



# Leading into the Future

Masterclass Report

*A report prepared by the Future of Work  
Consortium October 2020*

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## Introduction

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For ten years, the Future of Work Research Consortium (FoW) has explored the trends shaping industries, organisations and careers. Leaders are facing more demands now than ever before. The previous need for leaders to adapt and lead through an increasingly complex world has been exacerbated by COVID-19. Faced with the overwhelmingly uncertain future, leaders need to think, act and react differently to deal with today and tomorrow's critical challenges. These challenges inspired our research into what it means to lead into the future.

This FoW report reflects the insights of our multi-dimensional research approach, including interviews with business leaders, people leaders, and academics; a Work Experiences survey with over 500 responses from global leaders and employees across 200 organisations; and secondary research on academic leadership theories. This research process is augmented with insights shared by our Research Consortium members and expert guest speakers at the virtual Leading Into the Future Masterclass, which took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 2020.

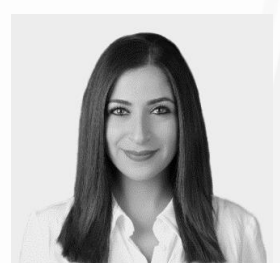
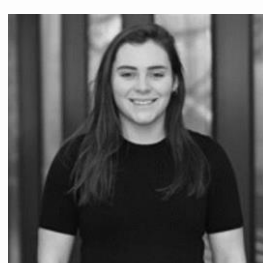
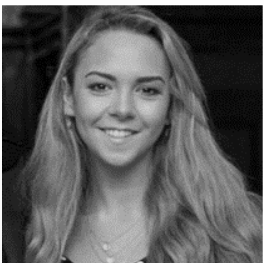
# Our Members

The diversity of our membership allows for unique cultural and strategic insights from organisations across different locations and industries



# Our Team

Our global team of researchers and advisors support organisations to deliver complex transformations and future-proof their strategy.



# The Changing Context

# The Changing Context

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The world had always been shaped by continuously changing forces. Strategic leadership requires a balance between the external environment and an organisation's internal factors<sup>1</sup>. Leaders must make strategic decisions based on their evaluation of these external and internal contexts. The internal organisational context has always been formed by an organisational culture and norms, employees' values and expectations (e.g. benefits, ways of working), and employees' networks. The external context has always been shaped by new technologies, which directly impacts ways of working, as well as societal values and norms.

The increasingly rapid change of the external context through COVID-19, Black Lives Matter Movement, and an impending recession, means that leaders must be more future-focused now than ever before. As the external context changes, an organisation's internal context undergoes a three stage process<sup>2</sup>:



## 1. Acknowledge



## 2. Act



## 3. Advance

Leaders must manage an emerging reality through the changing external context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, leaders must bring their organisations on a series of iterative milestones in the internal context.

# 1. Acknowledge



People are emotionally impacted by the changing external context. In Italy, people reported higher levels of stress due to uncertainty and stress from the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>3</sup>. Research studies have revealed new psychiatric symptoms in people without prior mental illness due to distress of others<sup>4</sup>.

As an authority figure, employees are turning to leaders to acknowledge and soothe emotional distress by providing a holding environment. 'Holding' refers to the phenomenon of a supportive environment used in psychological counselling<sup>5</sup>. This allows employees to remain engaged and resilient during times of crises. To successfully create a holding environment, research has found that leaders are required to 'contain' emotional distress by offering reassurance, and to 'interpret' by helping people make sense of the uncertain situation<sup>6</sup>.

In March, Vodafone, a UK telecom company, pivoted to an entirely home-based workforce in less than one week. However, one of the biggest early pain points were social connections. Employees quickly missed the social interactions within the office.

Anne Sheenan, director of Vodafone Business UK, created a new informal programme called "Sandwich with Anne". In this experiment, Sheenan invites 12 employees across different levels and departments at Vodafone to lunch. A sandwich is sent to invitees' home address. At 1pm, Sheenan and the 12 invitees have a virtual lunch together to talk for an hour.

By launching this informal experiment, Sheenan hopes to break virtual barriers by being open and acknowledging people's struggles with working from home.

## 2. Act

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As organisations move beyond the initial emotional reaction, leaders are making fast decisions and actions to help employees adjust to the changing external context. This is done by building a narrative that helps employees make sense of the situation and to build a collective purpose. As discussed in the *Building Narratives Report*, storytelling and narratives form powerful bonds between the storyteller and listener due to heightened neural connectivity in the left frontal cortex, allowing listeners to fully engage and empathise with the storyteller and other listeners.

### Effective narratives:

1. Tell a compelling story
2. Provide a concrete visualisation of the future
3. Describe an achievable future that is within reach
4. Recount your organisations' values and where your organisation is going

## 3. Advance

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In the final stage of adjustment, leaders are finding that they must advance their organisation into the future-state<sup>7</sup>.

Leaders must engage the whole system of their organisation, with representatives that cut across groups to enable the organisation's reinvention for the future. HSM's interviews have found that organisations that co-create directly with employees found these initiatives to be the most effective in easing anxieties over the uncertain future and job security.

When co-creating the future of the organisation, leaders must act with creativity by experimenting with how things get done. According to Stewart Friedman, organisational psychologist at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, leaders must design where and when experiments should take place with clear goals and metrics. Welcoming experimentation and ambiguity in structured ways can encourage people innovate and help the organisation stay relevant<sup>8</sup>.

# Current Leadership Risks

# Current Leadership Risks

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As organisations operate in an increasingly **Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA)** world, leaders are increasingly expected to lead change with empathy, understanding, and resilience<sup>9</sup>. Leaders are expected to demonstrate “deliberate calm” and “bounded optimism”<sup>10</sup>. They are expected to have both a coherent long-term strategy alongside short-term actions<sup>11</sup>. During times of crises, they are expected to lead crises management while taking on their usual responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter Movement are global events which no CEO has had previous experience or training. However, leaders are expected to extrapolate answers for new questions as teams look to them for direction. As a result, leaders face four key risks.

- #1** Your leaders face burnout
- #2** Your leadership cohorts have low diversity
- #3** Your leaders are overburdened
- #4** Your leaders lack incentive to develop authenticity

# #1

## Your leaders face burnout

Research on time has indicated two perspectives on time that govern time management: Time Structures and Time Norms. Time Structures refer to the explicit and formalized perspective of time. They lay out a system around which people can organise their time. Examples of Time Structures are business hours, project timelines, and holidays. Time Norms refer to the intangible and shared patterns related to time. These norms constrain time management through social pressures. An example of a Time Norm is the expectation to respond to emails immediately, or if a leader shows up to meetings late to signal status<sup>12</sup>.

Research has shown that time management activities (operational planning and prioritising activities) is related to a lower rate of job burnout. 37% of change in burnout levels can be attributed to time management itself<sup>13</sup>. However, as external and internal contexts become increasingly complex, expectations around time and the way time is managed has also changed.

The blurring of work and home life boundaries during COVID-19 means existing Time Structures have shifted. As they are working from home while leading through crises, leaders now have shorter deadlines and more tasks from family and work. From HSM's Work Experiences Survey, we have found that 42% of people who are working from home have caring responsibilities. People are now operating across many boundaries, with their day occupied with work, childcare, education for children. There is no longer a clear signal to start and end work for people as they find themselves moving between boundaries throughout the day.

Time Norms have also shifted due to COVID-19. Firstly, people are working longer hours. In France, Spain, and the U.K., the average working day has increased by two hours. In the U.S., the average working day has increased by three hours<sup>14</sup>. While people are waking up later in the day due to lack of commute, peak email time has lengthened by an hour from 10:00am – 11:00am to 9:00am – 11:00am<sup>15</sup>. Employees are also working later into the night. There are now spikes in corporate VPN usage from midnight to 3:00am which were not present before COVID-19<sup>16</sup>.

Secondly, people are experiencing unprotected time. Assumptions of immediate availability reshapes time norms. With no travel time needed, people report feeling like they have no excuse to be unavailable for calls or meetings<sup>17</sup>. Impromptu meetings are now a norm. One JPMorgan employee reported in an interview that his morning shower was interrupted by a meeting request. Once the employee logged back on, he was five minutes late to the call<sup>18</sup>.

## #2 Your leadership cohorts have low diversity

The case for diversity in leadership has been often recognised and cited, with multiple research studies that shows a direct link between diverse leaders and performance<sup>19</sup>. Beyond diversity, leaders' own multiculturalism predicts feelings of inclusiveness in teams for employees of colour. On the other hand, leaders' colorblindness predict relationship conflict for employees of colour<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, organisations with diverse leadership teams are more resilient. Firstly, diverse leadership teams can better anticipate potential issues and challenges through diverse experiences. Secondly, diverse leadership teams have higher levels of innovation to leverage diversity of thought to solve problems. Finally, diverse leadership teams enable better adaptation to adverse situations by reflecting and learning from each others' perspectives<sup>21</sup>.

However, the selection criteria for high-potential groups are typically so strictly defined that it filters out diversity. This leads to hyper-homogenous leadership groups of the same nationality, if not similar mannerisms, work styles, and perspectives<sup>22</sup>.

Hyper-homogenous leadership groups also risk affinity bias, where people tend to prefer those who are similar to themselves. Research has found three key areas of work impacted by affinity bias<sup>23</sup>:

1. Work allocation: Leaders are more likely to provide stretch assignments to people like them
2. Feedback: Leaders are more likely to provide constructive feedback to people like them
3. Informal mentoring and sponsorship: Leaders are more likely to offer informal mentoring and support to people like them

As a result, leaders are more likely to select and provide opportunities for growth for people like them, thus maintaining a hyper-homogenous high potential cohort.

#### Diversity Perception Gap

There is a diversity perception gap between leaders and their employees. Research indicates that while 68% of leaders say they create a diverse space, only 36% of employees agree<sup>13</sup>. To drive true diversity, leaders must move beyond their own networks to actively listen to and co-create with diverse groups.

## #3 Your leaders are overburdened

Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, a new research study found that leaders are more popular than managers. Many people believe that leaders' sole tasks are to design a compelling vision to mobilise their workforce. Managers, on the other hand, are process-oriented and conduct the back-end work of turning leaders' visions into reality. This is viewed (by leaders, managers, and most employees) as less valuable than leaders' responsibility of developing a vision<sup>24</sup>.

The line of thinking outlined in the research study, particularly during crises, puts leaders at risk of being overburdened. Firstly, there is a lack of co-creation when developing a compelling vision by over-valuing leaders' visions. Secondly, people surveyed believed that leadership and management are entirely different. People reported that what leaders do is more valuable as it relates to the organisational vision<sup>25</sup>. While leaders and managers are different in their roles, ways of working, and responsibilities<sup>26</sup>, leaders are also often responsible for ensuring their vision translates into reality, a responsibility that people believe is a less important task for managers to deliver<sup>27</sup>. This assumption leads to overburdened leaders, as much of their work goes undetected by their workforce.

## #4 Your leaders lack incentive to develop authenticity

Authentic leadership has emerged as a key trait for successful leaders. Authenticity predicts high psychological wellbeing<sup>28</sup> and self-esteem<sup>29</sup> for leaders. Particularly in times of crises, authentic leadership has never been more important to ensure the wellbeing of followers and leaders themselves.

According to Kernis (2003)<sup>30</sup>, authentic leadership requires self-awareness, unbiased processing, relational authenticity, and authentic action. However, these elements require leaders to understand their own fundamental values developed over the course of their career.

In many organisations, the currency of leadership is power. Throughout leaders' careers, there are limited opportunities that incentivise leaders' self-awareness or development of intrinsic values. Instead, extrinsic values such as legitimate power (formal power through job titles), money and status are used as rewards for progression<sup>31</sup>.

### Your biggest risks

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**What is the biggest leadership challenge that your organisation is facing during COVID-19?**

- a. Overburdened leaders – 48%
- b. Burnout – 38%
- c. Authenticity – 8%
- d. Low diversity – 7%

### Questions for HR leaders

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1. What are our new time norms when working remotely?
2. Are our leaders aware of any affinity biases that impact their sponsorship of high potentials?
3. Whose voice goes into the development of the new company vision following COVID-19?
4. Are employees given the time and incentives to explore and understand their values throughout their careers?

# The Five Factors of Future-Focused Leadership

# The Five Factors of Future-Focused Leadership

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In a world of increasing uncertainty, it is not sufficient for leaders to think only of the bottom line. Leaders instead need to be future-focused to help their organisations prepare for the different implications of the future. At HSM, we have identified five key areas that leaders must be cognizant of to be comprehensively future-focused.

**#1 Networked Leader**

**#2 Curious Leader**

**#3 Adaptive Planner**

**#4 Purpose Builder**

**#5 Wellbeing Enabler**

## #1 Networked Leader

### Foster diverse networks

Networked leaders recognise the importance of maintaining diverse networks of different strength of relationships.

**Strong core network** – Strong ties that are developed over time and frequency of interactions. These networks are the experts – the guardians of the organisation’s knowledge.

**Strong cross-boundary networks** – Strong ties that cross boundaries. These s wide networks and can lead to new ideas through combinations of different specialised knowledge.

**Weak cross-boundary networks** – A large number of weak ties (acquaintances and associates) that cross boundaries. Information is diffused faster and made available to larger number of people. There is potential to create value through dynamic new combinations and access to new information.

### Use different communication styles

Leaders must be able to leverage a range of communication styles to support different contexts. Guest speaker, Sabine Vinck, EMEA Regional Leader at Spencer Stuart noted that in Spencer Stuart's research, eight characteristics emerged when mapping culture along two dimensions: how people interact (independence to interdependence) and their response to change (flexibility to stability). These eight communication styles express how leaders are thinking about and leading their organisations cultures<sup>32</sup>.



### Eight Communication Styles

- 1. Learning:** Leaders emphasise innovation, knowledge, and adventure
- 2. Enjoyment:** Leaders emphasise spontaneity and sense of humour
- 3. Purpose:** Leaders emphasise shared ideals and contributing to a greater cause
- 4. Caring:** Leaders emphasise sincerity, teamwork, and positive relationships
- 5. Order:** Leaders emphasise shared procedures and time-honoured customs
- 6. Safety:** Leaders emphasise being realistic and planning ahead
- 7. Results:** Leaders emphasise goal accomplishment
- 8. Authority:** Leaders emphasise confidence and dominance

The context in which the organisation operates strongly affects the type of culture and communication styles necessary to succeed. What worked in the past may not work in the future. A strong, but misaligned with strategy culture can be a significant liability to the organisation. Therefore, leaders must be able to identify the culture and communication styles necessary to carry out their organisation's future strategy, and have the adaptability to communicate across this range of eight styles<sup>33</sup>.

### **Leverage impact**

When considering leadership potential, organisations must be cognizant of three particularly distinct categories of leadership potential:

- 1. Results and improvement**
- 2. Thinking potential**
- 3. Interpersonal and organisational**

Results and improvement are a commonly used metrics to determine leadership potential. Can a leader deliver results, make significant organisational process improvements, or lead large-scale innovations<sup>34</sup>.

Thinking potential is also a commonly cited indicator of talent and leadership. Experts in Organisational Psychology have long argued that IQ scores are strongly correlated with job performance<sup>35</sup>.

However, the third piece, interpersonal and organisational potential, is rarely explored. Leaders with insight into engaging and leveraging the impact of their relationships and groups in their organisations are critical<sup>36</sup>. Today's fastest-growing companies like Amazon, Google, Alibaba, and Uber are explicitly marketing themselves as hubs between networks and key ecosystem players to consumers<sup>37</sup>. As more organisations turn towards collaborative ecosystems, a leaders' ability to leverage the impact of internal and external stakeholders becomes increasingly critical.

## #2 Curious Leader

### Tap into expertise

Curious leaders are not always experts. Rather than solely focusing on building diverse networks, curious leaders leverage their networks of experts<sup>38</sup>.

They rely on their team's expertise to advise and guide them. To do so, they must have:

- Willingness to be advised by their employees<sup>39</sup>
- Honesty into admit they are not an expert in certain areas

This requires a shift in power. Leaders can no longer lead by expert power, leading with only their expertise. Instead, leaders must make a transition to lead by informational power, the ability to have access to valuable and relevant information.

“

*I'm not going to know it all, so I have to bring in people with the expertise around me.”*

*“The way leaders bring value has changed. Some might wonder ‘what’s left for me to do if I’m not the expert in the room’, we need to start helping leaders make that transition and seeing value beyond being the only expert on the team.*

”

### Enable psychological safety

50% of FoW interviewees noted **learning agility** or **curiosity** as a key leadership trait.

Learning agility refers to the flexibility to unlearn and relearn skills, grow from mistakes, and to rise to a diverse array of challenges. In a rapidly changing world, learning agility is critical for future-focused leadership.

While leaders themselves must have learning agility to navigate the changing context, they must also enable their workforce to succeed. Kenneth De Meuse, Korn Ferry Institute Vice President, estimates that only 15% of employees have strongly developed learning agility. Similarly, research indicates that no more than 30% of existing high-performing employees have the learning potential to succeed in a higher position<sup>40</sup>.

While high learning agility may be a hard-to-source trait, a study that observes performance gains and learning agility in engineers has found that the effects of learning agility can be boosted by psychological safety. In organisations with low psychological safety, those who have low learning agility have significantly lower performance than those with high learning agility. However, organisations with high psychological safety allows those with low learning agility to outperform employees with high learning agility<sup>41</sup>. A potential reason for this is that the high psychological safety provides an environment conducive to Error Management Training (EMT), a training method that actively encourages people to make mistakes in a safe environment during training and to learn from these errors. Meta-analysis research indicates that EMT may be more effective than error-avoidant training methods that would be utilised in low psychological safety organisations<sup>42</sup>.

Research has found that learning agility is moderated by psychological safety within an organisation. Without psychological safety, the benefits of having a high learning agility will not take effect. People with high learning agility have similar performance levels as those with low learning agility. However, psychological safety leads to performance gains in both people with high and low learning agility. Those with high learning agility will see a significantly higher level of improvement.

### **Sustain the learning agenda**

*In 2019, 79% of CEOs recognise that lack of essential skills threatens the future growth of their organisation. However, in HSM's COVID-19 Work Experience Survey, almost 1/3 of employees (30%) say their leaders never or rarely encourage reskilling or upskilling since COVID-19.*

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations have started to deprioritise upskilling initiatives. However, upskilling and reskilling the workforce will be increasingly critical for economic recovery and building organisational resilience. As the economy reopens, the need to redeploy and reskill displaced employees will also become an economic and moral imperative for leaders to consider<sup>43</sup>.

Learning itself faces a paradigm shift following COVID-19. Although many employees first learned by doing in the rapid transition to 100% virtual work, sustained virtual work will prove to be a challenge in upskilling and reskilling initiatives.

## #3 Adaptive Planner

Systems thinking is not a new concept. In fact, epidemiologists have been calling for more systemic ways of combating infectious diseases for years<sup>44</sup>.

Systems thinking goes beyond assessing individual actions and behaviours. Instead, it considers the connections, causes, and consequences of each action. This approach allows leaders to act in a way that reflects the interconnectedness and complexity of the external context.

To successfully use systems thinking in the changing external context, leaders must:

### Think systemically

On January 29<sup>th</sup> 2020, Chinese Scientists published a paper in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, which reported the initial cases of COVID-19 in Wuhan, and its ability to quickly spread across populations without detection<sup>45</sup>. Despite initial warnings and awareness of the fast spreading virus, no action was taken globally until months later. Our collective failure to understand the interconnections of our global system has cost us over 730,000 lives as of the date of this report.

Critical to systems thinking is the ability to understand and work with causal relationships. Identifying the relationships between different actions and decisions. In organisations, this comprises of several entities such as an organisation's policies, processes, practices, and people.

### Create shared understanding

For systems thinking to truly be systemic, it relies on a shared understanding of existing entities and causal relationships. If only few leaders in an organisation can think and act systemically, there would be barriers to systemic action or lead to systemic failure. This occurs when there is misalignment between or within systems that need to work together.

## Coordinate action

Coordinating action within an organisation relies on shared understanding and systemic thinking. However, as organisations are becoming increasingly collaborative and interconnected, leaders will have to consider how to coordinate action not only within their own organisations, but with external vendors or through partnerships. Understanding and anticipating how the whole system is intended to work, actually works, and how it may buckle under pressure, can practically elude and defeat most executives.

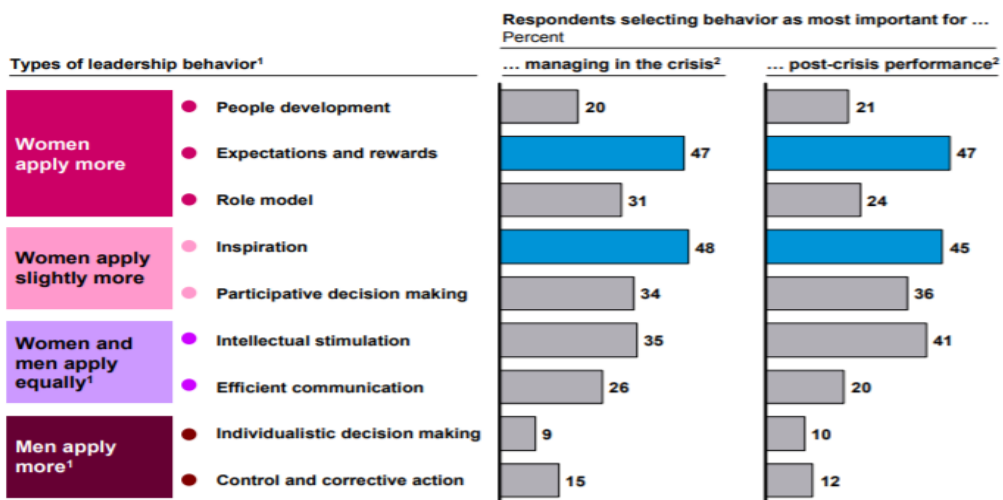
## #4 Purpose Builder

### Inspire and set expectations

During times of crises, people want their leaders to inspire while providing clear expectations and rewards. Research by McKinsey found that women typically adopt these two types of leadership behaviours seen as most important during and after crises. .

Exhibit 13

Women more frequently adopt the two types of leadership behavior seen as most important in and after the crisis



<sup>1</sup> From analysis in *Women Matter 2*, 2008

<sup>2</sup> *Women Matter 3* global survey, September 2009 (n=763 respondents: CXO level, senior management, middle management)

### Build compelling and transparent narratives

During times of uncertainty, purpose builders unite people by creating achievable and compelling narratives. Offering a realistic yet optimistic narrative can have a powerful effect on employees, inspiring them to support the organisation's recovery through COVID-19.

Transparency is integral for leaders. Thoughtful, frequent, and accurate communication from leaders demonstrates that leaders are indeed following the situation and adjusting their responses as they learn more.

Narratives that communicate a strong shared of values among employees can be particularly effective during crises. Research has found that there was a 400% increase in likelihood of employees maintaining high levels of organisational performance during previous recessions when they believe in and share their organisation's values<sup>46</sup>.

### Worse before better

Communicating transparency during any crisis requires preparation for 'worse before better' effect. According to Peter Senge (2008), this is a pattern in complex systems where organisations must first commit to encouraging people to speak up before seeing any improvement<sup>47</sup>.

For purpose builders, this means to engage employees in a dialogue about their concerns and challenges when navigating the changing external context. Before any impactful support or rally for purpose can be given, understanding employees' concerns would be critical to ensuring commitment and support for the organisation throughout the crisis.

## Your leadership competencies

### Which leadership competency has been most important since COVID-19?

- a. Adaptive Planner – 36%
- b. Wellbeing Enabler – 33%
- c. Purpose Builder – 18%
- d. Curious Leader – 8%
- e. Networked Leader – 6%

### Which leadership competency did your group select as the most critically lacking?

- a. Adaptive Planner – 45%
- b. Purpose Builder – 17%
- c. Curious Leader – 15%
- d. Networked Leader – 13%
- e. Wellbeing Enabler – 11%

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