

Holding the Line: Leading Through Uncertainty

The ground beneath our feet is shifting fast. When the future feels unclear, it's easy to gravitate toward those who speak with the loudest voice, the most certainty, and the greatest confidence.

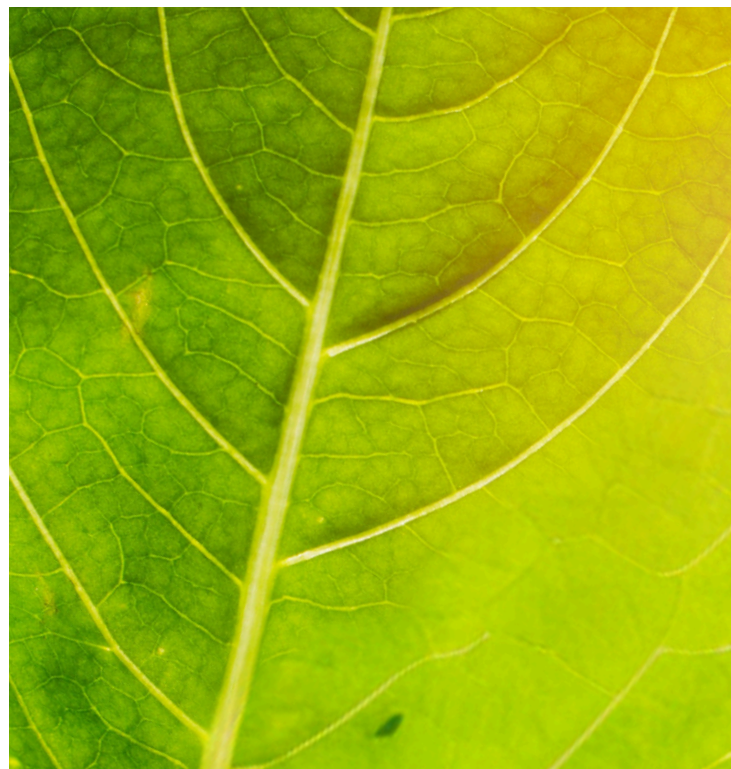
But dealing with uncertainty isn't a temporary situation, it's a backdrop of modern leadership. And - spoiler alert - those who thrive within it aren't always the loudest in the room.

Instead they're often anchored, focused and brave in small, consistent ways. They show up, even when they don't have all the answers. Because they understand something essential: that transformation begins within, and that to lead others through turbulence, they must navigate their own.

Over the past few months, I've been researching this topic, actively speaking with senior leaders navigating deep uncertainty, such as those reshaping their organisations in the face of market disruption, AI acceleration, and cultural fatigue. These conversations have been rich and revealing. What's clear is that while the context might shift, the core challenge of leadership remains deeply human.

In this piece, I've drawn together the most resonant insights from those interviews, research, woven in some of our thinking at Muuto, and reflected on the themes from within my leadership coaching practice.

My aim isn't to offer definitive answers, but to share a few truths that seem to hold under pressure and see if they resonate and help as you navigate your own unique situation.



1. Secure the anchor

Within an organisation and/or industry under considerable pressure, your first priority as a leader is stabilisation. This might sound unglamorous, but it's vital. Leaders I talk to emphasise the need to double down on foundations: do people have the tools to do their jobs? Is your licence to operate intact - legally, socially, reputationally, ethically? And do you have a clear, galvanising purpose to anchor decisions?

One executive put it succinctly: ***"When you're under challenge from external disruptors, you have to get the basics right, and this often gets overlooked, particularly in the complexity of today's context."***

This golden thread of purpose acts as both ballast and compass. It's not about lofty statements; it's about a shared sense of "why" that holds people together when everything else is moving around them.

One senior HR leader I spoke to, who led her organisation through transformation of existential proportions during COVID, told me how critical the organisation's values are in these times: "You have to stand by them during times of change, make every decision based on them, even in the toughest of times, they become your anchor."

By keeping that strong focus, you can galvanise momentum and innovation around it to keep the organisation moving towards its goals.

I call this a ***'golden thread'*** - a purpose that connects strategy, culture and delivery. And as a leader you hold tension on that thread every day

Agility is important but under pressure, what people really need is coherence, predictability, and a sense that even if everything's shifting, something still holds.



2. Focus, ruthlessly

In a world moving at the speed of AI, distraction is a strategic threat. The best leaders are becoming more intentional than ever. They're asking: Which innovations are for us, and which aren't? What can we deprioritise or delay?

As one leader put it: ***"With AI and the pace of change, there are too many distractions. Some new developments are not for you, or not for now."***

Holding the line on focus takes courage - especially when new technologies or shareholder demands pull you in ten directions at once.

But when everything is urgent, nothing is strategic. Leading in uncertainty often means saying, "Not now."

In my one-to-one leadership coaching work, we often explore personal boundaries, the lines we draw to protect our energy, our values, our purpose. They help us stay close to who we are and live life fully, regardless of what life throws at us.

By doing the same organisationally, leaders keep the organisation aligned to what will make it successful.

In Muuto's recent paper on AI, ***"Beyond Faster Horses"***, we talk about resisting the default urge to do more, faster. Real progress comes when you stop trying to manage everything and start creating space for experimentation. Only then will the right things grow.

HBR calls this the transition from "know-it-all" to "learn-it-all" leadership. When leaders can say "not now" as confidently as they say "yes", they protect their teams from strategic fatigue.



3. Be visible, be human

According to [DDI's Global Leadership Forecast 2025](#), surveying nearly 11,000 leaders across 50+ countries, 71% of leaders feel that stress has increased. And nearly half of those are considering stepping away for their own wellbeing.

Under pressure like this, a natural response can be to hide, to avoid the inevitably difficult conversations. If you don't feel 100% robust in your self it can be hard to have all the answers, all the strength.

But here's what came up over and over again in my conversations: When times are tough, people look to leadership not only for direction, but for orientation. The most respected leaders I spoke to didn't pretend to have all the answers. Instead, they showed up, tackled difficult questions directly, and modelled grounded self-awareness.

"Be visible. Tackle the hard questions with humility. People will respect that," advised one senior leader who works within the public sector, where showing up and being open to debate often carries considerable reputational risk.

I believe, and it isn't always a popular point of view, that to do this well takes a considerable amount of self-reflection and inner work. This isn't always comfortable but the benefits are powerful.

One person told me: ***"I had to deal with my own fear first, face my own demons, otherwise they were getting in the way of every decision I made."***

Another put it plainly: ***"If you don't like and know yourself, it's much harder to make the right calls, because you're not sure of the ground you are standing on."***

In my leadership coaching work, and in my psychotherapy practice I know this to be true. I will often ask:

- What is getting in the way of you showing up how you want to show up?
- How much do you like and value yourself?
- How do you respond to personal adversity and uncertainty? Do you know why it is that way?

Knowing the answer to these, being curious to why you respond the way you do gives you two things: awareness and choice. Awareness of how you might be inclined to respond and a choice in how you DO respond. The third, unintended consequence? You can lead with humanity and authenticity. If we don't attend to that inner work, our leadership can easily default to performance rather than grounded purpose.

4. Lead with both safety and speed

Psychological safety isn't a soft skill, it's a strategic one. When people feel safe to speak up, challenge assumptions, or flag issues early, things run more smoothly and improve faster. Learning accelerates. Risk-taking becomes productive, not paralysing.

As we've seen in our work at Muuto, transformation sticks faster in environments where trust is high and blame is low.

This isn't theoretical. Google's Project Aristotle showed psychological safety is the top predictor of team performance. At Rio Tinto, the lack of it cost the business dearly. At BP, psychological safety is what makes high-tech systems work because frontline teams trust their voices will be heard when things go wrong. And there are many other examples.

In ['Beyond Faster Horses'](#), we talk about this in the context of AI: **real transformation in the AI era requires both experimentation, and emotional headroom. People can't think creatively if they're bracing for blame.**

Leaders must shift from "know-it-all" to "learn-it-all", creating space for ideas to be tested, risks to be raised, and missteps to be seen as data, not failures.

Timothy Clark calls this building "thick trust". Not the superficial comfort of charisma, but the durable trust built through consistency, presence and transparency.

Psychological safety begins with leadership. And it is a simple reset to how mistakes and ideas are talked about. In our recent paper on this we highlight how to get started: "when a leader recounts a mistake and what it taught them, they signal that truth matters more than polish. It models vulnerability and paves the way for others to do the same."

This starts with your own story telling, honesty and curiosity as a leader and then ripples structurally into how work is discussed and coordinated across your teams, units and functions. For more on this read our paper in more detail: <https://www.muuto.co.uk/psych-safety-article-access>





5. Know when to shift gears

At some point, every leader faces the decision: Do I push through, or pivot? Am I driving a change programme, or holding space for recovery? That judgement call often sits in a grey zone, not a binary.

Here, leadership becomes an act of sensemaking. The most agile leaders I spoke to had built-in routines for reflection. Not just quarterly reviews, but weekly pulses with their teams, or moments in meetings to ask: “What are we not seeing?” That blend of pace and pause, of curiosity and clarity, is where strategic insight often lives.

Likewise, there are times when leaders must activate and accelerate transformation. The ability to shift into that mode doesn’t come from authority alone. It’s built on trust: the kind that grows through consistent listening (see above), handling hard conversations with care (see above) and staying focused on what truly matters. (also see above!).

When trust is strong and the environment is right, leaders earn the ability to change pace. You’ve built the relationships – and the credibility – that make people want to move with you, not just because they have to, but because they believe in where you’re going.

One leader I spoke to clearly articulated this:
“it is a trust equation: staying close to your people, keeping responsive, listening, being vulnerable and humble all give you the firepower to act fast and get results when you need it. You shift gears, your team responds.”

6. Development and assessment

Does this change what it means to be a successful or competent leader? Should we update leadership competencies and assessment frameworks in the context of this?

In times of unprecedented pressure, we don’t get results by increasing the amount of compliance or checks, but by amplifying the skills and capabilities that activate performance and wellbeing. **According to Forbes recently, 73% of overwhelmed leaders feel they lack sufficient support.**

It is not so much that leadership competencies have changed, more the aspects of the leadership framework, and the way leaders are assessed, need different amounts of focus at any given time.

Most leadership development frameworks have broadly common themes: strategic thinking, decision making, motivating and inspiring, communication and influence, emotional intelligence, accountability and results, change leadership and integrity and ethics.

Many of the leaders I speak to are making judgements on which elements of their leadership role need to come to the fore, depending on the business context. And they are asking themselves how to activate this for themselves and their teams. For example, at times of deep uncertainty or during an intense transformation agenda, balancing deeper empathy and motivational skill sets with a strong focus on decision-making and results becomes very important.

Greater success comes from intentionally targeting development, coaching and assessment on those elements of the existing framework that are most needed in the organisational context.

This makes sure critical leaders feel supported, rather than adding to the load of expectations, at a time that is already demanding enough.



Final Thoughts: The Work Within the Work

Leadership today isn't about having it all figured out, or even making things happen. **It's about helping people (and ourselves) find purpose and meaning whilst in perpetual motion.**

The leaders I interviewed didn't frame their role as heroic. They spoke about holding space, providing clarity, showing humility, and modelling resolve. They were both grounded and in flight, anchored firmly by their values, yet willing to evolve and act fast.

That's not easy. But perhaps it's exactly the kind of leadership that's fit for the age we're in.

About the Author



Helen Kewell is a Client Partner at Muuto and has over 25 years' experience gained at a top tier global consultancy, specialising in complex business transformation, culture change and change management. She is also a leadership development and DE&I expert and has previously held operational leadership roles at Carbon Search and C Squared.

Known for her ability to unravel complexity, inspire creative solutions, provide cultural guidance and an excellent motivator of teams. To talk to Helen about leading through uncertainty, or for any coaching on the topic please email helen.kewell@muuto.co.uk.

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