



ALISON EARL

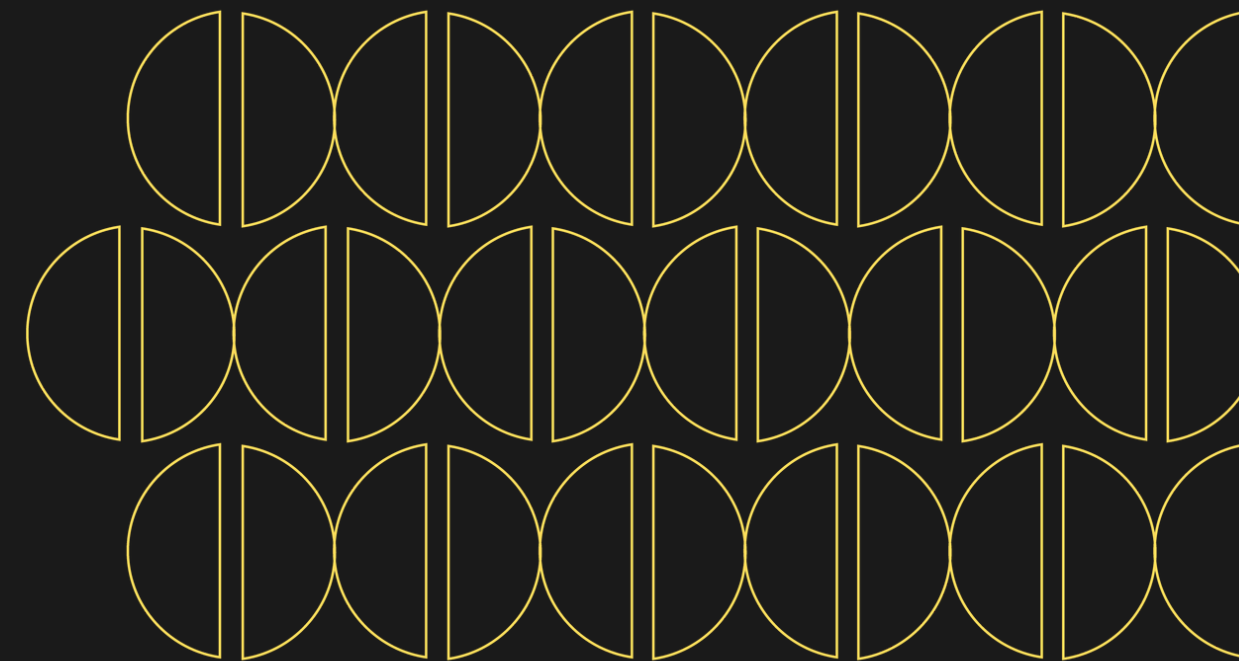
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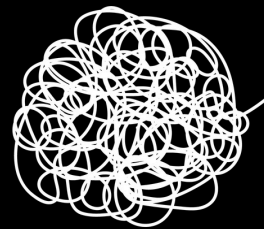
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EMERGING LEADERS WHITEPAPER

*Preparing Leaders to **Step into Uncertainty** and Create Results*





She has three tabs open, a half-finished slide deck, two unread Slack threads, and a meeting in four minutes. Her team is looking to her for direction on a project that shifted scope yesterday, again.

She knows what needs to happen. What she can't quite locate is the energy, the clarity, and the sense of solid ground to make it happen well. This is not a story about someone who isn't coping. This is a story about someone who is absolutely coping, and wondering when it starts to feel different.

The capability is there. The ambition was there too. But something about the relentlessness of the pace, the constant shifting of priorities, and the feeling of always being slightly behind has started to erode something harder to name.

If you work with emerging leaders, you recognise this. If you are an emerging leader, you might be living it.

This paper is about what's actually going on beneath that experience, and what we can do about it.



The question at the centre of this paper is the same question Morgana and I explored in our webinar: **how do we prepare emerging leaders to step up and take ownership when the landscape keeps shifting, and the future is unclear?**

The honest answer is that we cannot remove the uncertainty. The landscape will keep shifting. That is not going to change.

What we can do is build the internal foundation that makes emerging leaders genuinely capable of meeting it — with ownership, with curiosity, with the ability to collaborate across complexity and find possibility in the most demanding conditions.

That capability is built from the inside out. And for organisations willing to invest in it seriously, the return — in performance, in culture, and in the leaders who stay and grow — is significant.



ALISON EARL

Leadership Alignment and
People Transformation

Alison Earl is a leading corporate adviser and behaviour change expert, helping organisations around the world accelerate success by unlocking leadership alignment and people transformation. Over a 20-year career she has shaped strategies for global companies, been a repeat guest lecturer on behaviour change at the Harvard School of Public Health, and facilitated transformational change in over 50 organisations worldwide. She is the author of *Tripowerment* and *The Betterment Mindset*.



MORGANA WATERS

General Manager, Leadership,
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Morgana Waters is General Manager of Leadership, Culture and Development at Optus. With over 20 years of experience leading capability and organisational development across some of Australia's most complex organisations — including Allianz, QBE, TechnologyOne, and Optus — Morgana brings a rare combination of strategic perspective and deep practical experience to the question of how organisations can genuinely support their emerging leaders.

[WATCH THE WEBINAR](#)

The landscape has never moved this fast

Something has shifted in the last few years that goes beyond the usual pace of change. It is not just that organisations are transforming faster. It is that the nature of change itself has changed.

It used to be possible to complete a transformation. To see it through, consolidate, and move forward. Most organisations today describe a state of perpetual transition — where restructures overlap, technology requirements evolve before implementations are finished, and strategies shift before people have fully absorbed the last one.

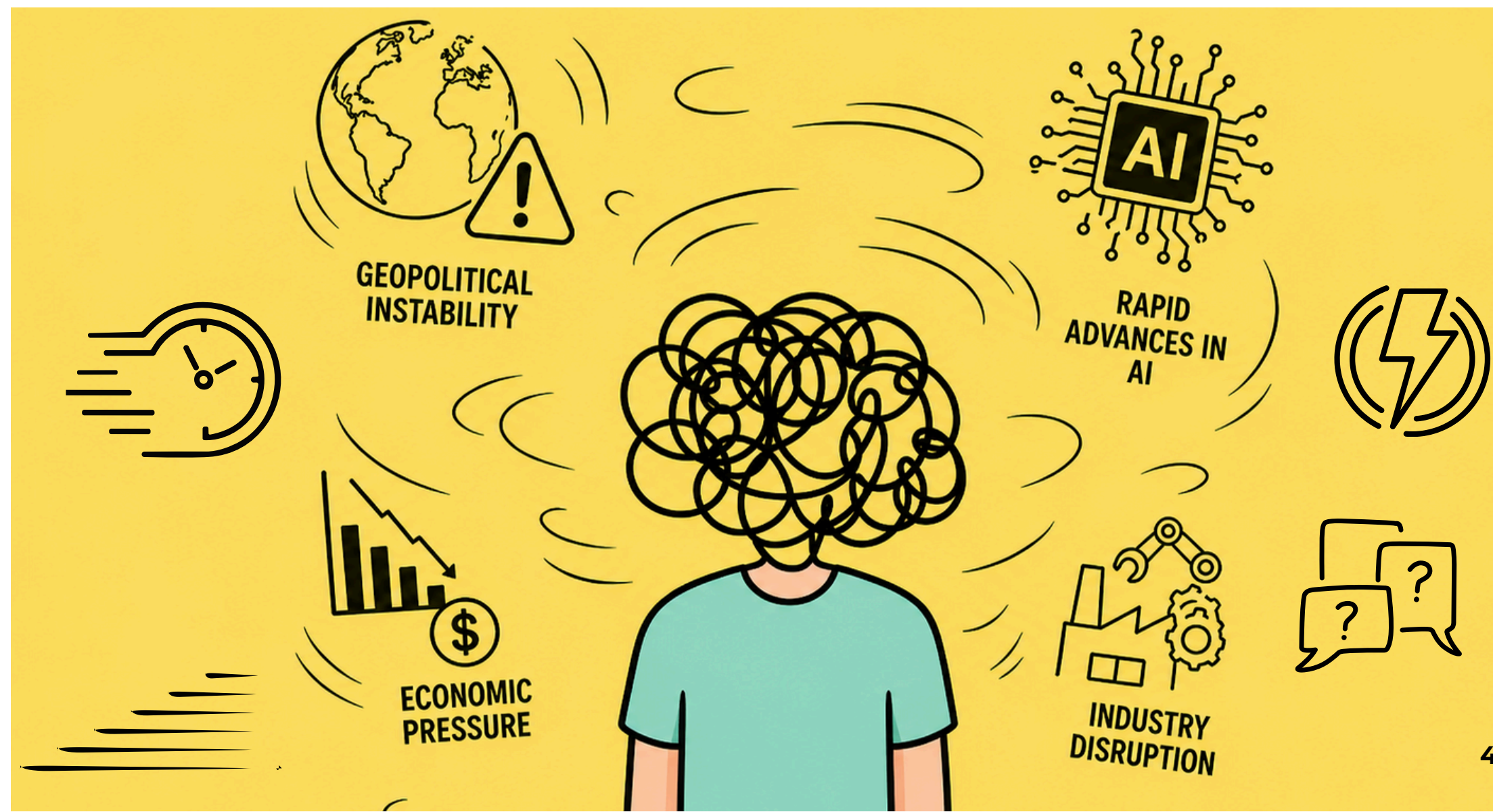
The data reflects this. In a global survey of 56,000 workers across 50 countries, PwC found that 62% experienced more change at work this year than last. And 44% did not understand why.¹ That second number is the one worth sitting with. Change without context depletes the very qualities organisations most need from their people: direction, discretionary effort, and the willingness to lean in.

62% of workers experienced more change this year than last. 44% didn't understand why.¹

The human cost of sustained uncertainty is well documented and consistently underestimated. Research cited in MIT Sloan Management Review found that roughly 40% of employees felt less ambitious under prolonged uncertainty.² Not less capable, less ambitious. That distinction matters enormously. The drive, the creative energy, the willingness to go above and beyond — these are precisely the qualities organisations want from their emerging leaders. And sustained uncertainty actively depletes them.

The mental health picture compounds this. Seventy-three percent of employees report that mental health challenges have negatively impacted their job performance — a 42% increase from the year before.³ Fifty-one percent experienced burnout in the past year, rising to 84% of tech workers.⁴ These are not fringe statistics. They describe the mainstream experience of people who are genuinely trying to deliver, in conditions that are genuinely hard.

40% of employees felt less ambitious — not less capable. Less ambitious. That's what sustained uncertainty does to people.²



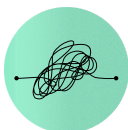
The challenges facing emerging leaders



AI and technology disruption

Artificial intelligence is not just changing what emerging leaders need to know — it is changing how they learn, how they build judgment, and how they demonstrate value. Roles that were clearly defined twelve months ago are being reshaped in real time.

Learning pathways that previous generations relied on — asking questions, sitting with hard problems, building expertise through productive struggle — are increasingly being bypassed. We will go deeper on this one, because there is something specific happening here that most conversations about AI are missing.



Unclear or shifting strategy

Strategy today is not a fixed destination; it is a living response to a world that keeps moving. Organisations are navigating constant shifts in market conditions, technology, and competitive pressure, which means priorities change, plans evolve, and emerging leaders will frequently find themselves in holding patterns or periods of genuine uncertainty about what comes next.

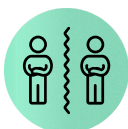
The ability to stay productive, motivated, and effective through those moments, without waiting for perfect clarity, is one of the most important capabilities a leader can develop.



Managing BAU alongside a transformation agenda

Most emerging leaders are carrying two jobs simultaneously — keeping the core business running while being expected to actively contribute to building something new. There is rarely additional time or resource to go with the expanded expectation.

The result is a constant tension between doing today's work well and showing up for tomorrow's, and the cognitive load of holding both, indefinitely, takes a real toll.



Siloed goals and structures

Every organisation knows its silos are not serving it, and yet mobilising genuine cross-functional collaboration remains one of the hardest things to do in practice. Competing priorities pull functions in different directions, and even when enterprise mindset is on the agenda, the structural incentives often still reward winning within a team rather than succeeding across them.

Emerging leaders inherit these dynamics and need to operate differently by building cross-functional relationships and driving shared outcomes, in spite of whatever barriers are in their way, to truly be successful.



Operating without full visibility or voice

In the emerging stage of a leadership career, significant contributions can go unseen, particularly in larger organisations where proximity to senior decision-makers is limited. Emerging leaders are learning to influence without authority, navigating decisions that get made above their heads and handed down to implement, and working through the gap between the value they add and the recognition or decision-making power that comes with it.

Learning to lead effectively from that position, rather than waiting for seniority to arrive, is one of the defining challenges of this stage.



Sustained uncertainty and pressure eroding ambition

We have already seen the data on this, and it is concerning. But the implication is worth sitting with. When pressure is relentless and uncertainty feels unwavering, it is not capability that erodes first. It is the internal drive that makes people want to grow, take risks, and step up.

Organisations can have exactly the right talent and still find their emerging leaders pulling back, not because they cannot do the work, but because the conditions are depleting the energy that would make them want to.



The peer-to-leader transition

The skills and experience that got someone to a leadership position are not necessarily the ones that will make them effective in it. Being technically strong, a deep specialist, a reliable executor — these are genuinely important qualities, but they are not the same as knowing how to lead, influence, and bring others with you.

And yet emerging leaders stepping into their first leadership roles often do not receive the skills-based development that would help them make that shift.

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A couple of years ago we had that phrase — create the flag on the hill and march to that. Today we have multiple flags that we need to walk towards, run towards, fly towards. There's many different ways that we're needing to move at different pace.

Morgana Waters on how the landscape has changed for leaders inside organisations today.

AI and the learning gap

New research from SurveyMonkey's State of Curiosity 2026 report — surveying nearly 2,000 workers — points to a concerning trend. Leaders are **routing questions through AI instead of their teams** at nearly **three times** the rate of individual contributors.⁵

The cost of this behaviour is twofold: the organisation loses the conversations that build collective judgment, and emerging leaders watching senior people model that behaviour learn to do the same, bypassing the human interaction that would normally develop their own thinking.

Early-career leaders build judgment by asking questions in real time, testing their thinking against a colleague who knows the context, and sitting in the discomfort of not-knowing long enough to develop a real answer. That process is how expertise is built. It is not efficient. And it is exactly what gets bypassed when the default becomes reaching for the machine, especially one designed to affirm our thinking.

Research from Carnegie Mellon, MIT, and other institutions is converging on the same finding: frequent AI users show **measurable declines in critical thinking**, with cognitive effort offloaded to the tool.

Workers who partially solve a problem before consulting AI outperform those who reach for it first.⁶ When you go to the tool matters as much as how you use it.

There is a masking problem underneath all of this that rarely gets named openly. Four in ten workers admit to **pretending they understood** something rather than asking the question that would have revealed they didn't.

For Gen Z workers, that number is higher still — they report the highest rates of **staying silent**, feeling pressure to already know the answer, and going quiet after asking too many questions.⁷ This is not a character flaw. It is a rational response to the conditions they are working in.

Technology will keep changing. Organisations that focus exclusively on keeping pace with each new technical requirement will always find themselves one step behind. The ones that build people who know how to learn, adapt, and contribute, regardless of what the landscape demands next, will have a durable advantage.

3×

Leaders route questions through AI instead of their teams at nearly 3× the rate of individual contributors

4 in 10

Workers admit to pretending they understood something rather than asking a revealing question

Gen Z

Highest rates of staying silent and feeling pressure to already know the answer



Frequent AI users show measurable declines in critical thinking — cognitive effort offloaded to the tool



Workers who partially solve a problem before consulting AI outperform those who reach for it first

95% vs 30%

Workers describe themselves as curious — but only 30% say their workplace strongly rewards it

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We'll really lose our critical thinking, but more than that, we'll lose our humanity. There's something really magic about saying, can I just sit beside you and just bounce this around for a moment? That's why we come to work.

Morgana Waters on what organisations risk losing when AI replaces human conversation.

What's needed from emerging leaders

Before we talk about solutions, it is worth being precise about what we are aiming for. Because 'emerging leader development' can mean many things.

When we ask senior leaders and L&D professionals what they actually need from their emerging leaders, a clear picture emerges. It is not primarily technical expertise. That is expected. What organisations consistently describe wanting, and struggling to find, is something different.

They want people who can stay grounded under pressure. Who can operate with clarity when the direction from above is less than clear. Who can build trust quickly and work across boundaries without losing themselves in the process. Who can see a restructure not as something happening to them, but as a landscape to navigate with intention.

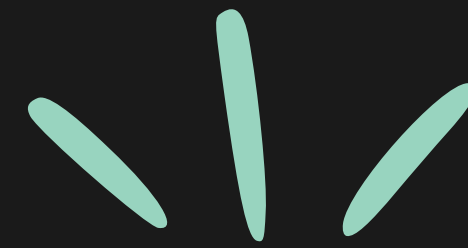
In research across forward-looking CEOs, Lynda Gratton at MIT Sloan Management Review identified a pattern that unites the next generation of leaders: they are comfortable moving forward without perfect information, as fluent in stakeholder ecosystems as in their domain, and they reframe power not as control but as the ability to build capability in others.⁸ Critically, what unites them is not background, industry, or seniority. **It is mindset.**

Research across more than 60 companies found that character and mindset are the biggest differentiators of leadership effectiveness, and that elevating character is associated with greater return on assets and higher psychological safety across the organisation.⁹

Curiosity, critical thinking, creativity are often cited as some of the most important human skills of the future. Interestingly, ninety-five percent of workers describe themselves as curious; yet only 30% say their workplace strongly rewards it.¹⁰ The breakdown appears to be largely in relation to their perceived ability to ask questions, challenge and brainstorm together.

Humans are inherently social beings and our best work is done through collaboration. Simply removing some of the monotonous meetings and replacing them with open brainstorming opportunities could unlock some magic.

So if what we need is leaders who are grounded, curious, collaborative, and possibility-focused; what actually builds those qualities? This is the question that most emerging leader programmes circle around without quite landing on.



The answer, in our experience and in the research, is consistent. It is not a new skill or a better tool. It's mindset and a set of internal shifts in how we think and behave, which separate the leaders who merely manage from the ones who genuinely lead.

The leaders who develop these qualities do not wait for the conditions around them to improve before they show up fully. They have built something internally that holds, regardless of what is happening externally.

We call this the Betterment Mindset. And it starts with understanding the journey.

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Clarity is an overrated word now. Intent is a really good word — understanding the intent of what an organisation is looking to achieve. But it's also understanding yourself. That's the one rhythm that you can control.

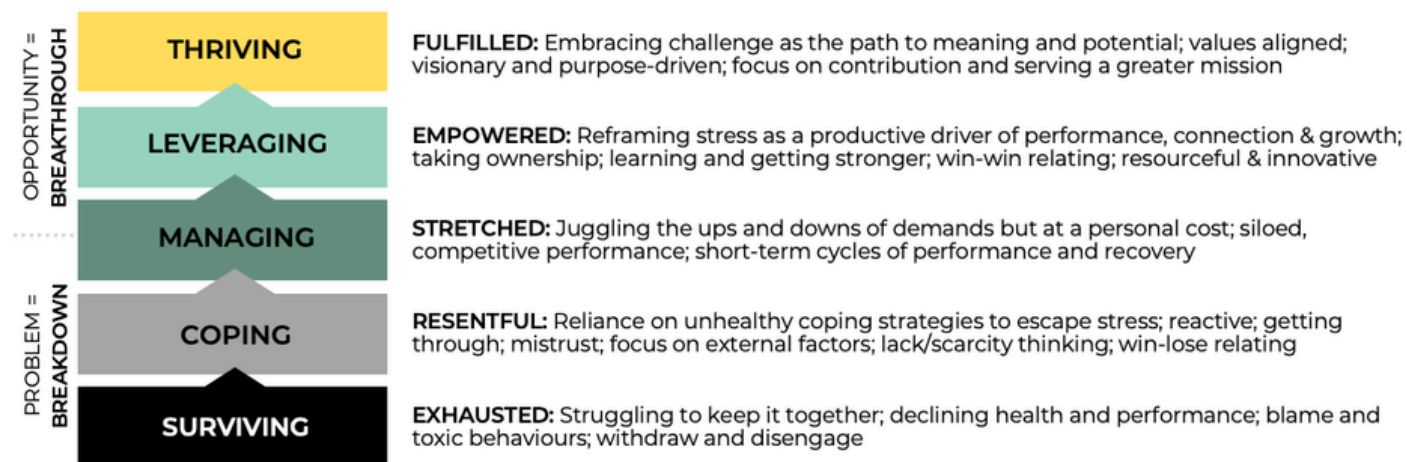
Morgana Waters on what replaces the search for certainty.

Understanding the journey

The Betterment Ladder

One of the most useful things we can offer an emerging leader is a mirror. Not an assessment. Not a competency framework. A mirror. Something that helps them recognise where they are, understand why, and see a clear path forward.

The Betterment Ladder is that mirror. It maps five levels of experience — Surviving, Coping, Managing, Leveraging, and Thriving — each with a distinct internal experience of how we show up, how we work with others, and how we approach challenges. Most people will recognise themselves at different levels in different contexts. The goal is not to achieve a level. It is to become more intentional about which level we are operating from, and why.



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Understanding your core — what can only you bring to a situation? You can learn from others and you can emulate, but if you understand what only you can bring, and what's your special secret sauce, it's holding on to that, and then being present in the moment.

Morgana Waters on how to thrive with uncertainty

Through the lens of an emerging leader, the ladder tells a particular story.

At Surviving, the experience is exhaustion. Running to keep up. Identity tied to performance metrics. A sense that any moment of stillness will be overtaken by the next demand. At this level, the future feels threatening rather than interesting.

At Coping, getting through becomes the primary strategy. There is reliance on effort as the answer to everything — staying later, working harder, absorbing more. Stress is accumulated rather than processed, and the emotional cost starts to show in how people relate to their team and their work.

At Managing, the emerging leader is competent and delivering. But they are stretched, siloed, and operating in short cycles of performance and recovery. They are good at their job, but something is still missing.

Leveraging is where the shift begins. The emerging leader starts to reframe stress as information rather than threat. They take ownership of how they show up, regardless of what is happening around them. They begin to see uncertainty not as an obstacle to work around, but as part of the landscape — expected, manageable, even energising.

At Thriving, something fundamentally different is happening. The emerging leader is contribution-focused rather than protection-focused. They are genuinely curious about how to add value and grow. Their sense of direction comes from within — from their values, their purpose, their care for the people around them — rather than from the clarity or approval of those above them.

The reframe that changes everything

The shift from Managing to Leveraging is not about getting more stability or more clarity from above. It requires making a deliberate internal decision to stop waiting for those conditions.

Uncertainty and change are not the obstacles to thriving. For leaders who reach Leveraging and Thriving, they become the expected terrain, even the source of growth. What anchors them is not a clearer strategy from the top. It is an intrinsic sense of purpose, a contribution focus, and genuine curiosity about how to add value.

Leaders who stay attached to protecting their role or waiting for permission before engaging fully find uncertainty destabilising. Leaders who stay curious, who ask what they can offer and how they can grow, find the same uncertainty energising. That internal shift is available to everyone. It is not a personality trait. It is a practice.

A useful reflection at any level: Where am I spending most of my energy right now — on what I can control, or on what I cannot? Am I leading from my values, or from my fears? Am I focused on what I can contribute, or on what I might lose?

These are not rhetorical questions. They are diagnostic ones, and the answers tend to be more revealing than most people expect.

MINDSET SHIFT ONE

Responsible Mindset: From Overwhelm to Ownership

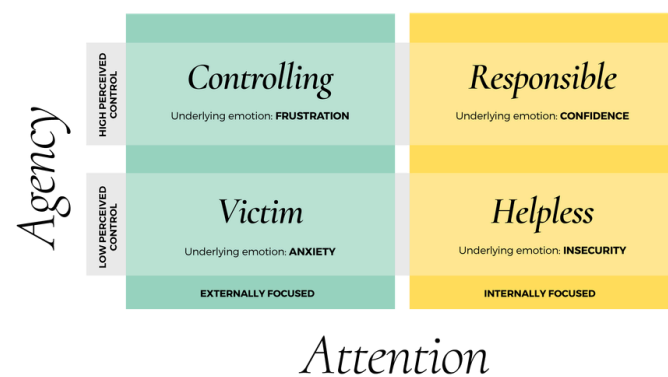
How to stop managing the noise and start leading from solid ground.

Understanding the dynamic

In our work, one of the most common things we hear from emerging leaders goes something like this: 'I feel like I'm doing everything right and still falling behind.' The overwhelm is real. But it is rarely a competence problem.

When pressure is sustained and the environment feels uncertain, different patterns tend to emerge.

The Four States of Mind framework helps us understand these dynamics. It maps our internal experience across two dimensions: how much agency we feel, and where we place our attention. The result is four recognisable states.



The Victim state combines low agency with external focus. The story here is 'this is happening to me and there is nothing I can do.' For an emerging leader navigating a digital transformation, going through a restructure, or simply feeling like they can't manage priorities, this state is can show up. It does not feel like victimhood from the inside. It feels like realism and an inability to change it.

The Helpless state also involves low agency, but the attention turns inward. The story becomes 'I am not good enough for this.' It is the imposter narrative, quietly running in the background during every meeting, every presentation, every decision made without enough information. The question shifts from 'am I doing good work?' to 'do I deserve to be here at all?', and without the right internal anchors, that question has a way of shrinking people at exactly the moment they need to expand.

The Controlling state looks more functional and even productive from the outside. High agency, but focused on external factors; the things that are not theirs to own. This state is driven by frustration rather than confidence. This is the emerging leader who takes on everything, never delegates, pushes back on every change, or insists on certainty before acting.

The Responsible state is where the shift happens. High agency, internal focus. Not control over everything outside, but ownership of how we show up, where we place our attention, and what we do with what we have. They've learned how to accept certain realities and instead put their energy into navigating them. This is the state from which genuine leadership becomes possible.

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I tell myself to remember my ABCs. Accept — just accept where you are, what the situation is. Breathe. And then connect — connect with the human you're working with, connect with the project, connect with the challenge. Just knowing that that is all that you have within your control, you carry a totally different mindset around what is hard, difficult, ambiguous.

Morgana Waters on her personal practice for staying grounded under pressure.

Building an inner compass

The path to Responsible is not a technique. It is a practice of building what we might call an inner compass — a clear enough sense of values, purpose, and agency that external uncertainty stops determining your internal experience.

In practice, this means learning to direct attention deliberately. Key questions become: *what can you genuinely act on right now? What can you shape, even partially, through your*

relationships, your contribution, your voice? What is genuinely outside your control — and what would it mean to release your grip on it and redirect that energy?

The leaders who reach Leveraging and Thriving have internalised this orientation. They are not immune to uncertainty. They have simply stopped treating it as a precondition for showing up. Their values drive their behaviour regardless of external conditions, and that consistency, over time, becomes the thing others trust.

What this looks like in practice

Consider AI adoption, or any significant digital transformation — two of the most common pressure points we see with emerging leaders right now. The technology is new, the expectations are high, and the degree of uncertainty about what it means for their role, their value, and their future is genuinely significant. The Four States of Mind play out in predictable and recognisable ways.

In the Victim state, the emerging leader experiences the change as something happening to them — threatening, destabilising, outside their control. The story running underneath is: this is going to make me redundant, or irrelevant, or exposed. This is happening to me. Energy goes into anxiety rather than action.

In the Helpless state, the focus turns inward. The story shifts to: I am not good enough for this. I should already know how to use these tools. Everyone else seems to be coping better than I am. This is where the masking behaviour the research identifies takes hold, performing competence that isn't yet there, staying silent in meetings rather than asking the question that would reveal the gap.

In the Controlling state, they are highly active and may even appear productive, but the energy is directed at controlling elements of the change that aren't necessarily theirs to own. This may include strategy, vendor decisions, platform choices or an array of other decisions that are made by others. They find it hard to accept these decisions, and friction and resistance build.

In the Responsible state, something different happens. The emerging leader brings their attention back to what they can control: their own response, their curiosity, their willingness to experiment. They are open about what they do not know. They treat the disruption as an invitation to grow rather than a threat to manage. They ask better questions — of the tools, of their colleagues, of themselves.

Same landscape for all four. Completely different experience of it, and completely different outcome for the people around them.

MINDSET SHIFT TWO

Win-Win Mindset: From Competition to Collaboration

How to build trust, break siloed cycles they did not create, and drive better outcomes across boundaries.

Understanding the dynamic

Many workplace cultures operate in a competitive performance zone. KPIs are set by function. Success is measured within teams, not across them. Resources are finite, recognition is comparative, and the unspoken incentive is often to win, or at least not to lose. People are not necessarily acting badly. They are responding rationally to the system they are in.

The problem is that the challenges organisations are facing increasingly cannot be solved within a single function. AI adoption, digital transformation, cultural change, customer experience — these are inherently cross-functional. They require people to share information, align on outcomes, and build on each other's thinking rather than defend against it. Organisations understand this. Most have enterprise mindset on their agenda. But the practice is considerably harder than the principle.

Emerging leaders will be essential to breaking these cycles. Not because they created the silos, but because they are the ones closest to where the work actually happens. They are the ones most capable of modelling a different way of working before it becomes the cultural norm. The question is whether they have the tools to do it.

The Win-Win Matrix helps us understand what keeps people stuck. It maps the working relationship across two dimensions: how assertive we are, and how much consideration we extend to others.

The result is four recognisable dynamics. Win-Lose: my way, regardless of impact. Lose-Win: your way, at the cost of my own position and needs. Lose-Lose: the destructive standoff where neither party gets what they need, and the work suffers. And Win-Win: the commitment to finding a better way and the only quadrant where genuine collaboration becomes possible.



Getting to Win-Win requires both assertiveness and consideration held simultaneously. It is not about being agreeable. It is about being honest enough to name what you need, curious enough to understand what others need, and committed enough to the shared outcome to find a genuinely better way forward.

For emerging leaders working inside competitive structures they did not design, that combination — holding your ground while staying genuinely open — is one of the most valuable things they can develop.

What this looks like in practice

One of the most powerful things we do in our emerging leader programmes is bring people from different functions together around a shared challenge their organisation is trying to solve. We use this as the basis for applying the tools to build trust and find a better way forward.

Initially, people tend to occupy their function — they represent their team's position, they protect their lane, they listen for threats as much as for ideas. However, as they form smaller cross-functional peer collaboration groups, which we call Peer Pods, something shifts. The challenge becomes more interesting than the competition. People start building on each other's thinking rather than defending against it.

Trust and psychological safety build, and the team build the skills to truly collaborate and get to better outcomes, faster, than any one area could get alone.

The commercial proof of this approach is compelling. A five-month programme at SEB investment bank — focused on psychological safety and perspective-taking applied to real business challenges, not classroom exercises — generated revenues 25% above yearly target. Across the bank, skills-based interventions linked to actual business problems produced over \$100 million in additional revenue.¹¹

“ If you've got positive intent, don't underestimate the insights that you can bring. If you come from a place of how can I help, what can I learn — rather than I'm the expert — people will want to work with you and people will want to connect.

Morgana Waters on how to build influence without positional authority

MINDSET SHIFT THREE

Opportunity Mindset: From Problem to Possibility

How to move from reactive firefighting to the kind of thinking that creates breakthroughs.

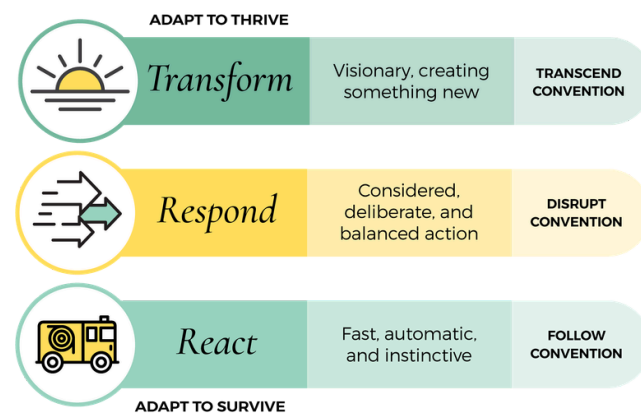
Understanding the dynamic

Most people are operating in constant run mode. The day is full before it starts. Meetings, deliverables, escalations, requests — the urgent crowds out everything else, and the horizon disappears entirely. This is not a time management problem. It is a thinking problem.

When we are stuck in reactive cycles, the thinking narrows. Creativity suffers. The kind of innovative, possibility-focused problem-solving that organisations say they want becomes genuinely difficult, not because people lack the capacity, but because the conditions leave no room for it. Problems get managed rather than solved. Workarounds become permanent. And the gap between where an organisation is and where it needs to be widens.

The reality is that disruption and setback are not going away. Emerging leaders will always face moments that demand an immediate response — a crisis, a shift in direction, an unexpected obstacle. Reacting quickly is sometimes exactly the right thing to do. But organisations that live permanently in that mode lose something critical: the ability to anticipate, to improve, and to transform before circumstances force them to. That is how organisations lose relevance, not suddenly, but gradually, through the accumulated cost of never quite getting ahead.

The Opportunity Ladder maps three distinct modes of thinking — React, Respond, and Transform — and helps us understand how easily people get anchored in the lower rungs under pressure.



At the React level, thinking is driven by immediate pressure. The focus is on putting out fires, managing the urgent, and getting through the day. There is nothing wrong with this mode — it is necessary, particularly in a crisis. The problem arises when people never leave it.

At the Respond level, there is more deliberation. Problems are addressed with some reflection. But the frame is still largely defined by the problem itself — what is wrong, what needs fixing, what is in the way.

At the Transform level, the question changes. Instead of 'how do we fix this?' it becomes 'what is possible?' The challenge is reframed as a springboard rather than a roadblock. This is where genuine innovation lives, and where most organisations are significantly under-investing.

Great leaders do not always operate at Transform level. But they move between the levels with awareness, and they do not get stuck. The emerging leaders who have the most impact are the ones who have learned to recognise when they are in React mode, and can deliberately shift to a higher level of thinking when the situation calls for it.

Here is what makes emerging leaders particularly important in this context. They are closest to the core business. Closest to the customer. Closest to the friction points, the workarounds, the places where things break down or could work better. That proximity is not a limitation of their seniority; it is a genuine advantage. The opportunities that would otherwise go unseen are often most visible to the people doing the work every day. The question is whether those leaders have the mindset and the permission to act on what they see.

“ It's not one or the other. Always look for the opportunity to improve the status quo, but always be keeping that eye on the horizon. If you're in a run role, that's a super important role — celebrate that role, polish and make things better. But don't not get interested about the future. Tomorrow's run work is today's strategy.

Morgana Waters on navigating the tension between BAU and transformation.

What this looks like in practice

An interesting dynamic we see in emerging leaders navigating transformation is a loss of energy, not from the transformation work itself, but from the sense that the work they are actually doing does not matter as much. When the organisation's attention is on the new and the strategic, the people responsible for keeping the core business running can start to feel like they are in second place. The exciting work is happening somewhere else. Their contribution feels invisible.

When people in run roles disengage from curiosity and stop connecting their work to the bigger picture, organisations lose exactly the perspective they need most: the ground-level insight that makes transformation actually land.

The shift starts with reframing the question. Instead of asking: *why is everyone focused on the strategy when I am stuck managing BAU?* The better question is: *what is the opportunity to make what I am responsible for better, and how does today's run work connect to tomorrow's strategy?* These are not rhetorical questions. They are genuine invitations to think differently about the value of what you do every day.

An abundance mindset in this context looks like staying genuinely curious about where the organisation is heading — going to the briefing, reading the strategy update, asking what the transformation means for your team's work — not because it is your job to implement it, but because understanding the direction makes everything you do more purposeful. It also looks like looking for the small improvements, the smarter processes, the better questions within your own world. That kind of contribution, consistently applied, is what gets noticed.

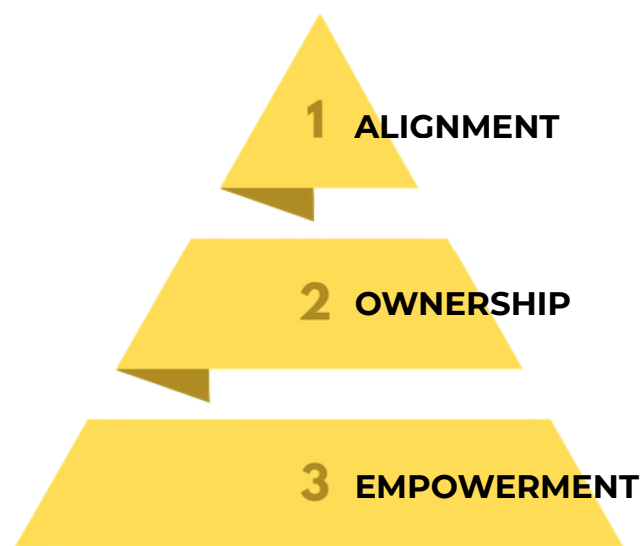
The emerging leaders who move from problem to possibility are not the ones who wait until the conditions improve. They are the ones who find the opportunity inside the constraint, and in doing so, make themselves indispensable to the very transformation they were worried was leaving them behind.

What this asks of organisations

Emerging leaders can do the internal work described in this paper. Many of them want to. But the conditions around them either support that work or undermine it, and the conditions are largely set by the people above them in the organisation.

This is not about blame. It is about accountability and creating the conditions for success. If we want a generation of leaders who can step into uncertainty with ownership, collaborate across boundaries, and approach complexity with curiosity, we need to look at what we are building around them, as well as what we are asking of them.

Three things matter most to accelerate success:



Alignment at the top

When senior leaders are genuinely aligned — clear on strategy, strong in their relationships, and modelling the cross-functional behaviours they want to see — emerging leaders have solid ground to build on. When they are not, they inherit the complexity and are asked to bridge gaps that haven't been closed above them.

The more inconsistency and uncertainty a business or strategy faces, the more critical alignment is. True alignment is built on organisational excellence — the more explicit and measurable factors, such as the conditions, expectations and mechanisms that align people with the work — and relational excellence — the more implicit factors, such as trust, unity, courage and human dynamics that unlock collective performance.

Ownership in the middle

Mindset and the ability to take ownership, even when things feel overwhelming and out of control, are buildable skills. Organisations that want to unlock their competitive advantage will actively develop these skills in their most promising leaders.

SLTs who give emerging leaders real problems to solve — across functions, with genuine accountability for outcomes — accelerate development faster than any programme.

Skills applied to actual business challenges build confidence, credibility, and organisational momentum in ways that classroom learning simply cannot replicate.

Empowerment in practice

Real empowerment goes beyond decision rights and development opportunities. It means equipping emerging leaders with the internal toolkit to thrive through stress, change, and uncertainty, not just survive it.

The leaders who sustain high performance over time are the ones who have built genuine self-awareness, strong internal anchors, and the practical skills to manage their own state, their relationships, and their thinking, even when the conditions around them are difficult. That capability, built intentionally, is what transforms a promising emerging leader into one who can carry others through uncertainty too.

“ Be open and curious. Don't underestimate the impact that you can have on the people around you. Don't undersell yourself, and don't let others undersell you. Believe that things are possible.

Morgana Waters on the one mindset shift that makes the biggest difference for emerging leaders.

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Unlocking your ultimate competitive advantage

The world is changing at a remarkable pace and so are the rules for success. In this environment, the organisations that thrive aren't just aligned; they're powered by people who take ownership and feel empowered to act. Alignment, ownership, and empowerment are the critical cornerstones of successful change; and underpin the people transformations that drive organisational transformation.

If you're ready to accelerate success in your organisation, get in touch at alison@alisonearl.com or +61412 189 616.

About Alison Earl

Alison Earl is a corporate advisor who accelerates successful change through leadership alignment and people transformation. She brings a unique blend of strategic vision, evidence-based frameworks, and behavioural change expertise to help organisations identify and address their most critical change issues, and empower leaders to build cultures that accelerate success.

We work with organisations committed to driving transformational change to accelerate success. Including those:

- Redefining ways of work
- Implementing a digital transformation or organisational restructure
- Navigating mergers and acquisitions
- Responding to external pressure to change through an industry reform or review process
- Successfully navigating changes in leadership.

"Our approach accelerates success through alignment, ownership, and empowerment. To create change that drives results, we work with leaders to identify critical areas holding your organisation back, and move teams into a collaborative performance zone."

Alison Earl

