



Performance
Frontiers



Adaptive Leadership

Thriving in Complexity

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“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

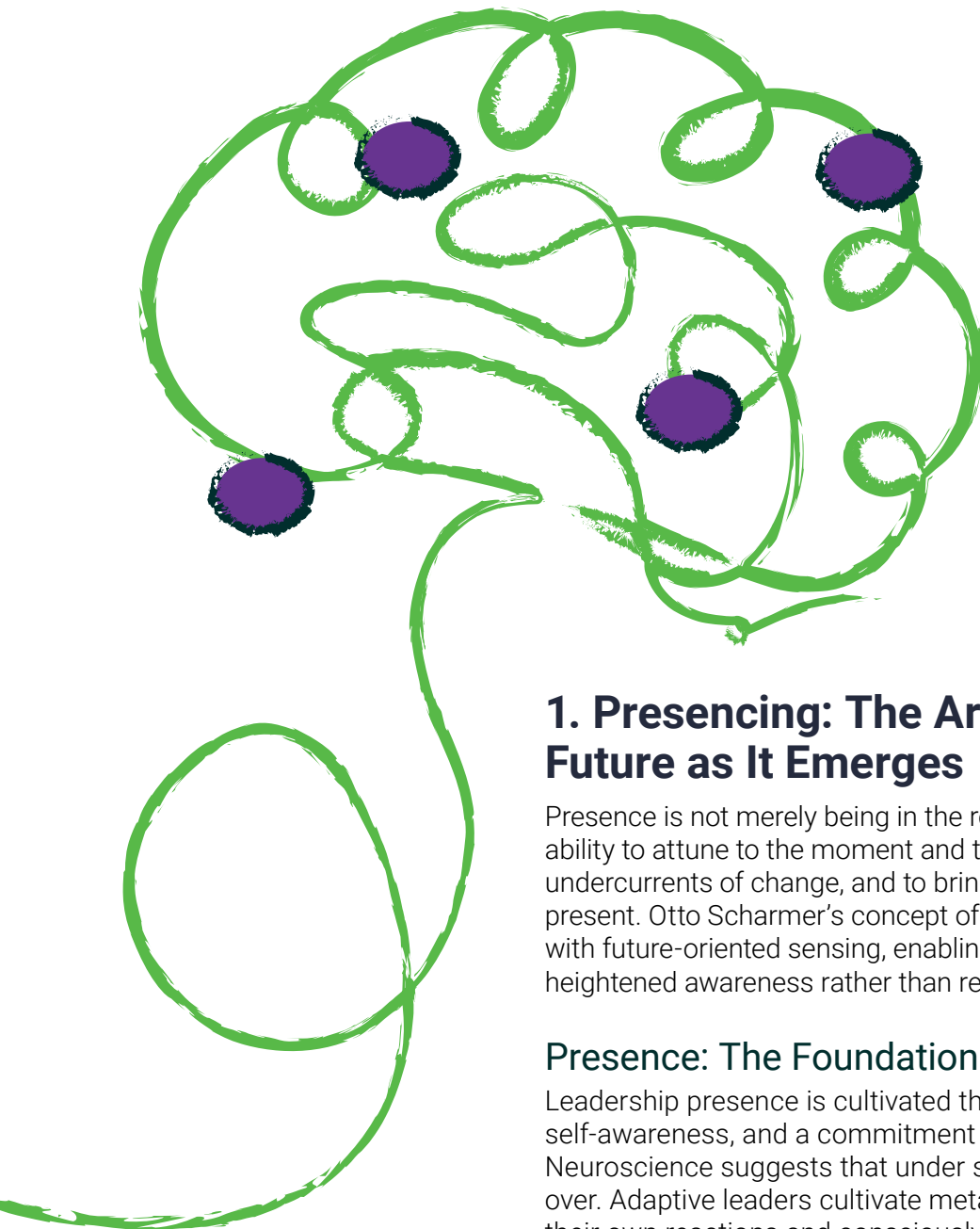
– Charles Darwin

Our world is a complex, unpredictable ecosystem, teeming with interwoven networks—natural and man-made—that shift, evolve, disassemble, and rebuild at an accelerating pace. The past few years, punctuated by the pandemic and rapid digital transformation, have further underscored the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) nature of our existence. It is in this swirling landscape that adaptive leadership emerges as a necessity, not merely a skill.

Some leaders flounder in the face of uncertainty, craving the stability of old paradigms. Others rise, not by virtue of strength or intelligence alone, but through their ability to embrace ambiguity, reframe challenges, and experiment toward new possibilities. The question is, how do leaders develop the capacity to adapt? How can organisations foster environments where adaptability is not only encouraged but deeply embedded in their DNA?

At the heart of adaptive leadership lies the ability to shift perspectives, remain present, question assumptions, engage with the broader system, and experiment boldly. Drawing on both foundational research in adaptive leadership—such as the work of Heifetz and Linsky—and over two decades of research and practice in developmental leadership, we explore the core capabilities that allow leaders to thrive in dynamic environments.





1. Presencing: The Art of Leading from the Future as It Emerges

Presence is not merely being in the room or on the screen—it is the ability to attune to the moment and the broader context, to sense the undercurrents of change, and to bring an emerging future into the present. Otto Scharmer’s concept of *Presencing* fuses deep presence with future-oriented sensing, enabling leaders to act from a place of heightened awareness rather than reactive habit.

Presence: The Foundation of Authentic Leadership

Leadership presence is cultivated through intentional communication, self-awareness, and a commitment to values-driven action. Neuroscience suggests that under stress, our habitual responses take over. Adaptive leaders cultivate metacognition—the ability to observe their own reactions and consciously shift into more resourceful states. This self-awareness allows them to remain grounded amid uncertainty and lead with authenticity.

Key questions:

- How am I fully present in this moment to respond intentionally?
- How do I embody and communicate my values in uncertain times?

Sensing: Attuning to Change and Emerging Possibilities

Sensing is the ability to perceive shifts before they become obvious. It requires an open mind (seeing the world afresh), an open heart (empathising with different perspectives), and an open will (letting go of preconceived notions and stepping into uncertainty).

Key questions:

- How might I cultivate a broader perspective on my current conditions?
- How do I suspend judgment and truly listen to emerging needs?

2. Curious Questioning: Unlocking New Possibilities

The quality of our leadership is shaped by the quality of our questions. Adaptive leaders challenge their own assumptions and those of their teams by engaging in generative questioning—questions that unlock possibilities rather than reinforce limitations.

One powerful tool is the ‘What if?’ question, as highlighted by [Warren Berger in A More Beautiful Question](#). This form of inquiry propels the mind forward, shifting focus from past constraints to future innovations. Adaptive leaders nurture an environment where questioning is not a sign of weakness but a catalyst for discovery.

Key questions:

- How am I engaging in the world with curiosity?
- What new questions could unlock transformative thinking for my team?

3. Connecting Whole Systems: Seeing the Invisible Threads

Adaptive leadership transcends individual actions—it is about understanding and influencing interconnected systems. In a VUCA world, isolated decision-making leads to short-lived solutions. Leaders must cultivate a whole-system lens, recognising patterns, interdependencies, and the broader impact of their actions.

As research in social brain theory suggests, [leadership is not merely about individuals](#)—it is about the relationships they foster. Leaders must become adept at network thinking, seeing how their decisions ripple across organisations, industries, and communities.

Key questions:

- How do I focus on the interconnections rather than isolated issues?
- Who am I connected to, and how does our collective influence shape outcomes?

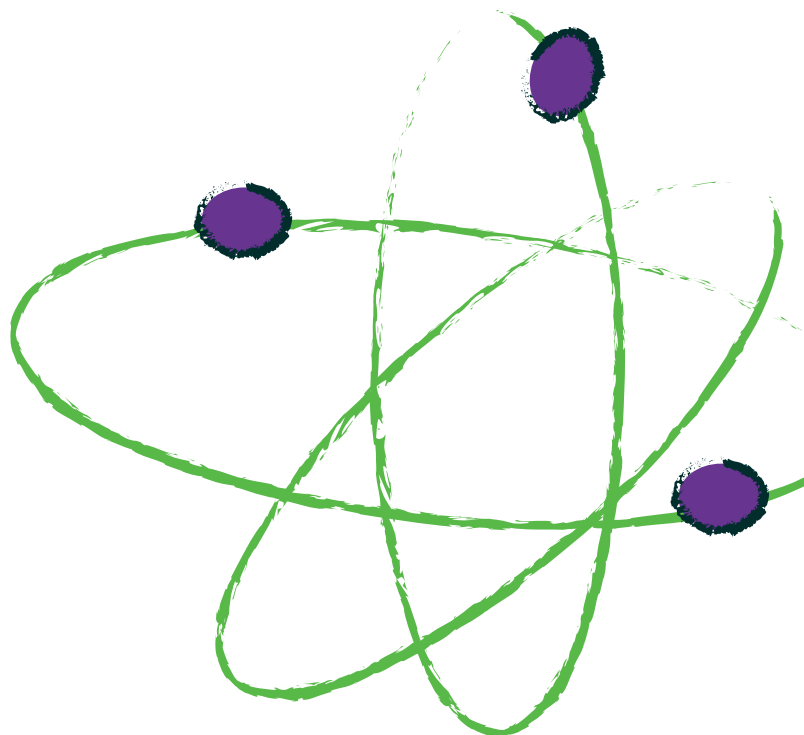
4. Experimentation: Leading with Courage in the Unknown

Traditional leadership models often emphasise certainty and control. Adaptive leadership, by contrast, embraces experimentation. It acknowledges that in complex environments, there is no single “correct” path—only a series of hypotheses to be tested, learned from, and iterated upon.

The biggest barrier to experimentation is fear; fear of failure, fear of making the wrong choice. This fear often paralyses leaders, causing them to default to outdated practices. Yet, the most successful leaders recognise that learning happens through action. They create environments where psychological safety allows for rapid experimentation and iteration.

Key questions:

- How do I use my current context to experiment and grow?
- How might we design a safe space for failure and learning?





The Conscious Act of Adaptation

As in nature, the ability to adapt is the defining trait of sustained leadership. What makes human adaptation unique, however, is that we can engage in it consciously. We have the power to shape not only our personal growth but also the evolution of our organisations and societies.

The world will continue to be uncertain. Complexity will only increase. But within this reality lies infinite potential. By cultivating presence, engaging in curious questioning, connecting whole systems, and embracing experimentation, leaders can transcend outdated paradigms and step into the future—fully prepared to shape it rather than be shaped by it.



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