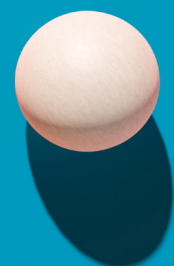


Rethinking Leadership for the Reality of Work

Featured Article—Global Research | See page 4



THE EVOLVING ROLE OF LEADERSHIP | 11

The mindset shifts, influence skills, and adaptability leaders need to guide teams and organizations through complexity and change

ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ALIGNMENT | 26

How leaders create alignment, strengthen culture, and better understand the human dynamics that drive engagement, collaboration, and execution

AI, INNOVATION, AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE | 38

When leaders can move beyond experimentation to create meaningful business impact in an AI-driven world



AI Business Essentials Certificate Program

Increase your AI awareness and develop
an impactful action plan for success.

cmcoutperform.com/AI



Canadian
Management
Centre®

GLOBAL RESEARCH

Rethinking Leadership for the Reality of Work

As leaders take on work beyond their formal roles while navigating technological disruption and uncertainty, organizational expectations outpace support systems. New findings point to five strategic actions organizations can take to strengthen leadership capacity and reduce role overload while building alignment in a continuously transforming workplace.

By Angela Kegler, PhD



Page 4

DEPARTMENTS

2 EDITOR'S PICK
When Expectations Outpace Support

3 FROM THE DESK OF THE
AMA GLOBAL CEO
The New Reality of Leadership
By Manny Avramidis

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

12 From High Performer to Leader: The Self-Awareness Shift That Defines Great Managers

The habits that drive personal success can become leadership blind spots when responsibility expands beyond individual performance. By Jill Macauley

16 Managing in the Age of Complexity
When disruption becomes routine, managers are the ones responsible for turning uncertainty into action. By Alan Zucker

**20 Leading Without Authority:
Influence Is the New Currency**
As organizations become flatter and more interconnected, influence increasingly determines who can create alignment and drive results. By JM Ryerson

ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ALIGNMENT

**25 Driving Alignment in Complex
Organizations**
Work now moves across functions and competing priorities. Alignment depends on leaders who can connect people to a shared outcome. By Janice Kapner

**28 Why Engagement Surveys Miss
the Real Story**
Employee engagement cannot be fully understood through survey data. The conversations and behaviors between measurement cycles often reveal far more. By Summer Alexander

**31 What Is the 'New Deal' in
the Workplace?**
Employees and employers are renegotiating expectations around trust, flexibility, well-being and performance. The results are reshaping the modern workplace. By Angela Rixon

AI, INNOVATION, AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

**37 How to Move AI from Pilot
to Production**
Most AI initiatives never reach production or generate measurable business value. The challenge lies less in the technology than in organizational readiness. By Martin Bittner

**41 When AI Makes Everyone Sound
Smart, Who Stands Out?**
Artificial intelligence can generate polished language, but credibility still depends on judgment and the ability to communicate with genuine authority. By Graham David



When Expectations Outpace Support

Organizations have never expected more from their leaders. Whether they've provided the support to match is another question.

We often think of leadership as if it's a personal challenge. Develop the right skills, build resilience, and improve communication. But our latest leadership research points to a different reality. Even the most capable leaders struggle when the systems around them aren't designed to support success.

Work has changed. The walls between roles have come down, cross-functional collaboration is essential, and leaders are expected to navigate complexity, drive transformation, develop talent, and embrace new technologies—and often all at once.

One theme surfaced repeatedly as we assembled this issue: Organizations continue to raise expectations while underestimating the support leaders need to meet them. The gap between expectations and support may be one of the defining leadership challenges of our time.

Across this issue, you'll find insights on leadership, organizational alignment, and AI-driven innovation. While the topics vary, a common question runs through them: How do organizations create the conditions for people to perform at their best in an increasingly unpredictable world?

Our research suggests the answer comes down to investment: in leadership development, coaching, role clarity, and support systems that help leaders succeed. Build that foundation and you build the capacity to meet whatever comes next.

The work ahead is growing more complex, but our mission remains the same: equipping leaders to grow, teams to perform, and organizations to exceed expectations.

Lauren McNally
Publisher & Editor, *CMC Quarterly*

JOURNAL OF THE
CANADIAN MANAGEMENT CENTRE

COPY EDITOR
Eileen Davis

ART DIRECTOR
Christopher Blankley

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
John Barberii

PRODUCTION MANAGER
Claire Kobay

PUBLISHER & EDITOR
Lauren McNally

PRESIDENT & CEO, AMA GLOBAL
Manny Avramidis

CMC Quarterly® (ISSN 2377-1321) is published quarterly by American Management Association International, 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019-7420, Second Edition 2026. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to American Management Association, 600 AMA Way, Saranac Lake, NY 12983-5534.

American Management Association is a nonprofit educational association chartered by the Board of Regents of the State of New York. *CMC Quarterly* is an independent forum for authoritative views on business and management issues.

Submissions. We encourage submissions from prospective authors. For guidelines, write to The Guest Editor, *CMC Quarterly*, 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019-7420 or email editor@amanet.org. Unsolicited manuscripts will be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Letters are encouraged. Mail: 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019-7420; email: editor@amanet.org. We reserve the right to excerpt and edit letters. Names and addresses must accompany all submissions.

Rights and permissions. ©2026, American Management Association. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission. Requests should be sent to amaquarterly@amanet.org

Editorial Offices
1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019-7420
Tel: 212.903.8075
Email: amaquarterly@amanet.org

Opinions expressed by the editors, contributors or advertisers are not necessarily those of CMC/AMA. In addition, the appearance of advertisements, products or service information in *CMC Quarterly*, other than those of CMC/AMA itself, does not constitute endorsement by CMC/AMA.



The New Reality of Leadership

For years, leadership development focused on helping leaders improve performance within established structures and systems. Today, those structures are changing faster than many organizations can adapt.

Our latest leadership research points to a growing gap between what organizations expect from leaders and the support leaders receive to meet those expectations.

Consider one finding: Nearly 7 in 10 leaders report spending at least half their time influencing people who do not directly report to them. In many organizations, work now moves across teams and reporting lines. Results depend less on authority and more on alignment.

At the same time, leaders are taking on responsibilities that often fall outside their formal roles. Many report stepping into operational issues and day-to-day problem solving simply to keep work moving forward. While these efforts may help in the moment, they come at a cost. Time spent filling gaps is time not spent developing people, building capability, or focusing on longer-term priorities.

What's particularly interesting is what leaders identify as most important for success. Despite the attention surrounding AI and new technologies, leaders continue to place the highest value on communication, decision making, strategic thinking, and emotional intelligence. These are not new skills. But they have become more important as the workplace has become more complex.

The lesson is straightforward. Organizations cannot assume leadership capacity will simply expand to meet new demands. Leadership development matters. Clear roles matter. Strong systems matter. So does creating an environment where leaders can focus their energy on developing people, driving execution, and advancing strategy.

Technology will continue to evolve. Business conditions will continue to shift. The need for capable leaders is unlikely to change.

The organizations that adapt alongside their leaders will be best positioned to thrive.

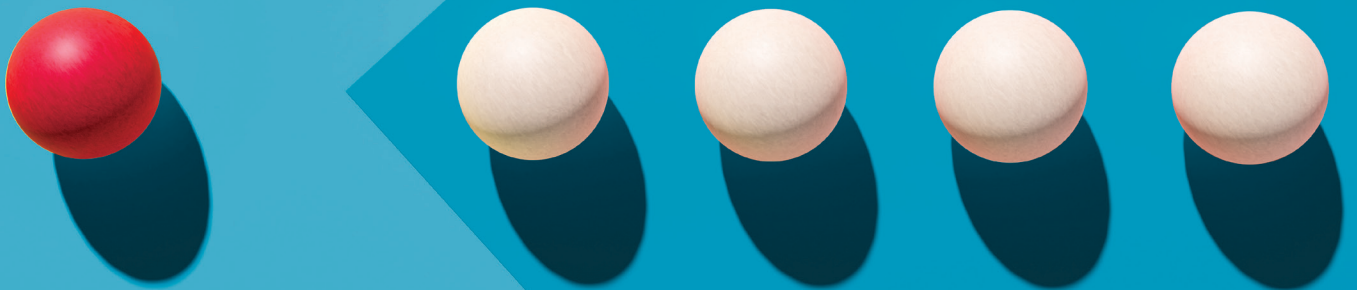
A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Manny Avramidis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Manny Avramidis
AMA Global

Rethinking Leadership for the Reality of Work

How organizations can close the preparedness gap
and build sustainable leadership capacity in a
continuously transforming workplace

BY ANGELA KEGLER, PhD



Today's leadership challenge is fundamentally a problem of systemic misalignment. Individual effort alone cannot fix it.

Leadership skills and responsibilities have expanded faster than the structures designed to support them. Organizational expectations now routinely outpace the infrastructure that enables effective leadership. As a result, many leaders operate in a constant state of disruption, stretched thin by demands that their roles were never built to accommodate.

Leaders no longer work within stable, predictable environments where formal hierarchy and established processes reliably produce results. Effectiveness today depends on the ability to create clarity amid ambiguity, influence teams without formal authority, and build organizational capability while absorbing increasing levels of operational responsibility.

The annual Leadership Survey from Canadian Management Centre and AMA Global of 1,249 respondents reveals a stark reality. While managers focus on the logistics of execution, leaders face mounting pressure to maintain strategic direction. The evolution of the modern workplace requires leaders to continuously create alignment and capability amid ongoing disruption.

THE RISE OF ROLE SPOILLOVER

The shift from stable leadership models to continuous change has altered how leadership shows up in organizations. Influence has increasingly replaced authority as the primary mechanism for getting work done. Leaders must align stakeholders across highly matrixed functions.

At the same time, leaders are absorbing significant work outside their formal roles. They are taking on project management and operational tasks that previously would have been distributed elsewhere. A striking 71% of leaders in the survey reported performing work outside their formal role.

This spillover work is driven by staffing shortages, unclear ownership of tasks, and urgent crises that demand hands-on involvement. When leaders consistently take on work that should be handled by others, the organization becomes dependent on individual leadership endurance rather than sound systems and accountability.

A staggering 59% of leaders reported that performing work outside their role actively limits their ability to focus on strategic priorities. As leaders step in to maintain momentum, their direct reports lose vital opportunities to build capability and confidence. Short-term productivity may improve, but long-term organizational leverage steadily declines.

NAVIGATING EXTERNAL PRESSURES

Three external forces are redefining the leadership landscape: artificial

intelligence/technology disruption, employee well-being/cultural expectations, and economic/geopolitical volatility.

AI is increasingly viewed as an embedded tool that accelerates execution. Leadership, in contrast, accelerates clarity. Without clear intent and defined decision boundaries, technology-driven speed can easily produce misalignment. Leaders are not required to master the underlying technology. Their true mandate is to guide people through the technology's impact on roles and decision making.

Leaders must simultaneously navigate rapid technological change and respond to evolving human needs. The core leadership capability in this environment is the ability to translate strategy into execution and foster deep trust that cuts through potential chaos.

71%

of leaders reported performing work outside their formal role

59%

of leaders reported that performing work outside their role actively limits their ability to focus on strategic priorities

44%

of leaders reported feeling fully prepared to meet future role expectations

CLOSING THE PREPAREDNESS GAP

Despite the expanding scope of leadership, capability development has not kept pace. In our research, only 44% of leaders reported feeling fully prepared to meet future role expectations. Preparedness gaps are most pronounced among mid-level leaders, who are expected to deliver immediate results while navigating increasing complexity with limited enablement.

To close the growing gap between leadership expectations and leadership capacity, organizations must move beyond broad calls for better leaders. They must focus on deliberate actions that enable leaders to perform effectively. The research points to five strategic imperatives:

STRENGTHEN EMPLOYEE- CENTRIC CLARITY

Leaders must consistently communicate priorities and purpose in ways that reduce ambiguity. When leaders frame work within a clear strategic context, teams understand what needs to be done and why it matters. This clarity supports alignment and sustained engagement.

ESTABLISH SHARED LEADERSHIP STANDARDS

Leadership teams must establish common standards for decision making. Clarifying who decides and what criteria are used is essential. Shared standards reduce unnecessary escalation and enable the organization to move forward with cohesion rather than fragmentation.

BUILD INFLUENCE WITHOUT AUTHORITY

Influence without authority has become the new organizational norm. Leaders must intentionally develop skills in stakeholder alignment and negotiation. These capabilities enable progress across matrixed environments without reliance on positional power.

REDEFINE DELEGATION AS DEVELOPMENT

Organizations should treat delegation as a primary mechanism for capability development, not simply a means of workload relief. By assigning meaningful responsibility and reinforcing accountability through coaching, leaders build confidence in others. This approach reduces role spillover and preserves leaders' strategic capacity over time.

ENABLE LEADERSHIP THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

Leadership effectiveness depends on organizational enablement as much as individual skill. Organizations should reinforce role clarity and align incentives to reward team development over individual heroics. Tools and processes must proactively support delegation rather than forcing leaders to compensate for structural gaps.

Leadership evolution is structural. The demands placed on leaders have expanded faster than the support systems designed to sustain them. Sustainable leadership capacity depends on intentional development and shared standards that enable leaders to focus on strategic direction. By investing in employee-centric clarity and organizational design, companies can turn workplace disruption into a distinct competitive advantage.

Angela Kegler, PhD, is a leadership and organizational development expert specializing in turning leadership theory into practical, real-world application for leaders and organizations.

Adapted from "Leadership Development in a Transforming Workplace: Emerging Demands, Gaps, and Opportunities for Today's Organizations."



NEW GLOBAL RESEARCH

Leadership demands have changed. Has your support?

Inside You'll Find:

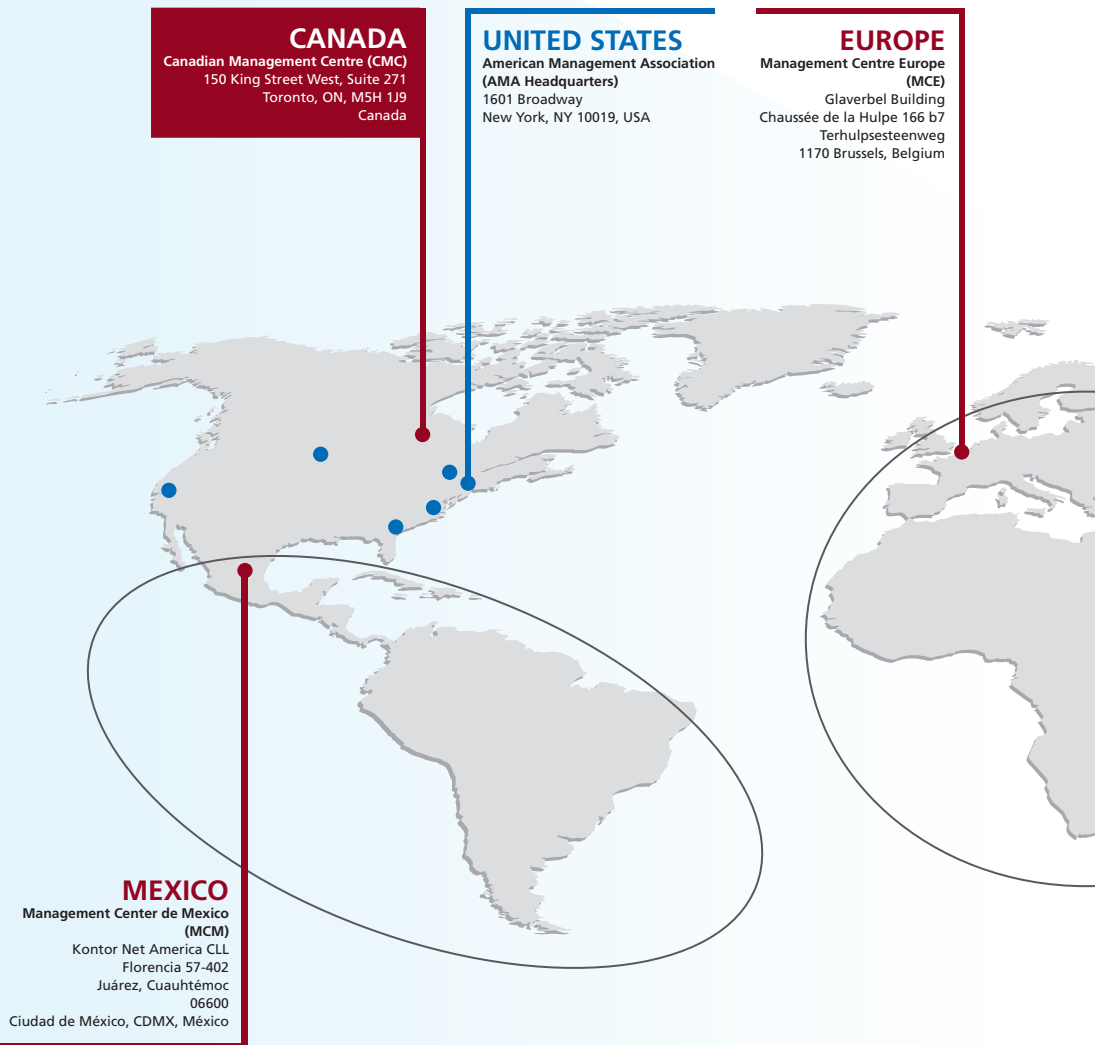
- Pressures reshaping 71% of leadership
- The real drivers of burnout
- Practical solutions for readiness

Download Whitepaper
cmcoutperform.com/transform



A Global Network Supporting Organizations Worldwide

In more than 100 countries around the world.



UNITED STATES

Manos Avramidis
President & Chief
Executive Officer
+1 212 586 8100
info@amanet.org
amanet.org

MEXICO

Eugenio Villaseñor Hernández
+52 55 3098 3300
info@amamex.org.mx
amamex.org.mx

CANADA

Geoff Blackwell
+1 416 214 5678
cmcinfo@cmcoutperform.com
cmcoutperform.com

EUROPE

Patrick Faniel
+32 2 543 2100
+32 2 543 2400
info@mce.eu
mce.eu

SAUDI ARABIA

Osama Dukhan
+32 475 72 9886
odukhan@mce-ama.com
mce.eu

INDIA

Anand Dewan
Licensee
+91 1800 102 1345
anand.dewan@amasouthasia.org
amasouthasia.org

THAILAND

Jaruwan Laptrakool
Licensee
+66 2 613 1033
thailand@trainocate.com
trainocate.com

Atlanta • Arlington • Bangkok • Beijing • Brussels • Chicago • Guangzhou • Ho Chi Minh City • Jakarta • Kuala Lumpur • Manila
Mexico City • New York • Riyadh • San Francisco • Shanghai • Shenzhen • Singapore • Taipei • Tokyo • Toronto

VIETNAM

PACE Institute of Management
PACE Building
341 Nguyen Trai Street
District 1
Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam

INDONESIA

PT Trainocate Indonesia
Treasury Tower Fl. 11 Unit G
District 8 - Lot 28 SCBD
Jl. Jenderal Sudirman Kav 52-53
Kel. Senayan - Kec. Kebayoran Baru
Jakarta Selatan - DKI Jakarta 12190

MALAYSIA

Quintegral Sdn Bhd
Unit 10.02, Level 10, Mercu 2
No. 3 Jalan Bangsar
KL ECO City, 59200
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

CHINA

AMA China Head Office
Room 306, Block G, Vanke Center,
No. 9335 Humin Road,
Xuhui District, Shanghai

INDIA

AMA South Asia Pvt. Ltd.
BYLD Group
2nd and 3rd Floor, Plot No. 48
Sector- 44, Gurugram,
Haryana 122003
India

JAPAN

AMA Japan
Quintegral Co., Ltd.
2F Hulic Kudan Building
1-13-5, Kudankita, Chiyoda-ku
Tokyo, 102-0073
Japan

THAILAND

Trainocate Thailand Co. Ltd.
999/9 The Offices at CentralWorld
16th Floor Unit ML 1606
Rama 1 Road
Patumwan, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

SINGAPORE

Quintegral Pte. Ltd
8 Cross Street
Level 28, Manulife Tower
Singapore 048424

SAUDI ARABIA

Isha Commercial Center
6299 Alisha Street Office 14 and 15
Second Floor, 12815 3190
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

PHILIPPINES

Quintegral Philippines, Inc.
19/F Philippine AXA Life Centre
Sen. Gil Puyat Ave.
Makati City, Metro Manila
Philippines

MALAYSIA

Sharifah Rafidah
Licensee
+60 36205 4818
solution@imperialconsulting.com
imperialconsulting.com

SINGAPORE

Alfred Chan
Licensee
+65 6332 2330
solution@quintegral.com
quintegral.com

VIETNAM

Binh Nguyen
Licensee
+84 28 3837 0208
ama@PACE.edu.vn
PACE.edu.vn
AMAVietnam.vn

INDONESIA

Ronny Kurniawan
Licensee
+62 21 295 33 333
indonesia@trainocate.com
trainocate.com

CHINA

Peter Kao
Licensee
+86 21 6473 7161
marketing@amachina.com
amachina.com

PHILIPPINES

Kristine Santayana
Licensee
+632 845 1324
solution@quintegral.com
quintegral.com

JAPAN

Bunshiro Ochiai
Licensee
+03 6268 9791
ochiai@alue.co.jp
quintegral.co.jp



Corporate Learning Solutions

Achieve Your Organization's Strategic Goals
Through the Development of Your People

We Ensure Results. Our engagement team sets the highest standards for effectively implementing your learning initiatives—providing a structure that connects targeted skills and behaviours to your key performance indicators through practical, real-world application.

Overcome business challenges and
create new opportunities with a
range of content that helps you:

- Reduce churn and retain valued employees
- Achieve revenue growth
- Minimize costs and reduce risk
- Improve employee experience
- Increase organizational resilience and morale
- Facilitate collaboration and problem-solving
- Develop, upskill and reskill



Investing in the development of your people allows them to learn, practice, apply new knowledge, and share insights—positively impacting their performance and enabling them to drive business outcomes and a meaningful ROI for your organization.

Find out more at cmcoutperform.com/CLS

1

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

The mindset shifts, influence skills, and adaptability leaders need to guide teams and organizations through complexity and change



From High Performer to Leader: The Self-Awareness Shift That Defines Great Managers

BY JILL MACAULEY



Most managers are promoted because they were excellent individual contributors. But the skills that earn promotion are not the skills that sustain successful leadership.

When people are exceptional individual contributors, they deliver, solve problems, and move quickly. They hold high standards. Their competence is visible and measurable.

Management demands something fundamentally different. Excellence as an individual contributor is measured by personal output. Excellence as a manager is measured by the output of others and the environment you create.

That shift isn't just operational. It's psychological. And it is where self-awareness becomes nonnegotiable.

THE IDENTITY SHIFT NO ONE PREPARES YOU FOR

Before their rise to management, new leaders often were high performers. As noted, success in the prior role was determined by their output. They were the person others relied on. They knew the work and could execute under pressure. They were *doers*.

Moving into management is both a role change *and* an identity shift. You move from producing outcomes yourself to creating the conditions for *others* to produce them. The focus shifts from execution to alignment, development, and accountability.

The work you previously took pride in was *doing*. Once you become a novice leader, on uncertain turf, you require a new identity and accompanying behaviors to match the demands of the role.

When this shift goes unexamined, managers still often default to *doing* versus *leading those who need to do*. They step in when others struggle, correct others quickly, and maintain high standards. They tighten control when results feel uncertain.

Over time, the strengths that once led to their success tip into something unintended—blind spots. The high achiever who once saved the day may now struggle to delegate.

HERE ARE THREE BLIND SPOTS NEW LEADERS TEND TO HAVE:

- 1 “Over-functioning” for the team by taking on the responsibilities, emotions, or workloads of teammates
- 2 Confusing clarity with control
- 3 Interpreting disagreement as incompetence

These blind spots, though unintended, create friction. And the friction that shows up at this stage often shapes the kind of leader you become.

WHY THIS STAGE OF LEADERSHIP IS SO CONSEQUENTIAL

Mid-level management is one of the most influential stages of a leadership career. You are close enough to the work to understand its pressures, and close enough to senior leadership to see its limitations. You may feel the tension of decisions that don't fully make sense. You may notice misalignment, communication gaps, or overconfidence at higher levels.

At the same time, you are forming your own leadership patterns. Without awareness, it is easy to replicate the very behaviors that frustrate you. It's important to understand that the habits formed here have the potential to scale with you.

If you respond to pressure by tightening control now, you will likely tighten more as your authority expands. If you avoid feedback now, you will avoid it later at higher stakes.



Leadership is about becoming the kind of leader whose presence strengthens the system around them. And that begins with the willingness to see yourself clearly.

This stage is not just about learning how to manage others. It is about deciding who you will become as a leader.

THE HIDDEN COST OF UNEXAMINED STRENGTHS

In my work with leaders across industries, I've recognized time and time again that self-awareness is one of the strongest predictors of leadership effectiveness.

In videos across Facebook and Instagram, an Apple podcast, and her 2018 article for *Harvard Business Review* ("Working with People Who Aren't Self-Aware"), organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich has noted that while the vast majority of professionals believe they are self-aware, only a small percentage truly are. And leaders who accurately understand their impact are rated as more effective by their teams.

Yet self-awareness is rarely treated as a disciplined practice in management. Why? Because management culture rewards outward focus: performance metrics, deadlines, efficiency, results. Self-awareness requires inward focus.

IT'S IMPORTANT FOR MANAGERS TO ASK THEMSELVES QUESTIONS SUCH AS:

- 1 How am I being experienced?
- 2 Where are my strengths overused?
- 3 What triggers defensiveness in me?
- 4 What identity am I protecting?

For high-performing managers, these questions are especially challenging. After all, the behaviors being scrutinized often are the same behaviors that led to their promotion.

Strengths also have a shadow side. Achievement can show up as impatience. Confidence can harden into rigidity.

Decisiveness can start to feel dismissive. And responsibility can quietly turn into overcontrol.

When leaders remain unaware of these patterns, the shadow side of their strengths begins shaping the culture around them.

NEGATIVE OUTCOMES CAN BE FOUND IN:

- 1 Teams adapting around the manager
- 2 People self-editing what they say
- 3 Initiative narrowing
- 4 Feedback disappearing

What looks like alignment to the naked eye turns into blind compliance. When managers fail to examine their impact, the cost of that obliviousness is absorbed by the people around them.

THE OPPORTUNITY INSIDE THE INFLECTION POINT

This stage of leadership carries risk, but it also carries leverage. Mid-level managers sit at a powerful intersection. You see how strategy translates into execution, understand the day-to-day pressures your teams experience, and observe how executive decisions push downward.

That vantage point puts managers at a crossroads. Some continue relying on the traits that helped them succeed as individual contributors. Others begin to shape their leadership more intentionally, paying attention to how their behavior affects the people around them.

Managers who develop real self-awareness begin to notice patterns in themselves. They learn to separate their identity from their performance. They become more open to feedback, even when it's uncomfortable. And they start to



recognize how pressure changes the way they show up with their teams.

They understand that leadership is less about being the most capable person in the room and more about creating an environment where others can perform at their best. That requires humility, curiosity, and the discipline to pause and question your own reactions. But it builds leadership capacity that scales.

BUILDING THE DISCIPLINE OF SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness isn't something leaders simply possess or lack. It develops over time, usually through reflection and honest feedback.

For many managers, that process starts by paying closer attention to how their behavior actually lands with others. Sometimes that means asking a colleague or team member a direct question: "When I'm under pressure, how do I tend to show up?"

The harder part is listening to the answer without immediately explaining it away. Moments of tension often reveal the most. When you feel the urge to prove your competence, take control of a conversation, or shut down disagreement, it may be a sign that a strength you rely on is starting to work against you.

These reactions rarely happen just once. They tend to surface again and again, particularly when pressure is high. Over time, those moments begin to form recognizable patterns.

The goal isn't perfection, but rather awareness early enough to adjust. Leaders who develop that awareness tend to

become more flexible in how they respond to challenges. And that flexibility is what allows leadership to evolve instead of becoming rigid over time.

↑ RISING WITH INTENTION

At every level of leadership, behavior shapes the system around you. But during the management stage, those patterns are still forming.

The habits you develop now—how you handle pressure, how you respond to disagreement, how willing you are to examine your own reactions—will travel with you as your authority grows.

When managers avoid that work, the friction they create doesn't disappear. It simply spreads outward to the people around them and eventually scales with their influence.

But when managers are willing to look at themselves honestly, something different happens. Their leadership becomes more intentional. They respond rather than react. They create environments where others can contribute more fully rather than quietly adjust around them.

You may not be able to correct every blind spot you encounter above you. But you can decide that as your leadership grows, awareness will grow with it.

Leadership is not just about moving up the ladder. It is about becoming the kind of leader whose presence strengthens the system around them. And that begins with the willingness to see yourself clearly. [🔗](#)

Jill Macauley is the chief operating officer of Behavioral Essentials, a producer of behavioral assessment software for hiring, leadership, and teams.

Managing in the Age of Complexity

BY ALAN ZUCKER



"May you live in interesting times" is commonly thought to be an ancient Chinese proverb. That's a myth. A British diplomat, Sir Austen Chamberlain, used the phrase in a 1936 speech, which Robert F. Kennedy amplified in his 1966 speech in South Africa.

The ability of large enterprises to effectively navigate complexity also is a myth. In the classic 1993 book *Reengineering the Corporation*, Michael Hammer and James

Champy estimated that 30% to 50% of change efforts succeed. As *Harvard Business Review* detailed in a 2017 article ("Overcome Resistance to Change with Two Conversations"), the success rate remained mostly unchanged almost 25 years later.

Managers and leaders at all levels in the organization respond to macro-, micro-, internal, and external events that have consequential impacts. Their team members' well-being, the

team's ability to fulfill its operational role, and ultimately the effectiveness of the organization may be at stake. Strategic change efforts capture much attention. But effectively responding to tactical change is equally critical and impactful.

Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity are persistent management challenges. Today, we face volatile supply chains, uncertainty regarding the impact of AI, and the complexity of collaborating with hybrid and remote teams. We can draw on the patterns and experiences from the past to better navigate today's challenges.

I have had the distinction of leading teams at three large enterprises as they traversed headline-grabbing crises. The executives did their best to contend with strategic and external fallout. However, it was the managers who had to contextualize and operationalize the new realities. Amid chaos, we had to stabilize our teams, brace for uncertainty, and lead courageously.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Michael Lewis's first book, *Liar's Poker*, provided an insider's view of the excesses, risk taking, and bravado of the Salomon Brothers' bond desk. The traders felt they were invincible and the rules did not apply to them. In 1991, Salomon tried to corner the market in United States Treasury securities.

I managed the team of a dozen analysts at the U.S. Department of the Treasury responsible for the securities auctions. I was in my late 20s, and it was my first leadership role. I remember being shown Salomon's bid and being told that something looked "funny." At that moment, there was a problem to resolve. I could not predict or imagine the turmoil that would follow.

That was the beginning of the end for Salomon Brothers. The head trader was convicted of fraud. The company was suspended from participating in Treasury auctions. It was acquired a few years later by Travelers Group and eventually disappeared.

Internally, my team was cast into chaos. Investigators from the Justice Department descended to collect evidence. We developed new regulations. New procedures and controls were implemented. Within two years, a new application was built and deployed. And the team nearly doubled in size.

I was focused on execution—keeping things going and addressing and resolving issues as they arose. Executive leadership was in crisis response mode. Political leaders, Capitol Hill, the press, and financial markets all needed reassurances that the auctions were fair and secure.

The Cynefin framework was developed nearly a decade later to help leaders understand complex organizational situations and choose context-sensitive decision-making approaches. The framework, developed by Dave Snowden when he

worked for IBM Global Services, is a sense-making tool that describes four states:

1 Simple problems can be addressed using best practices.

2 Complicated issues require expert analysis to define and resolve.

3 Complex problems are emergent, requiring experimentation to identify suitable solutions.

4 Chaotic situations must first be stabilized. Only then can an approach to the problem be considered.

At the time of the Salomon crisis, we were in a chaotic state. Initially, we tried implementing simple solutions. But that was inadequate. As things stabilized, we were able to deconstruct the situation.

Implementing new process controls was a simple problem. There were well-established frameworks and practices. Creating new regulations was complicated. Industry, Treasury, and Federal Reserve experts collaborated with lawyers to revise the auction rules.

Building a new application was both complicated and complex. To address the complicated aspects of the project, we assembled a team of business and technology experts. Seemingly minor details like synchronizing timestamps were a major issue.

Developing new software is always complex. We used a simple prototyping tool to document the application requirements and adopted an incremental and iterative development approach. We created and demonstrated screen mock-ups to the user community. Updates were made based on the feedback. A similar process was used to build the software modularly. These practices would be embraced a decade later by Agile.

■ PEOPLE ARE COMPLEX

I was an IT director at a Fortune 50 financial services company struggling in the aftermath of the 2008 housing crisis. Our strategic initiatives were failing to gain traction. The CIO decided to split the organization into "Run" and "Change." Run was responsible for ongoing operations and

Great teams rarely happen by chance. They are built day by day through relationships and trust.



supporting the legacy applications. Change would focus on the strategic initiatives. The goal was to improve alignment and accountability.

A highly detailed plan was developed, where “sending” and “receiving” managers acknowledged the transfer of duties. However, on Day One, work fell through the cracks. Friction between the organizations grew. Within a year, the company reverted to its previous structure.

The reorganization and its plans failed to account for complexity. People, organizations, and cultures are complex, adaptive systems. Their response to events is not predictable, monolithic, or static.

Because people differ, expect your employees to have different responses to changes at work. On one side are the champions who always embrace the opportunities. On the other side are the resisters. They are fearful and cling to the status quo. The majority in the middle are the participants and fence-sitters. Participants engage tentatively, and fence-sitters wait to see what happens.

An adaptive approach grounded in Agile principles will enable organizations to respond to changing forces more effectively. First, describe the desired end state. What are we trying to achieve and why? This becomes the “north star” that motivates, inspires, and guides employees’ efforts. Establish and execute short-term plans rather than long-term ones. This approach enables feedback, learning, and adjustment.

BUILD RESILIENT TEAMS

I managed the financial reporting systems and processes for MCI WorldCom. A few weeks before the company filed the largest bankruptcy in history, I had to fire a third of my team. It was Friday. On Monday, we would start processing and auditing hundreds of data files for the monthly financial close. And I had plans to leave on Saturday for vacation.

Friday morning was emotional. I laid off people who had worked with me for years. I sat with my boss as she fired some of my peers. In the afternoon, I met with my management team. Then I gathered the rest of the team. I shared my grief over the firing of friends. Afterward, I outlined a plan to close the books on Monday. Critical work was prioritized, and other tasks were either postponed or dropped.

I took my kids to the beach as planned. My laptop and

BlackBerry came along. Despite the upheaval, the close went smoothly. My team did a great job!

As I reflect on those experiences, I feel proud. Great teams rarely happen by chance. They are built day by day through relationships and trust. Traumatic events and stressors can either tear a team apart or make it stronger.

This was just the first of many new challenges and assignments caused by the bankruptcy. We developed a reputation for “getting things done,” not through heroics but through teamwork and cooperation.

LESSONS FOR TODAY’S MANAGER

Circumstances will differ, but the role of the manager in guiding teams through disruptions and uncertainty remains constant. Today, managers face new challenges: disruptive technologies and competitors, economic and market uncertainties, and a multigenerational workforce.

The lessons from my experiences are timeless and will equally benefit today’s managers:

Understand the context. We need to first understand our situation and environment before responding.

Adapt incrementally. Creating detailed, long-term plans is folly. Set a direction, start the journey. Get feedback and adjust.

Recognize that people are essential. Our teams are critical to our success. They consist of individuals with different needs and motivations. Build relationships and trust. Your team members will make you proud.

Build resilience. Resilience is like a muscle that strengthens with use. Empowering team members to make decisions and be accountable for their work builds strength.

Emotional intelligence is our superpower—our force multiplier. Managers with high emotional intelligence are adaptable, create positive work environments, and are more successful. Employing these skills allows us to address today’s challenges and be prepared for the future. 

Alan Zucker has more than 25 years of experience leading teams in Fortune 100 companies and the federal government. He is a consultant, keynote speaker, and instructor at leading universities and professional development organizations.



Content Licensing

Your Organizational Context—Our Content and Expertise

CMC Licensing is a content licensing solution that allows you to select the specific training your organization needs—with unsurpassed flexibility, scalability and value.

We will train your trainers so you can deliver on your timeline. Our adaptable capabilities and client support make it easy and convenient.

Benefits To Your Organization

- Turnkey training content and best-in-class talent development solutions
- Targeted internal training delivered in your chosen modality
- Unlimited use and customization
- Easy implementation and support

How It Works

- 1 Analyze and assess your talent
- 2 Define your training needs
- 3 Select the specific content you require
- 4 Implement confidently and easily with a full suite of resources and support



Could licensing our content be an ideal solution for your organization?

Scan the QR code to learn more or call 866-929-1590 to speak with a Training Advisor today.



Leading Without Authority: **Influence Is the New Currency**

BY JM RYERSON

You do not need a title to lead. You need courage.

For decades, leadership was defined by hierarchy. Earn the promotion. Get the office. Gain control. Make the decisions. That model is fading fast. Organizations today are flatter, faster, and more complex than ever. Teams span departments, time zones, and reporting lines. Information moves in seconds. AI accelerates decision cycles. Expertise lives everywhere. People closest to the work often see the truth first, and they expect to be heard.

In this environment, positional authority is no longer the advantage it once was.

Influence is. The professionals who rise today are not waiting for permission. They are not hiding behind job descriptions. They are not blaming leadership when something breaks. They are not saying, "That is above my pay grade."

They are leading without authority. And the organizations that fail to develop this capability will fall behind, because speed and alignment are now strategic advantages.

WHY AUTHORITY IS FRAGMENTING

If you are wondering why title-based leadership is losing its edge, look at what has changed inside most companies.

First, work is increasingly cross-functional. The most important outcomes now require sales, marketing, product, operations, finance, and people teams to move together. No single leader owns the entire path, yet everyone owns a piece of the result.

Second, specialization has grown. Subject matter experts often know more than the person with the formal decision rights. That shifts power from hierarchy to competence.



Third, talent expectations have changed. High performers want autonomy, purpose, and growth. If they only feel managed, they disengage or leave. Influence matters more than control.

Fourth, technology has compressed time. When a customer issue can go viral in minutes, when a competitor can copy features quickly, and when AI can accelerate execution, waiting for approvals becomes a liability.

In short, authority is being distributed by necessity. The question is whether your culture is keeping up.

THE MYTH OF THE TITLE: INTERNAL AUTHORITY COMES FIRST

A title grants authority. It does not grant followership. You can enforce compliance with position. You cannot manufacture

trust with it. You can demand performance through structure. You cannot inspire discretionary effort through hierarchy.

Leadership is not about control. It is about movement, and movement requires belief. In complex organizations, decisions cannot bottleneck at the top. Innovation cannot depend on one office. Accountability cannot be confined to one role. When leadership is tied only to title, organizations slow down. When leadership is distributed, organizations accelerate.

Leading without authority begins with one uncomfortable question: Will I take ownership even when I do not have control? That is the dividing line between passive professionals and influential leaders. Most people wait. They wait for direction, for alignment, for clarity. Leaders without authority create it. Instead of escalating every obstacle upward, they ask, "What can I influence from here?"

Instead of blaming silos, they build bridges. Instead of protecting turf, they create momentum. Instead of gossiping about what is broken, they become part of what is built. Internal authority precedes external influence. If you cannot lead yourself, you cannot lead others without a title.

THE THREE PILLARS OF INFLUENCE

In my work with executive teams, influence without authority consistently rests on three pillars: ownership, alignment, and credibility. These are not personality traits. They are repeatable behaviors.

Pillar 1: Ownership. Ownership means acting as if the outcome belongs to you. Not because it is in your job description, but that you care about the result. When a project stalls, ownership initiates a conversation. When confusion spreads, ownership clarifies the objective. When energy drops, ownership resets the standard.

Ownership is contagious. When one person steps up, others follow. But ownership has a line. It is not bulldozing. It is not dominating. It is responsible initiative. The way you show ownership without authority is by bringing clarity, options, and next steps, and then inviting partnership.

Pillar 2: Alignment. Influence without alignment feels self-serving. Influence with alignment feels strategic.

Leaders without authority understand the bigger picture. They know the organization's priorities. They understand the metrics. They connect ideas to outcomes. If you cannot clearly articulate how your proposal advances the organization's goals, do not expect others to champion it. Alignment turns personal initiative into collective momentum.

A practical test is simple. Can you connect your work to one of these three outcomes: revenue growth, cost control or efficiency, and customer experience and retention? If you can, you can speak to leaders in the language they live in.

Pillar 3: Credibility. Credibility is the multiplier. You say what you will do, do what you said, consistently. In matrixed environments where authority is shared, credibility becomes your most valuable asset. People follow reliability. They trust consistency. They collaborate with those who deliver. Credibility has three parts: competence, in which you bring value; character, where you can be trusted; and consistency, when you show up the same way under pressure.

BUILDING CREDIBILITY THROUGH EPR

One of the simplest and most overlooked ways to build credibility is something I call EPR: Encourage, Praise, Recognize. It costs nothing. Encourage effort when results are still forming. Praise progress publicly. Recognize contributions specifically.

Too many leaders reserve recognition for formal reviews or major wins. That is a mistake. Encouragement fuels effort. Praise reinforces behavior. Recognition strengthens belonging. When you consistently practice EPR, you increase morale, deepen trust, and expand influence. People gravitate toward leaders who see them.

And you do not need a title to do that.

Encouragement is not empty positivity. It is a signal that you see the work and you believe it matters. When people feel invisible, effort dies. When people feel seen, effort rises.

Praise is not flattery. It is reinforcement. Praise the behavior you want repeated. If you praise the late-night heroics, you will get more burnout. If you praise preparation, clarity, and teamwork, you get a healthier culture.

Recognition is precision. It is naming the specific impact someone had, not just saying "Great job." Instead, say things such as "Your analysis changed the decision," "Your calm in that meeting protected the relationship," or "Your follow-through kept the project alive." EPR is leadership without authority because it shifts the emotional environment. People want to work with the person who builds them up and holds the line.

COACHING AS A FORCE MULTIPLIER

If influence is the currency, coaching is the amplifier. Leading without authority does not mean controlling outcomes. It means unlocking potential.

Instead of telling peers what to do, effective informal leaders ask powerful questions:

- ▶ What outcome are we driving toward?
- ▶ What obstacle is really in the way?
- ▶ What does success look like for you?
- ▶ What support would make this easier?

Coaching shifts the dynamic from control to ownership. It invites people into the solution rather than pushing them toward it. When professionals feel ownership, they engage at a higher level. When they feel recognized, they contribute more freely. When they feel trusted, they take initiative. Coaching builds distributed leadership. Distributed leadership builds resilient organizations.

PRACTICAL MOVES TO LEAD WITHOUT AUTHORITY

This is not abstract theory. It is behavior. If you want to expand your influence starting today, use this playbook.

LEADING WITHOUT AUTHORITY IN THE REAL WORLD

A senior director I worked with led a high-stakes launch that depended on three teams that did not report to her. Deadlines were slipping. Frustration was rising. The default move would have been escalation and blame.

Instead, she led without authority. First, she clarified the win. She reduced the launch into three outcomes, each with a clear metric and date. Then she met one-on-one with the functional leaders and asked a simple question: What is the one thing that would make this easier for your team?

The answers were not complicated. One team needed a decision that had been stuck in email. One team needed scope clarity. One team needed recognition because they felt like a dumping ground.

She created alignment by mapping each request back to the shared goal. She built credibility by doing what she promised within 48 hours. She also practiced EPR in every interaction. She encouraged effort during uncertainty, praised progress publicly, and recognized specific contributions in group meetings.

The energy shifted. People stopped protecting themselves and started protecting the outcome. The launch hit the date. More important, the teams trusted each other more after it was done.

That is the power of influence.

Clarify the win. Define measurable outcomes before seeking support. If you cannot define the finish line, you cannot lead people there. Map the stakeholders. Identify who is impacted, who has decision rights, and who has informal influence. Most initiatives succeed or fail in the informal layer.

Build relationships before you need them. Influence is relational, not transactional. Trust is built in normal moments, not crisis moments. Initiate conversations early. Do not wait for formal meetings. Most resistance grows in silence. One-on-one clarity prevents group conflict.

Offer solutions, not complaints. Bring options to the table. Leaders without authority gain credibility by thinking in solutions. Make it easy to say yes. Do the prep work. Provide a simple decision. Reduce complexity. The easier you make action, the faster it happens.

Practice EPR daily. Encourage, praise, recognize. Culture shifts through repetition, not speeches. Model the standard. Energy is contagious. So is accountability. If you want speed, be responsive. If you want ownership, take it first. If you want excellence, raise your personal standard.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Leading without authority can backfire if you fall into two traps. The first trap is trying to be liked. Influence is not popularity. Sometimes you need to challenge, hold boundaries, and speak truth. Respect beats comfort. The second trap is acting like you have authority when you do not. That triggers resistance fast. Influence is earned through partnership, not power plays. Stay grounded. Stay clear. Stay accountable.

Organizations that rely solely on positional authority become rigid. Decision making slows. Innovation narrows. Accountability diffuses upward. Organizations that cultivate leaders at every level move differently. They adapt faster. They collaborate more fluidly. They retain high performers who feel valued. They solve problems at the level where they happen. Leading without authority is not a soft skill. It is a competitive advantage.

THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP

As technology reshapes work and AI handles increasing levels of analysis and execution, human leadership will differentiate itself through influence. Authority will continue to flatten. Titles will matter less than credibility. Control will matter less than connection.

The question every professional must answer is simple: Will you wait for the title? Or will you lead now? Title may give you position. Influence gives you power. And in today's environment, power belongs to those who are willing to step forward without permission. That is not just good leadership. That is how organizations win. [CO](#)

JM Ryerson is a leadership strategist, business coach, author, and founder of the Let's Go Win ecosystem, a personal and professional development platform empowering individuals and teams to lead with clarity, courage, and consistency. With nearly two decades of C-suite and coaching experience, Ryerson has guided high-performing leaders, entrepreneurs, and sales teams to overcome self-doubt, level up their mindset, and create cultures that win from the inside out.

2

ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ALIGNMENT

How leaders create alignment, strengthen culture, and better understand the human dynamics that drive engagement, collaboration, and execution



Driving Alignment in Complex Organizations

BY JANICE KAPNER



There's a moment in many leadership careers that doesn't get talked about enough.

You're in the room. The stakes are high. Whatever decision you make next carries a lot of weight. And you don't own the budget, the product, or the revenue, but you're still expected to influence the outcome.

I've spent much of my career in that position, advising CEOs, working alongside boards, and helping guide organizations through transformations, mergers, and high-pressure moments where alignment was critical. And what I've learned is that leadership isn't defined by authority. It's defined by influence.

In today's organizations, many of which are cross-functional and increasingly complex, the leaders responsible for shaping outcomes often don't have direct control over the teams

required to execute them. Influence has become as important as hierarchy. Sometimes, even more important.

WHY TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP MODELS BREAK DOWN

The traditional command-and-control model assumes that leaders have clear lines of authority, decisions flow top-down, and accountability follows structure. That's all well and good, but it's no longer the reality in most modern organizations.

Work happens across functions. Decisions involve multiple stakeholders. Execution depends on teams that don't report to the same leader.

Add in the pace of change, whether it's digital transformation, AI-driven workflows, or large-scale integrations, and the gaps widen even further. In these environments, authority alone

doesn't move work forward. You need alignment to really get the ball moving, and alignment is a direct result of how leaders show up.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE

Authority is assigned, but influence is earned. You can have a title and still struggle to drive alignment. You can lack formal authority and still shape outcomes in meaningful ways.

In my experience, the leaders who are most effective in complex organizations are the ones who understand that no one is obligated to follow you just because you're in the room. The people around the table earned their seats too.

If you want to influence decisions, especially when you don't control the outcomes, you have to build credibility with the very people you're expecting to just follow you willingly. And this doesn't just come overnight. You have to build it conversation by conversation, decision by decision.

FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR LEADING WITHOUT AUTHORITY

To help you not only build credibility but also learn how to lead without authority and really connect with your teams, I'm sharing my four guiding principles that have helped me in my own career and while advising other leaders: know the business deeply; be deliberate in how you show up; listen to understand, not respond; and separate ego from outcome.

Know the business deeply. This principle is important because one of the fastest ways to lose influence is to operate only within your functional lane. I've said this often, and I mean it: Don't settle for being the communications person who doesn't understand the business, the HR leader who doesn't understand the numbers, or the strategy lead who doesn't understand the customer.

If you want to lead without authority, you need to know:

- How the company makes money
- What the financial targets are
- Where the pressure points exist
- What the board is focused on
- Who the customer is and what they care about
- What the competitive landscape looks like
- Where the organization is trying to go in 12, 24, and 36 months

You don't need to be the technical expert in every area. You just need to be well-versed enough in the information that you're a credible source. When you understand the business, your recommendations are grounded in reality. You speak in

outcomes, not abstractions, and you connect your perspective to what matters most. Over time, you'll start to be seen less as a functional leader and more as a business partner. That's when you'll really see your influence start to build.

Be deliberate in how you show up. When you don't have authority, being deliberate in how you show up matters more than what you say. This is where I see many leaders unintentionally dilute their influence. They overexplain, speak too often, and constantly try to prove they belong in the room. As a result, their voice carries less weight.

Conversely, influence requires discipline. It means:

- Speaking with intention, not frequency
- Being clear and direct, not overly polished
- Holding your ground without being combative
- Letting your ideas stand on their own

When you operate this way, people begin to notice—not because you're louder, but because you're more deliberate. The longer you stay consistent here, the clearer it'll be that when you speak, it matters, and people will listen. That's influence.

At its core, leading without authority is about reducing friction.

Listen to understand. Listening is one of the most underrated leadership skills. And in environments where you don't have authority, it becomes a strategic advantage, making it even more important. But I'm not talking about passive listening. This is active, intentional listening. What are people reacting to? Where do objections keep surfacing? What concerns are being repeated? What language creates resistance?

If you pay attention, you'll start to notice patterns, and addressing those is how you build your influence.

When you truly understand stakeholders, your entire approach sharpens:

- You anticipate objections before they're raised.
- You address the real issues, not the surface arguments.
- You shape proposals that already account for resistance.

When people feel understood, they engage differently. They're less defensive, more open, and more willing to align with you. Getting more people on your side in this way is how to give your influence momentum.



Separate ego from outcome. This becomes important because when you're operating without authority, your ideas will be challenged, reshaped, and debated, and sometimes they'll even be attributed to someone else.

That's the reality of cross-functional leadership. If you're not prepared for it, it can be incredibly frustrating. I get it. I've been there. But the leaders who build lasting influence are the ones who stay focused on the outcome, not the credit.

That doesn't mean you allow your work to be misrepresented. But it does mean you don't let ego get in the way of progress, because in complex organizations, ideas are going to evolve, input will be shared across departments, and, for the most part, decisions are collective. Ownership of a single idea isn't the goal. The goal is to see the outcome be successful, regardless of who gets credit or who did the bulk of the work.

When you consistently show up with that mindset, people notice. They begin to trust that you're there for the business, not the spotlight.

THE ROLE OF TRUST, CLARITY, AND COMMUNICATION

At its core, leading without authority is about reducing friction, and the three most effective tools for doing that are trust, clarity, and communication.

Trust is built through consistency. Clarity comes from understanding. Communication is what connects the two. When all three of these elements are present, teams align faster, decisions move more efficiently, and overall execution improves.

However, when they're absent, you'll notice misalignment start to grow, assumptions begin to fill the gaps you're not addressing, and momentum across the board slow to a halt. I've seen this play out most clearly during moments of significant business transformation, such as mergers, restructurings, and other strategic operational pivots. Authority is often fragmented in these environments because no single leader owns the entire outcome.

In these cases, alignment, once again, becomes the difference between success and failure. In those moments, leaders who can articulate the "why" behind decisions, connect priorities across functions, and reinforce consistent messaging become

the stabilizing force in the organization, even without formal control.

THE COMPOUNDING EFFECT OF INFLUENCE

Organizations aren't getting simpler. They're getting more interconnected, more dynamic, and more reliant on cross-functional execution. And with the rise of AI and new ways of working, that complexity will only increase. This means your ability to lead without authority is becoming a core leadership capability.

When you consistently understand the business, show up with clarity and discipline, listen intentionally, and stay focused on outcomes, you send a signal to the rest of the team. You're basically saying: "I understand the stakes. I respect the people in the room. I'm here to move the organization forward."

That signal compounds the more you keep up with it. You'll notice people start to invite you in earlier, seek out your perspective, test ideas with you, and advocate for your involvement in conversations and issues you may not have been invited to earlier.

Bottom line, you become someone the organization relies on, not because you have authority but because you've built influence.

Remember, leading without authority isn't about control. It's all about credibility. And you have to build credibility over time through knowledge, discipline, intentional listening, and consistency. In complex organizations, that's what drives alignment, and in many cases, that's what determines whether strategy actually turns into execution.

At the end of the day, here's your biggest takeaway: Leadership isn't about the authority you're given. It's about the influence you earn. [CC](#)

Janice Kapner is CEO and founder of Kapner Perspective Group, which provides hands-on advisory support to CEOs, CCOs, CMOs, executive leadership teams, boards, and agencies when clarity, credibility, and judgment matter most, helping them navigate complexity, transformation, and high-stakes or high-impact moments. She is former chief communications and corporate responsibility officer at T-Mobile US and a senior communications leader at Microsoft.



Why Engagement Surveys Miss the Real Story

BY SUMMER ALEXANDER

Picture this: Your quarterly company-wide survey is completed, and the results look fairly stable. The scores you received from your team indicate that the members are confident in your leadership and would recommend you to others. You are feeling good. But before you celebrate, there may be a different story unfolding. One of your favorite direct reports is quietly interviewing for another role. Your most productive team member is on the verge of burnout. The survey may show everything is fine. In reality, your team is struggling.

That gap has a real cost. Global employee engagement dropped to 21% in 2024, with an estimated \$438 billion in lost productivity tied to it, according to Gallup's "State of the Global Workplace" report in April 2025. PwC's "2024 Trust Survey" found that while 86% of business executives believed employee trust was high, only 67% of employees agreed. For most organizations, the primary tool for understanding how employees are doing is a survey, which employees have learned to answer carefully.

This does not mean engagement surveys are not useful. They are helpful for spotting patterns across teams and seeing trends over time. The problem is that employees often hold back critical feedback when they are unsure of how it will be received or whether anything will actually change. The result is a version of reality that looks fine on paper and tells you almost nothing about what is actually happening. A 2024 Gallup study found that 42% of employees who voluntarily left their organization said their manager or organization could have done something to prevent it. If employees do not have an outlet to express their true concerns, leaders have no way to address them, leaving everyone in a state of artificial harmony.

Many leaders do not intentionally create this kind of dynamic. Most move into leadership because they were good at their jobs and genuinely want to see their organization succeed. What they rarely get is any real preparation for the messier, harder work of actually leading people. I recently facilitated a leadership development program in which one manager stated that this was the first formal training he had ever participated in during his 10 years as a leader. His experience is not unusual. The Center for Creative Leadership reported in October 2024 that nearly 60% of first-time managers never receive any training when they transition into their new leadership role. Without preparation, leaders tend to fall back on what feels most comfortable. That might mean avoiding difficult conversations, treating silence as agreement, or assuming the team is fine because the survey scores look stable.

What they need are practices grounded in human-centered leadership, a way of leading that operates on the simple premise that people need to feel safe enough to tell you the truth. This is less about collecting data and more about

everyday behavior. Leaders tell the truth, hear the truth, and act on it. Those habits take shape in routine moments that influence how teams communicate. One way to gauge this everyday truth-telling behavior is by observing what people are comfortable saying in routine moments such as project updates, team meetings, and weekly one-on-ones. Each of these leadership capabilities—telling the truth, hearing the truth, and acting on it—shows up in distinct but connected ways.

THE WILLINGNESS TO TELL THE TRUTH

During the early months of the global pandemic in 2020, I worked for an organization that went from in-person to fully remote overnight. I remember my manager telling our team that she had no idea how to keep us engaged or how we would be able to move our work forward under these new and unexpected circumstances. Leaders often carry the weight of feeling they have to have all the answers, and admitting they don't can feel too risky. But her honesty gave the rest of us permission to say what we were actually feeling. Once the truth was verbalized, everyone was able to share their concerns, and we worked together to develop a plan to move forward.

You don't have to expose all of your vulnerabilities to tell the truth. It is an opportunity to acknowledge when things are challenging rather than trying to figure out all the answers alone. Call out the problems and invite your team to help you develop a solution. If a decision didn't land the way you intended, say so. If the team is stretched too thin, acknowledge it directly.

People are usually already aware of what is happening. What they are watching for is whether you are willing to address the challenges. Even when the truth is uncomfortable, addressing it prevents teams from existing in a state of surface-level agreement. It also shows your team that honesty is valued and that having difficult conversations is a sign of a healthy team with a strong foundation of trust.



Without preparation, leaders tend to fall back on what feels most comfortable. That might mean avoiding difficult conversations, treating silence as agreement, or assuming the team is fine because the survey scores look stable.

THE COURAGE TO HEAR THE TRUTH

If a leader's willingness to tell the truth opens the door to honest dialogue, the way they receive feedback determines whether that door stays open. That is not to say receiving feedback is easy or even that you have to act on all of it. However, as a leader, you want to create a space where people feel comfortable sharing concerns, speaking up if they make a mistake, and asking questions that may challenge your decisions.

Early in my leadership journey, a leader told me that I often became defensive when I received difficult feedback. She said my initial response was to double down on my perspective and look for evidence that my thinking was right. It was hard to hear, but I knew that critical feedback usually contained at least some truth. When I made a conscious effort to listen more openly, I became a stronger leader and my team dynamics improved. People didn't feel pressured to agree with everything I said and felt comfortable asking tough questions and flagging risks.

Some common signs that you struggle to receive feedback are interrupting people, overexplaining, minimizing concerns, diminishing the person delivering the message, shifting blame, or appearing to accept feedback but never making any meaningful changes. When teams witness these behaviors, they begin to assess whether speaking up is worth the risk in the future. Employees can grow resentful when their feedback is heard and nothing happens afterward.

THE COMMITMENT TO ACT

Any trust built by being willing to tell and hear the truth can quickly erode if leaders choose not to act on what they heard. This does not mean leaders are required to implement every suggestion, but it does mean you need to acknowledge the feedback and show that it was considered. It is also okay to take time to reflect on what you heard and decide what actions make sense.

Acting on the feedback you receive is not about being nice for the sake of being liked. Acting on feedback does not mean overlooking poor performance or tolerating bad behavior. Implementing feedback can be as simple as making small adjustments, such as changing a meeting format, revisiting workload distribution, or publicly acknowledging team members' contributions.

When people see that feedback leads to change, they are more likely to keep speaking up. It's also okay to test a change, get more feedback, and decide to revert to a previous process if the change doesn't work. However, once you decide to implement a change, you want to make sure you close the loop. Let employees know their input helped to influence the decision, which signals to them that speaking up leads to action. You can also explain why a change is not possible or share the tradeoffs involved in a decision. This way, the team understands the thinking behind decisions, and they are less likely to assume their feedback wasn't valuable. The most important part of acting is showing that the input was considered and communicating what will happen next.

Telling the truth, hearing the truth, and acting on it are not isolated skills to be practiced once a quarter during a survey cycle. Creating opportunities in day-to-day moments helps ensure that you understand your team's needs and the challenges they may be facing. Leaders can intentionally build these habits into their regular interactions. Start by implementing intentional feedback loops, which can be as simple as ending a project by asking what worked well and what should be done differently next time. This approach makes feedback a team norm instead of a risky event with potentially unwanted consequences.

Using one-on-one meetings to do a pulse check also helps to create a safe space where real conversations can take place. Ask questions such as "What is getting in your way?" or "What is one thing I could do differently to better support you?" Team members may find it easier to surface concerns outside of a group setting. Add monthly brainstorming sessions where ideas are welcomed and debated without critique. This provides an outlet for ideas in a context where rejection is not a part of the process. Implementing these simple trust-building practices and offering multiple opportunities for feedback can help shift the team toward a culture where feedback is part of everyday work. 

Summer Alexander is a leadership development consultant and founder of Simply Training Solutions. She has led teams inside global organizations, coached over 125 leaders, and delivered leader development programs across four continents. Learn more at summeralexander.com

WHAT IS THE 'NEW DEAL' IN THE WORKPLACE?

BY ANGELA RIXON



Gallup's "State of the Global Workplace 2025" report puts global employee engagement at 21% and estimates the cost of disengagement at \$438 billion in lost productivity. Full engagement, Gallup suggests, could unlock \$9.6 trillion in value, roughly 9% of global GDP.

At the same time, the World Health Organization formally recognized burnout as an occupational phenomenon in the ICD-11, describing it as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by exhaustion, increased mental distance or cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy.

These are not isolated data points. They signal that the employment deal many organizations still operate under is no

longer aligned with the reality people experience at work, or with what organizations need from their workforce.

For much of the 20th century, the agreement was simple and largely unspoken: deliver, stay loyal, and you will be rewarded with stability, progression, and status. That "old deal" still shows up in performance ratings, promotion pathways, and leadership reflexes, especially top-down communication and the assumption that commitment is proven through long hours, often at a relentless pace.

But the context has changed faster than those assumptions. The "new deal" in the workplace is not a flexible-work policy. It is a reset of the psychological contract: a shift from employment as a transaction to work as a partnership, one

that creates value for the organization and meaningful growth for the individual. A simple reality shapes it—disruption is now the baseline condition of work. I see this tension most clearly when leaders say they want agility yet keep approval structures designed for stability.

WHY THE OLD DEAL IS BREAKING DOWN

The old deal is failing because the world of work has shifted faster than the systems and assumptions built for a more stable era have.

Work is being redesigned at scale as AI and technological shifts converge with powerful macro forces. In the World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs Report 2025," job disruption is projected to equate to 22% of roles by 2030, with 170 million new roles created and 92 million displaced (a net gain of 78 million).

This isn't only about job titles. It's about capability. Employers polled for the WEF report expected 39% of workers' core skills to change by 2030, and they reported that 50% of their workforce had completed training as part of learning and development initiatives (up from 41% in 2023). Learning is moving from a "perk" to an operating requirement.

In this context, "loyalty for security" is hard for organizations to offer and hard for employees to rely on. People are responding pragmatically. In Gallup's "State of the Global Workplace 2025" report, 50% of employees globally said they are watching for or actively seeking a new job.

The "war for talent" frame is now too narrow: What's really happening is a renegotiation of the value exchange. Employees know they must protect their employability, and employers need a workforce that can adapt, learn, and execute in the face of change.

The strain of this transition is showing up most clearly in the manager layer, the operating core of the organization. Gallup reports that manager engagement fell from 30% to 27% in 2024, a concerning shift given that 70% of team engagement is attributable to the manager. Deloitte Insights explained why in its March 2025 article, "Is There Still Value in the Role of Managers?": Managers spent nearly 40% of their time firefighting or on administrative work, and over a third felt unprepared for the people-leader aspects of the role.

In my work with leaders, the break in the deal is rarely dramatic. It's the accumulation of minor mismatches over time: shifting priorities, rigid accountability, and routine decisions that still require senior approval. One leader described it as "running faster each quarter just to stand still."

Leadership capacity has become a business constraint. When the manager layer burns out or disengages, execution suffers, along with customer experience and culture.

Finally, the "where" of work has changed what belonging requires. Hybrid and flexible models can increase autonomy and improve access to talent, but connection does not automatically follow. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, in its "CIPD Good Work Index 2025," reports that 37% of UK workers feel lonely at work (12% always/often; 25%



The new deal is not “we will keep you forever.” It is “we will build a high-trust partnership where, for the time you are with us, you can do work that matters, develop capability, and be treated as a whole human being while delivering outcomes that matter.”

sometimes), and its research on hybrid working highlights negative impacts on managers' ability to lead effectively, employees' connection to organizational purpose, and overall culture. A 2025 study in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* reinforces the point, finding that belonging in hybrid settings depends on distinct remote and onsite factors, including structured communication, time control, and intentional human connection, rather than proximity alone.

The old deal, built on stability, tolerable stress, and proximity, is colliding with a world in which most organizations can no longer offer those conditions, and employees are recalibrating expectations accordingly.

WHAT THE NEW DEAL IS

If the old deal was transactional, the new deal is relational and developmental: a set of mutual, partnership-oriented promises that make modern work feel worth it for both the employer and employee.

This is not an “anything goes” deal. Accountability, performance, and commercial outcomes still matter. The shift is what earns commitment (and discretionary effort) in conditions of uncertainty.

In my book *Meaning Over Purpose: The CEO's Strategic Blueprint for Growth and Lasting Engagement* (Practical Inspiration Publishing), I describe this shift as moving from compliance (doing what is asked because you must) to commitment (bringing judgment, creativity, and resilience because the work aligns with who you are, or who you are becoming). That distinction matters because, in a volatile environment, organizations can't expect policy to reduce disengagement; they have to earn commitment through experience.

A psychological contract lens is useful here because it makes visible what leaders often leave implicit: People respond to the perceived “rules of engagement” and mutual obligations as much as to the formal contract. When expectations are misaligned, trust erodes. When expectations are made explicit and delivered consistently, partnership becomes possible. The new deal language names what many employees feel but rarely articulate: a shift in what they believe work should provide.

So, the new deal is not “we will keep you forever.” It is “we will build a high-trust partnership where, for the time you are with

us, you can do work that matters, develop capability, and be treated as a whole human being while delivering outcomes that matter.”

THE TERMS PEOPLE ARE NEGOTIATING FOR NOW

Across sectors, four conditions consistently underpin sustainable performance: autonomy, growth, connection, and the translation of organizational purpose into personal meaning.

Autonomy with accountability. People want decision rights, flexibility, and an authentic voice without losing clarity about what “good” looks like. This is less about “letting go” and more about redesigning control: fewer approval chains, clearer guardrails, and shifting from monitoring activity to enabling outcomes. It aligns with the WEF's picture of accelerated change: Organizations need faster decisions closer to the work to compete in disrupted environments.

Growth and employability. When core skills are projected to shift at scale by 2030, development cannot sit at the edge of the operating model. Training participation is rising globally, a signal that continuous learning is becoming part of the new deal rather than an optional extra.

Connection and belonging. The data is increasingly evident that loneliness and cultural fragmentation are performance issues. When 37% of UK workers report feeling lonely at work at least sometimes, and employers report hybrid work's negative impact on culture and purpose connection, leaders cannot treat belonging as a “nice to have.” It is infrastructure for execution, collaboration, and retention, and it must be actively designed across both remote and onsite modes.

Meaning, not just corporate purpose. Many organizations have invested heavily in purpose statements. The employee question is more immediate: How does my work matter to someone, and why should I care? PwC's “Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey 2025” found that employees who see their work as most meaningful are 91% more motivated than those who find it least meaningful.

Leaders need a sharper distinction: purpose sets direction; meaning fuels energy. When they connect, people can see why their work matters and feel safe enough to act on it. PwC's 2025 research shows that employees who experience the highest levels of psychological safety are 72% more motivated

than those who feel the least safe. Yet, only 56% said it is safe to try new approaches at work, and just 54% said their team treats failure as a learning opportunity.

These findings challenge the assumption that motivation is primarily about rewards and incentives. Modern motivation is increasingly shaped by whether people feel safe to contribute and can see growth, experience meaning, and trust the direction of travel.

And that direction of travel includes AI. PwC reports that 54% of workers had used AI for their jobs in the past year, but only 14% said they use GenAI daily. Workforce transformation will not happen through technology deployment alone. It depends on adoption, capability development, and trust.

HOW LEADERS MAKE THE NEW DEAL REAL

The new deal becomes real in the moments that matter: how decisions are made, how work is designed, how feedback is given, and what gets recognized. A practical managerial question is: What am I reinforcing? Because reinforcement, rather than rhetoric, is how psychological contracts are experienced day to day.

Start by redesigning decision rights. Push decisions closer to the work with clear guardrails: what success looks like, the constraints, and when to escalate. This is how autonomy and accountability grow together.

Make progress and growth visible. People can work hard and still feel stagnant. Build growth into business-as-usual cadence: stretch assignments tied to capability, after-action reviews, and feedback translated into the next step. Protect time for development.

Rebuild trust in performance management. Deloitte's 2025 research found that 61% of managers and 72% of workers could not say they trust their organization's performance management process. And only about a quarter (26%) of organizations said their managers are very or extremely effective at enabling performance. Deloitte notes that this may reflect managers spending only about 13% of their time developing people. Trust grows when criteria are transparent, feedback is frequent, and conversations focus on future contribution and learning rather than surprise negative judgments.

Engineer psychological safety with standards. The PwC data makes the business relevance of safety explicit: Safety is a motivation lever. But it is often misunderstood as "lowering the bar." A more useful perspective is candor with respect, and accountability with learning. Leaders can model this by normalizing learning from failure and rewarding thoughtful risk taking when it improves outcomes.



Design connections deliberately in hybrid work. CIPD's findings that hybrid work can negatively affect culture, purpose, connection, and managers' ability to lead teams effectively are a warning: Hybrid work without intentional design becomes a slow-leak risk. Practical design choices include shared team rhythms (not constant meetings), intentional onboarding into culture, and "connection moments" that rebuild the informal learning and belonging that proximity previously provided.

Treat AI transformation as a partnership challenge, not a tech rollout. The WEF notes that upskilling is the most common workforce response employers expect, and PwC reports that workers already see productivity and quality benefits from AI use, yet daily GenAI use remains relatively low. The leadership task is clear: Set guardrails, invest in capability pathways, and communicate honestly about what AI will change and what it won't.

THE LEADERSHIP MOMENT AHEAD

If you're relying on heroic effort to hit targets, the deal is already failing. You're just not measuring the cost yet. The new deal offers a more sustainable model of management.

When engagement is falling, managers are disengaging, and half the workforce is watching the market, the risk is structural. This gap matters. Transformation will not happen through technology deployment alone. It depends on whether people feel safe enough to experiment, skilled enough to adapt, and clear enough about why the change matters.

The best new deals will not be written in an HR policy. They will be written, and delivered, through managerial behavior in the lived experience of partnership, day after day. 

Angela Rixon is the founder and CEO of The Centre for Meaningful Work Ltd. and is an award-winning leadership strategist, executive coach, and culture-transformation specialist with more than 25 years of experience. She helps CEOs and executive teams design human-centered cultures that achieve measurable business results while fostering inclusion, well-being, and authenticity.

YOUR GOAL IS SUCCESS

Ours is helping you get there

Experience hands-on learning with renowned faculty in CMC's highly engaging classroom environments. Courses feature real-world case studies and role playing with feedback for immediate improvement. We help you break through barriers and apply new skills for better business results.

Open Enrollment Sessions for Individuals and Teams

- ▶ Learn in public classroom sessions conveniently offered across Canada or virtually.
- ▶ Take risks in a safe environment while gaining insights from peers with diverse perspectives

Exclusive Group Training for Organizations

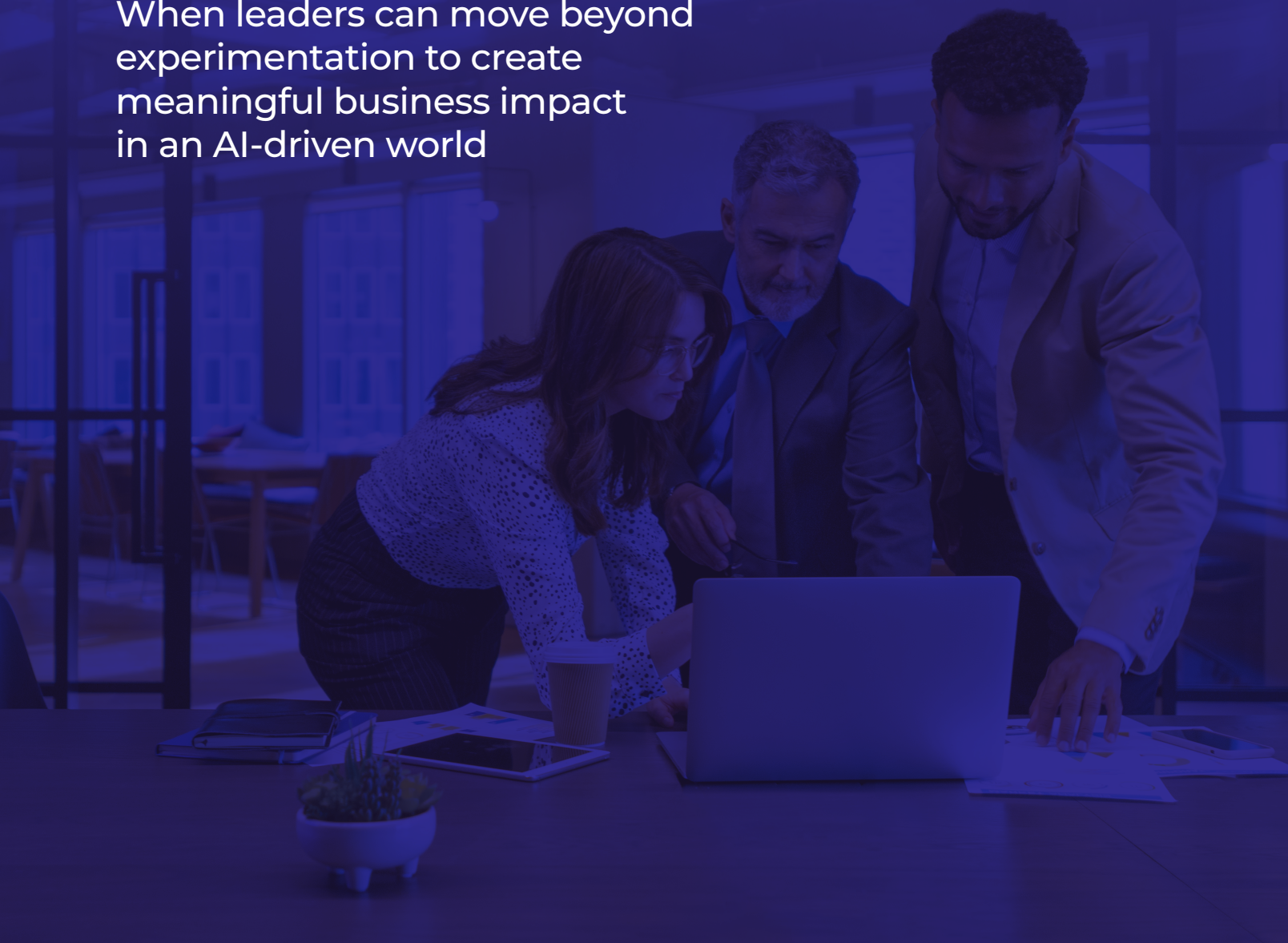
- ▶ Enjoy all the benefits of CMC training delivered privately at the location of your choice or live online
- ▶ Benefit from standard or customized learning aligned to your organization's goals
- ▶ License our flexible content in house through your trainers or ours

INVEST IN TRAINING THAT LASTS
cmcoutperform.com

3

AI, INNOVATION, AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

When leaders can move beyond experimentation to create meaningful business impact in an AI-driven world



HOW TO MOVE AI FROM PILOT TO PRODUCTION

BY MARTIN BITTNER



Generative AI is widely considered a decade-defining technology that is creating opportunities across all sectors and industries, for private and professional use. No technology has ever seen an adoption curve as rapid as AI tools—surpassing the internet and social media in terms of

time till mass adoption, according to a September 2024 “On the Economy” blog post from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (“The Rapid Adoption of Generative AI”). In the same vein, IDC’s FutureScape 2025 report states that investment in enterprise AI adoption will cross the \$150 billion level.

Implementing AI at scale is a transformative process, and it must be seen not as a sprint but a marathon that requires preparation, alignment, and commitment.

McKinsey experts say that about 80% of companies are already using AI in at least one business function ("The State of AI in 2025").

Based on these data, it might appear that AI, and especially enterprise AI, is an almost magical success story rewriting the playbook across all industries. LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, in AllBusiness.com's "15 Quotes on the Future of AI," said "AI is going to reshape every industry and every job."

However, there is a different side to this story: The MIT NANDA report published in summer 2025 ("The GenAI Divide: State of AI in Business 2025") sent shockwaves across boardrooms when it found that about 95% of AI pilot projects never make it to production and/or fail to generate a return on investment. This finding is not an isolated one but is well in line with conclusions from IDC's recent CIO Playbook ("88% of AI Pilots Fail to Reach Production—but That's Not All on IT"), which shows only about 12% of pilots/proof-of-concepts progressing to full deployment.

Two questions emerge. How do we reconcile the general perception of AI, and the news stories of rapid and successful AI adoption, with the MIT NANDA report? And what can leaders do to ensure that they are part of the 5% that see an actual ROI and enterprise adoption?

I have spent the past 10 years developing automation solutions for complex enterprise workflows and processes. As a two-time founder and CEO of a company that delivers AI workflow automation for the enterprise, I see firsthand every day what it takes to successfully automate the countless processes that drive biopharma, insurance, industrials, and so many other industries behind the scenes, and what leads to actual value creation.

The following learnings summarize some of the key insights I have collected and offer a perspective into how leaders can ensure that their choices will lead to actual AI deployment in production, at scale, and more important, to a clear return on investment.

BEWARE: AI IS NOT SOFTWARE

Artificial intelligence (and more specifically, in the context of this article, generative AI) is inherently different from software or code. AI operates as a probabilistic system that makes predictions based on likelihood and statistics, as opposed to

the deterministic nature of software that performs the exact same operation every time it is called upon. What that means is that adopting AI has to be done in a way that prioritizes dependability, reliability, and verification of the validity of its outputs through technical means as well as human oversight instead of assuming it will work the same way it worked in a demo.

Bringing AI on board is similar to hiring a junior employee. A newly hired employee learns from the company's SOPs, handbooks, prior work outputs, and above all by observing and interacting with colleagues. AI—in contrast to software—can do the same, learning from the data and the human feedback it is presented with. That is one of the greatest promises of AI, especially agentic AI, when deployed correctly: the ability to learn and fully adopt a specific organization's specific way of doing things, thus becoming an invaluable member of your team. Yet, this also means that training and oversight (often called "human-in-the-loop") are essential and have to be implemented from Day One.

Also, applying one generic AI solution will not fit the needs of many companies. We often think about the corporate world classified by sectors and industries, but in reality, even within one space, every organization is different and there is no "average company." For example, Toyota, Rolls-Royce, and Tesla are all car manufacturers, but a generic solution developed for the average of the three would require each of the three companies to change its specific processes to adapt to this new tool and, as a result, incur significant costs. This is unlikely to add much value to any of the three organizations.

AI can overcome this traditional way of thinking about the world, given its above-mentioned ability to learn and thus adapt to specific workflows in a tailored, n of 1 fashion. This means the right enterprise AI framework mirrors and augments your own processes, instead of forcing you to adopt someone else's way of doing things.

INTEGRATION MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

To make it brief: AI in isolation is pointless. The value of bringing AI into the enterprise is almost solely derived from deep integration into your data and across your organization. The power of AI lies in its ability to ingest and integrate large amounts of (structured as well as unstructured) data that

form the input layer for meaningful insights into the inner workings of your company and any output that needs to be produced. Whether it is about monitoring and planning production processes, performing root cause analysis for downtimes and incidents, or generating reports, memos, and regulatory documents, it is the data distributed across your organization that enables AI to generate all of these insights and outputs in a fraction of the time and cost it currently takes.

For an organization to integrate AI in the best ways possible, the right language must be chosen. No, we are not talking about English, French, or Mandarin, but about the programming languages underpinning AI and most enterprise applications. While AI firmly lives in the world of Python—which is ideally suited for experimentation, rapid development and prototyping, and generally data science work—most enterprise applications, the glue that keeps companies running, reside in Java, ensuring stability, scalability, dependability, and security for the applications that power our workflows.

This also means that to deploy AI in the enterprise—not just in isolated, sandboxed pilots but at scale and in production—we need to bridge that divide and leverage Java frameworks that can natively embed AI. In this way, companies get the best of both worlds, with the ability to seamlessly combine the power of AI with the strength of their existing enterprise tech-stack.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PEOPLE

Understanding, selecting, developing, and implementing the right technology is only one half of the equation; people are the other. Change management is a critical factor for the success or failure of any AI initiative, and its importance cannot be overstated.

Therefore, it is key to understand incentive structures and perceptions among company leadership and the wider stakeholders of a given process; to identify, coach, and support champions who can galvanize excitement and buy-in around new initiatives; to agree on success criteria and monitor them from the start; and to address concerns and fears openly and constructively. Implementing AI at scale is a transformative process, and it must be seen not as a sprint but a marathon that requires preparation, alignment, and commitment.

AI is undoubtedly one of the most defining trends, if not the single most defining trend, of this decade, and it will permanently change the way companies operate. Those that successfully adapt to this reality will undoubtedly take market share from those that don't, some of which will become the next Nokia or Kodak. But as leaders navigate this transformation, it is worth bearing in mind and communicating clearly to boards and teams alike that change is a natural part of the order of things—customer preferences change,

products become obsolete, new competitors emerge, and global market conditions shift.

To survive and thrive in the market, companies have always had to constantly adapt and evolve, and this time is no different. The only question is whether companies manage to keep up with the world changing around them by making smart choices, or get sidelined by others who are more attentive in their observations and more assertive in their actions.

BRINGING IT BACK TO THE BEGINNING

At the beginning of this article, we asked two questions that we can now answer: There are widespread misconceptions regarding what AI is, how it works, and how to best judge in the procurement phase whether it solves an actual business need in the way we need it to. The old playbooks for judging software demos and pilots do not apply to AI solutions. The challenges, risks, and pitfalls are different ones, and they need to be evaluated accordingly. Companies that embark on a pilot and publicly announce a successful AI deployment often realize shortly thereafter that actual production use of AI is a very different matter altogether. In times of extreme competitive and board pressure, it can all too often be tempting to signal to the outside world that one isn't obsolete but is instead at the forefront of leveraging AI. Confusing early sandboxed and often poorly planned pilots with actual production use of AI is a costly but sadly common mistake.

But what can be done? How can leaders ensure that their companies implement AI successfully at scale and in production? The key to that success is to act on a solid basis of understanding the basic workings of AI, while drawing on one's core strength: No one knows your own company better than you do, and no one has the same depth of insight into your use cases.

Aware of that superpower, leaders can then follow the steps and learnings outlined above to help them move from ideation and use case definition to designing meaningful pilots and managing a successful enterprise rollout. By doing so, they can position themselves in the best possible way against their competitors. In Allbusiness.com's "15 Quotes on the Future of AI," Ginni Rometty, former CEO of IBM, stated, "AI will not replace humans, but those who use AI will replace those who don't." 

Martin Bittner, MD, DPhil, is a two-time founder in workflow automation. He currently serves as co-founder & CEO of Redouble AI, a tech company backed by Y Combinator that leverages GenAI to automate enterprise workflows. Before that, he was the CEO of Arctoris, a successful pharma workflow automation company headquartered in Oxford which he co-founded.



When AI Makes Everyone Sound Smart, Who Stands Out?

BY GRAHAM DAVID

When generative artificial intelligence first became widely accessible, the reaction across business was immediate. Leaders could enter a rough outline and receive a structured argument in seconds. Speeches improved. Strategy documents became cleaner. Emails that once felt clumsy read with fluency and coherence.

For many, the first encounter felt almost disorienting. A tool could produce paragraphs that sounded thoughtful and composed. Within months, early enthusiasm gave way to more sober assessment. Outputs were sometimes generic, facts occasionally wrong, phrasing patterns predictable.

Then something else happened. Users became better at prompting. Models improved. Organizations embedded AI into the daily workflow. What began as novelty became infrastructure. The baseline of written communication rose steadily.

Today, structured articulation is no longer scarce. It is widely available. That shift has consequences for leadership. For decades, articulation functioned as an informal signal of capability. Leaders who could explain complex ideas clearly were often assumed to have thought them through carefully. Confused reasoning frequently revealed itself through hesitant explanation. Communication and cognition tended to move together.

AI has loosened that connection. Two leaders can now produce equally polished proposals. Both can generate persuasive messaging and structured narratives. On paper, their communication may appear indistinguishable in quality. Yet only one may have deeply examined the assumptions beneath the argument.

Articulation has been democratized. Depth has not. This is not a critique of AI. On the contrary, these tools can strengthen leadership when used well. They accelerate drafting, expose structural weaknesses, and allow leaders to explore alternative framing. They act as sparring partners, prompting clearer thinking. The issue emerges when refinement replaces reflection.

When language is shaped before reasoning is fully settled, communication can sound resolved while the underlying judgment remains tentative. The message appears confident. The ownership is partial. The distinction becomes visible not in documents, but in motion.

LEADERSHIP AND CONGRUENCE

Leadership does not reside in slides or email chains. It is exercised in live environments where assumptions are tested, emotions surface, and complexity cannot be avoided.

A board discussion offers a familiar example. A CEO presents a restructuring proposal supported by a well-crafted deck. The narrative is clear, and the risks appear managed. A director

asks, "What is the single assumption that, if incorrect, would undermine this plan?"

A leader who has internalized the analysis can respond directly. They may pause to gather their thoughts, but the answer acknowledges vulnerability, clarifies tradeoffs, and demonstrates awareness of second-order effects. The reasoning is accessible because it belongs to that leader.

A leader who has relied heavily on polished materials often struggles to move beyond prepared phrasing. The answer circles back to slide headings. The language remains smooth. The connection to the underlying uncertainty weakens.

The form survives. The depth does not. To understand why this depth matters, we need to clarify what leadership is.

Leadership is often conflated with position. Titles confer authority, and organizational structures define who can decide. Direction can be enforced through hierarchy. Yet leadership in its substantive sense is the capacity to create belief and alignment under conditions of uncertainty. It is the ability to hold complexity without denial and to articulate it without distortion. It is steadiness when outcomes are unclear.

There is a distinction between positional authority and organic authority. Positional authority derives from role. It enables leaders to issue instructions and allocate resources. Organic authority emerges when people trust that the leader understands the terrain and stands behind their judgment.

AI strengthens positional authority easily. It enhances the presentation of decisions. It helps frame strategy convincingly. It makes communication cleaner and more structured.

Organic authority cannot be manufactured in the same way. Organic authority depends on congruence. Congruent leadership communication describes the alignment between belief, reasoning, and expression. It includes words, tone, pacing, and behavior. When these elements reinforce one another, communication carries weight beyond its literal content.

The visible expression of this alignment is conviction. Conviction in this context does not refer to forcefulness or charisma. It is evident when a leader can explain a position steadily, adapt when challenged, and remain coherent across contexts. It signals ownership rather than assembly.

This extends well beyond high-profile presentations. Leadership unfolds continuously—in one-to-one conversations about performance, in negotiations with external partners, in informal discussions that shape culture, and in moments when difficult information must be shared.

Consider a manager addressing a talented employee whose conduct is affecting team morale. AI can assist in drafting balanced wording for the conversation and can suggest structure and phrasing. Once the exchange begins, however,



no script can substitute for presence. If discomfort causes the leader's tone to soften prematurely, or defensiveness emerges under challenge, the message loses integrity. Congruence is visible in such subtleties.

Political interviews provide another illustration. A public figure is asked a direct question and responds with a rehearsed line that only partially addresses it. The sentence is repeated despite follow-up prompts. The phrasing remains composed while the connection to the question fades. Observers recognize the gap instinctively. The issue is not eloquence. It is disconnection between question and response.

In organizations, similar dynamics unfold more quietly. A leadership team declares commitment to long-term investment while incentives continue to reward short-term performance. Employees observe the inconsistency. The words were articulate, but the alignment was incomplete.

GOING BEYOND “CLEAR” MESSAGING

Congruence is not confined to a single interaction. It includes consistency over time. As AI-generated fluency becomes ubiquitous, audiences grow more discerning. Surface polish becomes expected. It no longer differentiates. Attention shifts to what cannot be templated: judgment, adaptability, and coherence.

At this point, a counterargument often surfaces. If AI improves communication across the board, does that not simply raise standards? If everyone sounds clearer, why does embodiment matter? The answer lies in the nature of leadership itself.

Leadership is not merely the transmission of information. It is the shaping of belief. It requires people to commit effort, accept tradeoffs, and move toward uncertain outcomes. In such contexts, alignment between message and messenger influences credibility. Clear language is necessary, but it is not sufficient.

When stakes are high, people look beyond phrasing. They assess steadiness under challenge. They notice hesitation when assumptions are probed. They observe whether tone and behavior are reinforcing stated priorities. AI can improve

the clarity of what is said. It cannot generate the internal coherence that sustains belief.

WHERE THE VIRTUAL MEETS REALITY

Leaders who are able to use AI's virtual smooth tone but employ actual coherence in their messaging can prevail in three domains: influence and trust, career trajectory, and commercial value.

In environments saturated with polished communication, leaders whose messages feel grounded in genuine reasoning accumulate credibility. When thinking, language, and behavior align, trust compounds over time. Teams are more willing to follow through on difficult decisions. Stakeholders are more prepared to accept uncertainty.

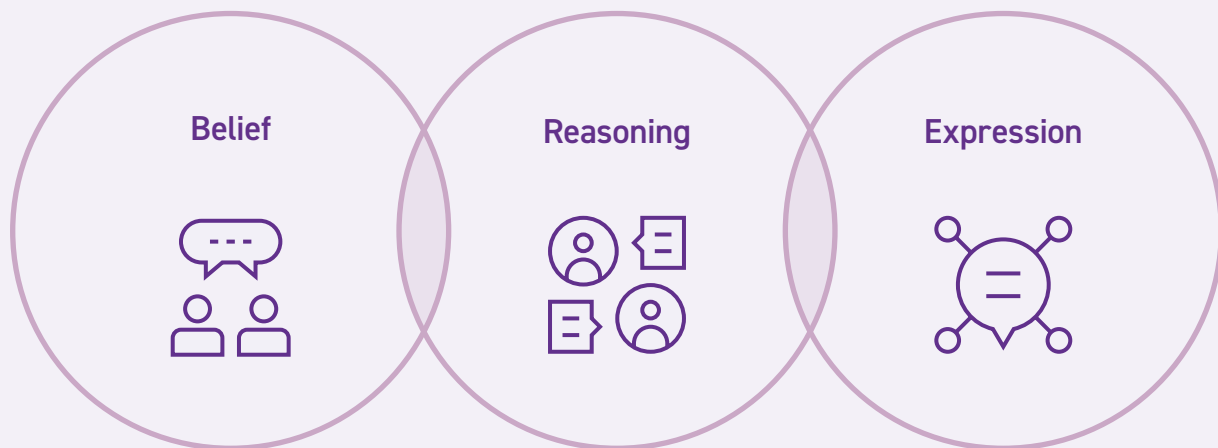
As leaders move into more senior roles, scrutiny intensifies. Board discussions become less scripted. Investor questions become sharper. Media interactions become less predictable. The ability to think clearly in real time and articulate tradeoffs without evasion becomes a marker of readiness. Those who rely heavily on prepared phrasing without demonstrating depth often struggle as exposure increases.

Across markets, routine cognitive tasks are increasingly automated. Administrative drafting can be supported, and structured writing can be accelerated. The more distinctly human capabilities of judgment, presence, and conviction remain scarce. Leaders who can step into complex environments, represent ideas convincingly, and maintain alignment across settings carry increasing value.

Replacing an administrative function with AI may be efficient. Replacing a leader whose authority rests on organic alignment is far more precarious. Scarcity creates premium. As articulation becomes universal, alignment becomes distinctive. This has practical implications for how leaders are assessed and developed.

Promotion processes that rely heavily on prepared presentations risk overvaluing refinement. Assessment that includes unscripted dialogue, scenario-based reasoning, and dynamic questioning surfaces more durable capability.

CONGRUENT LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION



Development priorities must shift accordingly. Leaders benefit from engaging deeply with their assumptions before refining language. They benefit from rehearsing difficult conversations with attention to presence, tone, and phrasing. They benefit from recognizing that measured pauses and visible thinking often strengthen credibility rather than diminish it.

There are simple ways to experiment with this discipline. For example, a leader can try to explain a strategic initiative without slides. If clarity depends entirely on visual scaffolding, further internal work may be required.

Colleagues can be invited to challenge a central assumption. Leaders can observe whether responses become defensive or exploratory.

High-stakes messages could be recorded and reviewed without sound. Do posture and expression reinforce intent?

These practices do not aim at theatrical polish. They extend the degree of ownership behind communication.

The broader context reinforces the importance of this capability. The volume of content competing for attention continues to expand. Generated text, imagery, and video circulate constantly. Well-formed language is abundant. Engagement is limited.

What commands attention is coherence anchored in lived understanding. Human communication remains compelling

because it signals presence and judgment. AI can strengthen this process. It can sharpen thinking and reveal blind spots. Used as augmentation, it amplifies capable leaders. Used as camouflage, it magnifies fragility. Over time, inconsistencies accumulate. Responses lack elasticity. Conversations feel scripted and credibility erodes.

Artificial intelligence has made it easier to sound intelligent. It has not made it easier to think clearly, to hold complexity, or to communicate with alignment across situations. Leadership, at its core, involves standing behind what is said. In an environment where fluency is widespread, the leaders who stand out will be those whose words, reasoning, and behavior reinforce one another across documents, discussions, and decisions.

Fluency is becoming common, but organic authority, sustained through congruent communication and visible conviction, carries the premium. When the script dissolves and the conversation becomes real, alignment endures. [CQ](#)

Graham David is a leadership communication specialist and Fellow of the Institute of Leadership with more than three decades of experience working with senior leaders, executives, and organizations. He is the CEO of Blue Beetle People Solutions, which helps leaders communicate complex ideas with credibility, clarity, and presence in high-stakes settings including presentations, difficult conversations, and organizational change.

Envision your best future—and make it happen with CMC's best-in-class,
time-tested professional development solutions.

10,000+

people learning with
CMC each year

98%

participants report they are
using what they learned

ACCELERATING
PROFESSIONAL
SUCCESS FOR
OVER 60 YEARS

99%

say their course gave them
relevant skills and knowledge
to apply in their job

15,000+

customized learning solutions
delivered in the past 25 years