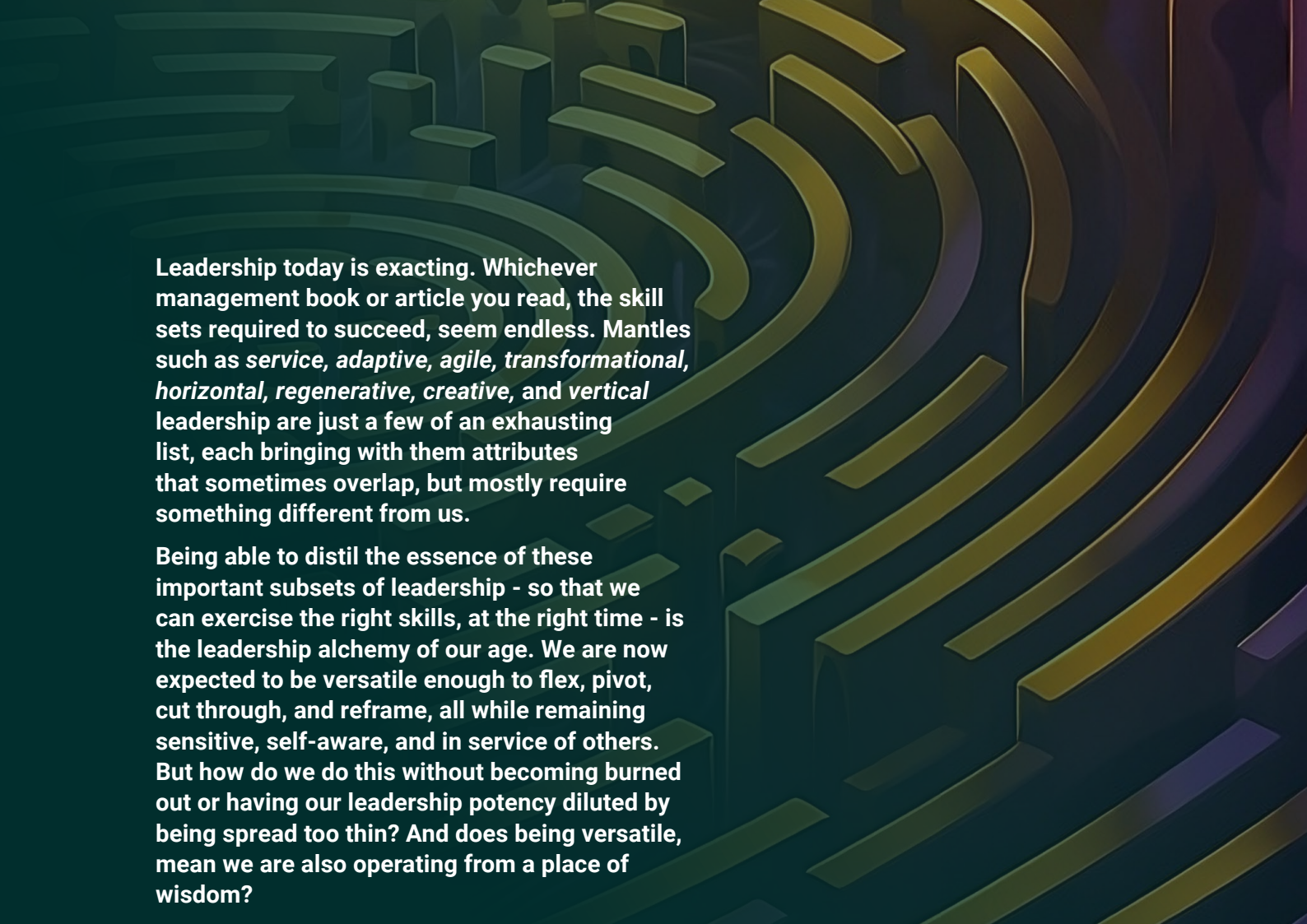


A 3D maze with a person walking through it. The maze is constructed from golden-yellow rectangular blocks, creating a complex path. The floor of the maze is a deep blue with a wavy, rippling texture. A dark silhouette of a person is walking away from the viewer down a path in the center of the maze. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the top surfaces of the maze walls and deep shadows in the recesses.

Is Versatile Leadership Wise Leadership?

Embracing Dualities, Polarities
and Paradoxes



Leadership today is exacting. Whichever management book or article you read, the skill sets required to succeed, seem endless. Mantles such as *service, adaptive, agile, transformational, horizontal, regenerative, creative, and vertical leadership* are just a few of an exhausting list, each bringing with them attributes that sometimes overlap, but mostly require something different from us.

Being able to distil the essence of these important subsets of leadership - so that we can exercise the right skills, at the right time - is the leadership alchemy of our age. We are now expected to be versatile enough to flex, pivot, cut through, and reframe, all while remaining sensitive, self-aware, and in service of others. But how do we do this without becoming burned out or having our leadership potency diluted by being spread too thin? And does being versatile, mean we are also operating from a place of wisdom?

What is Versatile Leadership?

Versatility is seen as the peak capability or meta competency for leading in a VUCA world. It is the ability to read and respond to change with a wide repertoire of complementary skills and behaviours. For instance, some circumstances call for leaders to take charge, force difficult issues, and make tough decisions, while other situations require leaders to enable, support, and include people. Similarly, organisations sometimes need leaders to look to their future strategic direction and at other times to focus on day-to-day operations and execution.

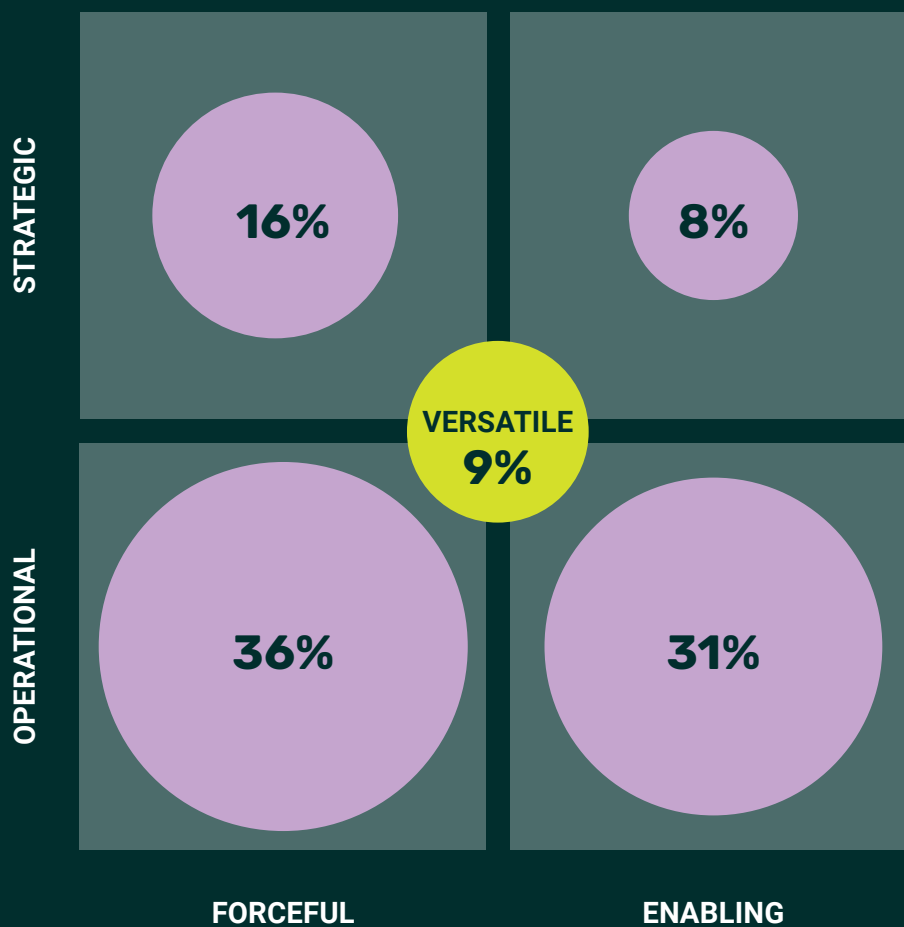
Knowing ourselves, our values, and our ambitions is the foundation for versatile leadership. Having deep levels of self-knowledge and awareness enables us not only to see ourselves as we are today, but to consider the long-term impact of the actions we are taking. If we want our day-to-day actions to be aligned with our values, we need to lead with mindful versatility that is enabled by self-awareness.

This will likely include being able to:

- embrace polarity, so that we can balance tensions in leadership and strategy
- dive deep into the assumptions, beliefs, and inner voices that sit beneath these behaviours and hold us in stasis, and reframe these in ways that align with core values and empower leadership growth

But maintaining this versatility is a challenge. According to recent research, only 9% of leaders can be called versatile - meaning they are able to be forceful, enabling, strategic, and operational in equal part and on-demand. Generally speaking, leaders are much stronger in one area than the others.

Proportion of Leaders with Different Combinations of Strengths as Rated by Coworkers



Source: Kaiser Leadership Solutions, Leadership Versatility Index, HBR

The stretch needed to become more versatile has also opened a conversation about the emotional labour required to be an effective leader. This is recognition that leaders also need to be sustained if they are to perform optimally.

Traditionally, leaders have often had to ignore their emotions, values, and beliefs to have the appropriate influence. This causes considerable internal distress, which until now has largely been seen as part of the job description. But as we begin to have a more purpose-aligned and people-centred focus in business, awareness has grown around the needs of leaders as well as teams.

The kind of support they we could offer leaders might include:

- prioritising leadership health and wellbeing programs
- prioritising leadership training around managing our emotions
- establishing peer support groups
- learning how to practice self-compassion



What makes a Wise Leader?

But does this reach for versatility also make us wise leaders? Or as we stretch in breadth, do we lose our depth?

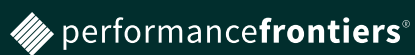
Some believe that wise leaders – like versatile leaders – are defined by their ability to assess and select what is needed in the moment and by having an array of resources to draw upon. Others would say wise leadership means understanding that our perceptions are clouded by inherent bias, and that **understanding context** is the key ingredient to decision making. Without contextual perspective, we can suffer from *wisdom deficiency syndrome* (WSD), which shows up as a belief in our own infallibility or “rightness.” This is generally characterised by an obsession with knowledge acquisition and an inclination to ignore our intuition and humanity.

The antidote to WSD is regular **self-reflection**, which allows the wisdom development process to flourish. Yet, self-reflection requires time and space, a scarce commodity in the versatile leader’s day to day. It calls for us to intentionally prioritise self-reflection as an important factor in leadership growth and success.

From there we can strengthen our capacity to hold the many leadership paradoxes, such as:

- Integrity – self-confidence and humility
- Competence – exploitation and exploration
- Safeguarding – safety and daring
- Empathy – compassion and distance

Versatile leaders have the attributes to lead in the face of polarities, ambiguities, and complexities, and this requires many of the same qualities that make a wise leader. The bridge between one and the other, though, lies in the framing of intent. Versatile leaders seek to be effective through their array of robust capabilities and their resourcefulness. Wise leaders may be versatile, but they also look through the lens of compassionate stewardship at how their leadership skills can best serve the greater good. As we strive to be more versatile in our day to day, it might pay to also keep in touch with our deep-seated intent.



Performance Frontiers
Suite 1E
19 Lang Parade
Milton QLD
Australia 4064
[P] +61 7 3870 8433
[E] info@performancefrontiers.com
performancefrontiers.com



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