Leadership Development 2025

The Inconvenient Truth About What and How

Core Flow
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Leadership styles are collapsing into noise.

Behaviors and trust matter most.”

“AI and complexity are not trends.

but forces reshaping what it means to lead.”

“Development must integrate inner work, with outer practice.”

Leadership development stands at a crossroads. For decades, new styles have been introduced authentic, transformational, servant, agile. Each claim to be the answer. Yet recent research tells a different story. Eva and colleagues (2024) show that when tested side by side, most of these styles collapse into the same underlying factor. Followers respond less to labels than to trust, fairness, and the quality of relationships. Liden, Wang, and Wang (2025) add that leadership theory has been weakened by this proliferation and by its reliance on survey data. They call for a shift toward observable behavior profiles, attention to power and followership, and preparation for digital and AI contexts.

The environment in which leaders operate makes this shift urgent. Ribeiro and colleagues (2024) demonstrate that digitalization and diversity now dominate the research agenda. The CBS Leadership Report (2024) emphasizes the need for leaders who can orchestrate both speed and reflection, sustain a moral compass, and bridge diversities in a context of permanent turbulence. Korn Ferry highlights that legitimacy is no longer automatic: leaders must act as connectors, linking business outcomes to societal purpose.

Taken together, the research is clear. Leadership development must move away from chasing styles and towards cultivating behavioral repertoires. It must build trust as the multiplier of leadership effectiveness. It must prepare leaders not only to use power but to question how they use it, adopting a critical stance in action, on action, and in their deeper being and having. It must embrace AI and complexity as forces that reshape what it means to lead. It must bring followers into the process, training leaders, and teams to co-create leadership. And it must make inclusion more than tokenistic, embedding it as a discipline of listening, humility, and systemic change.

I write this from a particular standpoint. My orientation is critical realism: I see leadership as rooted in real structures and constraints but always mediated by human interpretation. I am inspired by phenomenology's attention to lived experience and meaning making. And I am educated in a humanistic tradition that values ethics, reflection, and the development of the whole person. These perspectives shape how I interpret the research and why I insist on the importance of being critical in action, on action, and in being and having.

Leadership development that ignores these shifts risks becoming an industry of slogans. Leadership development that embraces them can grow leaders capable of navigating turbulence, cultivating trust, and co-creating futures with humility, firmness, and deep attunement to themselves and their contexts. That, I believe, is the task before us.

IN SHORT, LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT MUST MOVE:

- From **styles** → to **repertoires**
- From **labels** → to **trust**
- From **using power** → to **questioning power**
- From **technical fixes** → to **AI and complexity fluency**
- From **heroic leaders** → to **leadership co-created with the led**
- From **symbolic gestures** → to **systemic inclusion**
- From **outer performance only** → to **inner work that sustains coherence**

Leadership development that ignores these shifts produces slogans. Development that embraces them grows leaders who can build trust, question themselves, and co-create the future in a turbulent world.

CORE FLOW. Nels Karsvang, 2025

WHO THIS PAPER IS FOR

This whitepaper is written for those shaping the future of leadership development:

- **CHROs and HR leaders** who design and commission leadership programs.
- **Executives and senior leaders** reflect on their own growth in turbulent contexts.
- **Leadership developers, coaches, and consultants** seeking evidence-based direction.
- **Researchers and educators** are looking to connect recent scholarships with practice.

Its purpose is not to prescribe another style, but to sharpen the focus on what truly matters for leadership today — and how development can be embedded in daily life.

1. WHY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDS A RETHINK

Leadership development is at risk of drifting further away from reality. For years we have multiplied models, producing new “styles” of leadership at a remarkable pace. Transformational, authentic, servant, inclusive, agile — the list grows longer each decade. But recent research makes the uncomfortable point that these styles often describe the same underlying dynamic. Eva et al. (2024) demonstrate that when tested empirically, most styles collapse into a single factor that reflects how followers perceive leaders’ behavior. In practice, this means organizations have spent years investing in style-based frameworks that do little more than repackage the basics of trust and relationships.

That critique alone would be enough reason to pause and rethink. But the world leaders now inhabit adds a sharper urgency. Ribeiro et al. (2024), in their mapping of more than fifty-six thousand leadership articles, show how digital transformation and diversity are no longer marginal themes but core research frontiers. Liden et al. (2025) argue that leadership must prepare for the integration of artificial intelligence into decision-making. This is not a minor adjustment. AI challenges the boundaries of human judgment, introducing both new possibilities for augmentation and new risks of bias, error, and dependency. Leaders today must learn to work with a form of intelligence that is faster and sometimes smarter than their own.

At the same time, the broader environment has become one of permanent turbulence. The CBS Leadership Report (2024) captures this by describing the task of leaders as orchestrating both speed and rhythm — moving quickly, when necessary, but also creating the pauses that allow reflection and adaptation. Leaders face crises that do not end, technological disruptions that outpace regulation, and societal demands for responsibility that cannot be met by technical fixes alone. Korn Ferry (2023) adds another layer, showing that legitimacy now requires leaders to act as connectors, bridging business imperatives with social purpose.

These shifts are profound because they change the very meaning of leadership. It is no longer enough to be efficient or inspiring. Leaders must learn to navigate complexity as a permanent condition, to make ethical choices in a landscape where power is scrutinized more closely than ever, and to engage with new intelligences that alter what it means to decide. That is why leadership development cannot continue with business as usual. It must become sharper, leaner, and more deeply connected to the realities of practice.

2. WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The six core sources reviewed here offer complementary, sometimes conflicting, insights into the state of leadership and leadership development. Taken together, they form a sharper picture of where the field stands — and where it perhaps should go.

Eva and colleagues (2024) deliver perhaps the most inconvenient truth. When leadership styles are tested side by side, the differences almost disappear. Twelve "styles" collapse into one underlying factor, largely reflecting how followers perceive a leader's behavior. For practice, this means organizations have invested heavily in labels — authentic, servant, transformational — but the return is minimal. Followers are not moved by the vocabulary. They are moved by whether they trust their leader, whether they feel treated fairly, and whether they sense genuine care.

Liden, Wang, and Wang (2025) take the critique further. They review over a century of research and show how the field has been weakened by construct proliferation and an overreliance on surveys. Their call is blunt: strip back the noise. Focus on concrete behaviors that can be observed. Take power seriously, not as an afterthought. And prepare leaders for digitalization and artificial intelligence, which are changing leadership in ways more profound than any new style ever could.

Yet it is important to acknowledge the role styles have played. For decades, they gave leaders a shared language, offered inspiration, and helped organizations move beyond purely transactional views of authority. Transformational and servant leadership, for instance, shifted attention to trust, care, and ethics as vital elements of leadership. These contributions should not be dismissed. What recent research suggests is not that styles were meaningless, but that their boundaries blur when studied closely. Their legacy provides a foundation we can now build on moving from labels toward observable behaviors, trust as the multiplier, and leadership practices that integrate inner and outer work in daily life.

If Eva and Liden invite us to simplify, the CBS Leadership Report (2024) invites us to expand. Drawing on practitioner voices, it identifies clusters of future capabilities: orchestrating speed and rhythm, enabling learning, bridging diversities, sustaining a moral compass. At first glance these clusters can look like a wish list. But at their core, they describe the impossible balancing act leaders face: to move fast and still create pauses, to act decisively and still remain ethical, to lead across difference and still hold coherence.

The breadth of this demand is also clear in Ribeiro and colleagues' (2024) bibliometric review. By mapping more than fifty-six thousand papers, they show that leadership research now clusters around five themes: digital transformation, diversity, leadership processes, leadership development, and performance. Bibliometrics reveal what scholars care about — and digitalization and diversity dominate. Yet the study also exposes gaps, especially around intersectionality and the role of followers. In other words: we know what we like to measure, but not always what matters most in practice.

Alongside these academic works, Korn Ferry brings the consultant's lens. In *The Evolution of Leadership* (2023), they describe leaders as "connectors-in-chief," expected to link business

results with legitimacy in the eyes of society. The tone is more accessible, the categories familiar — agility, authenticity, empathy. Yet the core message resonates: legitimacy is fragile, and leaders must actively earn it. In *The Three Hallmarks of Leadership Development* (2024), the focus shifts to method: programs succeed only when they are contextualized, integrated, and sustained. Without this, development evaporates once leaders return to daily work.

Together, these six sources confirm what many of us sense already. Leadership is changing shape, but development has not kept pace. We are left with a paradox: too many models, yet not enough clarity.

3. OVERLAPS, CONTRADICTIONS, AND ROBUST FINDINGS

Placed side by side, the six contributions reveal striking patterns. The first is convergence. Despite their different origins, they point in remarkably similar directions. Eva and Liden show us that behaviors matter more than styles. Korn Ferry emphasizes trust, empathy, and authenticity as essential. CBS insists on sustaining a moral compass and orchestrating rhythm. Ribeiro demonstrates that digitalization and diversity dominate the research agenda. And all agree: Leadership development must be embedded and sustained if it is to have impact.

But convergence should not lull us into comfort. Contradictions are just as present. Korn Ferry continues to describe leadership through style categories, even as Eva and Liden dismantle them. CBS builds broad clusters that risk becoming wish lists, while Eva demands simplification. Surveys remain the default evaluation tool in many programs, even though Eva warns us that they blur together leader behavior, follower bias, and context.

Yet through these tensions, certain findings stand out as robust. The redundancy of styles is real, confirmed by more than one source. Trust and the quality of relationships consistently mediate effectiveness across contexts and models. Abusive leadership emerges as uniquely destructive. And programs that remain disconnected from daily practice fade quickly, while those integrated into work routines endure.

This synthesis leaves us with a sharper mandate. Leadership development must strip away noise and hold fast to what matters most. It must prepare leaders not with slogans but with repertoires, not with inspiration alone but with habits that can be lived in the noise of daily life.

4. MISSING PERSPECTIVES: ADULT LEARNING AND FOLLOWERSHIP

The six sources provide a powerful lens, but they also leave gaps. Two stand out as critical: how leaders actually learn, and how leadership is co-created with followers.

Adult learning theory tells us that transfer from training to practice rarely happens automatically. Decades of research on workplace learning have shown that without deliberate support, most of what is learned in courses never makes it into behavior. Coaching meta-analyses confirm moderate positive effects but also reveal that more hours or more sessions do not necessarily improve outcomes. What matters is the mechanism: Retrieval practice, spaced repetition, a climate that supports application, and structured after-action reviews.

Here I build on Donald Schön, who described reflection *in* and *on* action. For leadership today, I believe we must extend this to being **critical in action and on action**, and to being **critical in being and having**. Critical in action means questioning assumptions and power dynamics in real time, while the decision is unfolding. Critical on action means structured reflection afterwards, asking what biases and attachments shaped the choice. Critical in being and having means examining the deeper layers of identity and values that guide how leaders use power. Leadership development should not stop at teaching skills; it should help leaders cultivate this critical stance as an ongoing discipline.

The second missing piece is followership. Leadership is often treated as a property of the individual leader, but research increasingly emphasizes that it is co-created. Followers grant and claim leadership, exercise voice, and shape whether a leader's efforts succeed or fail. Yet leadership development almost never addresses this. If we only train leaders, we reinforce a heroic model that no longer fits the realities of complex organizations.

What is needed is a dual approach. Leaders must be trained to invite and work with follower agency, and followers must be given the tools to exercise it responsibly: to dissent constructively, to share leadership in innovation and learning contexts, and to step back when clarity of authority is required. Leadership is not a solo act, and development should stop pretending it is.

5. WHAT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SHOULD FOCUS ON NOW

Recent research converges on a simple but powerful insight: leadership development should stop chasing the next style or personality label and instead concentrate on a small set of priorities that make a real difference in practice. Based on the synthesis of six major sources and enriched by perspectives from adult learning and followership, I propose six focus areas for leadership development today.

5.1 BEHAVIORAL REPERTOIRES

The proliferation of leadership styles has led to unnecessary complexity. Eva et al. (2024) show that most so-called styles overlap to the point where they collapse into a single general factor: positive relationships. Liden et al. (2025) similarly call for clearer behavioral profiles instead of multiplying constructs.

What leaders need is not another "new style," but a **repertoire of observable behaviors** they can draw on across contexts. This repertoire should cover three broad categories: **task-oriented behaviors** (setting direction, clarifying priorities, coordinating work), **relational behaviors** (listening, empowering, showing concern), and **adaptive behaviors** (navigating ambiguity, experimenting, adjusting). Equally important is the ability to avoid or stop **anti-leadership behaviors** — actions that harm trust, silence voices, or abuse power.

Leadership development programs should therefore help leaders **practice and flex across these repertoires**, not by memorizing checklists but by engaging in cycles of action, feedback, and reflection. The shift from style to repertoire helps simplify the field while making learning more actionable.

5.2 TRUST & RELATIONAL QUALITY

Across all the sources, trust emerges as the strongest mediator of leadership effectiveness. Leaders who are perceived as trustworthy create the conditions for collaboration, risk-taking, and performance. Without trust, even technically brilliant strategies fail.

Trust is not built in grand gestures but in daily interactions: keeping promises, following through, showing vulnerability, repairing after mistakes. Korn Ferry points to empathy and authenticity as future leadership essentials; the CBS report emphasizes sustaining a moral compass. These all tie back to the same foundation: leaders must cultivate trustworthy relationships.

Leadership development should therefore integrate **relational micro-practices** into its design: Role-playing difficult conversations, practicing repair rituals, and embedding feedback loops. The goal is not to turn leaders into "nice people," but into leaders whose **consistency, fairness, and openness** allow others to follow with confidence.

5.3 POWER & ETHICS LITERACY

Power is always present in leadership. It can be used constructively to enable others and safeguard purpose, or destructively to dominate and silence. Yet many development programs treat power and ethics as side topics rather than central to the craft of leadership.

I argue that the heart of power and ethics literacy is what I call **the critical stance**. Here I draw inspiration from Donald Schön's concepts of reflection *in* and *on* action — but I extend them into being **critical in action, on action, and in being/having.**

Being **critical in action** means noticing power and ethical implications in the moment, while decisions are being made, and adjusting accordingly. It is the real-time discipline of questioning: *Am I silencing someone? Am I protecting what matters?*
Being **critical on action** means stepping back after the fact to reflect on how power was exercised: what biases were at play, what assumptions guided me, what could I have done differently?
Being **critical in being/having** means going deeper, examining what we hold onto — our values, identities, attachments — and how they shape our use of power. It is about asking: *What kind of leader am I becoming, and what is the cost of what I choose to hold or to let go?*

Embedding this critical stance into leadership development ensures leaders do not just learn techniques but cultivate a discipline of **ethical awareness and integrity**. It moves development from skills to conscience, from tools to character.

5.4 AI/DIGITAL/COMPLEXITY FLUENCY

The rise of AI and digital transformation is not simply another trend; it is reshaping the very conditions of leadership. Ribeiro et al. (2024) document how digitalization has become one of the dominant themes in leadership research. Korn Ferry likewise emphasizes agility and connectedness as essential.

Leaders must therefore develop fluency in navigating **complex, adaptive systems** — seeing patterns, anticipating unintended consequences, and engaging with AI as both a tool and a counterpart. This is not about making every leader a technical expert but about building the **judgment to work with new forms of intelligence**, the humility to question their own assumptions, and the ability to foster organizational learning in rapidly shifting environments.

Development programs should therefore include **scenarios, simulations, and reflective practices** around AI and complexity. Leaders should experiment with decision augmentation, practice bias-checking when using AI outputs, and learn to balance speed with reflection. In a world where complexity is the norm, leadership development must train not for certainty but for adaptability.

5.5 FOLLOWER AGENCY & SHARED LEADERSHIP

Leadership is not a solo act. Recent research on followership highlights that leadership is co-created: followers grant or claim leadership roles, exercise voice, and shape the space in which leaders operate. Yet development programs often focus solely on the leader, ignoring the relational dynamics that make leadership possible.

To correct this, leadership development must explicitly train leaders to **invite and work with follower agency**. This means developing routines that legitimize dissent, encourage diverse perspectives, and share decision-making in appropriate contexts. It also means preparing teams to exercise these roles: practicing voice, feedback, and taking leadership in bounded ways.

Shared leadership is not always the right solution — in crisis or time-critical situations, clarity of decision rights matters. But in innovation, learning, and changing contexts, shared leadership creates resilience and adaptability. Development should therefore teach leaders how to **balance authority with shared responsibility**.

5.6 INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP BEYOND GENDER

Leadership development must move beyond narrow conceptions of diversity. Ribeiro et al. (2024) show that gender remains over-represented in leadership research, while intersectionality the interplay of race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions is underexplored. Yet in practice, leaders must navigate increasingly diverse teams, organizations, and stakeholder environments.

Inclusive leadership is not about symbolic gestures. It is about building **systems and habits** that ensure diverse voices are heard and valued, and that psychological safety extends across lines of difference. It is also about developing the courage to address inequities and the humility to recognize blind spots.

Development programs must therefore go further than “gender awareness” sessions. They should integrate **intersectional awareness, bias interruption practices, and cross-cultural competence**. Inclusion is not an add-on; it is a foundation for trust, adaptability, and legitimacy.

5.7 INNER WORK: THE INVISIBLE FOUNDATION OF LEADERSHIP

Much of leadership development focuses on what can be observed: behaviors, competencies, measurable outcomes. But beneath these visible layers lies the inner work. The ongoing process of self-examination, reflection, and meaning-making that sustains leaders when external

techniques fail. Without this foundation, repertoires risk becoming mechanical. Without repertoires, inner work risks becoming self-indulgent.

Research consistently shows that derailment in leadership often stems not from a lack of technical skill but from inner fault lines: Unmanaged emotions, blind spots in values, or unresolved identity struggles. Studies on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998; Cherniss, 2010), on authenticity and identity work (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012), and on leader derailment (McCall & Lombardo, 1983) all point in the same direction. Leaders must be able to work with themselves as much as they work with others.

Inner work is not therapy disguised as leadership. It is a developmental practice rooted in critical reflection. Building on Schön's reflection IN and ON action, I argue that leaders today must also cultivate the ability to be critical IN BEING AND HAVING. This means questioning what we cling to, the attachments to identity, role, or recognition, and asking how those attachments shape the way we use power and relate to others.

In practice, inner work can take many forms: journaling after difficult decisions, dialogue with peers or coaches, embodied practices that reconnect leaders to their physical presence, or deliberate silence and retreat to make space for meaning making. What matters is not the format but the discipline. Leaders who do not pause to interrogate themselves risk reproducing unexamined patterns. Leaders who do pause create the possibility of transformation.

Leadership development should therefore not treat inner work as a luxury, but as a necessity. Programs that integrate reflective practice, values exploration, and identity work create leaders who are not only competent but coherent. In a turbulent world, coherence is not the absence of doubt but the capacity to hold it — with humility, curiosity, and resolve.

The Dimensions of Inner Work

Emotional literacy and regulation. Leaders must develop sophisticated understanding of their own emotional patterns and those of others. This is not about suppressing or managing emotions, but about recognizing how emotions inform judgment, influence relationships, and shape decision-making. It includes the capacity for emotional regulation under pressure—not as control, but as conscious choice about how to respond when activated by conflict, uncertainty, or criticism.

Mental model awareness and flexibility. Every leader operates from assumptions about how organizations work, what motivates people, and how change happens. These mental models are often unconscious but powerfully shape what leaders notice, how they interpret situations, and what solutions they consider. Inner work involves surfacing these assumptions, questioning their validity, and developing cognitive flexibility to see situations from multiple perspectives.

Somatic awareness and physical well-being. Leadership is embodied work. Stress, fatigue, and physical tension influence presence, decision quality, and relational capacity in ways that purely cognitive approaches to development often ignore. Leaders need practices that support physical well-being, body awareness, and the cultivation of presence that comes from integration of mind and body.

Values clarification and purpose alignment. Behavioral practices that are disconnected from authentic values become inauthentic performance. Leaders need ongoing work to clarify what they stand for, what they are trying to create through their leadership, and how their daily actions align with their deeper sense of purpose. This is not navel-gazing but practical work, values-aligned behavior is more sustainable and more compelling to others.

Meaning-making and spiritual development. Leadership involves making sense of complexity, uncertainty, and sometimes tragedy. Leaders need frameworks for meaning-making that help them navigate ambiguity, maintain hope in difficult circumstances, and connect their work to something larger than immediate organizational goals. This may be religious, philosophical, or secular, but it addresses the fundamental human need for purpose and transcendence.

Integration with Behavioral Practice

Inner work is not separate from behavioral development it is what makes behavioral development authentic and sustainable. The critical stance advocated in this whitepaper: Being critical in action, on action, and in being and having requires the self-awareness that comes from inner work. Trust-building behaviors are more effective when they emerge from genuine care rather than technique. Power literacy requires ongoing examination of one's relationship with authority and control. AI and complexity fluency demand the emotional regulation to work with uncertainty without being overwhelmed by it.

The integration happens through practices that connect inner awareness with outer action:

Reflective practice. Regular structured reflection on leadership experiences, examining not just what happened but what emotions, assumptions, and values influenced choices. This might take the form of journaling, coaching conversations, or contemplative practices that create space for deeper inquiry.

Mindfulness and presence cultivation. Practices that develop the capacity to be fully present in leadership moments rather than reactive or distracted. This includes formal meditation practice but also micro-practices throughout the workday. Pausing before responding, listening with full attention, noticing physical tension or emotional activation.

Values-based decision-making protocols. Systematic approaches to connecting choices with values, asking not just "What is the most effective decision?" but "What decision best reflects what I stand for?" and "How do I want to be remembered for how I handled this situation?"

Well-being as leadership capacity. Treating personal well-being not as self-indulgence but as leadership responsibility. Leaders who are chronically stressed, exhausted, or disconnected from sources of renewal cannot sustain the presence, creativity, and emotional availability that effective leadership requires.

Community and support systems. Recognition that inner work cannot be done in isolation. Leaders need relationships with coaches, mentors, peers, friends, family that support ongoing growth, provide perspective, and offer accountability for both behavioral practices and inner development.

Development Approaches That Honor the Whole Person

Leadership development programs that address inner work alongside behavioral skill-building require different design principles:

Create contemplative space. Development experiences should include time for reflection, introspection, and meaning-making, not just skill practice and information transfer. This might involve silent reflection time, guided self-inquiry exercises, or retreats that allow deeper exploration of purpose and values.

Address sustainability explicitly. Rather than treating burnout and stress as personal problems, development should address them as leadership effectiveness issues. How do leaders sustain energy and presence over time? What practices support renewal? How do organizational cultures either support or undermine leader well-being?

Integrate multiple ways of knowing. Not all learning happens through cognitive analysis. Include experiential learning, creative expression, storytelling, and embodied practices that engage different aspects of human intelligence and self-awareness.

Honor individual differences. Inner work is deeply personal. Development approaches should offer multiple pathways for self-exploration rather than prescriptive formulas. Some leaders connect with mindfulness practices, others with values clarification exercises, others with creative or spiritual practices.

Connect personal and professional development. Rather than maintaining artificial boundaries between personal growth and leadership skill-building, recognize that they are interconnected. Leaders bring their whole selves to work, and leadership challenges often trigger personal growth opportunities.

The Integration Challenge

The challenge for leadership development is to hold both behavioral specificity and inner development without collapsing into either pure technique or pure self-exploration. This requires what developmental psychologists call "both/and" thinking—the capacity to embrace apparently contradictory truths simultaneously.

Leaders need specific, observable behaviors they can practice and refine. They also need ongoing inner work that ensures those behaviors emerge from authentic intention rather than manipulation or performance. They need practical tools for immediate application. They also need contemplative practices that support long-term growth and resilience.

The framework advocated in this whitepaper with its emphasis on behavioral repertoires, trust-building, critical reflection, complexity navigation, shared leadership, and inclusion provides structure for development. But that structure must be animated by attention to the human being who will embody these practices. Without inner work, the framework becomes mechanical. Without behavioral focus, inner work becomes self-indulgent.

True leadership development integrates both:

- Creating leaders who are simultaneously more effective and more fully human.
- Capable of sophisticated action in service of purposes larger than themselves, grounded in self-awareness, and sustained by practices that nourish their capacity to serve others over time.

This is the deeper promise of moving beyond style proliferation. When leadership development addresses the whole person, behavior and values, action and reflection, effectiveness and well-being create not simply better leaders but more integrated human beings capable of creating the kinds of organizations and communities our world desperately needs.

6. HOW TO MAKE IT STICK IN DAILY LIFE

If there is one thing research and practice agree on, it is this: leadership development rarely fails because of what happens in the classroom. It fails because what happens afterwards is too weak to hold. Leaders return to overflowing inboxes, competing priorities, and old habits that quickly overpower new insights. Without deliberate structures for transfer, development evaporates.

Korn Ferry calls this out in their notion of the three hallmarks of leadership development: programs must be contextualized, integrated, and sustained. Adult learning theory adds the detail. Leaders retain and apply more when they are asked to retrieve knowledge, not just review it. They grow stronger when learning is spaced over time rather than delivered in one burst. They change when their environment signals that new behaviors are expected, supported, and reinforced. Coaching meta-analyses confirm that development gains are real, but also that they are fragile unless anchored in practice.

Making leadership development stick therefore requires weaving it into the fabric of daily work. Retrieval can be built into team rituals: a weekly huddle where leaders recall one insight from the past month and describe how they applied it. Spacing can be created by designing programs not as events but as cycles, where small practices are tested, reviewed, and adapted. Transfer climate can be shaped through explicit agreements between leaders and their own managers — contracts that specify what will be practiced, observed, and discussed.

The practices themselves can be remarkably simple. Leaders who introduce a “dissent round” at the end of meetings normalize challenge and broaden the range of perspectives considered. Leaders who create “repair rituals” make it easier to restore trust after a misstep, rather than letting small breaches fester. In digital contexts, leaders who keep decision logs when using AI not only reduce bias but create artifacts that become learning tools for themselves and their teams. These are not grand gestures but small habits that accumulate into cultural change.

Measurement, too, must be rethought. Most organizations still evaluate leadership development through surveys of satisfaction or self-reported confidence. Eva et al. (2024) warn us that such measures are clouded by bias, affect, and context. Instead, evaluation should be multi-method. Look at behavioral traces. How meeting dynamics change, how decisions are documented, how much talk-time is distributed across levels. Review artifacts such as decision logs, after-action reviews, or project notes to see whether reflective practice is taking root.

In the end, making leadership development stick is less about new content and more about new rhythms. What matters is not what leaders can recite in a workshop, but what they can sustain in the noise of daily life. Development is proven in the routines, the rituals, and the quiet adjustments that hold long after the slides are gone.

7. BRINGING THE FRAMEWORK TO LIFE: INSPIRATION FOR ACTION

The six themes outlined in Section 5 are not abstract ideals; they are practical pathways to leadership that works. Through my practice with leaders across industries, I've seen what becomes possible when individuals and organizations embrace these shifts. What follows are inspiring examples of how leaders and leadership developers can bring each theme to life, starting today.

Behavioral Repertoires: The Liberation of Moving Beyond Labels

What's Possible: Imagine leaders who respond fluidly to what's actually happening rather than trying to maintain a consistent "leadership brand." Picture development programs that teach specific, observable skills rather than personality insights.

Start Here - For Leaders:

- **The Three-Behavior Challenge**: Choose three specific behaviors you want to strengthen this month. Not "be more authentic," but "ask one genuine question before sharing my perspective in team meetings." Practice daily. Notice what changes.
- **The Situational Toolkit**: Build your behavioral repertoire like a craftsperson builds their toolbox. In one-on-ones, practice deep listening behaviors. In crisis moments, practice clear communication behaviors. In innovation sessions, practice generative questioning behaviors. Different situations, different tools.
- **The Mirror Practice**: Record yourself in meetings (with permission) or ask a trusted colleague to observe. What behaviors do you actually exhibit versus what you think you exhibit? The gap is your development opportunity.

Start Here - For Leadership Developers:

- **Behavior-First Design**: Replace personality assessments with behavioral observation exercises. Instead of "What's your leadership style?" ask "What specific behaviors do effective leaders in your context use most often?"
- **The Practice Lab**: Create safe spaces where leaders can experiment with new behaviors. Role-play difficult conversations. Practice facilitation techniques. Rehearse crucial moments before they happen for real.
- **Video Analysis**: Use brief video clips of excellent leadership moments (with permission). Analyze not the leader's personality, but their specific behaviors. What exactly did they do that made the interaction effective?

Overcoming the Typical Hurdle: *"This feels too mechanical I want to be authentic, not just perform behaviors."*

The hurdle here is the false choice between authenticity and behavioral skill. Authenticity isn't about being spontaneous or unfiltered it's about aligning your actions with your values. Professional athletes don't become less authentic when they practice specific techniques; they become more capable of expressing their athletic identity. Similarly, practicing specific leadership behaviors doesn't make you mechanical, it gives you more tools to express your authentic leadership intentions. Start by choosing behaviors that align with the leader you want to be, not behaviors that feel foreign to your values. Authenticity emerges through conscious choice, not unconscious habit.

Trust & Relational Quality: The Multiplier Effect

What's Possible: Imagine organizations where psychological safety isn't a buzzword but a lived reality. Picture leaders who repair relationships as skillfully as they repair processes. Envision teams that take intelligent risks because they trust their leader's response to both success and failure.

Start Here - For Leaders:

- **The Daily Trust Deposit**: Make one small trust-building action every day. Follow through on tiny commitments. Acknowledge someone's contribution publicly. Admit when you don't know something. Trust grows in small moments, not grand gestures.
- **The Repair Ritual**: When you mess up (and you will), develop a consistent approach: acknowledge what happened, take responsibility without over-explaining, ask what you can do to rebuild trust, then follow through. Make repair as routine as problem-solving.
- **The Vulnerability Practice**: Share appropriate struggles with your team. Not personal drama, but professional challenges: "I'm uncertain about this decision and here's why." "I made an assumption that was wrong." "I need your help thinking through this problem." Vulnerability builds connection when it's purposeful and boundaried.

Start Here - For Leadership Developers:

- **Trust Simulation**: Create realistic scenarios where leaders must rebuild trust after it's been damaged. Practice the language and behaviors of repair. Most leaders know trust matters but have never practiced how to restore it.
- **Relationship Mapping**: Help leaders identify the quality of their key relationships and create specific action plans for strengthening them. Not networking, but genuine relationship investment.
- **The Trust Audit**: Teach leaders to regularly assess their trustworthiness across the classic dimensions: competence, benevolence, integrity. Where are their gaps? What specific actions would address them?

Overcoming the Typical Hurdle: *"I don't have time for all this relationship stuff; we have business results to deliver."*

This hurdle reflects a false trade-off between relationships and results. High-trust teams consistently outperform low-trust teams on efficiency, innovation, and quality metrics because they waste less time on politics, experience less turnover, and take smarter risks. The key is to integrate trust-building into business activities rather than adding it as extra work. Acknowledge contributions during regular meetings rather than in separate sessions. Practice repair during project debriefs rather than waiting for annual reviews. Share appropriate vulnerabilities while discussing business challenges rather than in artificial team-building exercises. Trust-building accelerates business results when it's embedded in business processes.

Power & Ethics Literacy: The Critical Stance as Daily Practice

What's Possible: Imagine leaders who use power consciously rather than unconsciously. Picture decision-making processes that routinely examine assumptions and blind spots. Envision organizations where ethical reflection is as systematic as financial analysis.

Start Here - For Leaders:

- **The Power Pause**: Before significant decisions, ask three questions: "Who is affected by this decision who isn't in the room?" "What am I assuming that I should question?" "How might someone with less power than me experience this choice?" This isn't endless deliberation, it's conscious decision-making.
- **The Weekly Ethics Check**: Spend fifteen minutes each week reviewing your decisions through an ethical lens. What values did you honor or compromise? Where did you use power well or poorly? What patterns do you notice? Critical reflection becomes habit through routine practice.
- **The Assumption Challenge**: Regularly ask your team: "What are we assuming about this situation that might not be true?" Create culture where questioning assumptions is valued, not seen as undermining confidence.

Start Here - For Leadership Developers:

- **Power Mapping Exercises**: Help leaders visualize the power dynamics in their organizations. Who has voice? Who doesn't? How do resources flow? Where are decisions really made? Awareness precedes change.
- **Ethical Dilemma Labs**: Use real organizational dilemmas (anonymized) to practice ethical reasoning. Not theoretical philosophy, but practical ethics: competing goods, resource constraints, stakeholder tensions.
- **The Critical Friend Process**: Pair leaders with colleagues who are explicitly tasked with questioning their assumptions and blind spots. Institutionalize constructive challenge.

Overcoming the Typical Hurdle: *"This critical reflection sounds like endless second guessing—leaders need to be decisive."*

The hurdle is confusing speed with thoughtlessness. Critical reflection improves decision quality and speed over time because you make fewer decisions you must reverse later. The key is to build reflection into your decision-making process, not after it. Spend two minutes asking the power questions before you decide, not two hours after you realize you made the wrong choice. Use your team meetings to surface assumptions together rather than discovering them in crisis moments. Think of critical reflection as decision insurance a small investment up front that prevents larger problems later. Decisive leaders make better decisions when they pause briefly to examine their assumptions before committing to action.

AI/Digital/Complexity Fluency: Dancing with Uncertainty

What's Possible: Imagine leaders who thrive in ambiguity rather than being paralyzed by it. Picture decision-making that combines human wisdom with algorithmic insight intelligently. Envision organizations that adapt fluidly to technological change because their leaders model curiosity rather than fear.

Start Here - For Leaders:

- **The Learning Experiment Mindset**: Stop trying to predict the future perfectly. Instead, design small experiments that can teach you what you need to know. Test assumptions quickly and cheaply. Fail fast and learn faster.
- **AI Partnership Practice**: If you use AI tools, develop habits of intelligent collaboration. Question the assumptions underlying AI recommendations. Use AI to surface patterns you might miss but apply human judgment to interpret their significance. Document your decision-making process so you can learn from both successes and failures.
- **The Complexity Navigator**: When facing complex challenges, resist the urge to simplify prematurely. Instead, ask: "What are the key relationships and feedback loops in this system?" "Where might small changes have large effects?" "What would happen if we did nothing?" Complexity fluency grows through practice with complex situations.

Start Here - For Leadership Developers:

- **Scenario Planning Workshops**: Create realistic scenarios involving technological disruption, regulatory changes, or market shifts. Practice decision-making under uncertainty. Help leaders develop comfort with "good enough" decisions that can be adapted as new information emerges.
- **AI Ethics Training**: Not just how to use AI tools, but how to use them wisely. What are the bias risks? How do you maintain human accountability? When should you override algorithmic recommendations?
- **Systems Thinking Practice**: Use organizational challenges to practice systems analysis. Map relationships, identify feedback loops, find leverage points. Systems thinking is a learnable skill, not an innate talent.

Overcoming the Typical Hurdle: *"I'm not technical enough to work with AI and digital tools. I should leave that to the experts."*

This hurdle assumes you need deep technical knowledge to exercise leadership judgment about technology. You don't need to understand machine learning algorithms to ask good questions about AI recommendations: "What data was this based on?" "What assumptions were built into this model?" "How confident should we be in this prediction?" "What would we need to see to change our minds?" Your role isn't to become a data scientist it's to maintain human accountability for decisions that affect people. Focus on developing judgment about when to trust, question, or override technological inputs. Technical experts need leaders who ask intelligent questions, not leaders who pretend to be technical experts themselves.

Follower Agency & Shared Leadership: Co-Creating Leadership

What's Possible: Imagine organizations where leadership flows to wherever expertise and energy intersect. Picture teams that self-organize around challenges while maintaining accountability. Envision followers who take initiative confidently because they understand their sphere of authority and responsibility.

Start Here - For Leaders:

- The Rotation Practice: Identify decisions or responsibilities you don't need to own. Rotate facilitation of team meetings. Let subject matter experts lead discussions in their areas. Give project leadership to people who need developmental challenges. Leadership shared intelligently multiplies organizational capability.
- The Voice Invitation: Explicitly invite perspectives, especially from people who haven't spoken or who might disagree. "Sarah, you've been quiet—what are you thinking?" "Who sees this differently than I do?" "What are we missing?" Make seeking diverse input a visible leadership behavior.
- The Authority Clarification: Be explicit about decision rights. "I'm looking for input on this decision, and here's how I'll use what I hear." "This is a decision we're making together." "I need you to decide this within these parameters." Clarity about authority enables appropriate followership.

Start Here - For Leadership Developers:

- Followership Skills Training: Teach people how to exercise voice constructively, how to dissent respectfully, how to support decisions they influenced but didn't make. Followership is a skill set, not just compliance.
- Shared Leadership Simulations: Create exercises where leadership must rotate based on changing circumstances. Help teams practice the handoffs and communications that make shared leadership effective.
- The Authority Matrix: Help teams clarify decision rights across different types of choices. Who decides? Who must be consulted? Who should be informed? Shared leadership works better with clear boundaries.

Overcoming the Typical Hurdle: *"If I share leadership, people will think I'm weak or indecisive, leaders are supposed to be in charge."*

This hurdle confuses control with leadership. Strong leaders create strong teams; weak leaders need weak teams to feel powerful. Sharing leadership appropriately actually demonstrates confidence. You're secure enough in your authority to let others exercise leadership in their areas of strength. The key is to be intentional about when and how you share leadership. You're not abdicating responsibility; you're distributing it strategically. Start small: let someone else facilitate one meeting, lead one project, make one category of decisions. Notice how the team's capacity grows when leadership isn't bottlenecked through you. Your authority comes from your ability to create conditions for others' success, not from making every decision yourself.

Inclusive Leadership Beyond Gender: Systemic Change Through Daily Practice

What's Possible: Imagine organizations where diverse perspectives don't just get heard they actually influence decisions. Picture leadership that actively interrupts patterns of exclusion rather than hoping inclusion will happen naturally. Envision cultures where difference is leveraged as competitive advantage rather than managed as compliance requirement.

Start Here - For Leaders:

- The Pattern Interrupt: Notice patterns in your meetings and decisions. Who speaks first and most? Whose ideas get built upon? Who gets interrupted? When you see exclusionary patterns, interrupt them in real time: "Hold on, let's hear from Maria before we move on." "I want to come back to the point David was making." Pattern interruption creates inclusion.
- The Perspective Audit: Before major decisions, explicitly ask: "Whose perspective are we missing?" "How would someone with different life experience see this?" "What would our critics say about this choice?" Actively seek out views that differ from your own.
- The Inclusion Innovation: Don't just avoid excluding people, actively design for inclusion. Change meeting formats to ensure different communication styles are accommodated. Rotate leadership opportunities. Create multiple pathways for input and feedback. Design inclusion doesn’t hope for it.

Start Here - For Leadership Developers:

- **Bias Interruption Training**: Teach leaders to recognize and interrupt bias in real time, their own and others'. Not just awareness, but intervention skills. How do you respectfully challenge a biased comment? How do you create space for marginalized voices?
- **Inclusive Process Design**: Help leaders redesign their standard processes (meetings, hiring, promotion, project selection) with inclusion as a design criterion. What would decision-making look like if it actively leveraged diverse perspectives?
- **The Systemic View**: Train leaders to see inclusion as systemic change, not individual accommodation. How do organizational structures, policies, and cultures create patterns of inclusion or exclusion? What would need to change systemically?

Overcoming the Typical Hurdle: *"I want to be inclusive, but I don't want to walk on eggshells or worry about saying the wrong thing all the time."*

This hurdle treats inclusion as a minefield rather than a skill. The fear of "saying the wrong thing" often leads to saying nothing meaningful at all, which actually undermines inclusion. Instead of trying to be perfect, focus on being genuinely curious and responsive. When you make a mistake (and you will), practice repair: acknowledge it, learn from it, do better next time. Most people appreciate authentic effort over performative perfection. Start with simple practices: notice who hasn't spoken in meetings and explicitly invite their perspective. When someone shares an experience different from yours, ask genuine questions to understand better rather than immediately relating it to your own experience. Inclusion is built through consistent small actions, not through avoiding all possible missteps.

Inner Work: Building Coherence from Within

What's Possible:
Imagine leaders who carry themselves with coherence even in turbulence. Leaders who can pause under pressure, question their own being, and act with clarity rooted in values rather than impulse. Picture organizations where inner work is not seen as indulgent but as essential fuel for sustainable leadership. Envision teams led by people whose presence builds trust because they have done the work of trusting themselves.

Start Here – For Leaders:

- **The Reflection Habit:** At the end of each week, ask yourself three questions: What did I hold onto too tightly? What values guided my decisions? Where did I lose coherence and what can I learn from it?
- **Embodied Awareness:** Pay attention to your body in leadership moments. Notice tension in conflict, your breath in decision-making, your energy in dialogue. Use simple practices: Breathing, grounding, walking to reset presence.
- **Purpose Check:** Before major decisions, ask: Does this align with the leader I want to be? What story about myself will this choice reinforce?

Start Here – For Leadership Developers:

- **Built-in Reflection:** Integrate structured reflection moments into every program. Ten minutes of journaling, silent pause before debriefs, or guided values exercises can anchor learning.
- **Identity Work:** Design exercises that surface how leaders' self-concepts and attachments shape their behavior — for example, exploring the difference between "role identity" and "purpose identity."
- **Well-being as Capacity:** Treat well-being as a leadership resource. Include practices for renewal, resilience, and presence in development designs.

Overcoming the Typical Hurdle:

"I don't have time for inner work my role is about results."
This mindset treats inner work as separate from leadership rather than the ground it grows from. In reality, unexamined emotions, blind spots, and fatigue are among the biggest drains on performance. Inner work does not require hours of retreat it can be woven into daily practice through micro-reflections, intentional pauses, and aligning actions with values. Leaders who cultivate inner coherence are not less focused on results; they are more capable of sustaining results over time.

The Ripple Effect: What Becomes Possible

When leaders and organizations embrace these seven themes, the impact ripples far beyond individual development. Teams become more resilient because they can share and rotate leadership based on needs. Organizations grow more adaptive because they are not dependent on heroic individuals but on living systems of trust, judgment, and inclusion. Communities benefit because leadership becomes more ethical and participatory. And society gains because leaders learn to navigate complexity, question their use of power, and ground their actions in values.

This is not utopian thinking. It is already visible in practice: leaders who integrate reflection into their routines, who co-create with their teams, who hold both speed and pause, who weave inclusion into daily interactions. The dimensions work because it resonates with how leadership actually unfolds in complex human systems through relationships, through behavior, through conscious choice, and through the inner work that sustains coherence when turbulence grows.

The invitation is simple: Choose one theme that resonates. Pick a practice you can try this week. Notice what shifts. Then add another. Leadership development happens less through dramatic transformation than through the steady accumulation of small, consistent acts of practice.

The leaders and organizations that will thrive in the coming decades are not those who believe they have it all figured out, but those who are willing to experiment, learn, and adapt. The seven themes provide a direction. Practice, inner and outer, is yours to create.

What will you begin with?

8. CRITICAL REFLECTION

No Whitepaper is complete without examining its own foundations. The six sources reviewed here are strong and influential, but each comes with limits that must be acknowledged. And this whitepaper, while aiming to synthesize and extend their insights, is also shaped by choices, perspectives, and constraints that deserve scrutiny.

8.1 STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE SOURCES

Eva et al. (2024, Journal of Management Studies).
Their strength lies in cutting through decades of style proliferation with rigorous comparative analysis. By showing that twelve leadership styles collapse into a general factor, they expose redundancy at the heart of leadership studies. The weakness is their reliance on follower surveys. Perceptions of leadership are crucial, but they are not objective. Followers' ratings can be shaped as much by mood, context, or bias as by actual leader behavior. The study strips away theoretical noise but leaves us wanting more about what leaders tangibly *do*.

Liden, Wang, and Wang (2025, Journal of Business Research).
This sweeping review offers clarity in a field drowning in constructs. Its insistence on behavior profiles, power, followership, and digital leadership is persuasive and timely. Yet the review is critical without being equally generative. It dismantles weak theory but stops short of building a new integrative model. It also reflects a largely Western research tradition, which risks overlooking cultural variation in how leadership is practiced and experienced.

CBS Leadership Report (2024).
The report's strength is its future orientation. It captures practitioner concerns, identifying leadership clusters that reflect the reality of leading in turbulent times: speed and rhythm, moral compass, diversity. The weakness lies in its breadth. The clusters are compelling, but without sharper definition they risk becoming another "wish list" of qualities. The report is aspirational but not always actionable.

Ribeiro et al. (2024, Management Research Quarterly).
This bibliometric study's sheer scale of more than fifty-six thousand papers mapped provides a unique overview of the field. Its identification of major themes helps us see what leadership research values today. The limitation is that bibliometrics track volume, not impact. Trends in publication do not necessarily translate into effective leadership practice. Abstracts tell us what is being studied, but not whether the findings change how leaders lead.

Korn Ferry – Leadership Is Evolving.
The report's strength is accessibility. It translates complex shifts into clear, digestible language for organizations: leaders as connectors, agile and authentic. But its weakness is its dependence on style-oriented descriptors, the very categories Eva and Liden critique as

redundant. The evidence base is also opaque, as is often the case with consultancy reports, which reduces scholarly rigor.

Korn Ferry – The Three Hallmarks of Leadership Development.
Here the strength lies in design principles: contextualized, integrated, sustained. These hallmarks align strongly with adult learning theory and practical transfer research. The limitation is that the advice is generic. Few would argue against contextualization or integration, but the challenge is how to operationalize them in complex organizations. The report identifies what is necessary but not always how to do it.

9. REFLECTING ON THIS WHITEPAPER

This whitepaper builds on recent sources, but it is not without its own limitations. The synthesis emphasizes current contributions, which gives it freshness but risks overlooking longer historical arcs in leadership research. It is also grounded mainly in Western literature, which may not capture leadership practices in non-Western contexts where authority, power, and followership are experienced differently.

The arguments are sharpened intentionally. They cut through complexity to make practical points about behaviors, trust, power, and AI. In this sharpening, nuance is inevitably lost. For example, while Eva et al. exposes style redundancy, there may still be contexts where particular framings, servant, authentic, transformational, resonate with leaders and provide language for practice, even if empirically they overlap. Similarly, this whitepaper treats AI as a structural shift, but the field is still young, and its consequences for leadership remain in motion.

It is important to note the perspective I bring. I write as a critical realist, convinced that leadership is embedded in real structures and constraints, yet always mediated through human interpretation. I am inspired by phenomenology, particularly its attentiveness to lived experience and meaning-making. And I am educated within a humanistic tradition that values ethics, reflection, and the development of the whole person. These orientations shape how I read the research, how I emphasize reflection in and on action, and why I extend it into being critical in being and having.

This means the white paper is not neutral. It reflects my background as a developer and consultant, my philosophical orientation, and my belief that leadership development must connect evidence with lived experience. These choices give the work coherence but also limit its universality.

Being critical in action, on action, and in being and having applies here as well. This white paper is not a final word but a contribution. It interrogates assumptions both in the field and in itself and invites readers to do the same.

10. CONCLUSION: WHAT LEADERSHIP & DEVELOPMENT MUST BECOME

Leadership development has reached a turning point. The research is blunt: most leadership styles overlap, and the labels that dominate our programs add more noise than clarity. Followers respond to trust, fairness, and integrity not to whether a leader has mastered the vocabulary of authenticity or agility.

At the same time, the world leaders face has grown more demanding. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence are reshaping decision-making itself. Diversity is not just about gender representation but about navigating intersectional realities and building truly inclusive systems. Organizations operate in conditions of permanent turbulence, where the task is to move quickly but also to create moments of reflection and rhythm. And legitimacy is no longer granted automatically; leaders must earn it by connecting business outcomes to social responsibility.

In this context, leadership development cannot continue as before. It must shift from chasing styles to cultivating behavioral repertoires. It must move from abstract inspiration to the concrete work of building trust and sustaining relationships. It must prepare leaders not only to use power but to question how they use it — being critical in action, on action, and in their deeper being and having. It must embrace AI and complexity not as technical add-ons, but as forces that reshape what it means to lead. It must recognize that leadership is co-created inviting followers, peers, and stakeholders into the process. And it must expand the practice of inclusion beyond token gestures to a discipline of listening, humility, and systemic change. Above all, it must integrate the inner work that sustains coherence when outer pressures multiply.

If there is a manifesto to close on, it is this:

- From **style labels** → to **behavioral repertoires**
- From **surface charisma** → to **trust and relational quality**
- From **using power** → to **questioning power through a critical stance**
- From **technical fixes** → to **AI and complexity fluency**
- From **heroic leaders** → to **leadership co-created with the led**
- From **token gestures** → to **inclusive, systemic practices**
- From **outer performance only** → to **inner work that sustains coherence**

These are not items to choose from; they are interdependent dimensions of one practice. Trust without inclusion becomes fragile. Critical reflection without repertoires turns into abstraction. AI fluency without ethics risks harm. Leadership that denies the agency of the led collapses into hierarchy without followership. Inner work without outer practice drifts into self-absorption. Leadership development must therefore hold these together, not as separate boxes to tick, but as a living whole.

To me, this is what it means to take leadership seriously. It is not simply a question of skills or techniques, nor is it about personality or charisma. It is about the way we live, the act of leading in the immediacy of action, in the discipline of reflection, and in the deeper currents of being and having.

Leadership is not something we possess. It is something we practice. It grows with us. It is cultivated in the space between people, in the rhythms of organizations, and in the choices, we make under pressure. True development enables leaders to become co-creators of the future capable of being critical, interested, humble, and firm when firmness is required. It calls for deep attunement, both to oneself and to the shifting context we inhabit. Development that ignores this produces only slogans. Development that embraces it shapes leaders who can meet the world as it is — and help bring into being the world still to come.

> “Leadership is not something we arrive at. It is something we continually become, together.”
>
> *Core Flow. Nels Karsvang. 2025*

APPENDIX C: REFERENCES

CORE REFERENCES

(these six drive the main argument of the whitepaper)

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APPENDIX D: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Behavioral repertoires
The range of observable leadership behaviors — task, relational, adaptive, and anti-harm — that leaders can flexibly draw on in different contexts, rather than relying on fixed "styles."

Critical realism
A philosophical stance that sees leadership as rooted in real structures and constraints (economic, social, organizational) but always experienced and interpreted through human meaning-making.

Critical stance (in/on action, in being/having)
An extension of Donald Schön's reflective practice. It means questioning assumptions:

- IN ACTION — while leading in the moment.
- ON ACTION — after the fact, through structured reflection.
- IN BEING/HAVING — at a deeper level, interrogating one's values, attachments, and identity.

Followership / co-creation of leadership
The recognition that leadership is not a solo act but emerges in interaction. Followers grant, claim, and shape leadership through their agency — meaning leaders and led co-create the practice together.

Inner work
The reflective practices that build coherence in leaders by examining emotions, values, identity,

and purpose. It sustains outer action and prevents behaviors from becoming hollow performance.

Transfer climate
The workplace conditions that determine whether what is learned in leadership programs is actually applied. Includes manager support, opportunities to practice, reinforcement, and cultural signals.

Turbulence
A state of permanent, unpredictable change in which leaders must balance speed with rhythm, decisiveness with reflection.

Inclusion (beyond tokenism)
Leadership practices that actively interrupt exclusionary patterns and embed systemic listening, humility, and equity across gender, race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of diversity.

Complexity fluency
The ability to see patterns, feedback loops, and unintended consequences in complex systems — and to work intelligently with AI and digital tools as both partners and disruptors in decision-making.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nels Klint Karsvang is a leadership consultant, psychotherapist, and philosopher fueled by curiosity and a desire to leave people in a better place than when he first encounters them. He does not claim perfection in this pursuit , often stumbling along the way, but draws wisdom from each step forward.

He works as a “pracademic,” bridging research and practice by translating insights from psychology, philosophy, and management studies into tools leaders can use in complex real-world situations. His driving force is rooted in evidence, but always with an eye on practice searching for the delicate balance between science and application, where real change takes hold.

For more than 14 years, he has worked with top management teams and organizational change processes, with a focus on leadership development, executive team dynamics, and collaboration in environments marked by high interdependence.

Currently, his curiosity is propelled by complex adaptive systems, people analytics, and artificial intelligence. When these dimensions intertwine with the psychological landscape, moments of magic sometimes emerge, insights that help leaders not only achieve strategic goals but also deepen self-awareness and relational capacity.

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