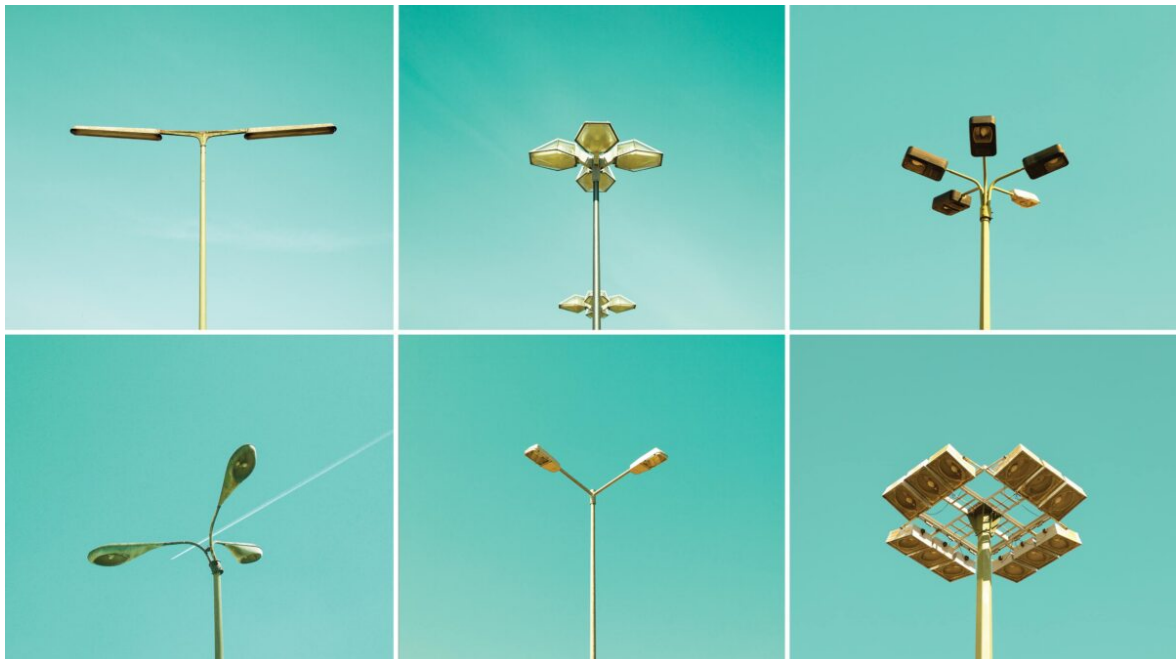


The Power of Options

by David Noble and Carol Kauffman

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Matthias Heiderich

Summary. Facing a crisis or an opportunity, leaders often fall back on the leadership style that has worked for them in the past. But to be effective, they need to rise above their default reactions and generate more options for how to respond in real time. In this article two... [more](#)

Ask leaders how they will respond to a crisis or a massive new opportunity, and they often will tell you they already know what to do. This is surprising because most crises and opportunities have unexpected elements. A high-powered executive whom we coach once told us, “In any crisis, I come out of the gate fast and

take action. I go over, under, or through any wall in my way. With my people, I lead from the front.” To be sure, that approach has the benefit of decisiveness, but it offers a narrow path, especially in high-stakes situations. What happens when such leaders run into obstacles they can’t muscle their way through?

Another leader we coached had a different approach. He was an incredible delegator with legendary calm. This worked well until a crisis surfaced and his team started feeling lost and overwhelmed. He stayed steady, confident in his default style, telling people, “Don’t worry, I have confidence that you’ll figure it out.” They didn’t figure it out, team members began fighting with one another, and within months the company lost its market-leading position.

In our work coaching and advising senior leaders, we have found that when faced with unfamiliar or risky situations, leaders often rely on their familiar playbook. They act instinctively, falling back on behavior and postures that worked for them before. But should their operating environment experience a discontinuity, reflexes—which may still be right at times—can no longer be counted on. To be effective, leaders need to rise above their default reactions and generate more options for how to act in the very moments when they are needed most.

Few leadership roles come with a treasure map showing a direct line to where X marks the spot. That’s why the ability to generate multiple pathways to a desired destination is crucial to success. Whether it’s chasing a strategy that could drive 10x growth in a

business, facing a potentially catastrophic threat, or guiding a team through uncharted territory, great leaders generate options so that when an opportunity arises or a crisis hits, they can pivot in real time and make the optimal move.

Our experience shows that leaders' success depends on their ability to MOVE—that is, to be *mindfully* alert to priorities, to generate *options* so that they always have several ways to win, to *validate* their own vantage point, and to *engage* with stakeholders to ensure that they are along for the ride. (We lay out this framework in our book, *Real-Time Leadership*. To gauge your ability to MOVE, take our self-assessment at RealTimeLeadershipInstitute.com.) In this article, we examine the crucial second step of our model. Specifically, we look at four common leadership approaches and the scenarios in which each can be most helpful, and we introduce a process for navigating the options in real time.

The Four Stances

Dozens of research studies spearheaded by American psychologists Charles “Rick” Snyder and Shane J. Lopez demonstrate how people's capacity to reach their desired goals can be increased by conceiving multiple possible pathways. Most people assume that success at a task is a question of perseverance or willpower. But Snyder and Lopez show that willpower must be coupled with “way power” to drive successful outcomes. Their research suggests that ideally you will have four or more options or pathways for achieving your goals (external priorities). It also demonstrates the importance of determining who you want to be as a leader in terms of your character strengths and values (internal priorities) and how you can best relate to others (interpersonal priorities).

Building on this work, we have developed an approach, called the “four stances,” to help leaders generate options for interpersonal communication. Think how tennis players nearly instantly shift

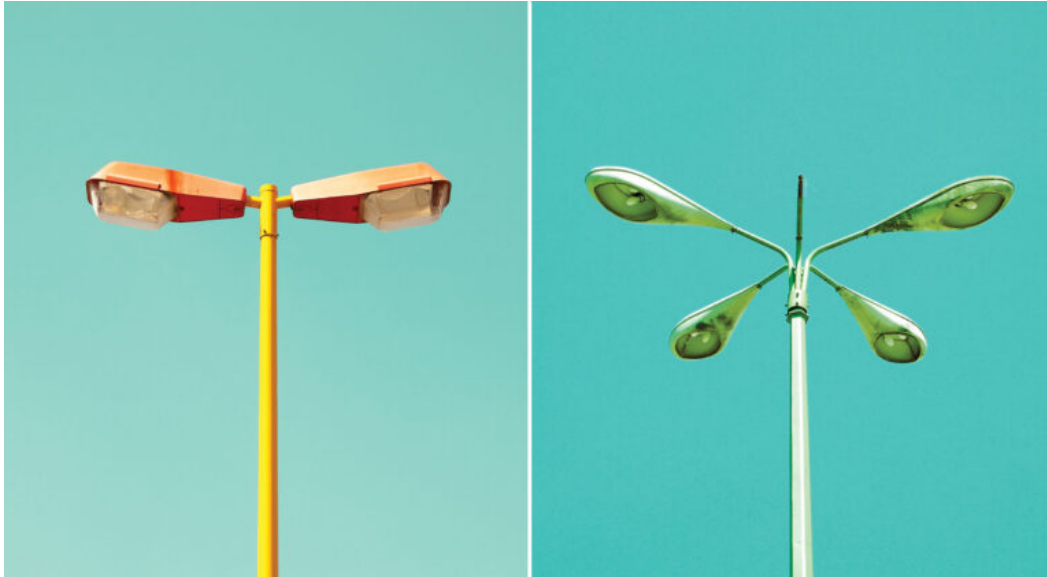
their stance to make an optimal response to a ball hurtling over the net. The core concept for our approach is rooted in evolutionary psychology and how our basic reflexes (fight, flight, and so on) automatically deploy under dangerous or novel circumstances. In the more evolved world of leadership, the four stances help leaders identify and access more interpersonal options. The stances are:

- **Lean In.** Take an active stance on resolving an issue. Actions in this stance include deciding, directing, guiding, challenging, and confronting.
- **Lean Back.** Take an analytical stance to observe, collect, and understand data. Actions include analyzing, asking questions, and possibly delaying decisions.
- **Lean With.** Take a collaborative stance, focusing on caring and connecting. Actions include empathizing, encouraging, and coaching.
- **Don't Lean.** Whereas a Lean Back posture involves observing and analyzing, Don't Lean is about being still and disciplining yourself to create space for a new solution to bubble up from your subconscious. This stance also serves to calm you if your emotions have been triggered. Actions include contemplating, visualizing, and settling through diaphragmatic breathing.

To win in any leadership moment, great leaders need to develop and be able to access all four stances. To illustrate, let's consider one of our clients, Isobel, a newly appointed president of a major business line at a tech company.

Isobel was in trouble and called us in. She was at loggerheads with the firm's mercurial CEO, who had a tendency to be unreliable—contradicting himself, changing positions, and often making promises the company couldn't deliver on.

“I’m getting a bad reputation for being aggressive at board meetings,” she told us at our first two-on-one coaching session. “I just tell the truth—someone needs to—but I’m the one getting dinged.”



Berlin-based photographer Matthias Heiderich is interested in architectural patterns and colors he finds in the city, especially in overlooked functional spaces and in the multitude of ways that inhabitants design and shape their surroundings.

As we talked, we identified a clear gap between her own and others’ perceptions. Leaning In—*way* in—was her default stance. As a former lawyer, she was a world-class debater, and her impact was far more powerful than she realized. It was clear she needed to overcome her reflexive behavior and find other viable ways to win. We described the four stances and asked her to consider alternatives to her default approach.

“But I need to be authentic,” she countered.

“Of course,” we responded, “but you can use other stances while still being true to yourself.”

We went through the stances one by one. In situations in which Lean In was the best choice, she saw that she could be more skillful by better calibrating the intensity of her remarks. If she could learn to Lean Back and not rush into conflict, she could slow down her reactions and be more strategic about when she would engage. If she applied Don’t Lean, she could take a moment to breathe, which could help her neutralize her activation by the

CEO and keep a clear head. We were all surprised that asking about Lean With was what pivoted Isobel into a new way of operating. Drawing on Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson's groundbreaking work on psychological safety, we asked, "What if your job at the board meeting was to make the CEO and directors feel safe?"

Isobel immediately embraced that approach, which appealed to her protective side. She spontaneously started thinking through the implications. Supporting the CEO would probably help him calm down and make the meetings less painful for everyone. In the Lean With stance, she could also tolerate his contradictions by understanding that his first reaction wasn't always his final word. She decided that she would enthusiastically support his comments when they were in alignment with the executive committee's assessment and refrain from reflexively challenging him when he veered off course, unless the board was close to a vote on that recommendation. After adopting this approach, her reputation with the board skyrocketed. She became known as a leader who made peace rather than war.

Putting the Process to Work

How can you adapt the four stances without an executive coach? We recommend a five-step process for addressing major opportunities and crises, whether they play out in the moment or over the long term. It will enable you to choose your way forward rather than being propelled by reflex.

Identify your default stance. Rank how comfortable you are working with others in each stance. This simple exercise is often all our clients need to identify their default stance, but if there's any doubt, reflect on feedback you've been given, such as a 360-degree review. You may think of yourself as a Lean With leader because you favor decisions based on consensus—but is that accurate? When you have power as a leader, people rarely tell you the truth about how you come across. Be honest with yourself.

Reflect on high-stakes situations. Is the stance you take under stress different from your default stance? Think back to instances when you were able to pivot in the moment if your default stance wasn't leading to the desired result and compare those moments with times when you stubbornly stuck with a failing approach. What held you back from moving to a different option? Habit? Panic? How can you build on experiences when you've done well while avoiding mistakes?

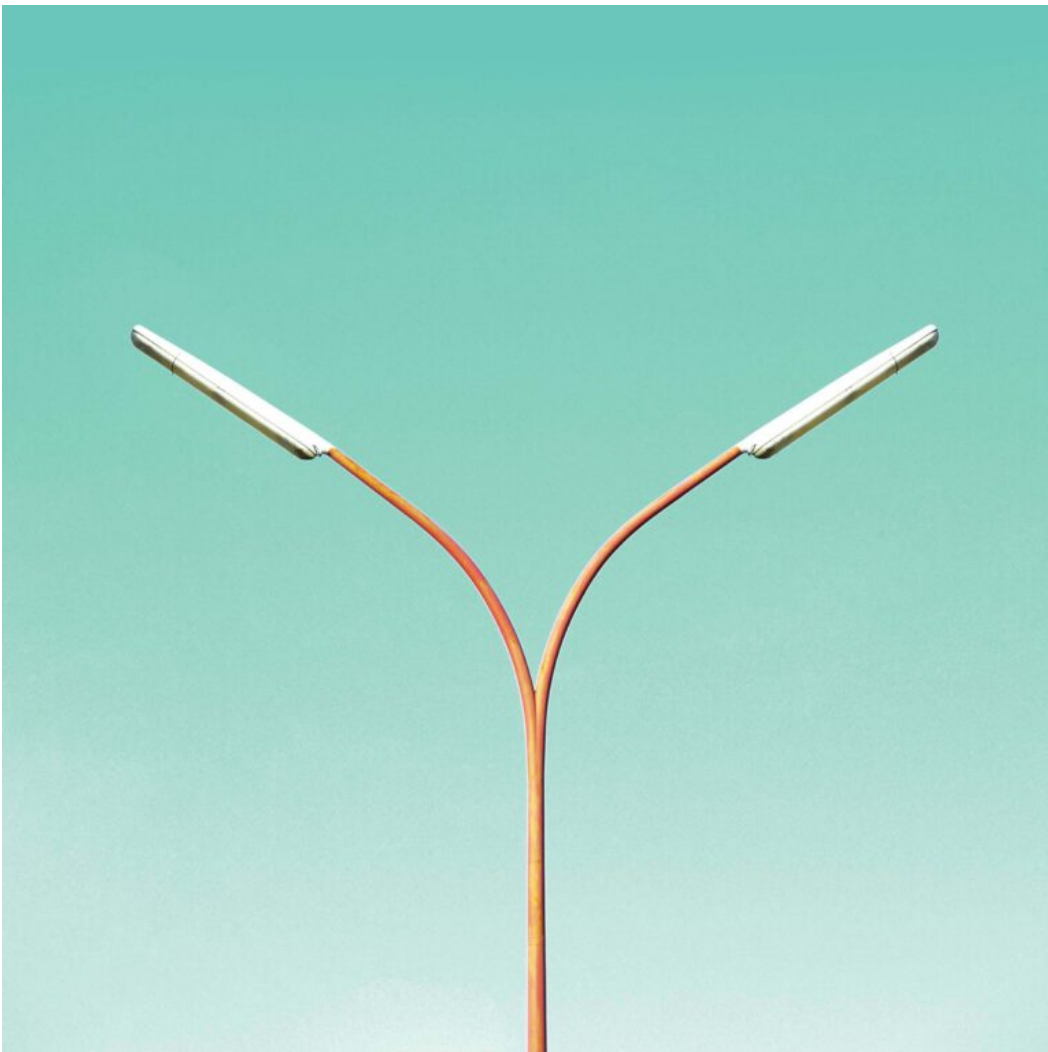
Determine the optimal stance on the basis of whom you are interacting with. Most leaders we work with are familiar with the Golden Rule of treating others as you would like to be treated. But the best leaders we have worked with employ the Platinum Rule—treating others as *they* would like to be treated, which may be different from what the leader would want in their shoes. Imagine an introvert suddenly interrupted by an extrovert who means to be helpful by offering a pep talk. Or, conversely, an extrovert in need of encouragement who ends up feeling ignored by an introvert whose intention is to offer the gift of space and time to think. To live by the Platinum Rule, become a keen observer of other people and yourself. Notice body language, tone of voice, eye contact, and reactions to what you do and how you move.

Make a plan. When an interpersonal issue arises, make space in real time to figure out how to handle it. This beat in time may last only a matter of seconds, but the point is to pause and get clarity on your intention so that you can be deliberate in your reaction. How do you want to relate, right now? Recognize that your default stance will be pulling at you—but remember that you have the option to choose a different one. We all need to dial back on some stances and develop others.

Even if you aren't in a situation where you must think on your feet, you can use the four stances to unlock options and create a plan in advance. Suppose you need to communicate a change in strategic direction to your team, such as a shift from a major cost-transformation effort toward a growth strategy. First, Lean In and

come up with a list of options for how you might best get people on board. When you think you are finished, Lean Back and be even more objective. Ask yourself, “What else would align the team?” Then Lean With by consulting others about what they think the options are for you to create a trusting and positive climate in which the change will be best received. And then Don’t Lean and see if anything else pops into your mind. Put the issue on the back burner for a moment and let your subconscious go to work.

Look for signs that it’s time to pivot. To create the impact you want, you need to be aware of any negative effects that a given stance is having on the people around you. This will be your signal that it’s time to adopt a new one. If Lean In is your default (as it is for many leaders), recognize that doing so too often—or too hard—can shut others down, especially when you are in a position of authority. In meetings, pay attention to how much you’re speaking compared with others. Automated transcription software can provide data showing whether your voice is (or is not) the dominant one in the room. Most leaders are surprised by how much they need to switch to Leaning Back or Leaning With. Focus on listening with the goal of understanding. Consciously catch yourself not only when you’re jumping into the conversation but also when you stop listening carefully and start thinking about your response. After someone has finished speaking, take three breaths before you reply.



Matthias Heiderich

If Lean Back is your default, observe how your team is reacting: Are your people engaged with bright and alert eyes? Are they drowning in data? You may win minds with analysis, but being overly objective may cause you to lose hearts. People won't be eager to work through the night to hit a deadline, but they will for an inspiring, caring leader. You must also observe yourself: Are you holding back when you should be speaking up to help your team?

When your default instinct is to Lean With, be wary of using the stance to avoid tough conversations or to accept poor performance because you "care." As a leader you may find it difficult to watch someone struggle, but support is different from protection. Look back over a week or a month and ask yourself how many times you ignored a performance issue fearing that speaking up would hurt the other person's feelings. Did you praise

team members when you should have been pushing for better results because you were worried about how they might react? Remember, when a baby chick tries desperately to break open its shell, you shouldn't help it. If you do, it may die. The thrashing around is how it strengthens its muscles so that it can survive in the world.

It's not common for Don't Lean to be a default stance, but people often overrely on it in high-stakes situations, sometimes shutting down under threat. That leads to errors of omission. Look back at your calendar and ask if there were times when you did not respond to others or rejected their concerns because it might have raised your stress level. Have you actively avoided a situation, such as a difficult team dynamic, hoping that the problem would somehow solve itself or that others would solve it without your participation? If you are susceptible to this type of behavior, work hard to recognize when it's happening, notice what it feels like, and consider other stances you might take.

As a general rule, it is best to Lean In when your team seems directionless and needs help getting organized or galvanized. Lean Back when more information will help ground you, your team, or stakeholders. Lean With when people need support, encouragement, or motivation. Don't Lean when the team needs to work something out on their own and your presence would impede their progress. At the same time, inject calm and confidence if they seem frenetic. (For a summary, see the exhibit "A Guide to the Four Stances.")

A Guide to the Four Stances

This list of cues can help you determine when to use—and when to avoid—each stance.

	Actions	When to use it	When not to use it
LEAN IN	Deciding, directing, guiding, challenging, confronting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When people seem rudderless and passive and need help organizing and focusing their efforts • When you want to energize people without triggering fear • When change is happening rapidly and chaotically • When the world has turned upside down and you need to stabilize the situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When people quiet down when you enter the room • When people don't offer counteropinions • When people need more support and time to think • When your emotions have been triggered
LEAN BACK	Collecting data, analyzing, asking questions, delaying decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When people need more information • When emotions are running high and more data will help ground the team • When you are working with introverts who respond better to data than to inspirational rhetoric 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When team discussion has reached the point of diminishing returns • When people seem overwhelmed and more data is obfuscating rather than clarifying thinking

	Actions	When to use it	When not to use it
LEAN WITH	Empathizing, coaching, collaborating, encouraging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When morale is low • When your people are extroverts and connection is the currency of choice • When you notice how a smile or an affirming remark energizes someone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you notice a team member needs space to think • When a team is operating well on its own and doesn't need support • When people want to feel independent
DON'T LEAN	Contemplating, being still, visualizing, breathing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When team members need to work something out on their own and your presence may be an intrusion or slow their progress • When the team is frenetic and needs a break or a time-out to calm things down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the team needs to step into planning or action mode • When a crisis hits and people are looking to you for guidance

Whatever stance you adopt, be aware that you can use it with varying levels of intensity. For instance, a Lean In comment can be a directive or a suggestion, and you can Lean Back with a deep dive on an issue or a more surgical set of questions. Your choice of framing should be dependent on what will work best for the other person given the situation at hand. As you work to improve your ability to use each stance, it's best to calibrate your behavior

according to your comfort level. If Leaning In is uncomfortable, for instance, push yourself to communicate one more thing than you might otherwise. If you don't Lean Back enough, try asking a question instead of making a statement.

The Four Stances in Real Time

Mastery of the four stances is about being able to read each moment and shift your stance quickly, under stressful circumstances. For the highest-stakes interactions, you will need to draw on all four. Consider a client of ours who, after considerable work mastering the four stances, was able to put them all into action during a tense moment.

Nathan, the CFO of a public health-care company, received news that its largest business unit had fallen short on its latest revenue forecast, imperiling the firm's earnings for the quarter. Nathan called an urgent meeting with Ted, the new president of the business line. In Nathan's office, Ted looked like he hadn't slept in days and appeared tense as a coil.

Nathan wasn't immediately clear on which stance was optimal to kick off the meeting, so he chose Don't Lean to see what surfaced. He took a deep breath to calm himself. He noted that his reflex was to Lean Back and grill Ted about the situation. He also realized that he was feeling blindsided by the revenue shortfall, but since Ted would be held accountable by the CEO, Nathan didn't need to rake Ted over the coals too. And he was angry with himself for having signed off on what had turned out to be an unreasonable forecast.

Leaning With, Nathan said, "This is rough for all of us. How are you doing?" Ted, who was braced for condemnation, was surprised. He unfolded his arms and talked about the toll this was taking on his entire team. Nathan said, "What's done is done. Let's unpack it together." Ted nodded.

Leaning Back, Nathan adjusted his instinct to launch a barrage of questions, and opted for a more open-ended question to reduce Ted’s defensiveness: “How should we approach this to get to the root causes?” Ted suggested they could start by exploring how much of the shortfall was a result of the operating environment, how much was execution challenges, and how much was a flaw in the forecasting model. Together, they identified the source of the problem and developed a plan to recoup some of the revenue gap.

“What else?” Nathan asked as the meeting came to its seeming conclusion. His calm approach motivated Ted to speak directly. “You and the CEO made a top-down decision to increase our targets just as the macro outlook was getting wobbly. We didn’t want to disappoint you, so we ended up overreaching. If you’d consulted me at the time, I would have told you that we had less than a 20% chance of getting there.”



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Nathan found this painful to hear, but he also knew it was the heart of the matter. Leaning In and Leaning With, he said, “Ted, you and I are still getting to know each other. I was aware that we were stretching, but I put the odds at 60% in our favor. If I’d known what you just told me, I might have shaded back the earnings guidance.”

“You didn’t seem very open to input,” Ted replied.

Absorbing the comment, Nathan used Lean With again. “I don’t want you to feel that way. It’s OK to have strong points of view. Going forward, I want you to know that the CEO and I both want

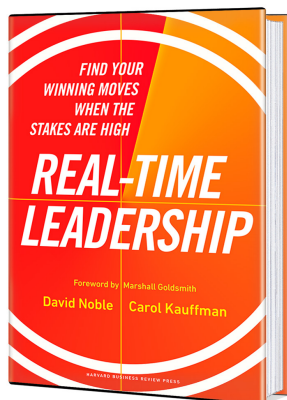
real debate, so don't hold back.”

Continuing to Lean In, Nathan added, “We may still make a call you don't like, but we need to have a rigorous dialogue to come up with a better decision for the firm.” Ted appreciated Nathan's candor and was receptive to the new guidelines. That wasn't the last time Ted's business unit presented a challenge to Nathan, but thanks to Nathan's agile response, it was the last time the cause was lack of communication and honest feedback.

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Creating options for managing interpersonal relationships requires keen observation skills in real time and the ability to self-regulate in stressful situations. But most of all, it requires humility to acknowledge that the approach that most helped elevate you into a leadership role won't always be the right one to deploy as a leader. No organization can survive if led by people who cling to the same approach in every situation. Just as the most enduring organizations are agile and adaptable, so too are the best leaders.

Editor's note: David Noble and Carol Kauffman are the authors of Real-Time Leadership (Harvard Business Review Press, 2023), from which this article is adapted.



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