

LEADING IN COMPLEX TIMES

Practical Leadership Insights from the Four Factor Model[©]:



Leaders today face environments where clear plans do not reliably produce clear results. Initiatives designed to improve performance can weaken relationships, while well-intended restructures often generate new problems and fixes that seem to work in the short term inevitably fail over time. This is not a failure of leadership effort. It is a mismatch between the oversimplified or linear management models we rely on and the non-linear or complex reality in which organisations actually operate.

The Four Factor Model^{©(1)} provides a practical way of working with this reality. It views leadership as the ability to:

1. See and share more complex perspectives
2. Clarify and pursue value based and pragmatic purpose,
3. Shape constructive processes that engage people when engagement is difficult
4. Notice and respond to both the weak and strong signals that show how the world around them is unfolding.

These capacities help leaders act wisely when certainty is impossible. What does it look like in practice? Canada's Prime minister, Mark Carney has demonstrated these leadership qualities in many of his government's actions since his election, summing up his more complex perspective and values-based purpose in his impressive address at Davos 2026.⁽²⁾

Whilst few of us operate on the world stage like Mark Carney, these 4 capacities hold true at every level of leadership in every organisation.

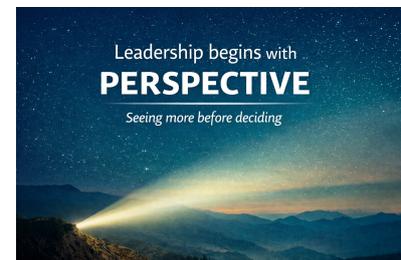
The Challenge Beneath Everyday Leadership

Most management approaches assume a simple sequence: define the problem → design the solution → implement the plan. Yet organisational life is rarely so cooperative! Multiple causes interact, effects are delayed, and people respond in ways that cannot be predicted. Leaders often discover that solving one issue creates several others.⁽³⁾

Traditional leadership coaching mirrors these assumptions by treating goals as obvious and pathways as stable. This can give comfort, but it narrows what leaders are able to notice and limits the range of possible responses.

Perspective Taking – Holding the Torch Higher

Leadership requires moving between immediate issues and details and the bigger context. Like a torch held close to the ground, intense focus reveals immediate tasks but hides the wider terrain. Raising the torch shows the broader system, though the image becomes less precise.



A sales director chasing quarterly targets may achieve short-term results while unknowingly damaging culture and client trust. Perspective taking is the discipline of remembering the higher view while acting in the moment.

Purpose – More Than Targets

Purpose is not simply a goal to be achieved or a number to be reached. It is the set of commitments that give our actions real meaning. Goals change; but values based commitments are a more enduring guide to pragmatic decision making when trade-offs appear. When purpose is reduced to metrics alone, organisations may succeed financially in the short term, while failing at human level, and undermining their true purpose and longer term future. Australia's "Robodebt" is a case in point.⁽⁴⁾



A public agency measured only on output and processing speed ignores the true needs and complexity of people they serve. When leaders reframe purpose around dignified service, processes can be redesigned so that both satisfaction and efficiency improve.

Positive Process – How Change Happens

How leaders engage people is critical. Meetings, conversations and decision processes shape the future as much as any strategy. Our processes must serve both Perspective and Purpose. This means they need to be value based, and pragmatic. In the complex organisational dynamics of human interaction they must also be respectful and participative. The combination of bigger perspective, clear purpose and pragmatic processes of participation often allows new possibilities to emerge that no individual could design alone. Positive process and psychological safety are not about creating comfortable harmony. They are about establishing conditions where challenge and support coexist, where people can engage openly

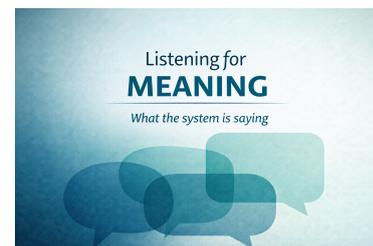


with tension, difference and disagreement without fear of humiliation or reprisal. Productive conflict is welcomed because it strengthens thinking rather than protecting appearances.^(5, 6)

An executive team confronting falling market share agreed to replace the usual update meeting with a “red team” dialogue. Two members were asked to argue against the preferred strategy while the rest listened without interruption. The discussion became uncomfortable, yet it surfaced assumptions about pricing and customer behaviour that had gone unchallenged for years. The final decision was stronger precisely because tension was engaged rather than avoided. This led to more complex perspectives and more effective action.

Proprioception – Language, Thought and the Noticing of Weak Signals

Proprioception in organisations is not only a technical awareness of trends or metrics. It is primarily a sensitivity to the movement of language and thought – how people are interpreting events, the stories they are telling, and the meanings that are gradually taking hold. Weak signals often appear first as small shifts in metaphor, tone, humour or what is no longer spoken about.^(7, 8)



To practise proprioception is to listen beneath content to the process of meaning-making: What assumptions are operating or becoming normal? Which questions have disappeared? What emotions are being legitimised or silenced? Leaders learn to treat these signals as early data about the future that is trying to emerge.

In a regional council the phrase “serving the community” slowly gave way to “managing customers.” Nothing in the formal strategy had changed, yet staff meetings became dominated by compliance language and risk avoidance. A director who noticed this shift invited teams to map the words most often used in emails and meetings. The exercise revealed a growing narrative of control rather than service. By re-introducing community stories into decision forums and redesigning performance reviews to include citizen impact, the council gradually restored a service orientation before morale and trust had fully deteriorated.

During a product launch a technology firm celebrated early sales, but developers began joking that the platform was “held together with hope.” The humour signalled anxiety about technical debt. Leaders who inquired into this language discovered design shortcuts that threatened reliability. Addressing the concerns early avoided a later and far more costly failure.

From Fixing People to Understanding Patterns

Effective leaders pause before acting to ask what perspectives are missing, what commitments are guiding them, how the process will shape relationships and what signals indicate the system is moving. Small experiments replace grand plans, and learning replaces certainty.

Conclusion

Organisations will not become less complex. Leadership therefore becomes the art of seeing more clearly, acting with deeper purpose, creating better conversations and listening to what is emerging. The Four Factor Model offers a compass for this journey, increasing the likelihood that decisions are wise rather than merely decisive.

Reflection Questions

- Where is our focus too narrow to see the real issue?
- Which commitments are guiding choices beneath the KPIs?
- Are our processes building capacity or only compliance?
- What weak signals have we been ignoring?

References

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