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Leadership Insights 2026

Trends Shaping Leadership & Organizational Performance

Introduction

At Conversant, we know that **the conversations are the work**. We believe leadership is practiced through the everyday conversations that shape decisions, alignment, and performance. In 2025, across hundreds of conversations with leaders of all levels across industries and geographies, we saw consistent patterns in the pressures and complexities organizations are facing.

These insights came from watching leaders work in real time – confronting uncertainty, clarifying priorities, challenging assumptions, and rebuilding trust under stress.

Who this is for

This report is for leaders who are responsible for strategy, performance, culture, and developing talent while actively working to keep pace with the realities of the world today. It's for leaders that care not only about *what* gets done, but *how* leadership is practiced when conditions are complex, fast-moving, and emotionally demanding.

How to use this report

The trends that follow are not predictions or prescriptions. They are practical reference points meant to help leaders stay oriented amidst uncertainty and cause the meaningful conversations that will enable their teams to achieve surprising results in challenging circumstances.

**THE FUTURE DOESN'T ARRIVE FULLY FORMED.
IT'S BUILT – ONE CONVERSATION AT A TIME.**

Conditions Shaping Leadership in 2026

Across industries, four conditions consistently surfaced in our work throughout 2025 and show clear signs that they will persist through 2026. These conditions aren't temporary disruptions; they are now part of the environment leaders must operate within. Each of the 6 trends in this report reflects one or more of these circumstances. When left unattended, they become barriers to meaningful performance, drain energy and increase stress.

Persistent Uncertainty

What once felt like temporary turbulence has become a constant backdrop. Economic shifts, geopolitical events, and rapid technological change continue to outpace planning cycles, requiring teams to make progress even when key variables remain unresolved. For leaders, the implication is clear: leadership effectiveness in 2026 depends less on technical expertise and more on the ability to regulate attention, create clarity, and help teams function well without the promise of stability.

The Cost of Misalignment

When senior leaders aren't aligned, the organization feels it quickly. Even small gaps can generate friction, duplicate effort, and slow execution while eroding trust. These gaps force teams to work harder to interpret direction, navigate competing expectations, and compensate for lack of clarity among leadership. Caring for alignment becomes an ongoing leadership responsibility, not a one-time event.

Conditions Shaping Leadership in 2026

Pressure for Speed

Organizations that have been optimized for rapid execution now struggle with fragmented ownership, unclear priorities, and a growing sense of urgency that increases activity but not impact. Speed alone no longer creates value: when executives move fast without shared understanding, misalignment cascades and collaboration breaks down. For leaders, the real performance differentiator in 2026 is not pace but timing — the ability to slow down at the right moments, align around what truly matters, and design for connected contribution.

Rising Stress

These conditions compound to create sustained cognitive and emotional load. Stress is no longer an individual challenge, it's a system-level issue that directly affects trust, decision quality, collaboration, and engagement, and will catalyze either breakdowns or breakthroughs, depending on how leaders respond.

6 Leadership Essentials for 2026

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Leading Effectively in Uncertainty

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From Individual Accountability to Shared Ownership

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The Discipline of Alignment

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Presence as a Lever for Performance

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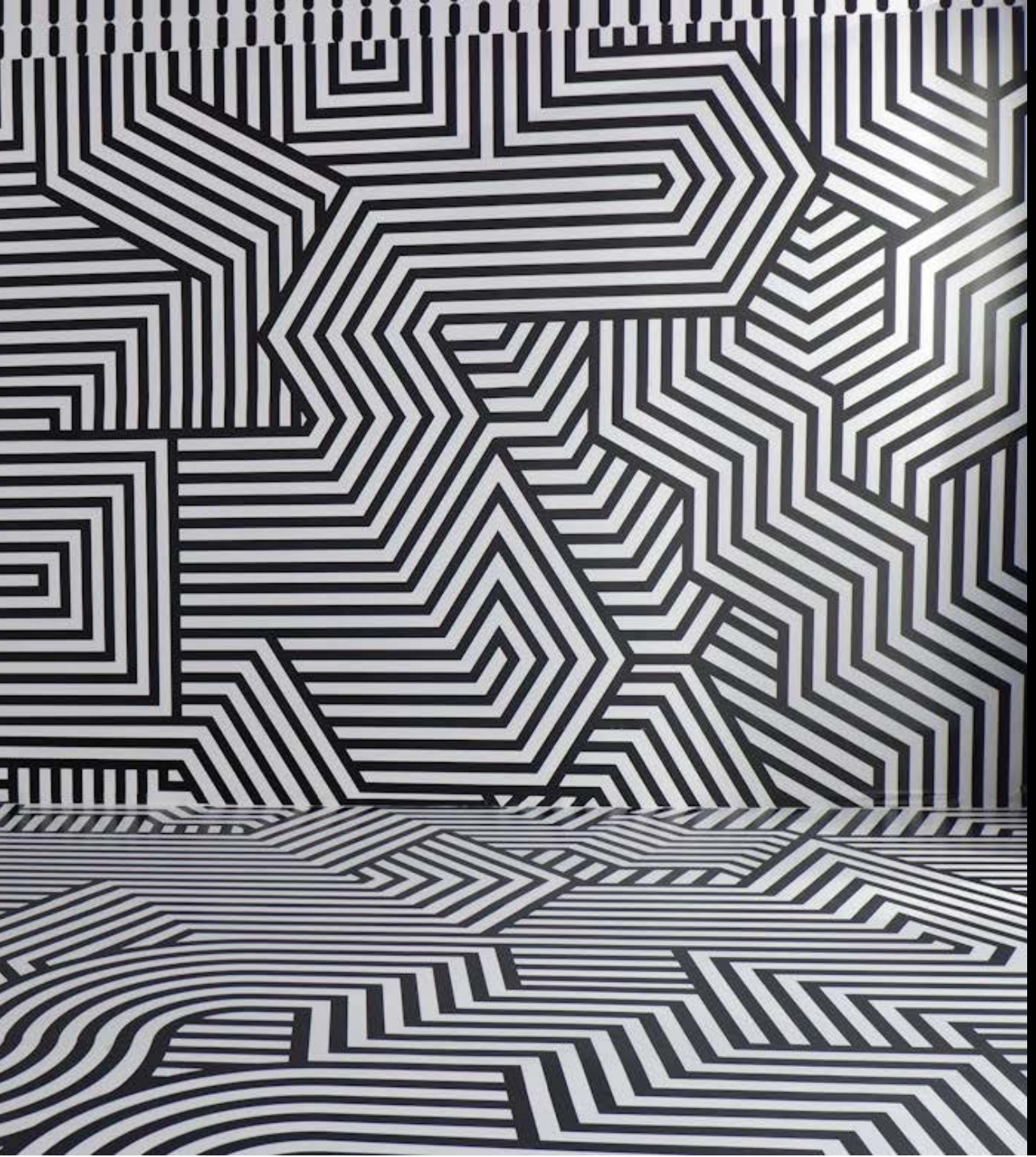


01

Leading Effectively in Uncertainty

01 Leading Effectively in Uncertainty

Leaders today operate against a continuous backdrop of uncertainty rather than isolated crises. As clarity becomes harder to find, many leaders feel pressure to move quickly, provide answers they don't have, or increase control to restore stability. When leaders respond to uncertainty by rushing to resolve ambiguity or jumping to solutions, they unintentionally amplify noise, confusion, and reactivity across the system.

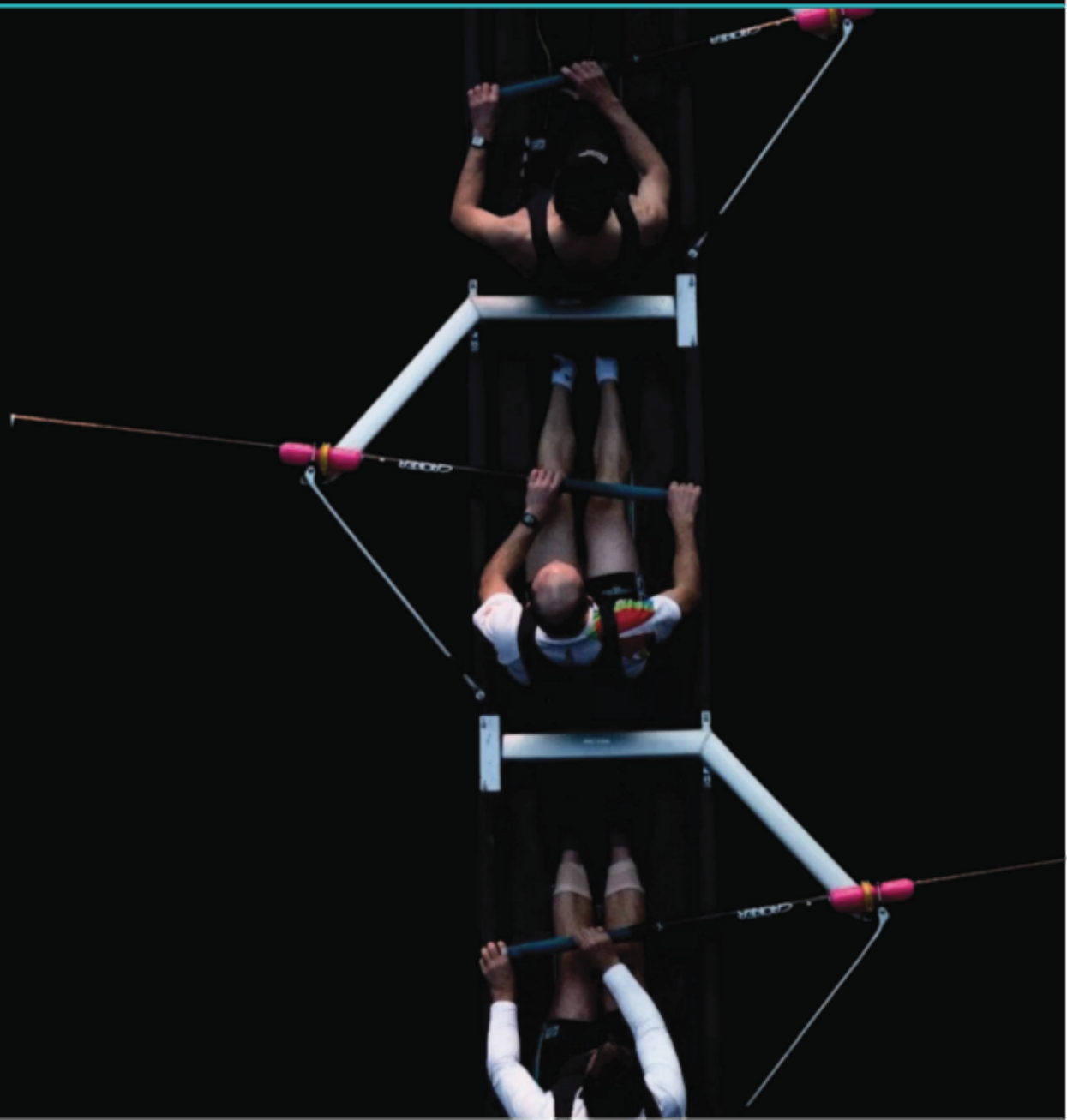
84% of leaders say they feel underprepared for future disruptions.
McKinsey & Company & World Economic Forum, 2025

> **The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.**
>
> F. Scott Fitzgerald

What Great Leaders Are Doing About It

As this continues into 2026, leaders are increasingly asked to function while holding contradictory realities at once: progress and fragility, hope and fear, momentum and uncertainty. Effective leaders don't try to eliminate uncertainty; they help people work well within it. They:

- **Name what is and is not clear** and focus attention on what can be influenced.
- Are able to **provide direction** without collapsing into pessimism or false optimism.
- Understand that **complex conditions** call for clear questions, persistent curiosity, and coordinated experimentation — not linear strategies based on outdated assumptions.
- Despite sustained psychological load, they practice **emotional leadership** and are aware of the ripple effect of their own emotional state.



Client Story

In one system operating under geopolitical and funding uncertainty, leaders arrived carrying visible anxiety and fear about decisions they could not control. Rather than moving quickly to planning or reassurance, we created space for leaders to name what felt genuinely uncertain and what was still within their influence. Only after that did we help them identify small, concrete actions they could take together.

Our Approach

Don’t Wait for Uncertainty to Pass. Build the Capabilities to Operate Within It.

We help systems stabilize under pressure so fear and ambiguity can be acknowledged without taking over. Our work supports leaders to own their influence, care for the intelligence that comes from connection, and make opportunities for valuable contribution clear.

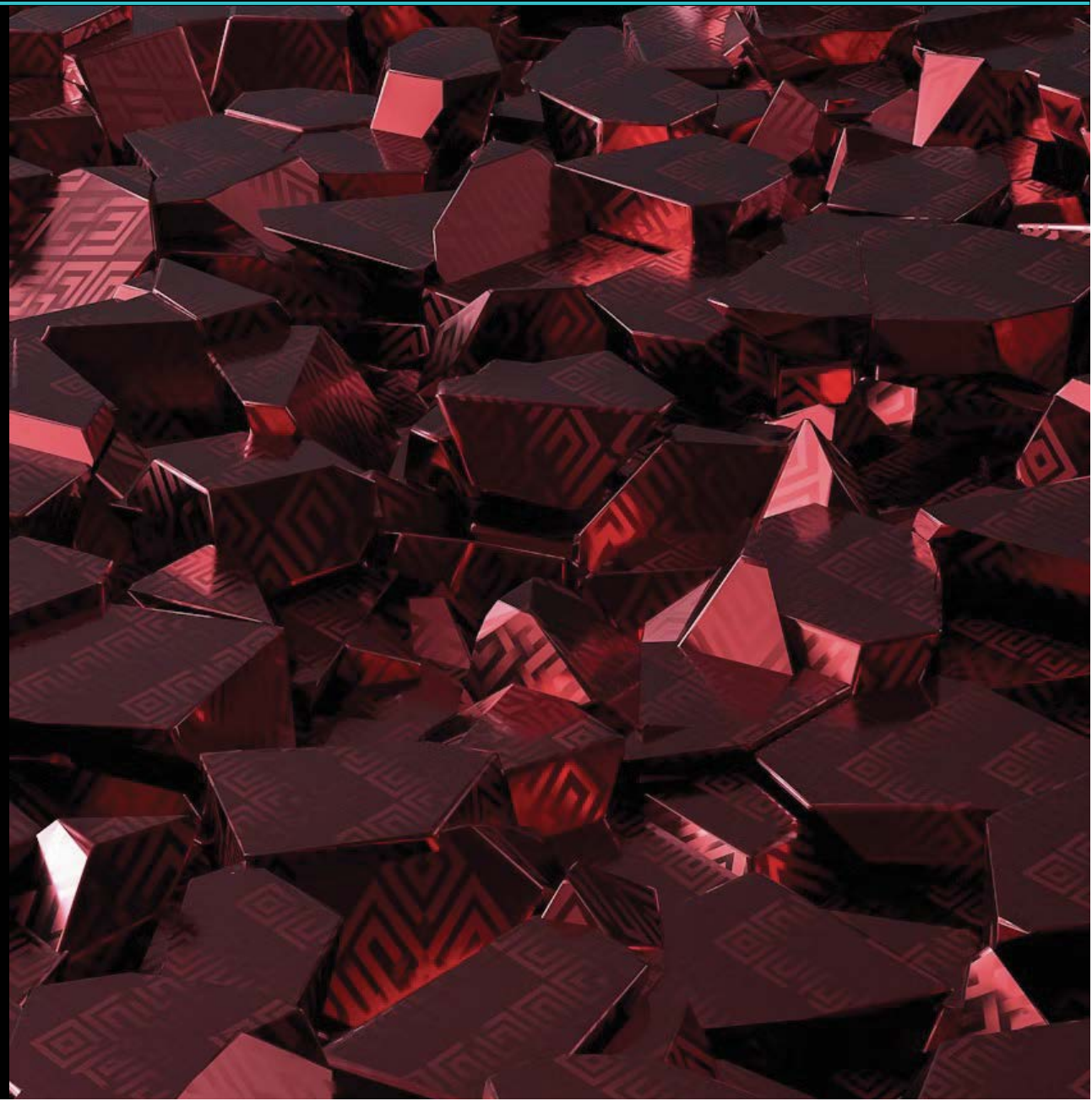
02

From Individual Accountability to Shared Ownership

02 The Shift from Individual Accountability to Shared Ownership

Organizations have become highly skilled at driving individual accountability and execution. As work becomes more interdependent, these same systems often reinforce siloed behavior. Leaders meet their own targets yet struggle to work across boundaries, align priorities, or take responsibility for enterprise outcomes. This leaves teams navigating competing expectations and fragmented ownership that slows progress and increases friction.

> **Anything produced for the benefit of one at the expense of the others is an investment in the demise of a business.**
> Mickey Connolly



What Great Leaders Are Doing About It

Effective leaders recognize that siloed behavior is not a personal flaw – it's a predictable reaction to how work is structured. They counter this by making the enterprise visible in everyday conversations.

- They **surface assumptions**, share context openly, and make their priorities and constraints transparent so others can make aligned decisions.
- Instead of optimizing their own lane, they **look for where work intersects** and actively coordinate with peers.
- They **model shared ownership** by inviting collaboration early, distributing credit, and holding decisions to a standard that serves the whole system, not just their function.

Enterprise performance improves when leaders stop optimizing their own lane and start modeling shared ownership across boundaries.

Client Story

In a large organization with strong individual accountability, leaders openly competed across functions, each optimizing for their own results. When we brought them together, we shifted the conversation from “Who owns what?” to “Where are we making this harder than it needs to be for each other?” That reframing made the cost of siloed optimization visible and opened the door to shared ownership.

Our Approach

Make the system visible so leaders can choose enterprise over silos

We help leaders see how their individual decisions and priorities interact across the system. By surfacing unintended impacts and aligning around what serves the whole, leaders learn to practice shared ownership rather than reinforce boundaries.

03

The Discipline of Alignment

03 The Discipline of Alignment

Misalignment at senior levels doesn't always look like open conflict. It shows up as unspoken differences, private side conversations, and competing interpretations of the same decision. Employees experience this as shifting priorities and unclear expectations, creating confusion, rework, and tension that teams can't resolve on their own.

Because signals from executives travel fast, even small gaps in alignment multiply across the system. Caring for alignment early and often is now essential leadership work.

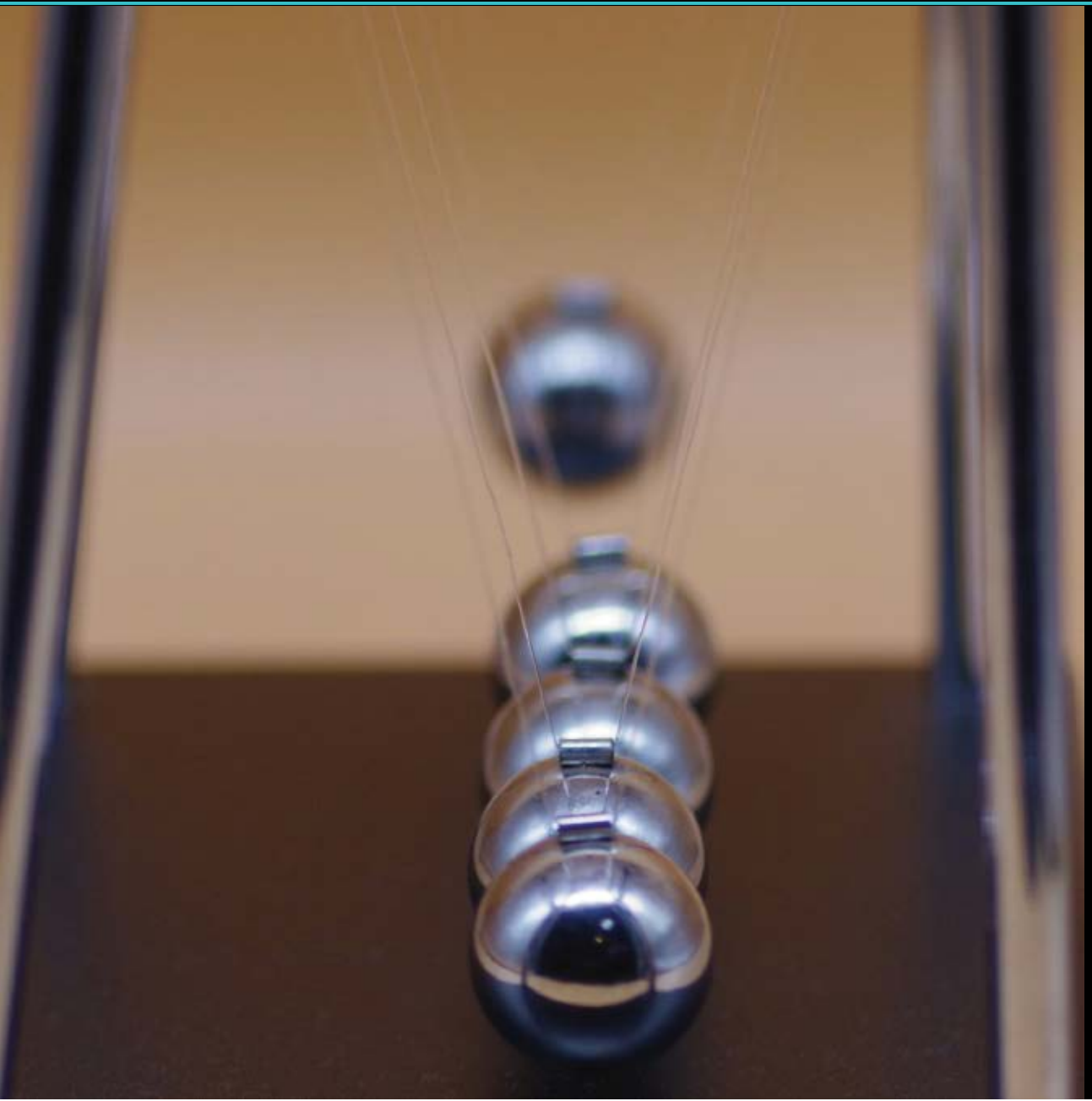
43% of employees say their leaders are not aligned
Korn Ferry Workforce 2025

What Great Leaders Are Doing About It

Effective leaders recognize that the source of high-velocity performance is alignment, not speed. They treat alignment as a necessary discipline and care for it ongoingly.

- They **address differences early**, inviting opposing views, researching points of tension, and surfacing risks and tradeoffs before decisions lock.
- They **listen for the essential values** shaping the views of their peers and the enterprise, steering conversations towards shared purposes, not away from conflict.
- They **demonstrate reliable decision-making** norms, make their thinking explicit, and support decisions once they are made.
- They **set a cadence for adjustment**, creating opportunities to refresh priorities and alignment as conditions shift.
- They **own the impact of their behavior** and use their influence to drive connection and mutual respect rather than distrust and avoidance.

> **There is nothing quite so useless, as doing with great efficiency, something that should not be done at all.**
> Peter Drucker



Client Story

Leaders one level **below** the executive team repeatedly described confusion caused by decisions being made informally or revisited after the fact, along with tension that was never openly addressed. We worked with the executive team to identify how the absence of visible alignment impacted their ability to lead and the opportunities they had to influence senior leadership and the experience of alignment throughout the organization.

Our Approach

Alignment beats effort every time

We create conversations where leaders can openly surface differences, clarify priorities, and agree on shared messages. We help executive teams establish decision norms and alignment routines so their influence is consistent, intentional, and felt throughout the organization.

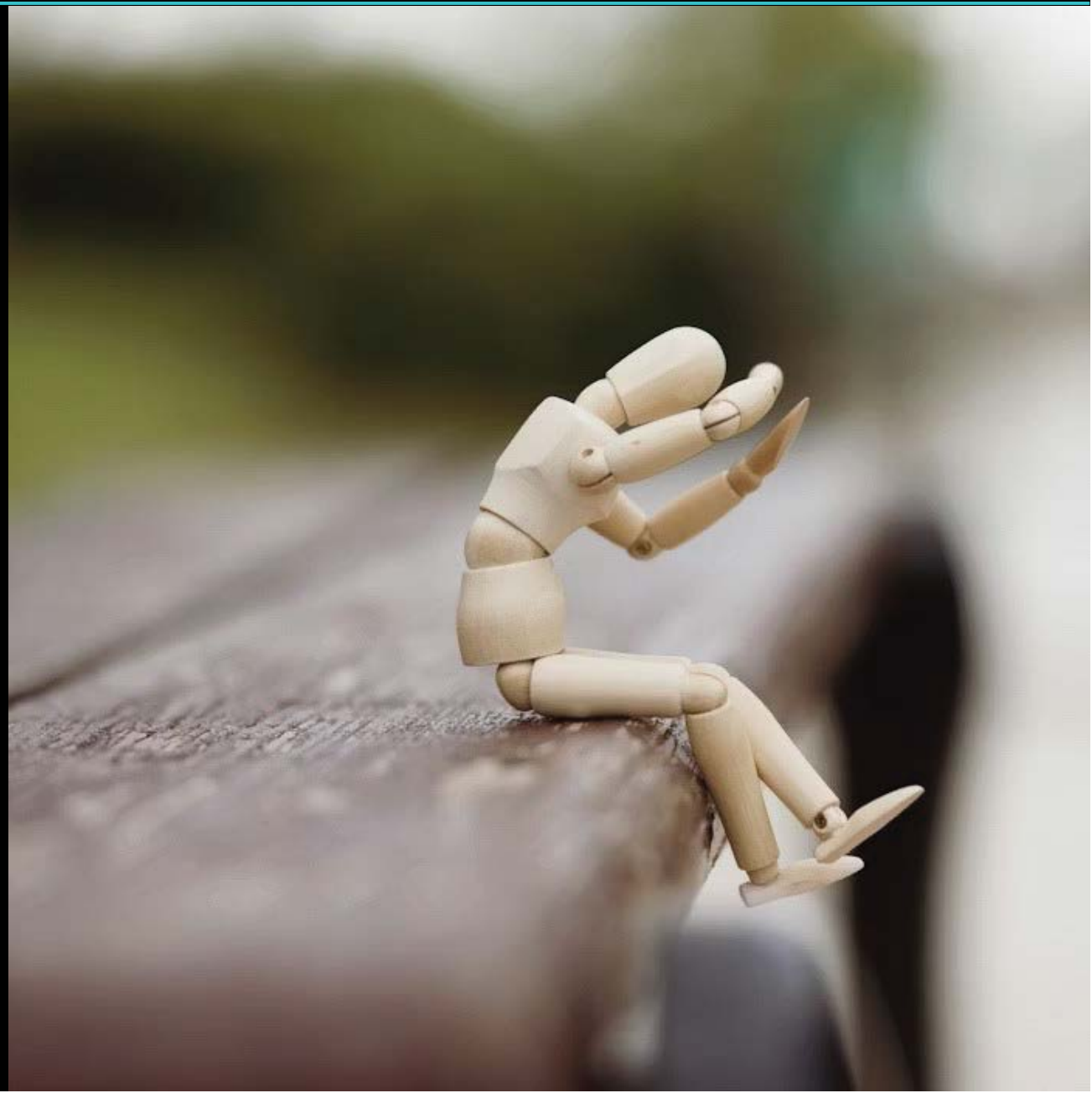
04

Presence as a Lever for Performance

04 Presence as a Lever for Performance

Chronic stress is undermining leaders' attention, listening, and decision quality. Practicing presence – mindfully bringing focus to the current moment – has often been dismissed as a soft skill, leaving leaders without a way to manage the emotional and cognitive load shaping their performance. In complex, fast-moving environments, how leaders show up matters more than what they say. Leaders who cannot regulate their own pace and attention unintentionally react more, listen less, and make it harder for their teams to feel seen, heard, and supported.

56% of leaders report burnout.
2025 Views From the C-Suite



What Great Leaders Are Doing About It

Many now question whether current ways of working can sustain future ambition. As targets increase and resources tighten, effective leaders treat presence as a responsibility, recognizing the impact it has on their own performance and that of others.

- Rather than reacting to every demand, they **slow the moment down** to understand what matters, then accelerate with clarity.
- They pay close attention to the **human experience of work**: when energy drops or stress rises, they treat it as actionable data, not something to push through.
- They look for where engagement, momentum, and meaningful progress are present and use those signals to guide priorities and sustain performance. They recognize **care, connection, and even love** as practical forces that sustain contribution over time.
- They **model correction, not perfection**, catching reactivity and demonstrating recovery in real-time.
- They show up to conversations with their **full attention**, creating conditions for people to feel seen and heard.

Client Story

In a highly analytical environment under increasing pressure, leaders found themselves multitasking, rushing decisions, and missing signals from their teams. They were initially resistant to work on presence – including developing physical, emotional, and cognitive self-awareness – seeing it as impractical. A brief experience focused on directing attention and regulating the nervous system revealed how these habits were undermining influence, clarity, and connection. When leaders brought presence into real conversations, decision quality improved, and teams felt more grounded, aligned, and supported.

Our Approach

Make presence a practical, sustainable leadership skill

We help leaders see how attention, pace, and the human experience of work shape influence and performance at scale. Through simple experiential practices, leaders learn to regulate their own presence, strengthen connection, and lead in ways that sustain energy and performance under pressure.

05

Insight-Driven Action

05 Insight-Driven Action

In fast-paced, shifting environments, pressure to move quickly can override the need to understand what's actually happening. When leaders jump to solutions before grasping the dynamics at play, they often misread the situation, miss critical signals, and commit to actions that fracture under changing conditions. Because today's challenges evolve faster than plans can, leaders must pause to understand what's real, what's emerging, and where clarity is still needed, then craft short cycles of learning to inform the path forward.

> **Intelligence is what you do when you don't know what to do.**
> Jean Piaget

What Great Leaders Are Doing About It

Leaders who thrive in complexity don't rush past uncertainty but turn toward it with curiosity, taking small, strategic actions that generate learning.

- They **distinguish signals from noise**, resisting the pressure to treat every demand as urgent.
- They **challenge their assumptions** regularly, aware that the processes and mental models that worked in the past don't guarantee success today.
- They **connect intelligence** across the system, tapping diverse perspectives to see patterns and understand dynamics faster.
- They **use short cycles of action and learning** to test ideas before committing significant time and resources. Progress accelerates when leaders create 30, 60, or 90-day experiments that reveal what works before scaling.
- They **orient teams before acting**, ensuring shared understanding of the problem and the purpose behind the next step.
- They **stay adaptable**, updating decisions as new information emerges rather than defending outdated plans.

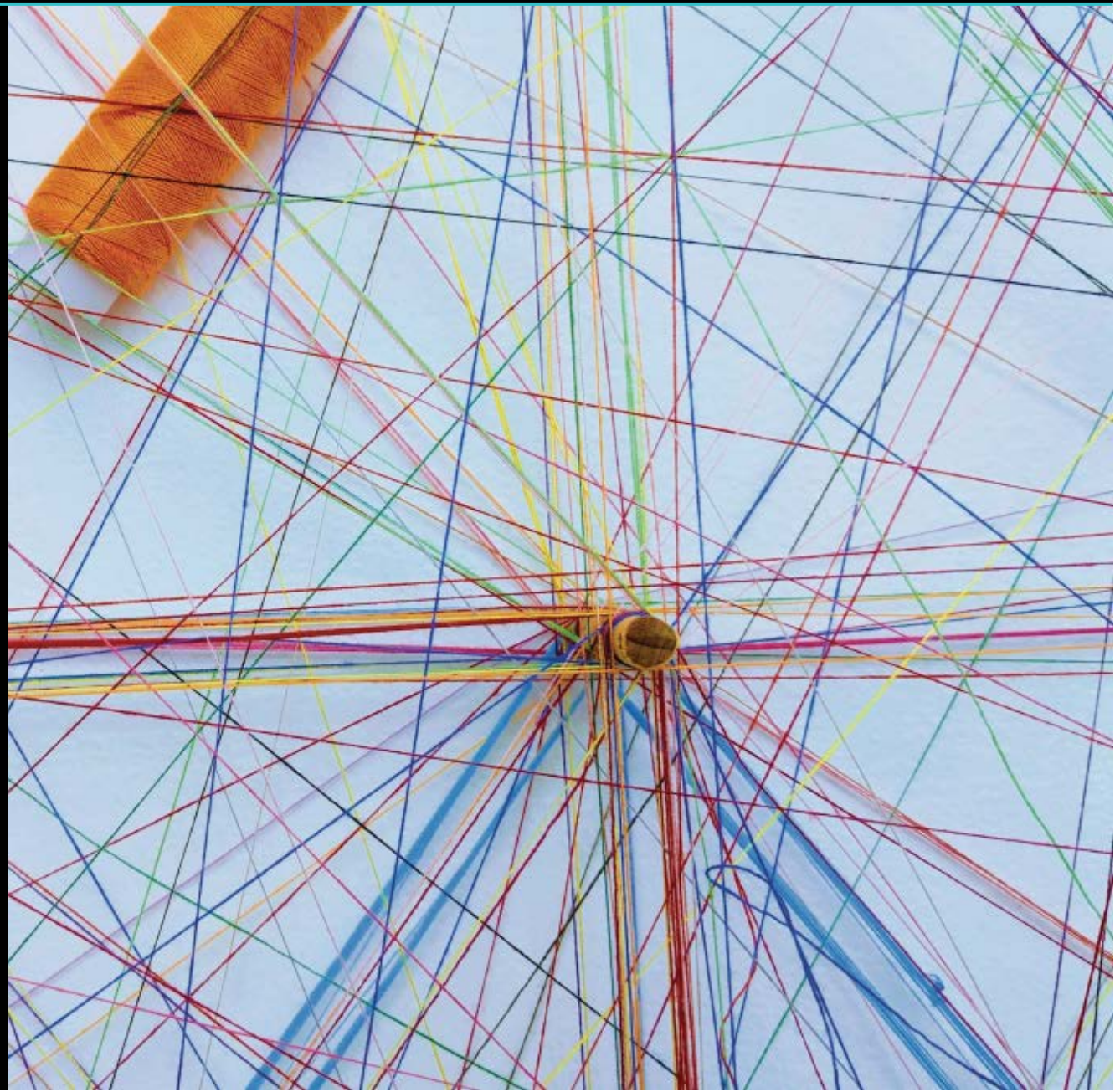
Client Story

In a system overloaded with initiatives, leaders pushed to solve and prioritize faster, yet impact continued to diffuse. Teams were moving quickly without a shared understanding of the problem or the dynamics shaping it. By slowing the moment and refocusing on what actually mattered, leaders saw where attention and effort were being misplaced. A few small, well-designed experiments set up opportunities to clarify the real priorities and help the organization redirect energy toward actions that could create meaningful progress.

Our Approach

Help leaders see the system

We create conversations where leaders can make sense of complexity together, naming assumptions, understanding pressures at play, and aligning on what it's time for now. With a shared framework for how to move through short cycles that reveal new insights, teams learn quickly and move forward with shared confidence.



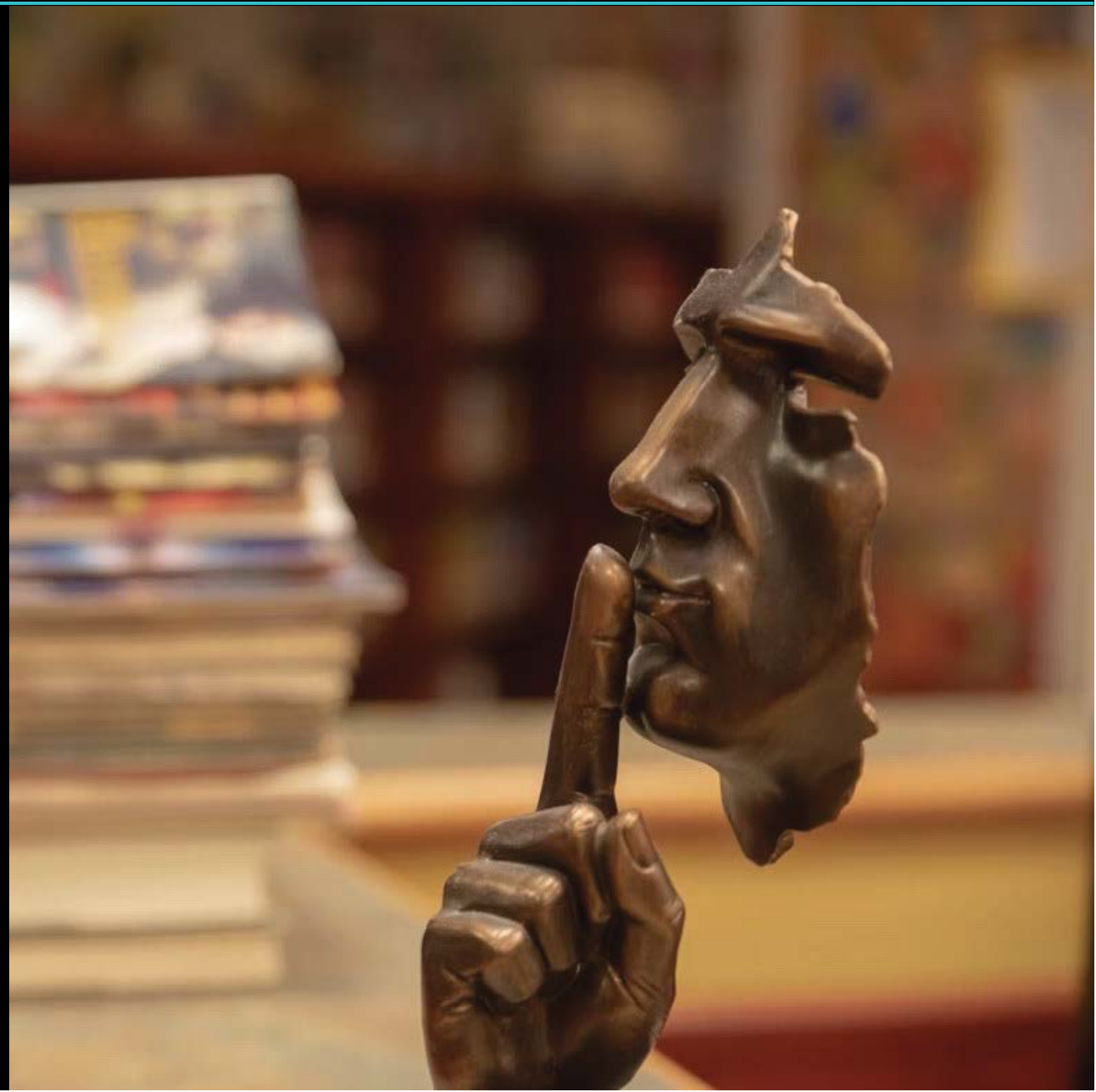
06

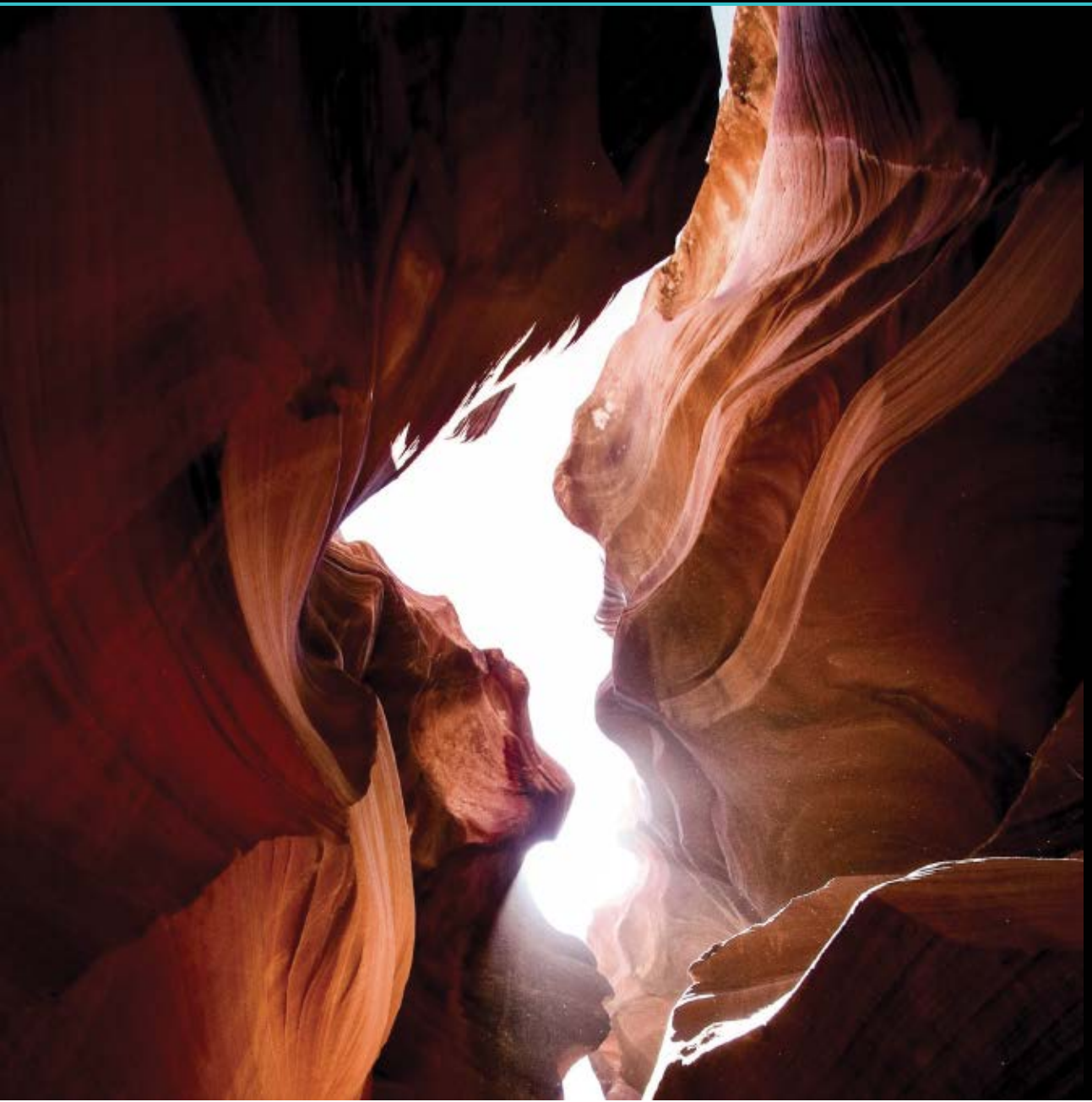
Closing the Feedback Gap

06 Addressing the Feedback Gap

Senior leaders are receiving less honest feedback in every direction - up, down, and peer to peer. Issues surface late or indirectly because people are unsure when or how to speak candidly across levels and functions. Pace, hierarchy, and limited modeling of healthy feedback make truth-telling feel risky, even when stakes are high. As systems grow more interdependent, small misunderstandings compound quickly. The absence of timely feedback becomes a systemic risk, eroding trust, clarity, and connection in ways that are easy to overlook and hard to repair. Leaders must create conditions where candor feels safe, valuable, and part of how work gets done.

> **"What someone tells you shows how safe they feel around you. How you respond will define what they tell you next time."**
>
> Robin Anselmi

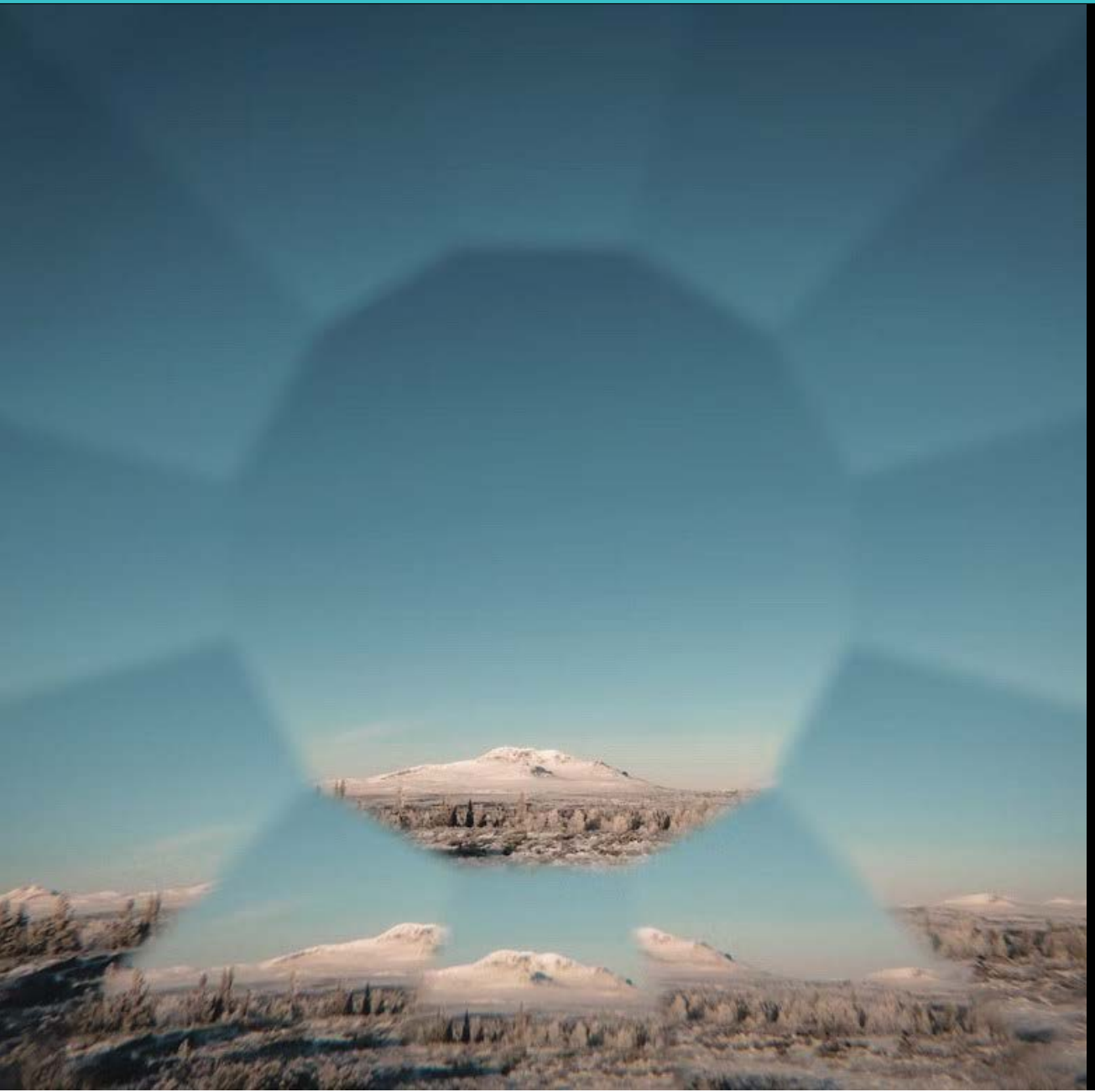




What Great Leaders Are Doing About It

Leaders who close the feedback gap don't wait for honesty to show up on its own. They create the conditions where important truths can be shared and feedback is valued.

- They **proactively seek feedback**, inviting insight across levels, functions, and peer groups rather than relying on downward channels alone.
- They **occur as present**, available, and emotionally responsible, signaling an openness and curiosity that others can step into.
- They **model clear, respectful feedback** across power differences, building others' capacity to speak candidly.
- They **listen for what isn't being said**, treating hesitation, indirectness, and silence as valuable data rather than absence of issues.
- They **normalize learning** and self-awareness in public, sharing their own assumptions, missteps, and course corrections.
- They **respond to feedback with action**, showing others that speaking up leads to conversations that can cause change.



Client Story

In several groups, leaders were surprised to hear feedback that had never surfaced before. Through structured peer conversations, they saw how even small reactions shaped what people were willing to tell them. As leaders practiced receiving feedback with steadiness and curiosity, candor became more available and challenging conversations led to valuable insights.

Our Approach

Create the conditions for constructive candor

We work with leaders to surface the conversations that aren't happening, learn how to navigate them with curiosity, and build routines that make feedback a natural and recurring part of collaboration. As leaders show they can handle the truth even when its hard, candor returns, trust deepens, and alignment improves.

Design for Meaningful Surprise

Today's conditions (constant change, rising stress, diffused attention, and unpredictable interdependencies) make sustained progress feel harder than ever. In environments like these, long plans age quickly, information overwhelms, and effort can outpace understanding.

In these circumstances, what matters most is our ability to learn quickly, adjust together, and generate progress in short, meaningful cycles. As we've seen across decades of research and practice, organizational vitality and resilience grows if there are regular experiences of meaningful surprise – small, strategic breakthroughs that change what people believe is possible.

The practices in this report create the conditions for meaningful surprise, and when you design them into your approach to leadership, they become a reliable source of progress and vitality.

This year's challenges will ask for **a new standard for leadership** - one defined not by control or speed, but by presence, learning, and collective intelligence. Leaders who embody this standard will make progress possible, even in uncertainty.

How to Design Leadership Development in 2026

1. DEVELOP LEADERS WHO CAN WORK WITH UNCERTAINTY, NOT AROUND IT

Leadership development must strengthen leaders' ability to slow the moment, name what's clear and unclear, and move forward without premature certainty.

In practice: Work with real scenarios, real ambiguity, and real-time navigation.

2. MAKE PRESENCE A CORE PERFORMANCE SKILL

With rising stress and diffused attention, presence is a lever for clarity, connection, and influence. It also takes practice, and reliability improves when peers engage in this learning together.

In practice: Build attention regulation, emotional leadership, and moment-to-moment awareness into development opportunities.

3. BUILD THE DISCIPLINE OF ALIGNMENT INTO EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP

Misalignment is now one of the biggest performance taxes in complex systems. Development must help leaders surface differences early, create shared understanding, and coordinate decisions that others can trust.

In practice: In cross-functional cohorts, work through examples of competing priorities to arrive at shared purposes.

4. MAKE FEEDBACK A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Design opportunities for senior leaders to receive feedback, understand their impact, and model their learning in real-time with peers, and encourage giving and receiving feedback as part of the normal flow of work.

In practice: Make development opportunities a space to practice candid conversations around performance and feedback.

Questions for Your Next Leadership Conversation

Conversations are the work of performance, growth, and change. Bring these questions to your leadership peers or to your team to bring the 2026 essentials to life in your work and world.

01. What are we pretending to understand that we actually don't?

02. What do we need to understand more deeply before deciding what to do next?

03. How could we better align on priorities in ways that are felt beyond this room?

04. Where is our effort high but our progress low? What might we need to look at differently?

05. How might we strengthen shared ownership and support for outcomes across our teams?

06. What assumptions are shaping our decisions that we haven't checked lately?

07. In what ways could we be more present that would help our teams feel more supported?

08. What are we all doing to take care of ourselves? How are we managing stress?

09. Where might our moods or behaviors be making it harder for people to be honest with us? What can we do differently?

10. Where might a quick win or small breakthrough shift the energy of our team?

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Conversant is a global leadership development firm that works with leaders and organizations facing complex, human challenges. For over 30 years, our work has focused on improving performance by improving the quality of conversations that shape decisions, collaboration, and results.

We partner with leaders to build credibility, influence, and shared ownership across teams and systems. Our approach is practical and experiential, grounded in the belief that leadership is developed through real conversations, not abstract models.

We work with organizations across industries and geographies to support leadership development that is relevant, human, and aligned with the realities leaders face today.

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CONVERSATION IS POWERFUL. LET'S START ONE.

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From Insight to Practice

The patterns described in this report show up at different moments in a leadership journey.
To support leaders in working with these challenges in practice, we offer these solutions:

Authentic Leadership Conversation

The Authentic Leadership Conversations Workshop will accelerate your leadership capability; by providing you with practical tools and techniques to increase your ability to collaborate, manage high-stakes conversations and create leadership presence.

Principles of Persuasion®

The Principles of Persuasion Workshop® is developed by and based on the groundbreaking research of NYT Best-selling author, Dr. Robert Cialdini. It will equip leaders with tools based on the latest behavioral science to be significantly more influential and effective.

Clear Leadership®

Clear Leadership® is a transformational 4-day executive programme focussed on relational mastery. It is grounded on over 30 years of research by Dr. Gervase Bushe, developing leaders' self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and communication for sustainable partnerships.

Contemplative Leadership

Contemplative Leadership is a programme grounded in research on mindfulness and contemplative practice, helping leaders remain composed in demanding situations and think more broadly about complex systems through regular reflective practices.

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