TruthWorks.

Leadership On The Edge

Why the leaders who will win tomorrow are already thinking differently today.











Leadership has historically evolved in step with its environment. But for the first time, the environment has *outpaced* evolution.

It's not a failure of leadership models. Most leaders are just trying to apply them to a world that has outgrown them.

We're navigating unrelenting complexity with lenses built for a simpler world, and we're surprised things look blurry. You can't see the future clearly when you're looking through old glass.



Not The *Strongest.*
Not The *Smartest.*
The Most Adaptable.

Humans evolved because we adapted. We survived because we could read our context and respond to it in ways no other species could.

Leadership has followed a similar pattern. Evolving in response to the changing world: from factory floors, to multinational org charts, to digital collaboration.

But in today's world, the pace of change has now outstripped the pace of leadership evolution. What we're seeing is an ever-widening gap between what our leaders and managers have been set up for and what the world now demands.

But this isn't just a leadership problem. It's a leadership design problem.

We're asking leaders to navigate the most demanding conditions work has ever seen, and they're drowning in responsibility inflation. They're undertrained for it, overwhelmed and burning out. And when leaders struggle? So do the people they lead.



“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence. It is to act with yesterday’s *logic.*”

Peter Drucker



The *Shift* Needed.

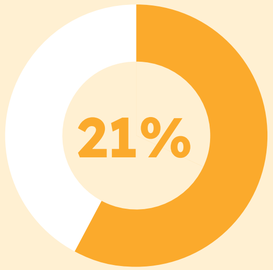
Here lies the opportunity.
We can support our leaders in their next evolution.

We can no longer wait for the next generation of manager to emerge. We need to recalibrate our understanding of what leaders need to be in a world that is permanently shifting.

This piece offers a reframing of leadership. Beyond a list of skills to adopt, we suggest a new way of seeing. Our framework views how leaders must act through a new lens. Because as the world becomes ever harder to read, we believe that good leadership will come down to how well you can read what’s in front of you. And the leaders who can will be the ones who win.

The World Current *Leaders* Operate In

If leadership has always been shaped by its moment, what is the landscape our current leaders are trying to navigate?



Global Employee engagement has dropped to just 21%

...costing the world economy

$438bn

in lost productivity.

(Gallup State of the Workplace 2025).



7 in 10

people believe business leaders routinely mislead them

Over the last five years, organisations have weathered post-pandemic turnover, supply-chain shocks, cultural fragmentation from hybrid work, hiring surges followed by sudden freezes, repeated restructuring and the accelerating impact of AI.

Various terms have tried to capture this reality: VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex,Ambiguous), BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-Linear, Incomprehensible), or Peter Vaill's"permanent white water": constant disruption, unpredictable conditions, and accelerating complexity that never resolves into calm.

"Transformation" isn't a project anymore. It has embedded itself structurally and psychologically into the world of work: it's the operating environment itself.

At the same time, employees' expectations around autonomy, flexibility, and meaningful work have shifted sharply. Employee dissatisfaction has led to another drop in global employee engagement, falling to just 21%, costing the world economy $438bn in lost productivity.

And this is unfolding amid a wider climate of rising global scepticism towards institutions, leaders and information sources. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2025 showed that 7 in 10 people believe business leaders routinely mislead them. In this context, employees are less likely to take leadership messages at face value, which directly impacts strategy execution, psychological safety and engagement.

Taken together, these conditions describe a world where everything is under strain — and our leaders have the responsibility to carry their teams through it. What style of leader is needed to respond to such an unsteady landscape?

The Foundation Of *Leadership* Today.

Across our work, five traits consistently emerge as the defining markers of effective leadership today. They represent the current gold standard: the essential attributes leaders need to meet today's demands. They form the infrastructure of modern performance, enabling teams to stay focused, aligned and resilient under pressure.



The Foundation Of *Leadership* Today.

The Anchor

A leader who creates calm in chaos. Absorbing and translating pressure. Teams look to leaders not for answers, but for the steadiness that gives the clarity, context and emotional grounding to stay focused when everything else is unstable. Maintaining composure, whilst also being human and communicating with honesty.

Example:

Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, *steered GM from the brink of bankruptcy following the ignition switch scandal, and reinstated the company as a global innovator. All by championing honesty, a human leadership style, mutual trust and a collaborative work culture.*



The Strategic Messenger

A leader who cuts through organisational noise and makes strategy usable. Strategy mostly fails because people don't understand it, not because it's wrong.

Strategic Messengers bridge the gap between organisational intent and daily action. They explain what strategy means, why it matters and how team members play their part. Where leaders succeed in closing the gap between a company's mission and employees' daily work, the impact is tangible: a 41% reduction in absenteeism and a 33% improvement in quality (Gallup).

Example:

Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, *inherited a stagnating giant, that was siloed and competitive. He introduced a growth mindset (from know-it-alls to learn-it-alls) and created a clear, human strategy that everyone could translate into their day-to-day. The company went from $300bn to $3tn.*



The Culture Role Model

Culture isn't what leaders say. It's what leaders show. They demonstrate consistency over time and embody values, even under pressure. They create psychological safety by modelling vulnerability.

Brené Brown's research reframes vulnerability in leadership as a commercial capability: "vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change" (TED). When people feel safe to express uncertainty and ask hard questions, they unlock the conditions for experimentation and discovery.

Example:

Jerry Greenfield, Founder of Ben & Jerry's *developed a company known for its strong social mission, progressive values and commitment to inclusion and environmental causes. He stepped away from the board when he felt cultural integrity had been compromised.*



The Coach

If there's one attribute that shapes performance more than any other, it's being The Coach. Coaches don't tell people what to do — they build capability. They ask questions, they stretch, they notice potential. They step back and let their team step forward. Creating teams that can win without them.

They also bring hope. Gallup's global leadership research shows that more than half of employees say that great leaders give them hope. Beyond reassurance and positivity, these leaders build confidence that their teams have a role in building it.

Example:

Jürgen Klopp, former manager of Liverpool FC, *developed ordinary players into world-class ones. Because he believed in them, challenged them and gave them space to grow. And in turn? Liverpool won their first FA Cup and regained their Premier League and Champions League titles, among others.*



The Team Protector

Not shielding teams from challenges or discomfort, but safeguarding wellbeing, inclusion and focus. Team Protectors know how to shape the energy of their team and provide the conditions that allow people to deliver. They balance focus with wellbeing. They manage workload, not just output. They watch for the signs of someone struggling, remove unnecessary pressure and make sure people don't burn out.

Example:

Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, *created a work culture that promoted diversity and inclusion, championed work-life balance and ultimately ensured that talent would blossom. Her strategies grew PepsiCo's revenue by 80%, and more than doubled its share price.*



But This Is Only The *Starting* Point.

These five traits are the foundation. Mastering them is essential, but they were built for an environment we've spent the last decade learning to navigate, not what's ahead.

With these foundations in place, we can look at what comes next: extending leadership capability through a new lens.



Leading Through The *Adaptive Leadership* Lens

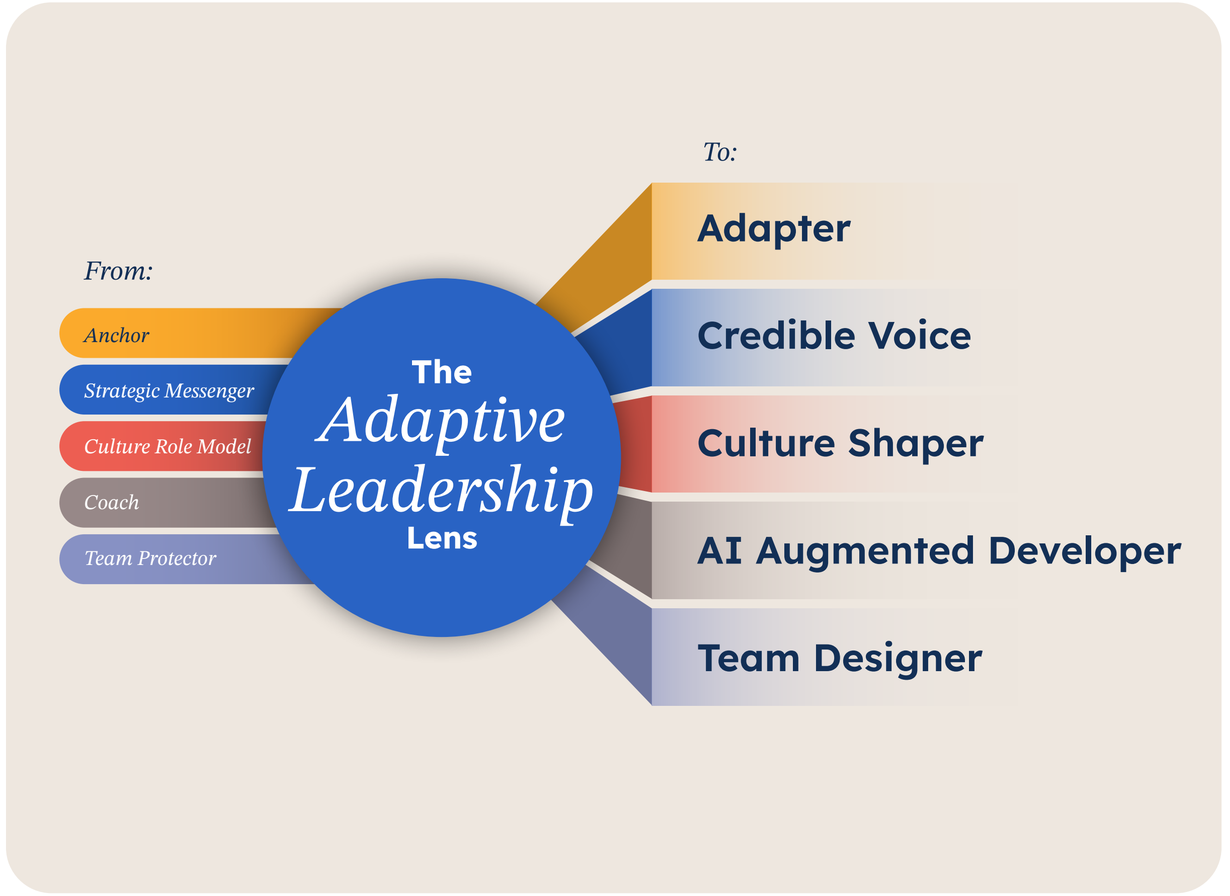
The environment won't stop shifting. So the question isn't whether leadership needs to evolve. It's how. Leaders must adopt a new way of seeing and reading that allows them to continually adapt.

The Adaptive Leadership Lens is not a competency checklist or a new model to memorise. It's a mental framework that helps leaders interpret complexity, anticipate change and respond with proportion in conditions that never stand still. It's about continually adjusting how you perceive and respond to what's in front of you.

It builds on today's foundational traits and extends them into territory that most leadership thinking hasn't yet mapped. Five overlapping lenses work together to bring sharper judgement to fast-moving conditions. These lenses don't operate in isolation; they interact, challenge and refine one another, bringing the future into focus.

Adopting these lenses will be the difference that increasingly separates leaders who are merely coping and reacting to today's world from those who are accelerating through continued disruption.

Let's take a look at how our leaders can get there, based on where they should be today.



Adapter

Every organisation is now, in some sense, a change organisation. Disruption doesn't arrive as a project anymore. It is the operating environment. The Adapter's role is to make this liveable for teams, not by papering over uncertainty but by building the habits and systems that make adaptability a natural default. The goal isn't a team that copes with change. It's a team that expects it, and knows what to do.

Anchor ↗

Today's leaders need to steady the ship. Tomorrow's must teach teams to sail through storms. Our environment won't stabilise, so leaders must evolve beyond stabilising.

> *Tomorrow's leaders must be incredibly aware of how they respond to the messy parts of continual learning: the failed attempts, the wasted sprints, the risks that didn't pay off. More than any speech or strategy, those moments send the loudest signal. Meet them with curiosity and reward the attempt, and people feel safe enough to try again. Meet them with frustration or control, and people learn the safer move: let the leader steer while they wait out the storm."*

Anna Wright ↘



Verified Expert

Strategic Messenger ↗

Clarity is no longer enough. In a post-truth era shaped by AI-generated content, viral half-truths and institutional distrust, employees aren't just asking what their role is. They're questioning whether what they're being told is accurate, complete, or even real. Strategy only works when it is believed.

Credible Voice

The Credible Voice earns trust not through polish or volume, but through evidence, consistency and the willingness to say what they don't know. They show their workings, communicate trade-offs and are candid about uncertainty, treating transparency as a strategic tool, not a liability. Fewer than half of employees say they genuinely understand their company's strategy. The Credible Voice closes that gap one honest conversation at a time. Because if your team doesn't believe you, they won't believe the strategy. And if they don't believe the strategy, it dies on the page.

> *Don't be fooled: credibility is not established through perfection. Leaders who only tout the wins are stuck in a dying paradigm. Consistent demonstration of human vulnerabilities, scars and all, will separate trusted leaders from those hiding behind only highlighting the wins. Talking about mistakes made from the perspective of learning to overcome future obstacles builds credibility faster than an unrealistic veneer of perfection."*

Alex Brown ↘



Verified Expert

Culture Shaper

As identity fragments, the manager becomes the primary source of belonging. Culture Shapers need a higher cultural intelligence (CQ) to curate meaning in environments where people are spread out and attention is pulled in different directions. Research from MIT Sloan found that small cultural rituals can raise retention and cohesion by as much as 20%. In a fragmented, distributed workplace, those rituals don't happen by accident. The Culture Shaper engineers them deliberately. They don't just model culture. They author it.

Culture Role Model ↗

Culture no longer lives in a building. In a world of hybrid work, it is no longer inherited. Instead, culture travels with people, across platforms, contexts and time zones. As work becomes increasingly project-based and networked, people will anchor less to a single employer and more to the environments where they do their best work.

> *A culture shaper doesn't just set the tone. They stay in the room long enough to hear how it lands. It's a shift from 'see me and follow' to 'move with me as we grow'. They make the invisible legible, shaping from within rather than leading from the front. We never lead alone: who we are as leaders is shaped by those who lead us, those we lead with, and those we are leading."*

Mary Lynn Parnell ↘



Verified Expert

Coach ↗

Today, managers coach. They give feedback, ask questions and help people grow. But the tools available to support that work are changing fast, and in a direction most people don't expect. What if AI could actually, paradoxically, make managers more human?

AI-Augmented Developer

The question isn't whether AI will change how managers develop people. It already is. The more interesting question is how far it goes. Coaching assistants that surface the right question to unlock a stuck conversation. Inclusion nudges that flag when someone hasn't spoken. Dashboards that show early signs of strain or disengagement, before they ever reach crisis point. The AI-Augmented Developer uses these tools not to become a more efficient manager, but a more present one. With the grind automated and the human insight sharpened, they can focus on what only humans can do: growing people.

The solitude of leadership is real and rarely talked about. Managers and leaders often carry their decisions alone, with no mentor, no sounding board, no one to say 'yes, you're on the right track' or to challenge their thinking. AI can change that. Used well, it gives leaders something they've always lacked: a partner available 24/7. One that helps them make decisions with more confidence and stop second-guessing themselves at every turn. And when a leader feels more confident and supported, their people feel it too, and that's a win-win for everyone."

Maria Kelly ↘



Verified Expert

Team Protector ↗

Today, managers protect their teams. They manage workload, guard energy and make sure people don't burn out. But protection is reactive. The future demands something more proactive.

Team Designer

Deloitte has named it "human sustainability": the idea that companies will increasingly be judged not just on profit, but on whether work improves people's long-term health, skills and purpose. For managers, this makes work architecture a core leadership skill: designing schedules, rhythms and workflows around human capacity, not just output. The early signals are already visible: four-day week pilots, right-to-disconnect legislation, AI workload monitoring. The Team Designer doesn't just protect people from burnout. They engineer the conditions so it was never the likely outcome.

> *When we use data to choreograph work around the natural rhythms and capacity of our brains and body, we prove that the most sustainable and profitable thing a business can be is intentionally, systematically kind."*

Neil Schambra Stevens ↘



Verified Expert

A Move Towards *Interpretation.*

These shifts mark a clear inflexion point in leadership. The capabilities that define effective management today remain necessary, but they won't be sufficient on their own much longer. As work becomes faster, more distributed, more sceptical and more technologically augmented, leadership must evolve from reaction to interpretation.

The Adaptive Leadership Lens turns leadership from a fixed identity into a continuous capability. Giving our leaders the perspective they need to evolve themselves and their teams ahead of their surroundings, not behind them.

Ask yourself

01 **If we look ahead 18 months, which of our leaders will be fit for this changing landscape?**

02 **What parts of our operating model make adaptive leadership harder than it needs to be?**

03 **What would stop this leadership evolution from taking hold, even if our leaders wanted it to, and did everything "right"?**

04 **If leadership is now a continuous capability, not a fixed role: what needs to change in how we hire, develop and support managers?**

05 **Where are we asking managers to lead in ways we haven't trained, enabled, or resourced them to do?**



The Cost of Standing *Still*

What happens when leadership stops adapting, but the world doesn't? A lot of what we're already seeing, but at greater scale and much greater cost.

Eroding credibility, losing next-gen talent, fragmented cultures, loss of competitive edge. A lot of pressure and burnout at the managerial level, and a ripple effect on the teams they manage.

Not acting on leadership now is a choice. One that will hold the organisation back.

Leaders and managers can be the key to financial and cultural change. We know that, with the right leadership, business is better.



Fortune states that companies with

good leadership

are

outperforming

the Dow Jones and the S&P 500.



When leading through agility, organisations achieve

30% gains

in efficiency, engagement, and operational performance — and become 5 to 10 times faster and significantly more innovative in the process.

(McKinsey)



And as managers account for 70% of the variance in team engagement, if leaders fully engage their teams...

$9.6 trillion

in productivity could be added to the global economy.

The equivalent of 9% in global GDP.

(Gallup State of the Workplace 2025)

The organisations that win will be the ones with leadership that continually adapts — shaping belief, energy and direction ahead of the changing environment.

Putting The Lens Into Practice

Making the shifts, step by step.

So, how do you bring this thinking into your organisation? Before building next-generation capability, ensure the foundations are sound. Jumping straight to The Adaptive Leadership Lens risks compounding the overwhelm leaders already feel. Start with today's fundamentals, then extend.

Evolution is a staged process. Master today's fundamentals first, and then extend into the next level of capability. Clarity around this will reduce friction, limit resistance and help leaders see the evolution as fair, achievable, and well-sequenced. And will ensure that your organisation has the foundation it needs to accelerate into the future.

5 Practical Steps To Get Your Leaders Future Ready ↗

01

Diagnose Your Current Leadership Landscape

Audit where you are. Consult engagement data, exit interviews, capability assessments, DEI insights and perform a culture scan to build a clear picture of current leadership strengths, gaps and opportunities.

If your organisation is growing, consider if your leadership setup has scaled with your business – are leadership expectations still calibrated to the demands of a smaller organisation?

Anna Wright ↘



02

Ensure Your Core Is Connected

Assess the gaps between where you are and where you want to be. Are values applied consistently? Is purpose clear? Do behaviours match what the organisation claims to stand for? Do you have the right stakeholders in place? If not, these are your starting points.

Is it a leadership issue, or a culture issue? Leaders cannot evolve if the core beneath them keeps shifting.

Mary Lynn Parnell ↘



Download Our Whitepaper



The Core Question – What to Fix and What to Flex

03

Build The Systems That Strengthen

Leaders can only meet today's expectations if the systems around them make good leadership possible. Do structures support workload, inclusivity and recovery? What can be automated, delegated or stopped? Outdated processes drain leadership capacity, clarity and decision-making, long before leadership performance visibly suffers.

Don't be afraid to 'break' your current systems to make room for the right structures that ensure managers aren't relying on personal effort alone.

Download Our Whitepaper



Resilience – By Design, Not Demand

04

Make Manager Training Foundational

Fewer than half of managers have received formal preparation for managing people. Those who do receive training are twice as likely to be engaged, experience greater well-being and perform better **(Gallup).**

If organisations expect managers to meet today's expectations and prepare for what's coming next, training must be core to organisational infrastructure. Not just another training programme or one-day workshop on generic leadership models, but an embedded cultural practice.

Developing the whole manager, equipping them with not only the operational basics, but the self-awareness and adaptability they need for leadership of the future.

Neil Schambra Stevens ↘



05

Incentivise with Reward & Recognition

Competency development won't stick if your systems celebrate the opposite behaviours. Align your recognition, performance conversations and promotion criteria with the behaviours you want leaders to demonstrate now.

Evolution is a staged process. Master today's fundamentals first, and then extend into the next level of capability. Clarity around this will reduce friction, limit resistance and help leaders see the evolution as fair, achievable, and well-sequenced. And will ensure that your organisation has the foundation it needs to accelerate into the future.

Is our leadership framework set up to reward yesterday's expertise or leading tomorrow's ambiguity?

Alex Brown ↘



The *Shift* Is Yours To Make

The world has changed faster than the leaders trying to navigate it. Most organisations know this. Fewer are doing anything about it.

The leaders in your business right now are trying to do an increasingly impossible job with tools and mental models that weren't built for this environment. That's not a talent problem. It's a design problem. And it's fixable.

The Adaptive Leadership Lens is how you fix it. Not with a one-day workshop or a new competency framework, but by changing the lens your leaders look through – so they can read situations more accurately, make better decisions and move before the moment demands it.

The ones who get this right won't just have better leaders. They'll have better organisations.





About TruthWorks.

TruthWorks is a female-founded, online marketplace that gives instant access to trusted, verified Experts in all aspects of People and Culture. Built to shake up the way companies work with freelance and fractional talent.

We believe that the brightest People and Culture experts are not always visible or accessible to the businesses that need their support. Companies instead rely on the sense of trust that comes with legacy agencies, big consulting firms or word of mouth recommendations to assign external talent to business-critical briefs.

This doesn't serve the industry because it means the same solutions on repeat, and less fresh, bold thinking. So we're bringing more transparency to the People and Culture talent pool so clients can make an informed choice, with ease.

Just like many other great services in life - they want to be able to see what they are getting and book with confidence, seamlessly. Our platform delivers that transparency.

Find out more

Making The *Adaptive* Leadership Lens Work For You

You've seen how the Adaptive Leadership Lens can lead to the future of leadership: *sharpening judgement, strengthening leadership and equipping organisations to operate in a world of continuous change.*

It's now over to you to instill that thinking into your organisation.

But you don't have to do it alone. At TruthWorks, our Experts can help organisations embed the Adaptive Leadership Lens into the fabric of how they lead. Supporting companies in diagnosing their leadership issues, and providing the practical roadmaps that will lead them to success.

Ready to help your leaders see the world differently — and lead differently because of it?

Find an Expert that can help you bring the Adaptive Leadership Lens to life in your organisation.

Find an Expert

