

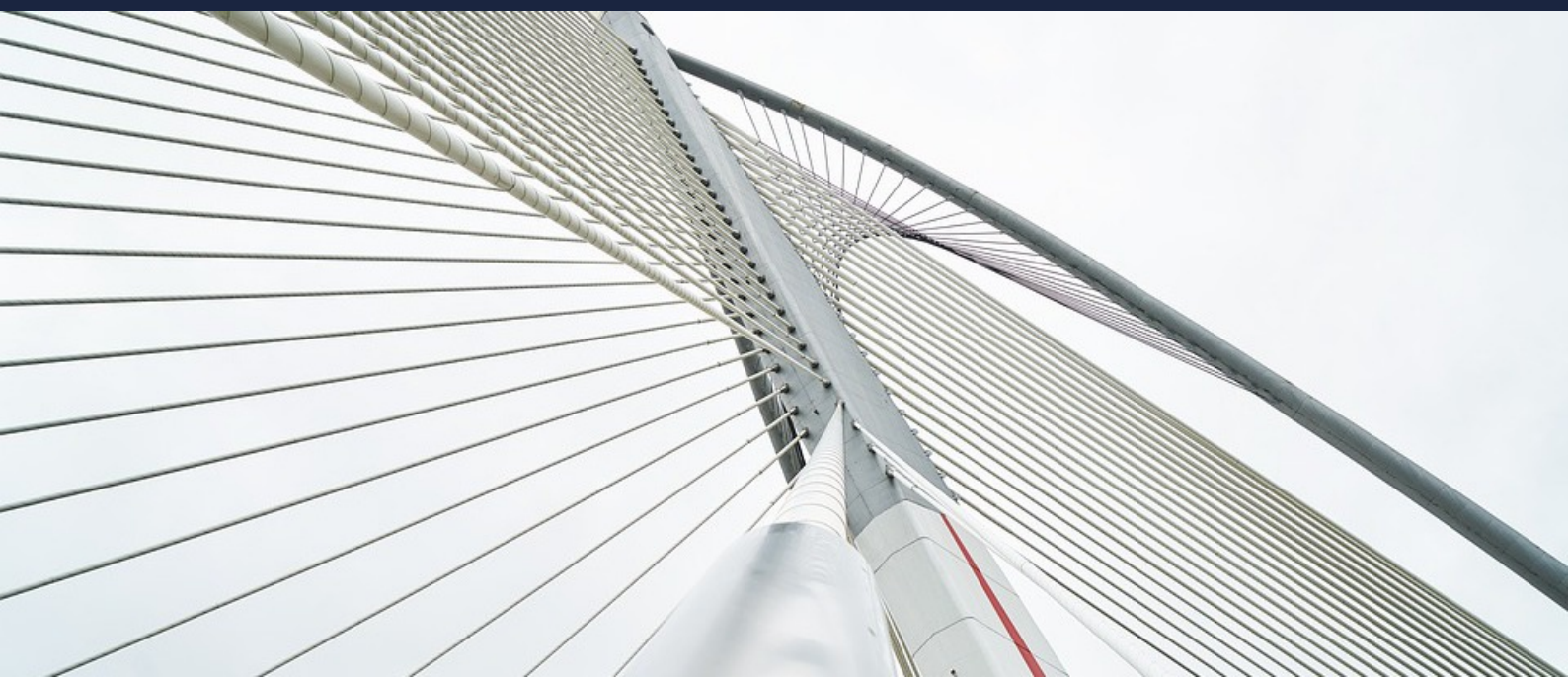
BEYOND CONTROL

Why Leaders Default to Control in Disruption — And How to Build Real Momentum

A Practitioner's Perspective on Leadership Through Uncertainty

Giovanni Leonardi

January 2024



Why Leaders Default to Control in Disruption — And How to Build Real Momentum

Leadership · No. 86

Originally written January 2024 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

"The real test of leadership in disruption is not how well you plan the next quarter, but how effectively you help others make sense of the present."

1. The Problem Nobody Wants to Name

Disruption is now the baseline condition for most organisations, yet leadership responses remain stuck in outdated reflexes. Instead of turning uncertainty into forward momentum, many leaders double down on control, issuing directives, tightening reporting lines, and promising stability that cannot be delivered. The result is teams that become passive, waiting for clarity that never arrives, while opportunities for adaptation slip away.

This pattern persists because the discomfort of admitting that traditional authority structures are insufficient feels too great. Leaders are praised for decisiveness, not for admitting they do not have all the answers. Consequently, disruption is treated as a temporary crisis rather than a permanent shift in operating logic.

2. Why It Happens — Three Structural Reasons

Three interlocking factors keep this default in place. First, most leadership development still assumes stable environments where strategy can be set from the top and cascaded downward. When volatility increases, the same tools produce rigidity rather than agility.

Second, performance systems reward the appearance of control. Metrics focus on activity and compliance rather than on whether teams are making sense of change or experimenting productively. Leaders therefore optimise for what is measured, not what is needed.

Third, psychological safety remains unevenly distributed. Middle managers, in particular, fear that surfacing ambiguity will be read as weakness, so they transmit pressure downward instead of creating space for collective problem-solving.

3. What Good Looks Like — The Three-Level Fix

3.1 Governance and structural level

Effective organisations redesign decision rights so that authority moves to where information is richest. This means fewer approval layers and clearer escalation criteria that distinguish between reversible and irreversible choices.

3.2 Data and insight level

Measurement shifts from output tracking to leading indicators of team health: speed of decision-making, quality of cross-functional dialogue, and willingness to surface bad news early. These signals reveal whether momentum is building or stalling.

3.3 People and culture level

Leaders model sense-making openly. They articulate what is changing and why it matters, then invite others to test interpretations rather than simply accepting direction. Courage is demonstrated by challenging legacy processes that no longer serve the current context, while psychological safety is protected so that experimentation does not carry career risk.

4. The Sector-Specific Complication

In regulated industries the tension is sharper. Compliance requirements create legitimate constraints on speed, yet the same rules can become excuses for avoiding empowerment. Leaders must therefore distinguish between regulatory boundaries that cannot move and internal habits that can be loosened without breaching external obligations.

5. Conclusion

Disruption will not reward leaders who merely survive it. The uncomfortable question is whether current leadership incentives actually select for the capacity to create momentum, or whether they continue to reward the comforting illusion of control.