

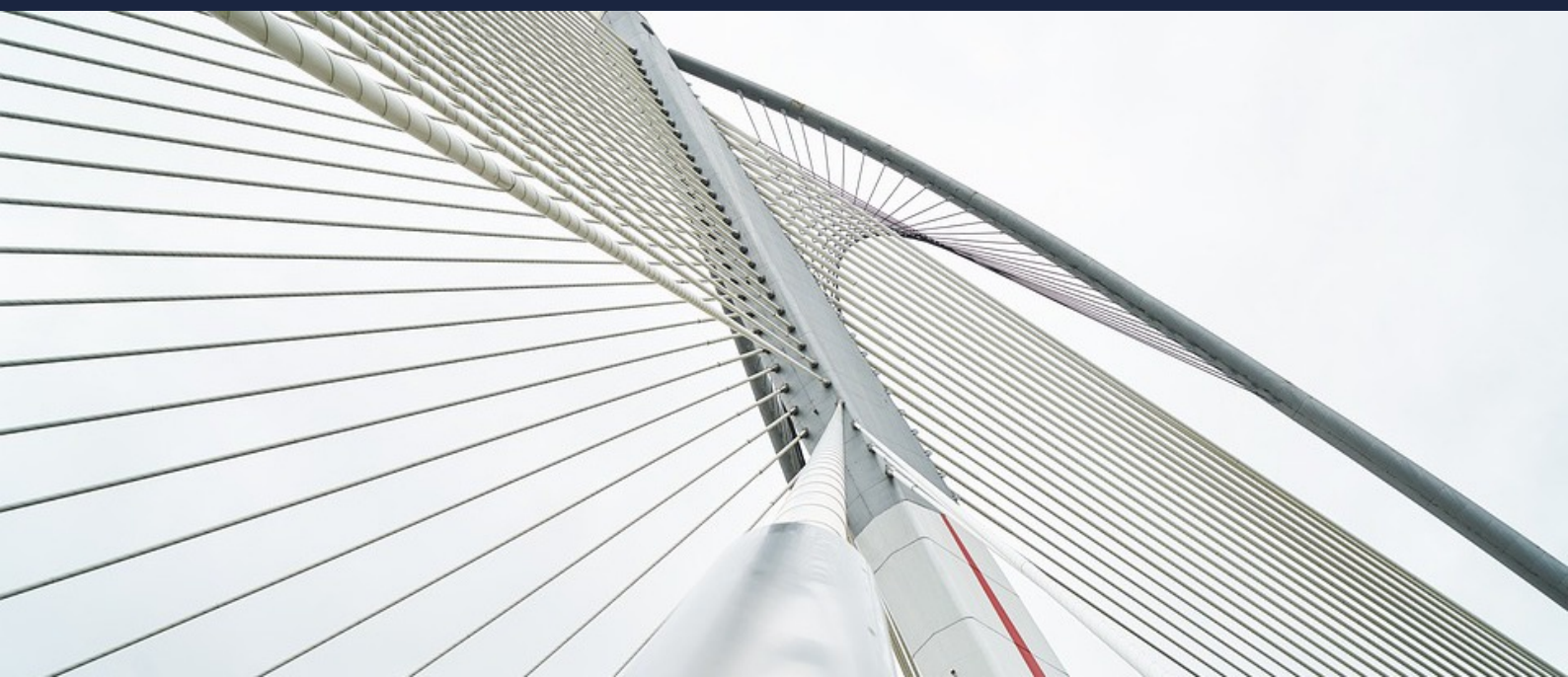
BEYOND THE COMPETENCY MODEL

Leadership in Crisis Versus Leadership in Comfort — Why the Pandemic Exposed a Generation of Untested Leaders

A Practitioner's Perspective on What Genuine Uncertainty Reveals About
Executive Capability

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“Comfort-state leadership is the art of appearing decisive while deferring every decision that carries personal risk.”

1. Executive Summary

The pandemic has functioned as an unplanned leadership assessment of extraordinary breadth and rigour. In the space of weeks, every senior leader in every organisation was placed under conditions that no leadership development programme, no executive coaching engagement, and no succession planning process had prepared them for: genuine uncertainty, with real consequences, and no precedent to follow.

What emerged was a pattern so consistent that it deserves examination. Some leaders thrived. They made decisions faster, communicated with greater clarity, and demonstrated a capacity for adaptive thinking that their previous track records had not predicted. Others — leaders with impeccable credentials, outstanding performance histories, and reputations built over decades — froze. They deferred decisions, retreated into process, demanded more data, and waited for someone else to go first.

This essay explores what distinguishes crisis-capable leaders from comfort-state leaders, why the distinction matters beyond the current emergency, and what it reveals about the way organisations select, develop, and assess their leadership talent.

2. The Comfort-State Leader

Most senior leaders in large organisations have been selected, promoted, and rewarded under conditions of relative stability. The economy grows. Markets are predictable within bounds. Competitors behave rationally. Regulations change slowly. The strategic plan, while never perfectly accurate, provides a navigable frame within which decisions can be made with reasonable confidence about their consequences.

Under these conditions, a particular leadership style flourishes. It is characterised by thoroughness, consultation, consensus-building, and careful stakeholder management. It values process over speed, alignment over action, and risk mitigation over risk

acceptance. It produces leaders who are extraordinarily effective at navigating complex organisational politics, building coalitions, managing upwards, and delivering predictable results within predictable constraints.

This is not a criticism. Comfort-state leadership is genuinely valuable. Large organisations operating in stable environments need leaders who can optimise performance within known parameters, who can manage stakeholder expectations, who can build sustainable teams, and who can deliver incremental improvement year after year. The skills required to do this well are real, demanding, and important.

The problem is that comfort-state leadership looks identical to crisis-capable leadership until a crisis arrives. The two are distinguished not by their competencies in normal conditions but by their responses when conditions cease to be normal. And because most leadership careers unfold entirely within normal conditions, the distinction remains invisible — to the organisation, to the leadership development function, and often to the leaders themselves.

3. The Moment of Revelation

The pandemic created the conditions that exposed the distinction. Within days of the lockdown, every senior leader faced a common set of challenges: operational continuity with a displaced workforce, revenue collapse or radical demand shifts, supply chain disruption, customer and stakeholder anxiety, and regulatory uncertainty. None of these challenges had a playbook. None of them could be addressed by consulting the strategic plan. None of them would wait for a committee to convene.

The pattern that emerged was remarkably consistent across sectors and geographies. Leaders divided, almost immediately, into two groups.

The first group moved. They made decisions with incomplete information, communicated those decisions with clarity and conviction, and accepted that some of those decisions would be wrong. They shortened their planning horizons from quarters to days. They empowered their teams to act without seeking approval. They abandoned the processes and governance structures that slowed decision-making, not recklessly but deliberately, recognising that the cost of delay exceeded the cost of imperfection. They were visible, direct, and honest about what they did not know.

The second group waited. They requested more data. They convened virtual meetings to discuss the situation without making decisions. They escalated to boards and committees that were themselves paralysed. They maintained the language of action — "we are assessing our options," "we are monitoring the situation closely," "we are developing our response plan" — while taking no action. They sought consensus that could not be achieved because no one had the information on which consensus could be based. They defaulted to the familiar: more analysis, more stakeholder engagement, more governance.

Comfort-state leadership is the art of appearing decisive while deferring every decision that carries personal risk.

The distinction was not about intelligence, experience, or seniority. It was not correlated with sector, function, or leadership style. The pattern cut across every demographic and every organisational type. What distinguished the two groups was something more fundamental: their relationship with uncertainty.

4. The Uncertainty Threshold

Every leader has an uncertainty threshold — the level of ambiguity beyond which their decision-making capacity degrades. Below the threshold, they function normally: they gather information, weigh options, consult stakeholders, and make defensible choices. Above the threshold, one of two things happens. Either they adapt their approach — shortening time horizons, accepting lower confidence levels, making reversible decisions and adjusting as information emerges — or they revert to the behaviours that work below the threshold, applying them with increasing intensity to a situation that does not respond to them.

The second response is what the pandemic exposed. Leaders whose uncertainty threshold had never been tested discovered that their decision-making model required a level of predictability that no longer existed. They were not incompetent; they were operating a system designed for a different environment. A Formula One car is a remarkable piece of engineering, but it is useless on a muddy track. The car is not defective. It was built for conditions that no longer apply.

This is why the revelation was so painful for so many capable leaders. Their past success was genuine. Their skills were real. But those skills were calibrated to conditions of relative stability, and the calibration failed catastrophically when stability disappeared. The leader who built a career on thorough analysis found that thorough analysis was impossible when the data changed daily. The leader who built a career on stakeholder consensus found that consensus was unachievable when stakeholders were themselves paralysed. The leader who built a career on risk mitigation found that every option carried risk and the only choice was which risk to accept.

5. The Five Behaviours That Separated the Two Groups

Across the organisations I have observed during this crisis, five specific behaviours consistently distinguished crisis-capable leaders from comfort-state leaders.

5.1 Decision Speed Under Ambiguity

Crisis-capable leaders made decisions in hours that comfort-state leaders deferred for weeks. The quality of those rapid decisions was, on average, comparable — not because speed improved decision quality, but because the additional information that delay might have provided simply did not exist. In an environment where the facts change daily, a decision made today on eighty percent information is more valuable than a decision made next month on eighty-five percent information, because the additional five percent will itself be obsolete by then.

The critical behaviour was not recklessness but calibration: crisis-capable leaders adjusted their confidence threshold to match the environment. They made the best decision available with the information available, communicated it clearly, and committed to revisiting it when new information emerged. Comfort-state leaders maintained their normal confidence threshold, which meant no decision could clear the bar.

5.2 Honest Communication About Ignorance

Crisis-capable leaders said "I do not know" and followed it with "here is what we are going to do anyway." Comfort-state leaders said "we are still assessing" and followed it with silence.

The willingness to acknowledge uncertainty publicly is one of the most reliable indicators of crisis leadership capability. It requires a kind of confidence that comfort-state leadership does not test: the confidence to maintain authority while admitting ignorance. In normal conditions, leaders are expected to have answers. In a crisis, the most credible thing a leader can do is name what they do not know and explain how they intend to proceed despite it.

Organisations responded to honest uncertainty with something approaching relief. Teams that were told "this is what we know, this is what we do not know, and this is what we are doing" performed better and reported higher confidence in their leadership than teams that were told nothing or, worse, were given false reassurance.

5.3 Delegation of Authority, Not Just Tasks

Crisis-capable leaders pushed decision-making authority downwards. They told their teams: "You have the authority to do what needs to be done. Here are the boundaries. Within those boundaries, act." Comfort-state leaders delegated tasks but retained authority, creating bottlenecks at exactly the moment when speed depended on distributed decision-making.

This behaviour revealed a deeper truth about leadership models. In stable conditions, centralised authority appears efficient because the decisions are predictable and the cost of waiting for approval is low. In a crisis, centralised authority becomes the primary constraint on organisational speed. The leader who cannot let go — who needs to review every decision, approve every expenditure, sign off every communication — becomes the single point of failure in an organisation that needs to move on multiple fronts simultaneously.

5.4 Willingness to Stop Things

Crisis-capable leaders stopped things. They cancelled projects, suspended programmes, shut down initiatives, and redirected resources — quickly, clearly, and without extended consultation. Comfort-state leaders were unable to stop things, because stopping things under normal governance requires the same level of justification and approval as starting them. The organisational cost of stopping — the sunk cost arguments, the political fallout, the stakeholder disappointment — was too high for leaders whose careers had been built on starting and sustaining, never on stopping.

The ability to stop things is perhaps the most undervalued leadership capability in large organisations. It is never tested in leadership assessments, never developed in leadership programmes, and never rewarded in performance reviews. Yet in a crisis, it is the single most important lever a leader has: the ability to free resources by ending work that no longer matters.

5.5 Emotional Steadiness Without Emotional Absence

Crisis-capable leaders were emotionally present without being emotionally destabilised. They acknowledged the human cost of the crisis — the fear, the disruption, the loss — without being paralysed by it. They showed concern without showing panic. They were serious without being grim.

Comfort-state leaders responded to the emotional demands of the crisis in one of two ways, both inadequate. Some retreated into operational detachment — treating the crisis as a purely logistical challenge, ignoring the human dimension, and losing the trust of teams who needed to be seen as people, not resources. Others were overwhelmed by the emotional weight, becoming visibly anxious, indecisive, and unable to project the calm confidence that teams needed from their leaders.

The middle ground — emotional presence combined with operational clarity — is difficult to teach and difficult to assess outside of genuine crisis conditions. It is, however, one of the most reliable predictors of whether an organisation's people will follow a leader through uncertainty or begin to route around them.

6. What This Means for Leadership Selection and Development

The pandemic has created an unprecedented dataset on leadership behaviour under genuine uncertainty. Every organisation now knows which of its leaders can operate in crisis conditions and which cannot. The question is what to do with this knowledge.

The tempting answer is to select for crisis capability — to promote the leaders who thrived and to sideline those who did not. This is too simple. Organisations do not operate in permanent crisis, and the qualities that make a leader effective in a crisis are not always the qualities that make them effective in stable conditions. The leader who makes rapid decisions under ambiguity may be impatient and autocratic when patience and consultation are what the situation requires. The leader who pushes authority downwards in a crisis may fail to provide adequate oversight during steady-state operations.

The better answer is to develop leaders who can operate across a wider range of conditions — who can recognise when the environment has shifted and adjust their leadership style accordingly. This requires three changes to current practice.

Leadership assessment must test for crisis behaviour. Current assessment centres and psychometric tools are designed to predict performance under normal conditions. They measure cognitive ability, interpersonal skill, strategic thinking, and emotional intelligence in controlled settings. They do not — because they cannot — measure how a leader behaves when the controlled setting disappears. Assessment must find ways to

introduce genuine ambiguity, time pressure, and consequence into the evaluation of leadership potential.

Leadership development must include real uncertainty. Executive education programmes and leadership development interventions operate in environments of artificial safety. The case study has a right answer. The simulation has a reset button. The coaching relationship is confidential and consequence-free. None of this prepares leaders for the experience of making irreversible decisions with incomplete information under public scrutiny. Development must create experiences that are genuinely uncomfortable — not dangerous, but uncomfortable enough to test the uncertainty threshold.

Succession planning must account for range. The leadership pipeline should not select exclusively for comfort-state capability or crisis capability. It should select for range — the ability to operate effectively across the widest possible set of conditions. This means identifying leaders who have demonstrated adaptability, not just performance, and who have shown the ability to adjust their approach when circumstances demand it.

7. The Inconvenient Truth About Leadership Development

The leadership development industry — the business schools, the executive coaches, the consultancies, the assessment firms — has built its models on the assumption that leadership is a set of competencies that can be developed through education, feedback, and practice. The pandemic has not disproved this assumption, but it has revealed its limits.

“No amount of competency development can substitute for the willingness to act when the consequences of action are uncertain and the consequences of inaction are worse.”

The leaders who thrived in the crisis did not do so because they had attended better programmes or received better coaching. They thrived because they possessed something that competency models do not capture and that development programmes do not reliably build: a tolerance for being wrong. The willingness to make a decision, to own it publicly, and to accept that it might be the wrong decision — and to do this repeatedly, under sustained pressure, with real consequences — is not a competency. It is a disposition. And while dispositions can be influenced, they are far harder to develop than skills.

This is the inconvenient truth that the leadership development profession must confront. The gap between crisis-capable and comfort-state leadership is not primarily a skills gap. It is a disposition gap. And closing it requires a fundamentally different approach to how organisations think about what leadership is, how they select for it, and how they develop it.

8. Looking Forward

The crisis will end. Normal conditions will, in some form, return. And when they do, the pressure to forget what we have learned about our leaders will be considerable. The comfort-state leaders who struggled will recover their composure, rebuild their confidence, and return to performing well under the conditions they were built for. The temptation will be to treat the crisis as an aberration — an unfair test that revealed nothing meaningful about leadership capability in "real" conditions.

This temptation should be resisted. The crisis was not an aberration. It was a test of a kind that will recur — perhaps not in the same form, but in the same essential character. Disruption, uncertainty, and the need for rapid adaptation are not exceptional features of the contemporary environment; they are defining features. The next crisis may be economic, technological, regulatory, or geopolitical. It will come, and when it does, the same distinction between crisis-capable and comfort-state leadership will assert itself.

The organisations that use this moment to examine their leadership honestly — to acknowledge where the gaps are, to adjust their selection and development practices, and to build leadership teams with genuine range — will be better prepared. Those that choose comfort over honesty will discover, the next time the world shifts, that their leaders are exactly as unprepared as they were this time.

The pandemic did not create a new category of leader. It revealed a category that was always there but never tested. The question is whether we will remember what we learned, or whether we will choose, once again, the comfort of forgetting.