

In an era where disruption is the default, leaders must be equipped to pivot, flex and rewrite the rules in real time. From AI integration and the plethora of new tools that comes with it to managing hybrid workforces, information overload and adaptive strategy, five experts share how they lead when there's no map, only momentum.

**Story by
Jane Nicholls**

Leading without a playbook

Human beings must prioritise being human

We're in the "decade of disorientation", according to Dr Sandra Peter and Dr Kai Riemer, co-directors of the Sydney Executive Plus initiative at The University of Sydney Business School. If leaders are to successfully steady their ship they need to start by "being real", says Peter. That means speaking like a regular person, not a pumped-up PowerPoint deck.

For Peter and Riemer's recently published *2026 Skills Horizon* report, the pair spoke with more than 150 global leaders, from heads of government to head chefs. "People are tired of corporate jargon and polished emails; they want the leader to connect with them," says Riemer. "No more 'blue-sky thinking', no more 'the next exponential'," adds Peter. "We talk about the grounded leader – a translator for their teams and a stakeholder of how the world is changing and what direction they need to go in. In order to turn all that messy information into what it means, they have to 'speak human'."

They also need to accept that hybrid work is here to stay and to embrace making it excellent for everyone. That means whole-team onboarding with virtual welcomes, a buddy system and mentoring programs, suggests Matt Cowdroy, founder of Think Productive Australia, a training company that "helps people love Mondays".

Cowdroy says that when physical proximity is rare, building those human

connections and sharing knowledge has to be planned. "In hybrid working, teams get very siloed so cross-functional projects are really helpful, as is peer learning where people from the same level of the business come together for training."

Number one is valuing tasks over time. "Leaders need to focus on outcomes, particularly in hybrid work," says Cowdroy. "You must get absolute clarity on the outcomes you're trying to achieve as a team and those you need to achieve as an individual. It's about expectations, rather than surveillance or checking up on people."

Harness AI before it starts to harness you

"There's a sense that advancements in technology are shaping businesses and societies at such a rate that there's an inevitability about it – but there is genuinely a way that humans can shape things," says Dr Tobias Feakin, managing director of boutique advisory firm Protostar Strategy and Australia's inaugural ambassador for cyber affairs and critical technology (from 2017 to 2023). "It's incredibly important that leaders are on top of understanding advancements in technology as well as what these mean to their businesses and decision-making processes."

Riemer agrees. "Your entire executive, including your board, must upskill to speak the language of tech," he says. "You need to figure out how to bring AI into the workplace to find

productivity gains without hollowing out the way you work. When people offload their thinking to AI because it's convenient, you might erode the expertise across your workforce or have issues around the quality of work. You need to build learning and expertise in your people so they don't engage in what we might call 'lazy' use of AI but rather critical, engaged use. It's up to leaders to engage in redesigning how people work with AI."

Peter adds, "We're seeing a lot of people think about how they reposition their organisations to take advantage of AI but it's now a people conversation more than a tech conversation."

One of those people is Katina Law, co-founder and co-CEO of IPS Management Consultants, a majority First Nations-owned company that recently celebrated its 10th anniversary. Last year, IPS worked with a consultant to examine how to use AI across its staff of 75, eventually choosing ChatGPT. "We made a conscious decision to incorporate AI and we wanted to do it in a careful, managed way," says Law.

For IPS, bringing in ChatGPT wasn't about reducing headcount but rather protecting company IP from being incorporated into some other large-language model – and being able to take on more work. "It's been a significant investment but we decided to be honest with ourselves that people were already using it and put guidelines, training and a safe environment in place."

"The idea of co-CEOs and co-leaders is being increasingly explored. Many CEOs have a confidant or a chief of staff – a person who can complement their skills and weaknesses... Leadership can be a very lonely exercise."

DR KAI RIEMER



"We need to destigmatise people changing their minds because in turbulent times you experiment, you learn and then you develop a different point of view."

DR SANDRA PETER



Yes, there is too much information

"We ask people what wastes their time and a lot of them say, 'Looking for information,'" says Cowdroy of Think Productive's pre-workshop surveys. "Even though we have these incredible tools, including a supercomputer in our pocket, people still can't find the information they need to do their work."

This virtual tsunami swamps our attention. "We talk about wearing the 'badge of busy'," says Cowdroy. "It's a mindset where people are constantly reminding themselves that they're overwhelmed – we are so distracted by technology, people and our own brains telling ourselves we're busy. We multitask and then we're not getting the best out of ourselves. Managing attention is key to achieving clarity and feeling more in control."

Leaders have to find a way to navigate "an information environment that is increasingly broken", says Riemer. "For a while, we would curate our information on social media by following different outlets. That's no longer working – it's overwhelming and it's now unreliable. You also need to avoid falling into an echo chamber by tapping in and out of different groups to be well-informed."

Peter agrees. "It becomes a skill to protect intellectual time amid this abundance of information and fractured attention," she says. That goes for everybody and it's on leaders to

streamline workplaces where tools have grown like topsy. Messages pinball around platforms from Slack to Teams to Trello to text and how many people have been defeated by the endless copy-all email chain?

"Leaders have to focus on how people work together because there are too many tools and it creates more and more confusion," says Cowdroy. "You need a communication manifesto, a ways-of-working document that sets out how we communicate, the tools we've agreed to use and what we expect of each other in terms of timing."

And all the experts advocate for more investment in training. "We say 'psychology before technology'

– thinking about the tools you're using and learning how to use them," says Cowdroy. "Diving in is a great way to start but very few step back later to learn the skills – most people don't know half of the things they can use Microsoft Teams for to make their life easier."

Everything is interlinked

Feakin has spent more than 25 years of his career studying how technologies fit with society and organisations, as well as "helping decision-makers translate very complex technologies into sound strategy and policy", he says. "The thing I've been dealing with for most of that time is the intertwining of geopolitical decision-making with

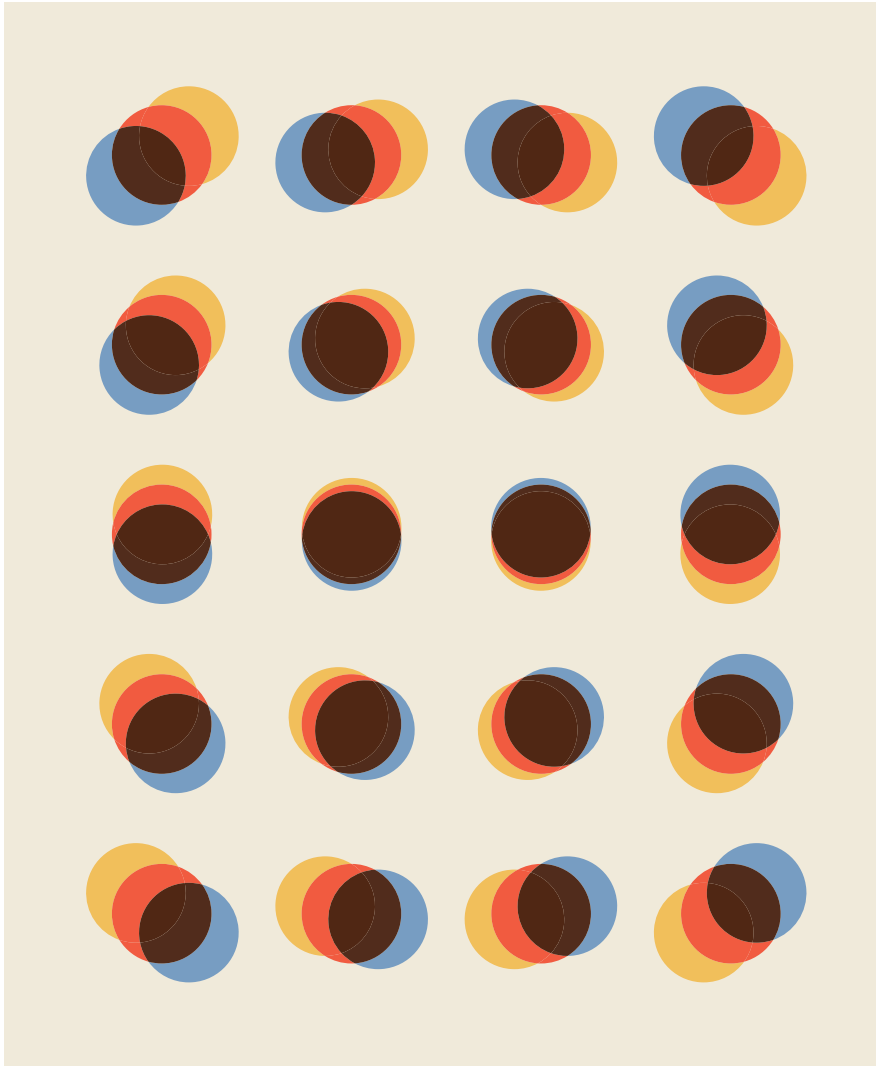
"A leader should be a guide rather than a parent, focused on outcomes rather than tasks."

MATT COWDROY



technology shifts and policymaking." He says there's currently a convergence of different advanced technologies, including AI, biotech and "the next new kid on the block", quantum computing. "It's becoming commonplace for society and businesses to grapple with this whole array of technologies, which all interlink and influence each other's development cycles."

"Technologically speaking, it's an incredible time to be alive – it will radically shift societies, businesses and governments. Ten years ago you could say that geopolitics was about borders and treaties, while technology was more about innovation, efficiency and profits. Now they're one and the same."



“To lead in this uncertain world, you need to first understand yourself... Then you can lead your team better and manage the external focus as well.”

KATINA LAW



Get comfortable in the chaos

Economists have been warning “fasten your seatbelt” for some time and Feakin concurs. “You can’t engineer certainty into an uncertain environment,” he says. “Control is an illusion.”

Law says it can be a time to make hay. “You have to look for the opportunity in the chaos,” she says. “Look for an open space to enter but realise that the barriers are often significant and you have to work over a long period of time and stay focused, even as the environment goes up and down. I’d say we’ve been doing adaptive strategy all the way along.”

This is yet another new paradigm for leaders. “It is indeed disorienting and leaders need to be on top of more things than ever before,” says Peter. “They’re dealing with technology change, changes in geopolitics, changes in how people understand what good work is, what good leadership is and even where they do their work. There’s so much change and so much information they’re being bombarded with – and so are their teams.”

Amid it all, she counsels, “don’t avoid your critics”, invite them in. “Get them to disagree because they’ll be better at seeing faults in your ideas and they’ll strengthen your ideas. In academia, we’re used to bringing our critics along. It’s how we work and it strengthens the work rather than tearing it apart.”

Accept that “you’ll never have perfect information or timing”, says Feakin. “It’s about having good processes in place so when you hit that crisis, you can make decisions and communicate them clearly, knowing that it will cascade in the right way.”

To deal with fractured information in this increasingly interconnected world, leaders must set what Peter and Riemer call “taste” – a clear point of view for the organisation from which everyone can make judgements. “Leaders need to be inquisitive and intellectually omnivorous. They need to carefully curate their information environment in order to develop their particular perspective on things,” says Peter. “Good leaders will also make a point of instilling and developing taste in others.”

Purposeful placemaking and taste-setting has high stakes in the decade of disorientation. “Every major technological issue – AI, data, semiconductors, cybersecurity – now has geopolitical weight behind it as part of it,” says Feakin. “These are serious and complex issues – you can’t make strategic decisions in a vacuum.”

“If you plan well in advance, understand what you’re trying to achieve and stay calm and clear-headed while all the variables are shifting around you – and hold fast to your principles – that is the essence of what modern leadership requires.”

DR TOBIAS FEAKIN

