes create a culture where accountability is safe.
- **Engaging in strategy cascades**, where people get to make sense of the strategy and form critical links to their daily actions.

One retail leader shared how their company **introduced team-based KPIs instead of individual targets**. Employees **took collective responsibility for results**, and instead of micromanaging, leaders **acted as coaches, helping teams navigate challenges instead of prescribing solutions**. The result? **Higher morale and faster decision-making**.

Research Findings: Psychological Ownership and Innovative Work Behaviour

Research in the *Current Psychology* journal examined the role of job-based psychological ownership and employee ambidexterity (the ability to balance exploration and exploitation activities) on innovative work behaviour and job performance among corporate employees. The findings suggest that fostering a sense of ownership can enhance employees' innovative behaviours and overall job performance. (Psychological ownership and ambidexterity influence the innovative work behavior and job performance of SME employees, *Current Psychology*, 2023).

3. Resilience: What Leaders Told Us



Resilience emerged as a defining factor in leadership success. The **leaders we spoke to didn't just focus on surviving challenges – they focused on adapting and emerging stronger when tested and challenged.**

A logistics executive explained:

"Resilience isn't about bouncing back – it's about moving forward in a world that keeps changing."

Executives recognised that **resilience is built over time** – it's not just about responding to a crisis, but **having the structures and mindset in place before a crisis happens.**

One leader described how their company **stress-tests its strategy** to uncover weak points before they become failures:

"We don't wait for a crisis to see if our business model holds up. We push it to failure in simulations, so we know what to fix before it's real."

How Leaders Put This into Practice

- **Creating structural resilience.** Leaders stress-tested business plans, diversified operations, and reduced reliance on a single revenue stream.
- **Investing in leadership resilience.** Many executives described **coaching, mental well-being programs, and peer networks** as essential tools.
- **Adapting and learning from setbacks.** As one leader put it:
"The question isn't 'how do we get back to where we were?' It's 'how do we move forward better than before?'"
- **Seeing around corners.** Another executive described the skill of anticipating what might lay ahead. *"It's critical to expect the unexpected than to expect things to remain largely the same."*

A logistics company showed this in action when it **diversified its supply chain across multiple regions, reducing risk from geopolitical instability.**

Research Findings: Resilient Leadership Reduces Burnout

Teams led by engaging leaders reported higher levels of happiness at work and trust in leadership, combined with lower levels of burnout than their colleagues who were led by poorly engaging leaders. (National Library of Medicine, 2022, The impact of engaging leadership on employee engagement and team effectiveness: A longitudinal, multi-level study on the mediating role of personal and team resources).

4. Engagement: What Leaders Told Us

More than ever, leaders described **the need to be present, authentic, and engaged**. One leader particularly highlighted the importance of positive **storytelling in leadership**:

"People don't follow spreadsheets. They follow compelling narratives."

Executives repeatedly returned to the idea that **leadership presence makes a difference**. One leader emphasised the impact:

"During change, people don't need you to have all the answers. They need to see you. Your calm, confident presence is what reassures them."

A healthcare executive also highlighted the connection between engagement and **well-being**:

"If you want more from your people, you must help them build their health, resilience, and personal well-being. That starts with leaders actively modelling what they expect."

One finance sector leader emphasised the importance of **laying out the reality** to boost engagement:

"Assessing your organisations' capability for change is essential – if you want to avoid cynicism and resistance, be honest, take a bit of time and don't try to force things through."

How Leaders Put This into Practice

- **Prioritising well-being.** Leaders **modelled work-life balance**, encouraged mental health support, and created environments where people could thrive.
- **Being visible and present.** Leaders described **walking the floor, having regular check-ins, and showing up in moments of uncertainty**.
- **Using positive storytelling to inspire.** One Executive emphasised this as the key to successful engagement and retention.
- **Setting the tone from the top.** While everyday matters are not often resolved top down, the tone, the values and the energy of the organisation are established by the senior leadership team. And people will pick up where there is disunity or mixed messages.

A healthcare organisation put these ideas into action by **introducing a well-being programme** that included **leadership coaching, flexible working, and mental health support**. The result? **20% lower turnover and a measurable boost in morale**.

Research Findings: The Impact of Engagement on Productivity

Research highlighted by ClickUp indicates that highly engaged business units experience a 22% increase in productivity. Engaged employees are more connected to their work and the company's mission, leading to greater effort and efficiency in their tasks (ClickUp People Management, 2024).



Final Thought: Make It Matter

Throughout these conversations, senior leaders repeatedly emphasised one truth: leadership today isn't about certainty – it's about adaptability, connection, and intent. The best leaders don't just react to change; they shape the way their teams and organisations navigate it.

So how do you **make your leadership matter** in uncertain times? These questions, inspired by our conversations with executives, offer a simple self-check:

Clarity: Am I providing direction or adding to the noise?

- Do my people know what's most important, even when circumstances change?
- Am I simplifying complexity, or are my messages unclear or overwhelming?
- Do I communicate even when I don't have all the answers?

Ownership: Am I empowering my team while remaining present?

- Are my people waiting for permission, or are they taking responsibility for results?
- Do I give them the autonomy to make decisions while providing the support they need and backing them up even when they make mistakes?
- Am I leading by example when it comes to accountability?

Resilience: Am I preparing my team to adapt and grow?

- Do we stress-test our strategies and challenge our assumptions before a crisis forces us to?
- How do we encourage learning from setbacks rather than just recovering from them?
- Are we investing in well-being, both for individuals and for the organisation as a whole?

Engagement: Am I keeping my people connected and motivated?

- Do I actively listen to my team and make time for real conversations and a wider perspective?
- Am I present, authentic and visible, especially during times of change?
- Do I use storytelling and purpose to inspire people, rather than just setting targets?



Leadership is about **making things matter** – for your people, your organisation, and yourself. As one executive put it:

“Uncertainty is the test of leadership—but it’s also its greatest opportunity. It’s where the most innovative solutions and enduring strengths are forged.”

The future is uncertain, but how you lead through it is within your control.
The challenge is clear:

Make It Matter.

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