



SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

LEADING IN PERPETUAL WHITEWATER: ROLES LEADERS CAN PLAY

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In today's era of perpetual whitewater leaders face turbulence, complexity, and ambiguity that demand new capabilities for leading change and supporting their organizations' overall change capability. This article synthesizes existing literature on building sustainable change capability through leadership. It is organized around five roles leaders can play: As navigators, leaders scan environments, interpret signals, and provide real-time navigation through situational awareness and sensemaking. As learning guides, they model and nurture curiosity, developmental readiness, and learning agility while orchestrating cultures where experimentation and reflection drive collective growth. As pilots, leaders compassionately guide people through the human side of change, reducing friction, by helping them process uncertainty, align diverse perspectives, and co-create shared meaning. As engineers, leaders design systems, structures, and distributed leadership practices that balance stability with agility, embedding adaptability into the fabric of the organization. Finally, as stabilizers, leaders steady their teams by demonstrating versatility, emotional agility, self-care, and boundary setting, providing microstability that complements organizational agility. Together, these roles highlight the paradoxical demands of modern leadership—balancing stability and flexibility, force and enablement, and learning and performance. Consultants and coaches can support leaders in understanding and cultivating these capacities and as a result help leaders both guide organizations through disruption but also embed resilience, adaptability, and trust as enduring capabilities for thriving in a world of constant change.

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What's It Mean? Implications for Consulting Psychology

Consulting psychologists can help leaders strengthen the capabilities required to guide organizations through constant change. By fostering their development in five key roles, psychologists support leaders who must sail in perpetual whitewater, balancing stability with adaptability. In doing so, they enable leaders to thrive personally while creating a greater capability for organizational change.

Keywords: change capability, organizational agility, leadership versatility, reactions to change, learning agility

We live and work in a world of perpetual whitewater—the unending complexity, ambiguity, and turbulence fueled by rapid technological disruption, economic uncertainty, global crises, and the constant evolution of the workforce. Leaders are at the vortex of these accelerating forces where the turbulence is strongest and the pull is inescapable. From this vantage point they must both withstand the swirl of pressures and provide clarity and direction so their organizations are not swept away. Being at the vortex means leaders are constantly navigating competing demands, rapid decision cycles, and unpredictable currents.

In the context of organizational change capability (OCC), leadership is arguably more important than any other factor. For example, research by [Albrecht and Roughsedge \(2023\)](#) suggests that leadership across all levels is a key factor in OCC. More specifically, they found that OCC depends not only on senior leadership's commitment and resource allocation but also on leadership at supervisory and front-line levels to translate capability into practice through culture, learning systems, and routines. In a systematic review of 48 studies, [Supriharyanti and Sukoco \(2023\)](#) found that leadership was repeatedly identified among the main antecedents of OCC and is one of the strongest predictors (and enablers) of whether an organization has the capability to change.

Developing leaders who are more prepared and capable of leading during constant change is a key opportunity for organizations, and the consultants who support them. Recent research by the [Center for Creative Leadership \(2025\)](#) found that the inability to adapt in the face of change was one of the most frequent reasons for leadership derailment. Developing change capability is not only important for leadership success—it is essential to organizational survival! Based on discussions with global chief executive officers, McKinsey identified a critical obstacle facing organizations “is having a deep bench of leaders who can not only thrive but excel in this uncertain 21st century environment” ([Sternfels et al., 2024](#), p. 2).

Despite acknowledgment of the importance of leaders in fostering OCC, no practical, science-based framework exists to guide coaches and consultants in selecting and developing leaders who can become the keystones in sustainable OCC. Traditional change management models assume that change is linear, episodic, and driven from the top, moving from stability through disruption back to stability. In contrast, today's change is continuous, unpredictable, and compounding, requiring agility, sensemaking, and collective adaptation rather than rigid step-by-step plans. Although aspects of these traditional models are still relevant, they do not adequately address the leader's role today in navigating constant whitewater.

The purpose of this article is to synthesize existing literature on building sustainable OCC through leadership. It is organized around five roles leaders can play when faced with perpetual whitewater:

1. Navigator
2. Learning guide
3. Pilot
4. Engineer
5. Stabilizer

Practical suggestions have also been included for ways that coaches and consultants can support the development of leaders' capabilities for each of these roles.

Leaders as Navigators

The first role of the change-capable leader is that of *navigator*. In constantly shifting conditions, recognizing when, where, and how to change is vital. This role requires a combination of situational awareness, sensemaking, and foresight that enables leaders to perceive, interpret, and respond strategically to changes in real time. Situational awareness combined with sensemaking can be considered a leader's global positioning system, enabling effective navigation during the turbulence of whitewater.

Monitoring Internal and External Signals

Situational awareness is critically important in a world shaped by digital transformation, climate uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and rapid innovation. Leaders must constantly monitor internal and external cues to anticipate emerging risks and opportunities. Leaders cannot rely on static plans. Instead, they must cultivate the ability to scan the environment, detect patterns, and adjust strategies accordingly (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

Originally rooted in military, aviation, and human factors, situational awareness involves perceiving key elements in the environment, comprehending their meaning, and projecting future states (e.g., Endsley, 1995). Applied to leadership this represents the ability to detect early signals of change, interpret their significance, and proactively respond appropriately. In complex, high-stakes environments, situational awareness allows leaders to anticipate problems, identify opportunities, and avoid costly blind spots (Patriarca et al., 2020). For example, a recent study across eight European countries found that a lack of situational awareness among leaders led to poor decision making, eroded trust, and weakened organizational resilience (Ramašauskienė et al., 2025). Leaders who accurately read the landscape are better equipped to respond swiftly and guide their teams effectively.

The need for situational awareness is consistent with historical theories such as contingency theory (Fiedler, 1967), which posits that effective leadership depends on aligning actions with situational variables such as task structure, team dynamics, and external pressures. Similarly, situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) emphasizes the need for leaders to adapt their style based on the context and readiness level of team members. However, the breadth and pace of change in today's environment raises the bar on the need for situational awareness at many levels *and* with variables that are fast-moving.

Although situational awareness is vital for effective leadership, it is also important to keep in mind that too much of it can be counterproductive, leading to cognitive overload, decision paralysis, micromanagement, and burnout. Research by Endsley (1995) and Klein et al. (2006) highlights that effective leaders filter information based on relevance to their goals, focusing attention where it matters most. Leaders must maintain a delicate balance of awareness and filtering.

Making Sense of Ambiguous Information

However, situational awareness alone is insufficient without the ability to interpret and give meaning to complex or ambiguous information. This is precisely when sensemaking becomes crucial. Sensemaking has been defined as the process by which individuals and groups construct meaning and understanding, especially in situations that are novel or unexpected (Eckstein, 2024; Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking enables leaders to frame environmental cues into coherent narratives that guide decision making and team alignment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Pattern recognition facilitates sensemaking by enabling individuals to integrate environmental cues into mental schemas that support comprehension in dynamic situations (Ancona et al., 2020; Endsley, 1995; Khan et al., 2024). Although artificial intelligence (AI) can support speed and scope of sensemaking, human judgment remains essential. Leaders must contextualize insights, question algorithmic biases, and integrate ethical, cultural, and relational dimensions that AI alone cannot capture (von Krogh, 2018).

Together, situational awareness and sensemaking support leaders in navigating complexity, building shared understanding, and making better decisions. Situational awareness, with the right

filters, gives leaders the raw material (facts, data, signals), while sensemaking gives them the narrative tools to interpret and act on those materials—often in collaboration with others.

Predicting the Future

Although situational awareness and sensemaking are critical for navigating the present, their combined value may extend further in strengthening a leader's ability to anticipate and shape the future. This is referred to as *prospective sensemaking* (Sakellariou & Vecchiato, 2022). Situational awareness provides early detection of weak signals and emerging shifts, while sensemaking links those signals into coherent patterns that suggest possible trajectories. Collectively, these capabilities help leaders project future states, explore scenarios, and prepare adaptive strategies before risks or opportunities fully materialize (Ancona et al., 2007; Shankar et al., 2023).

However, although prospective sensemaking holds considerable promise for helping leaders anticipate and shape future conditions, empirical evidence remains limited. Current research is largely conceptual or case-based, suggesting the need for further study to establish its effectiveness in leadership practice. With the growing reliance on AI-generated predictive models, it is essential for leaders to possess well-developed critical thinking. This enables them to evaluate AI outputs and thoughtfully assess the underlying assumptions by applying their own informed judgment.

Implications for Developing Leaders as Navigators

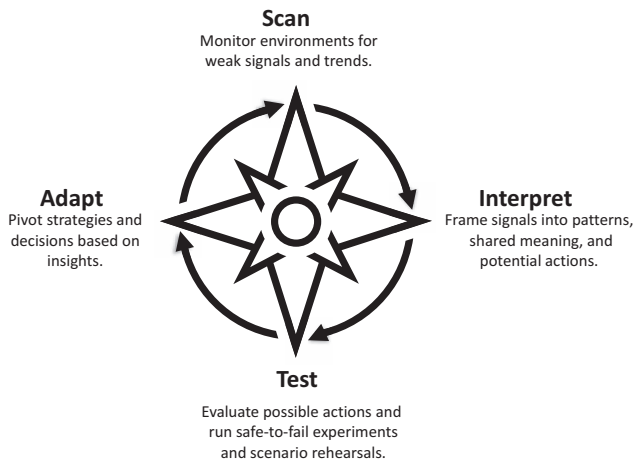
Leaders who practice and develop the capacity to quickly detect and make sense of change are better positioned to navigate complexity, build resilient cultures, and drive meaningful transformation. The scan-interpet-test-adapt framework presented in Figure 1 is intended to be a practical model representing the role of change sensitivity for leaders in navigating uncertainty—"a Leader's GPS." Using a framework like this can enable leaders to position their organizations ahead of competitors, build resilience, and inspire confidence by articulating a compelling picture of what lies ahead. Table 1 outlines practical actions consultants and coaches can take to support the development of leaders as change-sensitive navigators.

Leaders as Learning Guides

The second role of leaders in OCC is that of *learning guide*. Great leaders are never finished products. They must be capable of (a) continuously expanding, refining, and applying their own knowledge and

Figure 1

The Scan–Interpet–Test–Adapt Framework: A Leader's Global Positioning System



Note. From *The SITA Framework: A Leader's GPS* (p. 2), by Harvey and Adler, 2025, Schmidt Harvey Consulting, LLC. Copyright 2025 by Schmidt Harvey Consulting, LLC. Reprinted with permission.

Table 1
Developing Leaders as Navigators

Focus area	Practical guidance for consultant and coach
Engage in environment scanning	Encourage leaders to regularly monitor industry, technological, geopolitical, and social trends; use scenario planning and foresight teams to identify early signals; encourage “devil’s advocates” to challenge assumptions.
Create mental models	Help leaders build dynamic mental maps of how elements connect and evolve. Use systems mapping, scenario planning, and simulations to practice interpreting complexity.
Filter signal from noise	Train leaders to distinguish signal from noise. Use tools like the OODA loop (Ryder & Downs, 2022), mindfulness, and structured prioritization to focus on what matters most.
Leverage the power of diversity	Engage team in brainstorming to generate creative ways of potentially reacting to emerging challenges by coaching leaders on how to rein in expressing their own ideas first and encouraging input from all team members.
Encourage collaborative sensemaking	Encourage the leader to conduct regular debriefs, journaling, peer coaching, and inclusive dialog to test interpretations. Promote the value of shared sensemaking through active listening and curiosity.
Expose complexity	Coach leaders to more systematically design rotations, cross-functional projects, global assignments, or crisis simulations to strengthen their teams’ comfort with ambiguity.
Leverage technology and AI	Introduce the use of tools for real-time data and pattern recognition while coaching leaders on interpretation, ethical judgment, and relational impact. Emphasize leveraging artificial intelligence as a support but not a replacement for the leader’s own critical thinking.
Prevent overload	Guide leaders to clarify priorities, filter information, and delegate monitoring tasks. Reinforce the discipline of focusing only on the most relevant signals.
Apply emotional intelligence	Develop leaders’ self-awareness and empathy through assessments and practice, enabling them to interpret both environmental <i>and</i> interpersonal cues more effectively.

Note. OODA = observe–orient–decide–act.

skills; (b) demonstrating to others how life-long learning is practiced; and (c) orchestrating the ongoing growth of others. *Learning must become a way of being* for leaders (Vaill, 1996). As Albrecht and Roughsedge (2023) pointed out, the capacity of organizations to adapt and thrive in the face of change requires leaders who are “ready and willing” to take initiative and seize opportunities to stretch and grow. They note that the capacity of leaders to change and develop is fundamental to an organization’s capacity as a whole to change and flourish.

Organizations clearly recognize the importance of investing in the development of leaders. In the U.S. alone, organizations spend approximately \$166 billion annually on various training and development programs, with a significant portion allocated to leadership development. Although precise figures can vary, it is estimated that around 10%–15% of this budget specifically focuses on developing leaders. This means that organizations are investing around \$16 billion to \$25 billion annually in leadership development programs (Association for Talent Development, 2023). Unfortunately, this massive investment does not consistently translate into leader growth and all too often yields little-to-no return in strengthening leadership and, in turn, the organization (Lacerenza et al., 2017).

Developmental readiness and learning agility can help bridge this gap by enabling leaders to grow effectively through both experience and the more effective use of coaches and other formal programs (Association for Talent Development, 2023). Developmental readiness reflects a leader’s openness, self-awareness, and motivation to improve, making them more likely to engage in learning opportunities with intention. Learning agility complements this by allowing leaders to quickly absorb lessons from all their experiences and apply them to new situations. Together, these capacities support adaptation in complex, fast-changing environments.

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Cultivating Developmental Readiness

The concept of developmental readiness was introduced more than two decades ago as a critical factor to consider in the context of leader development (Avolio, 2005). However, it has received surprisingly limited attention as a key moderator of the relationship between the provision of learning opportunities to employees in organizations and the degree to which participants actually learn and grow. Developmental readiness encapsulates individual differences in the motivation, willingness, and ability of leaders to engage in and learn from development opportunities (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). It has been found to mediate the relationship between investment in development and actual growth in leader capability (e.g., Reichard & Beck, 2017; Reichard & Walker, 2016). A leader's readiness to embrace leadership development opportunities has been found to play a pivotal role in predicting the impact of, and return on investment derived from, participation in leadership development initiatives.

The key dimensions of developmental readiness include

1. Self-efficacy: Leaders' belief in their own ability to succeed at challenging development tasks.
2. Optimism: Maintaining a hopeful outlook toward achieving developmental goals.
3. Perseverance: Persistence in navigating barriers and potential distractions to remain focused on learning objectives.
4. Resilience: The capacity for overcoming adversity and enduring the setbacks and discomfort that inevitably accompany them.

Developmental readiness influences the *intentions* of an individual to engage in specific behaviors relevant to the learning opportunity offered. Consistent with the classical theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), these behavioral intentions are predictive of the probability of people engaging in those learning behaviors, which in turn predicts the likelihood that they will expand their capabilities, thereby benefiting from the developmental opportunity.

Reichard and colleagues (e.g., Pitichat et al., 2018; Reichard & Walker, 2016) applied the theory of reasoned action to trace the impact of developmental readiness on outcomes. Their studies show that leaders with strong scores on developmental readiness are more likely to display stronger intentions to perform specific learning behaviors, which in turn makes it more likely they will engage in those behaviors, resulting in more learning. In summary, assessing and building developmental readiness is essential to ensure that leaders are poised to deal with rapid change.

Developing Learning Agility

Whereas developmental readiness focuses on willingness and intentions to engage in learning, learning agility is the ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply that learning in new, challenging, or unfamiliar situations (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000). As traditional models of expertise become less relevant in the face of rapid change, learning agility has emerged as a reliable predictor of leadership success and adaptability (De Meuse, 2019; De Meuse et al., 2010; DeRue et al., 2012; Harvey & De Meuse, 2021a, 2021b).

Learning agility is not about *what* a leader knows but *how* they grow through experience. Agile learners demonstrate curiosity, openness, and the capacity to reflect and apply lessons across contexts. They seek out feedback, take calculated risks, and rebound from setbacks with a commitment to learning rather than defensiveness or blame. In doing so, they are able to adapt more quickly and lead others through uncertainty and change.

Learning agility is a meta competency that Harvey and De Meuse (2021b) suggest includes the following dimensions:

- Behavioral—Proactively seeks input, feedback, and experiences while staying flexible and willing to experiment.

- Cognitive—Stays curious, open-minded, and reflective, drawing lessons from experience.
- Knowledge—Applies effective learning strategies and self-insight into strengths and weaknesses.
- Motivation—Is growth-oriented confident, resilient, and driven to embrace challenges.
- Social—Uses social intelligence to build inclusive relationships, adapt to others, and manage conflict constructively.
- Attitudinal—Applies open-mindedness to try new things and experiment outside their comfort zone.

The link between learning agility and leading in perpetual change is especially strong. Leaders high in learning agility are more adaptable and less reliant on rigid routines or fixed mental models. As De Meuse (2017, 2019) found, high learning-agile leaders are not only more likely to succeed in stretch roles but also drive greater organizational flexibility and resilience. They model a mindset of experimentation and continuous improvement—key ingredients for building a learning culture and leading successful transformation initiatives.

Learning agility likewise supports faster recovery from failure, a critical trait in high-change environments. Learning agile leaders perceive setbacks as data points rather than personal failures, making them better equipped to innovate and lead through trial-and-error approaches (De Meuse, 2017; Harvey & Valerio, 2022). Their capacity for seeking feedback, reflection and adjustment contributes to psychological resilience and improved decision making under pressure.

Orchestrating a Culture of Learning

Leaders shape a culture of learning not only by pursuing their own growth but by modeling curiosity, reframing mistakes as opportunities, and creating structures that sustain development. They foster psychological safety enabling employees to take risks without fear (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014), and they embed learning into daily work through after-action reviews, coaching, and cross-boundary projects (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). They also help teams interpret experiences in ways that connect lessons to organizational vision (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995).

Sustaining this culture requires key levers such as psychological safety balanced with accountability (Edmondson, 2019), systems thinking, willingness to challenge assumptions (Senge, 1990), a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), a feedback-rich environment (Adler & Neiman, 2021), experimentation that drives innovation and improvement (Thomke, 2020), and reward systems that value learning in addition to performance. Together, these practices enable organizations to continuously adapt in complex environments (Harvey & De Meuse, 2021b).

A vital part of this culture is helping others learn to fail effectively, turning setbacks into stepping stones for growth. The concept of “failing fast” emphasizes rapid learning through small, low-cost experiments that identify flaws early, minimize wasted resources, and generate insights for adaptation and innovation (Ries, 2011; Thomke, 2020). Edmondson (2023) distinguished this from “failing well,” noting three types of failure: *intelligent failures*, which advance learning and innovation; *basic failures*, which result from preventable mistakes and highlight the need for discipline; and *complex failures*, which arise from unpredictable interactions and require collaboration and adaptability.

Leaders help team members “fail fast and well” by modeling openness, sharing their own mistakes, and framing failures as opportunities to learn (Edmondson, 2019, 2023). By fostering psychological safety, they enable teams to course-correct quickly. Leaders also guide teams in distinguishing preventable from valuable failures, encourage intelligent experimentation, and embed reflection practices such as after-action reviews and debriefs (Cannon & Edmondson, 2005). These practices accelerate innovation, build resilience, and help organizations turn setbacks into learning experiences (Koporcic et al., 2025).

Implications for Developing Leaders as Learning Guides

To be enablers of OCC, leaders must be deeply committed and skilled in the science and practice of learning itself—educating, guiding, and inspiring others through their own discipline, curiosity, and growth. [Figure 2](#) summarizes the key aspects of this role. Practitioners can assist leaders in becoming more change capable by developing self-sufficiency in their own learning, in supporting the learning of others, and in creating a culture where continual learning is expected and supported. [Table 2](#) provides practical suggestions for how coaches and consultants can support leaders in developing the capabilities needed for this role.

Leaders as Pilots

Harbor pilots help ships navigate through rocky shoals and narrow channels. They reduce the risk of grounding or collision. In the same way, leaders must serve as pilots, reducing the inevitable friction as individuals and teams go through perpetual, often painful, disruptive, habit-breaking transitions. As pilots, leaders help their teams feel accompanied, buffered, informed, and cared for. Leaders must bring others along in the constant flow of change. This includes (a) guiding rather than dictating, (b) helping people make sense of complexity, (c) supporting emotional needs and diverse reactions to change, and (d) aligning diverse voices and fostering shared ownership.

Creating Perspective, Meaning, and Hope in the Midst of Complexity

[Peterson \(2021\)](#) distinguished ambiguity and unpredictability—the “A” and “U” of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA)—as emotional byproducts of volatility and complexity. Unlike volatility and complexity—which can often be analyzed rationally—ambiguity and uncertainty trigger fear, anxiety, and defensiveness when people cannot make sense of unfolding events ([Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010](#); [Morriss et al., 2023](#)). In these moments, leaders must serve as both framers and meaning makers.

Through framing, leaders play a vital role in creating hope, which provides employees with a sense of possibility and forward momentum that counteracts fear and disengagement. In fact, a [2025 Gallup](#) survey found that *hope* is the primary need people around the world have of their leaders (56%), outranking even the next most important need of trust (33%). Leaders create hope by framing challenges and by positioning uncertainty as opportunities for learning and innovation ([Ancona, 2012](#); [Xia et al., 2024](#)).

For many employees—perhaps most—uncertainty is perceived as negative. Not knowing what has happened or is going to happen is viewed as undesirable and something to be avoided. Unfortunately,

Figure 2
Leader as Learning Guide

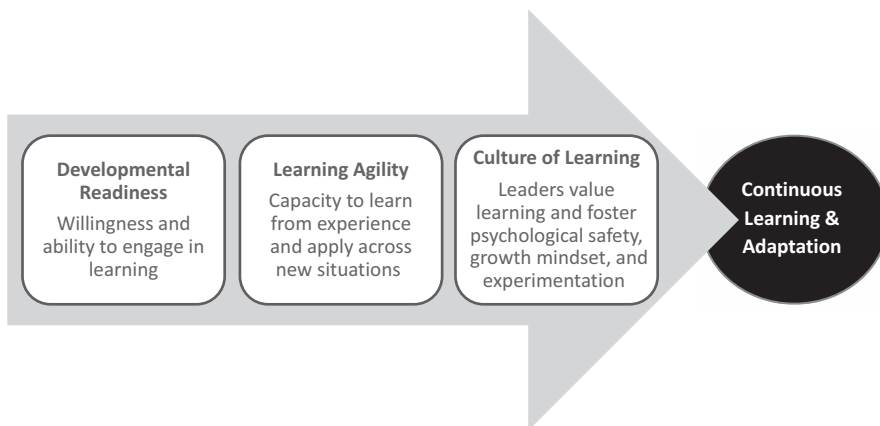


Table 2
Developing Leaders as Learning Guides

Focus area	Guidance for consultant and coach
Assess developmental readiness	Support development and use of tools such as Pitichat et al. (2018) 25-item scale to evaluate self-efficacy, optimism, perseverance, and resilience before investing in designing, implementing, and assigning learning opportunities.
Clarify learning intentions	Strengthen outcomes by asking leaders to rate their intention to engage in specific learning behaviors; intention predicts actual development (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Consider using scales such as the “Readiness Ruler” (Nowack & Mashihi, 2025).
Connect learning to purpose and identity	Help leaders link learning to values, career aspirations, and long-term impact to increase motivation and commitment.
Assess learning agility	Apply validated tools (e.g., <i>TALENTx7</i> , <i>viaEDGE</i> , <i>BurkeLAI</i>) and behavioral observations to assess and initiate dialog on learning agility (Boyce & Boyce, 2021, 2022).
Develop learning agility	Use models like the agile learning process and behaviors framework to intentionally strengthen adaptive learning behaviors (Harvey & Prager, 2021 ; Harvey & Valerio, 2022).
Foster a learning culture	Encourage leaders to model learning at the top, normalize failure, embed reflection and stretch assignments, and align systems to reward curiosity and adaptability (Edmondson, 2019 ; Ruyle et al., 2021).

recent research has shown that having a negative attitude toward uncertainty is associated with poor mental health and that excessive effort to seek certainty and avoid or minimize uncertainty can lead to low-quality decisions and dysfunctional action ([Appel et al., 2024](#)).

However, research by [Alquist and Baumeister \(2024\)](#) suggests that experiencing uncertainty *can* have beneficial effects when leaders frame it as a source of possibility rather than only as a threat. Highlighting the potential to influence the future can boost effort and engagement. By acknowledging what is not yet known while highlighting areas where action or learning is possible, leaders can channel the heightened attention and energy that uncertainty provokes into exploration, collaboration, and innovation. They can also leverage suspense and curiosity to sustain motivation (rather than rushing prematurely to closure), while providing enough structure and psychological safety so that uncertainty feels stimulating rather than overwhelming. In short, leaders who normalize uncertainty show how it can be worked with productively, and they balance it with reassurance to create conditions where not knowing becomes a catalyst for growth, learning, and adaptive action rather than paralysis.

As meaning makers, leaders can foster a more objective, hopeful understanding of the situation. By connecting the everyday employee experience with the opportunity to influence the future leaders can frame uncertainty as an opportunity and an energizing challenge rather than a debilitating threat ([Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991](#); [Maitlis & Christianson, 2014](#)).

Understanding and Supporting Diverse Reactions to Change

Adaptation is not just organizational but deeply human—requiring people to release old behaviors, identities, routines, and assumptions while embracing new possibilities. Some employees experience novelty and uncertainty as energizing, while others respond with fear, anxiety, or resistance, particularly when familiar routines are disrupted ([Erwin & Garman, 2010](#); [Harvey et al., 2021](#); [Smollan, 2006](#)). For some, finding hope may be inherently more difficult!

Despite the popularity of frameworks such as Kotter’s 8-step process, McKinsey’s 7-S model, Prosci’s ADKAR, and Lewin’s 3-step model, research suggests that up to 70% of change initiatives fail, often because of resistance and insufficient leadership support ([Burnes, 2011](#); [Ewenstein et al., 2015](#); [Hughes, 2011](#)). These failures underscore the limits of one-size-fits-all approaches and highlight

the human costs of poorly managed change, which include chronic stress, diminished trust, and higher turnover (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Responses to change vary widely and are shaped by neurological wiring, past experiences, personal values, and coping strategies (Dai et al., 2025; Rock, 2008; Smollan, 2006). The status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness (SCARF) model (Cox & Rock, 2012) shows how core needs—SCARF—determine whether change feels threatening or empowering. Similarly, perceptions of fairness, resilience, and efficacy influence whether individuals adapt constructively or resist (Bellis et al., 2019; Judge et al., 1999; Wanberg & Banas, 2000).

Leaders play a critical role in shaping these responses by addressing psychological and experiential factors. They can use the SCARF model to pinpoint what feels most threatening, recognize how past experiences shape current attitudes, and frame change in ways that build meaning and alignment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Attention to fairness, values, and coping strategies helps leaders tailor support and reduce resistance.

Assessments further equip leaders to anticipate responses. Oreg's (2003) *Resistance to Change Scale* identifies traits like routine-seeking and rigidity, while change belief scales (Armenakis et al., 1993, 2007) and attitude measures (Lines, 2005) capture confidence and readiness. The *Change Style Indicator* (Musselwhite, 1998) categorizes individuals in broad terms as conservers, pragmatists, or originators. Building on prior assessment research, Harvey et al. (2023) introduced an integrated assessment, *CONTINUUM*, which measures five facets of change response—emotions, preferences, confidence, expectations, and optimism. This produces a spectrum of behavioral reactions from “cautious” to “promoting,” offering actionable insights for tailoring change strategies to each type of reaction (De Meuse et al., 2025).

By understanding, recognizing, and adapting to their followers' diverse responses to change, leaders can cultivate resilience, reduce resistance, and foster healthier, more adaptive employees, teams, and organizations.

Preparing the Team for “Overboard” Experiences

“Overboard” experiences during change are inevitable because disruption pushes some people beyond their comfort zones, creating stress, resistance, or withdrawal when routines are upended (Oreg et al., 2011). These moments are a natural part of adaptation. Leaders can stabilize teams by normalizing the experience, fostering psychological safety, and guiding recovery.

Leaders should begin by evaluating areas of resilience versus brittleness within their teams. When experiencing failure, do team members seem deflated for long periods after? Do they waste too much time trying to deny the failure and focus too much on assigning blame? Or, on the other hand, are team members quick to share “early warning” signals of danger? Do they regularly discuss past situations of stresses that were not well handled to figure out what can be done to face those situations more effectively in the future?

Just as the captain of a ship ensures that overboard drills are routine, organizational leaders can proactively build team resilience. Leaders should identify common stressors from the past and develop strategies to reduce their recurrence in the future. Facilitating “what-if” discussions prepares the team for potential challenges, while encouraging team members to share early warning signs of issues helps the team respond proactively. It is also important for leaders and teams to regularly practice protocols for responding effectively to sudden challenges (Alliger et al., 2015).

Aligning Diverse Views and Encouraging Collaboration

Leaders play a pivotal role in aligning diverse perspectives and fostering collaboration. The importance of this role intensifies during times of change. Change often amplifies uncertainty, stress, and ambiguity, which can trigger defensiveness or siloed thinking. Leaders who align diverse perspectives help employees see the bigger picture, connect their individual contributions to shared goals, and reduce the psychological costs of uncertainty (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Diversity of thought—rooted in differences of experience, expertise, and worldview—enables richer problem-solving, innovation, and adaptability. However, without intentional leadership, these

differences can also fuel conflict, misalignment, and resistance (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). Leaders should act as integrators, creating structures and processes that allow individuals to share insights, challenge assumptions, and cocreate solutions. This requires building trust, facilitating open dialog, and modeling inclusive behaviors that signal all voices are valued. By doing so, leaders channel diversity into collective intelligence rather than fragmentation.

Encouraging collaboration likewise distributes the work of sensemaking, enabling organizations to detect weak signals and generate creative responses to emerging challenges (Ancona et al., 2007). Moreover, when employees feel included in shaping solutions, they demonstrate greater buy-in, resilience, and commitment to change (Edmondson, 2019). Thus, during periods of rapid transformation, leaders serve as catalysts for ensuring that diverse perspectives strengthen rather than fracture the organization.

Implications for Developing Leaders as Pilots

Consultants can assist leaders in honing their skills as pilots. Leaders navigating change must help employees make sense of complexity while supporting the diverse ways they respond. By connecting daily work to shared purpose, leaders create meaning and reduce uncertainty. They should also anticipate individual reactions, tailor support to different needs, and prepare for overboard experiences. Just as importantly, leaders must align diverse perspectives, foster collaboration, and channel collective intelligence into new ways of working. Figure 3 provides a graphic summary of the core components of this role. Table 3 provides practical suggestions for how coaches and consultants can support leaders develop the capabilities needed for this role.

Leaders as Engineers

In a world of constant disruption, leaders must evolve from change managers to change *engineers*—visionary designers and activators of transformed organizations. By shaping systems, cultures, and mindsets that support ongoing adaptation, these leaders guide their organizations through change and

Figure 3
Leader as Pilot

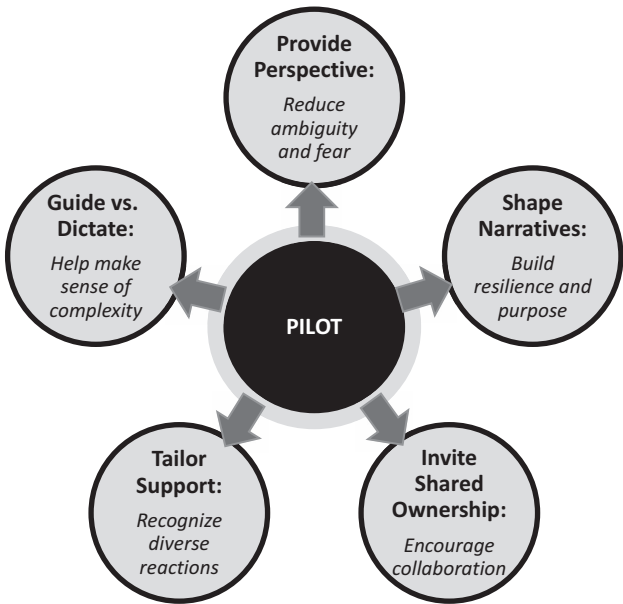


Table 3
Developing Leaders as Pilots

Focus area	Guidance for consultant and coach
Frame challenge to create hope	Challenge organizations and leaders to normalize uncertainty, creating hope and framing ambiguity as part of growth and uncertainty as opportunity. Focus attention strategically on solvable priorities rather than overwhelming unknowns or futile efforts to achieve certainty (Ancona, 2012; Fairhurst, 2010).
Create meaning	Help leaders link upcoming changes to organizational and personal missions, enabling employees to see their place in the story. Guide leaders to hold sensemaking dialogs and use symbolic actions to build shared understanding and meaning (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).
Reduce emotional consequences	Guide leaders to reframe mistakes as learning, promote experimentation, and emphasize progress. Use psychological safety principles to reduce defensiveness and foster group problem-solving (Edmondson, 2019).
Address neurological threat responses	Use the SCARF model to help leaders spot threat responses, share clear updates, give autonomy, acknowledge contributions, and promote fairness to reduce stress and resistance (Cox & Rock, 2012).
Recognize past experiences with change	Encourage leaders to acknowledge followers' past negative experiences with change and surface the resulting mindsets that may get in the way of dealing with present and future challenges (Armenakis et al., 1993, 2007; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).
Leverage assessments	Introduce organizations to tools like the <i>CONTINUUM</i> to identify employee responses (cautious, tolerant, supportive, promoting) and tailor communication accordingly (Harvey et al., 2021).
Rightsize the challenge	Help leaders build personal and team resilience by breaking change into manageable steps, celebrating small wins, and modeling coping strategies. Provide needed training and encourage mindfulness and peer support to strengthen adaptation capacity (Raetz et al., 2021).
Prepare for overboard experiences	Encourage leaders to identify common past challenges, facilitating "what-if" scenario discussions, encouraging team members to share early warning signs, and rehearse standard operating procedures to ensure readiness for sudden challenges (Alliger et al., 2015).

Note. SCARF = status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness.

build the capacity to thrive in it. In their role as engineers, leaders embed adaptability into the fabric of their organizations. They create foundational stability to sustain upheaval, much like a well-constructed ship in a storm, and empower a capable resilient crew.

Recognizing That Organizational Agility Requires Stability

When change is recognized as ongoing rather than a one-time event, it becomes clear that leaders must engineer systems and cultivate mindsets that support *continuous* adaptation (Pulakos et al., 2019). It is one thing to weather a short storm; it is quite another to design an organization with the strength and agility required for constant turbulence. Research highlights that organizational agility is a critical capability for navigating VUCA environments, as it enables assessing, adapting, and responding to shifting conditions with speed and resilience (Punia & Shankar, 2021; Teece et al., 2016).

Pulakos et al. (2019) characterized organizational agility as an integrated blend of proactive responsiveness and reactive resilience, where organizations manage and recover from disruptions effectively. Organizational agility in VUCA conditions is driven by (a) clear values and vision that

anchor stability; (b) flexible structures and processes that allow rapid adaptation; (c) empowered, skilled employees who can take initiative; and (d) a culture of learning and innovation that enables continuous renewal (Punia & Shankar, 2021).

Recent research underscores that organizational agility is a source of competitive advantage—boosting innovation, employee engagement, performance, and resilience across diverse economic and organizational contexts (Asghar et al., 2025; Bekos et al., 2025; Ludviga & Kalvina, 2024; McKinsey, 2021). Based on data from 325 firms, research by Pulakos et al. (2019) revealed organizations high in agility–resilience achieved significantly superior results—up to 150% higher return on investment and 500% higher return on equity.

Pulakos et al. (2019) also uncovered a surprising paradox: Contrary to common assumptions, their study revealed that agility stems not from speed alone, chaos, or ad hoc processes but requires *stability*. To create stability leaders must provide clarity in roles, processes, and expectations, which frees employees from unnecessary confusion and allows them to focus their energy on adapting when challenges emerge. Leaders must also foster psychological safety and trust, giving people the confidence to take risks and embrace change rather than resist it. Reducing organizational noise by simplifying systems and priorities decreases the overload that often accompanies change. Finally, leaders create stability by ensuring continuity in culture, values, and practices, helping organizations remain steady. In this way, stability is not the opposite of agility but rather its enabler, providing the secure underlying structure—the sturdy hull—from which organizations can pivot and move forward.

Overindexing on Communication

Stability also requires an appropriate degree of transparency in communication. Leaders are commonly faced with the dilemma of calibrating precisely how much information they should share with their teams when only equipped with an obscured view of the present, a foggy future, and limited information. In an integrated series of studies, Flynn and Lide (2023) demonstrated that, in the view of their teams, leaders often miscalibrate the amount of information they share—as much as 75% of the time. And overwhelmingly the research shows that leaders most often are seen as undercommunicating, much to their detriment as leaders.

In these studies, Flynn and Lide (2023) found

- Compared with those who overcommunicate, leaders who undercommunicate are seen as far less empathic and are viewed as significantly less effective by their teams.
- In a multirater survey with almost 1,000 participants, direct reports highlighted undercommunication as the leader's priority developmental opportunity ten times more often than they listed overcommunication as the leader's priority developmental need.
- Those who saw their leaders as generally *overcommunicating* rated their leaders just as capable as those who characterized their leaders as well-calibrated in the amount of information the leader shared. Those who viewed their leaders as generally *undercommunicating* rated their leader's capabilities at a significantly lower level.
- The researchers assessed preferences of 222 university alumni on the quantity of information they prefer receiving from their boss against the quantity they feel they actually receive. Respondents felt, overwhelmingly, that they received significantly less information than they preferred.
- In a final study the authors asked a sample of employees to evaluate the amount of communication they received from their leader during the first month of arguably our most challenging uber-whitewater event—the pandemic. Leaders were generally seen as having undercommunicated, much to the detriment of the leader's perceived effectiveness in the crisis.

Informational miscalibration in either direction can erode the sense of stability and trust in leadership. Undercommunication—whether intended or not—carries the more powerful message that leaders lack sufficient empathy, caring for, and trust in their teams. When coaching leaders, it is important to raise awareness of the common tendency to undercommunicate and to be sensitive to the potential costs of undercommunication to perceptions of the leader's effectiveness in leading change.

Harnessing the Power of Distributed Leadership

As engineers, leaders must also understand the value of leadership distributed across roles. Distributed leadership is an approach where leadership roles and decision making are shared among multiple individuals in an organization, rather than being concentrated among a few. This leadership model focuses on collaboration, collective expertise, and interdependence to achieve goals. Unlike traditional leadership that centralizes authority, distributed leadership spreads responsibilities across teams, encouraging greater involvement, innovation, and use of diverse strengths. It aligns with the matrix organizational structure, in which authority is shared and employees report to multiple managers, fostering collaboration and shared accountability.

Distributed leadership can be especially important during periods of rapid change, frequent innovation, and increased knowledge sharing, such as in global and remote work settings (Harris et al., 2022; Leithwood et al., 2009; Pearce & Conger, 2003). By empowering individuals with relevant expertise, organizations can adapt, innovate, and respond effectively to complex challenges, promoting collective responsibility and agility (Bolden, 2011; Spillane, 2006).

Evidence from entrepreneurial and high-tech firms links distributed leadership to higher team performance (Ensley et al., 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Meta-analyses further connect distributed leadership to team effectiveness, particularly in knowledge-driven industries (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016). It is also associated with stronger employee empowerment and organizational agility by reducing reliance on hierarchy (Bolden, 2011).

However, for distributed leadership to work, cultures of trust and clear accountability are vital. Poor implementation can lead to confusion and conflict. Leaders must prioritize trust, collaboration, and shared achievement over control (Harris et al., 2022). Their roles shift to facilitators and enablers, helping others lead (Spillane, 2006). This demands skills in facilitation, coaching, systems thinking, adaptive leadership, transparent communication, and conflict resolution (Bolden, 2011).

Implications for Developing Leaders as Engineers

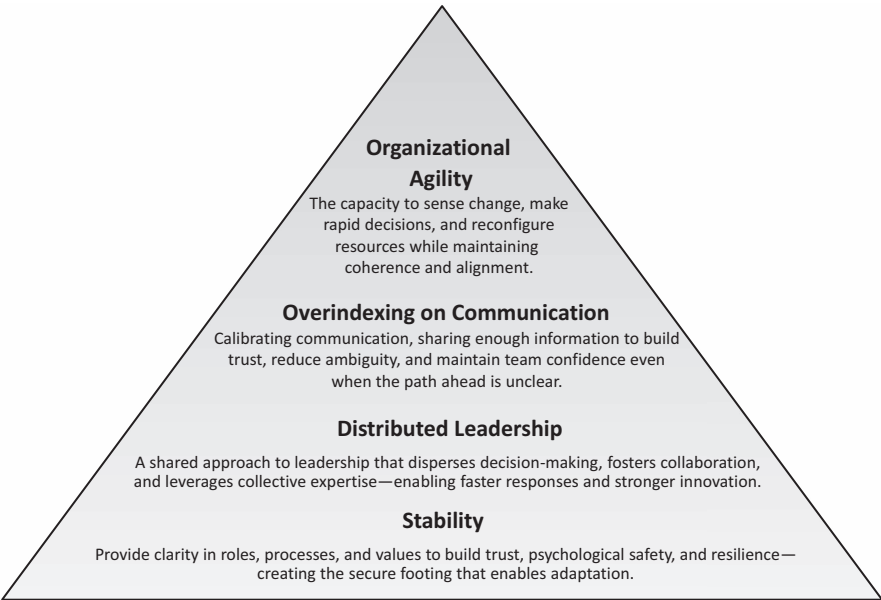
During times of constant disruption, leaders must evolve into engineers who design systems, cultures, and mindsets that are built for ongoing change. Consultants play a critical role in helping leaders balance stability and agility—anchoring organizations in clarity, transparent communication, trust, and shared purpose while enabling experimentation and rapid responses. Stability provides the foundation for resilience and psychological safety. Distributed leadership creates agility by allowing for more rapid sensing and decision making.

Consultants can guide leaders in creating structures and practices that foster both stability and agility. Together, these capabilities enable organizations to stay steady yet flexible, thriving amid uncertainty. Figure 4 depicts how stability and distributed leadership ultimately support greater organizational agility and, in turn, change capability. Table 4 provides practical suggestions for how coaches and consultants can support leaders in developing the capabilities needed for this role.

Leaders as Stabilizers

As noted in the prior section, organizational agility requires stability. Much like the keel and ballast of a ship, leaders provide the steadiness that maintains balance in rough waters. Leaders act as *stabilizers* by flexing their approach to provide direction, empowerment, or support depending on what the situation demands. Stabilizing leaders respond with calm and confidence when conditions shift rather than

Figure 4
Leader as Engineer



amplifying turbulence. This microstability complements the macrostability engineered at the organizational level.

Demonstrating Leadership Versatility

Leadership versatility involves a leader’s capacity to flexibly adapt their style, behaviors, and approaches depending on situational demands (Kaiser & Sherman, 2025; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2002). Versatility highlights the ability to balance and integrate opposing yet complementary behaviors—such as being both forceful and enabling, strategic and operational, or directive and participative. This competency emphasizes that effective leadership lies not in rigid consistency but in situational appropriateness and the ability to shift fluidly among approaches (Kaiser & Sherman, 2025).

During times of constant change, leadership versatility becomes especially critical. Leaders must pivot rapidly between exploration and execution, control and empowerment, and stability and innovation. Leaders who lack versatility often default to overusing their preferred style, which can undermine performance in dynamic contexts (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2002). Conversely, versatile leaders can read contextual cues, adjust their behaviors, and apply balanced responses that sustain both performance and adaptability (Denison et al., 1995).

A versatile leader is like a skilled captain—maintaining a steady helm while adjusting sails and rudder to navigate shifting winds and rough seas. Versatile leaders know when situations call for firm direction (to reduce ambiguity) and when to empower others (to unlock creativity). This balance ensures teams neither drift in confusion nor feel stifled, creating a sense of steadiness even in volatile conditions (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010).

Research consistently demonstrates that versatile leadership is a strong predictor of effectiveness and performance. Leaders who balance being both strategic and operational, or forceful and enabling, are rated more effective than those who overrely on a single style (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010). Empirical studies using the *Leadership Versatility Index* confirm that versatility not only enhances leader effectiveness but is also linked to higher business-unit performance (Kaiser et al., 2010). Broader research echoes this pattern: Meta-analytic evidence shows leaders who draw on a wide repertoire of task, relational, and change-oriented behaviors achieve stronger outcomes (Yukl et al., 2002).

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Table 4
Developing Leaders as Engineers

Focus area	Guidance for consultant and coach
Create clarity to enable flexibility	Encourage leaders to thoughtfully define roles, expectations, and streamlined processes to minimize confusion and free capacity for adaptation and innovation (Pulakos et al., 2019).
Foster psychological safety and trust	Support leaders in communicating more transparently, providing opportunities for practice and feedback in a safe space. Emphasize the importance of their normalizing risk-taking, treating dissent as opportunities to learn (Heifetz et al., 2009; Pulakos et al., 2019).
Prioritize to focus	Push leaders to resist the urge to launch initiatives without deep consideration of priorities and alignment with organizational needs (Pulakos et al., 2019). Work with the organization to make sure priorities are impactfully communicated and reinforced through multiple channels (Leithwood et al., 2009).
Anchor in stability	Consistently communicate a “north star,” creating shared purpose and values (Leithwood et al., 2009). Consultants should provide guidance that reinforces shared culture and values, and they should recommend rituals that provide continuity during turbulence (Pulakos et al., 2019).
Ensure accountabilities are clear to all	Remind leaders to memorialize agreements on decision rights and accountability using tools such as RACI and RAPID to prevent subsequent role confusion, conflict, and fragmentation (Bolden, 2011; Rogers & Blenko, 2006; Sagastume, 2024).
Leverage internal networks	Introduce multiple forums for strengthening internal networks that enable leaders to bridge silos, highlight interdependencies, and integrate diverse perspectives into coherent strategies (Heifetz et al., 2009; Spillane, 2006).
Ensure the right reward system	Work with the organization to ensure that behaviors such as experimentation, learning, and resilience are encouraged through the reward and recognition system (Heifetz et al., 2009; Raelin, 2018).

Note. RACI = responsible–accountable–consulted–informed; RAPID = recommend–agree–input–perform–decide.

Leadership versatility is closely related to several other leadership constructs that emphasize adaptability and responsiveness such as leadership flexibility (Denison et al., 1995), adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009), and leadership agility (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). For example, adaptive leadership emphasizes mobilizing people to face difficult challenges, let go of old ways, and develop new capacities. However, leadership versatility is distinctive in its explicit focus on balancing and integrating opposites—such as being both strategic and operational, forceful and enabling—rather than merely shifting styles. This makes versatility particularly relevant in navigating the tensions inherent in constant change (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010).

However, once again leaders face yet another paradox: balancing versatility with authenticity. They must simultaneously flex their behaviors situationally while remaining genuine, which is key to trust (Kleynhans et al., 2022). Leaders must keep in mind that authenticity does not mean acting the same way in every context but ensuring that shifts are grounded in consistent principles and transparent intentions (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). When leaders explain why they are adapting and aligning their actions with organizational needs and personal values, versatility is seen as responsive rather than inconsistent (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010). Recent research also highlights that authenticity and adaptability are not mutually exclusive. Leaders who align behavioral flexibility with their deeper identity build stronger trust, engagement, and resilience in times of rapid change (Caza et al., 2015).

Acknowledging the Need to Deploy One’s Own Oxygen Mask First

The multiple roles leaders must play to navigate constant change are inherently demanding. Many coaches will attest that leaders often have difficulty putting on their own oxygen mask let alone helping

others! Leaders themselves may feel like “victims of change.” They are frequently caught between strategic directives from above and the emotional realities of their teams below. They must absorb organizational shocks while managing their own fears and fatigue. In the words of one leader: “Everyday I wake up ready to charge the hill. And every night, I wonder if I’m a fool leading us over a cliff” (Carucci, 2025, p. 1).

Juggling the multiple roles required to lead during relentless change has the potential to create cognitive overload and role conflict. For decades, research has shown when expectations across roles clash, leaders experience stress, reduced decision quality, and identity tension that can undermine authenticity and credibility (Ashforth et al., 2000; Tang & Vandenberghe, 2021).

More recent studies highlight that when leaders face clashing expectations without adequate support, they experience higher levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and diminished decision quality, which in turn undermine their ability to empower others and sustain team performance (Iqbal et al., 2022). Persistent role conflict has also been linked to reduced job satisfaction and greater turnover intentions among managers. It can in addition trigger withdrawal behaviors and disengagement when role demands are excessive and support is lacking. It is not surprising that leaders are reporting higher rates of burnout (Brooks et al., 2023).

However, much like physical exercise, exposure to constant change can strengthen the leadership “muscles” needed to thrive in today’s environment. McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison’s classic book *The Lessons of Experience* (1988) illuminated the developmental power of challenging experiences such as turnarounds, failures, managing diverse teams, working across functions, and new roles requiring adaptation. Clearly, this list mirrors many of the experiences inherent to leading in perpetual change.

However, when *The Lessons of Experience* was published in 1988, business environments were more stable, and leaders typically encountered developmental challenges sequentially over time. Today, leaders often face many of these experiences simultaneously on a nonstop basis. It could be argued that the most critical capability leaders must possess to navigate change today is *the ability to stabilize themselves*. Leaders must combine the learning agility previously discussed with emotional agility, strong practices of self-care, and boundary setting.

Building Emotional Agility

Rapid change can trigger emotional responses such as fear, defensiveness, and overcontrol not only in employees but also leaders themselves (Joiner & Josephs, 2007). Emotional agility involves the ability to navigate one’s inner experiences—thoughts, emotions, and self-stories—in a way that is flexible, values driven, and adaptive to changing circumstances (David & Congleton, 2013). Rather than avoiding or suppressing difficult emotions, emotionally agile leaders acknowledge them, create space to reflect, and then respond thoughtfully rather than reactively (David, 2016).

Leaders able to demonstrate emotional agility are able to (a) stay grounded when faced with volatility, (b) model resilience for their teams, (c) create psychological safety and trust, (d) more successfully navigate conflict constructively, and (e) respond to uncertainty with openness rather than fear (Goleman et al., 2013). Leaders with emotional agility can recognize and regulate their own emotional responses reducing feelings of being overwhelmed (David, 2016). Emotional agility is not simply about forcing positivity but about embracing emotions as data. When a leader is emotionally agile, it shows up as the ability to notice, accept, and work with their own emotions (and the emotions of others) without being hijacked by them or suppressing them. Instead of reacting impulsively when stressed, anxious, or frustrated, they pause, make sense of what they are feeling, and choose responses aligned with their values and goals.

Prioritizing Boundary Setting and Self-Care

Boundary setting is also a critical practice for leaders who are bombarded by constant change and expected to juggle multiple roles simultaneously. Without boundaries, leaders risk cognitive overload, burnout, and decision fatigue, which erode both effectiveness and well-being. Establishing clear limits on workload, time, and availability helps leaders preserve the energy and focus needed to respond

thoughtfully rather than reactively. Boundaries create the psychological space required for reflection, sensemaking, and prioritization (Ashforth et al., 2000). Boundary setting can be framed as a means of sustaining the energy and clarity needed for navigating continuous change. It also signals to teams that balance is valued versus stigmatized (Barnes et al., 2015).

Although self-care is often perceived as a luxury, it is the foundation that enables leaders to access and sustain emotional agility—it preserves the energy, clarity, and resilience needed to notice, manage, and navigate emotions constructively in the face of constant change (Kuntz et al., 2017). Emotional agility is difficult when leaders are depleted, fatigued, or overwhelmed. Practices such as adequate rest, exercise, reflection time, along with healthy boundary-setting ensure leaders have the capacity to regulate their inner world rather than be hijacked by stress or negative emotions. Research has also found that when leaders engage in self-compassion, they help others more with both task-related and personal problems, because they identify more strongly with their leader role (Lanaj et al., 2022).

Implications for Developing Leaders as Stabilizers

Leadership effectiveness during times of uncertainty depends on cultivating versatility, demonstrating emotional agility, boundary-setting, and self-care. Versatile leaders balance opposing behaviors—such as being both forceful and enabling or strategic and operational—so they can respond to shifting demands without becoming bottlenecks. Emotional agility enables them to acknowledge and reframe internal reactions, remain grounded under pressure, and model calm responsiveness that fosters trust and psychological safety. Sustaining these capacities requires deliberate self-care and boundary setting, which preserve energy, strengthen decision making, and signal the value of balance. Figure 5 depicts how these practices create the microstability teams need while supporting agility at the organizational level. Table 5 provides practical suggestions for how coaches and consultants can support leaders in developing the capabilities needed for this role.

Conclusion

In today's world of "perpetual whitewater" leaders are pivotal to overall OCC. When leaders are equipped to navigate in this new environment, uncertainty becomes less threatening and a catalyst for growth. Based on a broad review and synthesis of literature, we have identified five key leadership roles for leadership success when navigating constant whitewater:

- As *navigators*, leaders scan the environment, interpret signals, and predict the best course of action.
- As *learning guides*, they model curiosity, developmental readiness, and learning agility while orchestrating a culture where experimentation, reflection, and growth are embedded in daily work.

Figure 5
Leader as Stabilizer

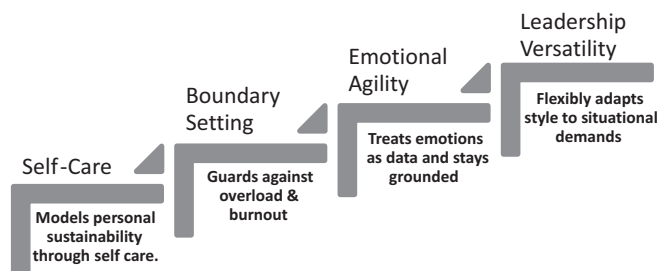


Table 5
Developing Leaders as Stabilizers

Focus area	Guidance for consultant and coach
Balance opposing behaviors	Have leaders practice flexing between forceful and enabling and between strategic and operational focus to match situational demands (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010; Kaiser & Sherman, 2025).
Monitor overuse of strengths	Use assessments to highlight potential “watch-outs” when leaders overuse strengths to the point they become liabilities. Use feedback tools like <i>Leadership Versatility Index</i> to identify and correct imbalances (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010).
Practice situational flexing	Work with leaders to have them anticipate and practice adapting their typical style to context—knowing when and how to act more decisively in crises, more encouraging of innovation when it is called for, and more reflective after a crisis to refine future approaches (Kaiser & Sherman, 2025).
Versatility balanced with authenticity	Encourage leaders to ground shifts in consistent principles and transparent intentions (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Explain the “why” for adapting and align their actions with organizational needs and personal values.
Cultivate emotional agility	Help leaders develop self-awareness, reframe unhelpful thoughts, act on core values, and regulate emotions through mindfulness and reflection (David & Congleton, 2013).
Frame boundary setting and self-care as enablers	Encourage leaders to set boundaries on time and priorities while protecting sleep, exercise, and recovery to sustain energy and resilience (David & Congleton, 2013). Remind them that these habits are core to sustainable long-term performance.

- As *pilots*, they compassionately guide people through the human side of change, helping them make sense of complexity, supporting emotional needs, and fostering collaboration across diverse perspectives.
- As *engineers*, they design systems, cultures, communication processes, and distributed leadership structures that integrate stability with agility, embedding adaptability into the fabric of the organization.
- As *stabilizers*, they create steadiness by demonstrating versatility, emotional agility, and self-care, ensuring sustainable resilience.

Key aspects of these five roles are summarized in [Table 6](#).

Leaders who contribute to OCC normalize turbulence as part of the landscape, framing it not as a failure but as an opportunity for learning and adaptation. Equipped with emotional agility, these leaders stay calm under pressure and model resilience, responding thoughtfully rather than reactively. They provide stability through clarity of values, vision, and purpose—even when precise answers are not yet available. By fostering psychological safety and encouraging experimentation, they help teams become more adaptable and innovative. As a result, the organization develops true OCC: the capacity to adjust course quickly, sustain trust, and thrive amid ongoing disruption.

Failing to Equip Leaders for the New Normal

What if leaders are not equipped to deal with constant change? Leaders may default to rigidity, overcontrol, or avoidance in the face of turbulence, creating confusion and disengagement across their teams. Decision making can easily become either paralyzed or shortsighted, with a tendency to cling to outdated strategies instead of exploring new approaches. Communication may falter, as leaders either overreassurance or withdraw, leaving employees uncertain and mistrustful. The emotional undercurrents

Table 6
Roles of Change-Capable Leaders and Key Aspects of Each

Role	Key aspect
Navigator Navigates constant turbulence by combining situational awareness and sensemaking to detect signals, interpret meaning, and guide their organizations with clarity and foresight	• <i>Situational awareness</i>—Continuously scanning internal and external environments to detect early signals, risks, and opportunities. • <i>Sensemaking</i>—Interpreting complex or ambiguous information and framing it into clear, shared meaning that guides decision making. • <i>Filtering and focus</i>—Distinguishing signal from noise to prevent overload and concentrate on what matters most. • <i>Predicting the future</i>—Linking current signals into patterns to anticipate possible trajectories and prepare adaptive strategies. • <i>Shared understanding</i>—Engaging teams in collective foresight and aligning actions around a coherent narrative.
Learning guide Models and nurtures curiosity, learning agility, and developmental readiness while creating environments where reflection and experimentation drive collective growth.	• <i>Modeling learning agility</i>—Demonstrating openness and humility by seeking feedback, experimenting, and learning from outcomes. • <i>Cultivating developmental readiness</i>—Building optimism, self-awareness, and perseverance to engage fully in continuous growth. • <i>Fostering psychological safety</i>—Encouraging inquiry and candor by reframing mistakes as opportunities for learning. • <i>Embedding learning in the flow of work</i>—Integrating reflection, feedback, and dialog into everyday processes and decision making. • <i>Normalizing experimentation</i>—Encouraging responsible risk-taking and celebrates intelligent failures that advance shared learning. • <i>Enabling collective insight</i>—Translating individual lessons into organizational learning, ensuring reflection strengthens adaptability at all levels.
Pilot Reduces the friction associated with continual adaptation by compassionately guiding teams through challenges of change, creating meaning, reducing fear, and fostering alignment and shared ownership.	• <i>Framing and meaning-making</i>—Highlighting what matters most, reframing uncertainty as opportunity, and connecting daily work to a larger mission. • <i>Supporting emotional needs</i>—Recognizing diverse reactions to change, reducing defensiveness, and providing psychological safety. • <i>Tailoring support</i>—Adapting leadership based on unique individual responses to change. • <i>Accompanying others</i>—Leading with empathy and presence so that people feel informed, supported, and not alone in the transition. • <i>Encouraging collaboration</i>—Aligning diverse perspectives, building trust, and facilitating inclusive dialog to cocreate solutions. • <i>Fostering resilience</i>—Breaking change into manageable steps, celebrating small wins, and modeling coping strategies.
Engineer Designs systems, cultures, and mindsets that embed stability, agility, and transparency, enabling organizations to adapt continuously while maintaining clarity, trust, and alignment.	• <i>Embedding organizational agility</i>—Building capacity to sense change, make rapid decisions, and reconfigure resources while maintaining strategic coherence. • <i>Anchoring in stability</i>—Providing clarity in roles, processes, and values to reduce noise, foster psychological safety, and create steady footing for adaptation.

(table continues)

Table 6 (continued)

Role	Key aspect
	• <i>Balancing stability and flexibility</i>—Cultivating systems that support continuous course correction without falling into chaos or ad hoc change. • <i>Fostering distributed leadership</i>—Sharing authority broadly, empowering expertise across levels, and reducing reliance on hierarchy for faster responses. • <i>Strengthening trust and accountability</i>—Creating a culture of openness, transparency, collaboration, and clear decision rights to prevent confusion and conflict. • <i>Enabling shared purpose and vision</i>—Aligning people through common goals and values, ensuring adaptability is tethered to organizational mission.
Stabilizer Stabilizes through versatility, emotional agility, and self-care, creating steadiness for teams while enabling adaptive responses in turbulent conditions.	• <i>Demonstrating leadership versatility</i>—Flexing between forceful and enabling, strategic and operational, or directive and participative behaviors as the situation demands. • <i>Balancing stability and adaptability</i>—Providing clarity and consistency while flexing responses to meet shifting challenges. • <i>Anchoring in values and authenticity</i>—Grounding adaptive behaviors in core principles and transparent intentions to build trust. • <i>Modeling emotional agility</i>—Staying calm under pressure, reframing challenges, and creating psychological safety by responding thoughtfully rather than reactively. • <i>Setting healthy boundaries</i>—Establishing limits to prevent overload, preserve focus, and modeling sustainable practices for teams. • <i>Prioritizing self-care</i>—Maintaining rest, renewal, and resilience practices to sustain energy and clarity while signaling balance as a cultural value.

of stress, frustration, and cynicism go unacknowledged, further eroding morale and even health. Over time, the organization becomes fragile—unable to adapt quickly, vulnerable to competitive pressures, and at risk of losing valuable talent to more resilient environments. In essence, they are poised to go the way of the Titanic!

It is worth speculating on how the five leadership roles described in this article might have applied to preventing an epic disaster like the sinking of the Titanic:

- Navigator: The Titanic’s officers received multiple iceberg warnings from other ships but failed to interpret and act decisively on the signals. A true navigator leader would have scanned the environment more carefully, sought input from others and recognized the risk despite confidence in the ship’s design, and slowed down or adjusted course. The absence of anticipatory navigation amplified the disaster.
- Learning guide: The Titanic culture was steeped in overconfidence—“unsinkable”—which left little room for curiosity or learning from near misses. Leaders did not foster an environment where questioning assumptions or experimenting with greater safety margins (e.g., lifeboat drills, updated lifeboat capacity) was valued. A learning guide mindset might have encouraged proactive safety practices and continual improvement.
- Pilot: When the iceberg was struck, communication to passengers was inconsistent, delayed, and often dismissive. Many people did not grasp the severity until it was too late. Leaders as pilots would have helped people make sense of the crisis, acknowledged fears, and guided

collective response with compassion and clarity—ensuring more lives were saved through timely, collaborative action.

- **Engineer:** Structurally, the ship's design emphasized luxury over resilience. The watertight compartments did not extend high enough, and lifeboat systems were insufficient. Leaders as engineers would have balanced innovation and stability, embedding adaptability into the system (e.g., more lifeboats, rigorous drills, flexible safety processes) instead of relying on a veneer of invincibility.
- **Stabilizer:** In the chaos of the sinking, steadiness and emotional agility were largely absent. Officers and crew struggled with inconsistent orders, lifeboats launched half-empty, and panic spread. A stabilizer role would have created calm under pressure, projecting resilience and organizing actions so that passengers felt supported rather than abandoned.

The Titanic tragedy—while not even a situation involving stormy conditions—highlights what has the potential to happen when leaders fail to embody these five critical roles. The disaster was not only a technological failure but also a profound leadership failure—of foresight, learning, sensemaking, design, and steadiness.

Themes Across the Five Leadership Roles

Across the five roles outlined in this article, several themes emerge. It is useful to consider these themes as potential core leadership capabilities. Each role requires leaders to *navigate ambiguity and complexity* through sensemaking, while simultaneously *balancing paradoxes* (e.g., stability and agility, providing direction and empowering). *Shared purpose and values* serve as a common anchor, guiding decisions and sustaining authenticity. All roles emphasize *enabling collective intelligence*, whether through distributed leadership, fostering learning, or aligning diverse perspectives. *Trust and psychological safety* emerge as foundational, allowing risk-taking, candid dialog, and resilience. Finally, leaders must *model learning and adaptability in themselves* while creating the conditions for others to adapt, sustaining energy and resilience through practices such as reflection, boundary setting, and self-care.

What Has Changed

It can be argued that many of these leadership requirements are not new and have always been necessary. However, in the past, leaders could apply these roles sequentially, often in more stable contexts where change was episodic and predictable. For example, situational awareness and sensemaking (navigator) once relied on slower information flows and focused on discrete shifts. Today leaders must filter overwhelming, real-time data streams and anticipate multiple futures at once. Similarly, guiding people through change (pilot) was once tied to specific initiatives with clear phases, but now leaders must continuously accompany individuals through ongoing ambiguity, requiring sustained empathy and adaptive framing. The role of engineer has expanded from designing relatively fixed structures to embedding continuous adaptability and distributed leadership into culture and systems, making agility a permanent capability rather than a one-off transformation. Finally, stabilizing leaders once provided steadiness, mainly through authority and consistency, but now must balance emotional agility, authenticity, boundaries, and self-care to create microstability for teams amid relentless turbulence.

Implications for Consulting Psychologists

Consultants and coaches can play a crucial role in helping leaders balance the multiple roles and paradoxes associated with leading during perpetual change. However, it is important for the former to understand the new roles the latter must play and how the demands on leadership have shifted dramatically from what they were in more stable environments.

By understanding these new expectations coaches and consultants can tailor their interventions to develop the competencies leaders truly need. This process includes assessing which roles may be natural

strengths for a particular leader or organization and which may need development. They can help leaders recognize paradoxes, practice versatility, and maintain authenticity while juggling multiple demands. Ultimately, coaches and consultants who grasp the complexity of modern leadership are better equipped to design developmental experiences, provide relevant feedback, and act as thought partners, enabling leaders to be a central pillar of enduring OCC.

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