

## Managing in Complex Times: Adaptive Leadership

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This conversation explored how senior leaders are reshaping their organisations to remain effective in an environment defined by speed, uncertainty and complexity. Rather than defaulting to more control, process and hierarchy, the discussion focused on how leaders are learning to sense weak signals earlier, adapt more quickly and still maintain enough coherence for decisive action.



### What Makes the Current Business Environment So Complex?

Leaders describe today's complexity as arising from having to operate in multiple, shifting roles within systems they were never trained for. Traditional management education prepared them to reduce noise, standardise processes and create predictable environments; that world has disappeared. The pace of change now makes old playbooks unreliable, and leaders must run mature businesses while simultaneously exploring new opportunities. The hardest ongoing challenge is deciding what to prioritise when everything appears urgent and interdependent.

Context amplifies this complexity in different ways. In global insurance and people leadership, managing a workforce across many countries means navigating geopolitical instability, divergent ESG expectations, social unrest and rapid advances in technology such as AI, all within an industry whose core model has changed little for centuries but is now ripe for disruption. For leaders working with China, complexity is heightened by a commercial culture rooted in long-term relationships, informal deal-making and shifting loyalties that often clashes with rules-based Western capitalism; the real work lies in reading human dynamics and gaming out multiple possible paths. In organisations that delayed transformation, complexity comes from trying to scale while modernising: legacy processes, fragile systems and immature capabilities collide with ambitious growth targets, forcing leaders to "remodel the plane while flying it."

### What Do Leaders Need to Unlearn?

Responding effectively to this environment is less about adding new skills and more about deliberately unlearning ingrained habits. Many leaders were trained to equate success with certainty, control and linear planning. In a complex, adaptive system, however, success increasingly depends on distributed decision-making, rapid experimentation and a willingness to learn from what does not work. Autocratic, top-down structures concentrate authority where information is scarcest, which is the opposite of what is needed when fast, local judgements are critical.

Unlearning also means reframing failure from a personal stain to a source of intellectual capital. In some cultures, one failed venture can mark someone as unreliable; in more innovative ecosystems, past failure is valued if leaders can articulate what they have learned, effectively "subsidising" future decisions. Hierarchical assumptions are being challenged as leaders see their role less as sitting at the top of a pyramid and more as serving the frontline in a "reverse pyramid", removing obstacles and simplifying work. This demands letting go of the comfort of control, accepting incomplete information, engaging wider groups in shaping

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decisions and normalising discomfort as part of the job rather than a sign that something is wrong.

### **How Has Leadership and the Context Changed Over the Last Five Years?**

While change itself is not new, its perceived pace, interconnectedness and intensity have increased. Economic shocks, pandemics and asset bubbles have always existed, but they now combine and cascade more quickly across systems. The only real constant is the guarantee of ongoing change, often outpacing organisations' ability to adapt. Leaders can no longer rely on long, stable cycles in which to refine strategy and gradually improve operations.

At the same time, power dynamics and expectations in the workplace have shifted. Younger, less tenured employees now have more leverage and expect transparent communication, regular feedback, psychological safety and meaningful support in navigating technologies such as AI; these are no longer "nice to haves". Social movements and geopolitical tensions have raised expectations for organisations to provide safe environments to speak up and to take clearer positions on values and societal issues. Middle managers feel particularly "sandwiched", handling hybrid work, mental health and cultural questions they were never trained to manage.

Meanwhile, the cost of experimenting with new technology has collapsed: leaders can essentially "talk" an app or workflow into existence, and AI tools can materially reshape a business in weeks. This explosion of technological opportunity broadens who can innovate and puts pressure on large, established institutions to embrace continuous experimentation or risk being bypassed by more adaptive players.

### **How Do Leaders Navigate Without a Textbook?**

In the absence of reliable playbooks, leaders are constructing their own "thinking infrastructure" to make sense of complexity. They are broadening their networks of thought partners beyond immediate leadership teams to include colleagues from other functions, mentors, alumni and contacts outside their industry. Bringing in people from different contexts helps them break out of narrow mental models. There is also a shift towards greater transparency with teams about ambiguity and trade-offs, involving people in shaping decisions rather than presenting fully formed answers from the top.

Leaders are also becoming more deliberate about experimentation and reversibility. They distinguish between decisions that are reversible, which can be trialled and undone, and those that are truly high stakes and irreversible, such as major capital commitments or strategic exits. The goal is not to "fail fast" for its own sake but to succeed by learning quickly and cheaply when something does not work. When facing critical challenges, leaders go deep with targeted experts, seeking out the best practitioners globally and learning from both their successes and their mistakes. Across all of this runs a mindset that values collective intelligence over heroic leadership: creating environments where ideas can be contested openly and where support systems and peer networks, especially for women and underrepresented leaders, are recognised as essential for resilience and sense-making.

### **Which Leadership Behaviours Enable Adaptability and Resilience?**

An adaptive leadership profile emerged from the discussion, built around a cluster of observable behaviours rather than abstract traits. Curiosity is central: leaders who habitually

ask questions, explore different perspectives and pay attention to what is not being said are better able to spot weak signals and emerging patterns. Persistence and conviction also matter, but in a specific form: having strong views that are “loosely held”, with enough determination to move forward through ambiguity yet enough openness to adjust direction as new information emerges. Complex problems, by definition, have no pre-existing solutions; someone must own the problem and be willing to lead into the unknown.

These qualities need to be coupled with a clear sense of direction and the practical ability to mobilise resources. Leaders must be able to describe a credible “better future” and translate it into concrete action, aligning people, capital and technology behind it. Humility and continuous learning underpin this work: being comfortable saying “I do not know”, actively seeking input, and inviting critique from junior and diverse voices. Resilient leaders remain resourceful in the face of setbacks, distinguishing true crises from mere discomfort so they do not overreact. Finally, they treat culture as a strategic asset, recognising that their own behaviour sends powerful signals about what is valued. By modelling openness, experimentation and intelligent risk-taking—and by protecting people from blame when experiments do not work—they embed adaptability and resilience into the fabric of the organisation.

### How Do Leaders Personally Cope with Overwhelming Complexity?

Beyond organisational practices, leaders highlighted self-management as essential to staying effective. Many are shifting from a focus on time management to energy management, treating their physical, emotional and cognitive energy as strategic resources. They accept that they cannot be “always on” without degrading their judgement and presence, so they are more deliberate about rest, recovery and focus. Re-establishing boundaries that were eroded by laptops, smartphones and hybrid work is a key part of this, carving out genuine off time, thinking space and life outside work. Reintroducing fun, celebration and human connection at work helps counterbalance relentless pressure.

Leaders are also using constructive self-talk and reframing to stay grounded in difficult moments. Simple mental scripts such as “keep moving forward” or “find a way” help them remain action-oriented rather than paralysed. They frame painful experiences as evidence of building new muscles, not proof of failure, and normalise the “intellectual solitude” of senior roles where there may be no one above them in their domain.

To keep perspective, they adopt heuristics like “if you have time to ask if it’s a crisis, it probably isn’t” and draw on past experiences of real crisis to calibrate their responses. Many emphasise maintaining an abundance mindset—treating life more as a comedy than a tragedy—while remaining realistically paranoid and alert to risks. Finally, coping with complexity means narrowing personal focus to areas where they can genuinely have impact and being honest about where they do not add value. By designing teams, processes and partnerships to complement their own limitations, leaders create a personal operating system that allows them to stay humane, imaginative and effective under sustained complexity.