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CAREY BUSINESS SCHOOL

Center for
Innovative Leadership

Present Moment Leadership

**A framework for leading
and developing leaders in
the modern world of work**

About CIL

The Center for Innovative Leadership (CIL) advances knowledge and builds the capacity for innovative leadership in modern organizations. Housed at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, the Center brings together faculty research, student learning, and engagement with leaders across sectors. Through its research, teaching, and experiential programs, CIL helps students and practitioners develop the judgment and capabilities needed to lead amid complexity, collaboration, and change. Learn more about CIL at <https://cil.carey.jhu.edu/>.

This whitepaper introduces Present Moment Leadership, the research-informed model that anchors much of CIL's teaching. Grounded in behavioral and situational leadership scholarship, PML begins with a practical question: What does this moment ask of me as a leader? The paper explains how leaders can assess what a situation requires and calibrate their expressions of empathy, competence, and agility accordingly. Rather than prescribing a single ideal approach, it offers leaders and those who develop them a shared language for reflection, growth, and more effective action.

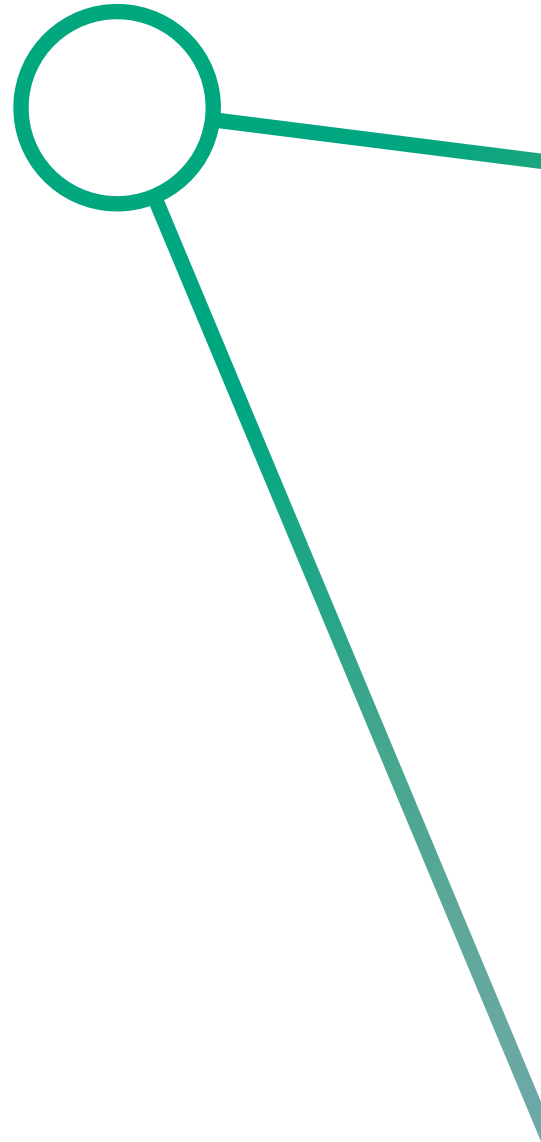


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SECTION 01

Introducing Present Moment Leadership

Introduction

Today's organizational landscape is characterized by rapid change, competing priorities, and increasing interdependence across roles, teams, and systems. Leaders are navigating a context where task demands, team dynamics, and environmental pressures are continuously in flux, often simultaneously, and at a pace that leaves little room for achieving any long-term equilibrium or stable alignment.

Researchers have long sought to explain how leaders can optimize their behavior to meet the needs of those they lead and help maximize team and organizational performance.

Recognizing the dynamic challenges of leadership, many of the field's most influential theories emphasize matching leadership styles to the characteristics and conditions of tasks and team members. Yet these are often described in relatively stable terms, such as teams with differing levels of competence and commitment, or individuals at different levels of maturity or readiness. Situational Leadership Theory (SLT), developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in the 1970s, proposes that "an optimal style of supervision [...] can be prescribed for given levels of subordinate maturity," where maturity is defined in terms of competence and commitment.^[1] But how stable are these qualities in practice, particularly in today's dynamic work environments?

While these theories have been highly influential, particularly within learning and development, they are built on the assumption that key aspects of the leadership context are sufficiently stable to allow for consistent assessment and accurate alignment. That is, the characteristics of individuals or groups are treated as enduring, with leaders able to orient around them accordingly, like landmarks. This logic has proven intuitively appealing and remains widely used, even as empirical studies have failed to provide clear support for its core predictions.^[2] Even refined versions of the situational leadership model retain an assumption of stability despite efforts to address these critiques.^[3]

Leadership today therefore requires ongoing adjustment rather than periodic alignment to traditionally labelled, fixed follower characteristics. The contemporary leadership experience is less about selecting a single appropriate style to be refined and developed, and more about responding effectively to a continuous stream of situational demands by drawing on a repertoire of behaviors,

tools, and approaches. While some contemporary leadership frameworks acknowledge this dynamism, they tend to stop short of offering explicit guidance on the behaviors individual leaders might enact in each moment as conditions evolve.

These developments point to a gap between how leadership is conceptualized and how it is enacted in practice. Existing models have provided valuable insights into the importance of adapting behavior to context, but they tend to rely on relatively static representations of that context. Meanwhile, the realities of modern leadership demand a more dynamic understanding, one that accounts for the moment-to-moment shifts that leaders must interpret and navigate. We believe that addressing this gap requires a fundamental rethinking of how leadership behavior is conceptualized, categorized, and enacted.

What is clear today, for researchers and practitioners alike, is that the conditions leaders are operating under are rarely stable.



Present Moment Leadership

A Framework for Leading and Developing Leaders in the Modern World of Work

The field of leadership research has become increasingly fragmented over time. The proliferation of newly documented leadership styles, exacerbated by their conceptual overlap and the absence of a well-validated overarching framework, makes it challenging to develop a coherent understanding of leadership in practice.^[4] As a result, there are growing calls for greater conceptual clarity and integration,^[5] including more systematic ways of categorizing and organizing leadership behaviors,^[6] moving toward a clearer taxonomy that helps leaders navigate the range of options available to them in practice as they respond to evolving situations and challenges.

Present Moment Leadership (PML) represents a shift in focus, from applying predefined leadership styles to interpreting and responding to the specific demands of each leadership moment as it unfolds.

Rather than asking what kind of leader one naturally is, or that one is supposed to be—questions that have preoccupied leaders and management academics for decades—PML focuses on a more immediate question, grounded in the realities of practice: what does this moment ask of me as a leader? From this perspective, leadership effectiveness is not measured by the consistent application of any particular style, but by the capacity to interpret and respond in the moment, and with an increased emphasis on behavioral range and flexibility to enable that response.

To support this moment-level view, PML draws on well-established research identifying three broad and empirically supported categories of leadership behavior: task-related, relational-related, and change-related.^[7] These categories reflect a long-standing effort in leadership research to identify broad domains of behavior through which leaders influence performance and organizational outcomes.

At a high level, each of these categories captures a distinct but complementary function of leadership. Task-related behaviors are concerned with direction, coordination, and the effective execution of work. Relational-related behaviors focus on building trust, supporting individuals, and maintaining the quality of interpersonal relationships, while change-related behaviors address the need for adaptation, learning, and innovation in response to evolving conditions. These domains provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how leaders contribute to performance, by ensuring efficient execution, sustaining relationships, and enabling adaptation over time.

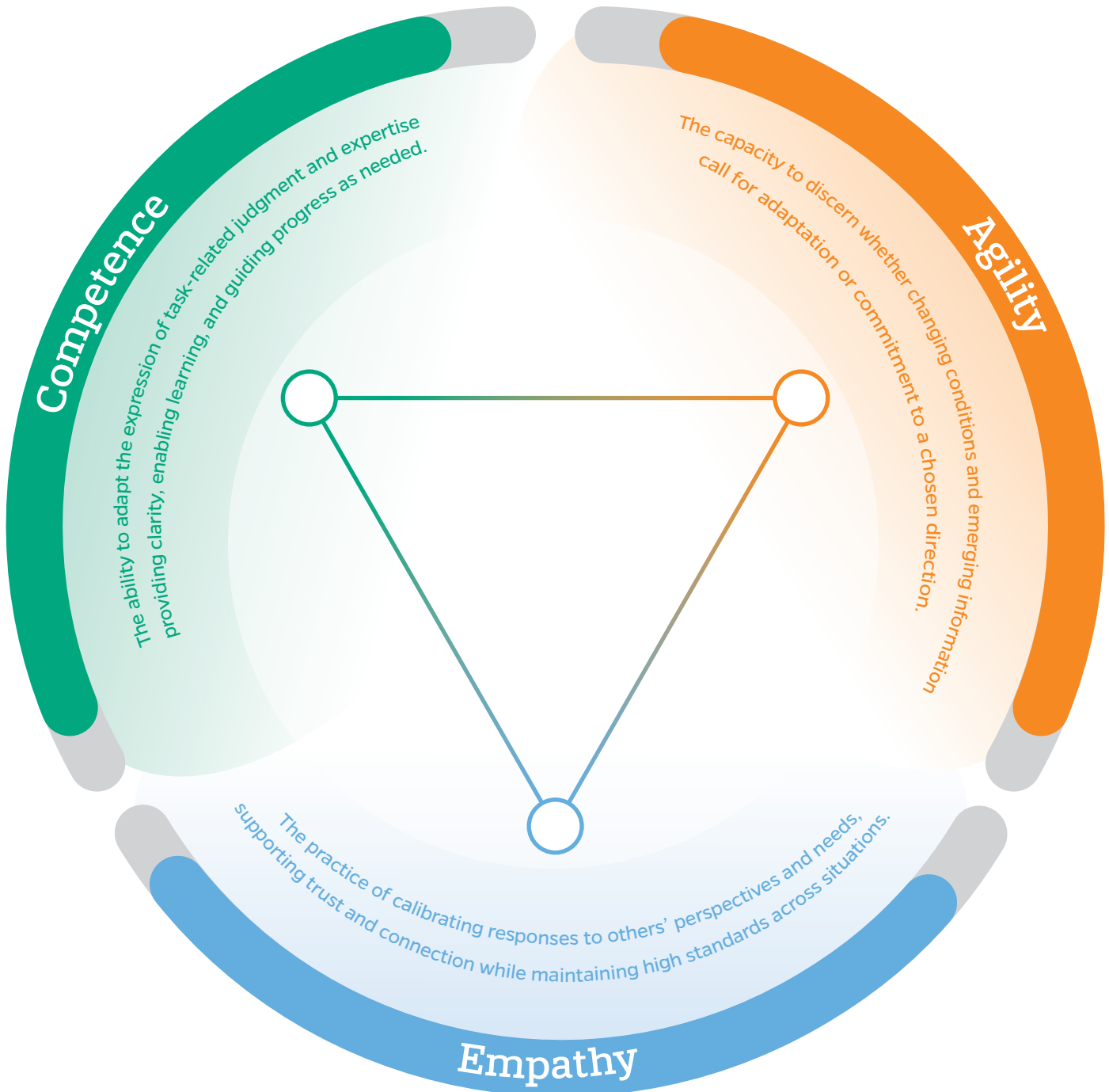
Building on this foundation, Present Moment Leadership organizes leader behavior into three interrelated elements: empathy, competence, and agility—each conceptualized as individual-level sources of behavior that leaders can draw on and adjust to address the needs of a particular moment.

These elements correspond broadly to relational-, task-, and change-focused forms of leadership behavior, respectively, but they are framed in terms of how leaders activate and act on their own knowledge, strengths, and capacities in the moment. PML seeks to translate and integrate these behavioral taxonomies into a form that is more directly applicable in real-time leadership practice.

PML proposes that each of these elements is activated in a leadership moment but expressed in different ways and to differing degrees. Empathy varies as leaders calibrate their attention and responses to others' perspectives and needs, supporting trust and effective interpersonal engagement. Competence varies as leaders apply task-related judgment and expertise, shifting between providing direction and enabling others to act. Agility varies as leaders determine whether changing conditions and emerging information call for adaptation or for steadiness, focus, and follow-through. Together, these three elements offer a coherent and practical way to parse the distinct behavioral demands present in any given leadership moment.

The Three Elements of Present Moment Leadership

Each element represents a distinct but complementary dimension of leadership behavior, which can be expressed in varying ways and to different degrees depending on what the situation needs.



Flexing Leadership Behavior in the Moment

Empathy, competence, and agility are always available to a leader. Rather than choose between them, the aim of PML is to determine how much emphasis each requires in a given situation.

Central to the PML framework is the notion that effective leadership depends on how leaders can flex the relative expression of these elements to meet the needs of the moment, rather than simply selecting a single approach to be maximized.

We have conceptualized these elements as individual-level sources of leader behavior that can be intensified, moderated, or intentionally held back as required. Leadership involves actively working with these elements in real time, adjusting the extent and form of their use as the situation unfolds.

Different moments and scenarios call for different combinations of these three elements. At times, the situation may require leaders to dial up and more fully apply their own competence, for example. This might include clarifying priorities, making decisions, or leading by example. At other times a greater emphasis on empathy may be needed: understanding perspectives, supporting individuals, and maintaining trust. In other moments, agility may come to the fore, as leaders respond to uncertainty, adapt to changing conditions, or facilitate experimentation.

Every moment requires some degree of each element—leadership is always a reflection of empathy, competence, and agility—but as situations evolve and unfold, leaders are called upon to flex each of these elements to fit the needs of the moment.

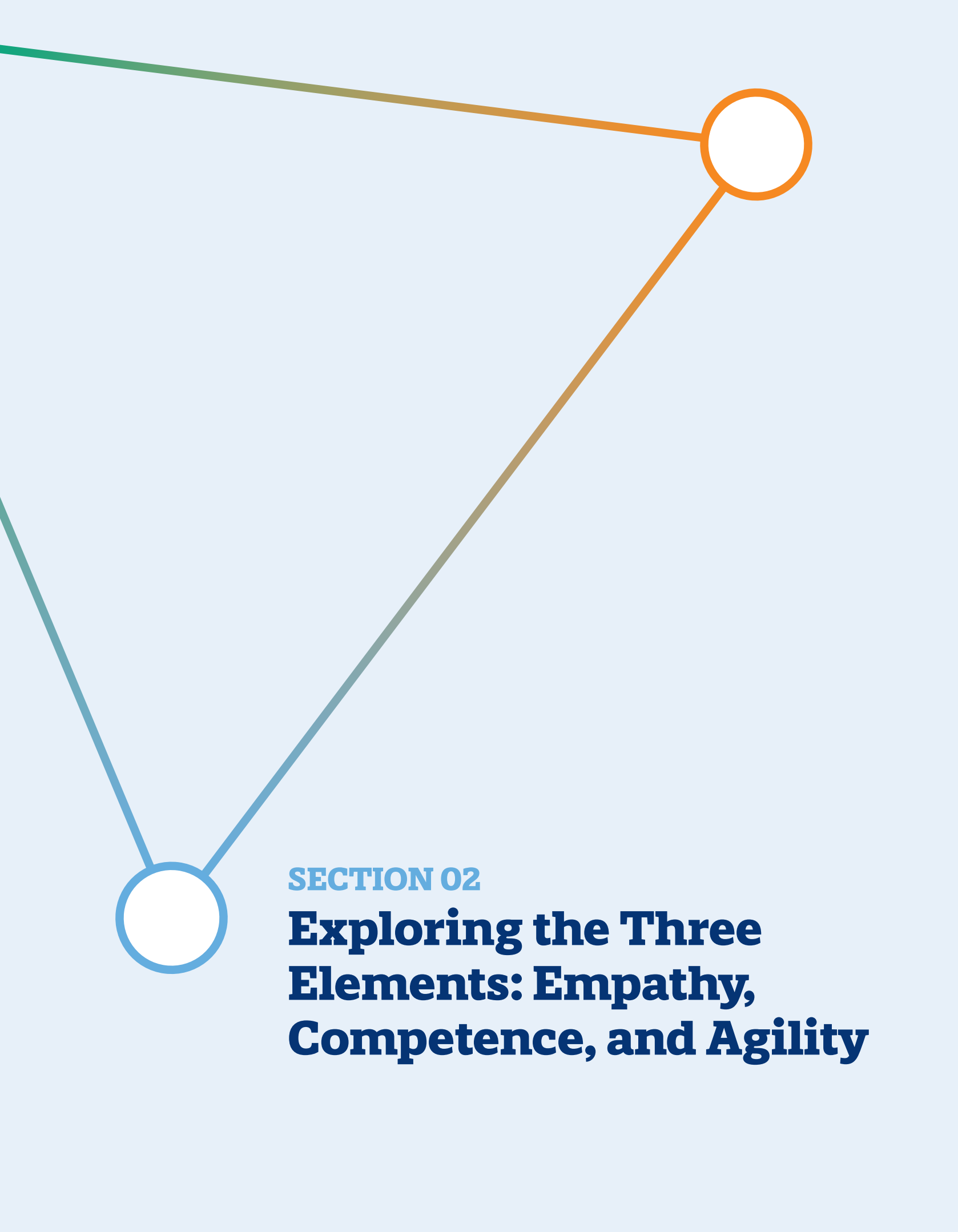
A key tenet of PML is to view leadership as a dynamic process. Rather than applying a fixed style, leaders are continually interpreting context and adjusting how these elements are expressed—sometimes within the same interaction, or as they move between different tasks, projects, teams or environments.

The Key Question: What does this moment ask of me as a leader?

PML provides a practical diagnostic lens for leaders. At its core is a simple but impactful question: What does this moment ask of me as a leader? By directing attention to the immediacy of the situation, leaders are encouraged to assess how empathy, competence, and agility may need to be expressed in different ways, and to dial in an appropriate response. In this sense, PML can be understood as a heuristic-like resource that supports leaders in diagnosing their own challenges and making more deliberate, context-sensitive choices in the moment.

Developing range and precision across the elements

Present Moment Leadership also provides a practical lens for leadership development. If leadership effectiveness depends on flexing empathy, competence, and agility in response to the moment, then leadership development is a process of expanding both the range and precision with which each element can be accessed and put to work with skill and dexterity. Each element can be thought of as a dial or gauge. As leaders gain experience, deepen their capabilities, and develop a broader repertoire of behavioral responses, they can adjust each element across a wider range. The colored bars in the PML diagram represent how this range expands through development. However, flexing is not simply increasing or decreasing the quantity of empathy, competence, or agility. It also involves selecting the form through which each is expressed. This enables more finely tuned responses—for example, dialing empathy up or down with greater sensitivity may require shifting from affective empathy (more visible emotional attunement and concern) toward more cognitive empathy (clearer, more detached perspective-taking),^[8] or vice versa depending on what the situation dictates. In this way, leadership development enhances how precisely, appropriately, and ultimately effectively, leaders can respond to a given situation.



SECTION 02

Exploring the Three Elements: Empathy, Competence, and Agility

Empathy

Why empathy?

A research-grounded understanding of the impact of leading with empathy is central to the theory of Present Moment Leadership. This is a leadership behavior that has been consistently linked to leadership effectiveness and tangible workplace outcomes. Research based on a large international sample of 6,731 managers across 38 countries, for example, found that leaders whose subordinates rated them more highly for displaying empathic behavior were also rated as stronger performers by their bosses.^[9]

Beyond individual performance, empathy also shapes the quality of relationships leaders are able to build within their teams. As Sadri et al. note, “empathy is a construct that is fundamental to leadership,”^[10] enabling leaders to understand and respond to the needs and perspectives of others. This capacity is critical in contemporary organizations, where leadership depends on collaboration across boundaries, alignment among diverse stakeholders, and the creation of shared direction and commitment.

In practice, empathic leadership might be observed when inclusion or “voice” are at stake. In meetings or team interactions, for example, some team members may find that their ideas or concerns receive little attention. Others may hesitate to speak up because they fear appearing incompetent or uninformed. In these moments, empathy can play a crucial role—helping leaders notice the dynamics beneath the silence and whose perspectives are not making it into the room. Leaders who respond empathically here are better able to create the conditions for contribution and ensure participation is not the sole preserve of the most confident or dominant voices.

Evidence also suggests that empathic leadership can shape employees’ everyday experience of work. Scott et al. followed 60 IT employees working under 13 managers over a two-week period, collecting 436 daily observations. They found manager empathy affected employees’ well-being in multiple ways. Employees with more empathic managers reported fewer day-to-day physical symptoms, including headaches.

Manager empathy also strengthened the relationship between teams’ progress toward their goals and employees’ positive feelings at work. The researchers suggest that empathic managers may create a

climate of understanding and support that influences how employees experience both the demands and accomplishments of everyday work.^[11]

Taken together, this body of research positions empathy as a critical leadership capability with measurable implications for leader performance, workplace relationships, and employees’ day-to-day experience of work. The inclusion of empathy within the PML framework reflects its strong empirical grounding, as well as the central role it plays in shaping how leaders engage with others in the moment.

Central to PML, empathy is context-sensitive and can be moderated

Though often conceptualized in a simpler form (empathy as a single, uniform response akin to caring), empathy is something that can be expressed in different ways and adjusted depending on the situation. Crucially, it is not fixed.^[12] Individuals who may not naturally be highly empathic can still demonstrate empathy under the right conditions, while for others it is something that may be de-emphasized or restrained.

This points to an important implication for leadership: though sometimes portrayed as a trait that leaders either possess or lack, empathy can also be characterized as a capability that can be brought forward, shaped, and moderated in response to what is happening around them (i.e., induced or situational empathy).

This context sensitivity is particularly important in organizational settings, where the demands placed on leaders can shift rapidly. A review by Arghode et al. highlights the role of empathic leadership in fostering trust, respect, loyalty, and commitment, conditions they note are especially critical during periods of change and uncertainty.^[13] In these moments, leaders who can accurately understand and respond to employee concerns are better able to sustain commitment, support collaboration, and maintain alignment across teams.

Consider, for example, a restructuring that leaves employees uncertain about their roles. Some team members may withdraw, while others may show signs of stress, affecting performance. In these moments, dialing up empathy—which could include

pausing to understand, asking questions, or signaling support—can create the conditions for openness and trust, enabling leaders to respond to the underlying anxieties rather than simply managing symptoms like missed deadlines or disengagement.

Effective leadership in these emotionally laden situations is not simply a case of having the capacity to show empathy but having the skill and ability to regulate how empathy is expressed. Put another way: empathy is not an “on-off” switch, but a multifaceted resource that must be actively moderated in response to the needs of the moment.

This “on-off” reading stems from simplifying empathy to a core idea: putting oneself in another person’s or group’s shoes and caring about their experience. In practice, empathy is more varied than this. Research distinguishes between cognitive empathy (understanding another’s perspective), affective empathy (sharing or resonating with another’s emotional state), and more interactive forms of empathic engagement that shape how people respond to one another in real time.^[14] Other work similarly differentiates between understanding another’s perspective, feeling with them, and experiencing personal distress in response to their suffering.^[15]

For leaders, this matters because flexing empathy effectively also means understanding and selecting the form of empathy that the moment demands. Some moments require clear perspective-taking without becoming overly emotionally absorbed; others call for visible concern and interpersonal attunement.

More empathy is not always the answer

Though empathy is frequently associated with positive leadership outcomes, a substantial body of research also highlights potential costs when empathy is unregulated or misapplied.^[16] Empathy can give rise to what Konrath and Grynberg describe as personal distress: an emotional response to the suffering of others whereby attention shifts away from the other person’s needs and toward managing one’s own reaction, leading to emotional strain and a tendency to withdraw or act in ways that relieve that distress.^[17] In demanding or emotionally intense environments, this can contribute to fatigue and burnout, particularly when empathic responses are insufficiently regulated or become overwhelming.

Even in the example above, where a team member is experiencing distress and an empathic response is warranted, maximizing affective empathy may not be optimal. Rather, the appropriate response may combine clear perspective-taking with visible support while avoiding becoming overly absorbed in the emotion of the moment. In this case, cognitive empathy enables leaders to understand what the moment requires, serving not only as a component of empathy itself but also as a guide for the appropriate expressions of competence and agility.

Leaders must also understand that empathy may bias decision-making. Because empathic responses are often directed toward specific individuals rather than groups, they can skew attention and resources in ways that are not always aligned with broader organizational goals. As Ferguson argues, empathy can at times conflict with fairness or collective outcomes, particularly when it leads decision-makers to prioritize the needs of specific individuals over more balanced or impartial considerations.^[18]

In high-stakes decisions such as promotions, workforce reductions, or performance evaluations, leaders may feel a strong empathic pull toward particular individuals. While understandable, over-indexing these responses can compromise fairness and impartiality. In these moments, empathy must be regulated to ensure decisions are guided by clear criteria and equitable standards.

In PML terms, this reinforces an important point for leaders: empathy is not something to be applied indiscriminately. Empathy is a resource to be drawn from and applied with intention and accuracy, apportioned to the situational context.

The examples above illustrate ways in which empathy may need to be amplified or expressed differently depending on the needs of the moment. Equally important is a leader’s ability to regulate and calibrate empathic responses. The examples below highlight situations where empathy must be balanced against competing demands or applied with greater precision to support both individual and collective outcomes.

Empathy in the Moment

While empathy is a critical leadership resource, research also makes clear that ramping up empathy “to eleven” is not always the solution. Empathic responses can introduce bias, particularly when they draw attention toward specific individuals at the expense of broader group or more impartial considerations.^[19] Different moments may therefore call for empathy to be dialed up, regulated, redirected, or expressed in different ways.

- **When resources need balancing across competing needs.**

Leaders continually face situations where time, attention, or resources are limited. Empathy may draw focus toward the most visible or immediate need, yet effective leadership requires a broader view across the system. Regulating empathy in these moments helps leaders step back, weigh competing demands, and allocate resources in ways that serve collective outcomes.

- **When accountability must be upheld.**

In moments of underperformance or missed expectations, empathy can make it tempting to soften feedback or delay difficult conversations. Yet avoiding accountability can undermine team standards and ultimately hinder the development of the underperforming individual. Here, empathy remains important but may be balanced with clarity and directness, ensuring that care does not come at the expense of performance, for example, maintaining cognitive empathy (clear perspective-taking) while avoiding an over-reliance on affective empathy that may bias decisions.

- **When different groups require different responses.**

A leader is working across multiple teams with different priorities, pressures, and perspectives. One team is under strain and requires support and understanding, while another is pushing for faster delivery and clearer direction. The leader may feel a stronger empathic pull toward the team having trouble, yet over-indexing on this risks neglecting the needs of others or creating perceptions of imbalance.

In this moment, empathy must be carefully calibrated across the system rather than focused exclusively toward a single individual or group. The leader may need to understand and acknowledge the pressures facing one team, while maintaining fairness and alignment across both teams. This may involve shifting empathic focus between groups, balancing understanding with boundary-setting, and ensuring that relational sensitivity does not come at the expense of collective outcomes.

For some leaders, the challenge here may lie in recognizing a tendency to empathize more readily with certain individuals or groups and guarding against that tendency shaping decisions in unintended ways. In these moments, effective leadership lies in adjusting where and how empathy is expressed, rather than simply increasing its intensity.

Competence

When to lead from expertise, and when to lead from inquiry

A common assumption in leadership thinking is that the skills required to lead are largely transferable—that a good “generalist” who can inspire, motivate, and direct people in one context should be able to do so effectively in another. Contemporary leadership research, however, challenges this view. Markman argues that effective leadership is not purely a function of general capability, but in fact tends to be deeply grounded in domain-specific knowledge. Leaders who understand the technical and contextual realities of their field are better able to interpret information, make sound judgments, and guide others effectively.^[20] Intuitively this feels true, and there is some evidence consistent with this intuition: for example, physician-led hospitals have been found to rank higher on measures of quality, although the evidence does not establish a causal relationship between physician leadership and hospital performance.^[21] More broadly, leadership effectiveness appears to be strongly influenced by domain-specific knowledge and expertise, meaning success in one organizational setting does not necessarily transfer automatically into another.^[22]

Within the Present Moment Leadership framework, as with empathy, competence should not be understood simply as a fixed attribute that a leader either possesses or lacks. Leaders can bring their expertise, judgment, and capability more strongly to the fore, or intentionally hold them back, depending on what the moment requires.

At times, leadership calls for a clear expression of expertise: setting direction, making decisions, and ensuring standards are met. At other times, restraint may be the better option, with holding back from asserting their own expertise to create space for others to contribute, question, and learn. Competence then is something a leader can deploy as needed, and to varying degrees.

In her research on high-performing teams, Amy Edmondson shows how leadership effectiveness rests on the ability to simultaneously create the conditions for team learning, while maintaining a focus on performance.^[23] Psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that it is safe to speak up with ideas, questions, or concerns, is a critical enabler of learning, innovation, and risk-taking.^[24] But as Edmondson shows, this belief alone is insufficient. Psychological safety must be paired with clearly set

expectations, disciplined execution, and a commitment to high standards.

“...leaders have two vital tasks. One, they must build psychological safety to spur learning and avoid preventable failures; two, they must set high standards and inspire and enable people to reach them.” ^[25]

This creates a fundamental leadership tension: not a choice between direction and participation, but when and how to integrate both in ways that meet the moment.

Within PML, competence is not defined by how much expertise a leader possesses, but by how that expertise is expressed in response to the situation. Effective leaders determine to what extent competence should be expressed through expertise, direction, inquiry, facilitation, or the creation of conditions that allow others' expertise to emerge. To address this tension, Edmondson suggests leaders practice “situational humility.” Situational humility is the recognition that, particularly in complex, dynamic, and uncertain environments, no leader has complete knowledge or certainty. Rather than diminishing authority, acknowledging this is a form of humility and a realistic appraisal of the limits of individual expertise. Edmondson argues that when leaders appear to “know everything,” others are far less likely to take the interpersonal risks required to contribute ideas or raise concerns. By contrast, displaying a learning mindset—blending confidence with curiosity and recognizing that there is always more to learn—sets the table for greater participation and collective problem-solving.^[26]

Leading through competence does not always mean providing answers or rushing to solutions. It may instead involve asking better questions, inviting input, and signaling that the knowledge of others is both needed and valued. An important distinction, when we think about flexing competence in this way, is that self-confidence and humility are not binary. Leaders can be confident in their own capabilities while remaining open about uncertainty. In practice, this means being willing to shift—sometimes rapidly—from directing to inquiring, depending how the situation presents itself.

It is through a modulated expression of competence that leaders are able to access the full intelligence of the team.

In some situations, competence is enacted through decisiveness, clarity, and expertise. In others, this directive approach is intentionally “throttled back” to instead demonstrate curiosity, openness, and the deliberate suspension of authority to enable contribution. The challenge for leaders is reading the situation and adapting accordingly, knowing when to lead from expertise, and when to lead from inquiry.

Different expressions of competence produce different outcomes

Like empathy, competence does not have a single behavioral expression. House and Mitchell distinguish between directive and participative forms of leadership, each of which draws on competence differently and may be suited to different circumstances.^[27] Directive leadership is expressed through behaviors such as giving specific guidance, clarifying policies and procedures, monitoring progress, and helping teams keep pace with deadlines and task completion. More recent empirical research by Li et al. found these behaviors associated with greater team efficiency. Participative leadership, by contrast, is expressed through consultation, the incorporation of follower views, and the creation of autonomy, collaboration, and openness in decision-making—and these behaviors were associated with greater team creativity.^[28]

In PML terms, understanding how different expressions of competence will produce different outcomes becomes a powerful lever for moderation. In some moments, the leader’s most valuable contribution is to provide structure and reduce ambiguity. In others, it will be to create the conditions for comparative reasoning and ideation.

One way this shows up in practice is when innovation or problem-solving is the aim, particularly where complex challenges require input from multiple sources of expertise. Generating new ideas requires space for exploration and divergent thinking. In these moments, leaders may shift how and how much they express their competence, moving from providing answers to enabling contribution by asking questions, inviting perspectives, and deliberately holding back their own solutions. This creates the conditions for others to think more independently and for a broader range of ideas to emerge.

Li et al.’s finding that participative leadership can become less efficient in the absence of sufficient direction reinforces this point: participation does not eliminate the need for direction, and direction does not eliminate the value of participation. Rather, effective leadership involves judging the balance between the two.^[29] Awareness of this is key to the ability to flex competence effectively; that is, for a leader to access and embody their competence in different ways, to suit different situations.

Too much of a good thing: can you ever have too much competence?

A leader will often be called upon to express their own competence, from solving thorny problems to acting decisively based on their experience and expertise. Research also shows that how competence is expressed, and how heavily it is relied upon, can impact whether teams surface or suppress critical information. As a result, especially in complex environments, an over-reliance on individual expertise or authority can inadvertently narrow the space for others to contribute.

The implications of this extend beyond the behavior of individual leaders to the way competence is organized within teams and organizations. If leadership effectiveness depends not only on what a leader knows, but also on how expertise throughout a system is accessed and utilized, then questions of authority, hierarchy, and team structure become important considerations.

Research on team structure suggests competence is not simply a function of the expertise held by a leader, but also of how effectively expertise is distributed and utilized across a team. Wellman et al. argue that the effectiveness of hierarchical structures depends on the nature of the task being performed. While traditional pyramid-shaped hierarchies can provide clarity and clear lines of authority, they may be less effective in environments characterized by high task variety, uncertainty, or complexity.^[30]

In such contexts, performance depends increasingly on the extent to which diverse perspectives, knowledge, and expertise from across the team are incorporated into decision-making.

These findings suggest that more distributed forms of authority can enhance team performance by enabling a broader range of information and insight to inform collective action.

More recent research suggests that the advantage may lie not in either approach alone, but in the ability to move between them. Abi-Esber et al. introduce the concept of “hierarchical adaptability,” finding across five studies that teams able to shift between more hierarchical and flatter patterns of influence as tasks changed achieved better coordination and performance than teams that remained consistently hierarchical or consistently flat.^[31]

This adaptability also allows expertise to move to the fore wherever it is most relevant. Weick and Sutcliffe describe this as “deference to expertise”: in high-reliability organizations, decision-making can shift toward those with the knowledge and experience most relevant to the situation, regardless of their formal position in the hierarchy. Effective leadership in these environments involves recognizing and mobilizing expertise throughout the system as circumstances evolve.^[32]

Situations requiring coordination, learning, or error detection are therefore moments where leaders may need to hold back from asserting their own expertise, creating the conditions in which others can contribute and develop theirs. This may involve shifting from telling to asking, from directing to inviting, and from presenting solutions to creating space for them to arise. Within PML, these shifts represent different ways of flexing competence in the moment, helping to ensure that relevant expertise is mobilized across the team.

Competence in the Moment

Different leadership moments call for different expressions of competence. Research shows that when work requires coordination, speed, and reliable execution, leadership behaviors such as providing clear guidance and clarifying roles and procedures can help teams maintain pace and meet task demands efficiently. At other times, particularly when teams need to generate ideas, learn from experience, or adapt to changing conditions, more participative and learning-oriented behaviors can create greater space for others to contribute.^[33]

Effective leadership therefore depends on adjusting how competence is expressed to meet the demands of the moment.

- **Working against the clock.**
In fast-moving, deadline-driven situations, ambiguity can slow progress and create friction points. Leaders who foreground their own competence here by clarifying priorities and setting a clear path forward can help teams maintain pace and focus, reducing uncertainty and ensuring critical milestones are met.
- **When inexperience hampers progress.**
Where individuals or teams lack experience or confidence on the task, a more directive expression of competence can provide much-needed scaffolding. Offering guidance, clarifications and setting expectations helps build capability while ensuring standards are met.
- **When teams are highly skilled and capable.**
Highly experienced teams often have the knowledge and insight needed to solve problems effectively. Over-directing in these moments can limit autonomy and reduce engagement. By stepping back, leaders signal trust and enable others to take ownership, and to contribute their full capability.
- **Driving innovation under time pressure.**
A team is tasked with developing a new solution, product, or approach under tight time constraints. The work requires creativity and exploration, yet set deadlines mean progress must be structured and decisions made quickly.

In these moments, a purely directive approach may feel natural to drive pace, but it is bound to limit the generation of new ideas. Conversely, a fully participative approach may eventually surface a ground-breaking new solution, but this is not compatible with the deadline. Effective leadership lies in calibrating between the two. Early stages may call for a more participative expression of competence, such as creating space for ideas, encouraging input, and exploring alternatives. As the work progresses, a shift toward greater direction may be required, drawing clear boundaries around ideation, setting time limits, and moving the team toward selecting and testing a solution rather than continuing to refine options indefinitely.

For some, the challenge here will likely be resisting the instinct to move too quickly into direction and closure. For others, it may be avoiding prolonged participation that delays decisions and risks a “perfect” solution becoming the enemy of a good and workable solution. In these moments, effective leadership depends on deliberately adjusting how competence is expressed as the demands of the work evolve.

Agility

Stepping back, gaining perspective, and pivoting

The third and final element of Present Moment Leadership is agility. Within this framework, agility refers to a leader's capacity to step back from the immediacy of the situation, gain perspective, and adjust their response as conditions evolve. Joiner and Josephs similarly define leadership agility as the ability to adapt behavior and strategy in real-time, grounded in what they call reflective action: the capacity to remain engaged in the flow of leadership while creating enough mental distance to reassess and respond more effectively.^[34] Like empathy and competence, agility is another dynamic behavioral resource that can be expressed more or less strongly depending on what the moment requires.

The need for agility in leadership is of course not new. The situational dynamics that leaders face have rarely been truly static. The need to adapt to changing conditions has long been recognized in leadership and strategy.^[35] The concepts underlying VUCA—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—have roots in work by Bennis and Nanus, and were subsequently adopted by strategists at the U.S. Army War College to characterize the geopolitical landscape at the end of the Cold War.^[36] What has changed and may explain why the need for leadership agility can feel more acute today, is the intensity, frequency, and interconnectedness of these conditions.

Contemporary organizational environments are characterized by continuous, accelerated change, where competitive conditions shift rapidly, technologies evolve, and external disruptions can quickly render fixed assumptions obsolete. In such contexts, leadership approaches that rely on stability or replicating the successes of the past can swiftly become detached from reality. Agility is a core leadership capability for maintaining alignment as conditions continue to evolve.^[37]

Joiner and Josephs describe four forms of leadership agility: context-setting, stakeholder, creative, and self-leadership agility. Together, these describe different ways in which leaders can step back and reassess a situation, engage with others, generate new possibilities, and reflect on and adjust their own leadership behavior.^[38] For those seeking to develop agility as a leadership resource, it is useful to clarify what agility is not, as much as what it is. Agility is not speed, reflexive action, or constant motion. Tandon et al. distinguish agility from neighboring ideas such

as lean thinking, flexibility, or pace of response, showing it instead to be a broader and more strategic capability: the ability to anticipate, respond, adapt, and in some cases help shape change through learning and innovation.^[39] Joiner reinforces this distinction, showing that agility depends on a leader's capacity to avoid becoming trapped in habitual or automatic responses.^[40] The aim is to respond more intelligently rather than just more quickly: to pause inwardly, notice the specific nature, stakes, and dynamics of the unfolding situation, and choose an appropriate course of action.

The importance of this becomes especially apparent in leadership moments where signals suggest the current approach is no longer working. Progress may stall, results plateau, or unintended consequences emerge. Rather than continuing to reinforce the existing plan, these moments call for leaders to recognize that something is no longer holding, and to actively shift course. Leaders may be required to question their attachment to the current approach, reframe the problem, and establish a new direction. Doing so calls for reflection and a willingness to learn anew rather than simply relying on what has worked in the past.

Agility as judgment and ambidexterity combined

Tandon et al.'s systematic literature review positions agility as a response to conditions such as volatility, technological change, and shifting stakeholder expectations, emphasizing the leader's capacity to interpret and adapt within an environment characterized by continuous and unpredictable change. In the context of day-to-day leadership, this capacity translates into a series of micro-challenges: judging when to pause and reframe, when to experiment and adapt, and when to hold course and execute.

One way this plays out in practice is the tension between exploration and exploitation.^[41] At a strategic level, this describes how organizations balance innovation (exploring) and efficiency (exploiting). At the level of the leadership moment this tension is experienced in more immediate and practical ways. A leader may need to decide whether to open up a problem, to invite the views and ideas of others, to test alternatives or challenge assumptions; or to close the problem down, focusing efforts on existing strategies and driving execution. In this way, strategic agility, sometimes discussed in abstract

terms, has a tangible impact on the decisions leaders make in their day-to-day work.

A practical example of this can be found in moments when innovation or experimentation is required, such as when a team is exploring new approaches or working in unfamiliar territory. Here, leaders may need to expand the frame of the work, encouraging experimentation, tolerating ambiguity, and resisting premature convergence. This may involve testing multiple paths in parallel, surfacing alternative approaches, and keeping options open for longer than feels comfortable to broaden the range of possibilities being considered.

A similar scenario appeared above in the competence section, where innovation and problem-solving were discussed as moments in which leaders may need to dial back the visible expression of their own competence, creating space for contribution rather than supplying solutions themselves. The same conditions can also call for a stronger expression of agility through openness to exploration. This highlights an important feature of PML: leadership moments often require movement across multiple elements simultaneously, a point explored in greater detail in the section that follows.

Returning to the tension between exploration and exploitation, organizational strategy rarely focuses exclusively on one or the other. Instead, it typically requires the capacity to do both, which researchers describe as organizational ambidexterity.^[42] In the same manner, leadership moments often involve navigating between competing demands. Tandon et al. draw on ambidexterity research to describe this dynamic, the capacity, for example, to pursue exploration alongside exploitation, holding both in view and shifting emphasis as conditions change.^[43]

Thinking about leadership agility in these terms highlights the different forms it can take depending on what the moment requires. There are moments that call for greater emphasis on context-setting agility, stepping back, widening the frame, and reinterpreting what is unfolding. Others call for stakeholder agility, engaging across perspectives to build shared understanding, or creative agility, where the task is to generate and explore new possibilities.^[44] At other times, the moment calls for restraint, a shift from exploration toward execution, where maintaining direction and coherence becomes more important than continuing to open up options.

The key for leaders is to exercise judgment in selecting and shifting between these forms of agility. This includes knowing when to reframe the situation, when to engage others more deeply, when to challenge assumptions and explore alternatives, and when to commit to a course of action and see it through. Each of these responses represents a different expression of agility. The task is to avoid defaulting to habitual patterns, and instead to notice what the moment requires and respond with the appropriate form of agility.

The levers needed to flex leadership agility in practice

Having considered how agility is expressed in terms of leadership attention and orientation, the next question becomes: how do leaders enact these shifts in the moment?

McKenzie and Aitken describe a set of leadership practices that represent how leaders express agility in practice. The practices focus on how leaders interpret, engage with, and respond to situations as they unfold and include behaviors such as “understanding and articulating personal values” and “knowing when to rely on existing knowledge versus learning anew.”^[45]

The latter practice reflects the tension between exploration and execution discussed earlier in relation to organizational ambidexterity. In a study of 201 leader–employee pairs, Mascareño et al. found that behaviors encouraging experimentation were associated with idea generation, while behaviors providing structure strengthened the link between ideas and implementation.^[46] Xi et al. provide experimental evidence that both approaches may be needed during implementation, allowing leaders to sustain progress while returning to exploration when unexpected problems arise.^[47]

McKenzie and Aitken’s broader set of practices offers a foundation for development, but leaders expand their repertoire by applying these practices across situations and learning from the results. Over time, this experience helps them navigate tensions between stability and change, action and reflection, confidence and doubt, and global and local demands. Leadership agility lies in selecting an approach suited to the moment and adjusting it as circumstances evolve, rather than defaulting to the same response across situations.

Agility in the Moment

Different leadership moments call for different expressions of agility. Effective leadership involves balancing change with stability, and openness with direction. Agility may involve reframing, exploring and adapting, but also maintaining coherence, alignment, and follow-through when the situation demands it.

- **When stability and continuity are required.**

During periods of execution, where plans are in motion and teams are working toward defined and time-sensitive goals, shifts in direction can disrupt progress and create unnecessary uncertainty. In these moments, leaders may need to protect coherence by reinforcing priorities, maintaining alignment, and resisting the urge to reopen settled questions. In these moments, agility may be expressed through the judgment to maintain course: resisting unnecessary changes in direction while remaining alert to signals that the situation genuinely requires reassessment.

- **When existing knowledge and experience are sufficient.**

Not every situation requires reinvention. When proven approaches are available and conditions are relatively stable, the challenge is recognizing when further exploration adds little value. In these moments, leaders exercise judgment about when to rely on existing knowledge rather than learning anew, applying established practices with confidence, while remaining alert to signals that this stance may need to shift.

- **Balancing short-term delivery with longer-term adaptation.**

A team is delivering against demanding targets, with clear expectations and ongoing pressure to perform. At the same time, there are signs that current ways of working may not be sustainable or sufficient for future demands, whether through changing customer expectations or shifts in the broader environment. The work is being done, but there is limited space to step back and rethink how it is being done.

In this moment, the leader may need to create space for reflection and learning within the flow of delivery, resisting the pull to focus exclusively on short-term performance while periodically stepping back to reframe how the work is approached.

This may involve practices such as building in moments of review, inviting perspectives on how work could be improved, and integrating learning without disrupting delivery. The challenge is to maintain performance while creating just enough space for adaptation, ensuring that execution today does not come at the expense of effectiveness tomorrow.

Putting Empathy, Competence, and Agility Together in the Moment

Leadership moments never call for empathy, competence, or agility in isolation. Instead, effective leadership depends on how these elements are combined and recalibrated as a situation unfolds.

The examples below illustrate this dynamic. Each illustrates how the three elements may need to be expressed differently across phases of the same challenge and how leaders with different natural proclivities may need to adjust their behavior in different ways. There is no single, universally-correct calibration for these cases. Rather, the scenarios demonstrate how effective leadership depends on making context-sensitive adjustments over time, including compensating for one's own tendencies to over- or under-rely on particular elements of leadership.

1. Judgment under pressure: a launch-critical defect shows up late

A consumer electronics company is days away from launching a flagship wearable device in multiple markets. Marketing campaigns are already live, retail partners are expecting stock, and the launch has already been delayed once. In final testing a battery fault is identified under a specific set of usage conditions. The engineering team is divided. Some argue the issue is marginal and can be patched post-launch. Others believe it creates unacceptable customer and reputational risk. Senior leadership wants a recommendation within hours.

This is a moment in which the pressures of time, sunk cost, and organizational momentum all increase the risk of premature closure, with a strong temptation to make a quick “gut feel” decision. The challenge is to move through the situation in a way that fully surfaces what is happening, enables a sound decision, and then stabilizes execution.

Phase 1: Surface the issue fully

While seeking immediate closure and pressing for a quick decision is tempting, the first task is disciplined sensemaking. The leader needs enough empathy to ensure dissenting technical voices are heard alongside the competence to probe the nature and implications of the defect. Agility is especially important here, particularly in its context-setting form: the leader must resist being pulled

automatically into the original launch plan and instead step back long enough to reassess what has changed.

At this stage, empathy means creating the conditions for candor. Competence is expressed through structured inquiry (e.g. disciplined sensemaking and integrating technical perspectives); while agility is expressed through widening the frame and preventing premature convergence on a decision simply because the organization is already in motion.

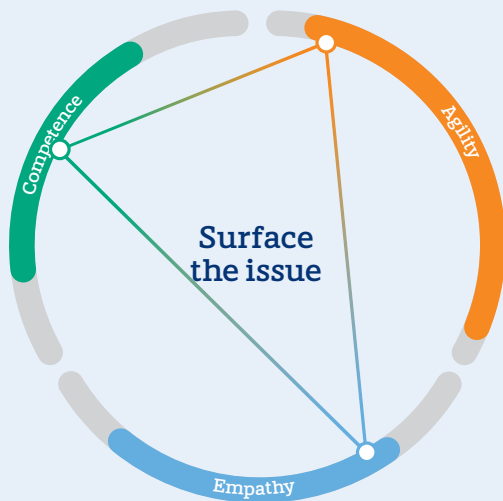
Phase 2: Make the decision under uncertainty

Once the issue has been surfaced and understood, the emphasis shifts. The leader now needs to narrow the frame, clarify the decision criteria, weigh the technical and commercial trade-offs, and make the call. At this point, competence comes more strongly to the fore, expressed through judgment, clarity, and decisiveness. Agility remains high, though it is expressed differently. In this case, it involves reframing the available options and adapting course in response to new information rather than continuing to explore alternatives, as leadership seeks a recommendation within hours.

Empathy remains present but becomes more regulated. The leader must recognize the disappointment, pressure, and emotional investment involved without allowing these to distort the key decision. In PML terms, this is a moment where empathy may need to be intentionally moderated so that concern for team effort does not outweigh wider customer and organizational consequences.

Phase 3: Re-contract and stabilize

Once the decision is made, the context shifts again. If launch is delayed, the team must bounce back quickly from disappointment, re-plan, and maintain alignment across functions. Here, empathy may need to come back up, acknowledging disappointment and supporting the team, while remaining sufficiently grounded to re-focus effort and maintain momentum. Competence remains high, now expressed through reprioritization and coordination. Agility may now reduce somewhat, because reopening the decision again now would risk confusion. The effectiveness of leadership in this moment lies in the ability to move from inquiry to judgment to stabilization.

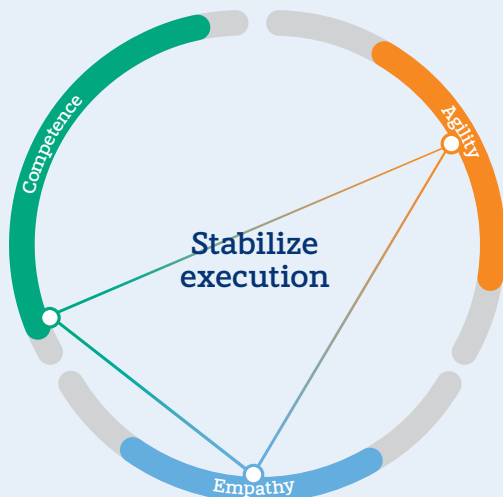
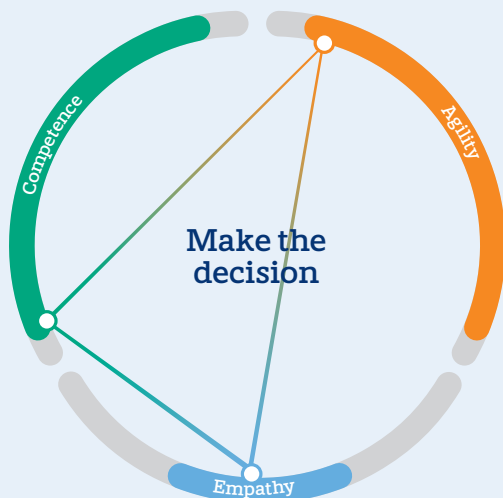


Illustrative calibrations across the phases:

How different leaders may need to compensate

The same leadership moment may call for different corrective moves from different leaders, depending on their natural tendencies and starting points. These differences are not random. Research suggests that leaders bring underlying tendencies or predispositions to how they express behaviors such as direction, participation, and control, which shape their default responses in the moment.^[48]

- A leader predisposed toward high empathy may need to regulate that response at the decision point, ensuring concern for the team does not become avoidance of an unpopular call.
- A leader predisposed toward high competence or directive traits may need to dial empathy up at the beginning, and express competence through inquiry rather than immediate judgment, so that potentially crucial marginal or dissenting views are not crowded out.
- A leader predisposed toward high agility may be effective in opening up the issue and reframing it but may need to dial agility down once the decision is made, to ensure a confident recommendation can be made, and that the team can re-engage in disciplined execution.



2. Learning after failure: reviewing a near miss in a healthcare setting

In a regional hospital, a near miss involving delayed escalation of care triggers a formal review. No lasting harm occurred, but only narrowly. The clinicians involved are experienced and respected. Tensions are high. Some feel exposed, some are defensive, and others are quieter than usual. Everyone in the room understands the review is officially about learning, but also knows that issues of judgment, credibility, and professional identity are in play.

This moment is not well served by complete procedural detachment, nor by unlimited emotional support. The challenge is to create enough safety for people to speak openly, enough structure for the review to stay useful, and enough adaptability for the leader to follow what emerges rather than force the conversation too quickly toward familiar or pre-determined explanations.

Phase 1: Set the table for open and honest discussion

At the outset, empathy needs to be strongly present, particularly cognitive empathy (understanding perspectives) combined with enough affective attunement to signal genuine concern. The emotional stakes are real, and unless people feel understood and sufficiently enabled to speak up, key information may remain unvoiced. At the same time, competence is required in facilitating a robust process structure: clarifying the purpose of the review, setting expectations for openness and rigor, and holding the discussion to a standard that is serious without becoming punitive.

Agility is also relevant from the start, because the leader must read the emotional tone of the room and be ready to adjust accordingly. This may involve slowing the pace, reframing language, or responding to defensiveness without allowing the conversation to harden into blame or self-protection.

Phase 2: Shift from individual accountability to systems thinking

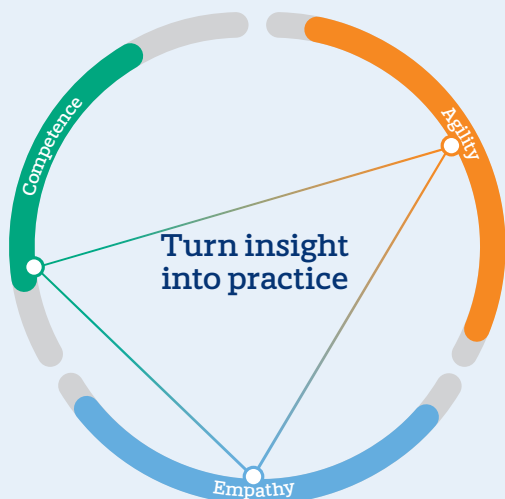
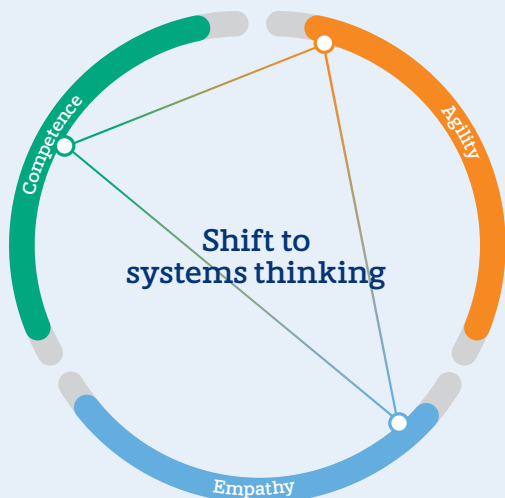
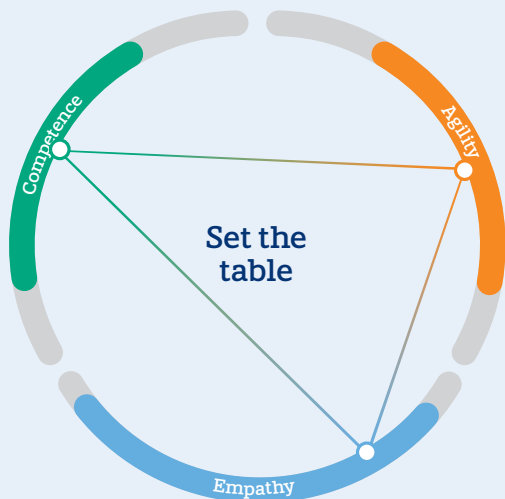
Once people begin to speak, the leader's challenge is to widen the frame. Rather than remaining focused on who did or did not do the right thing, the task becomes understanding the system of hand-offs, assumptions, communication patterns, and contextual pressures that allowed the near miss to occur.

This is where emphasizing context-setting agility becomes important. The leader needs to help the group step back from narrow, individual accounts and move toward a broader understanding of how systems and processes function in practice. Empathy remains high enough to keep people engaged and candid, while competence is expressed through disciplined inquiry.

Phase 3: Convert insight into changed practice

As thinking becomes clearer, the moment shifts once more. The review now needs to produce action: revised protocols, renewed escalation pathways, clearer role expectations, or changed routines. Competence is foregrounded, this time in a more directive form, through synthesis, decision-making, and follow-through. Empathy remains important, but it no longer leads. Agility moderates as the leader narrows the frame and helps the group converge on practical changes.

Without this final shift, the conversation may be thoughtful and psychologically safe but still fail to improve practice. The aim is to translate reflection into safer performance.



Illustrative calibrations across the phases:

How different leaders may need to compensate

There is no single ideal behavioral mix in this moment. As the situation evolves, the required balance shifts, and each leader must adjust from their own natural starting point.

- A leader predisposed toward high empathy may need to ensure support does not become avoidance, and that the conversation eventually moves toward accountability, and ultimately to changes in practice.
- A leader predisposed toward foregrounding their own competence may need to dial back visible expertise early on, asking more questions and offering fewer immediate explanations so that weak signals and uncomfortable truths can emerge, without putting “words in the mouth” of others.
- A leader predisposed toward high agility may be effective at reframing the issue systemically but may need to close the frame more decisively toward the end so that learning is converted into action.

3. Strategic disruption: weak signals become a credible threat

A regional logistics and fulfilment company begins to see signs that a new technology-enabled entrant is gaining traction in its core market. The competitor offers faster digital integration, greater visibility for customers, and a lower-cost model. At first, the signals are weak: a few clients mention the alternative, some frontline managers report shifts in expectations, and early performance data suggests increased churn risk in one segment. The incumbent business is still performing, but the pattern is becoming harder to dismiss.

This is a useful example because it shows agility is more than simply ‘responsiveness’: agility is the practical capacity to interpret weak signals, widen and narrow the frame at the right times, and manage the tension between exploration and execution.

Phase 1: Notice and interpret what is emerging

At the outset, agility needs to be strongly expressed. The leader must resist the pull of the current operating model, where “business as usual” is maintaining performance across existing KPIs, and instead create space to interpret what may be changing at the edge of the system. This may involve seeking out information that challenges existing assumptions, inviting views from people closer to customers, and exploring whether what looks like noise is in fact an early strategic signal. At this stage, agility is expressed primarily through context-setting and stakeholder engagement—reframing the situation while drawing in perspectives from across the system.

Empathy also matters here more than may be immediately obvious. Those closest to the market, or lower in hierarchy, may be the first to notice what is shifting. If their concerns are dismissed too quickly, valuable information may be lost. Competence remains present but should not dominate too early. This is not yet the moment for a fully closed solution.

Phase 2: Move from interpretation to bounded experimentation

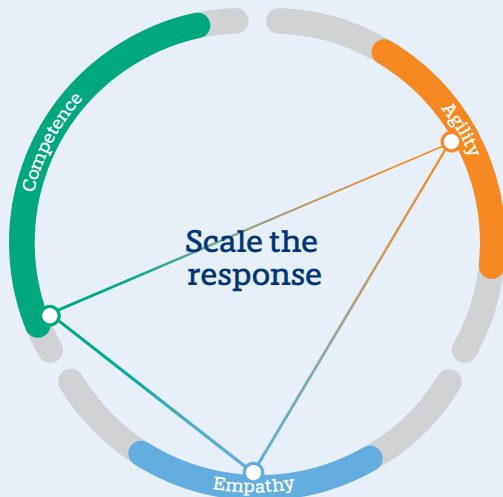
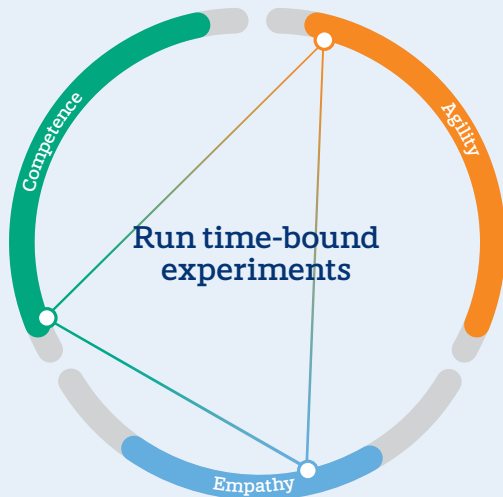
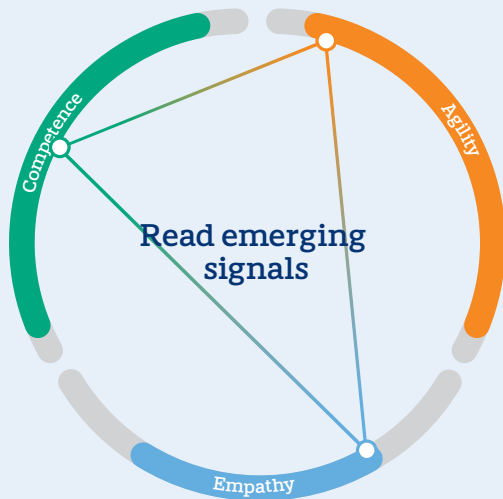
As the threat becomes more credible, the leader now needs to shift from broad scanning into time-bound action. This might involve piloting a revised offer, testing a digital service layer, exploring a partnership, or running targeted commercial experiments in a vulnerable segment.

Here agility is dialed up, expressed through openness to multiple paths and willingness to test assumptions rather than defend the existing model (i.e. “creative agility” in Joiner’s terms). Competence is also high, expressed through defining the parameters of experimentation: where to focus, how much to invest, what success looks like, and how decisions will be made. Empathy remains present in helping teams voice concerns and engage with change but may not be the dominant element.

Phase 3: Pivot from exploration to committed execution

As evidence accumulates, the leader must shift again. The organization cannot remain in indefinite experimentation. At some point, a more coherent path needs to be chosen and scaled. At this stage, competence comes more strongly to the fore in the form of prioritization, sequencing, coordination, and disciplined implementation. Alongside this, agility is expressed through self-leadership, the leader’s ability to reflect on what has been learned, commit to a direction, and regulate their own tendency to continue exploring. Empathy remains relevant in helping people manage the uncertainty and disruption that accompanies change, but again, is secondary to competence.

The challenge here is to move between sensing, testing, and committing, staying attuned to and aligned with the changing situation, and knowing where to flex, for example, between different forms of agility.



Illustrative calibrations across the phases:

How different leaders may need to compensate

- A leader predisposed toward high empathy may be well-placed to hear emerging concerns and signals but may need to force themselves to bring their own competence forward during the experimental phase to keep ideation and testing tightly focused.
- A leader predisposed toward competence and execution may need to resist the pull to keep optimizing a strategy that is still working and instead dial up agility to explore emerging alternatives.
- A leader predisposed toward high agility may excel at opening up options and challenging assumptions but may need to regulate that tendency later on so that experimentation gives way to commitment and execution.

4. Suspected fraud: protecting the organization while establishing the facts

A finance controller discovers evidence suggesting that a senior employee may have been authorizing irregular supplier payments over an extended period. The transactions appear unusual but the full picture is not yet clear.

If the concern proves justified, the financial, legal, and reputational consequences could be significant. At the same time, the allegations involve a respected and long-serving colleague, and premature action could unfairly damage careers and relationships. Senior leaders must decide how to respond while balancing confidentiality, due process, and organizational risk.

Unlike the previous examples, this is not initially a moment for broad participation, collective sensemaking, or extensive exploration. The first challenge is containment: protecting evidence, preventing further exposure, and establishing an appropriate process through which facts can be gathered and assessed. The leadership task is to respond proportionately while remaining open to the possibility that initial assumptions may prove incomplete or incorrect.

Phase 1: Contain and secure

At the outset, the priority is ensuring the integrity of the investigation and limiting further risk. Competence comes strongly to the fore, expressed through judgment, governance, and procedural discipline. The leader must ensure appropriate controls are put in place, relevant stakeholders are engaged, and evidence is preserved without compromising confidentiality or due process.

Empathy remains deliberately moderated. The immediate task is not to understand how individuals feel about the situation, but to establish what has occurred and prevent further harm. Agility is also less prominent than in many of the examples discussed previously. This is not initially a moment for exploration, experimentation, or reframing. Rather, the leadership challenge is to apply established processes with discipline and consistency, ensuring that evidence is preserved and appropriate governance procedures are followed.

Phase 2: Establish the facts and determine the response

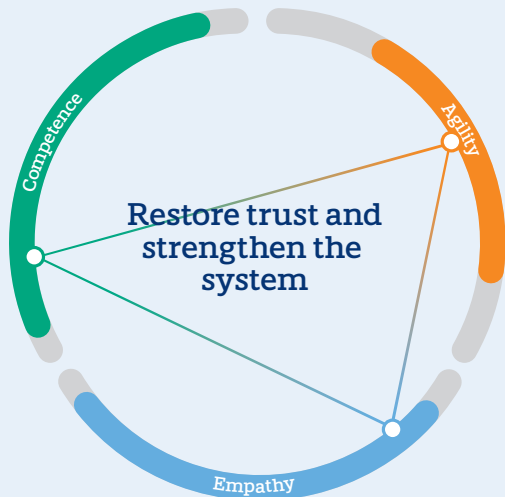
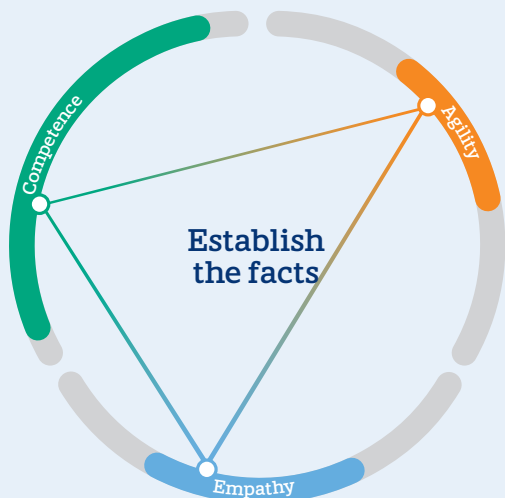
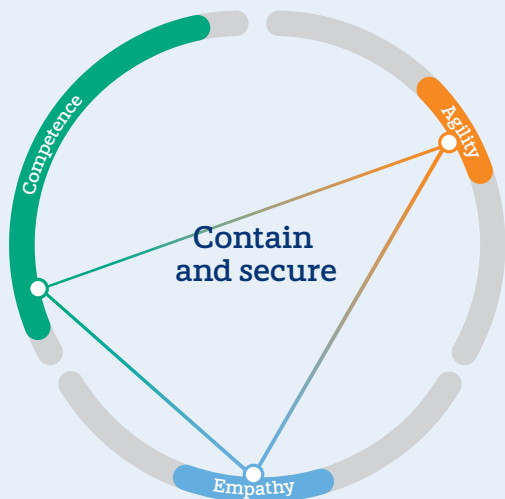
As the investigation progresses the focus shifts toward building a complete and accurate understanding of what has occurred. Competence remains the dominant element, expressed through disciplined inquiry, evidence-based judgment, and careful consideration of legal, ethical, and organizational implications. Leaders must resist pressure to reach conclusions too quickly while ensuring the process remains rigorous, fair, and confidential.

Agility is expressed more strongly than in the containment phase, but remains subordinate to competence and the requirements of the investigative process. As new evidence emerges, leaders may need to revise assumptions, widen or narrow the scope of inquiry, or adjust the response to reflect the seriousness of what is being uncovered. Empathy remains secondary, helping leaders maintain fairness and due process without allowing emotional alignment with any party to shape the investigation.

Phase 3: Restore trust and strengthen the system

Once the facts are established and appropriate action has been taken, the leadership challenge shifts again. The focus now becomes rebuilding trust, restoring confidence, and addressing any weaknesses in systems, controls, or culture that may have contributed to the issue.

Competence remains foregrounded, expressed through corrective action, governance improvements, and the implementation of stronger safeguards. Agility is still drawn on, enabling leaders to adapt processes and structures in response to what has been learned. Finally, empathy is now brought more strongly to the fore. Teams may feel unsettled, trust may have been damaged, and individuals may be left with uncertainty about what happened and why. Leaders need to acknowledge these impacts, communicate appropriately, and help people make sense of the changes that follow. Without this shift, the organization may resolve the immediate issue while leaving longer-term cultural damage unaddressed.



Illustrative calibrations across the phases:

How different leaders may need to compensate

- A leader predisposed toward high empathy may need to regulate that response in the early phases, resisting the urge to prioritize understanding, reassurance, or relationship preservation before the facts are established and appropriate safeguards are in place.
- A leader predisposed toward high agility may need to dial that tendency down initially, focusing on working within established governance processes until the nature and scale of the issue are understood.
- A leader predisposed toward high competence or directive leadership may be well suited to the containment and investigative phases but may need to dial empathy up more deliberately once action has been taken, helping rebuild trust, restore confidence, and support the organization in moving forward.

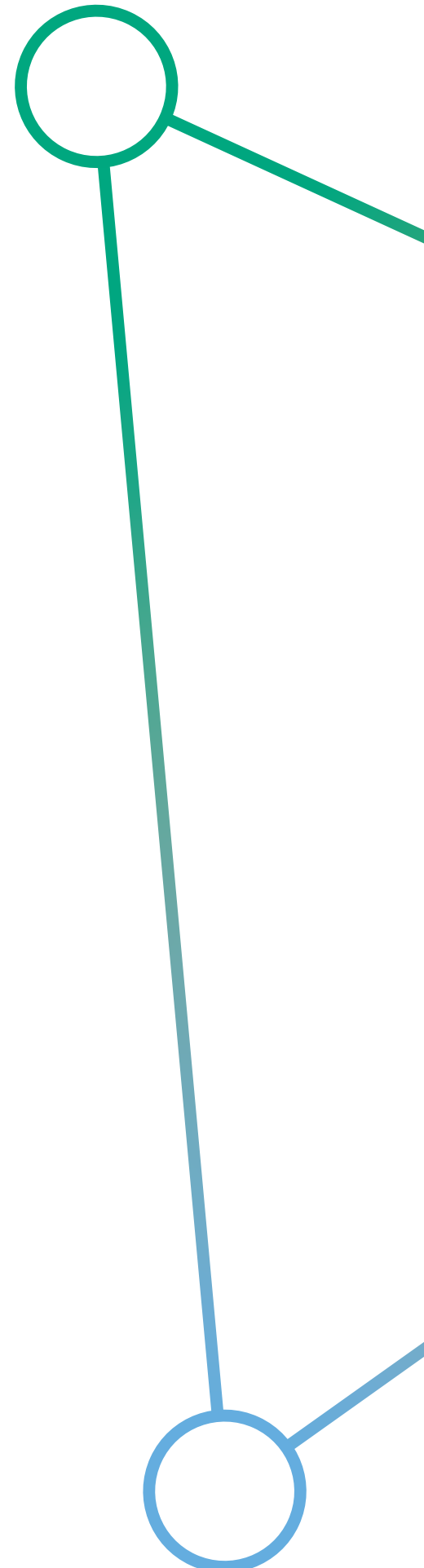
What these examples illustrate

These scenarios point to a core implication of Present Moment Leadership: Leadership challenges can be understood as a series of connected moments that together form an event. Because such events rarely unfold in predictable ways, they seldom require sustained emphasis on any one element of leadership alone. Nor is the answer found in identifying a single correct behavioral formula for a given type of challenge. Rather, effective leadership depends on how leaders draw on, shift between, and adjust these resources as the moments unfold. While the examples above are presented in phases for clarity, in practice these sequences will not always be linear, often looping back or perhaps evolving in surprising ways.

They also illustrate that effective leadership is not always a matter of dialing up empathy, competence, or agility. In some situations, leaders may need to amplify a particular element; in others, they may need to regulate it, sometimes quite deliberately. The example involving fraud demonstrates this clearly. In its early stages, the leadership challenge requires an unerring focus on disciplined execution of established processes. The same leadership element that is dialed up in one situation may therefore need to be moderated in another.

These self-corrective calibrations are often most challenging when they involve a leader's strengths, qualities perhaps closely tied to a leader's identity or sense of authentic self.

In this way, PML is a way of helping leaders become more aware of their own "default settings", expand their behavioral range, and respond with greater precision to what each moment really requires.





SECTION 03

Developing Present Moment Leadership

Exploring the application of Present Moment Leadership as both leadership development model and research-to-practice tool

Growth Framework: PML as a Working Model for Leadership Development

Present Moment Leadership provides a practical way of approaching leadership development, helping leaders expand the behavioral repertoire they can draw on across different situations. Within this PML context, development efforts relate to growing both the range and the accuracy with which leaders are able to express empathy, competence, and agility.

This makes PML especially useful as a working model for leadership development, offering leaders and development professionals a shared language for identifying strengths, gaps, and tendencies, and for translating these into targeted goals. Feedback from 360-degree assessments, coaching conversations, performance reviews, or observed leadership episodes can all be interpreted through the lens of empathy, competence, and agility. A leader may be seen as strong at creating trust, but less effective at bringing clarity or holding accountability; strong in driving execution, but less likely to invite challenge or alternative perspectives; or highly adaptive and exploratory, but slower to converge and commit. PML makes these patterns more visible, providing a clear foundation for development. Where leaders tend to become overly emotionally absorbed in others' experiences, or avoid difficult decisions as a result, development may focus on how empathy is regulated and expressed. This may include approaches such as compassion training, which seeks to maintain care and concern while building the capacity to remain grounded and respond constructively under emotional strain.^[49]

This is where the mechanism of growing becomes especially important.

Growth, in PML terms, involves expanding the forms through which each element can be expressed and improving the leader's ability to access them with greater precision.

Early in development, leaders often rely on a relatively narrow set of expressions: empathy may be expressed primarily through care and concern, competence through expertise and providing answers, and agility through reacting quickly to changing circumstances. As leaders gain experience, reflection, and practice, they develop a broader repertoire. Empathy may be expressed through perspective-taking, support, or compassion; competence through expertise, inquiry, or

facilitation; and agility through reframing, experimentation, or stabilization. More developed leaders are distinguished not simply by the range of responses available to them, but by their ability to select and express them with precision in response to the demands of the moment.

Used in this way, the framework supports a more grounded and developmental form of reflection. As leaders begin to work with PML in day-to-day practice, they are likely to notice recurring patterns in their own responses: moments where they avoid difficult calls, move too quickly to closure, hold back from challenge, or remain in exploration longer than the situation requires. PML gives both the leader and those supporting their development a way to name these patterns, discuss them, and agree where expansion of behavioral range is needed.

This also makes the framework well-suited to structured learning and development initiatives. A leadership program built around PML can use real leadership moments as the basis for reflection, peer discussion, and practice. Participants compare how they interpreted similar situations, where they instinctively placed emphasis, and what alternative responses may have been available. Our hope for the application of PML in this context is that development becomes more closely tied to the realities of leadership work, while still benefiting from a coherent and evidence-based model.

Diagnostic Framework: PML as a Research-to-Practice Tool

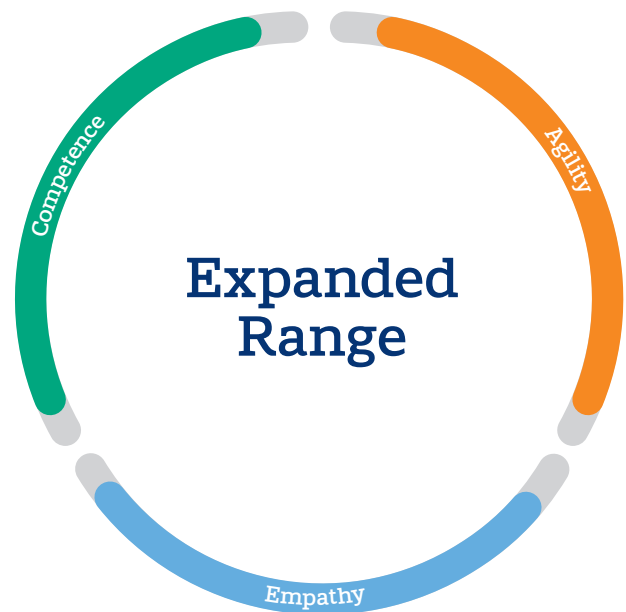
A persistent challenge within the field of leadership research is the gap between what studies show and what leaders are able to use in the flow of their work, a phenomenon consistent with the knowing-doing gap identified by Pfeffer and Sutton.^[50] While leadership research has generated substantial insight into effective behavior, the challenge often lies not in producing new knowledge but in helping leaders translate existing knowledge into action amid the demands, constraints, and uncertainties of practice.

The PML framework provides a way of translating insights from leadership and management research into a form that can be used in practice closer to the point of need. It addresses the knowing-doing gap by offering leaders a simple heuristic for interpreting what a situation requires and how to respond. By asking what the moment calls for, leaders can adjust their expressions of empathy, competence, and agility without stepping outside the situation for extensive analysis, making leadership knowledge more readily actionable in real time.

This translation is only part of the contribution. As leaders begin to use the framework in their day-to-day work, they generate a clearer picture of

how different responses play out across contexts. Patterns become visible: where certain approaches consistently work, where they fall short, and how timing and emphasis shape outcomes. These observations, grounded in lived experience, create the basis for a more continuous feedback exchange between practice and research.

PML supports a closer connection between how leadership is studied and how it is enacted, providing a shared frame through which insights can move in both directions. The framework helps maintain alignment between leadership research and practice, allowing each to inform and strengthen the other.



Conclusions

Present Moment Leadership offers a more integrated way of understanding and working with leadership behavior, bringing together established behavioral and situational perspectives into a single, usable model. By organizing leadership around empathy, competence, and agility, it provides a clear structure through which leadership can be interpreted, enacted, and developed.

At the center of this framework are two mechanisms: flexing and growing. Flexing captures the way leaders adjust how they draw on these elements in response to the situation they face. Growing reflects the expansion of a leader's capacity to express these behaviors in different ways. Together, these mechanisms shift the focus of leadership from selecting an appropriate style to actively working with a set of behavioral resources over time.

This framing opens several promising avenues for future research. It provides a basis for examining how leaders vary their behavior within situations, how they develop greater range in their responses, and how these

patterns relate to outcomes across different contexts. It also shifts attention toward the sequencing and timing of leader behavior across a series of connected moments as events unfold, rather than treating leadership as a set of static inputs applied uniformly across situations.

The framework also has practical implications. It provides a straightforward mechanism by which leaders can make sense of complex situations, as well as a shared language that can be used in development, coaching, and organizational settings.

In this respect, PML supports a closer connection between how leadership is studied and how it is enacted, helping insights move more effectively between research and practice. This closer integration of research and practice has the potential to foster more consistent and effective day-to-day leadership behaviors, which play a critical role in shaping employee engagement, trust, and sustained performance over time.

Present Moment Leadership offers a more dynamic and practice-oriented way of thinking about leadership. It reflects the realities of contemporary leadership while providing a framework that can guide both future research and leadership practice.

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