

Why “The Intrapreneur Leader” Will Shape The Future of Work

by Justin Pennington

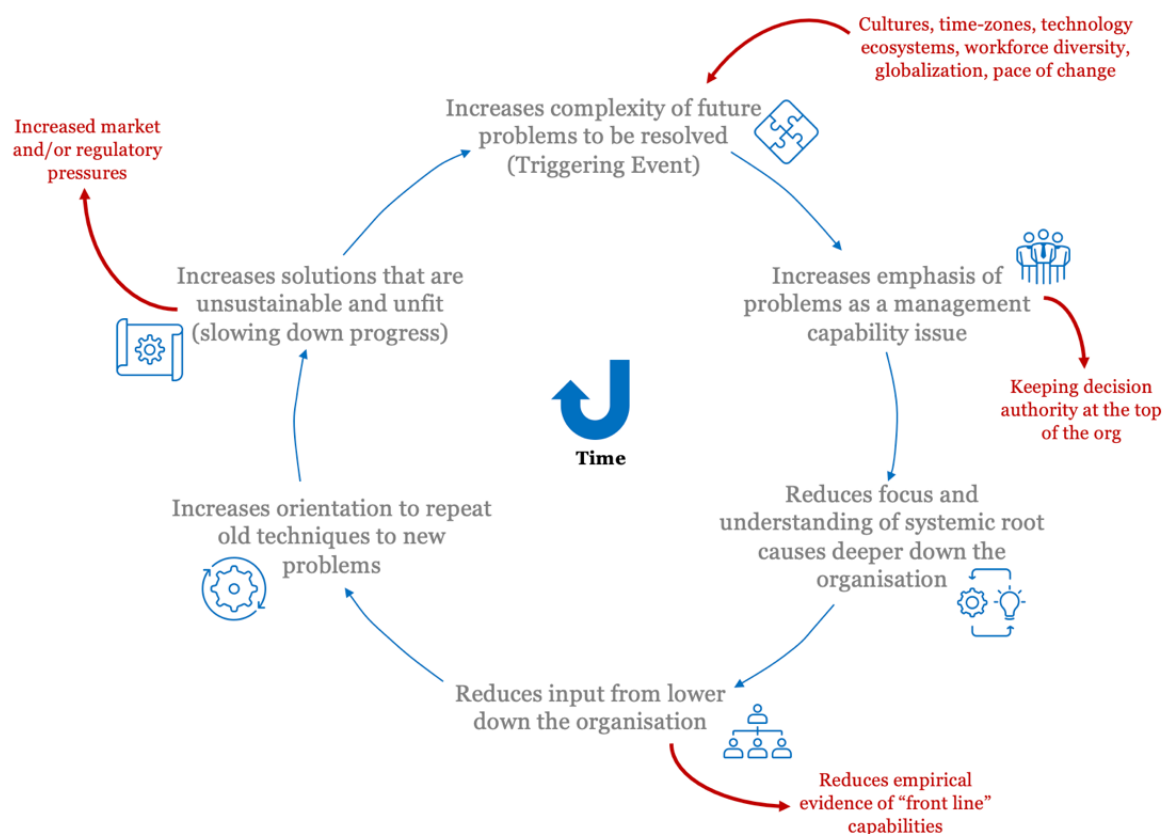


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There's a storm approaching. The old path to success — working hard, following orders, and climbing the ladder — is no longer a guarantee. Three headwinds are reshaping today's workplace: VUCA conditions (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), shifting expectations from the late-Millennials and Generation Z cohorts, and outdated top-down leadership. Together, they form a 'trichotomy of failure'.

Exhibit 1 lays out this reinforcing cycle of cause and effect. As future problems become increasingly complex, they are often misframed as leadership capability gaps, diverting attention from their systemic root causes and silencing frontline insights. Leaders often resort to familiar yet ineffective solutions that exacerbate the very issues they aim to resolve. The result? A cycle of escalating complexity. Pause for a moment. These patterns may already be quietly undermining your teams. Eroding clarity, engagement, and momentum.

EXHIBIT 1



Story loop illustrating the behaviour cycle of ever-increasing problem complexity within organisational systems.

Leading like it's 1950 in a world demanding Wi-Fi, feedback, and flexibility

Let's reflect on prevailing leadership practices. We've been taught at school to follow our teachers. They decide what's right and wrong. Classes reside within a faculty, which in turn resides within a school. Teachers, classes, faculty, school. Each unit is locked in a repeating pattern, replicating the behaviours from above. The flow of information is top-down.

Next, we have the effects of the Industrial Era, which gave rise to modern management theory. Managers are subject matter experts. Their focus is productivity. Their objective is to control the present and predict the future. An uncomfortable axiom remains: leaders decide; others execute.

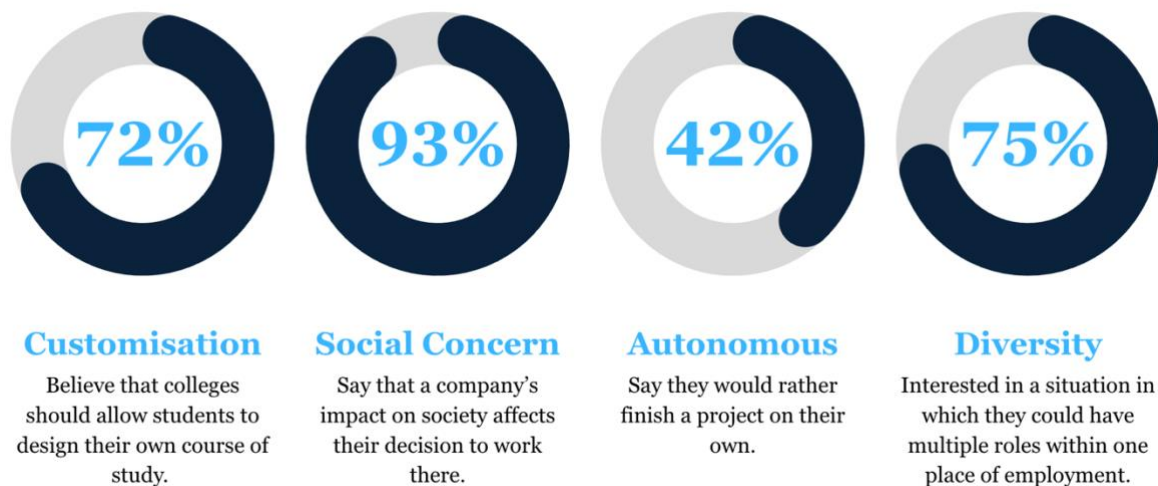
The technical leader needs hierarchies and expects people to accept the flow of authority and information. To achieve this, they require conformity. Conformity may feel safe, but it shields those in power from scrutiny and reinforces the status quo. Evolution needs more.

Like human biology, organisations need balance (homeostasis) to respond

effectively to disruption. Leaders once tackled clear-cut *expulsion* problems — known issues addressed by subject-matter experts using established solutions. Now, they face *normalising* problems driven by external change, which require collaboration and adaptation. They also face *transformative* problems rooted in deep structural issues across interdependent systems. Attempting to apply expulsion-style methods to these new problem types won't work. Going forward, leaders must diversify their approach to restore balance.

Now, consider emerging leaders. Generations are shaped by the forces of their time, and late-Millennials and Generation-Z undeniably bring a distinct worldview. In *Gen Z @ Work*, David and Jonah Stillman highlight key traits of this cohort (Exhibit 2): a need for customisation, global awareness, learning through doing, and an appreciation for diversity of thought, gender, and ethnicity. They reject bureaucracy, act quickly, and prefer autonomy over hierarchy. This generation isn't just joining the workforce — they're redefining it. They demand flexibility, purpose, and a Wi-Fi connection stronger than outdated corporate traditions.

EXHIBIT 2



Value drivers of Generation Z employees (source: Gen Z @ Work, David & Jonah Stillman)

Bold moves, but new solutions are missing the mark

In the last few decades, these challenges have been addressed. Concepts such as Agile, Teal, and Holacracy all challenge the traditional hierarchy model. Yet adoption is slow and insufficient. Larger institutions struggle to make any meaningful evolutions despite the promise of these new models.

Agile promotes fast learning, short work cycles, and continuous improvement. However, widespread adoption remains difficult outside of Technology firms. In their rush to become 'Agile', teams prioritise structural mechanisms: ceremonies, retrospectives, and tools like JIRA. The promise of Agile lies in profound behavioural change that goes beyond just process tweaks.

Teal replaces rigid hierarchies with purpose-driven, self-managed workplaces. It treats organisations as living systems, trusting individuals to self-organise and to make decisions based on their environmental conditions. But the gap between current and target operating states often proves too great, and many revert to traditional norms.

Holacracy distributes authority through teams or "circles". It aims to eliminate bottlenecks, reduce dependency on managers, and create more engaging, responsive workplaces. Yet its complex rules, governance meetings, and unfamiliar terminology quickly overwhelm people trying to change operating styles. Ultimately, people retreat to more familiar structures.

These patterns raise an awkward question: if intellectually credible models are

struggling, what hope is there for sustained evolution?

Let's revisit our biology analogy. There were changes in the environment during COVID. Then a vaccine was developed. However, human immunity still had to adapt. Organisations are similar. We have environmental changes and new models as solutions, yet individual capabilities have not evolved to adopt them sustainably.

This is the adoption gap. New models do matter, but they do not come alive through diagrams, principles, or executive endorsements alone. They can only take hold when individuals are capable of enacting them (Exhibit 3).

Rise of “The Intrapreneur Leader”

Intrapreneur. *Noun.* An employee who proactively and autonomously develops innovative ideas or projects within a company for the purpose of change.

We need a new kind of leader. One that redefines leadership not by how much they know, but by what they can do with others' knowledge. We need “The Intrapreneur Leader”.

The idea of an Intrapreneur was first popularised by Gifford and Elizabeth Pinchot in their 1985 book *Intrapreneuring: Why You Don't Have to Leave the Corporation to Become an*

Entrepreneur. Today, conceptual intrapreneurism is advocated through communities such as The League of Intrapreneurs, Corporate Rebels, and The Innovator's Circle.

The Intrapreneur Leader thinks like an entrepreneur but works from inside an organisation. They spot problems, find opportunities, mobilise people, and test small, low-risk experiments until value appears for customers, end-users, or stakeholders.

Becoming an intrapreneurial leader is an individual journey. At its core, it influences how you think, act, speak, and respond to situations. This personal leadership template builds on technical knowledge and leverages behavioural science and advanced skills to drive value. This leader recognises that they have limited information and knowledge and is open to being wrong. They understand abstract thoughts and concepts, observe patterns rather than points, and facilitate power rather than holding it.

The Intrapreneur Leader is not a role. It is a capability.

The template translates these leverage points into eight new skill capabilities (Exhibit 4). They are augmented by four enabling principles: humility and self-directed learning, skills for doing,

responsible initiative without waiting for permission, and diversified exposure.

EXHIBIT 3

Results of the ‘Trichotomy of Failure’ – The “New Normal”		Intervention Point
	- People must create conditions for emergence, experimentation, and shared ownership. - Individuals require purpose, autonomy, and influence, expecting leaders to enable growth, not dictate from above.	A generative attitude within a ‘community’ of peers. (Prompt 1)
	- Increasing change renders old assumptions obsolete; anthropology reveals shifting needs that data alone can’t capture. - Workers seek authentic, inclusive, personalized experiences and respond to firms that reflect real lives and truly listen.	Greater insights into end-users, putting them at the heart of solution focus. (Prompt 2)
	- Rapid change demands fast, human-centred iteration (unlike historic setting which relied on long-range planning). - Younger employees thrive in agile, creative environments, expecting to co-create solutions through collaboration.	Tools to ideate quickly and encourage people to “co-create”. (Prompt 3)
	- Problems are interdependent and consequences unpredictable; new tools and approaches are needed to reveal complexity. - The new cohort values transparency and interconnected thinking, seeking to achieve systemic impact (not “tactical fixes”).	Systems thinking and systemic re-design. (Prompt 4)
	- Bias and ambiguity cloud judgment and create more polarising views; structuring choices provide greater clarity. - Individuals expect intuitive, ethical, and fair decision processes, and sensitive to bias and manipulation.	Distributed authority and collective responsibility. (Prompt 5)
	- Initiative delivery must be reliable despite shifting priorities. - New workers value accountability and quickly disengage when intent doesn’t match action.	Smaller incremental steps that are delivered on-time and in-full. (Prompt 6)
	- In new environments with nonlinear career paths, personal branding ensures visibility and relevance. - Young employees see themselves as portfolio professionals, investing in personal branding to ensure visibility translates into opportunity.	Exploits internal marketing as a strategic capability rather than a function. (Prompt 7)
	- Connecting through empathy and relevance builds trust where logic or authority alone once sufficed. - The new cohort value emotional intelligence and inclusion, gravitating toward leaders who connect with them, not just direct.	Behavioural storytelling tactics to ensure messages resonates. (Prompt 8)

How the ‘Trichotomy of Failure’ creates newly required leadership capabilities

1. Being generative

Modern organisations don’t win through instruction and efficiency alone. They succeed by creating value with and for others. Being generative builds credibility, trust, feedback loops, and the habit of

leaving people and systems better than you found them.

2. End user anthropology

In a data-driven world, one truth remains: people are at the centre of every process, system, or problem. Business anthropology

helps decode this through direct observation and questioning. The goal is to uncover hidden patterns, meanings, and connections that others miss.

3. Creative synthesis

When we discuss words like creativity and innovation, they evoke fixed images. Yet with more complex problems, fresh thinking is required. Being innovative can mean creating a new control, changing a process, launching an internal initiative, starting a project, or adopting a new digital tool.

4. Sensemaking

When facing greater problem complexity, facts and experience alone won't deliver successful decisions. Clarity does. Sensemaking helps us understand what's going on when answers aren't obvious, and opinions diverge. The goal isn't just explanation. It's insight.

5. Horizontal decision making

Organisations are a series of decisions. In pyramid models, those at the top decide. But instead of chasing certainty, effective teams focus on the process by which

decisions are made. Decision architecture helps align thinking early, facilitate debiasing, and centre on principles over outcomes.

6. The OTIF premium

Delivering on-time and in-full builds credibility, which in the corporate world is currency. Predictability fosters trust. Consistently following through on commitments makes people feel secure relying on you. Credibility isn't claimed; it is earned through repeated behaviour.

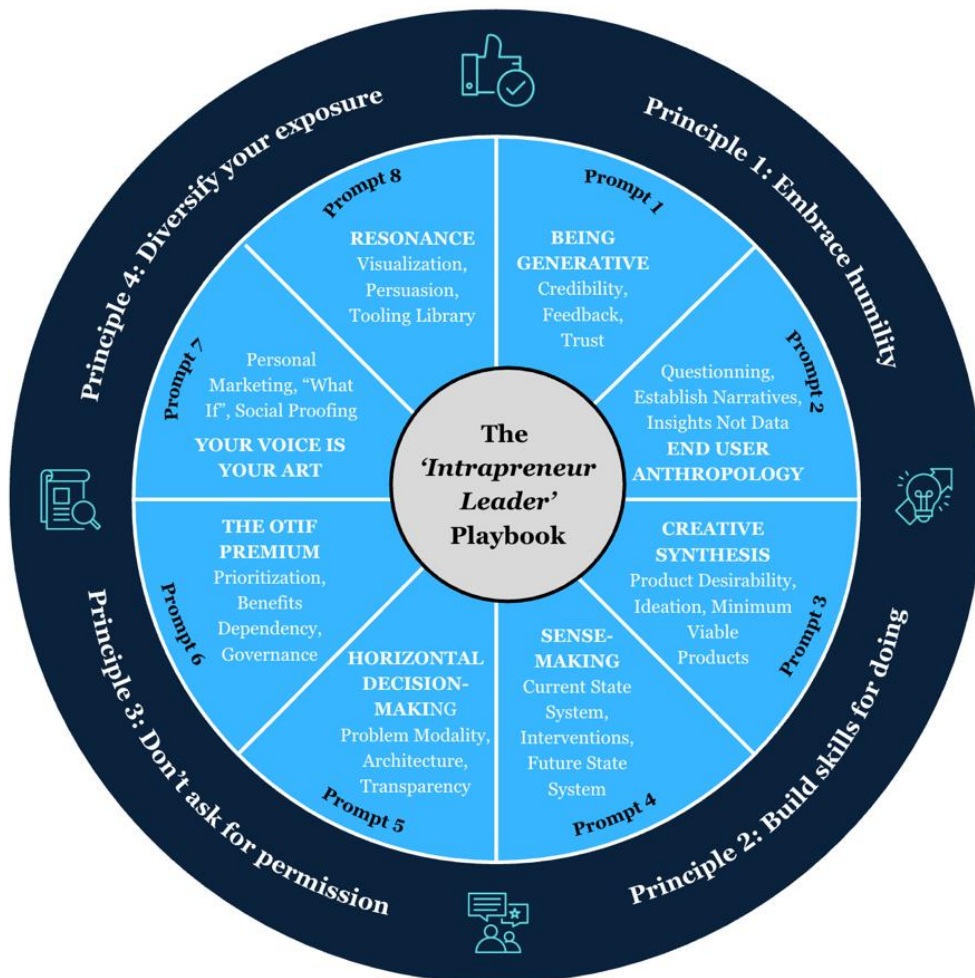
7. Your voice is your art

In modern organisations, voices struggle to be heard. Control and conformity stifle expression, making new ideas feel like threats. The Intrapreneur Leader must make communication intentional — clear, visual, and engaging.

8. Resonance

Like a transistor radio tuning into the right frequency, resonance occurs when a message aligns perfectly with its audience. To make ideas stick, we need more than logic. We need clarity, relevance, and emotional connection.

EXHIBIT 4



The x8 'Prompts' and x4 'Enabling Principles' of "The Intrapreneur Leader" playbook.

Tomorrow is too powerful to be led by the past

The future won't wait. There can be no lasting compromise between outdated leadership and the demands of what's next. The eight prompts are hallmarks of "The Intrapreneur Leader", and they signal a shift from authority to agility.

This isn't about knowing more; it's a mindset revolution for professionals who are done playing by outdated rules. It's for

those ready to lead without permission, valuing skill over status.

The future of work will not arrive because organisations describe it beautifully. It will arrive when enough people begin behaving differently.

The system does not change first. People do.

And not everyone. Just enough.



Justin Pennington, FRSA has a thirty-year career spanning 3 continents and multiple industries. He has dedicated his career to preparing tomorrow's talent — those who, like him, value adaptability, humility, and real-world learning. This article focuses on some of the main themes in his forthcoming book, *The Intrapreneur Leader*. The book captures his philosophy: championing a skills-based and behavioural science approach for emerging leaders to lead with clarity, grow through experience, and build without waiting for permission.

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