



THE ART OF
LEADERSHIP

Leadership under pressure

Seven capabilities that
sustain performance

Perspectives from SMG partners and
executive coaches on the capabilities
leaders rely on when pressure is constant

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Executive foreword

Leadership today is being tested in ways few leaders have experienced before.

Geopolitical uncertainty, economic pressure, technological disruption and shifting workforce expectations are converging at the same time. Leaders are being asked to make complex decisions faster, with less certainty, and with higher expectations from employees, boards and stakeholders.

In our [2025 Leadership Capabilities report](#), we explored the forces reshaping the leadership landscape. At that time, we highlighted how artificial intelligence, global political change, economic productivity challenges and generational workforce shifts were redefining what effective leadership looks like.

Those forces have not receded. If anything, they have intensified.

What has changed is the frequency and intensity with which leaders are being tested. Leadership capability is no longer revealed only in moments of major crisis. It is tested constantly through everyday decisions, competing priorities and the pressure to deliver results while maintaining trust, alignment and clarity.

In this environment, strategy must remain clear so that execution can occur. Leaders must maintain direction and coherence even when conditions are uncertain, and the path forward is still emerging.

This raises an important question:

How can leaders sustain effective leadership capabilities when operating under unrelenting pressure?

Through our work with CEOs, boards and senior leadership teams, we continue to observe a consistent pattern. Leadership effectiveness does not rely on a long list of competencies. Instead, it rests on a small number of capabilities that shape how leaders interpret context, make decisions and engage others.

In this Perspectives paper we explore seven capabilities that matter most when leadership is under pressure.

These capabilities sit across two dimensions:

1. **Contextual leadership** — how leaders understand the environment around them, identify challenges and opportunities, and align decisions with strategy.
2. **Behavioural leadership** — how leaders show up consistently and constructively in their interactions with others, particularly when the pressure to perform is high.

When leaders operate under sustained pressure, even strong capabilities can begin to erode. Collaboration can shift into consultation or

groupthink to avoid conflict. Empathy can slip into distance or disengagement. Strategic thinking can narrow into short-term problem-solving.

The leaders who remain effective are those who recognise these pressures early and deliberately strengthen the capabilities that allow them, and their organisations, to stay focused, aligned and resilient.

This paper reflects the perspectives and lived experience of the SMG partners and executive coaches who work closely with leaders navigating complex organisational challenges. It brings together those insights to highlight the capabilities that help leaders remain steady, thoughtful and effective when leadership is tested.



Virginia Mansell

Founding Partner
and Executive Coach



Mehul Joshi

Senior Partner and
Head of Leadership Practice

Introduction

Leadership capability under pressure

Leadership capability has always evolved with the environment in which it is exercised.

What has changed is the intensity and continuity of the pressure placed upon leaders. Geopolitical volatility, technological acceleration, regulatory scrutiny and shifting workforce expectations mean that leadership is now tested not occasionally, but continuously. In this environment, pressure does not simply challenge leadership capability. It reveals it.

Leadership rarely fails because of a lack of intelligence or experience. More often, it falters when pressure accumulates faster than leaders can adapt.

Across industries and sectors, senior leaders are navigating sustained complexity. Strategic horizons are less predictable. Stakeholder expectations are rising. Decisions that once unfolded over months are now required to be made in days or weeks. At the same time, leaders must maintain clarity of direction, cohesion across teams and confidence across the organisation.

In this environment, leadership capability is no longer tested occasionally. It is tested continuously.

Over the past year, the Stephenson Mansell Group has worked closely with CEOs, boards and senior

leadership teams navigating these conditions. Through executive coaching, mentoring and leadership advisory work, a consistent pattern has emerged. The leaders who remain effective under pressure rely on a small number of capabilities that shape how they interpret the environment, make decisions and engage others.

Together, the contributors to this paper represent decades of leadership advisory, executive coaching and operational leadership experience working with CEOs, boards and senior leadership teams across industries.

This Perspectives paper explores seven leadership capabilities that enable leaders to remain effective when complexity increases:

1. **Strategic thinking**
2. **Digital catalyst**
3. **Empathy**
4. **Collaboration**
5. **Integrity**
6. **Leading with curiosity**
7. **Calm resilience**

While each capability can be described independently, their true value lies in how they interact. Strategic clarity supports collaboration.

Curiosity strengthens strategic thinking. Integrity reinforces trust. Calm resilience enables leaders to sustain effective behaviour under pressure.

For leaders navigating complexity today, these capabilities are not theoretical. They are increasingly the difference between organisations that remain steady and those that struggle to maintain alignment and performance.

The question for leaders is not whether these capabilities matter. It is whether they can sustain them under pressure.



Seven leadership capabilities that hold under pressure

Strategic thinking

Digital catalyst

Empathy

Collaboration

Integrity

Leading with curiosity

Calm resilience

Strategic thinking

Focusing on what matters in a rapidly shifting environment

Why strategic clarity matters under pressure

Strategy without disciplined execution is not strategy. It is an aspiration.

As SMG coach and mentor Robyn Stubbs observes, the pace and complexity of the external environment require leaders to consciously lift their eyes to the horizon. Without that perspective, leaders risk becoming consumed by yesterday's problems and today's noise.

Effective leaders in volatile environments look outward and forward, not just inward. They resist the gravitational pull of immediacy. They maintain vigilance without becoming reactive.

Strategic thinking, at its best, enables laser-like focus on what Robyn describes as the *main game*. It does not require tunnel vision. It requires disciplined choice. In a crowded and noisy environment, it is impossible to respond to every emerging trend. The discipline lies in knowing what to ignore.

SMG partner and executive coach Mehul Joshi frequently reinforces this in executive sessions: strategy is not about responding to everything. It is about making deliberate choices about what truly matters and sustaining those choices under pressure.

Across our coaching work, we see that leaders who sustain strategic clarity create coherence amid noise. They decide what matters, and just as importantly, what does not.

When strategic thinking breaks down

Under sustained pressure, strategic thinking rarely disappears. It fragments.

Leaders slip into reactive patterns. Executive meetings become reporting forums. Agendas are dominated by operational updates rather than forward-looking debate. Every issue feels urgent.

One of the most candid observations from our masterclass discussions came from Robyn and SMG coach and behavioural change expert, Amanda Bickerstaff: many leaders are simply addicted to doing.

There is an endorphin hit that comes from ticking items off a list. Task completion feels productive. Reflection does not.

Amanda notes that leaders often self-sabotage by consistently placing tasks ahead of thinking time. Strategic thinking requires deliberate disconnection from operational noise.

This is not a capability gap. It is a discipline gap.

“In a crowded, noisy environment, it's impossible to respond to every emerging trend. Strategic thinking is about focusing on the main game and letting the rest go.”

*Robyn Stubbs,
SMG coach and mentor*

Strategic thinking requires leaders to pause, reflect, connect dots and test assumptions. Over time, those small habits build muscle. Without that habit, strategy becomes reactive positioning. Leaders find themselves firefighting rather than directing.

The generational overlay adds another dimension. Digitally fluent leaders are comfortable with rapid iteration and constant adjustment. More experienced leaders may rely heavily on pattern recognition developed over decades. Without conscious integration, executive teams can oscillate between overreaction and overconfidence.

Strategic thinking is the balance between vigilance and restraint. It is the capacity to remain alert without being driven by every signal.

Superficial vs disciplined strategy

Under pressure, strategic thinking can appear present while functionally absent.

Superficial strategic thinking

- Annual strategy days disconnected from daily execution
- Expansive ambition without explicit trade-offs
- Monitoring competitors reactively
- Constant pivots in response to short-term signals

- Strategy presented as narrative rather than a clear choice
- Executive meetings dominated by reporting rather than direction

Disciplined strategic thinking

- Multi-horizon thinking: immediate, medium and long-term
- Clear articulation of trade-offs and resource allocation
- The courage to say no
- Coherent alignment between strategy, structure and capability
- Ongoing recalibration without abandoning core direction
- Protected executive time for forward-looking debate

The distinction is subtle but profound. Superficial strategy preserves optionality. Disciplined strategy creates focus.

Coaching pattern: When strategy fractures

A CEO of a mid-sized organisation described feeling overwhelmed by volume. Every week brought new competitor activity, stakeholder pressure and internal escalation.

In executive meetings, discussions were wide-ranging but rarely decisive. Multiple initiatives remained active. No one could clearly articulate the top three organisation-wide priorities.

Through facilitated executive coaching, the team was asked to define what they would stop doing. The conversation was uncomfortable. Several pet projects were deprioritised. Capital was reallocated. Meeting agendas were redesigned to dedicate time to forward-looking debate rather than operational reporting.

Within months, performance stabilised, not because activity increased, but because clarity did.

What disciplined strategy requires of leaders

Sustained strategic thinking demands both personal and collective rigour. For individual leaders, it requires:

- Protecting time for horizon scanning and reflection
- Seeking disconfirming data rather than reinforcing bias
- Distinguishing signal from noise
- Being comfortable with incomplete information
- Exercising restraint before reacting

For executive teams, it requires:

- Explicit alignment with organisation-wide priorities
- Transparent debate around trade-offs
- Clear linkage between strategy and capital allocation
- Agreed decision rights
- Regular strategic recalibration, not episodic reset

Strategic thinking is not intellectual abstraction. It is decision architecture.

In coaching engagements, the work is often less about generating new ideas and more about refining judgement, clarifying assumptions,

stress-testing scenarios and strengthening the discipline to hold direction under pressure.

Embedding strategic thinking across the organisation

Strategic thinking cannot be done alone by the CEO. Heads of Talent and Learning must embed strategic capability across senior cohorts. This includes:

- Developing multi-horizon thinking in succession pipelines
- Building scenario-planning discipline into leadership programs
- Creating forums for structured strategic debate
- Aligning incentives with long-term value creation

For CEOs and investors, the signal is clear: if the system rewards constant short-term reaction, strategic thinking will erode.

When strategic thinking is embedded across the organisation, coherence strengthens. Strategic clarity must then translate into disciplined execution. Leaders hold their teams accountable not only for activity but also for delivering on the strategic priorities they have set.

Digital catalyst

Turning technology change into organisational advantage

Leading digital change

Technology is no longer a function leaders can delegate. It must be embedded in leadership practice.

As SMG executive coach Charles Weiser emphasises, technology is now the environment in which leaders operate, not the department they oversee. This shift requires leaders to act as digital catalysts.

SMG partner and executive coach Mehul Joshi describes digital catalyst as a leadership capability rather than a technical initiative. It is the capacity to understand the strategic implications of emerging technologies, integrate digital tools into organisational practice, sponsor experimentation and ensure technology translates into organisation-wide value.

This capability requires engagement. Leaders must use the tools shaping their business, not to become experts, but to lead credibly and govern responsibly. Without that experience, it is difficult to understand how technology is reshaping productivity, decision-making, the customer experience, and workforce capabilities.

Digital catalyst is ultimately a human leadership capability operating in a digital environment.

When digital leadership stalls

Technology may sit in IT. AI experimentation may emerge from People and Talent functions. Transformation teams may run pilots. Yet the executive team often maintains oversight without shared ownership.

When digital leadership is weak, initiatives remain distributed rather than integrated.

A second distortion occurs when speed outpaces leadership conditions. Leaders announce AI strategies, launch pilots or invest in tools without aligning governance, cyber risk and workforce readiness. Externally, momentum appears strong. Internally, clarity and confidence lag.

Charles draws an important distinction: many organisations attempt to lead AI rather than lead in AI.

Leading AI treats it as a technical rollout. Leading in AI reflects the capability of being a digital catalyst: shaping culture, behaviour and organisation-wide adaptation.

In practice, this is a leadership change challenge, similar to large-scale technology transformations or cultural initiatives. It requires leaders to reshape behaviour, capability and organisational norms.

As Charles notes, strengthening this capability changes the organisation's technology metabolism: the speed at which it can learn, adapt, test and repeat.

But this requires something many organisations still struggle with - visible experimentation and failure.

AI demands environments that allow teams to fail forward. Yet many organisations still penalise failure. Without executive role modelling and psychological safety, digital progress stalls.

There is also a generational dimension. Many employees are already using AI tools, formally or informally. Leaders who are not actively engaging with these tools risk losing credibility and governance control.

Developing the digital catalyst capability deliberately closes that gap.

Superficial vs disciplined digital catalyst leadership

Superficial expression of the capability

- Announcing AI strategies without executive use or understanding
- Delegating digital initiatives to functional silos
- Treating AI purely as a productivity shortcut
- Avoiding experimentation to minimise the risk of failure

- Treating innovation and governance as separate conversations

Disciplined Digital Catalyst capability

- Executive team members actively using digital tools
- Clear governance and cyber risk oversight
- Alignment between digital ambition and business strategy
- Shared accountability across the executive team
- Visible role modelling of experimentation
- Willingness to learn from failed initiatives
- Measuring digital initiatives against organisation-wide value, productivity and capability uplift

In his work with executive teams, Mehul observes that while organisations speak about technology, what is really being tested is leadership. Collaboration, judgement and emotional intelligence determine whether digital ambition succeeds.

Charles reinforces this point. The technology itself will become widely accessible. Competitive advantage will not come from tools alone. It will come from a stronger strategy and a stronger human design - organisations that create value through culture, coordination and clarity.

Digital catalyst is, therefore, as much a human capability as it is a digital one.

Coaching pattern: When the capability is absent

Across multiple executive engagements, we observe a consistent pattern.

An organisation launches a high-profile AI initiative with strong executive endorsement.

Internally, however:

- Senior leaders are not actively using the tools themselves
- Performance systems still penalise failed experimentation
- Risk and cyber teams are consulted late
- Informal AI use occurs without clear guardrails

Momentum slows.

Only when the executive team strengthens its digital catalyst capability, modelling usage, clarifying governance boundaries and aligning performance expectations, does adoption accelerate.

Digital adoption follows leadership behaviour.

What leading digital change requires

For individual leaders, developing digital catalyst capability requires:

- Strategic digital and data fluency
- Active use of emerging tools to understand their impact
- Curiosity about how technology affects their function and their own work
- Comfort learning through experimentation
- Early attention to governance, ethical and cyber considerations

Leaders must engage directly. Without personal experience, sponsorship lacks credibility.

For executive teams, strengthening this capability requires:

- A clear organisation-wide change plan sponsored by the Board and the CEO
- Shared ownership of digital ambition
- Visible, hands-on role modelling
- Alignment between innovation, risk and compliance
- Willingness to allow initiatives to fail and learn
- Integration of digital capability into workforce and talent strategy

Digital catalyst is not about fear, hype or passive approval. It is about curiosity and stewardship.

Embedding digital capability across the organisation

Technical training alone will not build digital leadership capability.

Heads of Talent and Learning must:

- Embed digital catalyst into leadership frameworks
- Build AI literacy across senior cohorts
- Create structured experimentation environments
- Align performance metrics with responsible innovation
- Integrate governance and cyber awareness into leadership development

For CEOs, executive leadership teams and boards, the responsibility is strategic.

Digital catalyst capability now influences organisation-wide value, operational resilience and risk exposure. Governance and cyber oversight must sit alongside innovation ambition, not behind it.

When leaders develop this capability, technology strengthens culture, productivity and organisational capability and translates into sustained value.

“Technology is not a department we delegate to. It is the environment we lead within.”

*Charles Weiser,
SMG coach*

Empathy

Building trust and alignment under sustained pressure

Why empathy is commercially critical

Empathy is often misclassified as a soft skill. In reality, it is one of the most commercially consequential capabilities leaders develop.

SMG founding partner and executive coach Virginia Mansell has long held that leadership effectiveness rests on a leader's ability to understand how others experience them. Without that awareness, strategy rarely translates into commitment.

SMG partner and executive coach Mehul Joshi frames it simply: empathy is the ability to understand yourself and others and use that insight to build trust, connection and ultimately organisational performance. At its core, empathy is the capacity to recognise another person's emotional state and demonstrate that they have been understood.

Empathy is not a relational add-on. It is a leadership capability that directly influences trust, alignment and execution.

The operating environment no longer behaves in predictable waves. As SMG coach and behavioural change expert Amanda Bickerstaff describes it, earlier disruption felt like paddling into defined sets of waves, challenging but directional.

Today, leadership can feel more like being inside a washing machine: pressure from all directions, shifting currents and constant motion.

In that environment, leaders who maintain an authentic connection with their teams navigate more effectively. Those who disconnect, even subtly, create instability.

Empathy becomes the stabilising capability in unstable conditions. As work becomes more fragmented and social connections weaken, the leadership requirement to demonstrate empathy has intensified significantly.

Where the capability breaks under pressure

Empathy erodes quickly under stress.

When targets tighten, restructures occur, or technology reshapes roles, leaders often default to speed and control. Under performance pressure, many revert to command-and-control behaviours without recognising it. Yet this is precisely when empathy matters most.

Across executive teams, we observe a recurring miscalculation: leaders assume clarity equals alignment. They believe that once a strategy is articulated, commitment will follow.

It rarely does.

“ Psychological safety does not lower standards. It creates the conditions where people can meet them. ”

*Amanda Bickerstaff,
SMG executive coach*

Generational expectations intensify this tension. Younger cohorts often expect transparency, accessibility and authenticity from leaders. More experienced leaders may equate authority with decisiveness and emotional restraint. Without empathy, these differences are misread as entitlement or rigidity rather than differences in perspective and expectation.

What appears to be a capability gap is often a relational misalignment.

When empathy capability is weak:

- Trust erodes
- Side conversations multiply
- Execution slows

Empathy capability prevents these fractures from becoming systemic. For senior leaders, empathy determines whether strategy translates into coordinated action.

Superficial vs disciplined empathy leadership

Superficial expression of empathy

- Being agreeable to avoid tension
- Over-accommodating underperformance
- Softening difficult feedback

- Turning a blind eye to inconsistent or toxic behaviour from high performers
- Mistaking harmony for alignment
- Avoiding conflict because it feels uncomfortable

Disciplined empathy capability

- Staying present through deep listening and clarifying questions
- Seeking to understand before solving the problem
- Giving clear feedback that invites self-reflection
- Creating space for challenge without retaliation
- Holding others accountable while providing support
- Navigating generational differences with curiosity rather than judgement

Empathy at senior levels requires maturity. Leaders must be able to sit with discomfort, hear perspectives that challenge their own and acknowledge impact without defensiveness.

Virginia often emphasises that self-awareness is the entry point. Leaders who cannot recognise their own triggers, blind spots and behavioural patterns struggle to accurately read others.

Empathy begins with self-awareness before it extends to others.

Coaching pattern: When empathy unlocks performance

A senior executive was widely regarded as intelligent, commercially capable, and results-focused. Performance outcomes were strong. Yet feedback suggested a persistent trust gap.

360 interviews revealed a pattern. The leader was “performing” leadership, always presenting confidence and certainty. Vulnerability was absent. Conversations were efficient but lacked warmth. Colleagues struggled to connect beyond the façade.

The leader was not intentionally detached. They believed this was what senior leadership required.

Through coaching, the focus shifted to self-awareness. Immediate feedback was provided within the coaching relationship, noting when the leader was present and when they were emotionally withdrawn.

As trust deepened, so did behavioural experimentation. The leader practised acknowledging uncertainty, inviting input and sharing more of their authentic perspective.

The result was a shift from façade to connection, which transformed the leader’s influence.

Empathy transformed the leader’s influence.

What developing this capability requires

For individual leaders, strengthening empathy requires:

- Deep self-awareness
- Willingness to examine personal triggers and biases
- Openness to feedback
- Genuine listening beyond surface agreement
- Comfort having difficult conversations directly

Leaders must separate intention from impact. Good intentions do not guarantee a positive experience.

For executive teams, strengthening empathy involves:

- Normalising challenge and dissent
- Encouraging diverse perspectives in decision-making
- Addressing generational tension openly
- Creating feedback loops that are genuinely heard
- Modelling vulnerability without undermining authority

Empathy does not weaken leadership authority. It strengthens legitimacy.

Embedding empathy across the organisation

Empathy capability does not emerge from communication training alone.

Organisations that strengthen this capability tend to:

- Embed self-awareness practices into leadership development
- Use 360 feedback rigorously and constructively
- Incorporate generational and cultural intelligence into programs
- Coach leaders in conflict navigation rather than conflict avoidance
- Align performance systems so that trust-building behaviours are recognised

For CEOs, executive leadership teams and boards, empathy capability influences engagement, retention, adaptability and reputation.

In periods of restructuring or technological disruption, trust becomes a strategic asset.

Where empathy capability is weak, organisations experience resistance, attrition and fractured alignment. Where it is strong, difficult transitions are navigated with cohesion and speed.

Under pressure, empathy either holds or it disappears. The difference is visible in trust, execution and organisational cohesion.

Collaboration

Creating shared ownership without slowing decisions

Collaboration is not consensus

No leadership capability is more widely endorsed, or more poorly practised, than collaboration.

Today, complexity has outpaced what any one leader can know or control. Value is created at the intersections, across functions, geographies, systems and stakeholders. Leaders can no longer “own” outcomes end-to-end.

Collaboration is therefore not about inclusion for its own sake. It is about enabling momentum, coherence and sound decisions in complex systems.

SMG partner and executive coach Mehul Joshi observes that executive teams often confuse collaboration with consensus. They believe collaboration requires full agreement before progress can occur.

It does not.

Mehul frequently references what he calls the 70/100 principle. If there is 70 per cent alignment on a decision, the team should move forward, provided there is 100 per cent commitment to the decision once it is made.

Waiting for total consensus slows execution. Moving without commitment fractures alignment.

Effective collaboration sits between these two extremes. It preserves decision speed while sustaining shared ownership.

SMG executive coach and facilitator Sangeeta Leach sharpens the distinction further: real collaboration is not about shared meetings; it is about shared ownership. Organisation-wide results come from shared accountability, not shared airtime.

Where the capability breaks under pressure

Collaboration breaks down fastest at senior levels under pressure.

SMG founding partner and executive coach Virginia Mansell is direct about the root causes: lack of trust, lack of understanding and lack of genuine relationship.

At the executive level, leaders are often asked to prioritise organisation-wide outcomes over their own functional agendas. Yet when incentives, power dynamics or ego remain unresolved, collaboration becomes performative.

Common breakdown patterns include:

- Teams that appear aligned but avoid robust debate
- Avoiding conflict to keep harmony

“**Collaboration is not shared meetings. It is shared ownership.**”

*Sangeeta Leach,
SMG executive coach
and facilitator*

”

- Side conversations undermining agreed decisions
- Protecting one's "patch" rather than the organisation
- Holding meetings without clarifying who owns the outcome

Sangeeta notes that capability is rarely the issue. Capacity is. When leaders are stretched, collaboration feels inefficient. Under pressure, they revert to doing it themselves.

Ironically, this is when collaboration is most needed.

Virginia also highlights systemic blockers. Misalignment between the Board, the CEO and the executive team creates ambiguity about priorities and decision rights. Without clarity at the top, collaborative behaviour below becomes fragile.

Where trust is thin, collaboration collapses into compliance.

Constructive challenge and psychological safety

Mehul describes collaboration as requiring psychological safety, the confidence that challenging an idea will not carry personal consequence. Without that safety, silence replaces dissent.

But safety alone is not enough.

High-performing executive teams actively practise constructive challenge. They test assumptions, question thinking, and bring different perspectives into the room to improve decision-making.

Constructive challenge is not confrontation. It is disciplined disagreement in service of better outcomes.

Without constructive challenge, teams avoid conflict to keep the peace, and important issues go unspoken.

With it, collaboration strengthens decision quality and builds trust.

Superficial vs disciplined collaboration leadership

Superficial collaboration

- Inviting input but already knowing the outcome
- Equating agreement with alignment
- Avoiding conflict to keep harmony
- Holding meetings without clarifying ownership
- Confusing activity with progress

Disciplined collaboration leadership

- Creating clarity about objectives and roles upfront
- Encouraging constructive challenge for better outcomes
- Being clear about when consultation ends, and the decision begins
- Committing openly and publicly to organisation-wide decisions once made
- Sharing accountability across boundaries

The 70/100 principle depends on mutual trust. Leaders in the minority must uphold decisions they disagree with. If the 30 per cent undermines the decision after the meeting, collaboration fractures.

Trust sustains collaboration beyond agreement.

Coaching pattern: When collaboration fails quietly

A senior executive was leading a major transformation requiring peer cooperation across divisions.

Meetings appeared productive. Colleagues nodded in agreement. No one openly resisted.

Yet deadlines slipped. Delivery stalled.

Through coaching, it became clear that the leader's drive for alignment was experienced as pressure to agree. People signalled assent but withheld commitment. Trade-offs were not explicitly discussed. Roles were blurred.

The shift came when the leader:

- Clarified shared outcomes and why the decision mattered
- Explicitly invited challenge
- Named the trade-offs in the room
- Confirmed decision rights before closing discussion

Engagement increased, even among those who disagreed. Progress accelerated because ownership was genuine.

Collaboration moved from surface agreement to disciplined alignment.

Embedding collaboration across the organisation

Collaboration capability cannot be built through off-sites alone.

Organisations that embed strong collaboration capability tend to:

- Clarify organisation-wide priorities visibly and repeatedly
- Align Board, CEO and executive messaging
- Reinforce shared accountability in performance systems
- Address incentive misalignment directly
- Coach senior leaders in conflict navigation rather than conflict avoidance

When collaboration weakens, silos strengthen, rework increases, and decision paralysis follows.

Where collaboration is strong:

- Decisions move faster
- Problems surface earlier
- Commitment holds under scrutiny

Collaboration today is not about being agreeable. It is about sustaining shared ownership under pressure.

Under stress, collaboration either deepens or fractures. The consequences are immediate.

Integrity

Holding the line when it would be easier not to

Integrity is revealed under pressure

Integrity is an easy word to use. Many organisations have integrity listed as a value. Most leaders would describe themselves as ethical.

In today's environment, integrity is not demonstrated in theory. It is revealed in decisions.

SMG founding partner and executive coach, Virginia Mansell, observes that leaders are being tested most where self-interest collides with organisation-wide interest. Insecurity, ego, short-term gain and fatigue can subtly distort judgement. Leaders can react to their own discomfort rather than hold to principle. They can be tempted to believe the grass is greener elsewhere rather than reflect and stay the course.

Integrity is not about public statements. It is about disciplined judgement when trade-offs are uncomfortable.

At its core, integrity reflects character: the willingness to do the right thing as a leader and as a human being, even when circumstances are complex.

Under sustained pressure, what erodes organisations is rarely dramatic misconduct. There are repeated inconsistencies between what leaders say and what they do.

Where integrity is challenged

Integrity shows up in:

1. Ethical trade-offs where short-term financial gain competes with long-term value
2. Transparency during regulatory or reputational scrutiny
3. Alignment between the Board, CEO and executive leadership around core values
4. Accountability when strategy execution falters

Virginia notes that misalignment at the top is one of the most powerful 'quiet eroders' of integrity. When values are stated but not consistently upheld, or when financial targets override agreed principles, credibility begins to fracture.

Recent public examples across sectors demonstrate how quickly confidence can deteriorate when leadership cannot align with regulatory obligations and core values.

Integrity is not simply about character. It is systemic alignment between stated values, strategy and execution.

“ Integrity, in practice, is not just fairness or ethics. The leaders who personify it demonstrate an ‘X factor’.

*Lynn Rasmussen,
SMG executive coach*

”

What leaders of integrity do differently

SMG Executive Coach Lynn Rasmussen makes a clear distinction. Leaders known for integrity do more than comply with standards. They are consistent in words and actions over time. They do what they say they will do. They act without ego and remain steady when challenged.

That steadiness builds trust. And over time, it builds legacy.

Where integrity quietly erodes

Integrity rarely collapses overnight. It erodes through patterns such as:

1. Avoiding difficult conversations
2. Inconsistent application of standards across divisions
3. Tolerating high performers, or turning a blind eye to rainmakers, whose behaviour contradicts stated values
4. Openly endorsing one position while privately supporting another
5. Prioritising short-term fiscal outcomes over long-term principles

When leadership sends mixed signals, trust declines.

When credibility weakens, collaboration deteriorates.

When collaboration deteriorates, performance follows.

Developing integrity as a leadership capability

Integrity is reinforced through:

1. Clear articulation of purpose and values
2. Explicit linking of strategy (“the what”) to execution behaviour (“the how”)
3. Consistent consequences for behaviour, regardless of status or performance
4. Encouraging constructive challenge at senior levels
5. Visible accountability from the top

Virginia emphasises that integrity must be driven from the Board and CEO level. Culture follows leadership alignment. Purpose-driven organisations build integrity into their DNA. Without strong sponsorship, integrity remains rhetoric.

For individual leaders, integrity requires self-awareness. Insecurity, ego and fear of loss can quietly distort judgement. Reflective practice and coaching help leaders recognise when decisions are being driven by discomfort rather than principle.

When decisions challenge integrity

In stable environments, integrity can remain largely untested. In volatile environments, pressure reveals it.

When financial targets tighten, when regulatory scrutiny intensifies, when reputations are at stake, leaders either hold the line or recalibrate.

In moments of consequence, integrity is either disciplined or diluted.

Five disciplined behaviours of leaders known for integrity:

Consistency with values

These leaders live and breathe core values. Complex decisions may be just as difficult for them, but they hold the line, even when unpopular or when outcomes are uncertain. This consistency builds trust because people know what to expect.

Accountability

They create and communicate clear accountabilities aligned to organisational purpose and strategy. They expect alignment. They hold others to account. Crucially, they take accountability for their own actions and are honest when they have “got it wrong.” It is disciplined integrity in action.

Transparent communication

Under pressure, they communicate frequently and in plain language. They

provide context. They are upfront about uncertainty. Stakeholders may not like every decision, but they respect the clarity.

Constructive challenge

Leaders of integrity create environments where it is safe to speak up, where there is psychological safety. They invite challenge and dissent in service of better decisions.

Calm steadiness

Their steadiness builds collective confidence. Even when paddling furiously beneath the surface, they project stability that reassures teams and stakeholders.

Integrity, in this sense, intersects directly with collaboration and calm resilience.

Lynn Rasmussen, SMG Executive Coach

Leading with curiosity

Prioritising inquiry over premature certainty

Curiosity is tested under pressure

SMG Executive Coach and Mentor Kerrie Kelly observes that curiosity at senior levels is continually gathering information to ensure perspective.

In stable conditions, curiosity can feel developmental. In volatile conditions, it becomes decisive.

Under pressure, leaders tend to narrow their lens. They default to what has worked before. They protect their position. They seek certainty.

Kerrie notes that when leaders feel frustrated by misaligned stakeholders, slowed by bureaucracy, threatened by internal competition, or lacking clarity, coaching or feedback, curiosity is often the first capability to contract.

Curiosity needs to be maintained so critical signals are not missed when leaders are too close to the issue. Otherwise, perspective narrows precisely when it needs to be widened.

Where curiosity narrows

Closed leadership patterns often appear as:

1. Avoiding difficult conversations
2. Confirmation bias - favouring information that supports existing views

3. "Circling the wagons" around their position in an attempt to protect themselves from adversity
4. Making trade-offs in strategy and tactics to massage egos, suit personalities or avoid making a mistake

That is not curiosity. It is self-protection.

Genuine curiosity requires the willingness to see what may be uncomfortable.

Balancing courage and curiosity

SMG Partner and Executive Coach Mehul Joshi developed a simple but powerful framing: effective leadership requires a balance between courage and curiosity.

Too much courage without curiosity becomes assertion without inquiry. Too much curiosity without courage becomes hesitation without decision-making.

Under pressure, leaders often default to courage. They assert. They defend. They move quickly to a solution.

SMG Executive Coach and Mentor Robyn Stubbs observes that the boards that perform well are those where there is genuine curiosity from every director around the table. Curiosity strengthens strategic judgement.

“Boards that succeed are those where there is genuine curiosity from every director around the table.”

*Robyn Stubbs,
SMG executive coach
and mentor*

Similarly, SMG Executive Coach Charles Weiser notes that in environments shaped by emerging technology and AI, leaders must be inquisitive and creative, and create environments where ideas win or lose, not people.

What disciplined curiosity looks like

Kerrie offers a disciplined model for developing curiosity: inside-out and outside-in.

Inside-out requires leaders to examine their own triggers, biases and default responses. What activates a fight-or-flight reaction? Where does ego distort judgement? What assumptions are being treated as fact?

Outside-in requires leaders to widen their perspective beyond the immediate business cycle. It involves lifting eyes to geopolitical shifts, emerging technologies, global competitors and industries at different life-cycle stages. It means thinking beyond the three-year strategic plan toward a longer horizon of what may be probable and possible over ten years or more.

Curiosity stretches both self-awareness and strategic foresight.

It requires leaders to broaden the range and depth of sources they rely on, to listen deeply to differing analyses and interpretations, and to remain open in challenging conversations with those who see the world differently.

Where leaders stall

Leaders most commonly stall when they:

1. Protect position rather than pursue insight
2. Default to certainty rather than exploration
3. Confuse busyness with learning
4. Avoid a challenge to preserve comfort
5. Disengage when they feel their perspective will not be heard

In the current environment of AI acceleration and geopolitical volatility, some leaders adopt a “wait and see” posture, preferring to follow rather than lead.

Yet evidence suggests that employees are often experimenting with new technologies despite formal policies or governance structures.

The risk of inaction is not neutrality. It is a slow decline.

Curious leaders understand this and move toward informed experimentation rather than defensive delay.

Embedding curiosity in leadership practice

Curiosity strengthens when organisations:

1. Encourage disciplined challenge at senior levels
2. Create environments where it is safe to question assumptions
3. Reward inquiry as well as execution
4. Expose leaders to diverse perspectives and longer-term scenario planning

Importantly, culture and incentives matter. Without visible sponsorship and support from senior leadership, curiosity collapses under the pressure of performance.

If leaders are penalised for experimentation, experimentation stops.

If dissent is punished, inquiry disappears.

Curiosity survives only where it is actively supported.

The difference under pressure

In stable environments, curiosity can feel optional. In volatile environments, it becomes essential.

Under pressure, leaders either narrow their lens or widen it. They either protect a position or pursue insight. They either default to certainty or remain open.

Curiosity is not about collecting information. It is about disciplined openness in the pursuit of better judgement.

“Curiosity at senior levels is the discipline of widening perspective when pressure pushes you to narrow it.”

*Kerrie Kelly,
SMG executive coach and mentor*

Calm resilience

Maintaining stability and direction under sustained pressure

Calm is contagious, so is stress

Leaders are operating in environments shaped by geopolitical volatility, regulatory scrutiny, technological acceleration and sustained performance pressure. The intensity is no longer episodic. It is continuous.

Calm resilience is no longer optional. It is the capability to absorb pressure, regain composure quickly and continue leading with clarity and steadiness.

SMG founding partner and executive coach Virginia Mansell observes that some experienced leaders genuinely thrive in this climate. Others, particularly those less accustomed to sustained change, experience declining productivity as stress and fatigue accumulate.

The difference is not personality. It is capability.

A leader's emotional state under pressure becomes the organisation's reference point. When leaders remain steady, communicate clearly and stay visible during disruption, teams stabilise. They acknowledge what has been lost or disrupted while also providing a clear path

forward. When leaders transmit stress or volatility, uncertainty spreads quickly, and performance falters.

Calm resilience shapes the emotional climate of the organisation.

Leadership under pressure 2026

Calm resilience is not emotional suppression

Calm resilience is sometimes mistaken for stoicism or emotional suppression.

Virginia is clear: genuine calm resilience is a lived capability. It cannot be learnt from a textbook. Leaders who demonstrate it can express empathy, acknowledge difficulty and still provide clear direction.

They hold operational and strategic complexity simultaneously, a rare but powerful advantage.

SMG Partner and Executive Coach Mehul Joshi often reframes pressure moments in practical terms. "When dealing with a setback, leaders often get sucked into a vortex of 'why did this happen?'. However, the critical question to ask is:

"What must I do?"

That shift from reacting emotionally to acting deliberately changes the quality of response.

Calm resilience is not the absence of emotion. It is disciplined regulation in service of purpose.

“Calm is contagious.
So is anxiety.”

The energy discipline behind calm resilience

Harvard Business Review's High-Performance Pyramid, originally developed by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, frames sustained performance as an energy discipline across four interconnected capacities: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual (purpose).

SMG applies a similar layered model in its coaching, often reframing "spiritual" as clarity of purpose.

Mehul describes calm resilience as the deliberate building and management of energy across these dimensions.

At the base sits physical capacity: sleep, recovery, boundaries and endurance. Decision quality erodes long before leaders consciously recognise depletion.

Above that is emotional capacity: awareness of triggers and the ability to regulate responses that may unsettle others.

Mental capacity enables perspective. Resilient leaders rehearse scenarios. They mentally walk through potential disruptions so that when events occur, they are prepared.

At the top sits purpose. Leaders anchored in a clear sense of purpose are less destabilised by turbulence.

They return repeatedly to what matters and what must be done.

The risk is rarely isolated moments of stress. It is constant, compounding pressure without recovery. Without conscious recovery disciplines, judgement erodes gradually and often visibly.

Calm resilience is built through energy discipline and recovery, not intensity alone.

Where the capability breaks down

Calm resilience most often breaks down when leaders:

- Mask stress rather than manage it
- Overwork without recovery
- Avoid difficult conversations
- Confuse intensity with effectiveness

Some leaders attempt to "power through" sustained pressure. Over time, this depletes energy reserves and narrows perspective.

Generational dynamics can add tension. Younger cohorts may expect transparency and emotional openness. More experienced leaders may equate authority with restraint. Calm resilience now requires integrating steadiness with humanity.

Developing calm resilience

Calm resilience strengthens through:

- Building physical recovery disciplines
- Increasing awareness of emotional triggers
- Practising scenario rehearsal before crises occur
- Clarifying purpose and decision principles
- Embedding deliberate recovery into leadership routines

Coaching plays a critical role. Mentors help leaders recognise when they have navigated pressure well and how to replicate those behaviours. They help address deeper tensions between performance and personal goals.

Virginia also emphasises the systemic dimension. Leaders trying new behaviours under pressure require sponsorship and backing from above. Without that support, experimentation feels risky and resilience weakens.

Calm resilience strengthens when support, alignment and long-term commitment are visible.

When pressure reveals calm resilience

In stable environments, resilience can remain background capability.

In volatile environments, it becomes visible.

When crisis strikes, when performance falters, when scrutiny intensifies, leaders either transmit steadiness or amplify anxiety.

Under pressure, resilience is either embedded or exposed. Resilient leaders create both an internal and external dialogue: what have we learned, how do we reconcile the disruption, and how do we move forward.

Lived examples of calm resilience

SMG executive coach and mentor Mark Elliott describes consistent patterns in leaders who demonstrate calm resilience over time.

In one case, a CEO confronted with a tragic workplace suicide travelled to a remote site the following morning to address 1,000 employees directly. He acknowledged his own emotions, outlined available support and remained present throughout the day. His steadiness and empathy created stability at a deeply unsettling moment.

In another example, a project leader navigating severe time and budget pressures maintained a calm, focused and quietly confident presence before executives, the CEO and the Board. Her composure during high-stakes presentations allowed stakeholders to concentrate on solutions rather than anxiety.

In both cases, calm resilience was not theatrical. It was embedded.

Patterns of calm resilience observed in practice

Leaders who demonstrate sustained calm resilience typically show:

- A stable personal foundation
- Comfort with their work-life balance, even when working hard
- A long history of practising resilience
- An optimistic orientation, quickly identifying a path forward
- The ability to act autonomously under pressure
- Little visible need for external reassurance during adversity

Mark Elliott,

SMG executive coach and mentor

Leadership revealed under pressure

Leadership capability has never been static. It evolves with the environment in which it is exercised. What has shifted is the intensity and continuity of the pressure placed upon leaders.

The seven capabilities outlined in this paper are not new ideas. Strategic thinking, digital catalyst, collaboration, empathy, integrity, curiosity and calm resilience have long been associated with effective leadership. What has changed is that they are now tested simultaneously and continuously. They can no longer exist as isolated strengths. They must operate together under sustained complexity.

In stable conditions, capability gaps can remain hidden. Under pressure, they become visible. Clarity fragments. Collaboration fractures. Integrity erodes quietly. Curiosity narrows. Resilience depletes.

When these capabilities are disciplined and embedded, they compound. They create coherence, trust and forward momentum and an organisation that does not just survive pressure but performs through it.

For Boards, CEOs, and executive leadership teams, the question is no longer whether these capabilities exist within the organisation. The question is whether they are sufficiently embedded to hold under pressure.

In today's environment, pressure is structural. And it reveals leadership quickly. Pressure does not create the gaps. It finds them.

Acknowledgements

This paper reflects the collective experience and insights of SMG's senior partners and executive coaches and mentors. It also draws on insights from SMG's leadership advisory and executive coaching work with CEOs, boards and senior leadership teams across industries.

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The authors would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Stephenson Mansell Group colleagues whose executive coaching engagements, board and leadership experience and ongoing observations informed the development of this Perspectives paper.

Robyn Stubbs, Charles Weiser, Kerrie Kelly, Lynn Rasmussen, Amanda Bickerstaff, Sangeeta Leach and Mark Elliott, whose coaching engagements and observations continue to shape our perspective.

About Stephenson Mansell Group

Stephenson Mansell Group (SMG) is one of the region's most established executive leadership development firm's, trusted by CEOs, boards and executive leadership teams to strengthen leadership capability and organisational performance.

Through executive coaching, mentoring and leadership advisory work, SMG supports leaders navigating complex operating environments, helping them strengthen decision-making, alignment and leadership effectiveness.

Over more than 25 years, SMG has supported more than 10,000 leaders across over 600 organisations, including ASX-listed companies, government agencies and multinational organisations across Australia, New Zealand and Asia.

The firm brings together a network of more than 60 senior executive coaches and mentors, including former CEOs and senior leaders. This combination of commercial experience, behavioural insight and structured leadership frameworks enables SMG to support leadership development at individual, team and organisational levels.

About the SMG Leadership Institute

The SMG Leadership Institute is the learning and development platform of Stephenson Mansell Group. It provides organisations and leaders with access to curated leadership courses, digital learning resources and blended development programs designed to strengthen leadership capability at scale.

The Institute combines online learning, leadership insights and moderated programs with SMG's coaching and mentoring expertise. Organisations use the platform to complement executive coaching, support leadership programs and provide ongoing development for emerging and established leaders.

Through a combination of structured courses, thought leadership resources and facilitated learning experiences, the Institute enables organisations to extend leadership development beyond individual coaching engagements and embed continuous leadership learning across teams and organisations.

The logo for SMG, consisting of the letters 'SMG' in a white, sans-serif font. The letter 'G' has a small orange square at its bottom right corner.

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