

Rewriting the Playbook: Leading Through Compounding Uncertainty

Today's consumer leaders around the world are navigating a new kind of complexity. They are expected to lead in an arena where the rules of the game are changing, but no one is quite sure what the new rules are.

AI is redefining how work gets done and transforming customer engagement. Consumer expectations are evolving faster than business models can adapt. Armed with real-time data from AI and smartphones, consumers are making quicker, more informed purchase decisions, accelerating shifts in behavior. At the same time, long-standing industry assumptions — from sourcing strategies to margin structures — are being upended by disruptions such as shifting government agendas.

Disruptions no longer come in waves — they compound. Economic, social, technological, political and consumer behavior shifts are accelerating simultaneously, creating an environment that is harder to predict, plan for, and lead through. In this environment, legacy playbooks are evolving. And the very definition of what "good leadership" looks like is shifting.

“Previously, you had a playbook and you played it. It's completely different today. The old playbook doesn't work anymore”

Jon Moeller

Chairman, President & CEO, Procter & Gamble

Of course, no consumer leader has ever led in a time of perfect certainty — volatility has long been part of the job. But today's environment is different. [The scale, speed, and interconnectedness of today's challenges](#) are pushing leadership into uncharted territory and reshaping expectations of what successful leadership looks like. Yet many leaders stress that volatility is not necessarily a constraint — it is also a catalyst and an opportunity, accelerating innovation, sharpening priorities, and deepening focus on customers.

Volatility is not a barrier; it's a forcing function for innovation, agility, and a closer connection to our most important asset: our customers.”

Alexis Nasard

CEO, Swarovski

To help consumer leaders navigate what's to come, our research draws on in-depth conversations with sixty-five consumer leaders — from CEOs and C-suite executives to board directors across the US, Europe and Asia, representing organizations that range from the world's largest consumer conglomerates to fast-growing challenger brands - exploring how they're responding to compounding uncertainty.

Why situational leadership has never been more critical

We have identified five shifts that are making the role of the consumer leader more critical than ever. Each shift brings new and often competing demands — forcing leaders to flex between styles, adjust their decision-making approach, and practice situational leadership.

From independent to intertwined issues

From transformation to radical disruption

From a vertical to a horizontal presentation

From single to multiple time horizons

Five shifts making situational leadership more critical than ever

From unitary and aligned expectations to plural and polarized ones

From independent to intertwined issues

What used to be isolated disruptions are now overlapping and compounding — turning complexity into something systemic. Consumer leaders aren't just solving one challenge at a time; they're navigating the ripple effects as each issue impacts the next.

Geopolitical developments are triggering regulatory shifts that are directly impacting supply chains, cost structures, and sourcing strategies. What starts as a supply chain issue quickly becomes a pricing challenge, then a brand trust issue. Growing pressure, shifting priorities, and a rising risk of burnout can challenge talent retention.

From transformation to radical disruption

Issues with the power to fundamentally reshape industries are appearing and taking hold with unprecedented speed. Tariffs and supply chain volatility can destabilize sourcing strategies overnight, forcing margin resets and, in some cases, threatening entire business models.

“Tariffs, rising costs, franchisee response – all of this compounds under the banner of uncertainty.”

Chris Kempczinski

Chairman & CEO, McDonalds; Board Director Procter & Gamble

[Artificial intelligence](#) is simultaneously redefining how consumer [industries operate](#) and how customers interact with businesses. It is not just enhancing workflows — it is rewriting them. Large retailers are piloting AI agents to run category management, automate pricing, and soon AI is expected to be able to negotiate directly with suppliers. The result is an uneven playing field: data-rich retailers with higher capital investment are racing ahead, while smaller retailers and CPGs risk being left behind. But the real frontier isn't AI alone — it's how human judgment and AI capabilities combine.

“AI will transform marketing because it will transform everything — from innovation to content creation to demand generation. But what won't change is what makes a great brand: solving real pain points with innovation and creativity, bringing everyday joy – that should still be about EI, not AI.”

Samir Singh

EVP APAC, Colgate-Palmolive

“The greatest fuel for AI is data. If you have the best data, then you have the right to win in AI.”

Stuart Aitken

CEO, Circana

And layered on top of these shifts, consumer behaviors themselves continue to evolve in ways that make it hard for leaders to keep pace. From the rise of GLP-1 drugs in the US, to TikTok Shop in Asia, to European consumers placing greater value on products being local, leaders around the globe are being forced to adapt in real time.

Russell Reynolds Associates' [Global Leadership Monitor](#) shows that consumer behavior remains the most significant external factor shaping the health of consumer organizations — influencing what consumers value, how they shop, and the experiences they expect.

“Staying in tune with evolving consumer behavior is essential for CPG leaders, especially in the current dynamic operating environment. As consumers become increasingly deliberate in their choices, we must be equally intentional in our decision making.”

Mick Beekhuizen

President and CEO, The Campbell's Company

From single to multiple time horizons

Consumer leaders today are being pulled in two directions simultaneously: the urgency of short-term delivery and the pressure to build long-term resilience. While managing costs, protecting margins, and hitting quarterly targets remain essential, so too is investing in the capabilities and strategies that will secure relevance five years out.

Performance used to be about delivering results in order to earn the right to transform. Today, [transformation itself is table stakes](#), and success is defined by the ability to adapt continuously along the way. Every short-term move carries long-term consequences, making prioritization across issues like tariffs and AI increasingly complex. At the same time, boards are pressing CEOs to move faster, be more decisive and place the right strategic bets to secure the company's future.

“Delivering short-term goals is always challenging. However, the newer and added challenge is navigating increased uncertainty. Leaders are having to fire fight more often and deal with a wide range of issues related to shifting trade policies, accelerating health and wellness trends and regulatory changes.”

Brendan Foley

President & CEO, McCormick

From unitary and aligned expectations to plural and polarized ones

Today's leaders are being held accountable to a broader and more vocal group of stakeholders than ever before — from shareholders and customers to regulators, employees, and the public. These stakeholders often have divergent, even conflicting, priorities. And in some markets, the challenge is magnified by local politics and regulations that are moving in opposite directions.

Expectations around issues like DE&I now vary not only across continents, but even from state to state within the U.S. What's standard in one region may be [politically charged](#) in another, forcing leaders to make judgment calls that will inevitably draw criticism — no matter what side they take.

For some CEOs, this means spending more time in policy and government conversations than ever before — engaging directly with lawmakers to share their perspectives and manage emerging risks.

“I'm spending more time in DC and Brussels, working at different levels to flag potential implications of decisions — more so than in the past.”

Carlos Abrams-Rivera

CEO, Kraft Heinz

From a vertical to a horizontal presentation

The forces reshaping consumer businesses rarely sit neatly within one function. Retail media is a prime example: now [surpassing \\$100 billion globally](#), it is reshaping how brands engage with consumers. For leaders, this means not only adapting to new business models, but also competing on new terms and with new capabilities required to succeed.

Once seen primarily as a marketing function, retail media now touches merchandising, data analytics, supply chain, finance, and customer engagement. For example, allocating in-store space for digital screens requires coordination between operations, IT, brand partnerships, and finance.

AI is another prime example – capturing its potential is not just a technical exercise, but a cultural and organizational one. Questions of ethics, safety, and new models of work demand collaboration across teams and functions, requiring leaders to work with one another in ways many top teams were never designed to do.

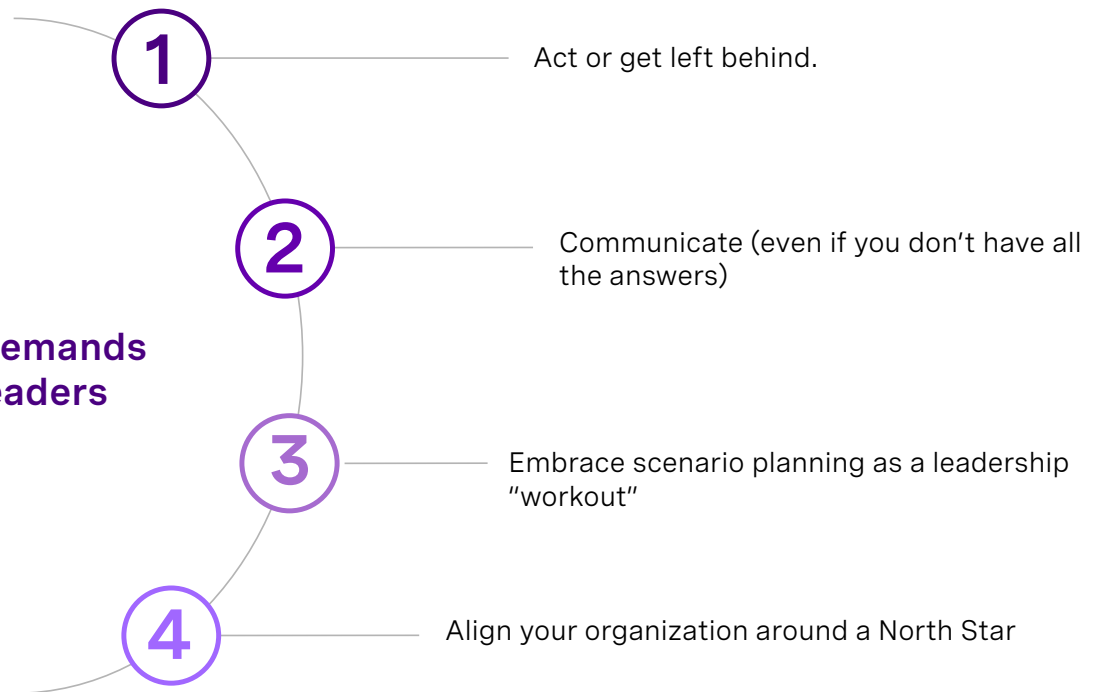
“Projects are increasingly more cross-functional and require a deeper level of coordination and communication.”

Sean Gamble
President & CEO, Cinemark



What today's environment demands of consumer leaders

What today's environment demands of consumer leaders



To address these shifts, consumer leaders have had to evolve their leadership playbooks. Interviews revealed four capabilities that help successful leaders navigate compounding uncertainty with ease:

01

Act or get left behind

Amid today's volatility, waiting for certainty or trying to control all of the workstreams means missing the moment. Leadership today is less about having all the answers and more about acting with conviction, taking informed risks when visibility is limited, and making decisions with the best information available. As conditions evolve, it also requires the flexibility and adaptability to adjust course as new information emerges. That means moving directionally, if not always precisely.

“We learn more from failures than from successes, yet many people leave that powerful lesson at home when they come to work. Our goal is to empower employees to take calculated risks.”

Tony Capuano

President & CEO, Marriott, Board Director,
McDonald's

02

Communicate (even if you don't have all the answers)

Since COVID, the demand for clear, consistent communication has only grown — not just with employees, but with their teams, boards and external stakeholders. This year has underscored that successful [leadership through uncertainty](#) is less about having every answer and more about reassuring, projecting calm and confidence, and providing clarity on direction, even when that is just acknowledging what is still being worked through.

“In tougher and uncertain times, it’s important to show both heart and presence. I make a point of spending extra time with the team as a group, so they know where we stand together — reducing uncertainty and enabling smart and bold decisions.”

Stina Westerstad
CEO, BabyBjörn

03

Embrace scenario planning as a leadership “workout”

In today’s environment, leaders are under pressure to make faster decisions and shift course quickly. To enable that pace, many are using scenario planning not as a theoretical tool, but as a practical way to test responses, align decision-makers, and stay ready. The goal isn’t to predict what’s next — it’s to “build a muscle” to move quickly without losing focus.

“Scenario planning is like warming up in a sport. Practice enough to get your mind in shape for whatever comes your way and to build the confidence you can perform.”

Maria Henry
Board Director, Nike and General Mills

“To face uncertainty, you must identify the certainties within the uncertainty.”

Henry Chen
CEO, Sanyuan Group

04

Align your organization around a North Star

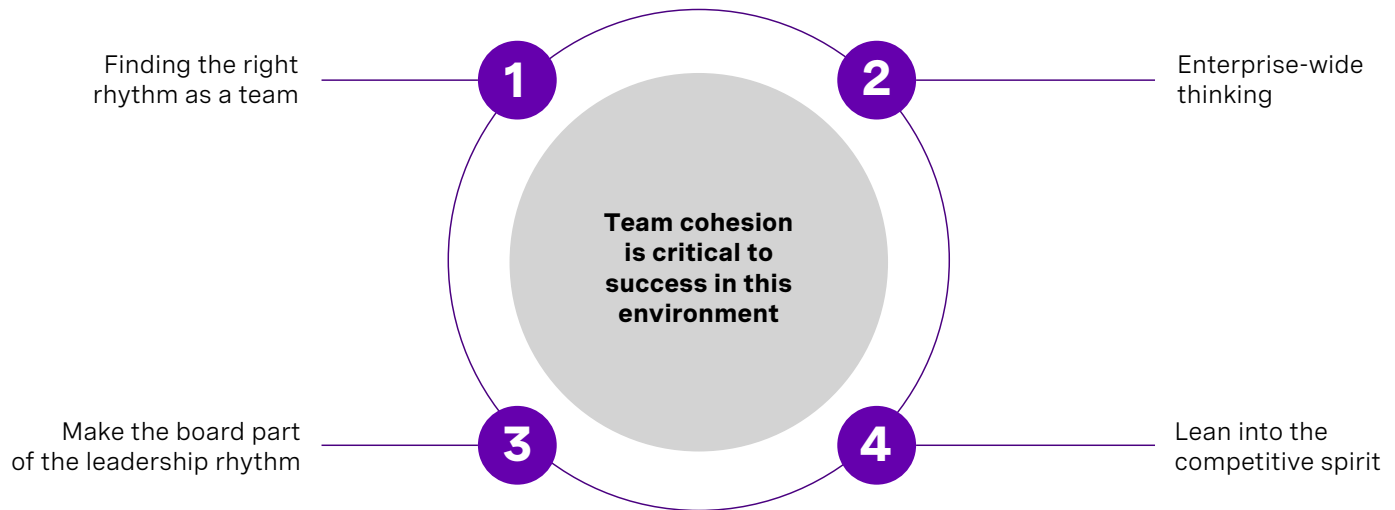
Pressure from investors and shareholders to deliver short-term results can tempt leaders to compromise on the principles that underpin long-term success. The most effective resist that pull, using their company’s mission and values as a filter for decisions, a source of stability for their teams, and a guide through tough trade-offs. Protecting purpose now – even when it requires harder calls – positions the company to come out stronger as conditions improve.

“The challenge is staying true to your company’s purpose when there’s pressure for short-term results. You have to hold the line now so you can emerge stronger when conditions improve.”

Scott Boatwright
CEO, Chipotle

Team cohesion is critical to success in this environment

Leadership has become a team sport more than ever. No matter how experienced or visionary, [no leader can navigate today's complexity alone](#). The most effective leaders are building empowered and aligned teams that can move quickly and with autonomy, investing in how the team works and how decisions are made:



01. Finding the right rhythm as a team

Many of today's strongest leadership teams were forged in crisis. What distinguishes them isn't just pace, but rhythm that works for them as a team: regular check-ins, clarity around priorities, and space for honest debate. That rhythm allows teams to operate with urgency, without chaos, while also building in time to recharge so they can sustain performance and avoid burnout.

High-performing teams also know when to pull together and when to give space. They balance deep collaboration with empowering individual leaders to stay connected to their own functions and teams. The goal isn't constant coordination, but deliberate connection — creating the conditions for both speed and influence.

“We operate in a series of sprints, driven by action, accountability, and autonomy, and then move to the next sprint. We are making sure to measure our sprints, especially their intensity, and buffer in recovery so our team has time to recharge.”

Joe Preston
President & CEO, New Balance

“Ultimately, I'm leading the people who lead the business. Leadership is about setting compelling strategic direction and the why of the work, it is clearly about results leadership. But, the real unlock to impact at scale is in leading the leaders.”

Shane Grant
COO Americas, Colgate-Palmolive

02. Enterprise-wide thinking

The most effective leaders see their executive team—not their functions—as their true first team. Rather than defending silos, they lean into horizontal collaboration, recognizing that the company succeeds only when the leadership body operates as one. Enterprise-minded leaders bring their expertise to enrich collective judgment, not to accumulate personal power.

“The real goal is to have a ‘one demand team’ with a growth mindset. If I’m in supply chain, I don’t say, ‘R&D isn’t my job.’ Instead, I ask: how can our production lines create new products or unlock cost savings?”

Carl Su

Managing Director China, General Mills

03. Make the board part of the leadership rhythm

Increased uncertainty has drawn boards closer to the business. The days of quarterly updates are over; boards are now actively engaged in decision-making cycles. That means executive teams need to align not just internally, but across governance lines, bringing boards in early as decisions are being made and preparing them to respond quickly when needed. Keeping the board connected to important decisions helps build directors’ confidence in how events are unfolding.

“As you navigate uncertainly, it’s important to bring the board along with you without making them feel as if they need to be the ones managing the company.”

Jeff Harmening

Chairman & CEO, General Mills

04. Lean into the competitive spirit

The market environment is not only a test of resilience, but also a catalyst for performance. Success comes not from resisting uncertainty, but from embracing it. Leaders who treat disruption as fuel can ignite their organizations — sharpening focus, fueling a competitive edge, and turning pressure into momentum. This mindset transforms volatility from a risk to be managed into an arena for growth, where organizations strengthen operational discipline, accelerate innovation, and build cultures energized by challenge.



Don't toss your playbook; actively seek to evolve it

The strategies and instincts that once defined success can quickly become liabilities if left unquestioned. In today's environment, established patterns are not always reliable.

Organizations that [master compounding](#) uncertainty move beyond simply adapting to change – they begin creating it. They don't wait for market shifts to force adaptation, they stay intentional about challenging long-held assumptions and creating new, evolved playbooks.

To close each conversation, we asked our interviewees: What's the best advice you've ever received, that feels especially relevant right now? Here's what they shared:

“We can make this as stressful and as challenging as we want but, ultimately, we have a strategy and a plan. Stay calm and stay focused to run the play.”

Kara Trent
President, Americas, Under Armour

“No one is brilliant, and no one is terrible — the reality is usually somewhere in the middle.”

Peter Duffy
CEO, MONY Group

“Talk to others and leverage a wide network to gather additional sources of inspiration.”

Sean Gamble
CEO, Cinemark

“Make the best decision with the information you have today. If we need to change tomorrow, then we can do that.”

Ron Ostrowski
CEO, Rawlings Sporting Goods

“Focus on your key topics and simplify your business. Repeatedly do the right thing.”

David Zhang

Managing Director, China Ferrero

“The consumer will never give you the answer. They will give you the insight that leads to the answer.”

Aaron Powell

CEO, Pizza Hut (Yum! Brands)

“Be open minded and apply common sense, especially after the decision-making process.”

Jaime Ramirez

CEO, Fluidra; Board Director, Kimberly-Clark Corporation

“Invite innovation from across the business—including junior levels.”

Andrew Swinand

CEO, Inspired Thinking

“Accept the things you cannot change, have the courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Nathan Coe

CEO, Autotrader

“Listening is key, especially now. Use your ears and your mouth in the ratio you’ve got them.”

Jack Sinclair

CEO, Sprouts Farmers Market

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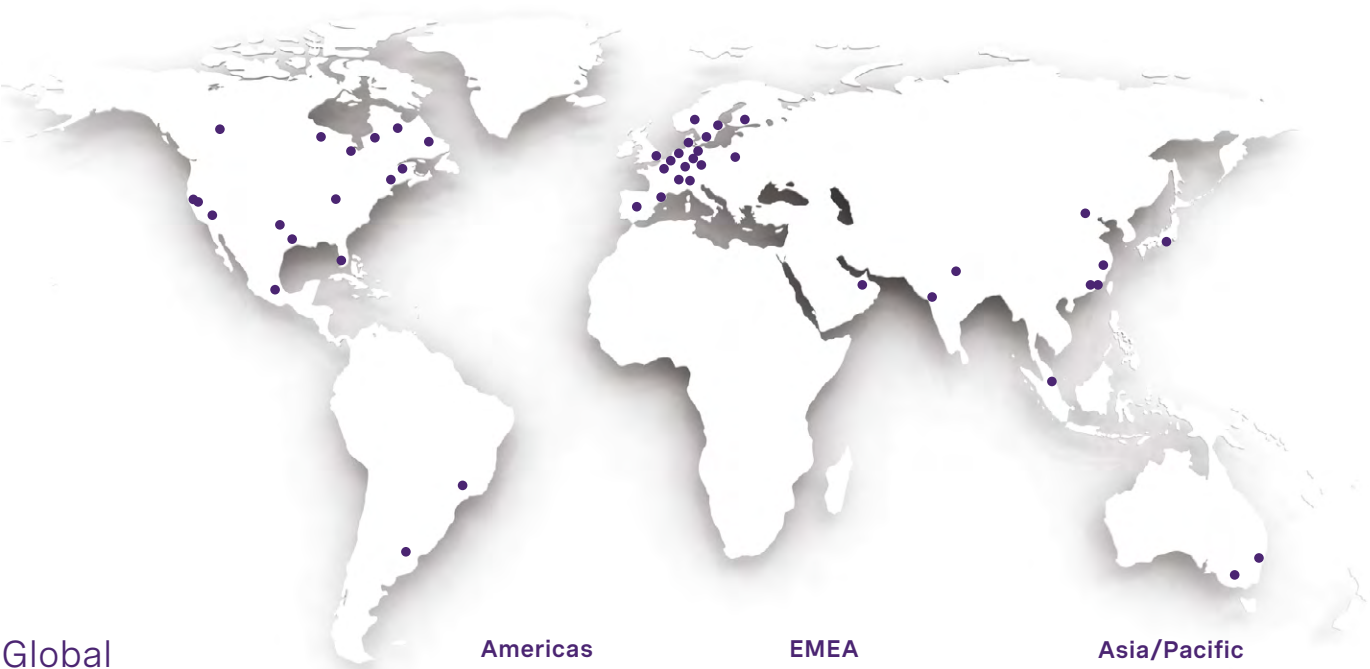
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Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leadership advisory firm. Our 500+ consultants in 47 offices work with public, private, and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today's challenges and anticipate the digital, economic, sustainability, and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. From helping boards with their structure, culture, and effectiveness to identifying, assessing and defining the best leadership for organizations, our teams bring their decades of expertise to help clients address their most complex leadership issues. We exist to improve the way the world is led

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