The Third Wave
The Future of Leadership Development

Over the past 70 years, ideas about leadership and leadership development have evolved significantly. Now, increasing business model disruption, diminished trust in leaders, and escalating employee expectations require that we again rethink what it takes to lead well. Today’s world requires leaders who have more authenticity, better agility, and a stronger sense of agency than ever before. But achieving these outcomes demands that we enter a new era of leadership development that is radically different from previous eras. We call this the Third Wave. The Third Wave of leadership development provides a framework, principles, and ideas on how to prepare our leaders for what is needed in this new world.
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“Everyone has their own recipe but, honestly, it’s the same ingredients, with a little more or less spice.”

- A Pivot client, during recent conversation
The Problem: Are Leaders Getting Better?

In her recent book, *The End of Leadership*, Barbara Kellerman offers a scathing critique of the current state of leadership development: “As a whole, the leadership industry is self-satisfied, self-perpetuating, and poorly policed,” she argues. “Leadership programs tend to proliferate without objective assessment; leadership as an area of intellectual inquiry remains thin; and little original thought has been given to what leader learning in the second decade of the 21st century should look like.” While these criticisms are hard for those of us in the field to hear, there is truth to her comments. Leadership development can and should be a transformational experience, but it often falls well short of the mark.

Indeed, the executives with whom we work share similar concerns. They worry about return on investment or complain that the field of leadership development has grown stale. To be sure, there are business schools and consulting firms out there creating interesting, sometimes transformative experiences. But mainstream executive development can sometimes look formulaic or even shallow. “Everyone has their own recipe,” a client recently told us, “but, honestly, it’s the same ingredients, with a little more or less spice.”

No one wants to do away with leadership development, not even Kellerman. So the critical question for us, and perhaps for many of you, is: How can we push leadership development further? There’s certainly reason to ask this question. The world needs better leadership right now. As a litmus test, ask yourself the simple question: How many great leaders can I name?

If leadership is lacking and our methods for developing leaders have grown stale, what can we do? We believe the answer is to create more experiences that are attuned to the unique challenges of today’s environment. But to do this, we must have a different kind of conversation about leadership development and, in the end, be willing to take more risks in how we develop our leaders.

Our intention with this article is to initiate that conversation by sharing our vision of the future. If leadership development were to keep pace with the changing needs of our businesses, society, and culture, what would it look like? We begin by describing the three most critical leadership pressures leaders face today. These demands are present across industries and have significant ramifications for how leaders guide their organizations into the future. The second section is a review of the key models and assumptions that have guided our thinking about leadership development over the past 70 years. We believe that, while helpful, many of these ideas are outdated and, as a result, are misguiding our leaders. Finally, we present a new model for leadership development—what we refer to as the Third Wave—that offers a clear framework and design principles for how to prepare our leaders for the new world.
The New World

Disruption

It is often noted that the scale of change that will occur over the next ten years will surpass that of the past fifty. To be sure, we have been talking about the “increasing pace of change” for over two decades now. But a more vital difference is that the kind of change is changing. It is no longer enough to say that we live in a “turbulent” world. As Clay Christensen, the well-known Harvard Business School professor and author of *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, has put it, we now live in a disruptive world.

The difference between turbulence and disruption goes beyond semantics. Turbulence suggests difficulty staying on the pre-defined course. It gives the feeling that one is probably in for a bumpy ride. Today’s leaders face different conditions. Technological innovations have begun to put the very foundation of industries at risk. Publishing, technology, and media were only the beginning. We see early signs of sea changes in industries as diverse as healthcare, retail, financial services, energy, and consumer goods. A senior executive at one of the world’s largest apparel companies recently told us that the fundamental principles upon which his business was built will have to change in the next three years. His comment wasn’t an anomaly. We hear similar sentiments from virtually every one of our clients.

Disruption requires businesses to fundamentally challenge who they are and why they exist. In the past, leaders were required to create strategies and long-term business plans. In today’s world, leaders are responsible for re-inventing their business. Leaders must now revamp their profit models, transform their market positioning, products, and services, and perhaps even reevaluate their core values and assumptions. Their very identity may be in flux.

The Trust Deficit

If disruption weren’t enough, the very base upon which leadership is built—trust and authority—has begun to erode. Change, ambiguity, and uncertainty require stronger emotional bonds between leaders and followers. But today, followers are more cynical about leaders than ever before. Back in 2000, even before the recession, one study found that a paltry 7% of employees trusted their leaders.¹ Our belief is that this trend is accelerating.

There are many reasons why employees feel more disappointment in, dislike for, and distrust of business leaders. High unemployment, excessive executive compensation that is decoupled from business performance, and greater economic volatility are but a few of the factors that have changed the emotional connection between leaders and their followers.

Inequalities in business and distrust in authority are certainly not new, but there is a third factor that makes these trends more important than ever before. Technological innovations and social media have given employees greater access not only to communication but also to information about their leaders. Comments that appear incongruous or hypocritical can be circulated quickly and, often times, without a leader’s knowledge. Likewise, anecdotes of inequality, foolishness, or even duplicity can be widely shared, thus enhancing the cynicism, distrust, and anger that people feel towards their leaders.

Even a leader with great integrity, empathy, and positive intentions is not immune to these perceptions, these trends impact how employees see business leaders as a group. In other words, today’s leaders must inadvertently take responsibility for the failures and misdeeds of other leaders by the very nature of being in their position. They must work against what we refer to as a trust deficit.
Most of the leaders we work with today feel perplexed not only by increasing industry disruption and cynicism but also by an eroding sense of authority. Executives operate in heavily matrixed environments, decentralized corporations, and federated organizations. Each of these environments demands collaboration and partnership across functions and divisions. But such structures—or, more accurately, cultures—diminish or confuse leaders’ authority. As one client told us, “Since everyone has a say, many people can say ‘no’, but no one can say ‘yes.’”

The reality is that leading in business is harder today because the balance of power between leaders, their peers, and followers has equalized. Leaders are expected to have more responsibility while having less structural authority and positional power within their organization.

At the same time, the breaking of the traditional social contract between organizations and employees has dramatically increased the personal expectations that followers have of their leaders. No longer can leaders expect employees to perform solely in exchange for financial compensation and security. In today’s volatile economy, leaders provide skills, individualized development, and, most importantly, meaning for their direct reports in exchange for job performance. It is a tall order.

Technology has amplified this power shift by making self-expression easier and more communal. Facebook and YouTube allow employees to post comments, pictures, and videos about their organizations and leaders. Other sites, such as Glassdoor.com, provide employees with a forum to publicly (but anonymously) give detailed reviews of company culture, leaders, and even compensation. Innovations such as these are increasing employees’ expectations of influence and transparency. As a result, they are further leveling the playing field between leaders and followers.

We see the new equilibrium expressed in how people talk about their leaders and their organizational cultures. “Strong” leaders are described as collaborative, inclusive, engaging, and inspiring. Work groups are required to be team-focused, democratic, matrixed, and participative. Everyone expects to have a voice.

We believe that these three core shifts in business—disruption, the trust deficit, and the new equilibrium—have created a new world for leaders. Now more than ever, leaders must develop better agility, more authenticity, and a stronger sense of their own agency. These characteristics go beyond knowledge, skills, and even competencies—and, as a result, demand that we radically change how we develop leaders.
The Foundation:
The First and Second Waves of Leadership Development

To understand what must be changed, it is important first to understand the key assumptions that have guided us to this point. In looking back, we see that ideas about leadership and leadership development have progressed through two distinct eras—each with its own ideology and methodology.

The First Wave

In the first half of the 20th century, there was little meaningful distinction between leadership and management. Leadership development, as we know it today, didn’t exist. If you wanted to become a business leader, you learned how to be manager. And in response to the rise of the modern corporation, management was driven by an imperative to create more rational, systematized, and often quantitatively focused organizations. In contemporary terms, the first era in leadership development was dominated by the “hard” side of business.

Leadership candidates were managers who had mastered knowledge of the core functional domains, like accounting, administration, finance, and marketing, and of the standard systematic methods for running a business. Knowledge was the primary outcome of development.

Since mastering a body of knowledge was considered the key ingredient to strong leadership, the favored approach to business teaching was the case method, made famous by the Harvard Business School. During the First Wave, the case method was less a stimulant for discussion than a way to deduce a concrete answer. “Leadership”—when it was taught—was treated as an intrinsic constellation of traits. As such, leadership didn’t lend itself to development. You either had it or you didn’t.

The Second Wave

By the 1970s, the rational ideology of the First Wave was under siege. Many MBAs discovered that the real world bore little resemblance to the theories they had learned in school or the systematic analyses they had been taught. Shaped by these frustrations and provoked by the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, a Second Wave rose and began to gather strength. With it, a “soft” alternative challenged the quantitative “hard” side of business. The defining characteristic of the Second Wave was the ascendancy of social and emotional dimensions of organizational behavior. During the Second Wave, books like Tom Peters and Robert Waterman’s *In Search of Excellence* and Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* began to outsell equally acclaimed books on strategy and finance.

In the Second Wave, theories of leadership also changed. Scholars began studying leadership behavior in practice and began to create taxonomies of different leadership styles. Leadership thus moved from emphasizing inherent traits to categorizing different styles that could be matched against different situations. This shift fundamentally altered beliefs about leadership. While earlier theories stressed that leadership was something you possessed (or didn’t), newer style inventories and categorizations assumed that leadership could be enhanced, taught, and developed.

The emphasis on the soft side of business shifted the focus from individual leaders to teams and interpersonal dynamics. Leaders—and those developing them—
enthusiastically embraced the tools of feedback and self-reflection. Skills overtook knowledge as the critical outcome of good development, and the soft turn in leadership development put the onus on learning through experience and application. Formal classroom leadership training was widely complemented by experiential techniques such as simulations, ropes courses, and mentoring.¹

However, disruption, the absence of trust, and the new equilibrium all demand that leaders go beyond the tenets and techniques of the First and Second Waves. Leaders need more than business acumen and emotional intelligence to be successful today. We believe that the new world demands that we radically redefine leadership development, including how we think about leadership (ideology), what we emphasize (focus), who we develop (participants), the methods we use (techniques), and the results we expect (outcome). The aggregate of these changes constitutes the Third Wave in leadership development.

**The Third Wave:**
Redefining Leadership Development

A summary of the distinctions between the First, Second, and Third waves of leadership development across five key dimensions.

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Ideology
Bringing the Hard and Soft Sciences Together

In the Second Wave, hard and soft slugged it out or otherwise stayed clear of each other. Seen in stereotype, the hard, cold, masculine emphasis on logic, numbers strategy, and finance was pitted against the soft, intimate, feminine qualities of relationships and behavior. For too long, this ordering of the world divided the leadership development field. In today’s highly disruptive, competitive environments, decisions about business models must be suffused with concerns about culture, and discussions about culture should reflect concerns about how money is to be made. Future leaders must be able to integrate both the hard and soft aspects of leadership.

Consider a recent “Leader’s Day” summit that we facilitated among the top leaders at a Fortune 500 company. Led by the VP of HR and the VP of Strategy, participants engaged in a lively and rigorous debate about the emerging vision. The group asked and answered big questions: How do we handle the inevitable conflicts created by a business platform that serves customers with different needs? How does our new positioning impact the way we work across parts of the business? Can we fail fast and learn, or are we just kidding ourselves? These questions can’t be easily divided into hard debates about strategy and soft conversations about people. The two “sides” are intertwined. The conversation is simply about the business and the changing conditions in which leadership will arise.

Focus
From Personality to Purpose

Steve Jobs, one of the most revered business leaders of our generation, presents a curious but important question about leadership in today’s world. Jobs was a visionary and a leader people rallied around, but the Apple CEO also displayed behavior dramatically inconsistent with the generally accepted principles of emotional intelligence that were immensely popular in the Second Wave. That leaves us with an important question: Is the legacy of Jobs’ leadership a cautionary tale or an inspiration? There’s no shortage of opinions on this matter.

From our perspective, the Steve Jobs question highlights a critical dimension of Third Wave thinking—that leadership development no longer can be about a particular model, style, or universal set of competencies. To be effective, leaders can’t follow models, rules, or recipes from others. Instead, they must balance the unique circumstances and challenges in which they operate with a strong sense of purpose.

By purpose, we mean the strongly felt sense of responsibility that a leader has for taking action even in the face of risk, conflict, and uncertainty. Purpose is the grounding that enables leaders to be agile amidst disruption, to earn the trust of others, and to lead without ascribed power and authority. It goes beyond talent, skills, or even knowledge.

Unlike personality or behavioral approaches to leadership, purpose defies quantification, categorization, or assessment. Purpose can’t be taught, but it can be discovered.
To help in the discovery process, we have leaders ask themselves three basic questions:

1. **What am I being called to do?**
   We ask leaders to take an unflinching look at the context in which they are leading. What are the big problems in the business that need solving? Where do I (or we) feel a call-to-action? What do I feel responsible for? Have we stepped up to these challenges, or are we taking the path of least resistance? If it’s the latter, what’s holding us back? The critical activity here is “sensemaking”—the ability to read the situation and create meaning, order, and clarity out of an ambiguous and perhaps chaotic context.

2. **What’s the right thing to do?**
   The second set of questions is deeply personal. These are about the leader’s convictions and how they link to what the organization is asking of them. Who am I as a leader? What’s my story? What really matters to me? What’s the right thing to do given the circumstances I find myself in? If there are risks involved, what am I willing to take a stand on? What is the unique difference that I can make here and now?

3. **What kind of leadership is it time for now?**
   These conversations typically end with the final question: What kind of leadership is it time for now? In other words, what do I, as a leader, need to do to help the organization most? This question moves leadership from the theoretical to the actionable and links it directly with the business context. Rather than defining leadership via traits or styles, leadership is defined by a specific need.

   When properly guided through these questions, leaders conclude with a stronger sense of purpose and a point of view about the leadership actions they need to take. Thus, the Third Wave shifts from teaching models of leadership to creating methods that enable leaders to cultivate their sense of purpose and to put that purpose into action.

### Participants

**From Clean Fish to Clean Tanks**

Most leadership development focuses primarily on the personal learning of individual leaders. The problem with this approach is that teaching individuals to be great leaders without reference to the environments in which they lead has minimal impact. Put differently, a singular focus on individual learning is like putting a clean fish into a dirty fish tank. You can take a leader out of his organization and give him new skills, but when you plunge him back into the organization, the learning doesn’t stick. The clean fish gets dirty again soon enough.

To be effective, we must develop a leader’s personal leadership while also cultivating the system within which that leadership is exercised. For us, one of the best metrics of success for leadership initiatives is therefore very different from the conventional post-program evaluation. After a leadership development experience, we ask: Has the dialogue in the organization fundamentally changed? If the answer is “yes,” and leaders are stimulating new and generative conversations, the program has done its job. If the answer is “no,” and the dialogue looks exactly the same as it did before the program took place, then something hasn’t worked. The purpose is to clean both the fish and the tank.
To make more tangible the opportunities this approach creates, consider the following conversation that we facilitated between a group of 20 vice presidents of a financial-services company and their CEO. The event occurred as the strategy of the business had begun to shift.

Manager 1: John, with all due respect, I don’t think you’re giving us clarity. How do we make these decisions when we don’t know what has the higher priority?

CEO: You’ve got to figure it out for yourself. You can’t escalate everything. You’re leaders.

Manager 2: We could figure it out if we knew what was important and what wasn’t. We don’t have a framework for making these decisions.

Consultant: I want to point out a dilemma. John is saying that he and the top team can’t field every concern. At the same time, the senior managers don’t feel confident operating without a deeper understanding of the business. Otherwise, it turns into a political football between groups.

(A short but pregnant pause in the conversation)

CEO: You guys should know that we don’t have everything worked out yet. What if we told you what we do know and also what we haven’t yet figured out? Would that help?

Group: Yes! (Heads nodding)

As you can imagine, this dynamic is quite common in organizations. A group of senior leaders, responsible for their departments, must make decisions across complex organizational boundaries, getting buy-in from individuals over whom they have little formal authority. The managers here are asking for a set of priorities to guide decision making. The CEO, highly in touch with the market disruption that is changing the business, is unable to provide the clarity his team desires. Strategy, change, decision rights, influence, and politics are all intertwined in this moment.

This example highlights two essential features of the Third Wave. First, learning doesn’t just take place inside an individual participant. The Third Wave would argue that it is impossible to teach someone how to manage disruption, strategy, or political dynamics independently of his or her context. Secondly, the learning is directly and immediately applied rather than abstract. When you bring people together around real concerns, it eliminates the distance between learning and its application. Such moments don’t just produce abstract knowledge about leadership; they create visceral learning that permeates the very way participants begin to exercise leadership. Thus, the learning becomes embedded, operationalized, and intertwined with change.

Technique
From Application to Immersion

We might ask if learning about leadership enables us to exercise leadership any better. From our perspective, knowing doesn’t always translate into masterful action—especially not in moments of peak anxiety and stress. It takes an actual storm to learn how to captain a ship in a storm. Learning,
then, must increasingly take place in the natural setting where leadership is exercised. We call this immersion learning: the extensive and intense exposure of leaders to the natural settings in which leadership is actually exercised.

One of the most successful types of immersion is reconnecting executives with their customer base. Although most executives will claim to know their customer needs intimately, the reality is that few have daily exposure to their customers. Providing leaders an opportunity to meet with, observe, and relate to customers gives them a firsthand sense of their customers’ needs, how they think, and what is most important to them.

Cade Cowan, a partner at Pivot, tells a story about taking an executive of a large retailer to the home of a working-class family. While the mother of the house spoke with the executive, he asked if he could take a look in the fridge to see what brands they purchased. There, he discovered nothing but a half gallon of milk and a stick of butter. The executive said it was the most powerful experience in the program and the first time he really understood what his company was trying to do in terms of helping people save money. No analysis could have made that kind of impression or helped him connect his own sense of purpose with the organization’s mission.

Participants experience immersion differently from a case, a simulation, or even an action-learning project. This is because they learn not just cognitively, but also emotionally. The unique conditions that make visceral learning possible cannot be foreseen and simulated, done justice in a case study, or practiced outside of their naturally occurring settings.

Ideally, immersion learning transcends organizational boundaries to engage whole business ecosystems. Including stakeholders from the broader industry in which the company operates, such as suppliers, business partners, and government officials, broadens a leader’s perspective. As executive education participants confront increasingly disruptive markets, conducting conversations and learning across organizational boundaries makes more and more sense.

Outcome
The Three A’s: Agency, Authenticity, and Agility

Helping leaders articulate their sense of purpose, working with them to address real-time business issues, and utilizing immersion experiences are techniques designed to produce outcomes that go beyond knowledge, skills, and competencies. Instead, they enable the leadership qualities needed for the future, the most important of which we refer to as the Three A’s: agency, authenticity, and agility.

Agency: This is the inwardly felt confidence that one can and should make a difference in the world. Psychologists define a sense of agency as an individual’s subjective awareness that he or she can initiate, execute, and control his or her own actions. In our conversations with CEOs, they often say something along the lines of, “I wish my next level down would figure things out for themselves.” They ask us to help them find leaders who will not wait to be told what is right or depend on others for answers. In essence, they are looking for individuals with a sense of agency—those people who are more likely to initiate action, independently feel a sense of responsibility for results, and hold themselves accountable. In complex organizations where roles, responsibilities, and decision rights are ambiguous, a strong sense of agency is one of the most important attributes a leader can possess.
**Authenticity**: If agency is about accepting responsibility to take action, authenticity is about doing so in ways that are congruent with a leader’s personal convictions and the challenges facing the organization. Authenticity is thus a double-sided obligation; it means being true to yourself and true to the people around you. We would argue that, in the context of the trust deficit, authenticity matters more today than ever before.

**Agility**: The final A refer to the ability to lead nimbly in the face of uncertainty. In a rapidly changing world where leaders are responsible for reinventing businesses, flexibility combined with a strong sense of purpose becomes critical. Knowing “what you are fighting for” clarifies when one should be open to change or when one should stand their ground despite being in unknown territory. It is thus the foundation of agility.

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**Implications for Practice**

Over the past three years, we have learned much from our clients and partners about how to implement Third Wave initiatives. We have come to focus on five design principles that are critical to this type of experience.

**Ideology**
**Put Disruption in the Foreground.**

Leadership development must be based and focused on the key dilemmas, issues, and questions facing the business—both economic and cultural. Typically, disruption lies at the heart of these dilemmas. By addressing competitive threats, changing customer needs, and how the business must reinvent itself, leaders will develop an integrated perspective on their business. Put these issues in the foreground to ensure that leaders are improving their ability to navigate complexity, change, and uncertainty.

**Focus**
**Discover Purpose.**

Leadership development should address a person’s business context, as well as emphasize who they are as a unique human being and their sense of inner responsibility for taking action. The experience should build their intellectual and emotional capacity in an integrated way. More importantly, it should help them discover their own authentic sense of purpose and articulate how they will put that purpose into action.

**Participants**
**Bring the Ecosystem into the Room.**

Leadership can’t be taught in a vacuum. At critical junctures, you must bring people outside the cohort into the room and get conversations going. Stated another way, the best method for teaching “enterprise thinking” is to include customers, partners, and key stakeholders as part of the live learning experience.

**Technique**
**Use Immersion to Stimulate Visceral Learning.**

The real work of a leadership development program is to help participants figure out things for themselves. Transformational learning takes place when leaders have real, first-hand contact with others. No theory, textbook, or case study can simulate the real thing. Insights most often come from experiences that are less cognitively processed than implicit and viscerally felt.

**Outcome**
**Develop Agency, Authenticity, and Agility.**

The output of leadership development should be less about knowledge, skills, tools, or competencies than about changing mindsets, the quality of leaders’ dialogue, their sense of responsibility, and their sense of purpose. These experiences are more likely to produce responsible, authentic, and agile leaders. We would argue that, as professionals, we should let go of competency or leadership models and think more about the experiences we create for leaders.
To succeed, the Third Wave approach demands material investments of time, energy, and resources.

The high level of customization, open-endedness, and executive involvement also places a considerable burden on our HR, CLO, or learning-and-development colleagues. For many HR leaders, a Third Wave program means stepping out of their own and the organization’s comfort zones. They have to put skin in the game, take risks, and continually gain buy-in and sponsorship for the initiative. But the rewards tend to match the risks, and many of our clients point to Third Wave engagements as the turning point that propelled them into more strategic conversations with the executive team.

The biggest precondition for the Third Wave is the leadership that leadership professionals exercise themselves. A Third Wave program is no sure bet. We’ve struggled at times and learned lessons—just as we expect leaders in our programs to do. But in the new era of leadership development, all of us—leadership professionals, HR, and executive sponsors included—must demonstrate exactly as much agency, authenticity, and agility as we expect from participants.

1. Maritz Poll, Maritz Research (April 17, 2000)

2. Three main tributaries fed this rational approach to management: 1) the rise of the corporation, especially in the United States, producing entities large and complex enough to require a formal managerial discipline; 2) the 1950 Celler-Kefauver Act, which curtailed the ability of a company to achieve a too-dominant position within its industry. The law had the unintended effect of increasing companies’ sizes as they expanded instead of moving them into other industries; and 3) influential reports, ca. 1960, from the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corp., which argued that business schools should develop and teach a more systematic “management science” in order to produce superior strategic decision making and operational performance. Response to the reports brought intensified emphasis on analytical and quantifiable management methods. (These three main First Wave drivers were adapted from Rakesh Khurana’s excellent book, Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise of Management as a Profession.)

3. Gina Hernez-Broome and Richard L. Hughes, Center for Creative Leadership

Many of these styles were deeply influenced by the wider cultural milieu. For example, leadership styles might be arrayed along a continuum between a predominantly “task” versus “relationship” orientation, or between an “autocratic” versus “democratic” set of preferences.


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CONTACT

Pivot Global Headquarters
621 SW Alder Street, Suite 200
Portland, OR 97205
Tel: +1 (503) 640 5335
Fax: +1 (888) 922 6301

info@pivotleadership.com
www.pivotleadership.com