Next Generation Leadership for a World in Transformation:
Driving Dialogue and Action

By the Global Future Council on Leadership,
with support from the Forum of Young Global Leaders

R E P O R T

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Foreword

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Rethinking leadership in a time of unprecedented technological disruption, stretched planetary boundaries, and growing global and societal divisions is essential for restoring trust in leaders and societies at large as well as for achieving better outcomes for people and the planet. The Forum of Young Global Leaders (YGLs) is proud to be doing so in a dialogue- and action-driven way with the World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on Leadership (GFC). The council aims to reimagine leadership and explore what leadership models, skills, and mindsets can help to address current and emerging global challenges effectively and close the trust gap.

The GFC is rooted in the vibrant community of YGLs – composed of leaders from all walks of life between 30 and 40 as well as a growing group of alumni – who contribute a unique vantage point by combining experience with fresh perspectives. The backgrounds of the council members span executive and legislative experience in the public sector, corporate leadership, entrepreneurship, civil society, and research and education. The council is made up of members representing 17 countries, enabling a global approach that is sensitive to regional and cultural contexts.

It is also thanks to this plurality in the council – and a reflection of global realities – why we do not aim to provide a single prescriptive model for *the future* of leadership, but rather consider what leadership *futures* may look like. This approach is timely given the constant evolution of challenges leaders face – a static model of leadership would quickly become outdated. We instead focus on four systemic leverage points vital in the leadership cycle. These

points allow us to adopt an integrated approach and unlock new leadership futures: Starting with the leadership pipeline and the selection of leaders, then exploring how they are trained, how they make decisions and take action and, ultimately, how they manage succession and leave a lasting legacy. We believe that these systemic leverage points are likely to stand the test of time and, importantly, they can be adapted to different contexts, whether cultural, sectoral, or institutional. Additionally, we highlight different leadership innovations related to each leverage point in spotlight boxes to inspire new thinking and encourage dialogue.

Numerous discussions beyond the GFC on Leadership itself have contributed to the creation of this report. They included the broader YGL community as well as the GFCs on Artificial General Intelligence, Climate and Nature Governance, Faith in Action, and Good Governance, illustrating the intersection at which modern leadership sits.

Building on the above, we suggest four strategic shifts for leadership to become future-proof and to be fuelled by dialogue and next generation thinking: moving from linear to intergenerational leadership, from control to co-creation, from individual authority to shared agency, and from short-term performance to long-term impact. These suggestions and the report as such are meant to inspire current and emerging leaders and to serve as a starting point rather than an end point: We conclude with an invitation to collaborate on a global leadership lab – an open, collaborative, and dynamic platform for dialogue and action as we venture into new leadership futures to rebuild trust.

Executive summary

Leadership today is not future-proof and, in many cases, not even present-proof. The systems and institutions, assumptions and traits that have long shaped how leadership is defined and exerted are under unprecedented pressure. Technological disruption, geopolitical fragmentation, ecological stress, and widening societal divides are reshaping the conditions under which leaders make and implement decisions.

Leadership models that were once built on stability and hierarchy can no longer sustain themselves in a world marked by constant transformation, increasing acceleration, and complex interdependencies. The widespread erosion of trust in leaders and institutions worldwide is not the cause, it is a symptom of a more profound crisis. Leadership has failed to evolve at the pace of reality, at the pace of crises that unfold.

Rethinking leadership thus holds immense opportunity. Youth and the next generation of leaders can play an important role in injecting fresh thinking and an intergenerational perspective. This is essential to ensuring that emerging leadership models reflect the aspirations and realities of those who will inherit and reshape tomorrow's systems, and key for reimagining trust, legitimacy, and agency in the 21st century.

This report draws on insights, literature and experiences from the Global Future Council on Leadership (GFC) and the Young Global Leaders (YGL) community at large. Asking what must change in how we define, develop and deploy leadership to not only stay abreast with today's challenges, but to shape the future we want for ourselves and for future generations, the direction becomes clear: We must innovate at the core of leadership, its practice, and approaches. This is precisely what this report aims to explore, paving a pathway for action. First, it proposes four systemic leverage points that appear particularly promising for making leadership both present- and future-proof:

How are leaders cultivated and chosen?

What and how do leaders learn?

01
The leadership pipeline and the selection of leaders

02
The training and development of leaders

Four systemic leverage points to make leadership present- and future-proof

04
Leadership legacy

03
Decision-making and action of leaders

How might leaders leave a lasting legacy?

How do leaders make decisions and take action?
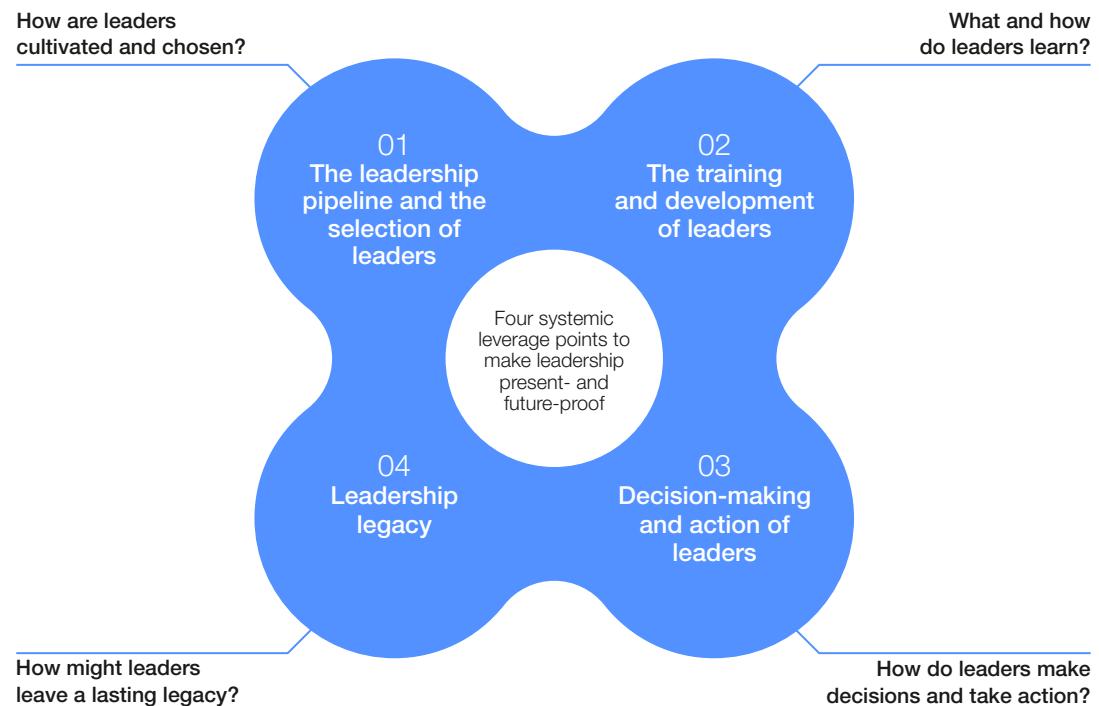
These leverage points are interdependent, yet distinct. Together, they provide a valuable analytical and practical framework for change. For each leverage point, the paper highlights a few leadership innovations to inspire new thinking and encourage dialogue. Simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, it also proposes strategic shifts to help reinvigorate leadership amid crises and mistrust, making dialogue a central leadership practice that builds bridges and fosters hope. These shifts include moving:

– **From linear to intergenerational:** Incorporating youth voices and the next generation of leaders to consider the aspirations and realities of those who will inherit and reshape tomorrow's systems.

– **From control to co-creation:** Transitioning from commanding to convening, leveraging distributed intelligence and enabling collective problem-solving.

– **From individual authority to shared agency:** Enlarging the space of responsibility for the pursuit and outcomes of decisions based on their co-creation.

– **From short-term performance to long-term impact:** Rethinking leadership incentives and mindsets to prioritize positive long-term outcomes over immediate wins and popularity.

Collectively, these shifts propel leadership that is distributed, adaptive, and builds on dialogue – capable of listening deeply, learning continuously, and acting collectively, thus helping to enhance cohesion and trust in and across societies. Since this report is to serve as a starting point for ongoing dialogue and action, it concludes with an open invitation to collaborate on a new global leadership lab. This lab is envisioned as an open and dynamic platform that turns insights into impact across four key areas:

Create a space for ongoing dialogue across generations, regions and sectors on the evolution of leadership in an age of acceleration and transformation.

Develop an interactive, digital repository of global research and leadership innovations, providing both inspiration and practical insights.

Convene

Curate

The global leadership lab

Driving dialogue for trust and action

Catalyse

Cultivate

Partner with government, business, academia and civil society to pilot new leadership models and projects.

Provide regularly updated tools for leaders to enhance their competencies and impact for long-term value creation, including training frameworks and leadership scorecards.

1 | The challenge of future-proofing leadership

Leadership today is not future-proof and, in many cases, not even present-proof. The systems and institutions, assumptions and traits that have long shaped how leadership is defined and exerted are under unprecedented pressure. Technological disruption, geopolitical fragmentation, ecological stress, and widening societal divides are reshaping the conditions under which leaders make and implement decisions.

Leadership models that were once built on stability and hierarchy can no longer sustain themselves in a world marked by constant transformation, increasing acceleration, and complex interdependencies. The widespread erosion of trust in leaders and institutions worldwide is not the cause, it is a symptom of a more profound crisis. Leadership has failed to evolve at the pace of reality, at the pace of crises that unfold. What is more, it often lacks the perspective of future generations.

According to the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer[1], nearly 70% of people believe that both business and government leaders are misleading the public. Similarly, 61% of the people surveyed report a moderate or high level of grievance against governments and businesses. Moreover, over half of them also report having a zero-sum mindset. That is, believing that support to a different group in society would inevitably come at the expense of their own group.

The leadership implications of this finding are far-reaching: If leadership is about galvanizing groups towards a shared goal, reconciling opposing sides becomes nearly impossible. Groups view their solutions as incompatible, resulting in gridlocks at the expense of society, security, prosperity, and the planet. Moreover, this gridlock reinforces the perception that leaders are incapable of delivering results, thereby increasing the trust deficit and starting a vicious cycle. Dialogue and the capacity to deal with competing views, along with a shift in the use of distributed intelligence, are crucial for fostering co-creation rather than relying on top-down approaches. Dialogue is not an end in itself, but a means for rebuilding trust, for collaboration and action.

However, in today's state of permacrisis – the lasting confluence of different sources of disruption at a global scale – it is easy for pressure and reactivity to overpower reason. Leaders find themselves in an overwhelming information environment: We have more data than ever, but not always better knowledge, let alone better judgment. Dis- and misinformation make finding common ground even more difficult.[2] To appease social media or public sentiment, leaders may make short-term or ill-informed decisions, temporarily defusing tension, but ultimately undermining trust. This hinders lasting positive outcomes for current and future generations. A shift from short-term decision-making to long-term impact and resilience is therefore direly needed.

Individual resilience also becomes an essential factor, as the mental health and physical integrity of leaders are increasingly under pressure. The personal risk of visibility and speaking up is mounting. This has become apparent not only through public defamation campaigns, but also physical attacks on political, business, academic and civil society leaders across continents and the political spectrum. As the toll for leaders and their loved ones gets higher, the leadership pipeline further diminishes and one may ask: *Do I really want to lead under these conditions?* Or, conversely, *who are the people stepping into leadership under these conditions?* Structural inequalities or opaque practices in the leadership selection process further aggravate challenges and introduce bias in the leadership pipeline.

This context calls for leadership ethics that can bridge divides. A survey conducted within the YGL community supports this, as it ranks the possession of a moral compass as the most crucial leadership skill of our time.[3] Too often, leadership has been confused with charisma, mere visibility, or personal ambition. While local and cultural contexts need to be considered, criteria to identify true leadership vocation grounded in values evidence and long-term perspective, are also crucial.

All of the above makes clear: To meet current challenges and to actively shape future ones, we must innovate at the core of leadership, its practice, and approaches. This is precisely what this report aims to explore. First, it proposes four systemic leverage points that appear particularly promising for making leadership both present- and future-proof:

The leadership pipeline and the selection of leaders

The training and development of leaders

The decision-making and action of leaders

The legacy of leaders

These leverage points are interdependent, yet distinct. Together, they provide a valuable analytical and practical framework for change.

Simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, the white paper also proposes strategic shifts to help to reinvigorate leadership amid crises and mistrust, making dialogue a central leadership practice that builds bridges and fosters hope. These shifts include moving from:

– Linear to intergenerational leadership.

– Control to co-creation.

– Individual authority to shared agency.

– Short-term performance to long-term impact.

As the report emphasizes, future-proofing leadership requires not only new models and mindsets, but collective commitment and dialogue. It therefore concludes with an open invitation to collaborate on a new global leadership lab.

Insights from the 2025 YGL Leadership Survey at a glance

RANKING OF THE MOST IMPORTANT LEADERSHIP SKILLS

01	Moral compass	02	Empathy and the ability to build trust
03	Vision and storytelling	04	Resilience and tolerance for failure
05	Foresight and future preparedness	06	The ability to engage a wide and varied set of stakeholders
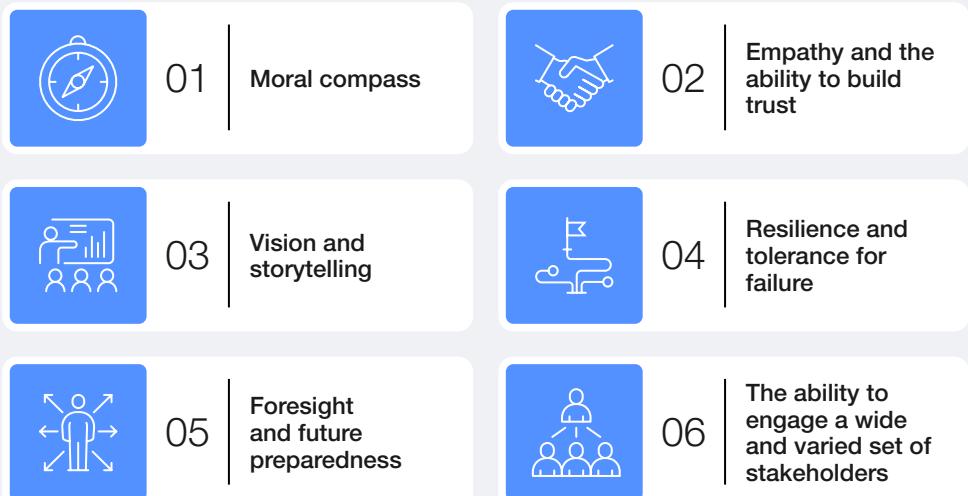
GRAPPLING WITH EVOLVING LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS

– In the current context, 81% of respondents agree or strongly agree that leaders in politics, corporations, academia, and nonprofits are **not incentivized to prioritize long-term results** over short-term gains.

– 64% of respondents agree or strongly agree that **faith and spirituality can be guiding principles** for leadership. 27% of respondents hold a neutral stance.

– Only 29% of respondents agree or strongly agree that **the development of artificial intellgence (AI)** will make the exercise of leadership easier. 25% of respondents hold a neutral stance.

2 Thinking next generation: Leverage points for new leadership futures

2.1 The leadership pipeline and the selection of leaders

The leadership pipeline and the selection of leaders – how leaders are cultivated and chosen – form a powerful systemic leverage point to open new leadership futures. At the intersection of individual capability and institutional design, it determines what kind of values, competencies, and visions guide collective action. While, of course, the exact selection mechanisms vary across sectors and political systems, they do shape legitimacy, authority and strategic direction. Furthermore, poor selection of leaders tends to lead to poor leadership outcomes, hence eroding legitimacy and trust.

Current leadership selection too often values mere visibility over competence and integrity. It tends to reproduce existing power structures and succession pipelines, favouring similar profiles based on past success rather than on emerging needs. The result is a pattern of temporal myopia, structural gatekeeping and replication, all of which stifle innovation.

The challenge is not only who leads, but how leadership readiness is cultivated and how selection processes can develop alongside social, environmental and technological change. This is central to building institutions that are trustworthy, capable and future-proof. This leverage point thus requires a dual focus: Nourishing a diverse and future-oriented leadership pipeline and redesigning selection systems to reflect the evolving realities transitioning from static to adaptive yet principled criteria.

SPOTLIGHT 1

Enhancing preparedness:
Leadership factories to make people fit-for-purpose, not position

Leadership has never been more complex and exposed to such a high-speed environment across all sectors, be it business, government, academia, or civil society. The challenge is no longer just navigating uncertainty, but preparing leaders who can thrive within it. Traditional executive programmes are often focused too narrowly and evolve slowly. What is needed now is something faster, broader, and deeper: Leadership factories that operate at industrial speed and scale.

This model, designed to keep pace with emerging leadership challenges, builds a continuous pipeline of leaders ready for today's volatility and tomorrow's possibilities. While "factory" may sound mechanistic, the idea is about scaling people-preparedness, not position-preparedness:

Equipping leaders to act with calm, clarity, and confidence in the era of generative AI and socio-geo-economic complexity, where decisions must not only keep up with the acceleration of technology and multifaceted challenges, but also find ways to get ahead of them.

Every organization should ask: *What kind of leaders do we want and do we need to build? How can we do so on time?* The answer defines not just institutional success, but societal resilience in the decades ahead. In the global leadership lab, we may explore the design of leadership factories for various sectors and regions. We may also explore how leadership selection is not a one-off moment in time, but builds on a fit-for-purpose pipeline.

A sustainable leadership pipeline requires investment in people, pathways, and principles to prepare individuals for leadership in complex, interdependent systems. Leadership must be treated as a renewable societal resource, cultivated intentionally and inclusively. It is about the quality, quantity, and diversity of leadership potentials that can be identified, including low-profile or non-traditional leadership personas across all age groups. Outreach strategies and partnerships with underrepresented communities, networks, or training institutions enable inclusivity and drawing in diverse experiences. Tailored career acceleration programmes can open access to the leadership pipeline for the next generation of leaders, enabling fresh perspectives and breaking the cycle of institutional self-reproduction.

Career acceleration mechanisms to turn inclusion into influence

Traditional leadership pipelines often reproduce privilege rather than redistributing opportunities. Building truly diverse leadership requires intentionality at every stage of the leadership development funnel, from selection to ongoing development. Underrepresented leaders often face structural barriers, mental health strain, and double workloads that limit their chances of success. Targeted acceleration mechanisms, including mentorship, fellowship, and sponsorship, aim to transform the way talent is identified, supported, and sustained. Rethinking entry points and support systems is crucial to ensure that potential is both recognized and realized.

These mechanisms combine access to networks, visibility in decision-making spaces, and tailored development journeys. Beyond mentoring and support in strategic decisions, effective sponsorship offers genuine advocacy. All of this helps to highlight the positive impact of aspiring leaders from minority backgrounds and is essential to turn inclusion into actual influence. Embedding these practices helps to dismantle systemic barriers and transform diversity into a source of institutional strength as research by Herminia Ibarra has found.[4]

Formalizing sponsorship, i.e., the individual support for high-potential leaders from underrepresented backgrounds, can become a leadership practice of its own, just like expanding visibility initiatives and measuring progress beyond recruitment efforts. That way, inclusion may deliver tangible outcomes: Broadening perspectives, improving decisions, and strengthening collective intelligence.

To address structural barriers, organizations must critically examine the identification patterns and criteria used when selecting leaders. Openness and transparency of the selection process are essential, as are the institutional or legal predispositions that influence the choice of specific profiles. Moreover, the evaluation of candidates and setting of expectations has to be based on contextual and emerging needs and incentivize moral decision-making.

Concrete avenues for action may include new ways to assess contextual readiness. For example, a scoring aligning leadership style and maturity with systemic needs, or tests to evaluate a candidate's values-based decision-making capacity. Emphasizing these capacities in the selection process will also require institutions to implement mechanisms that protect and support ethical leaders further down the line. This allows to safeguard integrity and trust after their appointment and institutionalizes moral courage, ensuring it actually materializes in the leader's decision-making and action.

Leveraging digital tools in the selection process can provide both opportunities and challenges.

For example, they may facilitate algorithmic screenings or audits of potential candidates. Yet, they can be prone to bias and manipulation. Finally, selecting the selectors (unless a clearly defined electorate exists) can also play a crucial role. Creating selection committees that include various sectors and generations ensures that a range of perspectives influences decision-making processes, while the processes themselves nevertheless need to be well governed and structured in their own right.[5] Ultimately, how we select our leaders determines how we define and secure our futures.

Given its strong future-oriented component, one of the leadership principles to be further explored by the global leadership lab is the transition from linear to intergenerational leadership. Integrating youth voices and the next generation of leaders – beyond the pipeline and selection also in the decision-making process itself – is essential to ensuring that emerging leadership models reflect the aspirations and realities of those who will inherit and reshape tomorrow's systems. Their participation brings fresh perspectives, digital fluency, and moral urgency – key ingredients for reimagining trust, legitimacy, and agency in a world in transformation.

2.2 | The training and development of leaders

Training and development equip leaders with the knowledge, skills, mindsets, values, and tools necessary to create a vision, make informed decisions, facilitate collaboration, and take effective action. They also influence what goals they are pursuing, thus profoundly yet implicitly shaping leadership outcomes for companies, organizations, and societies. The way leaders are trained and undergo lifelong learning, therefore, is a critical systemic leverage point to shape new leadership futures.

In an era of rapid transformation and global uncertainty, leadership training can no longer rely on static competencies or traditional instruction. The challenge today lies not only in what leaders know, but in how they act when faced with ambiguity, ethical dilemmas, and technological disruption. Many programmes are still too theoretical, narrowly focused on technical expertise and detached from lived experience, also neglecting individual resilience and self-reflection. As a result, leaders often lack the moral compass, empathy and adaptability needed to guide teams and societies through complexity; something that thought leader and YGL alumna Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, argues for in her book *A different kind of Power*.[6] Future-proof leaders can mobilize collective intelligence and act with courage and humility at once.

The future of leadership development depends on transforming as much on what we learn, as on how we learn. It must evolve into holistic, lifelong learning that shapes both character and capacity,[7] connecting moral ambition with strategic foresight.[8]

While modern leadership education must integrate moral grounding, it must do so with care: A moral compass can unite or divide, especially when shaped by rigid, exclusionary worldviews rather than profoundly human values. Training is to enable the capacity to foster dialogue among diverse perspectives, helping to identify the shared values that propel societies forward. Among them are fairness, empathy, and a sense of common purpose – a purpose that leaders *hold* for themselves and may also *give* to their stakeholders.

Exploring such moral grounding requires a broader mindset shift: What is often considered divisive rather than shared, especially across cultural, institutional, or historical boundaries, actually needs to move more to the forefront in order to look beyond the surface. Jacinda Ardern put this beautifully when reflecting: "If you ask a room of parents, 'What are the values that you think are really important for your kids?' you'll hear the same things: People want their kids to share, they want them to be generous, they want them to be kind and empathetic, they want them to be brave, courageous. Those values that we teach our kids, we then see somehow as weaknesses in leaders?"[9]

SPOTLIGHT 3 | Spiritual intelligence as a leadership capability

In the 2025 YGL Leadership survey, 64% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that faith and spirituality can be guiding principles for leadership. This suggests that most respondents view faith and spirituality not as private or irrelevant domains, but as legitimate moral and ethical foundations that can inform leadership practice.

Spiritual intelligence moves the focus from belief or ritual to capability and refers to the inner ability to process life's challenges, develop constructive interpretations of events, and align action with transcendent values.[10] It emphasizes forgiveness, humility, mercy, patience, and the cultivation of our innate human potential for good. The fundamental shift is to treat spirituality as a measurable, developmental, and practical capacity, rather than a fixed trait or an inherited belief system.

Spiritual intelligence entails assessing and strengthening discernment, meaning-making, and reflective practices that connect purpose, ethics, and inner awareness. It builds on values that have unifying, rather than divisive power. Its impact can be transformative for leadership, well-being, and community renewal, helping individuals and organizations navigate complexity grounded in integrity and hope.

Avenues for uptake include embedding a "Spiritual Intelligence Index" into leadership and organizational assessments, connecting it with emotional intelligence and resilience frameworks, and applying it across corporate, faith-based, nonprofit, and educational settings to cultivate leaders and communities rooted in moral clarity and compassion. This also opens a practical way to counter the use of faith and spirituality as a divisive force.

Such moral reasoning is also critical as breakthrough technologies, including AI, reshape every sector and what it means to be human. Leaders must ensure that technology amplifies human dignity rather than replaces it. What is more, drawing on the 2025 YGL Leadership Survey, generative AI is expected to make leading as such more difficult (45% of survey respondents believe that generative AI will not make the exercise of leadership easier). Training, therefore, needs to build in AI and deep tech literacy, anticipatory capacity, ethical awareness and moral agency, helping leaders harness innovation whilst mitigating adverse effects.[11]

To unfold its full potential, learning must occur both within and extend beyond the classroom; it is about the conditions for learning. Since, as research shows, humans learn best from experimentation and example,[12] experiential formats – such as shadowing, field visits, and purposeful immersions, paired with moments of reflection – allow leaders to connect theory with lived reality, fostering systemic understanding and long-term vision. Practically, this also entails designing adaptive training pathways that cater to lifelong learning across all ages and seniority levels. Cultivating consciousness, character and courage,

leadership can flourish in many spaces, across society and organizational levels.

In such an environment, dialogue can help to build trust and cohesion, transforming diversity and potential tension into creative energy and collective problem-solving. Strengthening deep, mindful listening and storytelling will be crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and shared goals. Ironically, in this context, what is often considered a soft skill – hence, implicitly, a second-order skill – such as listening needs to move to the forefront as a fundamental leadership competency. With that, leadership does not need to rely on the brilliance of one person, but rather on the distributed intelligence of many. No longer perceived as a solo act, but a collective practice that prioritizes convening over commanding, leadership pursues a strategic shift from control to co-creation.

The global leadership lab stands ready to explore how training can become transformative and support that strategic shift: A platform that gathers people from diverse backgrounds to reimagine, co-design and test leadership development that is ready to evolve at the speed of the world we live in, grounded in dialogue, opening up pathways for co-creation across generations and points of view.

| SPOTLIGHT 4 | Mindful listening as a door-opener to genuine dialogue |

Mindful listening is essential for genuine dialogue, for hearing out different opinions and beliefs, and for understanding the reasons behind them. It is not a technique to influence an outcome, but a foundational attitude of deep receptivity and a means to create a shared future based on trust and social cohesion. Overcoming duality, leaders who listen can create spaces for solutions that are greater than any single viewpoint.

To avoid abstraction and selectivity, mindful listening is rooted in the surrounding people and environment – one's immediate habitat. Listening consciously and with the readiness to postpone judgement, this grounded attitude creates psychological safety and opens a two-way street for connection and action.

At a deeper level, mindful listening extends to the voiceless across two axes: Temporally, by heeding the voices of ancestors and future

generations. Spatially, by moving beyond human-centrism, recognizing the voice of nature, which is critical to managing planetary boundaries.

This practice does not eliminate a leader's individuality, but expands it from an isolated self to being embedded in a larger living system of "interbeing",[13] also echoing the Ubuntu philosophy: "I am because we are", seeing community as a building block of society and leadership action.[14]

Cultivating mindful listening requires practice and collective effort. It is a skill that can be trained and there are practical guides readily available, such as a *Guide to Deeper Listening for Better Understanding* by the nonprofit Millions of Conversations.[15] It is a cultivation that enables leaders and societies to make decisions informed by a wider, yet deeply grounded, social, ecological, and temporal awareness.

The decision-making and action of leaders

Effective decision-making today requires more than analytical intelligence. Leaders must preserve rationality under pressure, separate signals from noise, and present compelling evidence in an era where truth and science are under mounting strain. Leaders must cultivate both a moral compass. At the same time, they must be able to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances imposed by the acceleration of technological breakthroughs, the limits of planetary boundaries, and the complexity of societal, geopolitical and economic tensions. Cherishing unanswered questions prepares leaders for decision-making in the face of uncertainty, which requires both courage and humility. Creating 'living plans' that can be reviewed and adapted as the context changes, while maintaining focus on an overall goal, becomes indispensable.

SPOTLIGHT 5

The advantages of integrated leadership

A modern, integrated approach to leadership activates human capabilities that are often seen as opposites: The ability to be both directive and reflective, to balance compassion with accountability, and to stay grounded in inner knowing while remaining open to listening, learning and evolving. It enables decisions that combine rigorous data with intuitive insight.

Operating from a higher level of alignment – bridging mind, heart, and action – integrated leaders make consistent decisions, which enhances trust and resilience. Research shows that leaders with an integrated approach tend to perform better, particularly in environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and complexity.[16]

In a world of increasing fragmentation and polarization, integrated leadership helps reconcile paradoxes and foster alignment within and between individuals, teams, and broader systems. It harmonizes analytical thinking with intuition, autonomy with collaboration, and strength with empathy through the "power of two" – the integration of dualities within self, between others, and the world. This approach enables a shift from managing trade-offs to generating coherence, empowering leaders to create sustainable, human-centred impact.

Developing an "Integration Quotient" (InQ) diagnostic as a new measure of leadership effectiveness could be a collaborative project for the global leadership lab.

Surprisingly, while leaders are constantly expected to make decisions and take action, they receive little formal support and training to help them succeed. In a recent survey by the Global Association of Applied Behavioural Scientists, 45% of seasoned professionals reported having no structured process for making important decisions, and 63% said that they had not received adequate training from traditional training institutions to support this process.[17] As complexity rises, knowledge and skills must continuously adapt to new realities, with interdisciplinary foresight and horizon-scanning capacities being among the most promising ones to enhance future preparedness – which has been ranked among the top skills needed by the 2025 YGL Leadership Survey. Leveraging data and technology in this context, such as generative AI to facilitate evidence-informed decision-making or data analysis to identify patterns, is crucial – yet must be coupled with human integrity.

Digital tools may also enhance the quality of constructive deliberation and participation as pilot projects around the world start to show.[18] One of the most critical roles of leaders and leadership teams, thus, is not only making decisions themselves, but also building the capacity for decision-making in others and using collective intelligence. Inclusive, participatory decision-making processes that engage diverse groups may strengthen not only the quality, but also the legitimacy of leadership choices. Achieving this enables a strategic shift from individual authority to shared agency. As a consequence of the shift from control to co-creation, contributing to the decision-making process thus also entails taking ownership for the pursuit and outcomes of those decisions – a factor of duty, but more importantly an empowerment that can help to build trust.

20% of respondents to the 2025 YGL Leadership Survey have ranked the erosion of fact-based public discourse and decision-making as a key factor that has made the exercise of political, corporate, academic and nonprofit leadership particularly difficult over the last decade.

Evidence-informed decision-making is key to sound leadership choices. It combines the best available research with contextual factors, public opinion, and feasibility. Evidence does not eliminate uncertainty, but it grounds decisions in rigour and data, which is essential for navigating complex and rapidly changing environments.

In the age of generative AI and the diffusion of power through social media, this process must be rethought. Machine learning and AI, particularly generative AI, have fundamentally changed how we perceive reality and distinguish fact from fiction. This task becomes more difficult as artificial content, such as deepfakes, improves in ease of creation and quality. Moreover, generative AI transforms how evidence is produced, disseminated, and utilized. In theory, it speeds up access to knowledge and makes complex insights more digestible for leaders and the public. However, it also presents challenges about data quality, model transparency, and reproducibility, requiring leaders to navigate new layers of what is considered credible evidence – and the public to hone its receptivity for these challenges and opportunities, too.

To lead effectively in this environment, leaders need new tools and mindsets, including digital and data literacy to evaluate AI outputs, ethical awareness to apply evidence responsibly, grit to question even highly persuasive results, and the ability to engage in dialogue to embed findings in context and needs. As the guardrails for human decision-making fundamentally shift, as Urs Gasser and Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argue in their book *Leadership with AI*, leaders must adopt adaptive governance – ensuring decisions remain agile, flexible, and, if necessary, reversible as new, better evidence becomes available.[19]

When evaluating decisions and actions, leadership success is often measured by quick wins or service to a specific group, rather than what creates meaningful and lasting benefits for people and the planet. A new assessment paradigm is needed – something that is elaborated on in the next section when looking at leadership legacy.

Finally, one often-overlooked element that enables success in transitioning from decision-making to action and achieving tangible results, is effective communication. While narratives and storytelling may make actions compelling – and have also been ranked as one of the top leadership skills in the 2025 YGL Leadership Survey – they also fuel divisiveness. What is meant here, is leadership communication that goes both ways: One side involves clarity and consistency in transmission – saying what is and why, while the other involves leaders listening and holding space – a cycle of taking a moment to explain and then listen again. Ultimately, this allows to test a leader's position and reveals whether it holds up to scrutiny, changing the power dynamics of how leadership is perceived. Leadership thereby undergoes a strategic shift in distributing agency and mobilizing collective intelligence – an innovation in leadership that the global leadership lab is prepared to explore further.

The legacy of leaders

It has become clear that true leadership is not only about delivering results, but about building trust, empowering people, and leaving behind systems that continue to serve societies and the planet long after a leader steps aside. However, leadership success is often measured through short-term, easily quantifiable achievements while overlooking the more profound and enduring impact that leadership can – and must – have. The legacy of leaders has therefore been identified as another systemic leverage point to unlock new leadership futures.

The modern concept of legacy is often entangled with an individual's desire for recognition and immortalization. Thus, driven by temporal myopia, short-term metrics and election cycles, leaders tend to define their legacy as a static monument – a heroic, independent achievement assessed at a given moment in time. This focus on a personal footprint creates profound organizational fragility and may lead to several possible unproductive outcomes: Either the incumbent's inability to pass the baton or, on the successor's side, blind repetition or destructive critique. All of which stifle

evolution and the opportunity to grow stronger through new perspectives and innovation, whether across schools of thought, political camps, or generations. We must therefore fundamentally redefine "succession planning as an act of leadership" as a recent Harvard Business Review article puts it,[20] and legacy itself from a static monument to a dynamic, living process.

What is more, seeing legacy as a long-term responsibility enables stewardship. Thus, the goal moves from being a hero to being a good ancestor.[21] This approach entails shifting from a rigid, binary logic of right or wrong, win or lose, to a non-dualistic understanding of a complex work. AI amplifies this as it can be viewed as our "ancestral intelligence", serving as a vast repository of humanity's collective knowledge and actions. In an era where AI learns as much from data of failure as from success, the leader's obsessive need to be flawless becomes attenuated. The responsibility shifts to being a challenger – one who contributes valuable learning data through new attempts and critical questions.

SPOTLIGHT 7 · Being a good ancestor to become a better leader

Being a good ancestor starts with the question of what we want to leave behind for future generations. In times of endless news cycles and continuous public scrutiny, leaders may fall into the trap of temporal myopia, focusing on their own, individual short-term legacy rather than what positive outcomes they can unlock for generations to come.

Being a good ancestor requires cultivating a healthier relationship with one's ego and, ultimately, the profound and practical awareness of one's own fallibility. This awareness liberates leaders from temporal myopia, from trying to paint the perfect picture based on limited, individually-

driven perspectives. Instead, the goal becomes leaving future generations a wider canvas to paint their own future on – ensuring they have more options and agency.

Leaders can work on becoming good ancestors by actively asking: *What if I were wrong? What should we keep and what should we let go of for future generations?* This practice, which combines humility, open-mindedness, and long-term perspective, can be systematically embedded in leadership development, decision-making, and board-level strategy to ensure lasting resilience and intergenerational justice.

Equally, a living legacy requires a novel approach to succession. Instead of incumbents holding on to their position and perpetuating existing structures, or successors tearing down the old, this model requires a conscious process of renewal. Here, the ancient Buddhist Kuyō principle may offer valuable guidance, as it encapsulates acknowledging and expressing gratitude for the contributions of predecessors, the mindful assessment of what to carry forward, and the courage to mark a clear turning point. This respectful process allows to leave a wider canvas, empowering successors, organizations, and systems to move forward.

Legacy is not only shaped by an individual's mindset, but also by the organizational structures and incentive systems in place. Effective governance of succession planning involves setting clear expectations for both incoming and outgoing leaders. Institutions having processes and procedures, and society fostering a stronger understanding of long-term stakes and uncertainties, facilitates this.

Despite – or exactly because of – the volatility of global systems today, leaders need to think in decades, not in quarters. To achieve this, the global leadership lab may explore how a shift from

short-term performance to long-term impact can be practically achieved and measured.

While the business case remains the tough driver, exploring the inner work that enables leaders to overcome temporal myopia and binary win-lose dynamics, to expand their sense of mastery[22] and self beyond an isolated heroic legacy, and to embrace the role of a challenger in the age of both artificial and ancestral intelligence, is one aspect. The other is including voices from the next generation. This helps to adopt a long-term perspective and to cater for intergenerational justice, and uncovering new opportunities thanks to fresh perspectives and approaches. That way, intergenerational leadership is not a moral obligation, but a competitive advantage.

Finally, curating new vocabulary and metrics that foster a long-term vision, will help to shift incentives for leaders to leave lasting, positive legacies.

| SPOTLIGHT 8 | Shifting incentives with a new leadership impact scorecard |

What if we profoundly shift leadership incentives and the way we measure leadership success? A new leadership impact scorecard can serve as a valuable stepping stone to prioritize long-term and intergenerational impact. The scorecard would encourage leaders to look beyond immediate financial or political outcomes and prompt them to ask themselves critical questions.

Alongside traditional economic, social and environmental indicators, the scorecard could track metrics such as: The high-level long-term trust and legitimacy built (measured through periodic, systematic both individual reflection and collective multistakeholder assessments rather than short-term popularity polls); both the ability to pass the baton and the continuity of key initiatives three, five and ten years after a leader's term; the representation of women and minorities in leadership pipelines; as well as an organizational well-being index reflecting mental health, engagement and retention – something that Thomas Roulet and Kiran Bhatti have termed as *well-being intelligence*.[23]

Crucially, stakeholders themselves – especially younger generations – need to be included in leadership evaluation through participatory mechanisms that enable stronger bottom-up accountability. Restoring leadership credibility that way will also help reduce the growing gap between leaders and the societies they serve.

Ultimately, leadership success need not be measured by applause or popularity, not only in what leaders achieve personally, but by the trust they inspire, the resilience they foster in individuals, organizations, and the environment, as well as the positive legacy they leave for future generations. These dimensions can serve as a foundation for refining and piloting the leadership impact scorecard in the global leadership lab.
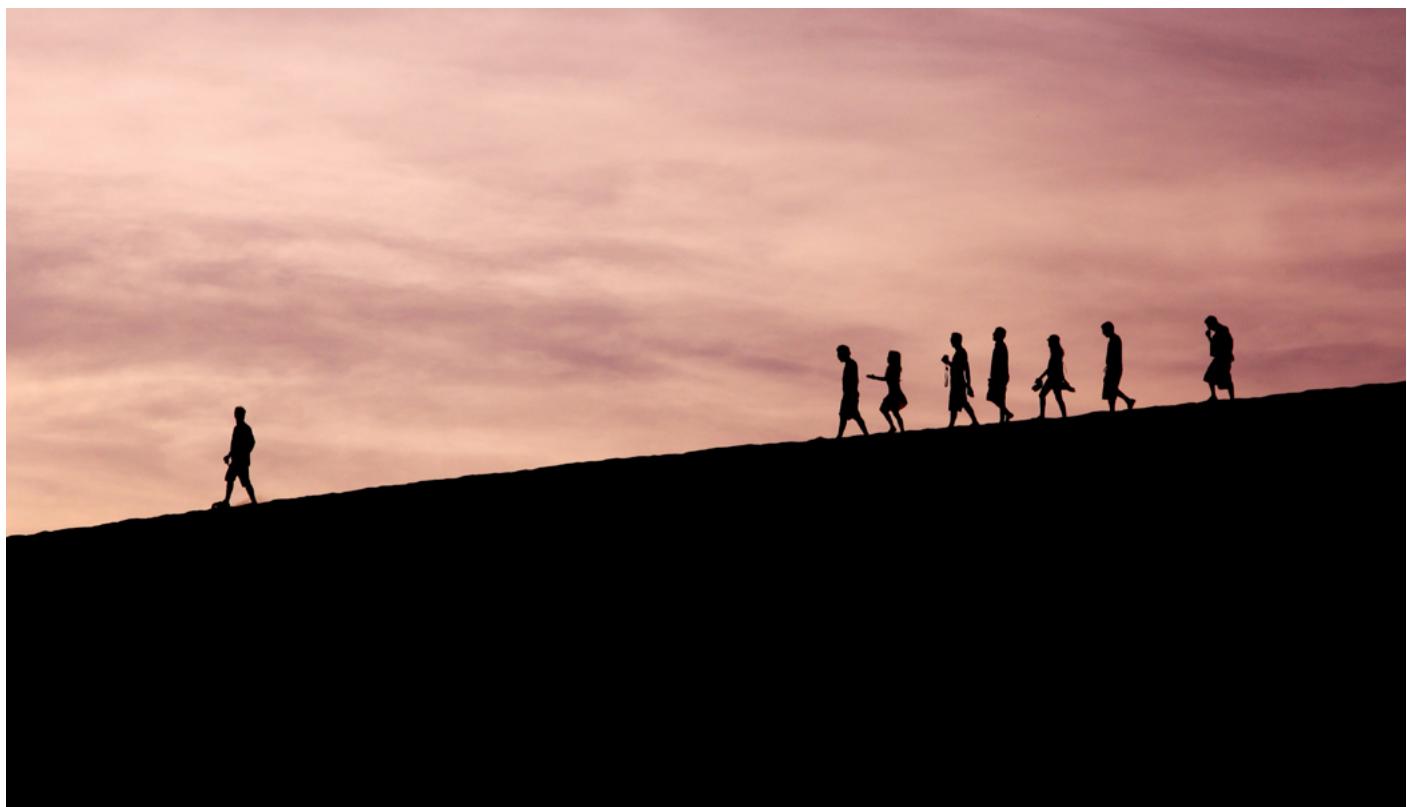
3 | Driving dialogue, collaboration and action: A global leadership lab

As has become clear, traditional leadership models built on linear planning, centralized control, individual heroics and short-term gains can no longer suffice to address current and future challenges. What emerges instead is a demand for morally grounded leadership that is distributed, adaptive, and building on dialogue – capable of listening deeply, learning continuously, and acting collectively, thus helping to build cohesion and trust in and across societies. Thinking next generation in this process, including youth and emerging leaders, will help to inject fresh, intergenerational perspectives.

The World Economic Forum convened the GFC on Leadership to explore the evolving role and nature of leadership – also seen from a next generation perspective being anchored with the YGL community. Through this report and the proposal for a new global leadership lab, the GFC seeks to facilitate innovation at the core of leadership: What must change in how we define, develop, and deploy leadership to not only stay abreast with today's challenges, but to shape the future we want – for ourselves and for future generations?

The lab will facilitate an ongoing and participatory exploration of how leadership must evolve to meet current and emerging demands, serving as a tool for leaders to enhance their own perspectives and skills, thereby becoming more effective leaders. The lab spans generations and sectors, cultural and regional contexts, integrating perspectives from business, government, academia, civil society, and the next cohort of leaders – all united by a shared recognition that the future of leadership must be adaptive, while being anchored in shared purpose and a carefully crafted moral compass.

The global leadership lab, therefore, is envisioned as an open, collaborative and dynamic platform. Its mission is to translate insights into action through four pathways:

Convene: Create a space for dialogue on the evolution of leadership in an age of acceleration and transformation, and carefully feed into what a future-proof leadership compass may look like. Such dialogues may take place through the World Economic Forum's platform and communities, as well as online to sustain and shape intergenerational, cross-regional multistakeholder conversations.

Curate: Develop an interactive, digital repository of global research, publications, case studies, and leadership innovations that explore the changing nature of leadership and trust in times of disruption, offering both inspiration and practical insight.

Cultivate: Provide regularly updated, essential tools for leaders to enhance their competencies and impact towards long-term value creation. This includes innovative training frameworks and development opportunities as well as leadership assessments and impact scorecards.

Catalyse: Partner with government, business, academia, and civil society to pilot new leadership frameworks and projects that drive progress across the four key systemic leverage points and unfold real-world impact.

Ultimately, the global leadership lab is both a platform and an invitation to reimagine how leadership can be exercised as a vehicle for collective progress. It further explores the principles and practices of future-proof leadership: One that moves from linear to intergenerational leadership, from control to co-creation, from individual authority to shared agency, and from short-term performance to long-term impact – strategic shifts that need to take root both in leaders themselves and in organizations.

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Acknowledgements

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