

Insights



Leading across borders: why it's now a hard performance driver

EACTP* Mastermind on Leadership: Anton de Leeuw and Scott Y Stuart Esq

Five years ago, many leaders could still treat cross-border leadership as a specialist capability - useful if your organisation happened to be international, optional if it didn't. That era is over. The evidence is catching up with lived reality: leading across boundaries is no longer a "nice-to-have,"

it is a foundational performance driver for organisations trying to achieve strategic goals. In a recent survey by Heidrich & Struggles¹, roughly two-thirds of leaders now see this capability

We want to explore why that shift has happened, what "boundaries" actually mean in practice, and the mindsets and behaviours that let leaders turn complexity into advantage. This is not a theoretical conversation for us. Between BM&T's cross-border turnaround work and INSOL International's global professional community, we spend our time in the spaces where different systems, cultures, generations, incentives and risk appetites collide.

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What boundaries really are (and why they're multiplying)

When people hear “leading across borders,” they often picture geography. That’s part of it, but it’s the simplest part. The harder boundaries are often invisible: between professions, generations, sectors, ideologies, and ways of making meaning. Scott frames this as the ability to “connect disparate perspectives, bridge silos, and mobilise talent wherever it sits.”

Notice the order of that sentence. First, connect perspectives. Then, bridge silos. Only then can you mobilise talent. This is a sequence, not a slogan. Leaders who skip the first two steps, who try to “drive alignment” before they’ve built understanding, create compliance at best, and quiet resistance at worst. In global environments, the cost of that mistake compounds quickly.

The multiplicity of boundaries is also why cross-border leadership feels harder now than it did even a decade ago. We are operating in a moment of unusually high divergence: geopolitics are fragmenting, civic trust is brittle, and economic shocks are no longer rare events. In Scott’s words, leaders are managing an era of “disparate perspectives” shaped by culture, politics and emerging economies, and it takes sustained effort to “put the pieces into the right place” so organisations can still “inch forward.”



The human boundary: fear, change and the pace of adaptation

One of the most under-appreciated boundaries is not between countries but inside people. The real frontier is how humans respond to uncertainty. This is where leadership either becomes catalytic or coercive.

Scott offers a powerful lens: fear is normal, fearlessness is not the absence of fear, and leadership sits in the tension between fearlessness and recklessness.

In cross-border settings, fear often shows up as defensiveness (“that won’t work here”), nostalgia (“we’ve always done it this way”), or cynicism (“head office doesn’t get us”). Leaders who treat those responses as stupidity or obstruction miss the point. Fear is information. It tells you which identity, history, or survival instinct is being threatened.

The pandemic was a live experiment in this. Many organisations adapted in months in ways they had assumed would take a decade. The lesson was not that people love change; it was that when the environment forces change and leaders give people tools and permission, they can move fast.

The second lesson is more uncomfortable: without that forcing function, humans tend to stick. That isn’t a moral failing; it’s biology and culture, but it is a strategic risk. Cross-border leaders have to help organisations practice adaptation before necessity compels it. That means cultivating curiosity, not just compliance.

Multi-generationalism: four generations, one workplace

Both of us see generational dynamics as one of the hardest contemporary boundaries. We are living through a rare workplace reality: four generations, Baby Boomers through Gen Z, working side by side. Scott described this as a “rare inflection point” that creates both tremendous opportunity and real tension.

Cross-border leaders cannot assume one universal motivational language. The things that signal respect, urgency, or trust in one generation can signal indifference or threat in another. The emerging leaders are also reshaping expectations faster than organisations’ governance systems are adapting. So, leading across boundaries today means being bilingual in time: respecting legacy while designing for the next cohort’s realities.

The practical implication is that leaders need to become deliberate integrators of different generational assets - pace, craft, digital intuition, institutional memory - rather than referees of generational conflict. When leaders do this well, they don’t just reduce friction; they compound capability.



DEI as a lived practice, not a programme

Diversity, equity and inclusion are often discussed as a moral or reputational agenda. But in global leadership, it is also a functional necessity. If you are leading across multiple cultures and legal systems, you cannot afford to run the organisation through a single dominant lens.

Scott’s point in our conversation was strikingly practical: DEI becomes organic when a leader is visibly available to hear different ways of thinking, and when people feel their divergence is valued rather than tolerated.

This is leadership as posture, not policy. Programmes can help, but they never replace the day-to-day micro-signals of openness: who gets airtime, which stories become “normal,” what humour is safe, what disagreement looks like, how decisions are explained.

Cross-border leaders should therefore judge their DEI maturity less by dashboard metrics and more by the quality of dialogue in the system. Are people able to disagree without retreating into tribes? Do minority perspectives change outcomes, not just meeting minutes? Those are the real tests.

The discipline of listening and the courage to be unfinished

If there is a single thread that runs through everything above, fear, culture, generation, DEI, it is listening. Not performative listening, but the kind that genuinely updates your model of the world.

The true power of a leader lies not in being heard but in the courage to listen. To really listen. In cross-border contexts, you cannot lead well unless you are constantly learning. The minute you think your experience in one jurisdiction or sector gives you full authority in another, you become dangerous to your own strategy.

This is where humility becomes operational. Humility is not softness; it is accuracy about what you do and don’t yet understand. And, as Scott puts it, “leadership is evolutionary - leaders must be unafraid to make mistakes, learn publicly, and stay responsive rather than brittle”.

Leaders who thrive across boundaries tend to do four things consistently:

01.

They build bridges before they build plans. They invest time in understanding the system and the people before pushing alignment. That's not slow; it's strategic pacing.

02.

They treat uncertainty as a working condition, not a defect. Rather than trying to eliminate ambiguity, they help teams make decisions in smaller, purpose-anchored moves.

03.

They mobilise talent regardless of where it sits. Boundary-spanning leaders spot capability in the edges and bring it into the centre, making the organisation bigger than its org chart.

04.

They keep a childlike curiosity. Scott's "magic-wand" advice to global leaders was to stay fascinated, imaginative, and willing to embrace what the wider world can teach you.

That mindset isn't fluffy. It's the antidote to siloed thinking.

A closing reflection

We are heading into a decade that will redefine leadership. The organisations that succeed won't be the ones with the most elegant strategies; they will be the ones whose leaders act with courage, recognise their responsibility to the planet by stewarding their organisations to give more than they take, and can traverse boundaries faster than complexity grows. That means being integrators of difference, translators of fear, and stewards of trust across cultures, generations and systems. And perhaps most importantly, it means leading yourself as actively as you lead others - staying introspective, learning-oriented, and willing to evolve.

When leaders do that, borders stop being barriers. They become the terrain where strategy gets real, value compounds, and people discover what they are capable of together.

*EACTP – European Association of Certified Turnaround Professionals. *What is the EACTP?* | European Association of Turnaround Professionals

1. Heidrick & Struggles (2025) *Leading across boundaries: Why CEOs and board members see this capability as a strategic asset.* Heidrick & Struggles International, Inc. Available at: [/mmt/data/Leading across boundaries_Why CEOs and board members see this capability as a strategic asset.pdf](https://mmt/data/Leading%20across%20boundaries_Why%20CEOs%20and%20board%20members%20see%20this%20capability%20as%20a%20strategic%20asset.pdf) (Accessed: 02 November 2025).

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