




**THE SELF-
DISRUPTIVE
LEADER**

**MARKET REPORT:
UNITED
STATES**

The Self-Disruptive Leader is
part of Korn Ferry's three-year
examination of the transforming
and disrupted Future of Work



***Leadership
will make
or break
businesses.***

A person wearing a blue helmet and a black jacket is rappelling down a steep, rocky cliff face. They are holding a yellow rope that extends across the frame. The background shows a clear blue sky and distant mountain ranges.

As much as it may seem logical to think so, it doesn't always follow that great companies have great leaders. High performance often hides a multitude of sins—toxic cultures, questionable practices, employee disengagement, and more.

This stark reality was revealed in Korn Ferry's latest report examining the skills future leaders need. Not only were investors of companies dissatisfied with what they saw, but they considered current leadership styles to be in urgent need of change: 70% argued short-term pressures stripped leaders of the ability to push through innovation, digitization, and change, while a surprising two-thirds (67%) identified current leadership norms as "not fit for the future."

With the only certainty seemingly being that business will only face greater uncertainty, Korn Ferry's findings suggest a new, very different leader is required.

Our research found that if companies are to avoid **self-destructing**, leaders need to embrace, rather than simply react to, the external disruptions they face. To beat disruption, they literally need to "**disrupt**" themselves—their thoughts, their values, their actions. Disruption of markets can only be met with the disruption of the leadership approach.

In short, it's the Self-Disruptive Leader companies now need.

Companies with leaders who aren't future-ready face a double bind: not only are they less able to adapt to the changing business environment, they may face a penalty from those who evaluate their businesses. To navigate this difficult situation, many companies need to overhaul their leadership development programs, as well as the very structure and culture of their businesses. This organizational step change will enable them to equip their leaders-in-waiting with the opportunities they need to become a new generation of Self-Disruptive Leaders.

In this supplementary report, we uncover what self-disruptive leadership could mean for the United States.

Investors call for a new model of leadership.

The combined impact of disruptive global megatrends has forced organizations to evolve rapidly—sometimes frantically—thereby making leadership crucial to continued success. Competent leaders are even more vital in a complex and continually evolving ecosystem. Companies that fail to satisfy the market that they have the right people at the top risk dwindling investment.

And yet our research shows that only 15% of today's leaders can be considered self-disruptors.

There is an urgent need to develop a pipeline of future-ready leaders today. Investors and analysts in the United States rate talent as very important across enterprises, but especially at the top: 90% cite an exceptional CEO as critical to an organization's success. Meanwhile, 64% of investors say the need for transformation is going to make leadership more important to company performance within the next three years.

But the demand for this strong, innovative drive isn't confined to one individual at the top: investors want leadership strength across the C-suite and beyond. In the United States, 60% of respondents cited boards of directors as crucial to corporate performance, with the same proportion demanding top skills and capacities in the senior leadership team.

No more business as usual.

Investors in the United States see the squeeze on the companies they rate and invest in: 78% believe these companies are confronting disruptive challenges, and 76% believe companies need to deliver some transformational change.

Technology is compounding organizations' stresses, as it allows changes in one industry to swamp others—new competitors now emerge from anywhere. Tech companies now constitute the six largest companies in the world, and the expansion of this sector's horizons seems boundless. Constant tech-related shake-ups make strategy planning a real challenge: 64% of US investors say it is harder to forecast threats when competition can come from anywhere. This has led 80% of investors to value future vision and orientation over past performance. In fact, globally, a company's financial performance and earnings growth is now one of the least compelling factors for those making investment decisions.

Instead, US investors want organizations to launch into a major reconsideration and transformation of their practices on talent and leadership.

But exactly how do organizations get from here to tomorrow, and how do they identify, attract, develop, retain, promote, and expand the number of leaders they must have to succeed in the future of work?



The market context for the Self-Disruptive Leader.

84%

American investors who said the pressure for short-term performance works against leaders' ability to deliver innovation, digitization, and change.

62%

American investors who said they'd give leaders increased financial scope to make the changes necessary to bring their businesses in line with the future.

70%

American investors who believe that traditional and legacy leadership will not be fit for the future.


60%

American investors who said they would give leaders more time to effect major change.

Introducing the “Self-Disruptive Leader.”

Models of good leadership are often based on replicating the characteristics and capabilities that have succeeded in the past. But while many of these qualities are important, this approach neglects the importance of the future. In a world characterized by rapid change, yesterday's paradigms risk becoming redundant, or even harmful. Predicting exactly what the future will require is an impossible task, so leaders instead must equip themselves with a strong portfolio of future-oriented and change-ready skills in order to keep responding to fluctuating market demands with dynamism and insight.

We call these adaptive change-makers “Self-Disruptive Leaders.” Today's business environment is characterized by rapidly changing strategies, business model innovation, and operational transformation. While leaders trapped in yesterday's mindset often struggle to find their place and voice in this new business world, Self-Disruptive Leaders are highly learning agile, self-aware, emotionally and socially intelligent, purpose-driven, and assured but humble. They proactively modify their own methods and attitudes, enabling them to keep pace with the rapidly transforming environments that threaten slower-moving peers. Flexible mindsets at the top permeate throughout these businesses and enable every individual to navigate change and succeed in a shifting landscape. Leaders who make their teams dependent block growth; rather, those who can get organizations behind their vision and then empower others to execute on it are well-positioned to achieve.

A person is climbing a rope ladder against a rock face. The ladder is made of white ropes and is attached to a red rope. The person is wearing a black shirt and yellow pants. The background is a dark green, textured surface.

The qualities that differentiate the Self-Disruptive Leader can be summarized by the ADAPT dimensions:

A

Anticipate: Demonstrate contextual intelligence to make quick judgments and create opportunities; focus on the societal needs that the organization wants to serve; provide a direction to unify collective efforts even among disoriented environments.

D

Drive: Energize people by fostering a sense of purpose; manage the mental and physical energy of themselves and others; nurture a positive environment to keep people hopeful, optimistic, and intrinsically motivated.

A

Accelerate: Manage the flow of knowledge to produce constant innovation and desired business outcomes; use agile processes, quick prototyping, and iterative approaches to rapidly implement and commercialize ideas.

P

Partner: Connect and form partnerships across increasingly permeable functional and organizational boundaries; enable the exchange of ideas; combine complementary capabilities to enable high performance.


T

Trust: Form a new relationship between the organization and the individual that centers on mutual growth; integrate diverse perspectives and values; help individuals to uncover their sense of purpose and facilitate them in providing their maximum contribution.

How we uncovered the Self-Disruptive Leader.

By analyzing the leadership profiles of 150,000 leaders from the Korn Ferry Institute's proprietary data, the study uncovered the five ADAPT qualities of effective, future-focused leadership—qualities which correlate with a country's ability to innovate, according to the Global Innovation Index, as well as with a company's likelihood of being an acclaimed brand. Additionally, the study uses opinion research from 795 investors and analysts to model the gap (in 18 key global markets) between the current supply of these high-performance qualities and the market's demand for them, to reveal just how wide leadership skills shortages are globally and by market. (For more information on the methodology or to download the full Self-Disruptive Leader global report, please visit: kornferry.com/self-disrupt.)



An aerial photograph of a city, likely New York City, showing a river (the Hudson River) flowing through the urban landscape. The image is heavily tinted with a dark blue and green color scheme. The river is visible on the right side, with several bridges crossing it. The surrounding area is filled with buildings, trees, and parks. The overall tone is professional and modern.

What does self-disruptive leadership mean for the United States?

Organizations are in an age of constant digital disruption. They're facing new and ever-evolving competitors, changing business models, and shifts in consumer behavior like they've never seen before. Furthermore, many industries in the US are experiencing a talent shortage that is likely to accelerate in the coming years. To succeed in the future, leaders need to let go of the control, consistency, and closure principles of business leadership that they learned in the past. Self-Disruptive Leaders need to focus on trust, purpose, and energizing others. Only through continually adapting to keep pace with the market will leaders be able to succeed.

Albertina Vaughn, Senior Client Partner, United States, Korn Ferry

The current state in the United States.

In the United States, investors on average believe that only 28% of all leaders in the country are equipped to lead future businesses. Investors clearly care about the leadership and talent bench strength of organizations. They're looking and asking, "Who can tell me the growth story I want to believe?" Organizations need to be a little more disruptive in their approach to talent. They need to energize and manage information flow and let people have a place to be heard. There's a theme of care, positivity, and optimism that Self-Disruptive Leaders bring when they're doing it right.

What the United States has, what the United States wants.

Although there is global demand for all aspects of self-disruptive behavior in leaders, each market has different strengths and weaknesses in its current stock. What's more, investors in different markets have distinctive priorities when it comes to what they want most from leaders. As a result, the greatest skill shortfall varies in different places, and leaders in each economy need to focus on a different ADAPT dimension to satisfy market demand.

American investors and current leaders align most on **Partner**, which implies a culture that emphasizes collaboration and connection. However, there's a significant gap on **Anticipate**—investors rank it high on their list, but leaders scored low on this quality. This suggests that leaders may fall behind the expectation of being bold and proactive to provide clear, unique directions into the future.

The gap between leaders' abilities and market expectations.





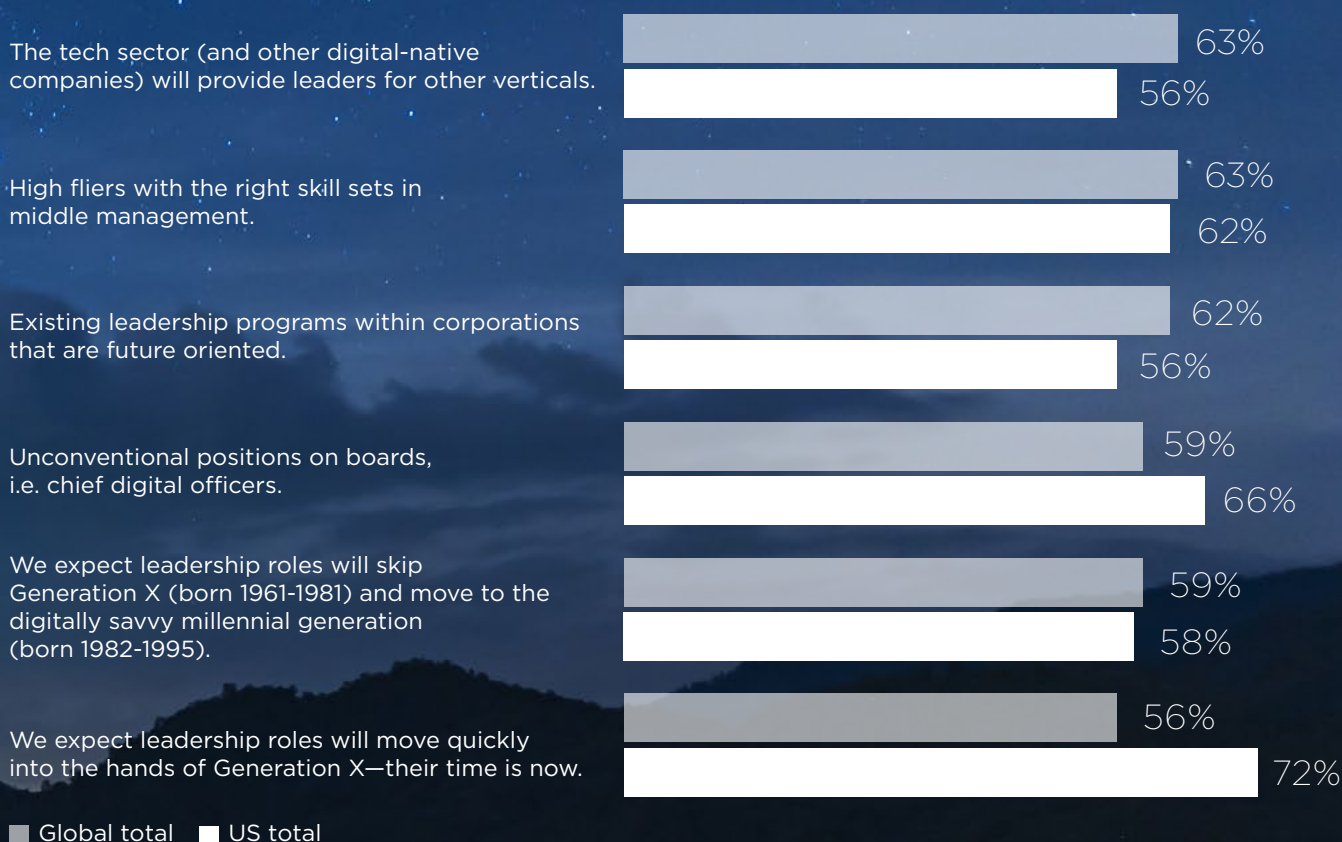
The importance of focusing on trait-based development for breeding the next generation of Self-Disruptive Leaders.

Organizations need to focus on cultivating leaders who have the ability to face a future that is unknown, selling products that don't yet exist to customers whose tastes and needs are always changing. Simply reacting to market trends will mean being two steps behind.

Where will Self-Disruptive Leaders come from in the future?

Where can these future leaders be found? Many already occupy lower-level roles in their companies. To make the most of this talent pool, any individuals with potential must be allowed to test their aptitude at a higher leadership role. To become leaders, they'll need exposure and guidance in dealing with executive job functions such as enterprise value, profit and loss, balance sheets, and external stakeholders. They must circulate throughout an organization to stimulate their minds, learn new skills, experience different ways of working, and build important relationships with colleagues of many different backgrounds, experiences, and capacities.

Investors view on where Self-Disruptive Leaders will come from:



In the United States, an overwhelming number of investors—72% to be exact—expect leadership roles to move quickly into the hands of Generation X, people born between 1961 and 1981.

Rediscovering existing potential.

Self-Disruptive Leaders won't be found using well-worn practices. Instead, organizations will need to think about talent as a system if they want to tackle this complex and multilateral issue. Recruitment, compensation, training, development, and succession planning may need a full revamp to ensure that organizations widen and maintain a flow of diverse talent, especially of hard-to-find Self-Disruptive Leaders. In beginning to develop this system, businesses should focus on three key points:

- **Develop new mindsets.** Traditional leadership development focuses on skills and behaviors, but this needs to be supplemented with mindset development to successfully advance new Self-Disruptive Leaders.
- **Open up leadership development opportunities.** Leadership development must become available to more people. In the past, it often has been elitist and focused on certain individuals; it needs to move toward a collective model that empowers everyone in a company to develop their leadership capabilities.
- **Foster always-on development.** Organizations need to facilitate always-on development not only by providing learning opportunities, but by helping busy employees navigate training easily and rewarding them for learning. Simultaneously, individuals at all levels need to take ownership of their own development. Together, this will build an employment contract built on mutual growth.

Although these changes may seem daunting to current executives and directors, companies must act with urgency to put these structures in place. This evolution matters: the market already knows that companies need to do more to help tomorrow's Self-Disruptive Leaders climb up through the business, with 63% of investors and analysts globally saying high fliers with the right skills and capacities in middle management will be vital in the future of work.





The final word.

Traditional training routes aren't equipped to solve the leadership crisis, often producing outmoded mindsets that can't keep up with the rate of change. Instead, a revolution in how companies develop leaders is vital for closing the leadership pipeline gap.

To capitalize on an increasingly disruptive world, companies must accelerate their identification, recruitment, retention, development, and promotion of leaders with self-disruptive potential at all levels of the business. Organizations must develop a culture that empowers everyone within them to challenge their own thinking and disrupt themselves.

This final point underpins the solution to the leadership crisis: leadership can no longer be isolated and inscrutable. By cascading ADAPT proficiencies throughout the organization, companies will develop a self-perpetuating ecosystem of leaders, ready for whatever the future of work brings.

For more information on self-disruptive leadership in the US and how to prepare for it, contact:

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To download a full copy of the global Self-Disruptive Leader report please visit: kornferry.com/self-disrupt.



About Korn Ferry

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