

BEYOND PEACETIME LEADERSHIP

Leading Under Radical Uncertainty

A Practitioner's Perspective on Leadership Under Radical Uncertainty in Transformation



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“We had spent a decade teaching leaders to build consensus, and then handed them a year in which consensus was the one thing there was no time to build.”

1. Executive Summary

Something became visible over the past fourteen months that had been hidden for the whole of the preceding decade. The organisations that came through the worst of the downturn with their transformation capability intact were not, in the main, the ones with the most sophisticated leadership development. They were the ones whose senior people turned out to possess a set of capabilities that no development programme had set out to build, and that several development programmes had actively trained out.

The leader the crisis demanded was a stranger to the leader we had spent years cultivating. We had cultivated a leader who builds consensus, who consults widely, who moves deliberately, who is careful not to get ahead of the evidence, and who understands that lasting change is change people own. These are real virtues, and in ordinary conditions they produce better outcomes than their opposites. Then the ground moved, and every one of them became, for a period, a liability. The organisations that changed successfully under pressure were led by people who could decide without consensus, act ahead of the evidence, and restructure and reassure in the same breath – and who could do all this without mistaking their own decisiveness for wisdom.

This essay is an attempt to describe that leader honestly, to explain why our systems for growing leaders produced so few of them, and to draw out what the past year should teach us about how organisations actually change – which turns out to be a rather different account from the one our change methodologies tell.

2. The leader the programmes discovered they had

When the pressure came, it came faster than any deliberative process could accommodate. Decisions that would ordinarily have taken a quarter – which programmes to stop, which sites to consolidate, which parts of the operating model to redesign – had to be taken in a fortnight, on information that was incomplete and getting worse. And in that compression a great many senior leaders discovered something uncomfortable about themselves: that the whole apparatus of their leadership had been built for a tempo that no longer existed.

The pattern I have observed, watching leaders across organisations move through the past year, is that the ones who struggled most were often the ones who had been most highly developed. They had internalised, deeply and sincerely, that good leadership means bringing people with you, testing your thinking against others', and resisting the temptation to act on incomplete information. Faced with a situation that punished delay above all else, they reached for their strongest instincts and found those instincts were

the problem. They convened the workshop when they should have made the call. They sought the alignment when the time for alignment had passed. They waited for the data to firm up while the ground they were standing on gave way.

Meanwhile a different kind of leader came into their own, and frequently it was not who anyone expected. Sometimes it was a person the development system had quietly marked down — too directive, too impatient, insufficiently collaborative, a little too willing to get ahead of the room. Under normal conditions those were flaws. Under these conditions they were precisely the capabilities the moment required, and the organisation's survival came to depend on people whose leadership style it had spent years trying to soften.

3. Why development had prepared the wrong person

It would be easy, and wrong, to conclude from this that our leadership development was simply misguided. It was not. It was optimised, with considerable skill, for the world that existed when it was designed — a world of expansion, in which the central leadership problem is genuinely one of coordination and buy-in.

When an organisation is growing, its scarcest resource is aligned effort. There are more opportunities than can be pursued, and the constraint on pursuing them is getting enough people pointed the same way with enough conviction to sustain the effort. In that world, the leader who builds consensus is not being timid; they are solving the actual binding problem. Change that people own does outlast change that is imposed. Deliberation does surface the errors that haste would miss. The whole edifice of collaborative, consultative, evidence-led leadership is a rational response to conditions in which time is abundant and alignment is scarce.

The crisis inverted both terms. Time became the scarcest resource and alignment became a luxury. And a capability that is optimal under one set of conditions is not merely less useful under the inverted set — it is often actively harmful, because it consumes the very resource that has become scarce.

We did not train bad leaders. We trained leaders for abundance and then subjected them to scarcity, and were surprised when the skills of abundance failed. The failure was not of the individuals but of a development system that had mistaken the conditions of a decade for the nature of leadership itself.

There is a deeper problem underneath this, and it is worth naming. Our development systems had come to treat one style of leadership as maturity and its opposite as immaturity. The consultative leader was "evolved"; the directive leader had "development needs." This was never true — it was a preference of the times dressed up as a theory of growth. What the past year revealed is that decisiveness under uncertainty and consensus-building under stability are not points on a single ladder from immature to mature. They are different capabilities suited to different conditions, and a leader who has only one of them is exposed the moment the conditions change.

4. What crisis leadership actually required

If we look closely at what the leaders who succeeded actually did, rather than at their temperament, three capabilities recur. They are worth setting out precisely, because they are teachable, and because our failure to teach them was a choice rather than an inevitability.

- Deciding without consensus, but not without counsel. The successful leaders did not stop listening. They compressed listening into hours rather than weeks, took counsel from a small number of people they trusted, and then decided alone and owned the decision. The failure mode on one side was paralysis — waiting for an agreement that would never come. The failure mode on the other side was the leader who mistook deciding alone for deciding without input, and made confident, uninformed, catastrophic calls. The capability was the narrow path between them: fast, informed, and unmistakably owned.
- Acting ahead of the evidence, while staying honest about doing so. The information never caught up with the pace of events. Leaders who insisted on certainty before acting were overtaken; leaders who acted on partial information and pretended it was complete accumulated errors they could not see. The ones who succeeded acted early and said plainly that they were acting on judgement rather than proof — which preserved their ability to change course when better information arrived, because they had never staked their authority on being certain.
- Cutting and reassuring at once. This was the hardest, and the rarest. The crisis required leaders to restructure — to remove people, stop programmes, shrink footprints — while simultaneously holding the confidence and commitment of the people who remained. The instinct is to treat these as opposed: to be either the hard leader who cuts or the warm leader who reassures. The leaders who held their organisations together did both in the same act, being unflinching about the decision and deeply humane about its execution, and refusing to let either cancel the other.

Notice that none of these is a matter of temperament. Each is a discipline. A naturally consultative leader can learn to decide alone under pressure; a naturally directive leader can learn to take counsel before doing so. What defeated so many was not that they lacked the temperament but that no one had ever asked them to build the discipline, because the development system did not believe the conditions that required it would ever arrive.

5. The paradox of decisiveness

There is a trap in everything I have said so far, and honesty requires me to walk into it rather than around it. The obvious lesson of the past year — that we need more decisive leaders — is also a dangerous one, because decisiveness untethered from judgement is not a virtue. It is the thing that caused a good deal of the damage in the first place.

Some of the worst destruction I have seen over the past year was done by leaders who read the moment as a licence for decisiveness and used it to make sweeping, irreversible decisions quickly and badly. They cut capabilities the organisation would desperately need in the recovery. They dismantled teams whose value was invisible on a spreadsheet and unrecoverable once gone. They mistook the speed of their decisions for the quality of them, and the crisis gave them cover, because in an atmosphere that prizes action, the leader who acts decisively is applauded regardless of whether the action was right.

This is the paradox the essay has been circling. The crisis punished the leader who could not decide, and it also rewarded, at least in the short term, the leader who decided recklessly. The capability that actually mattered was not decisiveness. It was judgement

exercised at speed — which is a far rarer and more demanding thing, because it requires the leader to hold two contradictory disciplines at once: the willingness to act before certainty, and the humility to know that acting before certainty means they are quite likely to be wrong.

“Decisiveness without judgement is just recklessness that happens to be applauded. The crisis rewarded both the wise and the reckless — and only time will tell them apart.”

The leaders I trust most, looking back over the year, were the ones who moved fast and stayed frightened of their own decisions — who acted with conviction in the moment and revisited relentlessly to catch the errors that conviction had concealed. That combination looks like weakness to an organisation that wants a hero. It is, in fact, the only form of decisiveness that does not eventually destroy the thing it was meant to save.

6. What this asks of how we grow leaders

The uncomfortable conclusion of the past year is that our systems for developing leaders were built on an unexamined assumption — that the conditions of the growth years were the permanent conditions of business, and that leadership meant excellence within those conditions. That assumption has now been falsified in the most expensive way possible, and it would be a waste of the lesson to conclude merely that we need to add a crisis module to the existing programme.

The deeper implication is that we have been developing leaders for a single climate when we should have been developing them for a range of climates. A leader who is superb in abundance and helpless in scarcity is not a fully developed leader who happens to have hit a bad patch. They are a specialist who has been sold to themselves and to their organisation as a generalist. The past year has shown what that specialisation costs when the climate turns, and it has shown it in organisations that thought they had done everything right.

What would it mean to develop leaders for the range rather than the climate? It would mean teaching decisiveness and consensus-building as distinct disciplines, each with its conditions, rather than teaching one as maturity and the other as a failing. It would mean putting developing leaders deliberately into conditions of compressed time and poor information, so that the disciplines of crisis are built before the crisis rather than discovered during it. And it would mean being honest, in a way our development systems have not been, that the leader who is celebrated in good times may be exactly the wrong leader for bad ones — and that the reverse is also true, which is why the person the system marked down may be the person the organisation eventually cannot do without.

The crisis leader nobody trained for was, in the end, not a different kind of person from the leaders we had. Many of the people who rose to the moment had been in the organisation all along, held back or marked down for possessing exactly the capabilities the moment required. What we failed to train was not the person. It was the recognition that leadership is plural, that the conditions decide which form is needed, and that an organisation which can only grow one kind of leader has, without knowing it, bet everything on the conditions never changing. The past year was the collection of that bet.