

Leadership & Capability

Insights from Lab 4 of the Purpose in Practice Community

November 2025



The Purpose-in-Practice
Community

Contents

[About Us: The Purpose-in Practice Community](#)

[Lab 4: Leadership & Capability](#)

The brief

The process

[Insights summary](#)

[Resources](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

page

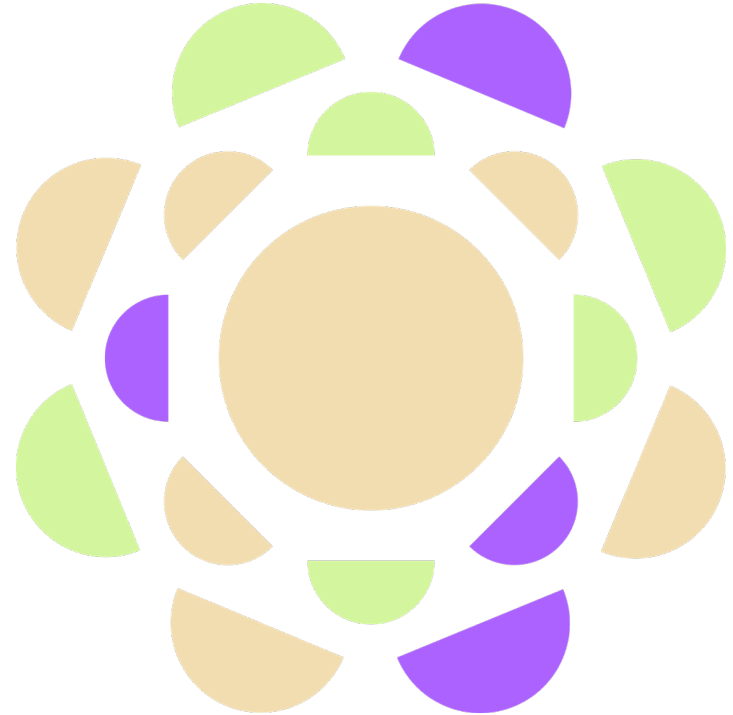
3

5

8

15

16



About Us:

What is the Purpose in Practice Community?

The Purpose-in-Practice Community (PIPC) brings together senior leaders and changemakers to collectively explore how they can put people and the planet at the heart of business and organisational success. Making this shift is complex and multi-layered, and there is no rulebook to follow. The process of becoming purpose-led not only involves substantial shifts in strategy and culture, but fundamental changes to the beliefs and assumptions that underpin how an organisation creates value for all its stakeholders – and for society.

On convening its founding community members, it became apparent that the purpose-led business movement is growing, with more businesses committing to transform, and an increasing volume of definitional frameworks and standards available to anchor credibility. However, while many of these frameworks describe the 'what' and 'why' of purpose-driven business, the 'how' is missing in terms of clear and accepted practices to achieve these standards. Decoding and unlocking these practices is the work of this community.

This collaborative network hopes to develop the potential and power to contribute to changing the landscape of business. Together, we intend to drive both organisational change and larger systemic shifts that create the conditions for purpose-led businesses to thrive.

The community:

People who are passionate about businesses adopting a purpose-driven approach working in their organisations to help them to be purpose led.

The vision: A better world, accelerated by better business.

- Moving from: business optimised primarily for growth and profit (shareholder value)
- Towards: business optimised for human wellbeing and a sustainable ecosystem; with growth and profit in service of that

The mission:

Creating space for catalysts to learn and innovate together; building confidence and resilience to transform businesses for better.

The objective:

Create and grow a network of catalysts to work together to accelerate the transition towards purpose-driven business.



About us

What are we focussed on?

In 2022, founding members convened to explore the priority questions and organisational practice evolution required to catalyse purpose-driven business. A series of 'Labs' emerged – a format we use to connect and create breakthrough thinking and practice.



How might we create and sustain understanding of what it means to be purpose-driven?

Focus of this document



How might we ignite, cultivate and sustain purpose within and across organisational boundaries; creating the conditions necessary for people & purpose to thrive?



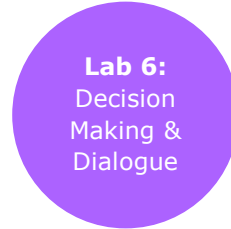
How might we make purpose core to strategy and performance; appreciating new forms of value and accountability?



How might we develop leadership in service of purpose, and what are the resources and capabilities we need to bring about systemic change?



How might we reframe how we see value, beyond financial value, and measure what matters?



How might we embrace dialogue and constructive tension to navigate difficult decisions, creatively?



How might we design products and propositions that deliver good outcomes for people and planet?



How might businesses work together to influence and create wider systems change?



About the Lab:

Leadership & Capability

The Context

We are facing several significant and interrelated social and environmental challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss, social inequality, mental and physical health problems and the weakening of trust in democratic institutions. Society is increasingly looking to business to play a more active role in addressing these systemic challenges, alongside government and the non-profit sector, as only collective action can tackle the root causes and shape a future that supports the long-term wellbeing of all people and planet.

Organisations (particularly those designed for efficiency and profit maximisation) will need to undergo profound transformation to be capable of not only surviving in a more turbulent world, but to meet the expectations and demands of the stakeholders on which their survival depends. For many, there is an increasing appetite to do so by becoming a purpose-driven organisation, one that exists to create value by serving society and respecting the dignity of all the people it interacts with – and by doing so, generates financial returns. This transformation calls for a different type of leadership development at all levels – both inside organisations, and across organisational boundaries.

The Challenge

Leaders face an increasingly complex and demanding situation. In many cases, they are trying to deal with a business model that was designed for a different context and is now under commercial pressure to rapidly reinvent itself. In addition, they are trying to do so with a greater degree of scrutiny, internally and externally, of the impact of the business – both environmentally and socially – and an expectation that “negative externalities” are reduced, and positive impact is created.

They are working in a rapidly evolving context, navigating the multi-faceted disruption of technological innovation, AI, and significant socio-economic and geopolitical shifts. The boundaries of their role are also expanding – how they work, with whom and how “enterprise-level” progress is achieved and assessed are all in flux.

The present realities of leadership already look very different from the past, and demand a reimagining of how we develop leadership in service of purpose, how it is supported and what might be needed for the future.

About the Lab: **Leadership & Capability**

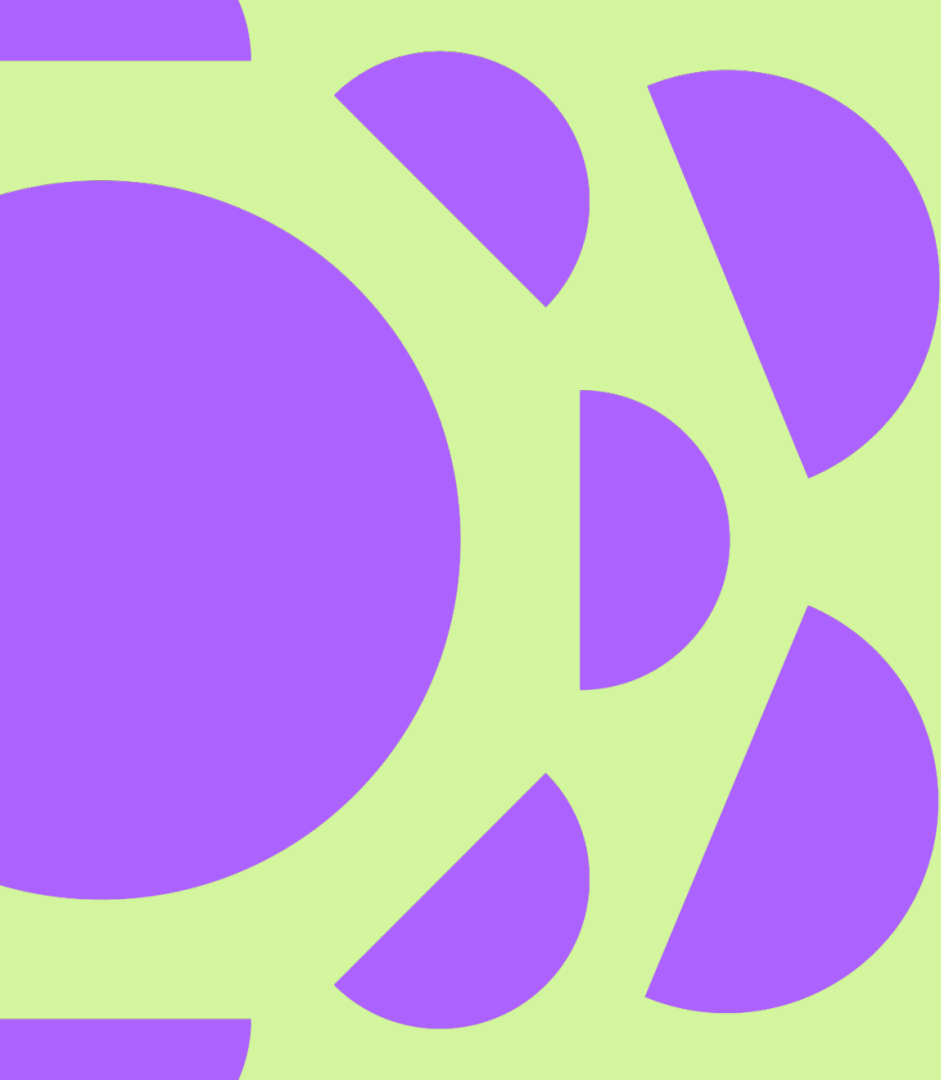
The Lab brought together over 40 people from a range of organisations with different backgrounds, expertise and experience, from HR, culture, learning & development to purpose, sustainability, organisational design and development.

Over a series of meetings, including a full day workshop, the Lab participants considered the present realities of leadership and how organisations might reimagine how we develop leadership in service of purpose, how it is supported and what might be needed for the future.

The questions considered:

- What might it mean for an individual – the mindset, behaviours, skills and capabilities needed?
- What might it mean for organisations - to create the conditions for this leadership to emerge?
- What is needed to lead change at a more systemic level, across organisations and sectors, to help solve our biggest societal challenges?
- What we can be doing now to support this type of leadership?



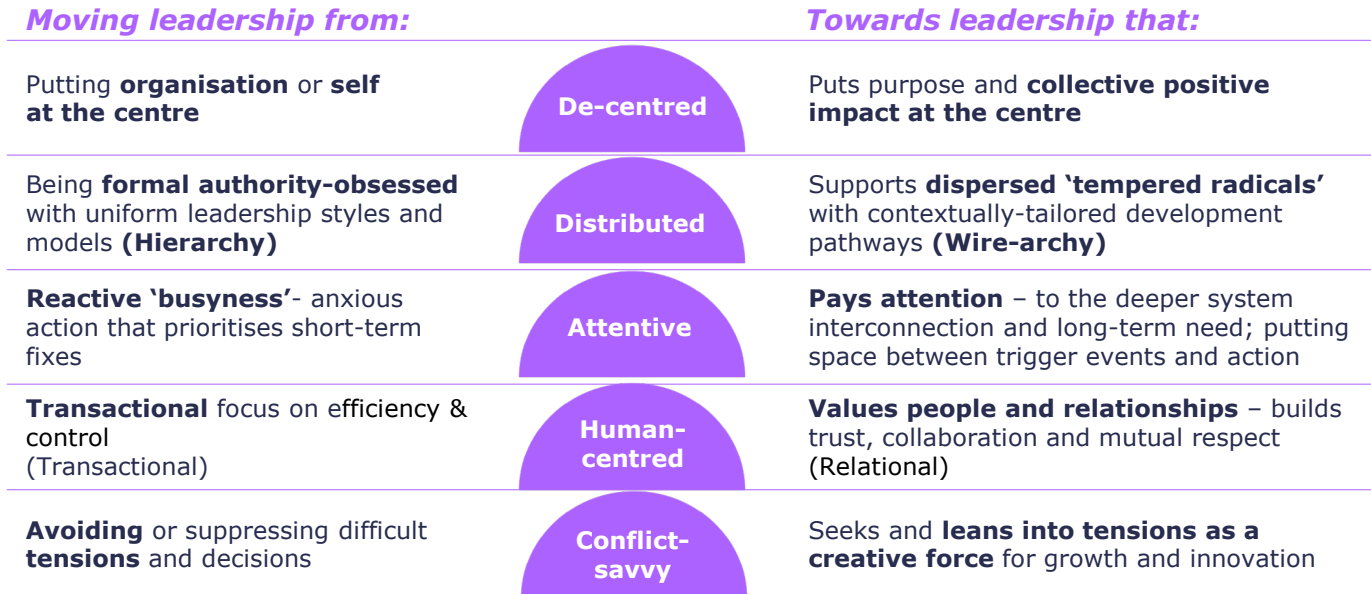


**What
emerged?**

Insights Summary

Harnessing leadership in service of purpose

The Lab participants explored what it means to lead in a way that enables purpose to flourish—not just as a statement, but as a lived reality. The enquiry surfaced five insights that engage leadership as a collective, human, and systemic force. Participants recognised that becoming a purpose-led organisation requires a shift from traditional, hierarchical models to leadership that is distributed, reflective, and grounded in mutual value. The Lab highlighted the importance of decentering the self and organisation in favour of purpose; embracing leadership as a dynamic system; creating space for reflection and systemic awareness; leading with a deep respect for human dignity; and using tensions as a creative force for innovation:



Insight 1: De-centred


Putting the purpose rather than the organisation at the centre, de-centring is the invitation to see oneself and the organisation as part of something bigger, exploring with openness different relationships, perspectives and approaches to find a path towards collective goals.

In the context of leadership: de-centring has two aspects:

- At the individual level, de-centring the self – leaders can see themselves as part of a greater purpose, and start to prioritise collective benefit
- At the organisational level, de-centring the organisation in service of putting the purpose/collective interest at the centre

How and why did this emerge as a topic?

The concept of de-centring emerged in Lab 3 which explored purpose led strategy, and is explored more in the Lab 3 toolkit which can be found here: [Purpose in Practice Strategy Toolkit Lab 3](#)



**Collective
positive impact
at the centre**

To de-centre yourself as a leader, to de-centre your organisation, where you are no longer “centre of the universe” can be unsettling and discombobulating. But it could also re-orient you and the organisation back towards your purpose.

De-centring in leadership could also be viewed as understanding the map of stakeholders we work with and how we engage with them. In the Lab, we asked ourselves the question “who is the shareholder mass?” When balancing commercial pressures and purpose, we seem to get waylaid by the quarterly reporting cycle we are beholden to, as well as this shareholder mass, who are people too. Perhaps then de-centring is also a practice in understanding the structures we’ve created, becoming more aware of what has taken centre stage and why, and then to stand back and seek to take a broader, wider perspective in service of the purpose led outcomes you are seeking.

What can we be doing now to support this type of leadership?

- Recognise that you / your organisation is not at the centre – instead focusing on the meaningful challenge you / your organisation is setup to serve
- Consider the wider societal context when making decisions and setting priorities - stepping out and allowing the outside in
- Consider multiple viewpoints. Understand the needs and perspectives of others; allowing diverse perspectives to emerge and deeply listening to these perspectives
- Create conditions for mutual benefit to flourish – the quality of relationships in and of themselves create value and it is about recognising that mutual value.

Insight 2: Distributed

Re-thinking about leadership as something that you 'do' not what you 'are', shifts from seeing leadership in terms of traditional hierarchy roles, to a more dynamic, networked resource to be harnessed. The Lab acknowledged the need for harnessing a larger leadership system of inter-related and intertwined entities, that can have more impact on the organisation's purpose, than individual or hierarchy leadership can.

As supported by the work on Adaptive Leadership (Ronald Heifetz), "leadership" is an act (verb) - not a position (noun). In short, everyone has the ability to exercise leadership, regardless of how much formal authority they are given. That is not to diminish the critical role of senior leadership in change, but rather that there is a wider, untapped, leadership powerhouse to be harnessed.

In order to reorientate and centre the organisation around people and purpose, the Lab found we must identify and connect those with a deep desire to do so, at all levels. These were referred to as 'tempered radicals' (see alongside). We must let go of our obsession with individual "hero leaders" in a hierarchy and adopt a more holistic perspective of leadership as a system/network. Lab participants referred to this as a "wire-archy". The lab acknowledged that leadership itself is multidimensional - with no "one-size-fits-all" or "cookie cutter" style, mode or approach to be developed.

Tempered radicals in particular, play a vital role in challenging existing structures and norms, bridging the gap between business as usual and a purpose-led future. They work within the constraints and power structures of the organisation to create openings for transformation. Tempered radicals as "Jujitsu Practitioners" - using the existing system's momentum and weight against itself to drive change.

A **tempered radical** is a term from organisational leadership and change literature (especially from Debra Meyerson at Stanford/Harvard).

It describes someone who:

- Works inside a system or organisation but does not fully conform to all of its dominant norms.
- Holds values, beliefs, or goals that may be at odds with the mainstream culture.
- Wants to create change in ways that align with their deeper convictions.
- Chooses to act strategically rather than confrontationally—balancing their desire to fit in enough to be effective with their desire to push for transformation.



Watch author and researcher John Higgins discuss the concept of tempered radicals. Ultimately, tempered radicals play a vital role in shaping organisations, but they must navigate carefully—leveraging both the energy of marginalised voices and the power of existing structures to drive lasting change.



Insight 2: **Distributed – cont’d**

How did this emerge?

- Understanding that leadership exists at individual, collective, systemic, dispersed, and decentralised levels
- Traditional leadership development practices focused on building individual leadership competence will only yield minimal contribution to the evolution of a leadership system, acting collectively in service of positive impact
- Many in the Lab felt the “split-screen” challenge, striking a delicate balance between being radical enough to challenge the status quo and drive meaningful change, while also being moderate enough to work within the system and gain buy-in from various stakeholders. Being a “tempered radical” is an embodiment of “split-screen mode” - “playing the game as is and as you wish it to be”
- The idea and practice of sports coaching emerged during the Lab—when we coach athletes, we tailor our approach to their unique strengths and weaknesses. Why then do we not adopt the same approach in leadership development? Every leader is different and perhaps the pathways to developing these leaders, and the pathways to how leaders can emerge overall need to more multidimensional—leadership exists at an individual, collective and systemic levels

from
hierarchy to a
'wire-archy'

What can we be doing to rewire leadership as a system?

- Re-examine organisational design. Shift the over-focus on hierarchical authority, to more dynamic, networked groups of influencers and collaborators.
- Adopt more fluid and participatory processes, where the emphasis is on collective intelligence and shared responsibility.
- Create conditions for all to lead in their roles with a clear collective purpose
- Bridge the gap between those at the top and lower down the traditional hierarchy to challenge assumptions around what leading is and is not, where it resides, within whom and to what ends
- Develop Jujitsu-like capabilities - agility, timing, and strategic positioning to turn the organisation's own inertia and resistance into opportunities for progress.
- Develop communication and storytelling capabilities: adjusting language, messaging, and stories based on the specific audience and context without losing sight of what one stands for.
- Create support systems for tempered radicals to maintain well-being and resilience e.g. peer support and community (internally & externally), recognition of small wins and 'intelligent failures' and pay particular attention to if and how tempered radicals feel they have psychological safety in the organisation
- Tailor development to the leader's needs – valuing their context and unique experience. Move away from offering the same programmes to the same roles/levels of leaders—one might benefit from a programme at Harvard Business School, and another might thrive more with 1:1 coaching.
- Challenge your assumptions about what leadership need to look like

Insight 3: **Attentive**

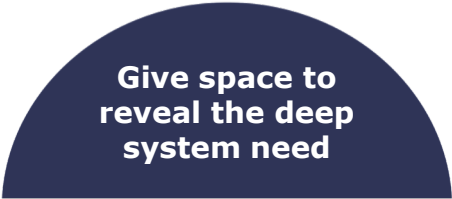
Inherent in becoming a truly purpose-led organisation is a greater awareness of our interdependence with society and the natural world. The Lab considered how spaciousness brings into focus interdependencies, and how we impact and are impacted by others and the world around us.

Spacious mode is about attention management, not time management. In a spacious mode, we see the world around us as dynamic and relational and can better understand how things come together and interrelate, as part of a wider, deeply interdependent, ambiguous world.

Learning is achieved through equal parts action and reflection. Without sufficient space to sense-make and reflect, "busyness" - quick, mechanistic, pressurised decisions could prove disastrous not just for ourselves, but also others and future generations. The insight gained through the spacious mode directs our doing towards human flourishing.

"Without space, we can only see and think narrowly. If we cannot see and think more expansively, we cannot make wise choices. Without wiser choices, we cannot change let alone transform"

Reference: ([Permission to Pause](#) Megan Reitz & John Higgins)



**Give space to
reveal the deep
system need**

How and why did this emerge as a topic?

This deeper attention was (partially) experienced in the room, with people welcoming the opportunity to grapple with deeper tensions and challenges

There was collective acknowledgement:

- of the need to understand situations systemically, not as made up of independent parts.
- of the absence of neat solutions and that navigating complexities is part of leadership today.
- that opportunities to reflect helps leaders unpack /challenge their assumptions, explore their mental model and widen perspective - from being self-focused, to being able to observe and feel our mutuality and interdependence (de-centering).

What can we be doing to support Spaciousness?

- Ensure that leaders and teams have regular opportunities to step back and reflect on their work, strategies, and collective goals e.g. scheduled retreats, workshops, or team meetings focused on reflection.
- Encourage leaders to consider the legacy they wish to leave behind, and how this shapes their attention and actions today - with at least 2% more courage
- Create the conditions for spacious mode:
 - Safety**
 - People**
 - Attention**
 - Conflict**
 - Environment**(reference: [Permission to Pause](#). Megan Reitz & John Higgins)

Insight 4: **Human-centred**

Purpose-driven businesses seek to contribute positively to the wellbeing of people and planet. The Lab reflected on human centred leadership – respecting the dignity of all the people the organisation touches – going beyond employees, to customers, suppliers, communities, investors and future generations – everyone who is affected directly or indirectly by the business, highlighting that a business is essentially a series of relationships and that the long-term success of the business depends on the quality of these relationships. Human centred leadership therefore looks beyond the short term, to nurture and value the strength of these relationships - this includes seeking outcomes that enable each person to reach their full potential.

One topic that came up in the Lab in the context of human centred leadership was how it might inform how businesses adopt and use AI and other cutting-edge technologies. Bringing a human centred leadership lens can change how leaders think about the impact of how these technologies are deployed - on employees, customers, suppliers, communities and so on. For example, whether the technology is deployed as an enabler that can help to foster stronger and better relationships with stakeholders through improved quality of services, better more fulfilling work and a means to help deliver on the organisation's purpose, or whether it is used solely as a means to extract short term financial gains without regard to potential longer-term consequences.

**Moving from
transactional to
relational**

How and why did this emerge as a topic?

- Participants recognised that as businesses face more complicated and complex challenges, we need relational leaders who practice curiosity, hold multiple perspectives and see their role as exploring the way forward together with others.
- As companies grapple with how to use new technologies, we need leaders who recognise that technologies are enablers that can help to help deliver on the purpose and who consider the human aspects of any deployment

What can we be doing now to support this type of leadership?

- Actively publicise the needs and aspirations of employees, customers and other stakeholders
- Measuring success beyond ROI – considering additional metrics that evaluate success beyond traditional performance - including employee satisfaction, customer feedback, and overall organisational resilience
- Incentivise enterprise-wide impact and partnership by encouraging and fostering collaboration and teamwork, building a stronger, more resilient workforce.
- Create opportunities for participation – internally - but also with customers and other stakeholders - that increase collaboration, creativity and trust (as people feel part of any change)

Insight 5: **Conflict savvy**

There are inevitable tensions and difficult decisions in all business and particularly in purpose-driven organisations where leaders seek to serve not just short term financial interests but look to take into account the longer term impact their organisation has on people and planet.

The Lab reflected that by reframing ethical and other tensions and difficult decisions as opportunities rather than obstacles, leaders can harness these challenges as a source of energy, growth, innovation and organisational cohesion.

How and why did this emerge as a topic?

Many in the Lab felt that increasingly the role of purposeful leaders is to sit with tensions, polarities and paradoxes. It's less about shiny solutions and more about bringing problems and building the muscle to tackle them together – “community without unity”, “conflict is growth trying to happen” and “giving attention to where there is tension”



**Leaning into
tensions as a
creative force**

What can we be doing to support this type of leadership?

- **Fostering open dialogue and transparency:** by encouraging open dialogue about complex issues, leaders create an environment where diverse perspectives are valued. Cultivate a culture where courageous conversations are the norm - pushing beyond comfort zones to find meaningful solutions.
- **Increase opportunities that welcome challenge** - reframing tensions and difficult decisions as opportunities rather than obstacles
- **Seek healthy and robust dialogue**, recognising that the best collective efforts emerge from a range of perspectives in creative tension. When divergent views are openly acknowledged rather than suppressed, tension can be harnessed to co-create meaning, active engagement and breakthrough ideas.
- **Developing critical thinking skills:** navigating ethical paradoxes requires leaders to think critically and creatively. By regularly engaging with these challenges, leaders can sharpen their decision-making abilities and develop a more nuanced understanding of complex business landscapes.
- **Driving innovation and adaptability:** by viewing these challenges as opportunities for innovation, leaders can channel their energy into developing new, ethically sound business practices or products. Acknowledging the absence of neat solutions and the necessity of continuous engagement in navigating challenges reflects resilience and adaptability in leadership practices.

Resources

De-centered

[The Evolution of Corporate Purpose Over The Last Ten Years — The Beautiful Truth Purpose in Practice Lab 3 Toolkit Strategy](#) (decentreing in strategy development)

Distributed

[Into the Wirearchy](#)
[Debunking the Myth of Universal Leadership: Why One Size Does Not Fit All](#)
[Six ways to Scale Corporate Leadership Development | Harvard](#)

[Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change](#)
[Brene Brown Podcast - Leading in an age of employee activism](#)

Attentive

[Spaciousness report](#)
[How to Give Yourself More Space to Think](#)

Human centred

[What it is to be human | Blueprint for Business](#)
[How you Show Up Affects my Voice — Megan Reitz \('I-It', 'I thou' 'Turn towards'\)](#)
[Purpose in Practice Lab 2 Summary: Purpose, Culture and Employee Engagement](#)

Conflict savvy

[Purpose in Practice Lab 1 Summary: Building a shared understanding of Purpose](#) (leaning into tension)
[Purpose in Practice Lab 1 Playbook: Building a shared understanding of purpose-driven business](#) (polarities workshop)

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Lab leads



Geraldine Percival
Group Head of Talent and Development,
Asahi Europe and International



Katherine Wässer
Head of Purpose & Culture
Transformation, Jaguar Land
Rover

Lab facilitators



Jack Wellby
Deputy Director, Advisory, Forward Institute



Kristina Teow
Partnerships Manager, Forward Institute



Dee Corrigan
Head of Corporate Engagement, A Blueprint for
Better Business

Thank you

Contact: pipc@blueprintforbusiness.org



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