Leadership in transition:

Rethinking styles, context and culture in a changing world.

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Why leadership models are being rewritten

Leadership playbooks in the twentieth century centred on stability, hierarchy and control. However, the ingredients of leadership have completely changed today. With the advent of new technologies, the shift to hybrid work following Covid, and with employees placing greater emphasis on holistic wellbeing, the expectations from leaders have evolved significantly. Leaders today are expected to manage all of this at remarkable speed, yet their reference points are often outdated leadership models. Traditional approaches to leadership were based on assumptions such as 'the leader knows best', that information should flow from the top down, and that control ensures performance. In contrast, today's leaders operate in environments shaped by continuous disruption, digital connectivity and globalisation.

Sidharth Jain, Director – Strategy at Lloyds Metal & Energy, highlights an often under-discussed challenge: the sheer volume of information leaders must process today. He notes that much of this information is not consequential but still demands attention, making it increasingly difficult to filter what truly matters. The expectation that leaders must remain constantly informed further compounds this challenge, turning attention itself into a constrained resource. New leadership models therefore need to prioritise agility, efficiency, adaptability and collaboration.

Command-and-control leadership styles can slow organisations down when decisions require inputs from diverse teams across functions and geographies. Added to that, workforce expectations have evolved. Employees increasingly seek purpose, inclusion and meaningful participation in decision-making rather than purely transactional relationships with employers. New generations entering the workforce expect leaders to demonstrate fairness, empathy and social awareness. Leadership is no longer limited to directing work or making decisions, but includes creating environments where people feel heard, trusted and motivated to contribute. This shift, as Mr Jain notes, is already visible in leadership practices. He observes that, with the 'democratisation of information', there is much greater inquisitiveness than ever, as well as a heightened expectation of dialogue.

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As a result, leadership no longer goes unquestioned and decision-making is no longer purely top-down. Instead, leaders must engage with perspectives across levels, including those far removed from traditional hierarchies. Listening, therefore, has expanded from a managerial responsibility to a core leadership capability.

Suvajit Karmakar, Country Managing Director India and Asia Sub-Regional Director, Ayvens, articulates this shift - 'As the head of an organisation, I am morally responsible towards every committed employee. It is the salary that we pay that runs their family, educates their children and builds their future.' For Mr Karmakar, this sense of accountability is the foundation of leadership effectiveness.

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From know-it-all to learn-it-all

When **Satya Nadella became Microsoft's CEO** in 2014, the company had spent a decade stagnating. Internal competition between divisions had grown corrosive, stack-ranking pitted employees against each other and the culture rewarded individual brilliance over collaboration.

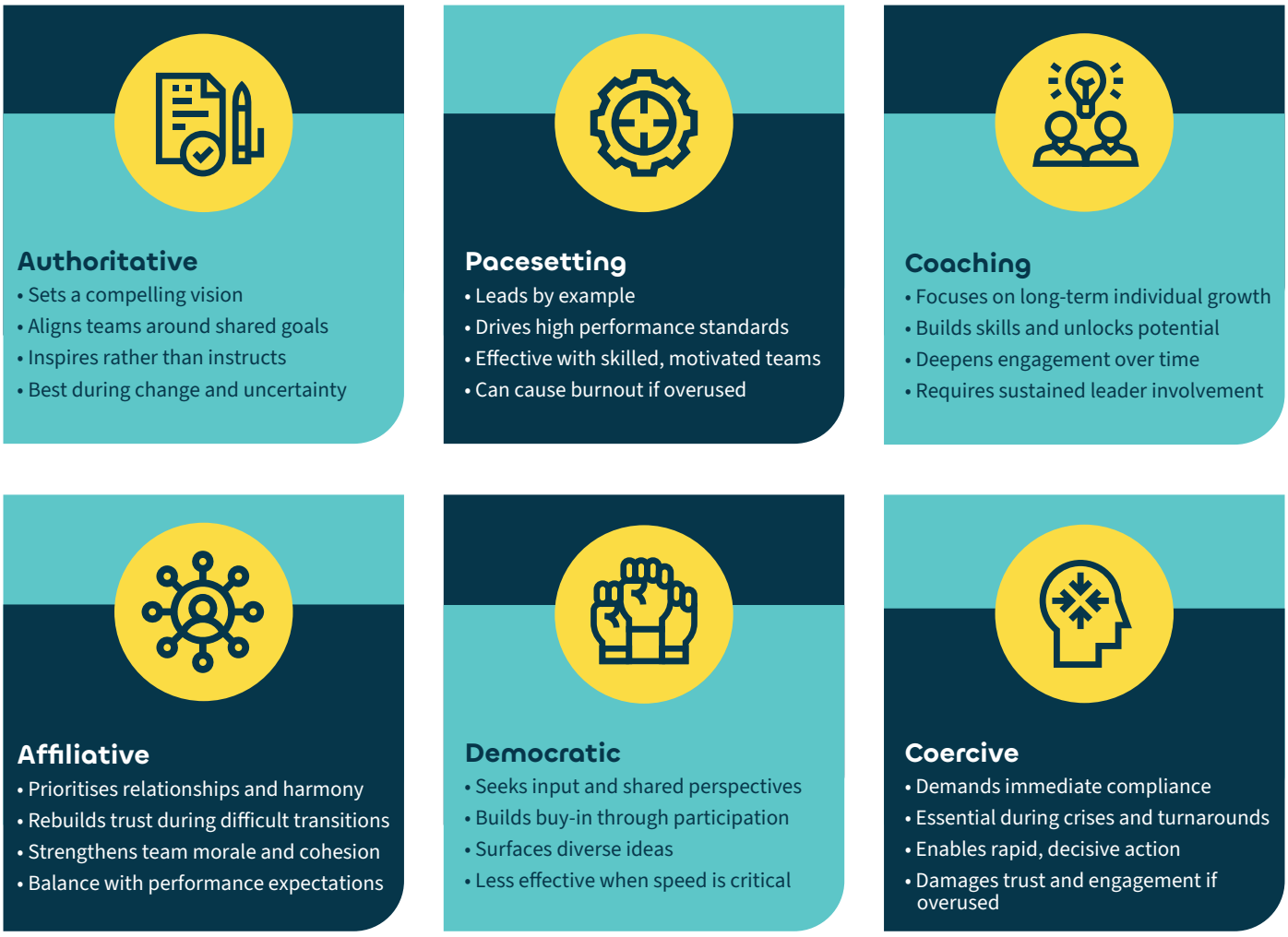
Mr Nadella's first act was cultural, not strategic. He dismantled the ‘know-it-all’ identity and replaced it with a ‘learn-it-all’ mindset, drawing on Carol Dweck's growth mindset research. He eliminated stack-ranking, built psychological safety into leadership expectations and modelled humility publicly — openly acknowledging what he did not know and inviting challenge from below.

Microsoft's market capitalisation grew from approximately $300 billion in 2014 to over $3 trillion by the mid-2020s. The cultural transformation preceded the commercial one; by changing how people were led, Mr Nadella created the conditions for Azure, Teams and the AI pivot to succeed.

Why leadership effectiveness depends on context

Leadership has often been described through fixed styles, as though effective leaders must identify one approach and consistently follow it. Yet, modern leadership thinking suggests that effectiveness lies not in choosing a single style but in understanding when different approaches are needed. Daniel Goleman, whose work on emotional intelligence reshaped leadership research, argues that great leaders recognise that different circumstances call for different responses. Leadership styles therefore function less as labels and more as behavioural tools that leaders draw upon, depending on the organisation’s needs, team maturity and business conditions. Research shows that leadership effectiveness increasingly depends on individual traits, organisational context and the environment around it.

Daniel Goleman's leadership styles



Research by McKinsey reinforces this: different leadership behaviours are effective at different stages of an organisation's lifecycle. Struggling businesses benefit from clarity, fact-based decision-making and strong direction, while healthier ones require collaboration, empowerment and stretch goals to sustain performance. Leadership effectiveness therefore evolves alongside organisational maturity — no single style is universally effective and the capacity to shift between directing, coaching, collaborating and empowering as conditions change is what defines modern leadership. This dynamic is visible in practice. Mr Karmakar notes that he instinctively reaches for the Coaching or Visionary style, flipping to Pacesetting when the situation demands it; Commanding requires the most deliberate effort to develop. The admission is telling: even experienced leaders find that certain styles must be consciously built rather than naturally assumed.

Shifting gears: Multi-style leadership in practice

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Indra Nooyi led PepsiCo from 2006 to 2018 through a financial crisis, shifting consumer preferences and a controversial strategic pivot toward health and sustainability — all while managing strong, independent division leaders.

Ms Nooyi modulated her style constantly. With her executive team on long-term strategy, she was authoritative, holding firm on ‘Performance with Purpose’ even under investor pressure. With business unit leaders, she shifted to coaching, giving autonomy while investing in development. During the 2008 financial crisis, she became more directive. And personally, she was affiliative — famously writing handwritten letters to the parents of senior leaders acknowledging their contribution.

PepsiCo's revenues grew from $35 billion to $63.5 billion during her tenure. Her career remains one of the clearest real-world illustrations of Goleman's multi-style model operating at scale inside a complex global organisation.

The hardest part: When leadership styles conflict

Leadership frameworks are easier to understand than they are to implement. Leaders frequently face moments where two legitimate approaches pull in opposite directions, where the right answer is genuinely unclear, and where the cost of getting it wrong is borne not just by the organisation but by the people in it.

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Three types of tensions arise with particular frequency:

- **Empathy versus accountability.**
  Leaders are increasingly expected to demonstrate care for their people; to acknowledge pressure, recognise effort and create psychological safety. Yet the same leaders are held responsible for performance outcomes that cannot always wait for wellbeing to stabilise. The affiliative leader who prioritises harmony risks allowing underperformance to go unaddressed. The coercive leader who pushes hard on results risks breaking the trust that makes sustained performance possible. What is required is the judgment to know when a team needs to be heard before it can be pushed and when holding back on accountability is itself a form of negligence.

- **Participation versus speed.**
  Democratic leadership builds better decisions over time, involving people generates ownership, surfaces blind spots and produces solutions teams will actually implement. But participation takes time that organisations under pressure frequently do not have. Leaders who default to consensus in fast-moving situations can find themselves presiding over well-consulted inaction. The tension is between two legitimate values that genuinely compete. Mr Jain describes the trade-off between speed and accuracy in decision-making. While his instinct has been to move quickly to avoid 'analysis paralysis', he acknowledges that this has, at times, led to incorrect decisions. In response, he has introduced a structured pause: allowing time-bound consultation before acting. This approach reflects a broader leadership adjustment: balancing decisiveness with deliberation in environments where both speed and correctness carry high stakes.

- **Empowerment versus intervention.**
  The shift away from directing and toward enabling is one of the clearest trends in modern leadership. In practice, however, empowerment is not always received as freedom. A team that lacks confidence, clarity or capability may experience autonomy not as trust but as abandonment. Step back too early and the team struggles without support. Stay too long and you prevent them from developing the independence they need. Mr Karmakar captures this tension through a sports analogy that resonates particularly well in an Indian context: 'Most of the time I lead like a football captain — someone who sets the goal but, while on the field, is a player who needn't demonstrate authority. But when the situation arises, I also have to become the cricket captain who has to continuously strategise and demonstrate authority.' The two types of captaincy are not contradictions; they are the same leader reading different moments.

What makes these tensions difficult is that they do not resolve into rules.
A leader dealing with a team struggling under tight deadline must simultaneously provide direction, coaching, empathy and speed. In practice, this ambiguity often plays out in unexpected ways. Mr Jain recalls moments during town halls where unexpected questions exposed gaps in his own knowledge. Rather than deflecting, he would turn the question back to the team, encouraging further exploration. The exchange, often handled with humour, helped create a more open and participative environment. The skill is in holding multiple legitimate demands at once, making a call and remaining honest about the trade-off being made.

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Leadership across cultures

As organisations operate across geographies, leadership effectiveness increasingly depends on understanding how the cultural context shapes expectations of leaders. While core leadership qualities such as integrity and sound judgement remain universal, cultures differ in their implicit beliefs about what good leadership looks like. A leader's natural style may therefore be seen as a strength in one region and a limitation in another. This risk of misreading cultural cues is not uncommon, as Mr Jain's experience in Indonesia illustrates. Initially, he interpreted a deferential workforce as being strongly aligned with top-down directives, only to later realise that the local culture placed a high value on softness, relational trust and implicit communication. Resistance, when it emerged, was often silent rather than explicit. The experience underscored how easily cultural misunderstanding can erode trust and how difficult it is to rebuild, reinforcing the need for leaders to invest in deep contextual understanding rather than rely on surface-level cues.

Plainly, leadership expectations vary significantly across regions, particularly in terms of decision-making and communication styles. According to a study in the Harvard Business Review, in Northeast Asia and parts of Latin America, effective leaders tend to prioritise consensus-building and structured processes, ensuring alignment among stakeholders before moving forward. In contrast, leaders in Germanic and Nordic Europe, the UK and the US are often expected to be more opportunistic and self-initiating, demonstrating flexibility and comfort with ambiguity. Communication norms also differ: some cultures value direct, task-oriented leaders who address issues immediately, while others prefer diplomatic leaders who maintain harmony and carefully adapt messaging to preserve relationships.

For leaders navigating this on the ground, the learning process is rarely theoretical. Mr Karmakar, who has managed teams across India and Southeast Asia, including a complex Japanese partnership within a French multinational, describes getting himself fully involved in floor-level operations to understand what motivates people in each country. He personally visits customers, partners and suppliers in their offices to absorb the local work culture. His approach of actively seeking out shared reference points between Indian and local cultures reflects a broader principle that cultural adaptation is built through proximity, not assumption.

Cultural intelligence and its limits

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In 1999, **Carlos Ghosn,** a Brazilian-Lebanese, was sent to rescue a near-bankrupt Nissan on behalf of Renault. Japanese corporate culture operates on deeply embedded norms: decisions build through consensus, seniority determines who speaks and public criticism is avoided. Arriving with a Western restructuring playbook and imposing it top-down would have failed immediately.

Mr Ghosn's effectiveness came from recognising this and adapting. He began by listening rather than directing, spending months understanding the organisation before prescribing solutions. He also worked through cross-functional teams that felt participative within the Japanese cultural frame. He was transparent about Nissan's problems — unusual for Japanese corporate culture — but framed his commitments as personal accountability, which resonated deeply in a culture that values honour and follow-through. He did not transplant a French leadership model; he translated his intent into a form the organisation could receive.

Nissan returned to profitability within a year. However, Mr Ghosn's arrest in 2018 for financial misconduct offers an important insight: the cultural intelligence that made him effective eroded as his authority grew and accountability diminished. Cultural adaptability is not a one-time achievement, it requires sustained humility to endure.

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What future-ready leadership looks like

As organisations face continuous disruption, effective leadership will increasingly be defined by mindset rather than position. The shift is away from hierarchical, directive models toward collaborative and networked ones where leadership responsibility is shared across teams, and leaders are expected not only to deliver performance but to enable sustainable and inclusive growth. A defining capability of future-ready leaders is adaptability: the ability to adjust one's approach depending on organisational needs and team dynamics, creating clarity of purpose while allowing teams genuine autonomy in execution. As work becomes more complex and interdependent, leadership will increasingly involves building trust, developing people and fostering environments where collaboration drives performance.

Cultural and relational intelligence will be equally important. Global and hybrid workplaces require leaders who can navigate different communication styles, expectations and decision-making norms while maintaining alignment around shared goals. Inclusive communication, empathy and openness to learning are today operational capabilities, not merely 'soft skills'. Leaders who can integrate diverse perspectives are better positioned to unlock innovation and sustain engagement across distributed teams.

Taken together, these shifts point to a redefinition of leadership itself – which is becoming less about authority and more about creating the conditions in which organisations can continuously adapt and thrive. In a world defined by constant change, the most effective leaders will not be those who adhere to a single model but those who evolve alongside the systems and people they lead. Mr Karmakar distils the qualities he looks for in the next generation of leaders to a short list: curiosity, empathy, ownership and the willingness to learn. His summary reinforces the paper's central argument: the defining leadership resource is not a fixed set of skills, but the disposition to keep learning how to lead.

Empathy as leadership infrastructure

Jacinda Ardern served as New Zealand's Prime Minister from 2017 to 2023, navigating two defining crises — the Christchurch terrorist attack in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic — both demanding rapid decisions under conditions of public grief and deep uncertainty.

Ms Ardern led with humanity first. After Christchurch, she refused to name the attacker, wore a hijab when meeting survivors and moved swiftly on gun reform through cross-party consensus. During COVID-19, she held informal briefings that acknowledged uncertainty openly, trusted her advisers publicly and communicated with citizens as participants rather than subjects.

New Zealand achieved among the best early COVID-19 outcomes in the developed world. Ms Ardern demonstrated that empathy and transparency are not alternatives to effectiveness; they are mechanisms of it. Her leadership has become a globally studied model of what future-ready leadership looks like when traditional authority structures are insufficient.

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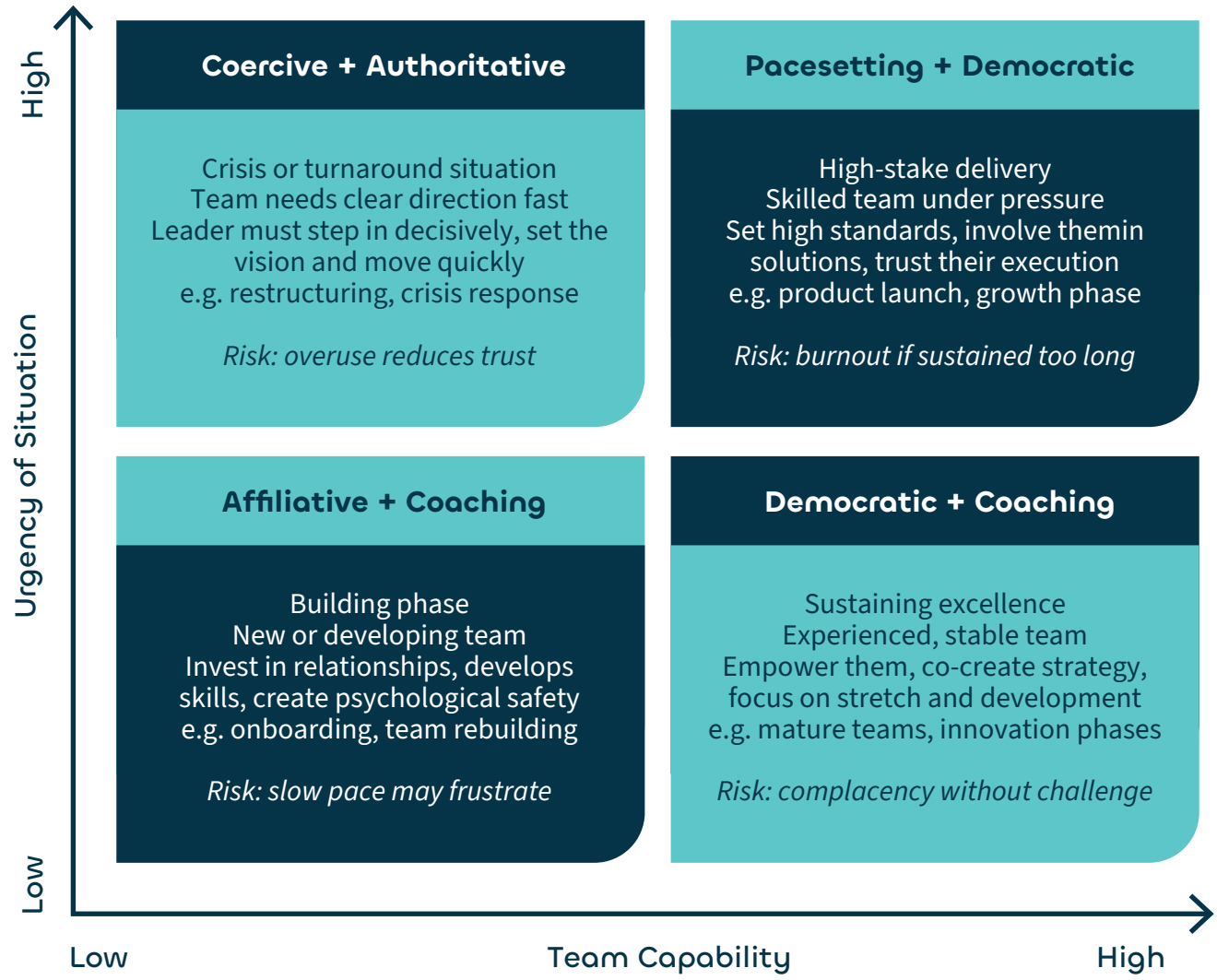
What does your organisation need right now?



The matrix above offers a practical diagnostic for leaders navigating this complexity. It maps four combinations of leadership style against two variables that shift constantly: the urgency of the situation and the capability of the team. A low-capability team in a high-urgency environment calls for Coercive or Authoritative leadership, where clarity of direction matters more than consultation. A skilled team under pressure benefits from Pacesetting combined with Democratic input, where high standards are set but execution is trusted. Where urgency is low and the team is still developing, Affiliative and Coaching styles create the psychological safety needed for growth and where a capable, stable team operates without immediate crisis, Democratic and Coaching approaches sustain performance and guard against complacency. The matrix does not prescribe a preferred quadrant; no single position is inherently superior. What it illustrates is the central argument of this paper: that the quality of leadership lies not in the style chosen but in the accuracy of the diagnosis. Leaders who can read where their organisation sits and adjust accordingly, are the ones best placed to lead through whatever comes next.

Ayvens in India

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