

# How do leaders keep pace with change and demonstrate adaptability?

*A webinar from Strategic Design by Argon & Co (formerly Bevington Group)*

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**Strategic Design**  
by Argon&Co\* Formerly Bevington Group

# Overview

1. The era of “ungovernable change”
2. How does a leader keep pace with change?
3. How can leaders act to show visible adaptability?

# The era of “ungovernable change”

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# Veloskey et al. (2026) argue that we are in an era of “ungovernable change” with four key factors reducing a leader’s sense of control

## Stacked

Changes layer one on another with no time to absorb one shift before the next begins

## Continuous

No clear start or end. Transformation becomes a constant state, not a project



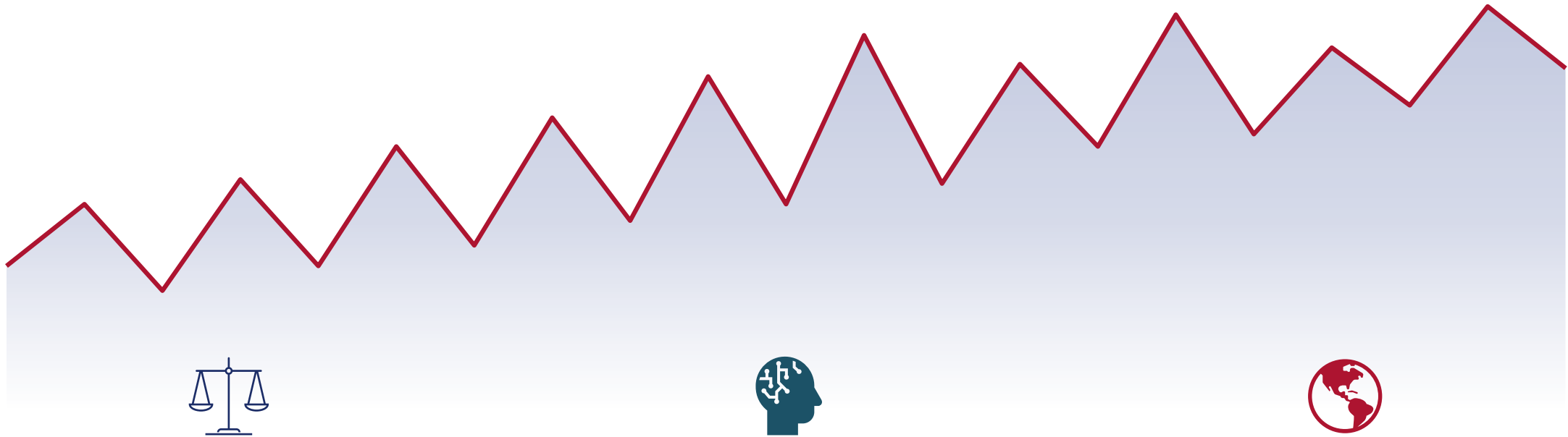
## Interdependent

Initiatives are linked across functions and even one failure can trigger a domino effect

## Externally driven

Impacts originate outside with global shifts in technology, politics and society

Solomon et al. (2026) suggest that volatility used to be the exception. Now it's the background noise of business; silently reshaping operational and capital decisions



### Policy Volatility

Tariffs, regulations, and immigration rules can now shift with a single social-media post, upending hiring and supply-chain plans overnight

### AI Infiltration

AI is working its way into every workflow and decision, blurring the line between helping people and replacing them. And raising hard questions about the meaning of work

### Geopolitical Fragmentation

The once-integrated global system is splintering into rival blocs, leaving firms to navigate a patchwork of shifting risks, sanctions, and trade barriers

There is a danger that fear quietly reshapes the way we lead; reordering and reprioritising long before our behaviour visibly changes. When left unchecked, fear tends to surface in three ways



### When the brain senses threat

Under stress, the brain narrows its focus to spotting danger, leaving **little room for the creativity** we need to notice new opportunities



### Slipping into firefighting

We rush to fix what's urgent and keep putting off what matters. New ideas start to feel unsafe, so they stall; we **trade long-term potential for short-term protection**



### Freezing up

We wait for a clarity that never quite arrives and tighten our grip. **Fear breeds micromanagement**, and our focus quietly shifts from creating value to simply avoiding loss

# Even the right strategy fails against the wrong inertia. This is why diagnosing organisational inertia matters before launching a transformation

## Insight Inertia

- Transformation cannot begin until the forces for change are perceptibly stronger than the comfort of the status quo
- Leaders often mistake their own strategic clarity for organisational alignment
- **Without a "felt-need" across the system, initiatives fail not through open revolt, but through "narrative drift" and fading interest**
- Jack Welch (GE) famously advocated for repeating the case for change incessantly until you are "tired of hearing your own voice" to ensure the message survives the status quo bias

## Psychological Inertia

- Resistance rooted in **cognitive dissonance**. When practices that created past success are labelled as future obstacles, it triggers a threat response to one's professional identity
- This manifests as "passive-aggressive agreement" (nodding in meetings while engaging cautiously in practice)
- People cling to legacy methods as a defence mechanism against the **Psychology of Fear** and the threat of irrelevance in an AI-saturated world

## Action Inertia

- The inability to sustain necessary steps for change because the organisation is **held back by calcified processes, outdated governance, and "mythological" ways of working**
- Formal and informal routines designed for yesterday's stable environment become a serious drag when change is stacked and interdependent
- Thomas Dannenfeldt (Ceconomy AG) highlights that breaking this inertia requires **shifting from "long-term planning" to "short-term navigation,"** reengineering core processes to achieve both speed and synergy

Rallying people behind a bold picture of the future *used to work*. In an era of constant, hard-to-predict change, it often does not succeed



Most employees don't trust their organisation to change well. Many feel past changes were handled badly

### Quiet scepticism

When people are constantly stretched, they stop believing that the organisation will ever "get there"

### Back to safety

When the goal feels out of reach, the shared story breaks down. Teams retreat to whatever feels safest for their own patch

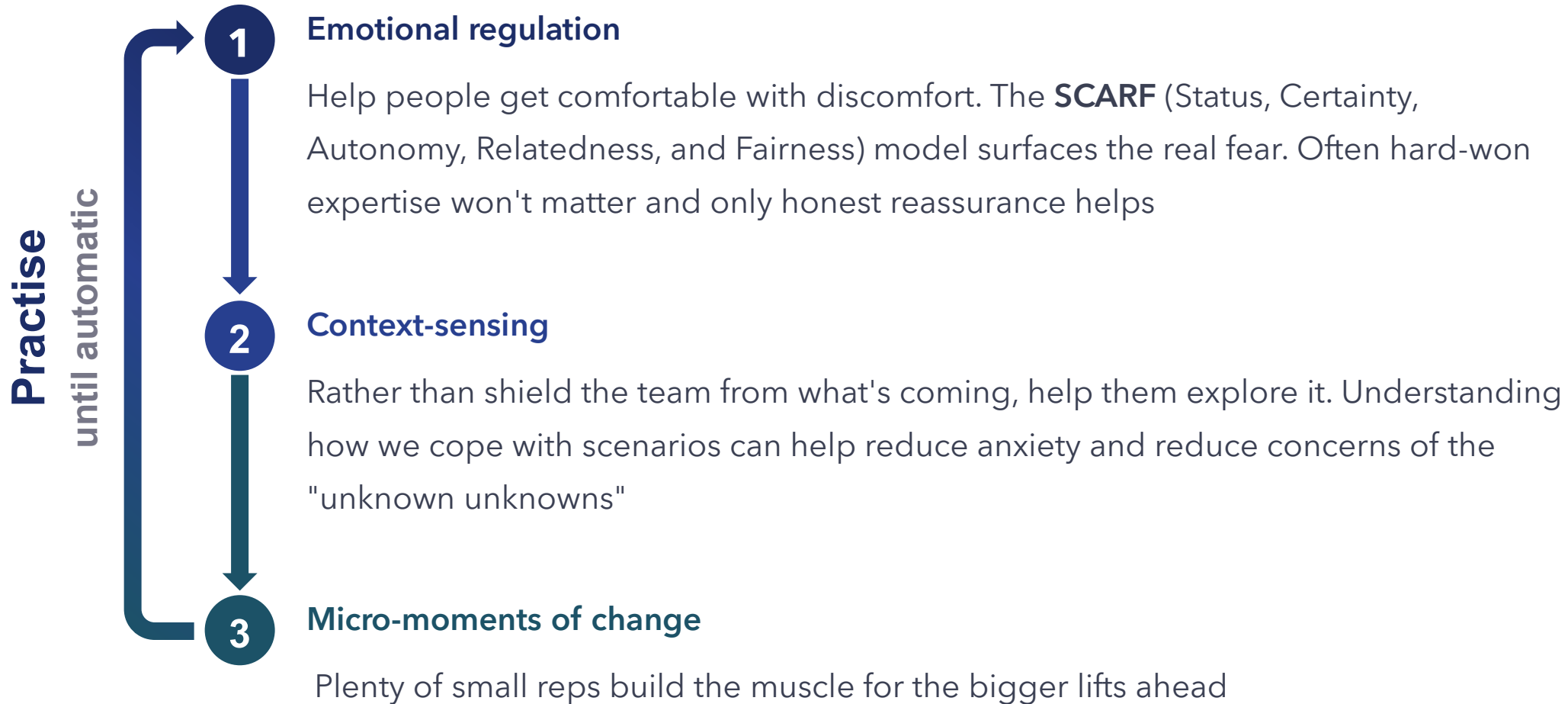
### Leaders need to shift from destination to journey

The leaders getting traction talk less about the rewards of a far-off destination, and more about the cost of standing still, and the value of small, steady, visible wins

# How do leaders keep pace with change?

# 2

Lasting change doesn't come from big bursts of enthusiasm around one-off events. It grows from a handful of skills we practice in everyday work until they become automatic reflexes

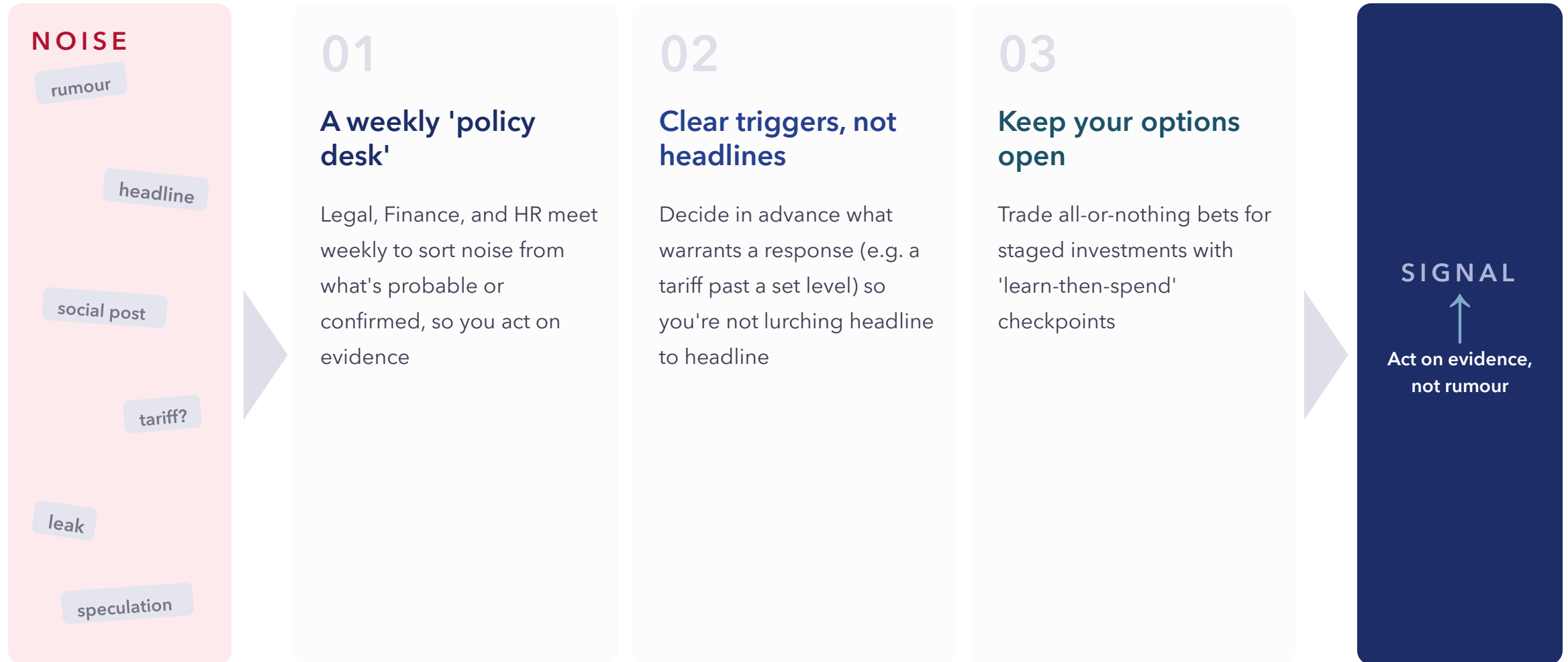


# Change registers in the brain as a threat. The SCARF model maps the five social domains behind that response so leaders can dial down threat, build safety, and help people lean into discomfort

<b>S</b> Status	<b>C</b> Certainty	<b>A</b> Autonomy	<b>R</b> Relatedness	<b>F</b> Fairness
Our sense of importance relative to others	The brain's need to predict what comes next	A felt sense of control and choice	Feeling safe and connected, as a friend, not foe	The perception of fair and even-handed treatment
<b>Recognise contribution; invite people into decisions</b>	<b>Share what is known; name what is still unknown</b>	<b>Offer choice in how, not only whether</b>	<b>Build trust; lead change with people, not at them</b>	<b>Be transparent about why and how decisions are made</b>

Each domain can trigger a **threat** (move away) or a **reward** (move toward) response. Address them, and the discomfort of change becomes a manageable stretch rather than a danger

# Systems can help turn noise into signal



Sources: Lyons, M. (2025) 'Being adaptable isn't enough. You have to demonstrate it', *Harvard Business Review*

# How can leaders act to show visible adaptability?

3

# Three things people want to see

## VISIBLE ADAPTABILITY RESTS ON THREE KEY PILLARS

### Agility

Pivoting quickly and bringing people with you and treating change as an opening to do something better

#### Example

Facing AI-driven layoffs, one leader turned the threat into a 60-day pilot co-designed with his team. They generated twice the insight and every job was kept

### Resilience

Staying calm, focused and steady when the pressure is on

#### Example

Through five rounds of layoffs in three years, one leader kept fear from setting the tone, instead pointing the team toward what they could control

### Foresight

Reading the early signals of disruption and getting ahead of what's coming

#### Example

A VP of Operations spotted trade-war signs early and quietly diversified suppliers, dodging cost spikes that hurt rivals when tariffs hit

# Turn personal adaptability into a shared, future-ready capability that becomes a team habit. A surprising amount of the work involves how you talk about change



## Turn foresight into a team reflex

- Leaders cannot shield people from every volatility, instead share the accountability and point them at it, turning foresight into a team habit
- Ask team members to track the forces shaping the organisation (a new regulation, a new AI tool), then teach the group what they found. Do this often and scanning ahead becomes a reflex, not a scramble



## Let your language do the work

The phrases leaders repeat tell people whether they are **protecting the past or shaping the future**

✗ ~~"This is how we've always done it."~~

✓ **"What could we gain if we reimaged this?"**

✓ **"If we started fresh today, what would we build?"**



## Be honest about your own discomfort

When new technology makes leaders uneasy, admitting it helps build out trust, and shows the team that growing and changing together is simply how leaders work (noting the messaging approach "this is challenging, but we can do it")

# Caring for people and holding them to a high bar can feel like a paradox, however, this is the key skill that leaders needs



## Start with the fear underneath

- Use a lens like the SCARF model to find what people are really afraid of e.g.
  - Resistance to automation usually isn't about the tool
  - Rather it's the worry that hard-won expertise will stop mattering

**"We will still count on your expertise to make this new process better."**



## Hold the line on performance

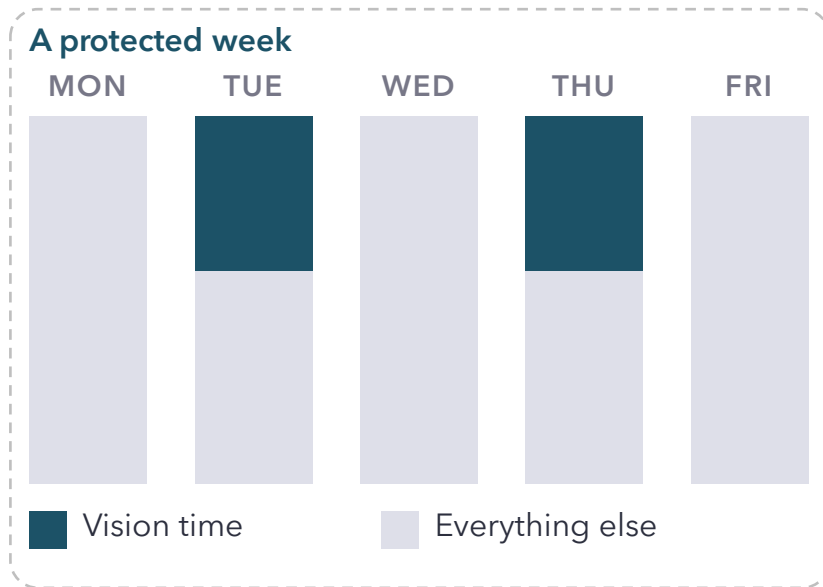
- Naming that the change is hard doesn't mean easing off
- The bar stays where it is and leaders keep the team moving toward real deadlines and real quality

**"This shift is hard and the deadline still stands"**

**Empathy keeps people engaged. Accountability keeps them moving. Together they build trust and the maturity a bigger role demands**

## Leaders should protect “vision time” as a critical asset, as attention is a leader’s scarcest resource

Fear is a quiet thief of attention and when leaders spend every hour firefighting, the big calls get deferred and the strategic edge slips away



### How to protect it

- 1 Block it, and mean it**  
Set fixed, immovable time just for strategy and long-horizon choices
- 2 Keep the “what” clear of the “how”**  
Don’t let incident reviews or operating diagnostics eat the session
- 3 Model it from the top**  
Treat thinking time as optional and your people will too

### Example

A publishing president blocked two mornings a week for strategy. No email, no crises, no status updates. And she asked her team to do the same

Tired brains never design bold futures. Guarding where attention goes is the real work of leadership

# In summary

## In summary, adaptability is a skill leaders can build, not a trait they either have or don't

- We've entered an era of "ungovernable change", where shifts are stacked, continuous, interdependent, and externally driven, and traditional vision-led leadership no longer keeps pace
- Left unchecked, constant volatility breeds fear that quietly reshapes how leaders prioritise and decide, long before their behaviour visibly changes
- Keeping pace comes from everyday reflexes, not one-off events: regulating emotion (using SCARF to name the real fear) and building systems that turn noise into signal
- Visible adaptability rests on three pillars people want to see:
  - Agility: pivoting quickly and treating change as an opening to do something better
  - Resilience: staying calm, focused, and steady when the pressure is on
  - Foresight: reading the early signals of disruption and turning them into a shared team habit
- Protect "vision time" as a scarce asset

# And, of course, we are here to help if you need it...

If you have any additional questions or require further information, please contact

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