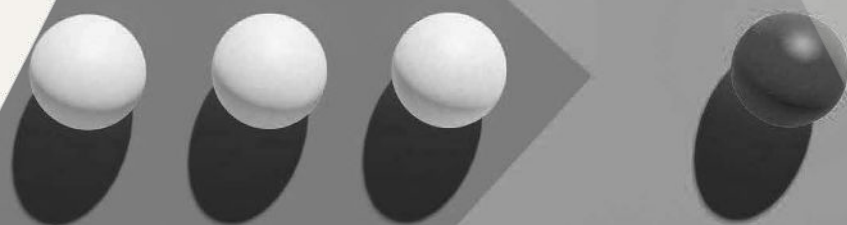


Rethinking Leadership for the Reality of Work

How organizations can close the preparedness gap and build sustainable leadership capacity in a continuously transforming workplace

BY ANGELA KEGLER, PhD



Today's leadership challenge is fundamentally a problem of systemic misalignment. Individual effort alone cannot fix it.

Leadership skills and responsibilities have expanded faster than the structures designed to support them. Organizational expectations now routinely outpace the infrastructure that enables effective leadership. As a result, many leaders operate in a constant state of disruption, stretched thin by demands that their roles were never built to accommodate.

Leaders no longer work within stable, predictable environments where formal hierarchy and established processes reliably produce results. Effectiveness today depends on the ability to create clarity amid ambiguity, influence teams without formal authority, and build organizational capability while absorbing increasing levels of operational responsibility.

The American Management Association's annual Leadership Survey of 1,249 respondents reveals a stark reality. While managers focus on the logistics of execution, leaders face mounting pressure to maintain strategic direction. The evolution of the modern workplace requires leaders to continuously create alignment and capability amid ongoing disruption.

THE RISE OF ROLE SPOILLOVER

The shift from stable leadership models to continuous change has altered how leadership shows up in organizations. Influence has increasingly replaced authority as the primary mechanism for getting work done. Leaders must align stakeholders across highly matrixed functions.

At the same time, leaders are absorbing significant work outside their formal roles. They are taking on project management and operational tasks that previously would have been distributed elsewhere. A striking 71% of leaders in AMA's survey reported performing work outside their formal role.

This spillover work is driven by staffing shortages, unclear ownership of tasks, and urgent crises that demand hands-on involvement. When leaders consistently take on work that should be handled by others, the organization becomes dependent on individual leadership endurance rather than sound systems and accountability.

A staggering 59% of leaders reported that performing work outside their role actively limits their ability to focus on strategic priorities. As leaders step in to maintain momentum, their direct reports lose vital opportunities to build capability and confidence. Short-term productivity may improve, but long-term organizational leverage steadily declines.

NAVIGATING EXTERNAL PRESSURES

Three external forces are redefining the leadership landscape: artificial

intelligence/technology disruption, employee well-being/cultural expectations, and economic/geopolitical volatility.

AI is increasingly viewed as an embedded tool that accelerates execution. Leadership, in contrast, accelerates clarity. Without clear intent and defined decision boundaries, technology-driven speed can easily produce misalignment. Leaders are not required to master the underlying technology. Their true mandate is to guide people through the technology's impact on roles and decision making.

Leaders must simultaneously navigate rapid technological change and respond to evolving human needs. The core leadership capability in this environment is the ability to translate strategy into execution and foster deep trust that cuts through potential chaos.

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of leaders reported performing work outside their formal role



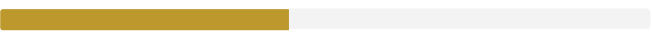
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44%

of leaders reported feeling fully prepared to meet future role expectations



CLOSING THE PREPAREDNESS GAP

Despite the expanding scope of leadership, capability development has not kept pace. In AMA's research, only 44% of leaders reported feeling fully prepared to meet future role expectations. Preparedness gaps are most pronounced among mid-level leaders, who are expected to deliver immediate results while navigating increasing complexity with limited enablement.

To close the growing gap between leadership expectations and leadership capacity, organizations must move beyond broad calls for better leaders. They must focus on deliberate actions that enable leaders to perform effectively. The research points to five strategic imperatives:

STRENGTHEN EMPLOYEE- CENTRIC CLARITY

Leaders must consistently communicate priorities and purpose in ways that reduce ambiguity. When leaders frame work within a clear strategic context, teams understand what needs to be done and why it matters. This clarity supports alignment and sustained engagement.

ESTABLISH SHARED LEADERSHIP STANDARDS

Leadership teams must establish common standards for decision making. Clarifying who decides and what criteria are used is essential. Shared standards reduce unnecessary escalation and enable the organization to move forward with cohesion rather than fragmentation.

BUILD INFLUENCE WITHOUT AUTHORITY

Influence without authority has become the new organizational norm. Leaders must intentionally develop skills in stakeholder alignment and negotiation. These capabilities enable progress across matrixed environments without reliance on positional power.

REDEFINE DELEGATION AS DEVELOPMENT

Organizations should treat delegation as a primary mechanism for capability development, not simply a means of workload relief. By assigning meaningful responsibility and reinforcing accountability through coaching, leaders build confidence in others. This approach reduces role spillover and preserves leaders' strategic capacity over time.

ENABLE LEADERSHIP THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

Leadership effectiveness depends on organizational enablement as much as individual skill. Organizations should reinforce role clarity and align incentives to reward team development over individual heroics. Tools and processes must proactively support delegation rather than forcing leaders to compensate for structural gaps.

Leadership evolution is structural. The demands placed on leaders have expanded faster than the support systems designed to sustain them. Sustainable leadership capacity depends on intentional development and shared standards that enable leaders to focus on strategic direction. By investing in employee-centric clarity and organizational design, companies can turn workplace disruption into a distinct competitive advantage.

Angela Kegler, PhD, is a leadership and organizational development expert specializing in turning leadership theory into practical, real-world application for leaders and organizations.

Adapted from "Leadership Development in a Transforming Workplace: Emerging Demands, Gaps, and Opportunities for Today's Organizations."

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