



# SuccessFinder Leadership Excellence Framework



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# Research overview

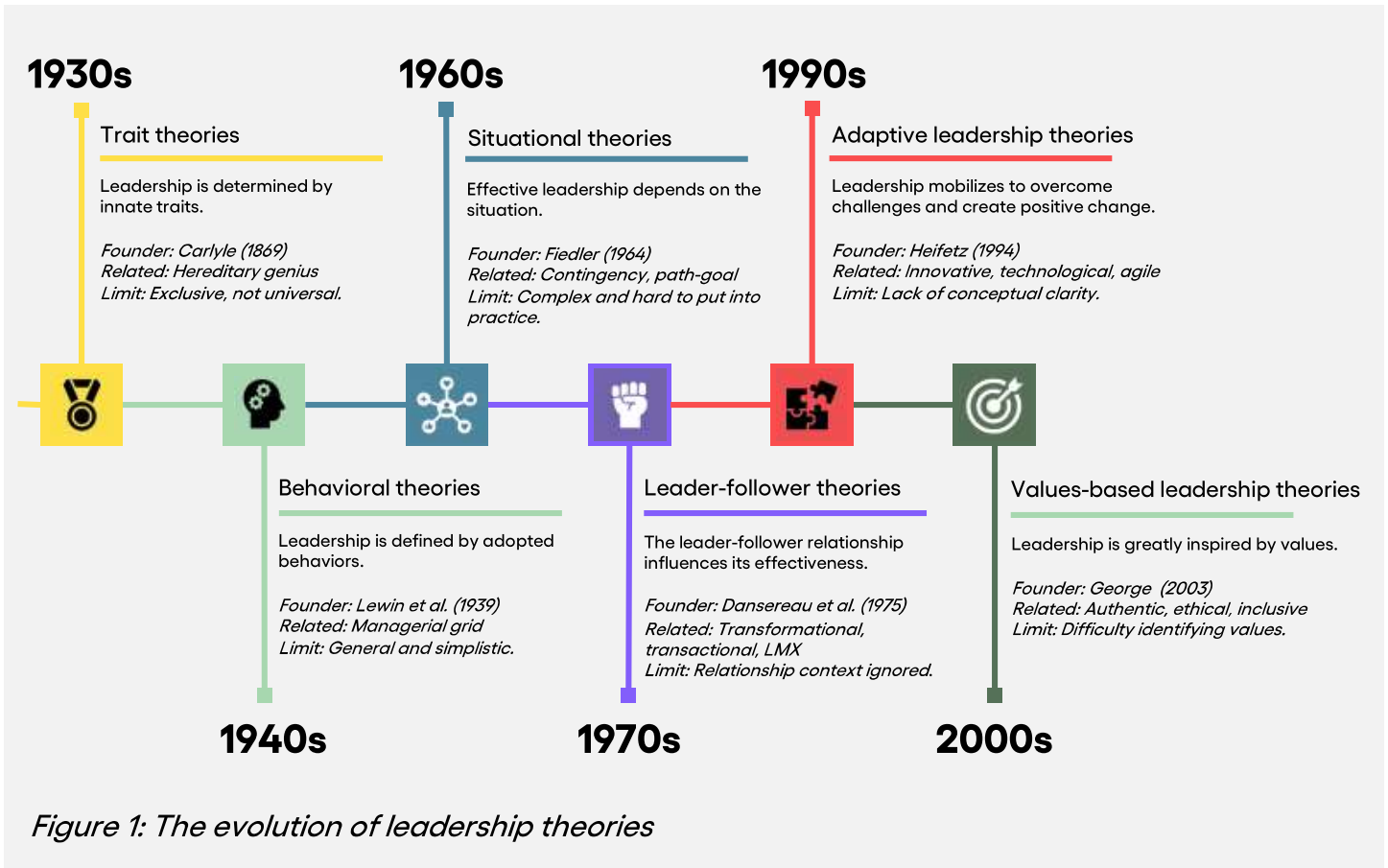
Imagine yourself in a dynamic and ambitious organization. You are a middle manager identified as high potential and you aspire to become a VP in the next few years. But where do you start? Human Resources has introduced you to the new leadership development program and there are a multitude of opportunities available to you. Do you want to develop your communication style, your time management, your ability to delegate, your strategic vision, your emotional intelligence or your ability to manage change? The risk of you getting lost in this maze of competencies is real. You would benefit from focusing your energy on the competencies that will be most useful to you and thus should be prioritized. Our framework will help you fulfill this mission and more.

**The goal of the SuccessFinder Leadership Excellence Framework is to have a tool that allows leaders to:**

- Associate SuccessFinder competencies with key leadership themes;
- Easily identify key competencies that are useful in their context;
- Assess their strengths and areas of development for each orientation;
- Define specific and measurable development objectives;
- Prioritize their efforts based on the potential impact of each competency on their leadership.

But first, what is leadership? And how does SuccessFinder define excellence in leadership? Let us explore the theoretical foundations of these questions.

# A Framework Anchored in Key Leadership Theories



Organizational research has explored an exciting array of leadership characteristics through theories focused on leaders' traits, behaviors, relationships (leader-follower), styles (e.g., situational, adaptive), and many more<sup>1</sup>. In trait theories, people don't learn to become leaders. They are born this way with traits that are relatively stable across time, such as intelligence, charisma and adaptability<sup>2</sup>. However, this vision of leadership limits the development of individuals who are not fortunate enough to be born with these characteristics. This void is filled by behavioral theories that argue that, on the contrary, leadership can be observed and learned with practice<sup>3</sup>. Good news! Your leadership development program can help aspiring leaders after all. Situational theorists, on the other hand, take a broader view by stating that certain leadership behaviors can be more or less effective, depending on the situation and context of the leader. So, there's no one style that's better than another - it all depends on the circumstances<sup>4</sup>. For example, if your employees criticize you for having an authoritarian style, this may still be the most appropriate leadership style in certain contexts. It's all a matter of circumstances. Rather, the problem

arises when a leader focuses too much or too little on one of these styles and not on their ability to adapt to their environment and different situations. For leader-follower theories<sup>5</sup>, we need to take a closer look at the dynamics between leaders and their employees. To be effective, there must be a certain complementarity. You may then wonder how your relationships with your employees are doing. Do you feel that they trust you? Do you think they feel understood? While interesting, this approach is complex and more difficult to put into practice. Indeed, leaders collaborate with a diversity of people with very different personalities. You may have one employee who is fully engaged while another is demotivated. Some will want closer supervision, while for others, increased supervision will make them feel like they are losing their autonomy. In the 90s, theories of adaptive leadership emerged and focused more on mobilizing people rather than directing or controlling<sup>6</sup>. These theories responded to the new realities of organizations, particularly in terms of change management and innovation, since they seek to help individuals and organizations face profound changes and more complex challenges. Many of our customers will find this shift relatable, because it is a reality that the vast majority are facing. More recently, researchers are increasingly focusing on the importance of the values that the leader wants to reinforce and convey<sup>7</sup>. Maybe you're a leader for whom authenticity is paramount, or you have diversity and inclusion as a priority. In these values-based theories, transparency and principles are put forward. They serve you to motivate and engage others with a clear vision. Each of these theories makes an important contribution to the understanding we have on the themes of leadership.

For our part, SuccessFinder relies on the complementarity of these theories, particularly those that are behavioral<sup>8</sup> and situational<sup>9</sup>, to guide you in your decision-making, because this approach allows you to consider both individual and contextual factors. On the one hand, we know that it is possible to identify and measure the specific behaviors of the most effective leaders. We have been doing this for several years. When creating and developing SuccessFinder, there was already an interest in understanding what makes the most effective leaders unique. This interest still exists today. We know that leadership excellence is learned through experience, observation and practice. We also know that effective leadership can be defined in different ways, depending on the context of an organization and its culture. Our leadership scale and our various personalized benchmarks are perfect examples of this. Thus, a leadership style might be appropriate in context A, while unsuitable in context B. Here are three examples to illustrate this complementarity:



You use an authoritative style when working with a team of new, inexperienced employees.



You use a democratic style when working with a team of highly skilled professionals.



You use a participatory style when working on a complex project that requires input from all team members.

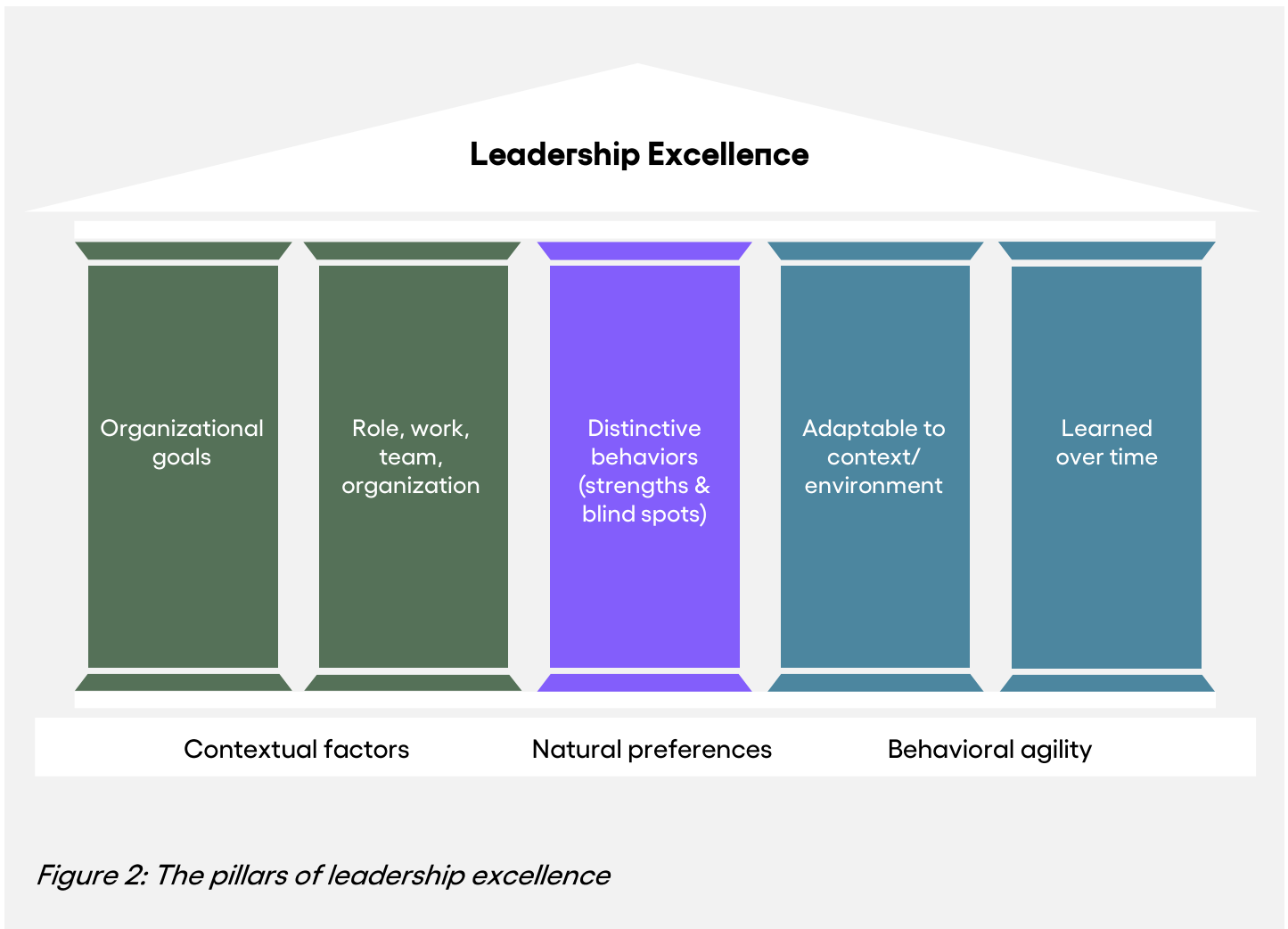
With our theoretical positioning made clear, we can now tackle the definition of leadership excellence.

# Defining Leadership Excellence

Most studies on leadership effectiveness are based on employee evaluations and rarely consider measures of organizational success. SuccessFinder considers the performance of leaders through several performance indicators, including the creation of custom benchmarks and the study conducted by our researchers on the leadership ladder. Our assessment helps leaders clearly understand their development process by knowing what natural strengths they can rely on as well as the areas of development to prioritize that are directly related to the success of the organization.

For us, **leadership excellence** is the learned ability to effectively influence and guide individuals or groups towards the achievement of organizational goals by demonstrating distinctive behaviors and styles that are adaptable to the specific needs of the context and employees.

This definition incorporates elements that are essential to leadership: behavioral agility, natural preferences and contextual factors.



Our SuccessFinder Leadership Excellence Framework is a conceptual model that leverages trends in leader assessments, scientific literature, and the advice of recognized experts to provide a holistic approach. So, it focuses on five key elements: **Leading Self, Leading Others, Leading Execution, Leading Change** and **Leading Growth**. This framework is designed to help leaders reach their full potential. We'll go over the details of the latter in the next section.

# The Tree of Leadership



Leadership in all its complexity is simplified when we conceptualize it as a living, growing tree that represents how different orientations support your effectiveness and development as leaders. Like a healthy tree, there are many parts that contribute to the development of your leadership. Let's explore this concept together.

For leaders, having good self-management allows you to firmly entrench yourself in your role. The more you take moments of introspection to get to know and understand yourself better, the more you nourish the trunk of the tree by making it stronger for your development. Indeed, it will be difficult for you to maintain good relationships with others if you do not realize the impact you have on them. Also, as a leader, you will always have a strategy to achieve your goals. Being aware of your personal obstacles and relying on the support of your team will facilitate effective execution.

To illustrate the orientation of change, think of the branches of the tree. They grow by adapting and thriving in an ever-changing environment. Finally, we are left with the fruits of the tree which represent the orientation of growth. The results of your efforts in the other four orientations will allow you to grow and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

The tree analogy is a powerful image for understanding the different facets of leadership and their interdependence. By feeding all parts of the tree, you will be able to create a positive and lasting impact on your teams, your organization and society. Let's move from the image to a more concrete approach to the matter.

## 5 SuccessFinder's Leadership Orientations

In this section, we use SuccessFinder competencies to present how behaviors can support certain directions. Our competencies may support more than one orientation. For example, you could develop the Thriving in Chaos competency to better support the orientation of Leading Change, as well as Leading Growth and Leading Execution. The competencies help to operationalize the orientation presented.

### Leading Self

Leading Self is the cornerstone of leadership. It is the ability of leaders to know themselves and to manage their emotions, thoughts, motivations and behaviors. It is an essential part of your leadership, as it allows you to stay calm and focused under pressure, to make informed decisions, and to inspire others. Leading Self is an ongoing process that requires introspection, practice, and perseverance. A leader who underestimates this direction may make impulsive and rash decisions (Leading Execution). This could create a stressful and confrontational work environment that demotivates the team (Leading Others). Alternately, an introspective leader will manage their emotions appropriately and will be better positioned to guide their team through difficult transitions and ambiguity (Leading Change). If you're a leader who isn't afraid to learn from mistakes and improve, you can serve as a role model for the company by fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement, which will create fertile ground for innovation (Leading Growth).

Leading Self can manifest itself in different ways. As leaders, you've probably had to manage your stress to stay calm and focused under pressure. This ability helps you make rational decisions and avoid knee-jerk reactions<sup>10</sup>. You may also need a high level of energy to complete projects and motivate your team. By taking care of your physical and mental well-being, you'll be more likely to maintain high energy levels in the long run<sup>11</sup>. In a context where you must carry out interventions, it will be useful to have strong values to guide you. By acting on principle, it inspires

trust and respect in your team. It will also make it easier for you to communicate your vision and inspire your team<sup>12</sup>. To conclude, by pursuing inspiring goals, you will create a sense of motivation and engagement in your employees who will understand what they are contributing to<sup>13</sup>.

To better understand an example of this type of orientation, we can draw parallels with some well-known leadership styles like authentic leadership and ethical leadership. Leaders wishing to develop their emotional intelligence could also focus on this orientation. Inspiration, values and self-awareness are in the spotlight.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this section, of all the orientations, Leading Self is the most fundamental, as it strongly influences the other aspects of leadership. When it comes to development, this is also where it all begins. To be able to grow, you need to take moments to develop your self-knowledge, know your personal values, and know where you want to go. This is where SuccessFinder adds significant value for leaders by sharing valuable information about their strengths and blind spots. These reference points allow you to start the process of high-quality self-reflection that promotes a real awareness that will have a beneficial effect on your next step: Leading People.



## Leading People

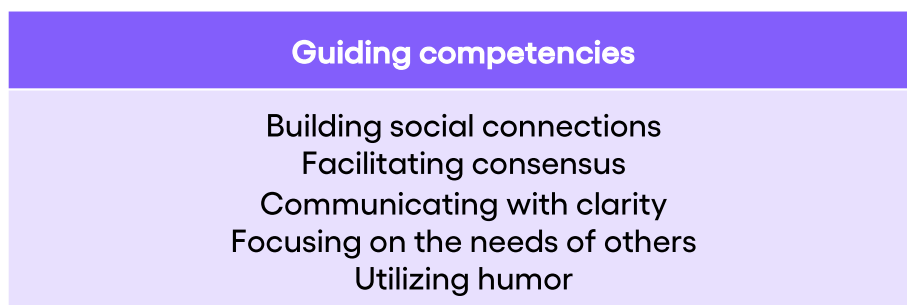
Can leaders afford to focus all their efforts on achieving results to the detriment of the efforts they could place on developing their interpersonal skills? If he does, there will be a high price to pay. Even without personal experience, you may have already witnessed what this situation can lead to for others. In addition to having good self-management, an effective leader can build and maintain strong relationships with others to achieve common goals. This allows you to collaborate effectively, motivate others, and resolve conflicts constructively.

You need to connect with others, whether it's your employees, collaborators, or customers. What leaders accomplish, they achieve as a team! Never alone! The relationship with one's team is even more important for leaders who aim to retain their employees for a long time. Indeed, this sincere bond meets an important need amongst many employees<sup>14</sup>. A leader encourages the participation of their team and seeks consensus. By including others in your decision-making process, you reduce silos for better collaboration, cultivate respect and a sense of equality among your employees<sup>15</sup>. It will also be very helpful to clearly communicate your ideas and expectations. By using clear and transparent language and checking in to make sure your

message is understood, you avoid misunderstandings and conflicts<sup>16</sup>. By acknowledging the needs of others and seeking to meet them, you create a positive work environment that promotes psychological well-being<sup>17</sup>. Lightening the mood can also have the same impact on the work environment by making it more pleasant. By showing humor and encouraging conviviality, you stimulate engagement, foster creativity and collaboration<sup>18</sup>. By being a spontaneous role model in expressing your emotions, you encourage others to open up in turn, which fosters authentic connections and an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their emotions without fear of being judged.

Think about the democratic leadership style or servant leadership. These examples focus on collaborating with others. Leaders seek to engage, to see others as partners, and to actively listen. These leadership styles are far removed from those that retain tight control over employees and reinforce power hierarchies.

These interpersonal competencies can be essential for you to become an effective leader, as they allow you to motivate your team, resolve conflicts, and create a work environment where everyone can thrive and reach their full potential.



## Leading Execution

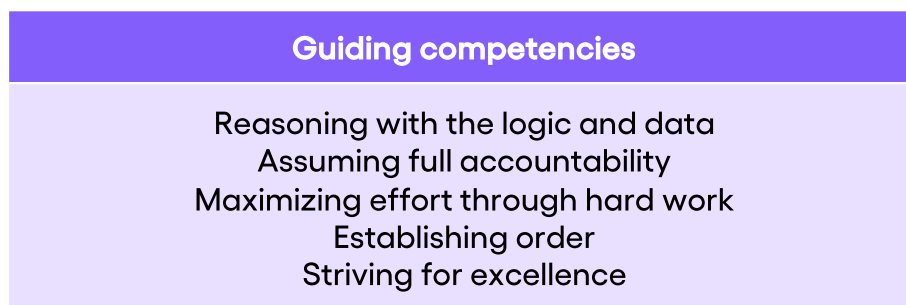
Now that we've talked about managing yourself and others, it's time to talk about execution. This is the ability of a leader to put their plans and ideas into action. It is an essential part of leadership, as it enables you to turn your vision into reality and achieve the goals you have set for yourself and the team. This facet tends to be minimized in favor of the relational aspect of leadership, even though both are essential and complementary to one another. While it's important to consider the human aspect, as a leader, you must make difficult decisions that sometimes go against people's interests, for the good and survival of the organization.

In many situations, leaders need to be able to rely on objective data and analytics to understand problems and identify the most effective solutions. In other words, what do the numbers say? This evidence-based approach allows you to make informed decisions and achieve concrete results. This approach will increase trust in the decision-making process and helps to achieve the best possible outcomes<sup>19</sup>. What about your level of accountability as a leader? It's imperative that you take responsibility for your actions and those of your team. You are a role model after all.

Maybe you didn't know it, but leaders who take accountability for their mistakes increase the respect of their employees, not the other way around<sup>20</sup>. A leader may also need to lead by example by being fully committed to their work. This can inspire their team to do the same and perform at their best<sup>21</sup>, which can ensure successful strategic change implementation<sup>22</sup>. To avoid delays and wasting the team's time and energy, a leader needs to be highly organized, and plan work efficiently to track the progress of different projects<sup>23</sup>. Finally, if you want to ensure customer satisfaction and the long-term success of your organization, you will need to set high-quality standards while ensuring that your team meets them<sup>24</sup>.

If you think about it for a few seconds, is there a leadership style that aligns well with this orientation? If the transactional, bureaucratic or task-oriented styles come to mind then you are correct! With these styles, leaders focus more on control, completing tasks, and following procedures.

As discussed earlier, competencies that can support execution are essential for an effective leader, as they enable them to achieve set goals, meet deadlines and budgets, and create a productive and high-performing work environment. While execution is important, most leaders operate in ever-changing environments where they must adapt their goals. The next orientation is highly suitable for these circumstances.



## Leading Change

Change is a constant in the business world. You likely often hear about the need for agility, adaptation, flexibility and transformation. As a result, leaders are asked to help their team adapt to change and manage these changes in a positive way. Doing so is crucial to navigating the inevitable uncertainties in organizations. We can consider recent changes such as the digital transformation brought about by artificial intelligence, a shift to creating more diverse and inclusive environments, or the role of innovation for the survival of the organization. The acronym VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) then takes on its full meaning<sup>25</sup>. Leaders need to change their mindset about what the VUCA world brings. While it is true that change can be a source of anxiety, effective leaders see these instances as opportunities. Like Leading Execution, Leading Change is an orientation that enables leaders to make difficult decisions that foster and support change because these changes are necessary to the health and survival of the organization.

As an effective leader, you understand that change is inevitable and so you welcome change as a positive opportunity. You can encourage risk-taking and create an environment where new ideas are welcome<sup>26</sup>. You may need to set ambitious goals and inspire your team to achieve them. You will not hesitate to get out of your comfort zone to achieve your goals<sup>27</sup>. Sometimes, you may be expected to manage in a more chaotic and disorganized environment. Despite these difficult conditions, you can't shy away from making decisions<sup>28</sup>. Knowing how to assert yourself for the sake of your team and defend your choices can also help you inspire confidence in others<sup>29</sup>. If you are comfortable with change, you will not be easily discouraged by obstacles. Naturally high resilience will encourage your team not to give up<sup>30</sup>.

Styles such as agile, remote (or hybrid) leadership or digital leadership are good examples of this orientation, Leading Change. You will find common strengths, for example, adaptability to the environment and a strong resilience. These styles encourage leaders to empower team members and give them the autonomy to make decisions and act independently.

The competencies that support this orientation are essential to adapting to new situations, seizing opportunities, and leading your team to success, even in uncertain environments. If the competencies for change are about guiding people through periods of transition, we will see that those associated with growth are more about creating a vision for the future.



## Leading Growth

After covering four out of five orientations, we still must understand how leaders can take a strategic approach to organizational growth. To survive, your business needs to grow and improve over time. To do this, you need to communicate a clear vision, set ambitious goals, and motivate employees to reach their full potential. With a growth mindset, you help the company stand out from competing organizations. This orientation reminds you to explore new markets, strive for continuous improvement, and create an environment that fosters innovation and learning to stay competitive<sup>31</sup>.

To have a vision for growth, you need to think differently and find innovative solutions to problems. Effective leaders encourage creativity and experimentation within their team<sup>32</sup>. The latter is a growth engine, but its success depends largely on a rigorous analysis of its profitability. As such, leaders must make strategic decisions that aim to create long-term value<sup>33</sup>. It's not enough to just jump on the bandwagon, but to understand which new ideas are worth pursuing.

In terms of influence, some charismatic leaders will also use their presence to communicate their vision with enthusiasm. This is especially useful if you want to increase your level of impact and grow your network<sup>34</sup>. The same goes for your political influence, which is essential to better understand power games, implicit rules and know how to use them to advance your ideas, to build alliances or to negotiate skillfully<sup>35</sup>. Most of the time, the progress of your projects also depends on your ability to rally stakeholders, to persuade them of the merits of your vision and to convince investors of the longer-term potential that the organization offers. When it comes to understanding the complexity and challenges of a strategy, leaders need to think abstractly and see the big picture to understand the impacts it can have<sup>36</sup>. Finally, our clients are talking to us more and more about entrepreneurship. Organizations are increasingly looking for leaders with an entrepreneurial profile so that they are not afraid to act, to be proactive and to take initiative to support their vision<sup>37</sup>.

Styles that may partly reflect this orientation are transformational leadership, innovative leadership or charismatic leadership. Through this lens, the strategic vision, the level of influence and the communication style are put forward.

Each of these competencies can support your growth vision, as they help create an inspiring vision for your team, set profitability-oriented goals while achieving them, and lead your organization to long-term success.

Guiding competencies
Reflecting creatively and intuitively
Maximizing profitability
Inspiring others
Exercising political influence
Thinking conceptually
Initiating action independently

Based on these broad orientations, you can identify the key points that will allow you to grow and strengthen your impact as a leader. But what about the next steps to get there?



# How to apply the Leadership Framework in Your Organization

It is essential to remember that the objective is not to develop all the competencies of each orientation in an exhaustive manner. That would be impossible and unrealistic. Rather, the goal is to provide you with a framework to guide you in your personal development and to help you identify areas where you can focus your efforts. Each competency can be useful to you, and there are several factors to consider before making choices. Simply understanding the options available to you is a great first step.

We encourage the use of this framework to focus development and coaching conversations on foundational leadership themes. The tree analogy can also serve as a guide to chart a progressive path of behavioral agility as needed. With this framework, you can decide whether you need to strengthen your self-management, improve your ability to connect with the people who work with you, be more effective in your execution, manage change with ease, and/or better inspire the growth of the organization.

To take advantage of it, you will need to identify:

- Where you stand in terms of your natural and not-so-natural preferences. This can be used to identify one or more leadership orientations that already seem to characterize your style and that you are probably already using with ease.
- The various contextual factors, such as job characteristics, organizational goals, or the needs of your role and team. This will tell you where to focus your development efforts – particularly if there is a leadership orientation that is particularly relevant, but less natural.
- Your motivation and commitment to developing the behavioral agility necessary to adapt your natural strengths to the needs of your situation.

Behavioral agility is an important component for your development. Since there is no "best" leadership style, you need to develop your ability to adapt your behavioral strategies to the context. By developing your self-awareness, flexibility, and resilience, you'll more intentionally support your team and organization<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, you will better understand both your current potential as a leader and the elements where you could excel even more.

Interested in using our framework to guide your development discussions and support your organization's leaders? Or are you a leader yourself and would like to learn more? Feel free to consult [our article](#) for concrete examples on how to integrate it into your organization.



Book a demo with our experts for more information on SuccessFinder or our research.

**Let's talk!**

# Research team

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Mélanie holds a PhD in Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management from HEC Montréal. Currently Senior Behavioral Scientist at SuccessFinder and lecturer at HEC Montréal, she is passionate about two main areas: employee well-being and HR function effectiveness. Her thesis focused on emotional intelligence at work and its impact on employee well-being (satisfaction, burnout, motivation, intent to leave), culminating in the creation of an assessment tool on different types of emotional intelligence at work to better determine its impact on employees.



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