

Leading Through Time With Anticipatory Leadership

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Leadership is about enabling change. And enabling change relies on the ability to see ahead, think ahead, and move ahead. So why is it then that so few leaders work with the future in a structured way?

This question reveals a paradox at the heart of many leadership practices today. While leaders are constantly navigating change and uncertainty, few dedicate time or resources to *systematically* exploring what might lie ahead in the longer term. Foresight is often seen as interesting, even inspiring, but rarely treated as an operational discipline that informs decisions, shapes strategies, and defines priorities.

Research tells us this is not due to lack of awareness. According to the *Executive Leadership Barometer 2035*, published by the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies (CIFS), Danish leaders overwhelmingly recognise foresight as one of the most important competencies for the coming decade. Alongside digitisation and change management, strategic foresight ranks in the top three capability areas executives believe they need to succeed. The survey *A Clearer Role for the Board?* carried out by Aarhus University and CIFS reveals a similar picture. Board members across large European firms recognise that navigating external uncertainty has become central to their role, yet they also broadly acknowledge that they lack the capabilities to effectively do so in practice.

What emerges is a systemic blind spot. Leaders and boards understand that the future matters, but they also recognise that the importance of a long-term view is not reflected in how their organisations are led. The reason is not only due to familiar problems like organisational inertia or reluctance – or that what is “urgent” in the day-to-day tends to crowd out what is “important”. Leaders also often lack the structures, routines, and sometimes incentives to work proactively with the future.

From my own experience having been engaged in numerous business strategy processes, often facilitated by highly competent internal teams, there is a consistent pattern: strategy conversations are overwhelmingly focused on what is happening here and now and dominated by budget cycles and operational metrics.

When the future is brought into the discussion, it is usually framed through present-day trends and how to catch up with them, rather than exploring how the future might unfold through a complex interaction of various driving forces. Foresight, when it appears, is often limited to glossy reports or a slide in a quarterly update, and often far removed from where real decisions are made.

The challenge is not for leaders to acknowledge and comprehend that foresight is important. Most already know that. The challenge is how to operationalise it and make foresight a consistent part of how leadership happens – on the board, in the executive team, and across the organisation.

The leadership literature knows the future matters

Most leadership theorists implicitly spotlight “the future”, but most do so in ways that leave critical gaps.

John Kotter famously describes leadership as the process of defining what the future should look like, and the role of the leader as one who charts a unifying vision for how to reach it. Ronald Heifetz’s focus on the importance of sense-making and learning similarly contains a future dimension in how it highlights the need to engage with emerging patterns and navigating uncertainty over time. In Henry Mintzberg’s observations on managerial practice, the ability to hold a long-term perspective is also present. He argues that strategy is not a linear process of forecasting and control, but a dynamic, emergent practice – similar to what foresight preaches – and portrays leadership as a practice that spans multiple time frames.

So, it is not that leadership literature ignores the future. Very much the contrary. But what it often lacks is a structured approach to working with it. Vision is treated as an abstract ideal. Strategic direction is assumed to emerge from insight and experience. But rarely do leadership frameworks offer concrete tools for exploring uncertainty, rehearsing for multiple outcomes, or stress testing decisions against divergent future conditions. The lack of guidelines for how to operationalise the future leaves a gap between leadership theory and leadership practice.

Leadership styles and their assumptions about the future

Another, perhaps even more important, point is the lack of guidance on *when* to apply different leadership models. I firmly believe that the expected future condi-

tions in which an organisation will operate should determine which leadership approach is best suited.

However, in practice, leadership styles tend to be “inherited” from past successes, borrowed from dominant management norms, or unconsciously embedded in organisational culture.

The approach leaders adopt is also shaped by underlying assumptions of the world and the future: Is it stable or unstable? Predictable or uncertain? Can it be shaped, or merely survived? But again, this is often unconscious and based on past experience rather than a structured analysis of future conditions.

Across leadership practices, assumptions about the external environment vary widely. Traditional styles such as transactional leadership are rooted in a logic of optimisation. They assume a relatively stable environment, where performance can be improved by tightening control, aligning incentives, and ensuring compliance. Leadership becomes about reinforcing the known.

Transformational leadership, by contrast, places the leader as a visionary force – someone who sees a better future and mobilises others to pursue it. Here, the future is less fixed and more open to influence, but the leadership logic often remains top-down. The leader is the one who defines the direction, and others follow.

Other styles, such as adaptive leadership or agile leadership, treat the future as complex, uncertain, and co-created. In these approaches, leadership is less about knowing and more about sensing. The leader is a facilitator of distributed intelligence, rather than a central source of answers.

This implicitly reflects different positions on two key dimensions:

- **Assumptions about future conditions:** Is the external environment seen as relatively stable and predictable? Or is it seen as uncertain, turbulent, and emergent?
- **Strategic posture:** Does leadership orient itself toward exploitation and optimisation of the existing model, or toward exploration and transformation?

Where an organisation is placed on these two dimensions (which we will revisit in more depth below) has a profound influence on the fit of a given leadership style. In environments perceived as stable and predictable, it makes sense to emphasise planning and control. In turbulent and uncertain conditions, responsiveness,

alignment, and organisational learning become more important than planning. Yet in most cases, the leadership style is not adjusted to accommodate for the *future* needs of the organisation, but is a product of the past.

Anticipatory leadership in action

This has several implications. First, it requires leaders to reflect on their own defaults – their personal leadership comfort zone – and to ask whether it fits the emerging context. Second, it implies that leadership development should not only focus on capabilities like communication, decision-making, or resilience, but also on foresight and the ability to adjust leadership style to varying conditions. And third, it highlights that leadership is not just about managing people. It is about matching the organisation's internal dynamics with the external conditions it is facing – and doing so with strategic intent.

A recent CIFS client engagement with a large organisation operating across Europe brought this into sharp focus. Initially, we were asked to help develop a futures-oriented strategy within one geographical unit in a multi-national organisation. But through a structured scoping process, it became clear that the real need was broader: the whole group needed to be engaged in the exercise to ensure strategic alignment. What emerged was a landscape of potentially radical shifts – not just incremental changes, but a potential need for fundamentally rethinking parts of the business model. It also became clear that the future was not arriving uniformly. Different regional units were exposed to very different drivers and levels of uncertainty. As a result, the organisation's traditionally centralised, top-down approach to strategy and leadership was no longer fit for purpose. A more decentralised, context-sensitive approach was required – not just in the strategy, but in how leadership was exercised.

Seen this way, foresight becomes more than a planning tool. It becomes a way to lead. It helps shift the conversation from *what is your leadership style?* to *what does the future require of your leadership?*

That is anticipatory leadership in action.

CIFS Anticipatory Leadership framework

CIFS has developed an **Anticipatory Leadership framework** to help executives match the way they lead and strategise to the world they are likely to inhabit.

The work begins with a carefully structured foresight process to explore three questions relating to **assumptions about future conditions**: *What in the external landscape is clearly changing? What, beneath the noise, is likely to endure? And which factors remain genuinely uncertain?*

The key here is that the leadership team arrives at a point where they share a common understanding of the future to drive strategic conversations from, rather than relying on a collection of individual hunches. This creates far richer and more coherent strategic dialogue.

Once that shared foundation exists, the leadership group can address the next issue: **strategic posture**. In some contexts, the future reveals unmistakable opportunities – openings that favour decisive commitment and a bolder, “exploit” posture. In others, signals are too hazy to justify a single big bet; here an adaptive stance that keeps options open may be wiser – this calls for a more “explorative” posture.

Leaders cannot choose the external environment that they will face in the future, but they must choose the stance that will let them thrive within it. The CIFS Anticipatory Leadership framework becomes a simple but powerful prompt: *Based on your assessment of the future conditions, what kind of strategic posture is needed? And what leadership style will then be best suited?*

Or sometimes also using the model slightly different: *Based on your assessment of the future conditions, and given that most leaders tend to have a ‘go to’ leadership style, what strategic posture will then be best suited?*

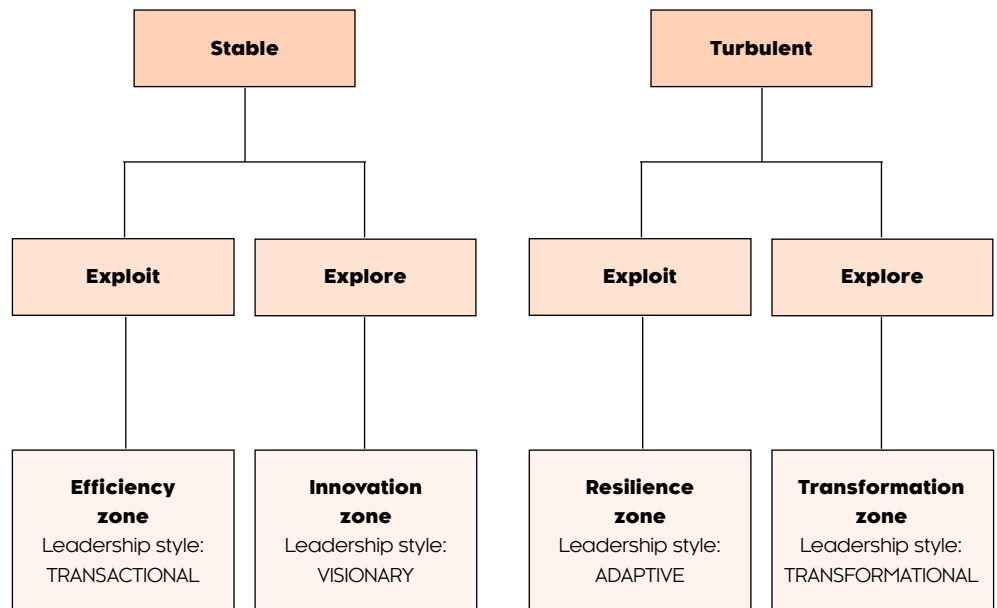
FUTURE CONDITIONS

Foresight-based
assessment

STRATEGIC POSTURE

Choice

ZONE





ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT FUTURE CONDITIONS: These are your expectations of the external environment you will face and should be based on a thorough foresight analysis. An important insight is not only where you are heading, but also where you are coming from. This will give you some guidance about what your current setup is optimised for.

STRATEGIC POSTURE: Given your future conditions, what would be your preferred strategic posture. This is a choice. If you see a clear path to a better position, the choice is often easy. But this is not always the case. You might see a necessity to change, but do not see a clear alternative. This uncertainty could cause you to stick to your current business model, or it could lead you to a more explorative change.

ZONE: Your circumstances will be determined by your future conditions and your strategic posture. The reason for calling this a zone is that these circumstances will determine more than just your leadership style. They will also guide your foresight approach, your culture, your recruitment strategy, and more. For now, our focus is on the leadership style.

LEADERSHIP STYLE: Given your path through the decision tree, you will arrive at a leadership style that, all things equal, would be the optimal one. In practice, it is not a clear-cut decision tree. It consists of spectrums and deviations across your organisation. However, it will allow you to reflect upon where you are coming from, where you are heading, and what this will mean for your leadership style.

The zone you end up in based on the assessment of future conditions and strategic posture will guide you towards the ideal leadership approach:

- In the relatively predictable **Efficiency Zone**, transactional leadership, rigorous performance indicators, and foresight used mainly to confirm early warning signs are often enough. The strategy process revolves around annual optimisation and lean improvements.
- The **Innovation Zone** still benefits from a strong core business, yet future growth demands adjacent bets. Visionary, agile leadership – supported by foresight-led ideation – encourages rapid prototyping and iterative portfolio plays.
- Where volatility and uncertainty are high, and the organisation does not see a clear path of how to transform, or for other reasons decides to remain focused on optimising current business, the organisation will be in the **Resilience Zone**. Here, leaders should blend top-down direction with bottom-up sensing, use foresight to stress test current operations, and run topic-based scenarios to continuously explore what is coming.
- If disruption seems unavoidable or transformative opportunities are identified ahead, the company would be in the **Transformation Zone**. This will require transformational leadership, future-back visioning, and a willingness to pivot the core. Strategy becomes a staged portfolio of bold repositioning programmes.

Talented executives do not cling to a single leadership doctrine. They calibrate, continually, to the organisation's context, capability, and strategic horizon. By aligning future conditions, strategic posture, and leadership in this way, the Anticipatory Leadership framework turns leadership from a habit-based unconscious preference towards an active tool to shape your organisation to become future ready.

Most leaders that I talk to about this framework broadly expect a movement towards more turbulence and unpredictability. Interestingly, most current leaders have been taught how to lead under more stable conditions – the optimisation-oriented environment found in the Efficiency Zone. Being aware of this shift is critical. Those who are ahead of the curve will gain a competitive advantage, because these organisational changes take time to implement.

Leading through time

Anticipatory leadership is not a new ideology. It is a call for leadership to return to its most essential role, which is navigating across time. The organisations that

thrive will be the ones with leaders who do not hold on to a preferred style, but who consciously adapt their approach to the strategic context and the future outlook they will need to navigate.

What distinguishes anticipatory leaders is not their ability to predict the future, but their discipline in working with it. They understand that uncertainty is not something to be avoided but engaged with. They see foresight as a core operating logic present in how we frame decisions, allocate resources, engage talent, and evolve culture.

At CIFS, one of the most powerful outcomes we consistently observe in strategic foresight processes is a transformation in how leaders relate to the future. It ceases to be a distant concept or an abstract construct, and instead becomes a tangible, integrated dimension of leadership. It shapes the conversation, informs the strategy, guides the processes around it, and cultivates forward-thinking organisational culture. That is the essence of anticipatory leadership. ■

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT FUTURE CONDITIONS	STRATEGIC POSTURE	ZONE	LEADERSHIP STYLE	FORESIGHT APPROACH
Relatively stable and predictable	Exploit Extension of current business model with a focus on operations and efficiency gains	Efficiency Zone An environment with known success metrics and repeatable models	Transactional, directive, outcome-focused	Foresight-tested Scanning to validate assumptions and monitor continuity
Relatively stable and predictable	Explore Transformation of offerings and the business model with a focus on changing specific elements	Innovation Zone An environment stable enough to sustain the core, but future growth requires adjacent exploration	Agile, visionary, empowering	Foresight-led Exploration and ideation related to adjacent futures to inform innovation bets
Relatively unstable and volatile	Exploit Extension of current business model with a defensive focus on adapting to changes and new conditions	Resilience Zone An environment that threatens the current business logic, but transformation is not (yet) necessary or possible	Adaptive, situational, pragmatic	Foresight-tested Scenarios to stress-test current operations and improve agility
Relatively unstable and volatile	Explore Transformation of offerings and the business model with an offensive focus on adapting to constant change	Transformation Zone An environment where disruptive change is imminent or underway, and the current model is no longer viable	Transformational, bold, future-back oriented	Foresight-led Scenario and systemic foresight to inspire reinvention

