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**The Leadership Paradox:**  
Leaders Want Feedback But Fear  
the Cost of Asking For It



White Paper: The Leadership Paradox  
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# Foreword

As we begin 2026, organizations are operating under extraordinary pressure. Leaders are being asked to navigate historic levels of complexity while maintaining engagement, performance, and trust in environments marked by uncertainty, leaner teams, and heightened scrutiny.

At the same time, expectations of leadership have evolved. Modern leaders are expected to collaborate more deeply, invite challenge, share power, and create psychologically safe environments where people can speak up, innovate, and adapt.

Yet many organizations are struggling to realize these ideals in practice.

New research conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of Turas Leadership reveals a critical disconnect at the heart of modern leadership. While senior leaders overwhelmingly endorse collaboration and constructive challenge, many do not feel safe enough to consistently enact those behaviors themselves.

These findings point to a paradox that many organizations have not yet named: leaders largely understand what good leadership looks like, but many feel constrained from leading in the way they believe is right.

This paradox matters because when leaders hesitate to invite challenge, slow down decision-making, or openly acknowledge uncertainty, it sends powerful signals throughout the organization. In turn, employees—particularly those with less formal power—become more cautious, less vocal, and less willing to surface dissenting perspectives.

We hope you find these insights illuminating and that the recommendations that follow give you a helpful blueprint for addressing these issues in your organization.



*Emily Scherberth*

Founder & CEO, Turas Leadership Consulting, Inc.

# Summary of Findings

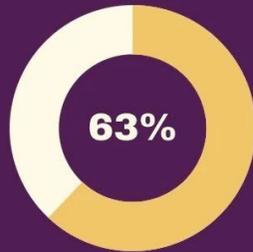
## The Leadership Paradox: Leaders Want Input - But Fear The Cost of Asking For It



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A new Harris Poll/Turas Leadership survey reveals a disconnect between what senior leaders say they want from their teams, and what they feel safe enough to ask for, without compromising their reputation. According to the survey of 317 senior leaders, conducted January 12-16, 2026:



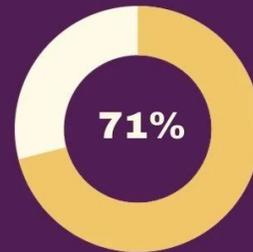
of senior leaders that said they want input but worry that asking for it will make them look weak



of senior leaders that said they wish their teams would challenge them more often



of female leaders who feared looking weak if they asked for input



of male leaders who feared looking weak if they asked for input



## Executive Summary

A recent Harris Poll survey commissioned by Turas Leadership reveals a troubling paradox at the heart of modern organizations: while 90% of senior leaders say they want their teams to challenge them more, 63% admit they won't actually ask for that input because they fear it will make them look weak. Among male leaders, that figure rises to 71%.

This disconnect—between what leaders believe and what they feel safe enough to do—isn't a failure of skill or will. It's a crisis of capacity. And it points to two fundamental shifts organizations must make if they want to create the conditions for innovation, engagement, and sustainable performance:

- **Build psychological safety as a system, not a direction.** Most organizations create psychological safety downward (for teams) but not upward or inward (for leaders). When leaders don't feel safe to model vulnerability, openness, and shared decision-making, those behaviors don't take root anywhere else.
- **Develop leadership capacity, not just leadership skills.** Teaching leaders what to do—without expanding their capacity to hold complexity, regulate emotions, and stay present under pressure—produces leaders who know the right answers but collapse under strain.

This white paper examines what the research reveals about the state of leadership today, why traditional approaches to psychological safety and leadership development are falling short, and what organizations must do differently to build leaders—and systems—capable of navigating the complexity ahead.

# The Double-Bind of Modern Leadership

## The Vulnerability Paradox

Nearly two-thirds of senior leaders say they would seek input from their teams to make big decisions more often if doing so didn't make them look weak. This finding alone should be a wake-up call for boards, CHROs, and C-suite executives. The majority of leaders believe that simply asking for help—one of the foundational behaviors of modern, collaborative leadership—carries a reputational cost they're unwilling to pay.

The gender differences makes the finding even more striking: 71% of male leaders fear appearing weak if they ask for input, compared to 46% of female leaders. This 25-point gap suggests that traditional mental models of authority—the belief that leaders must project certainty, control, and independence—remain more entrenched for men in leadership roles.

What makes this data particularly concerning is what it reveals about organizational culture. Leaders aren't operating in a vacuum. If nearly three-quarters of male leaders believe that asking for input will undermine their credibility, it's because organizational systems—through promotion criteria, performance evaluations, informal norms, and cultural narratives—have reinforced the patriarchal idea that vulnerability is a liability.

## The Feedback Paradox

Ninety percent of senior leaders say they wish their teams would share constructive feedback that challenges them and the status quo of the organization more often. In other words, the vast majority of leaders want to be challenged. They value dissent, diverse perspectives, and honest dialogue. They understand—intellectually—that better decisions come from collaborative problem-solving.

Yet when we look at employee data from other research, we see a troubling disconnect. According to a 2024 study, 63% of Gen Z employees and 52% of Millennials do not feel confident expressing their opinions at work<sup>1</sup>. A separate survey of 21,000 employees found that only 27% say their leader always encourages and recognizes suggestions for improvement<sup>2</sup>.

Together, these findings reveal a double-bind: Leaders want something they won't initiate, and employees want to contribute but don't feel safe doing so. The result is organizational gridlock—where innovation is stifled not because people lack ideas, but because the system hasn't created the conditions for those ideas to surface safely.

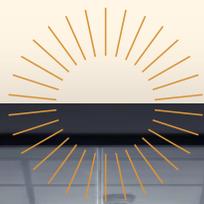


## Leadership Under Unprecedented Pressure

These findings don't exist in isolation. They emerge against a backdrop of mounting evidence that leadership itself is under unprecedented strain:

- 80% of leaders report feeling under more pressure to ensure the long-term prosperity of their organizations<sup>3</sup>
- 71% of C-suite leaders say they would quit their jobs to protect their well-being<sup>4</sup>
- A 2025 Harvard Business Review study found that middle managers feel less psychologically safe than their own direct reports<sup>5</sup>

Leaders are being asked to embody modern leadership behaviors—openness, vulnerability, collaboration, shared problem-solving—while navigating volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) at levels unprecedented in most of our lifetimes. They're expected to model behaviors they may not feel safe practicing. And when they can't, the entire organizational system suffers.





## Building Psychological Safety as a System

For the past decade, organizations have invested heavily in creating psychologically safe workplaces. They've trained managers on inclusive leadership, implemented speak-up policies, and measured employee engagement. Yet despite these efforts, the data suggests psychological safety remains fragile—especially at the leadership level.

The problem is that most organizations have approached psychological safety as something leaders create for others rather than something the system must support for everyone, including leaders. This produces what we might call directional psychological safety—safety that flows downward from leaders to teams, but not upward to leaders themselves, and not inward where leaders confront their own doubts, uncertainties, and limitations.

### Why Directional Safety Fails

When psychological safety is directional, leaders become its providers but not its beneficiaries. They're expected to model vulnerability, invite dissent, and admit uncertainty—while simultaneously operating in cultures that may punish those very behaviors at the leadership level.

Consider what happens when a senior leader asks their team for input on a strategic decision. If organizational norms—explicit or implicit—suggest that asking for help signals indecision, weakness, or incompetence, that leader faces a choice: model the collaborative behavior they espouse, or protect their reputation. The survey data tells us what most leaders choose.

The consequences then ripple throughout the organization:

- **Teams learn that psychological safety is performative.** Leaders say they want feedback, but their behavior suggests otherwise. Teams notice the gap between espoused values and enacted behaviors.
- **Innovation narrows under pressure.** When leaders collapse into certainty or control under strain, teams follow suit. The organization's capacity to hold complexity becomes constrained by the leader's capacity to hold complexity.
- **Culture change stalls.** You cannot build a speak-up culture if the people modeling it don't feel safe doing so themselves. Transformation requires leaders who can embody new behaviors even when it's uncomfortable.
- **Burnout accelerates.** When leaders must project confidence they don't feel, maintain control they can't sustain, and suppress doubts they can't share, the emotional labor becomes exhausting. The 71% of C-suite leaders contemplating leaving to protect their well-being aren't weak - they're exhausted from holding what the system won't help them hold.



## What Systemic Psychological Safety Requires

Building psychological safety as a system means creating conditions where everyone—regardless of role, rank, or authority—can take interpersonal risks without fear of retribution. It means designing organizational structures, norms, and practices that support vulnerability at every level, not just at the front line.

Here's what that looks like in practice:

### 1. Governance and Accountability Structures That Normalize Uncertainty

Boards and executive teams must actively create space for leaders to surface doubt, ask for help, and change their minds without it being interpreted as incompetence. This means:

- Designing board meetings and executive sessions that include structured time for exploring what leaders don't know, not just what they do
- Evaluating leaders on their ability to invite dissent and integrate feedback, not just on their decisiveness
- Creating formal mechanisms (e.g., red team exercises, pre-mortems, decision reviews) that institutionalize challenge and debate

### 2. Performance and Promotion Criteria That Reward Collaborative Leadership

If asking for input truly carries reputational risk, it's because organizations still reward heroic, individualistic leadership over collaborative, systems-oriented leadership. To shift this:

- Explicitly include "invites challenge," "shares decision-making authority," and "models learning from mistakes" in leadership competency frameworks
- Use 360-degree feedback processes that surface whether leaders create safety for others, and whether they feel safe to be vulnerable
- Promote leaders who demonstrate the capacity to hold complexity and lead through uncertainty, not just those who project certainty

### 3. Peer Support Systems for Senior Leaders

If leaders don't feel safe asking their teams for input, where do they feel safe processing complexity, testing ideas, and acknowledging uncertainty? Systemic safety requires peer structures where leaders can:

- Engage in confidential peer coaching or action learning cohorts
- Work with executive coaches or advisors trained in capacity-building (not just skill-building)
- Participate in cross-organizational cohorts where leaders can share challenges without career risk



#### 4. Cultural Narratives That Celebrate Learning, Not Just Winning

Organizations that genuinely support systemic psychological safety don't just tolerate failure—they actively celebrate learning. This means leaders sharing stories of when they changed their minds, asked for help, or led through uncertainty. It means town halls that feature leaders discussing what they're figuring out, not just what they've figured out.

**The Bottom Line on Systemic Safety:** You cannot build psychological safety for teams if you haven't built it for leaders. And you cannot build it for leaders through training alone—you must redesign the organizational systems, structures, and cultural norms that currently punish the very behaviors you're asking leaders to model.





## Leadership Development: Focus on Capacity, Not Skills

The second fundamental shift organizations must make is rethinking how they develop leaders. The current approach—focused almost exclusively on skill acquisition—explains why 63% of leaders know they should ask for input but won't, and why 90% want challenge but don't create the conditions for it.

The problem isn't that leaders don't know what to do. Most senior leaders have been trained in inclusive leadership, strategic thinking, and collaborative decision-making. They've read the books, attended the workshops, and understand the theory.

The problem is that knowing what to do and having the capacity to do it under pressure are two different things.

### The Difference Between Skills and Capacity

Skills are techniques, tools, and behaviors you can learn and apply. Active listening is a skill. Giving feedback is a skill. Facilitating a strategic planning session is a skill.

Capacity is your ability to hold complexity, ambiguity, and emotional intensity without collapsing into control, certainty-seeking, or avoidance. Capacity determines whether you can actually use those skills when it matters most—when you're under scrutiny, when the stakes are high, when you don't have all the answers.

Think of it this way: A leader might know how to invite dissent in a meeting. But if their capacity is constrained, what happens when someone actually challenges their thinking in front of the board? Do they stay curious, or do they become defensive? Do they integrate the feedback, or do they dismiss it?

Capacity is the container. Skills are what you put in it. And when the container is too small, skills don't matter—because under pressure, leaders default to self-protection.



## Why Most Leadership Development Fails to Build Capacity

Traditional leadership development focuses on adding things: new frameworks, new techniques, new behaviors. But capacity isn't built through addition—it's built through transformation. It requires leaders to:

- **Examine their mental models of authority and success.** What do they believe it means to be a "strong" leader? Where did those beliefs come from? Are those beliefs serving them—or constraining them?
- **Develop self-awareness about their triggers and patterns.** What situations cause them to tighten control? When do they rush to certainty? What emotions arise when they're challenged, and how do those emotions drive behavior?
- **Build tolerance for ambiguity and discomfort.** Can they sit with not knowing? Can they hold tension without needing to resolve it immediately? Can they stay present when their credibility feels threatened?
- **Cultivate emotional regulation under stress.** Can they notice their emotional responses in real time and choose how to respond, rather than being driven by reactivity?

This kind of work doesn't happen in a two-day workshop. It requires sustained practice, reflection, feedback, and support. It's developmental work, not training.

## What Capacity-Building Leadership Development Looks Like

Organizations that successfully build leadership capacity take a different approach to development. Instead of starting with skills, they start with expanding the container. Here's what that looks like:

### 1. Assess Current Capacity, Not Just Current Competence

Traditional assessments measure what leaders know and how they perform. Other assessments like the [Turas Leadership Capacity Assessment™](#) measure:

- How leaders respond when ambiguity rises
- Their ability to stay grounded when challenged
- Whether they can hold paradox without collapsing into either/or thinking
- How quickly they default to control when complexity exceeds their comfort zone
- Their willingness to genuinely share power and invite dissent

These assessments help leaders understand not just what they do, but why they do it—and what happens when their capacity gets exceeded.



## 2. Create Developmental Experiences, Not Just Training Events

Capacity grows through experience, reflection, and practice over time. This means:

- Cohort-based programs that run for months, not days, with ongoing peer coaching and accountability
- Action learning where leaders work on real challenges while simultaneously examining their own responses, assumptions, and patterns
- Reflective practices like journaling, peer consultation, or executive coaching that help leaders develop self-awareness
- Simulations and role-plays that deliberately surface leaders' triggers and give them opportunities to practice new responses in low-stakes environments

## 3. Focus on Identity, Not Just Behavior

The 63% of leaders who fear looking weak aren't suffering from a behavior problem—they're grappling with an identity question: "Who am I as a leader if I don't have all the answers?"

Capacity-building development helps leaders:

- Explore where their sense of competence and worth comes from
- Distinguish between confidence ("I can handle this") and certainty ("I know the answer")
- Redefine strength as the ability to hold complexity, not the ability to project control
- Develop a leadership identity rooted in learning and growth, not in being right

## 4. Build Strengths-Based Foundations

One of the most effective ways to build capacity is to help leaders understand and leverage their natural strengths. When leaders operate from their strengths—the ways they naturally think, feel, and behave—they have more energy, confidence, and resilience available for the hard work of leading through complexity.

Frameworks like CliftonStrengths® provide leaders with language to understand:

- Their unique value and how they naturally create impact
- Where they're likely to excel and where they'll need support
- How to build teams with complementary strengths rather than trying to be well-rounded individuals

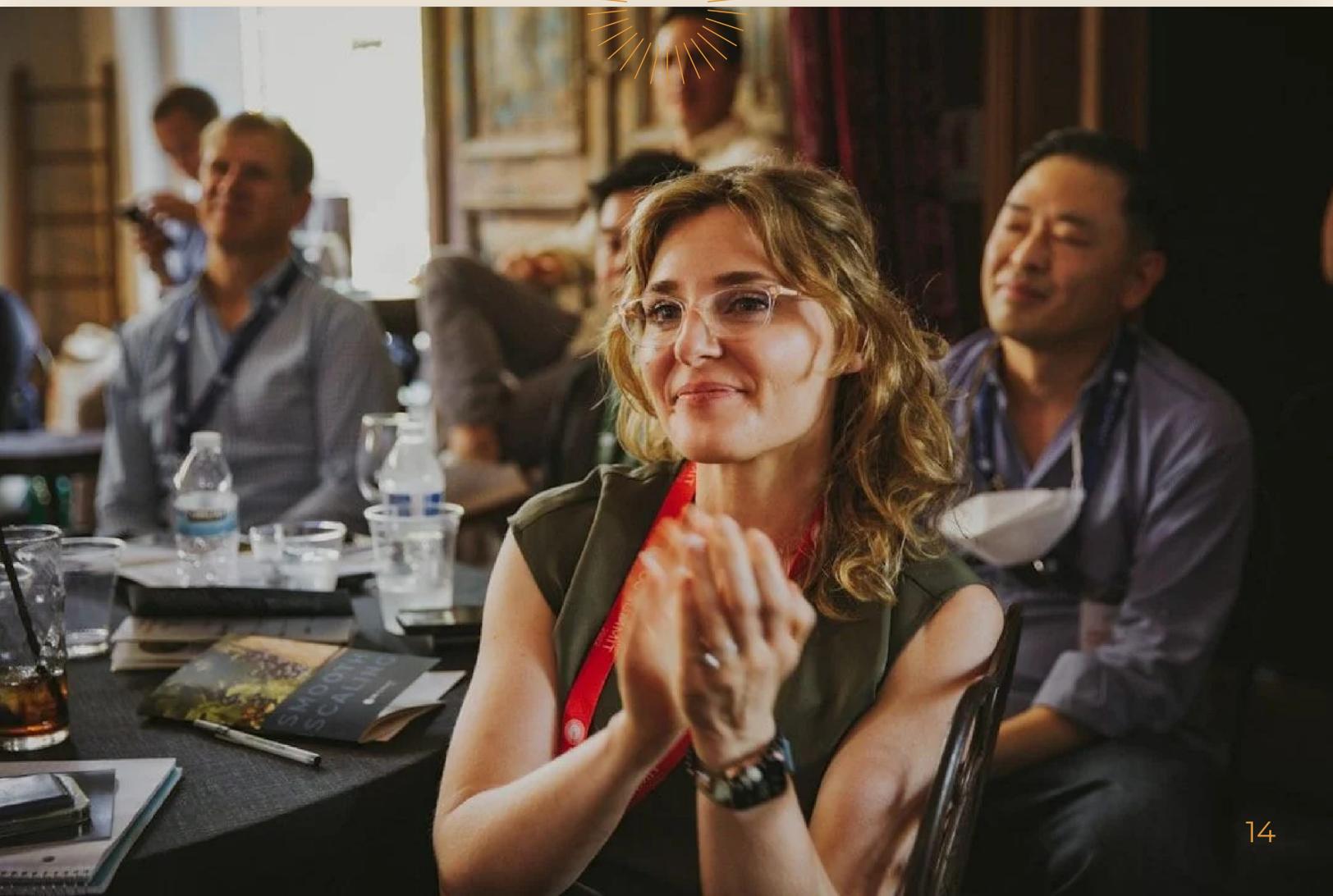
This strengths-based foundation creates confidence and humility—leaders know what they bring, and they know they can't do it alone. That combination is essential for asking for input without it feeling like weakness.

## 5. Embed Capacity-Building in Real Work

The most powerful capacity-building happens when leaders are supported to practice new ways of being in their actual work, not just in a classroom. This requires coaches, facilitators, or peer groups who can:

- Help leaders prepare for high-stakes moments (e.g., board presentations, difficult conversations) by examining what capacity is required
- Debrief those moments afterward to surface what happened internally when pressure rose
- Provide ongoing support as leaders experiment with new behaviors and build new neural pathways

The Bottom Line on Capacity-Building: Organizations cannot transform by teaching leaders what to do. They transform by helping leaders become people who can do it—even when it's hard, even when they're uncertain, even when their credibility feels at risk.





## Conclusion: The Path Forward

The Harris Poll data reveals what many executives already sense: traditional approaches to leadership development and organizational culture are no longer sufficient. Leaders want to lead differently. They understand that collaboration, vulnerability, and shared decision-making produce better outcomes. But they're trapped in systems that haven't evolved to support those behaviors—and they lack the internal capacity to sustain them under pressure. The solution is to:

- Redesign organizational systems to make psychological safety systemic rather than directional—so leaders feel as safe to be vulnerable as they expect their teams to be
- Invest in capacity-building that helps leaders develop the inner resources to hold complexity, regulate emotions, and lead through uncertainty—so they can actually use the skills they've learned when it matters most

This isn't a quick fix. Building systemic psychological safety and developing leadership capacity takes time, intention, and sustained commitment. But the alternative—continuing to invest in skill-based training while organizational systems punish vulnerability and leaders collapse under pressure—is no longer viable.

The organizations that will thrive in the years ahead won't be the ones with the best strategic plans or the most sophisticated technologies. They'll be the ones that have developed leaders capable of navigating complexity without defaulting to control—and systems that support those leaders in doing so.

### How Turas Leadership Can Help

Turas Leadership Consulting specializes in helping organizations make these fundamental shifts. Through our Leader-First Transformation™ model, we work with C-suite and HR leaders to:

- Assess current leadership capacity using our proprietary [Leadership Capacity Assessment™](#), which measures leaders' ability to navigate complexity and ambiguity in uncertain times.
- Design systemic psychological safety by examining governance structures, performance criteria, cultural narratives, and peer support systems that either enable or constrain vulnerability at all levels.
- Build leadership capacity through cohort-based development programs, executive coaching, and strengths-based approaches (our founder is a Gallup-Certified CliftonStrengths® Coach).

Turas can help you create sustainable transformation by working at the intersection of individual development, team dynamics, and organizational systems—because real change requires all three.

## About Turas Leadership Consulting, Inc.

Ready to explore what this could look like for your organization?  
Contact us to schedule a complimentary consultation:

Email: [info@turasleadership.com](mailto:info@turasleadership.com)

Web: [www.turasleadership.com](http://www.turasleadership.com)

And if you're curious about your own capacity as a leader, we invite you to take the [Turas Leadership Capacity Assessment™](#).

### About the Survey

This white paper is based on a survey conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Turas Leadership Consulting, Inc. from January 12-16, 2026 among 317 business leaders (Directors and above). The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within +/- 5.4 percentage points using a 95% confidence level.

### About Turas Leadership Consulting, Inc.

Founded in 2025, Turas Leadership Consulting, Inc. provides leadership development, team building, organizational consulting and executive coaching services that generate measurable impact resulting in deeper engagement, increased productivity, and higher profitability. Through its Leader-First Transformation™ model - a leadership-centered approach to organizational transformation that develops the inner capacities leaders need to catalyze lasting change - Turas helps create healthier, more resilient organizational cultures.

## References

1. [Mental Health America 2024 Mind the Workplace Report](#)
2. [Leadership IQ 2020 State of Leadership Development Report](#)
3. [KPMG 2025 Global CEO Outlook](#)
4. [Deloitte 2024 Well-Being at Work Survey](#)
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