



LEADING IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND RISK

The defining leadership theme of 2026

Introduction

From geopolitical conflict and economic uncertainty to cyber threats, misinformation and the disruptive impact of artificial intelligence, leaders are increasingly being asked to make high-stakes decisions under conditions of extreme ambiguity.

Against this backdrop, a world-class panel of experts in politics, economics, national security and defence convened to explore what effective leadership demands in an era of persistent crisis and risk.



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Digital Thinking, Chair,
Full Fact and former
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Amicus Limited, and
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George Parker
Political Editor,
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Organised by Savannah Group and Amicus Limited, and curated by the Next Generation Leadership Institute, the event was one of an ongoing series designed to stimulate debate about how leadership needs to evolve in response to today's business environment, characterised by The Three 'V's:

VOLATILITY

Sudden shocks and disruptive events

VARIABILITY

Greater unpredictability in geopolitics, economics and market dynamics

VELOCITY

The accelerating speed of technological and organisational change

Throughout the discussion, speakers highlighted the ways in which these forces are already reshaping leadership decision-making, from the need to operate with incomplete information to the growing importance of resilience, agility and cognitive diversity to improve judgement and organisational decision-making.

The panel also agreed on something more fundamental:

“Periods of uncertainty don't create leadership problems. They reveal them.”

Key Themes From The Discussion

VOLATILITY IS BECOMING STRUCTURAL

Geopolitical tensions, economic pressure, technological disruption and information instability are interacting in ways that make the business environment less predictable than in previous decades. Leaders are increasingly having to make decisions with incomplete information, under greater time pressure and while multiple risks are building simultaneously.

In this context, the expectation of relative stability between crises is becoming less reliable. Organisations are instead operating in a constant state of strategic adjustment.

For leaders, this means developing organisations capable not only of responding to shocks, but of operating effectively in environments where disruption is increasingly normal.

“Things are as unstable as they’ve ever been, and what happens next depends on how these events unfold.”

SCENARIO THINKING IS REPLACING LINEAR STRATEGY

Some organisations still plan around a single “base case”. However, the reality discussed in the room was that leaders now need to consider multiple possible futures rather than a single forecast. That means understanding what risks would force a strategic pivot, identifying early signals that scenarios are shifting and ensuring organisations retain the adaptability to respond quickly.

“The issue isn’t predicting the future perfectly. It’s knowing what would trigger you to change course.”

The leaders who perform best in volatile environments are often those who prepare operationally for uncertainty rather than trying to eliminate it.

CRISIS REVEALS THE TRUE STRENGTH OF LEADERSHIP TEAMS

One of the themes that came through strongly was that crises expose leadership weakness. Periods of stress tend to reveal whether teams challenge each other effectively, whether decision-making is disciplined under pressure, whether leaders communicate clearly when uncertainty is high and whether organisations can adapt quickly when assumptions change.

Strong leadership teams tend to share several characteristics:

- Individual breadth of experience
- Collective clarity of purpose
- Cognitive diversity and constructive challenge
- Strong trust within the team
- The ability to make decisions without perfect information

“Clarity of purpose becomes even more important when the wind is blowing in all directions.”

In volatile environments, leadership team effectiveness becomes a central determinant of organisational resilience and a force multiplier in identifying and capitalising on opportunities when they come.

TRUST AND “RESILIENT TRUTH” ARE BECOMING LEADERSHIP ISSUES

A particularly striking part of the discussion focused on the information environment. The proliferation of misinformation, competing narratives and AI-generated content means organisations must increasingly think carefully about how they establish trusted information and shared understanding internally.

“Facts matter. If we don’t know what information we can trust, we will make poor decisions.”

Without that foundation, decision-making becomes slower and more fragmented. For leadership teams, this means being deliberate about:

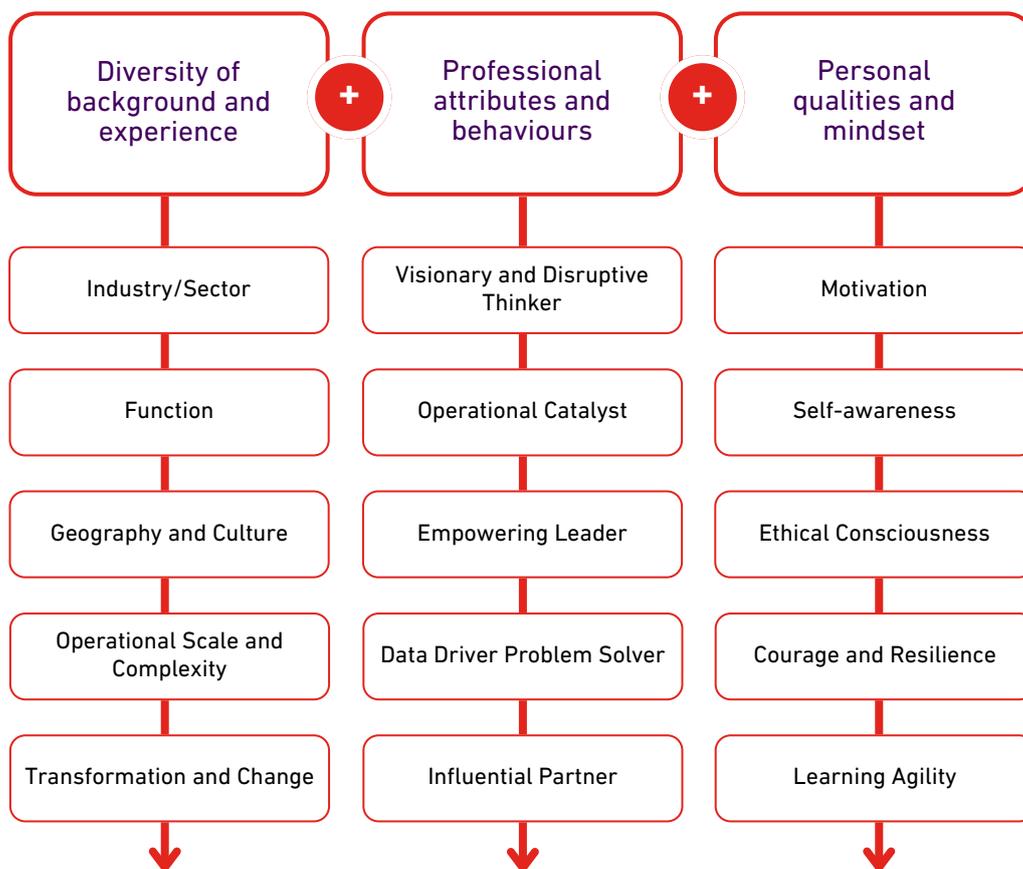
- What data is trusted
- How information flows through the organisation
- How leaders communicate clarity through uncertainty

LEADERSHIP REMAINS A FUNDAMENTALLY HUMAN ENDEAVOUR

Despite the increasing role of technology, the discussion repeatedly returned to a simple point:

Organisational resilience ultimately comes down to people.

The Next Generation Leadership Institute has identified key capabilities and experiences that enable leaders to navigate volatility, velocity and variability.



These capabilities do not appear overnight during a crisis. They are developed over time through improved team composition, more effective leadership development and greater diversity of experience.

“Leadership is a skill. Like any muscle, it can be developed.”

Leading In The Context of The Three 'V's

With volatility, variability and velocity as the defining attributes of the environment leaders now face, organisations need to develop three corresponding leadership capabilities.

ADAPTABLE LEADERSHIP TEAMS

When markets, geopolitics and economic conditions are less predictable, leadership teams must be able to adapt their thinking quickly.

This requires teams that combine cognitive diversity, strong challenge and debate and the ability to reassess assumptions as conditions evolve. Adaptability at the leadership level allows organisations to respond intelligently when the environment changes.

“You need a culture of inquisitiveness and curiosity, where people are willing to challenge assumptions.”

“The question is how well your organisation can respond to unexpected shocks.”

AGILE LEADERSHIP RESOURCING

Volatile environments create moments where organisations need new or better leadership capabilities quickly, whether to address a crisis, lead a transformation or stabilise a critical function.

Organisations are now structuring leadership resourcing to enable fast access to additional capability when circumstances demand it.

The ability to access immediately available specialist leadership talent can often determine how effectively organisations respond when unexpected events occur.

ACCELERATED SUCCESSION PLANNING

The speed of change in technology, business models and organisational structures is overtaking legacy succession models. Businesses need to anticipate the evolving requirements of existing leadership positions, together with the need for new roles in the future. They must ensure that the organisation has strong succession candidates using a combination of accelerated internal leadership development and agile external talent pipelining.

“In a fast-moving environment, future leadership readiness becomes a strategic advantage.”



The Leadership Resilience Framework

Volatility of Events

- Geopolitical crises
- Economic instability
- Impact of disruptive new technologies



Adaptable Leadership Teams

- Enterprise leaders with broad functional experience
- High collective degree of cognitive diversity
- Strong balance of strategic and operational abilities

Variability of Markets

- Blurring of traditional sector boundaries
- Rapidly changing customer behaviours
- New business models and market entrants



Agile Leadership Resourcing

- Rapid access to crisis management capabilities
- Flexible deployment of experienced interim managers
- Project-based use of independent transformation consultants

Velocity of Change

- Acceleration of shifting business dynamics
- Faster innovation cycles
- Quicker decision requirements



Accelerated Succession Planning

- Leadership succession requirements recalibrated to 'the new normal' of The Three 3 'V's
- Higher impact internal leadership development interventions
- Ongoing external talent pipelining that mirrors internal succession needs

Conclusion

Successfully leading through crisis and risk will become the defining theme for 2026. Resilient, agile teams are crucial for navigating the next 12 months and beyond.

Savannah Group and Amicus Limited are working with boards and leadership teams to help organisations strengthen these three capabilities, building and developing leadership teams that are adaptable, resilient and ready for the environment ahead.

While the external environment continues to be volatile and unpredictable, quality of leadership will remain the single greatest source of competitive advantage.



About Savannah Group

Savannah Group is a global executive search and leadership advisory firm. We help organisations diagnose leadership needs, design tailored talent strategies, and deliver high-impact results through executive search, interim management, and talent intelligence. Our next generation approach combines deep expertise with data, insight and pace, powered by MapX, our proprietary AI-enabled leadership analytics platform.

About Amicus Limited

Amicus Limited is a leadership consultancy that helps organisations improve performance by developing stronger leaders, resilient teams, and organisational culture. Drawing on experience from both the military and corporate sectors, Amicus supports organisations in strengthening leadership capability, shaping positive workplace cultures, and navigating change with clarity and confidence. The team brings together real-world leaders with extensive experience of leading people, managing complexity, and delivering results in demanding environments.

