

# WHAT'S NEXT? A LOOK AHEAD AT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Industry leaders share insights  
on what the future holds

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# THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

If there's one thing everyone in learning and development (L&D) can agree on, it's that there's never been a more critical time to be thinking about how leadership is evolving. Skillsoft spoke with some of the most influential thought leaders in the industry to get their perspectives on what the future holds for leadership development and compiled the insights here. According to these leaders, the future requires new power skills, like resilience, agility, collaboration, and a growth mindset during this era of digital expansion and organizational change.

Read on to discover their thoughts on the opportunities and obstacles facing the leadership development landscape.



# PAUL MICHELMAN

Editor-in-Chief, *MIT Sloan Management Review*

“ Those who aspire to lead next must possess a sense of wild adventure, a willingness to grab the reins and hang on with one hand as the world enters a period of unpredictability and disruption unlike any we have experienced during our lifetimes. It will take time for organizations to create flexible new models for learning and development demanded by this new environment, leaving individuals more responsible for seeking out their own opportunities for growth than ever before. It’s up to organizations to provide aspiring leaders with the freedom to do that. ”

## WHAT ARE THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANIZATIONS THAT MODERNIZE THEIR LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES?

It’s critical for leaders today to embrace the unknown. As we exit the pandemic period and enter a new phase of the human condition, one marked by frequent disruption and unfamiliar challenges, leaders and organizations will need to lean into the unknown, the scary, and the ambiguous with a willingness to learn in the moment. Leaders must recognize and seize development opportunities and capture these experiences in a way that makes them transferable to leaders across their organizations.



## WHAT ROADBLOCKS DO COMPANIES FACE WHEN MODERNIZING THEIR MANAGEMENT PRACTICES?

When you possess little confidence in your understanding of what the future holds, it becomes all but impossible to prepare to manage it. Organizations that hold their practices and cultures sacred — even if they have been proven effective over decades — will be the most vulnerable in a world marked by threats and disruptions we have never seen before. I urge organizations to adopt a challenging duality, loosen their grip on the past while not getting too caught up in the future’s specifics. Pierre Nanterme, the former CEO of Accenture, who passed in 2019, spoke of it as knowing the right direction to head in but not obsessing over the destination. That doesn’t speak to the need for “modernizing” management practices as much as helping managers adopt new, often uncomfortable, ways of thinking and acting in which uncertainty may be the only given.



## HOW HAS THE INCREASE IN REMOTE WORKERS AFFECTED MANAGEMENT PRACTICES?

I think the answer depends on what type of business you're in. The management practices of highly structured operations that rely on precise processes have been extraordinarily challenged by the forced remote environments of the pandemic. How to keep value chains built to be executed in shared physical spaces functioning by a dispersed workforce has been transformational for managers. However, many organizations, particularly those in the knowledge economy, have discovered that remote work is not dramatically different. With one consistent and critical exception: the need for an active human connection that transcends traditional managerial relationships and overcomes the digital divide. Simply, managers must be caring human beings who take an active interest in the emotional and physical health of everyone who surrounds them. That can be a great deal harder than it sounds.



## **WHAT IMPACT HAS DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION HAD ON LEADERS AND BUSINESS OUTCOMES? WHAT DOES THE ROAD AHEAD LOOK LIKE?**

There's been a cliché spreading amongst digital transformation leaders during the pandemic. It goes something like this, "We executed our three-year transformation plan in three weeks." The sentiment is that as we were forced to work remotely through digital technology, our transformation to digital organizations happened in the blink of an eye. Organizations that rest on the laurels of achieving a "digital transformation" due to learning how to use Zoom, Slack, Google Docs, or Microsoft Teams make a grave error on two fronts. The first is that they equate digital transformation to using digital tools to get the same work done.

In contrast, real digital transformation is not merely functional but broadly strategic: it requires companies to revisit what they choose to do, how they compete, not simply how they execute. The second mistake is that they view digital transformation as their most significant challenge, the thing that will prepare them for the next decade. Yes, deriving the fullest value possible from new technologies is an absolute competitive necessity but technology is just one disruption to be managed. Organizations must prepare more broadly for even more challenging disruptions, brought on climate change, global economic uncertainties — and I am sorry to mention — future pandemics. It's a harsh world out there, one full of existential threats. Companies that recognize this will be the most likely to survive and prosper.



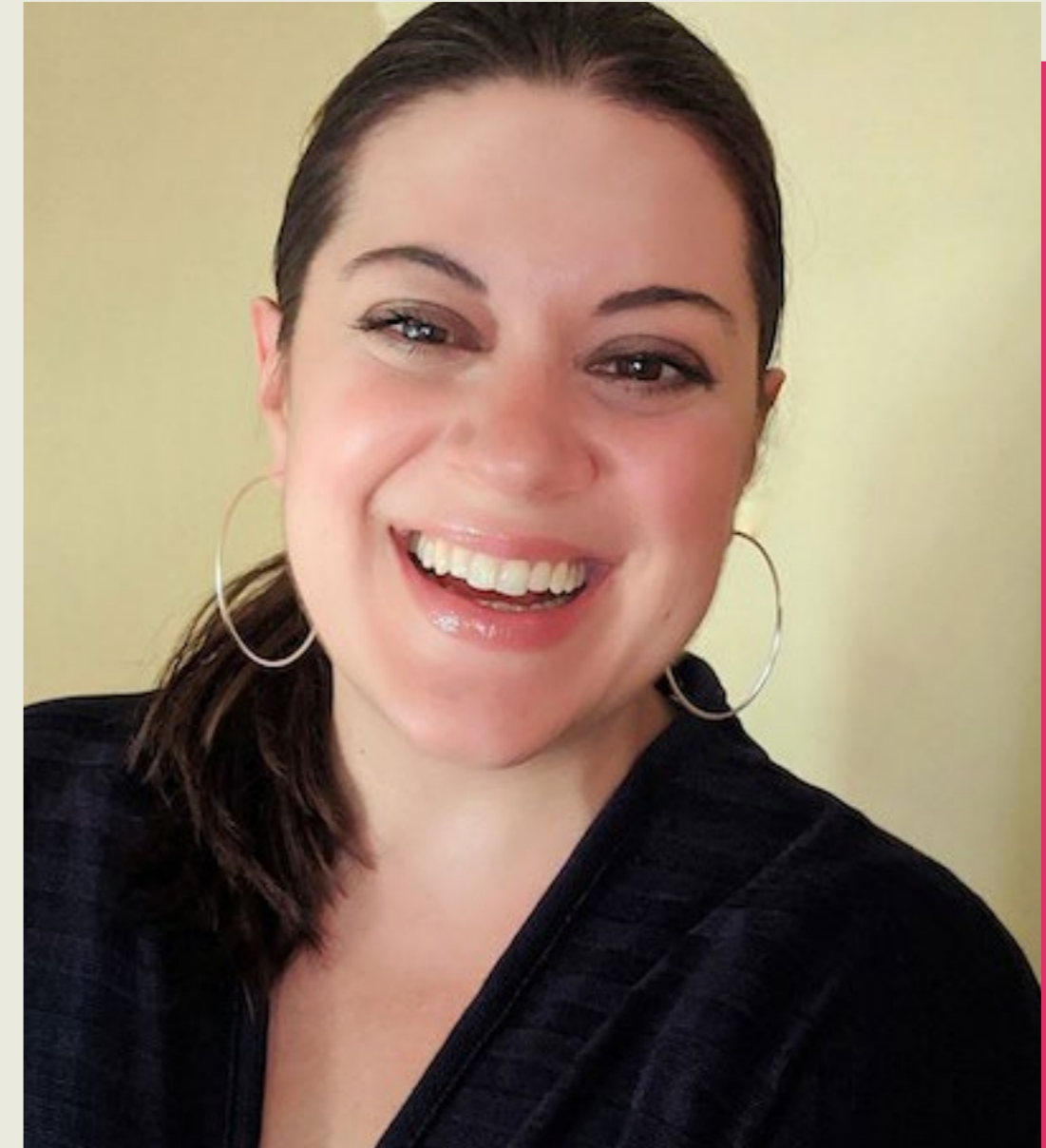
# ELISA VINCENT

VP of Global Talent Enablement, Skillsoft

“ Leadership today is about leading ecosystems of interconnected functional and cultural networks that require equal attention, focus, and nourishment to survive. Amid a global pandemic and rapid organizational disruption, leadership development has become a study and a practice of both the head and the heart in new ways. ”

## HOW HAS LEADERSHIP CHANGED OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, AND IN WHAT WAYS WILL IT CONTINUE TO EVOLVE?

Leaders must have an acute focus on motivating, engaging, and inspiring individuals and teams. They must enable agility, build resilience, and drive productivity while navigating increasingly complex and changing organizational structures, markets, and stakeholder groups. There is a renewed focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and enabling individual and organizational growth through cultural, systemic transformation. As a result, leadership today is about leading ecosystems of interconnected functional and cultural networks that require equal attention, focus, and nourishment to survive. Moving forward, leaders will need to acknowledge that they are not just responsible for their teams and bottom-line results. They are part of a larger global mechanism that is rapidly changing, part of an ever-evolving network of teams, and responsible for outcomes with increased visibility and focus on both what they deliver and how they deliver it.



## WHAT COMPETENCIES AND MINDSETS DO LEADERS NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL ECOSYSTEM LEADERS?

I believe that leaders today need what I like to call the 4-A competencies:

**Awareness:** The ability to self-assess, seek feedback, reflect, and adopt new behaviors consistently. This competency requires a growth mindset, a curiosity for continuous learning and improvement, and a willingness to identify and eliminate bias.

**Agility:** This competency is the unique ability to determine when to pivot and when to persevere. Leaders must align, equip, and sustain change positively for their teams. Agility requires personal resilience and a flexible leadership style based on the needs in a particular moment.

**Authenticity:** Being authentic is the ability to inspire inclusively with emotional intelligence and strategic transparency. This competency requires courage, a strong sense of purpose, and vulnerability. Authentic leaders engage and inspire others with integrity, intention, and a shared purpose.

**Accountability:** This is the ability to hold oneself answerable first. Leadership accountability requires leaders to become role models and provide a healthy sense of ownership in ways that empower others to do the same. They welcome and celebrate victories and failures and enable a growth mindset for their teams.



## **WHAT ROLE WILL DIGITAL LEARNING PLAY IN THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?**

If this global pandemic has proved anything, it's that digital learning is here to stay, not as an elimination of the human element of learning, but rather as a tool to enhance and evolve our experiences. We're all working and learning online using digital tools to communicate, coach, manage projects, track progress, strategically plan, and learn — all day, every day. Moving forward, learning in digital contexts will allow us to apply leadership competencies in real-time. Through machine learning and artificial intelligence, we'll explore new worlds, new situations, and new ways of doing things that will bolster our awareness and ability to learn while leading busy lives. We're learning in the flow of work each day, and digital learning is compatible with where we work and how we work. It allows us to upskill and reskill in an effective and time-sensitive way, and it will continue to be a great enabler of leadership development in the years to come. Yet, speed and access should not come at the expense of quality and value. Leadership development experiences such as 360 feedback, coaching, mentoring, and teamwork will always prove invaluable in leadership development and key to unlocking human potential.



# MORRA AARONS-MELE

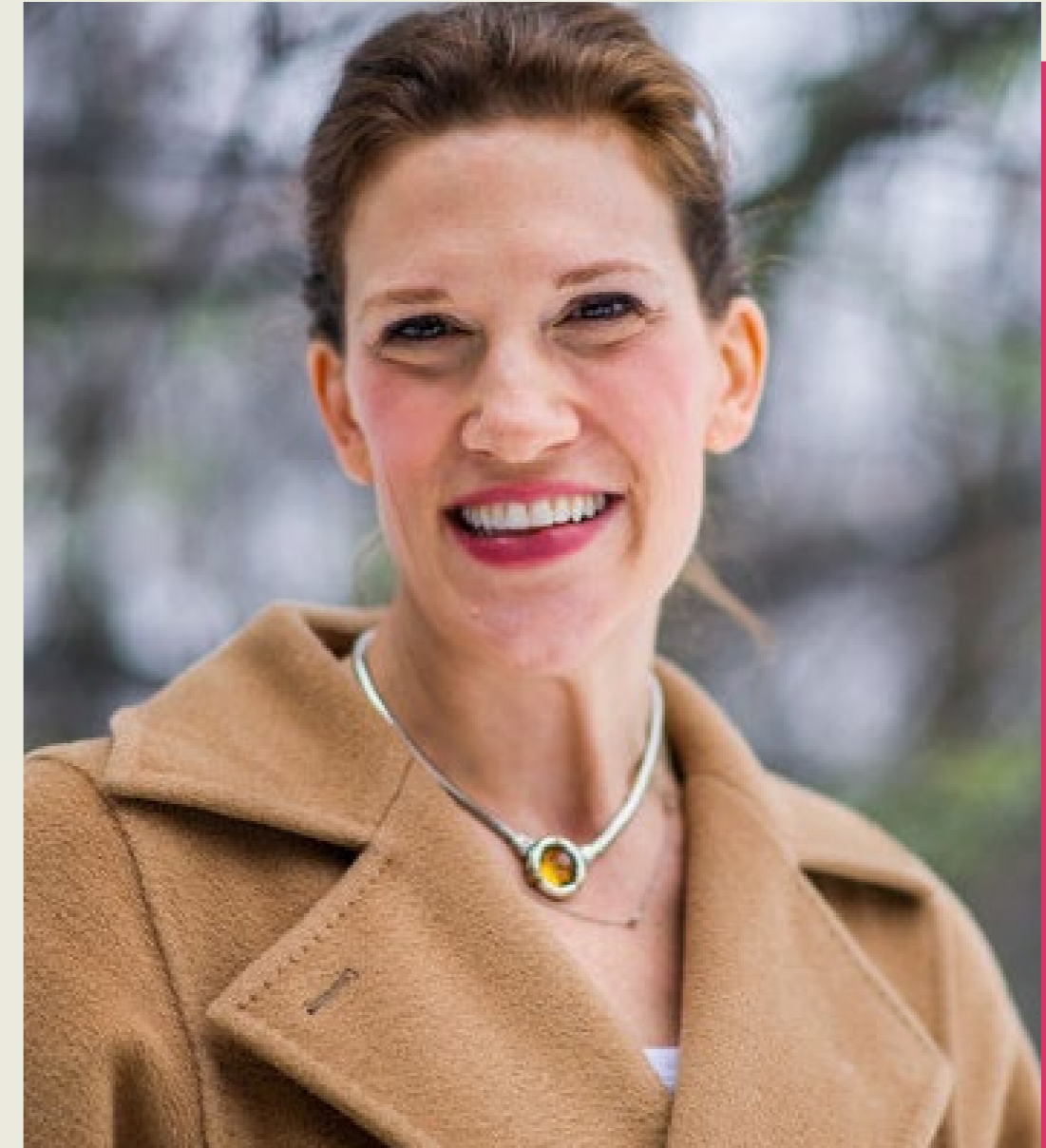
Founder, Women Online

Host of *Harvard Business Review's*, *The Anxious Achiever*

“ Leadership in the future will be the polar opposite of the old command and control model. Leaders in the age of digital transformation and rapid change need to adopt an approach that fosters collaboration and encourages innovation. Real leaders will be human, above all. They will be vulnerable, authentic, and skilled in building an environment that brings their teams through tough times and enables growth. ”

## WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL TREND DO YOU SEE HAVING THE MOST IMPACT ON LEADERS IN THE FUTURE?

One of the most significant organizational trends is a large-scale shift to a remote work environment. Home-based and distributed teams have expanded rapidly due to the pandemic, and it seems as though this environment is here to stay. Leaders will need to hone their communication skills to adapt to this new workplace and address new issues that may come up like isolation and burnout. A modern leader will need to bring their collaboration and team-building skills to new levels when employees aren't physically present. This new remote workplace requires more effort for leaders, and they will need to think differently about how to cultivate a productive work environment.



## WHAT NEW OBSTACLE WILL LEADERS FACE IN THE FUTURE?

Without a doubt, leaders will face issues concerning the mental health of their team members and their emotional intelligence. This obstacle may be new to some managers. Leaders need to stop being scared of dealing with their mental health and instead turn evaluating and understanding their psyche into a strength — just like adopting a new workout program or maximizing time efficiency. Decades of research on emotional intelligence have shown that people who understand their feelings have higher job satisfaction, greater job performance, better relationships, and can synthesize diverse opinions and lessen conflict. And all those things contribute towards effective leadership. The pandemic taught us that our mental health is crucial to protect. Leaders must set a good example by managing their mental health and encouraging their teams to speak up if they need help.



## **WHAT COMPETENCIES OR MINDSETS DO YOU THINK ARE NEEDED FOR FUTURE LEADERS TO BE SUCCESSFUL?**

From my perspective, leaders will need to adopt an agile and growth mindset while keeping empathy at the forefront of everything they do. Leaders will need to accept that they don't have all the answers in the post-pandemic world and tap into their team members' collective power. The successful leaders of the future must embrace the unknown and become a trustworthy guide as they navigate new territory together. Communicating early and often will help leaders to build trust through uncertain times.



## DR. GERALD KANE

Professor of Information Systems and Faculty Director,  
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“ We will also see even more innovation as organizations and leaders emerge from the pandemic more digitally savvy, more risk-tolerant, more agile, and more experimental than ever before. These are critical aspects of something I call digital maturity. Digital maturity isn't primarily about implementing new technology but developing the skills, talent, culture, leadership, and strategy to compete in a digital world. Many of the most important innovations don't involve technology at all. ”

### WHAT TREND DO YOU SEE HAVING THE MOST IMPACT ON LEADERS IN THE FUTURE?

Undoubtedly, the trend that will have the most impact is the repercussion of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the wake of the pandemic, many companies have experienced a period of considerable innovation — some out of necessity, others by choice — accelerating years' worth of digital plans within a few months. This tidal wave of innovation



likely represents the most significant advancement since the early stages of the dot-com boom, when the Y2K bug forced massive technological investments and modernization. While we now have a rough timeline about when it will be possible to return to in-person work, it is unlikely that we will simply return entirely to the “old ways” when the pandemic is over. Most companies were about 10-15 years behind where they needed to be digitally when the pandemic struck, and they have rapidly closed that gap in the year since.

I expect we will also see even more innovation as organizations and leaders emerge from the pandemic more digitally savvy, more risk-tolerant, more agile, and more experimental than ever before. These are critical aspects of something I call digital maturity. Digital maturity isn't primarily about implementing new technology but developing the skills, talent, culture, leadership, and strategy to compete in a digital world. Many of the most important innovations don't involve technology at all. COVID may end up igniting a massive wave of business innovation that will forever change the way organizations work. This change could be one of the pandemic's real silver linings if it serves as the catalyst to drive the types of changes necessary to compete in an increasingly digital world. We're only at the beginning of that change now.



## **WHAT COMPETENCIES AND MINDSETS DO YOU THINK ARE NEEDED FOR FUTURE LEADERS TO BE SUCCESSFUL?**

The Stanford Psychologist Carol Dweck differentiates between a fixed and a growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe that skills and talent are innate, and they think that success or failure is mainly attributable to environmental factors. In contrast, people with a growth mindset believe that skills and talent result from hard work, and they think that success or failure is mostly the result of that hard work.

Organizations can also exhibit a fixed or a growth mindset. In my research on organizational digital transformation, we asked executives whether their company would be in a stronger or weaker position in 10-20 years due to digital trends and why? Respondents who said their organization would be in a weaker position largely attributed that weakness to competitive forces or market pressures. This response is typical of a fixed mindset. People with this mindset may say, “I’m just not a tech person,” “We can’t do that because we’re a legacy company,” or — my favorite — “Wall Street won’t let us think about the long term.”

In contrast, respondents who said their organization would be in a stronger position going forward said it would be because they would develop the digital capabilities to compete. These people exhibit a growth mindset. When I talk to organizations about digital transformation, the first step is to shift the organization’s mindset from a fixed to a growth mindset. I believe that virtually anyone and any organization can develop the skills necessary to compete in a digital world. The most significant change needed is the recognition that both individuals and organizations can make the changes required to compete.



## HOW CAN COMPANIES BUILD A CULTURE OF GROWTH AND LEARNING TO PREPARE FUTURE LEADERS?

My research suggests two answers to this question. The first answer concerns preparing future leaders. While one may believe that digitally mature companies have better leaders, it's not necessarily the case. Over 50% of the most digitally mature companies think they need new leaders to compete in an increasingly digital world. The difference, however, is that digitally mature companies are doing something about it. Over 80% say they are providing the necessary support to develop those future leaders, while less than 10% of the least mature companies say they are doing so.

The second answer concerns the culture of growth and learning. One of the biggest challenges that most companies face in digital transformation is the willingness to experiment and risk failure. That led me to hypothesize that digitally mature companies were more likely to experiment than less digitally mature companies. After all, companies like Google experiment all the time, and new platforms like Split, Optimizely, and Humanyze bring that capability to experiment to more traditional companies.

When I tested my hypothesis, however, I was wrong. Companies of all stages of digital maturity reported that they experimented heavily. What set the more digitally mature companies apart was what they chose to do with those experiments. They were more likely to use successful experiments to drive change across the organization. Experimenting is essential, but it's not enough. Suppose you don't use what you've learned from those experiments to work differently. In that case, those experiments simply provide the illusion of a culture of growth and learning that will do little to help your organization compete. We've all heard the adage of fail fast and fail early, but do you also have the courage to succeed?



# ABOUT SKILLSOFT

Skillsoft delivers digital learning, training, and talent solutions to help organizations unleash their edge. Leveraging immersive, engaging content, Skillsoft enables organizations to unlock the potential in their best assets — their people — and build teams with the skills they need for success. Empowering 45 million learners and counting, Skillsoft democratizes learning through an intelligent learning experience and a customized, learner-centric approach to skills development with resources for Leadership, Technology and Development, and Compliance.

Skillsoft and SumTotal are partners to thousands of leading global organizations, including many Fortune 500 companies. The company features three award-winning systems that support learning, performance and success: Skillsoft learning content, the Percipio intelligent learning experience platform, and the SumTotal suite for Talent Development, which offers measurable impact across the entire employee lifecycle.

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