Leadership that matters today.

What matters in leadership in disruptive times.

It took all of 200,000 years of human history for the world's population to reach 1 billion people, then just a mere 200 more to balloon to 7.7 billion. In the past 40 years alone, the population has doubled.

Has there ever been a time in human history where leadership matters more than it does today?

We are in unchartered waters. There can be no precedent for what the implications of this seismic shift might be, although one thing seems evident; in this instance, the maxim of "strength in numbers" does not appear to hold true. On the contrary, our collective, humanity seems fragile, grappling to make sense of a world that feels increasingly untethered, unstable and unpredictable. Noah Yuval Harari[1] describes it as the "age of bewilderment," where humankind finds itself in a "nihilist moment of disillusionment and anger."

We are confounded by crisis and conundrums that swirl like some impenetrable mist—from a slowing global economy to unresolved trade tensions to an ever-accelerating pace of technological change. All of this coinciding with the rapid emergence of ecological constraints and rising inequality.

And just when the world needs to band together to work this all out, it is pulling apart, becoming more isolated, retreating into populist, faux-simplistic, nationalist agendas.

It's difficult to get a grip exactly on how, why and what the future will look like beyond the horizon, but we anticipate increasingly significant disruption, volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

And of course, it's easy to feel despondent about all this, but where things get more hopeful is that a large amount of the risk can be buffered

through effective leadership. Social researcher Hugh Mackay sums it up beautifully when he says, "increasingly we yearn for leaders who can tell us a guiding story, who can explain us to ourselves, who can offer us a vision of where we might be heading, and why the journey is worthwhile."

We are at a critical juncture, where it has become the responsibility for leaders in all walks of life to define the framework for the path forward. To accept that leadership is the animating cause of every effect. **That's right – leadership changes everything!** Therefore, it is not enough to assume leadership titles or occupy important positions in the organisational hierarchy, without yearning to have consequential impact. To not settle for being successful when there is such a need to be significant.

In short, it's time to ensure that leadership matters.

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Leadership matters most when it:

- Creates a sense of galvanising purpose.
- Directs and mobilises people and their ideas.
- Gives life to the human yearning to contribute.
- Orients, reassures and anchors, in times of stress, fear and change.
- Makes followers feel good, about their individual selves and the groups to which they belong.
- Makes sense of an increasingly complex, inter-connected and demanding world.

At its most fundamental, leadership is not something that is imposed on people but is something sought out by people as an innate part of being human. As individuals, we look to leaders for many reasons—to minimise threats, for survival, purpose, meaning and achievement—but mostly we look to leaders who help, encourage and inspire us, to be the best version of ourselves.

We want and need leadership to matter deeply, for when it does not, we are all diminished.

What matters in leadership?

If we understand **why** leadership matters, we need to furthermore understand **what** matters in leadership. Despite so much focus and attention on the subject of leadership, in the face of the unprecedented complexity of our times, we feel that there is something in the prevailing model of leadership that is failing.

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Though we feel let down by so many of our leaders, there are examples of truly significant leadership. Think of Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenage climate activist who is the voice of her generation. Think of Bill and Melinda Gates quest to rid the world of diseases like Malaria. Of Jacinda Ardern's, poise, grace and empathy in the wake of the horrifying Christchurch terror attack.

Picture India's cricket captain Virat Kohli placating the mob booing Steve Smith on his return to international cricket, or Joshua Kwong, the Hong Kong legislator they refer to as "God Kwong" because whenever there is trouble, he rushes there to help.

For too long, we have analysed the facts and chased the numbers without finding the story. We have negotiated accountability through command and control and failed to activate and empower a broader network. We have incrementally improved in our risk averse silos when we need to innovate to change the game at speed or face all manner of disruption. And we have also confidently projected a persona of knowing all when increasingly we need the vulnerability to admit we understand very little.

If leadership is going to matter, if it is to be major factor in the success of teams, organisations and societies, then it needs to be disrupted.

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Leadership that matters will embrace five essential qualities:

1. Anticipate by turning ambiguity into unique opportunities.
2. Drive optimal energy at work for continuous success.
3. Accelerate the execution to capture new value.
4. Partner to combine complimentary capabilities.
5. Trust to integrate and capitalise on diverse values.

The Self-Disruptive Leader[2]

Korn Ferry analysed the profiles of more than 150,000 leaders, as well as opinion research from 795 investors worldwide. We have pinpointed five dimensions of high performers that allow them to move quickly, self-disrupt, and—importantly—bring organisations with them.
For leaders to succeed in the future of work, they must ADAPT: Anticipate, Drive, Accelerate, Partner and Trust.

The Korn Ferry's ADAPT model

Anticipate	Drive	Acelerate
Perhaps the most important attribute of any leader is the ability to create clarity, where none exists. To be a "meaning maker." Leaders need to have superior contextual intelligence, see opportunities ahead of others, provide clear directions on where they want to go and secure first mover advantage. Leaders must drive the shift from analytical fact finding, to finding the story.	We are entering an era when the world will change so quickly, and the challenges will be so unfamiliar that few of us will have a fully tested competence to lead and contribute, and indeed, most people will operate at the edge of their competence. We will constantly be asked to give up our routines and re-skill in order to navigate further uncharted territory. Employee energy will become one of the key performance differentiators. Leaders will increasingly play a vital role in managing employee energy, to generate positive energy not only on their own teams but across the organisation. Leaders must drive the shift from coping to thriving.	Participating in the flow of knowledge creation only makes sense if the organisation is able to seize the value from new knowledge. Innovative leaders will remain open to process but push for prototypes as early as possible. They will also appreciate that change is rarely welcomed with open arms and will need to possess the inner strength to take the helm in order to apply new ideas and carry those through to completion. Leaders must drive the shift from incremental improvement to changing the game.

Partner	Trust	
The approach to innovation in the future will be fundamentally different than the past. The size, scope and speed of technological advancements and change are breathtaking. Companies will need to shift from a model of sole control to one anchored in collaboration where players engage in multilateral interactions in an innovation ecosystem. Leading this ecosystem will become one of the core leadership qualities in the future. Leaders must drive the shift from hierarchies to networks.	Value is created through the effective integration of a diversity of ideas. More and more, leaders are being asked to shoulder the responsibility for handling the integration challenge in order to achieve competitive edge. To do this, leaders must be credible and trusted by others. They need to respect individuals and demonstrate authenticity and vulnerability. 'Coach, not tell' has to be their mantra and being open to and embracing difference, their way of life. Leaders who build trust will drive the shift from success to significance.	

The ADAPT qualities are out there, but they are not plentiful. They require nurturing and urgently so. We need to equip leaders with the knowledge, capability, mindset and behaviours needed to execute their strategies and navigate a constantly changing context.

So where to start? To make change this big, for those tasked with leadership development, we recommend a ground zero reset. This reset requires us to:

1. **Hold up the mirror:** Only when we become aware of our traditional mindsets, patterns of behaviour and our underlying belief systems, can we change. Only the self-aware leader will be able to self-disrupt.

2. **Slow down to accelerate:** Speed is given great currency in today's market but embracing a new leadership paradigm will require us to pause in order to gain clarity and build fresh perspectives. Only when leaders create space to reflect and elevate their sense-making will they be able to shift from hyperactive speed to transformational significance.

3. **Put mindset ahead of skillset:** Most leadership development has focussed upon building competence and skill (horizontal development). Disruptive leadership is about mindset (vertical development), how we make sense of the world, how we explore the reasons why we are drawn to lead and become clear and purposeful about the significant impact we seek to have.

Principles of Leadership Development

How often do we hear the language born of traditional mindsets in our organisational narrative?

- This is beyond my control. I have no choice.
- The business of business is business.
- Failure is not an option.
- If I want something done right, I'll do it myself.
- Harmony is achieved when differences are reduced.
- I should not show my weaknesses.

Cultivating an invaluable talent

Our research shows that businesses urgently need to begin cultivating the right leadership pipeline: only 15% of today's leaders excel across all five ADAPT dimensions and can be considered self-disruptors.

This narrative needs to be confined to another time, when command and control from the centre could create effectiveness and efficiency, when buoyant global growth "floated all boats," where competitors were known, change was emergent not disruptive and workplaces were densely populated with people who overwhelmingly looked the same.

In today's world of hyper change this narrative is failing with many organisations finding that their traditional leadership and management models are insufficient in dealing with the new challenges.

And while the history of leadership is abundant with theories, models and concepts, what has developed in recent times is the accelerated change that requires organisations to more closely examine what they expect of leaders and how to prepare them for the future.

To some, the rapid advances in AI and robotics suggests that human labour will be eventually rendered obsolete. Korn Ferry sees a different future of work. Human nature to strive for achievement is strong, and alongside technological advancements, there are significant interpersonal, organisational and political matters to manage. As we steer this complex navigation to the future, effective leadership will matter even more than it has in the past.

We see 10 foundational principles for the development of leaders who will thrive in this new world.

Reflective questions for leaders:

How do you pool the resources when you don't have sole ownership?

How do you handle energy loss when people are constantly asked to give up their routines and reskill themselves in order to navigate uncharted territory?

How do you form and lead a distributed, non-hierarchical organisation when the boundary and structure fade, and interdependence between partners is voluntary and transitory?

The 10 principles for developing self-disruptive leaders.

1. **Self-awareness** - Only when we become aware of our patterns of behaviour and our underlying belief systems, can we change. The foundation for any new way of leading will be the provision of insights into competency, personality traits, motivational drivers and learning agility.

2. **Horizontal and vertical** – Most leadership development has focussed upon building competence and skill (horizontal development). Disruptive leadership is about mindset (vertical development), how we make sense of the world, how we explore why we are drawn to lead and become clear and purposeful about the significant impact we seek.

3. **Shift mindsets** - Leaders need to demonstrate a new mindset in an increasingly volatile and uncertain business environment. Mindset is an internal operating system; the mindset we have impacts how we make sense of the world. Today's growing business complexity requires an evolving mindset. Thriving in this environment calls for more sophisticated ways of thinking. In a hyper changing environment, leaders need to continuously update (to self-disrupt) their mindset to stay effective. Leaders trapped in yesterday's mindset may struggle to find their place and voice in this new world.

4. **Provide developmental heat** - Due to the pace and extent of change, many people will play at the edge of their competence. Success will require us to constantly relinquish what feels easy and comfortable and try something different and difficult. To develop, leaders need to be faced with complex situations that disrupt habitual ways of thinking. New experiences will spark learning and some stress is needed to move leaders out of their comfort zone.

5. **Optimise energy** - Employee energy has become one of the key performance differentiators in today's rapidly changing environment. Managing energy for optimal output is a business imperative and not just an employee benefit program. Leaders must understand the importance of building capacity and resilience in self and others and develop sustainable energy generating habitual behaviours.

6. **Encourage broad perspectives** - The exchange, confrontation and enrichment of diverse ideas leads to enhanced results. Create environments for 'colliding perspectives' that expose leaders to different world views, opinions and backgrounds to build perspective and elevate the capacity for sensemaking.

7. **Learning with others** - The source of new competitive advantage will come not from a short-term focus on maximising current financial performance, but from boosting future profits through participating in the flow of knowledge creation and from collective efforts rather than individual genius. Social connections and new relationships also help people update their identities. A critical part of accelerating leadership mindset change is to find new role models and peer groups who can serve as "mirrors" in order to build self-awareness.

8. **Develop leaders at every level** - In an increasingly decentralized and open system, leadership is less tied to a position of formal authority in the hierarchy. It is better defined as a shared process where decision making is distributed across networks and boundaries at every level. Use online and self-directed learning to shift the onus from HR ownership of development to the individual.

9. **Pause principle** – Leaders need to slow down to accelerate; speed is given great currency in today's market but embracing a new leadership paradigm will require us to pause in order to gain clarity and build fresh perspectives. Only when leaders create space to reflect and elevate their sense-making will they be able to shift from hyperactive speed to transformational significance.

10. **Build a leadership culture not just leadership programs** -To navigate this rapidly changing business world, many organisations will need to overhaul not only their leadership development programs but the structure and culture of their businesses. Organisations must create structures and diverse and inclusive cultures that empower employees at all levels to challenge their own thinking and disrupt themselves to create an ecosystem of innovation and future ready leaders.

The final word

Organisations are still a long way off from being able to call out, accept, and develop these new leaders of the future. Once organisations begin to do so, they will be able to tackle great challenges with grand consequences not only for businesses but communities and the planet. If disruption is inevitable today, so too should disruptive leadership.

What's next?

Find out the state of your leadership team with a Self-Disruptive Leader Health Check. The Health Check is based on the success profile of Self-Disruptive Leaders and accesses the leaders' ability to ADAPT (Accelerate, Drive, Anticipate, Partner and Trust) as well as behavioral and technical competencies.

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The Korn Ferry ADAPT model offers an integrated leadership framework:
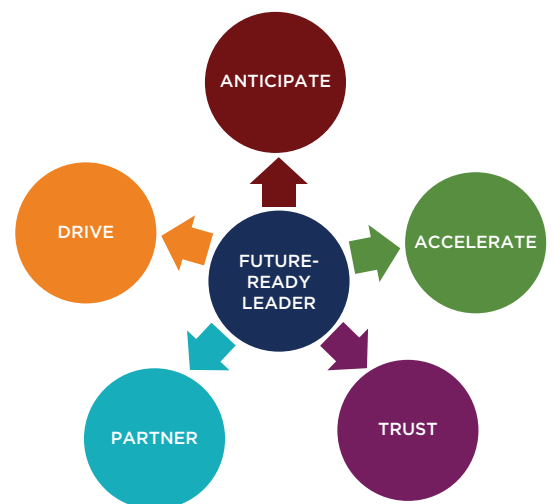
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2. Korn Ferry (2019). The Self-Disrutive Leader Report: https://focus.kornferry.com/leader-ship-and-talent/introducing-a-new-breed-of-future-ready-leaders/

About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organisational consulting firm. We help clients synchronise strategy and talent to drive superior performance. We work with organisations to design their structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people to bring their strategy to life. And we advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their people.