

Leadership Has Lost Its Equilibrium: Why success for the next generation of leaders involves embracing polarity

Leadership has always been about choices: some will be easy, some will be obvious, and others will disrupt sleep, prick consciences, and feel like the best of a set of bad options.

Leaders are constantly making these choices:

- Be decisive or collaborative.
- Move fast or minimise risk.
- Put people first or prioritise performance.
- Trust data or trust instinct.
- Drive change or preserve stability.

Every conference, leadership book and LinkedIn post seems determined to convince us that success lies on one side of the argument. But what if they're all asking the wrong question? What if exceptional leadership isn't about choosing a side at all? What if leadership has become the art of holding competing truths simultaneously?

That is the central idea behind my forthcoming book.

We are living through the Age of Polarity

Leaders today are operating in an environment unlike anything previous generations experienced. We survived a global pandemic and thought that we would return to normal. Yet the new normal has created an unprecedented shift across multiple dimensions.

- Artificial intelligence is reshaping work faster than organisations can redesign themselves.
- Employees want flexibility while businesses demand greater productivity.
- Social media rewards certainty while effective leadership increasingly requires nuance.
- Political division has entered our workplaces.
- Generational expectations are colliding.
- Trust in institutions is declining.
- Every decision is scrutinised, shared and judged before leaders have even finished making it.

The result?

Leadership has become exhausting and bewildering. Leaders don't lack capability, but their capacity is being severely tested. They are expected to resolve contradictions that often cannot be resolved. And to make a false promise of certainty that they can never keep.

The false promise of certainty

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Many leadership models were developed in relatively stable environments. Predictability was, well, predictable. Today we increasingly operate in VUCA business environments. Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. And underpinning this is the increased interconnected nature of work, life, society, politics, and religion.

The lines have become irrevocably blurred, and individuality and identity have also become much more nuanced and self-defined. The rules have gone out the window!

Yet we still search for universal answers to unanswerable questions and solutions to problems that we haven't even properly defined.

- Should employees work remotely or in the office?
- Should organisations focus on shareholder value or stakeholder value?
- Should AI replace work or augment it?
- Should leaders be vulnerable or authoritative?

The answer, frustratingly, is often "it depends."

And "it depends" is not a satisfying and convincing leadership response. Even though in many cases it is the truth. Yet truth is more malleable than we care to admit and dare to communicate. Each of us has our own truth, and leaders must define what that means for them. The strongest leaders I have worked with throughout my career rarely deal in absolutes, but they absolutely knew what their beliefs, boundaries and red lines were.

They recognise that almost every major leadership challenge exists somewhere between two opposing positions, and then they decided to what extent they were going to take a position, even one of honest ambiguity, so that those following them would feel a sense of direction, comfort and trust in their leadership voice.

The practice of leadership is becoming an exercise in equilibrium

For nearly three decades working with executive teams around the world, I have watched leadership become progressively more complex, and I've sat in the rooms where tough decisions are made while leaders try to navigate the unprecedented levels of ambiguity being thrown at them.

The organisations that thrive are rarely those with the strongest single ideology. They are the organisations that build the strongest capability to adapt. This adaptability requires a different leadership mindset. We are no longer in the era of the leader as an omnipotent being. We are now focused on leaders as guides and, dare I say, influencers.

To do this well, leaders must embrace the concept of equilibrium. Equilibrium is not compromise. It is not indecision. It is not sitting on the fence.

Equilibrium is the deliberate ability to recognise competing priorities, understand their value, and make conscious decisions about where balance should sit in any given moment. It acknowledges that leadership is dynamic rather than fixed. Today's right answer may be tomorrow's mistake.

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The paradoxes leaders now face

Modern leadership is filled with almost infinite unresolvable tensions and competing stakeholder groups. These are not problems to be solved; they are positions to be managed. To attempt resolution is untenable and poses a significant and real risk to the well-being of leaders.

When asked what today's leaders are thinking about, these are some of the issues they face:

- How do you move quickly without leaving people behind?
- How do you encourage challenge while maintaining psychological safety?
- How do you build inclusive cultures while still rewarding exceptional performance?
- How do you remain authentic while recognising that every word carries organisational consequences?
- How do you use artificial intelligence without removing humanity?
- How do you maintain consistency while responding to an increasingly unpredictable world?

These questions define today's leadership landscape and are strong indicators of the qualities and approaches that leaders need within their toolkits. Authenticity, inclusivity, AI capability, empathy, consistency and intentionality, to name a few.

This is the new leadership compendium.

Maintaining critical thinking

One of the greatest risks facing organisations today is binary thinking replacing criticality. It encourages simplistic answers to complex questions or, in the worst cases, a lack of accountability and proactivity, with leaders being expected to always make the call while others wait passively.

Binary thinking creates unnecessary conflict and rewards compliance and certainty over curiosity; it pushes leaders toward performative and idealistic positions instead of the practical wisdom that today's challenges require.

Great leadership requires intellectual flexibility and humility.

The willingness to ask:

"What don't I know?"

"What truth exists on the other side of this debate?"

"How do I acknowledge different positions while making progress?"

Curiosity may become one of the most valuable leadership capabilities of the coming decade.

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Human leadership in an AI world

Artificial intelligence makes this conversation even more urgent.

Technology will increasingly outperform humans in speed, pattern recognition and information processing.

But leadership has never simply been about processing information.

Leadership is about judgement.

Nuance.

Context.

Relationships.

Trust.

Ethics.

Meaning.

Empathy.

These qualities become more valuable—not less—as technology advances.

The future belongs to leaders who centre humanity while embracing and exploiting all the benefits of technology. A human-centred approach to AI requires a strong ethical foundation and the intellectual agility to keep on top of developments, while consistently challenging the potential it brings against the ethics of any decisions on usage and adoption.

A new leadership playbook

For years we've craved certainty, waiting for things to “calm down”. When perhaps we should have been embracing uncertainty and the qualities required to thrive in seeming chaos.

The next generation of leaders won't be remembered because they always had the right answers, and they won't necessarily be judged by their successes. They will be remembered for how they managed through crisis and how they made people feel as they navigated the most turbulent times.

They will be remembered because they knew how to hold complexity without becoming paralysed by it. They will know:

- When to challenge.
- When to listen.
- When to push.
- When to pause.
- When to lead
- When to follow.

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- When to ask.
- When to tell.

Finding equilibrium while sitting with tension and leading through chaos is the new definition of leadership capability. And I believe it is the foundation of the next great leadership era.



I'm Roianne Nedd, a leadership advisor, organisational culture consultant, keynote speaker, author and fractional Chief People Officer. I help leaders and organisations build healthier cultures, navigate change with confidence and create workplaces where people and performance can thrive together. If you'd like to follow my work, I'd love to stay connected: Join my community [here](#).