

WHAT WATER?

**HOW CONTEXT SHAPES WHAT
WE SEE, WHAT WE DO, AND
WHO WE BECOME**



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Bennetts is best known as the founding Chief Executive of Z Energy, having led the company's transition from its previous global owners in 2010. In thirteen years at the helm of Z, Mike led significant corporate events, including the launch of Z as a brand, an IPO, \$3 billion of M&A deals, debt and equity raises, and a takeover response. In 2016, Mike and Z were respectively the CEO and Company of the Year in the Deloitte Top 200. Mike was the founding Convenor of the Climate Leaders Coalition from 2017 to 2022, reflecting his Commitment to the energy transition and the challenges around environmental and social sustainability.

Mike developed cross-cultural leadership experience by working in Africa, Asia and Europe between 1992 to 2008. He has held governance roles since 1999 in joint ventures, private and public companies in South Africa, China, Singapore and New Zealand. Mike is currently the Chair of Punakaiki Fund Limited, a \$130-million venture capital fund, having started with an initial equity of \$1.5 million in 2014.

Throughout his two decades of experience as a CEO, Mike is recognised for his transformational leadership style and Commitment to developing the people he works with.

Since mid-2023, this has been reflected in Mike's venture as an Executive Coach at Taumata Advisory Limited. Mike's stated purpose is to "realise individual and organisational potential" through his work as an author, speaker, coach, consultant and mentor.

Mike's client base of leaders and leadership teams spans large private and public companies, as well as SMEs, start-ups, and NGOs across New Zealand, Australia, and Asia.

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Author's Note

What Water? is the fourth book in a series exploring the invisible architecture of leadership.

Re-Authoring Leadership focused on Identity – not what leaders do, but who they are being while doing it.

The Commitment Advantage moved to Commitment as cause: a stand declared and lived, not compliance or preference, but a chosen future that reorganises effort and powers breakthrough performance.

Above the Ceiling turned to breakthrough itself – what becomes possible when Identity and Commitment align powerfully enough to shatter plateaus and redefine what is considered achievable.

If those three books describe the driver, the engine, and the lift-off, this book describes the atmosphere.

Context is the water. It is not strategy, not culture as a values statement, not mood – although mood lives inside it. Context is how situations occur to people – the invisible frame of interpretation within which Identity stabilises, Commitment strengthens or erodes, and Action becomes obvious or impossible.

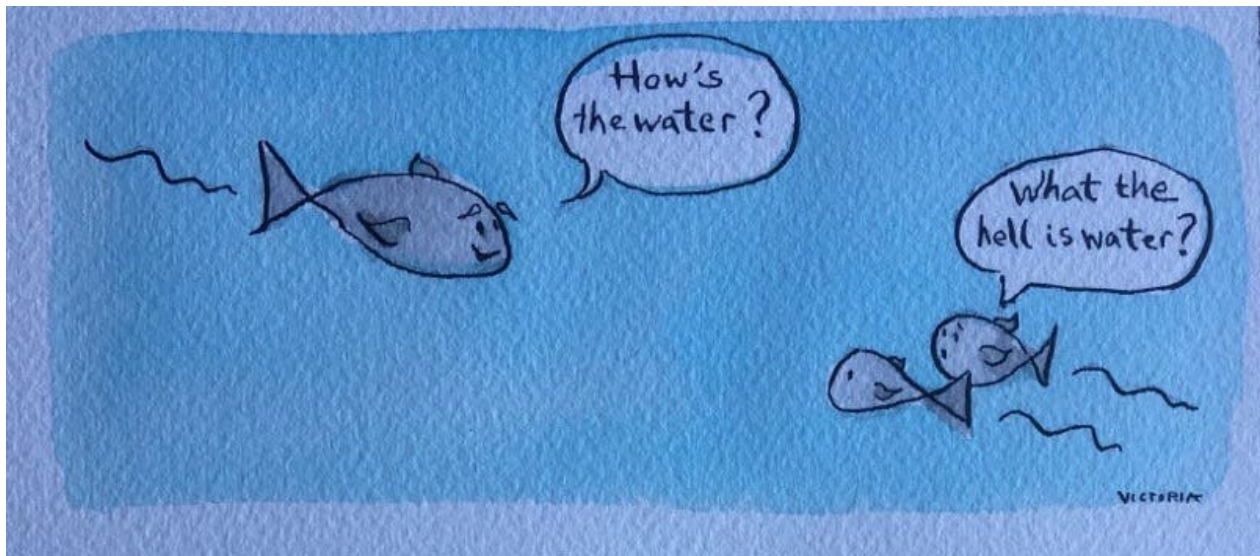
What Water? can be read independently. Readers familiar with the series will recognise how Context completes the architecture – and why the Operating Primer remains incomplete without it.

Prologue

*What if the most powerful forces shaping your leadership
are the ones you cannot see?*

Leadership begins to change the moment people stop treating Context as background and recognise it as the invisible environment shaping what occurs.

The insights around Context can be captured in this single image.



It is a simple joke. It is also the problem of leadership.

We live inside meanings we cannot see. The water is everything we take for granted – the assumptions, expectations, interpretations, and stories that make the world feel coherent. Most of the time, we do not notice them because they work. We only see the water when it changes temperature or turns murky.

Most leaders spend their time focused on content: strategy, structure, targets, talent, metrics. They debate what to do next, review what happened last quarter, refine plans, and escalate their efforts.

When performance stalls, they assume the answer lies in greater precision, discipline, and activity. Leaders swim in their own water – quarterly rhythms, strategic reviews, emotional climates, and the silent agreements that define what success means. This invisible Context determines how things occur and, therefore, how people perform. The most decisive events in organisational life do not happen in spreadsheets. They happen in this unseen atmosphere of meaning.

Rarely do leaders stop to ask: What water are we swimming in?

Context Is Ancient

Long before corporations or management theories, humans lived inside invisible containers of meaning. Context was our first survival technology.

Early hunter-gatherer groups faced a world of uncertainty: weather, predators, famine. What kept them alive was not sharper tools but shared interpretation – the ability to agree on what was happening and what to do about it. Around firelight, they built stories that made the world coherent. Those stories were not decoration. They were operating systems.

Anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas showed that every culture is a web of significance – invisible agreements about what counts as sacred, safe, or taboo. Rituals, myths, and taboos were early forms of Context design.

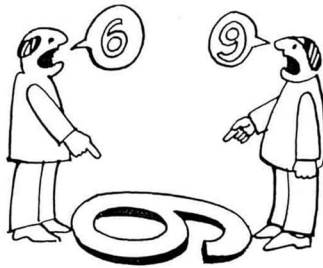
Today's leaders inherit that same work. The all-hands meeting, the strategy offsite, the values rollout – these are modern rituals for renewing the shared story. The content has changed, but the need has not.

Context, then, is not a new leadership idea. It is humanity's oldest inheritance. We have always lived inside stories large enough to hold our fears and small enough to guide our actions. Every generation must remake those stories, not because the facts have changed, but because meaning always drifts.

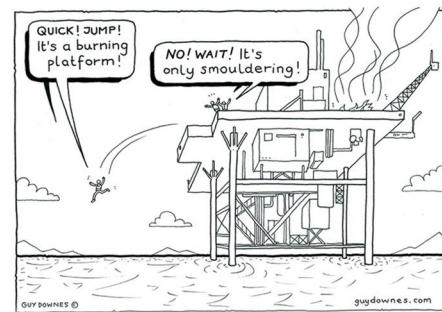
To lead is to stand in that lineage: a designer of meaning, a steward of the invisible water that sustains human possibility.

The Contemporary View

When I am delivering a keynote or leading a workshop, I usually introduce Context through the following slide. The cartoons show how different meanings can arise from the same situation.



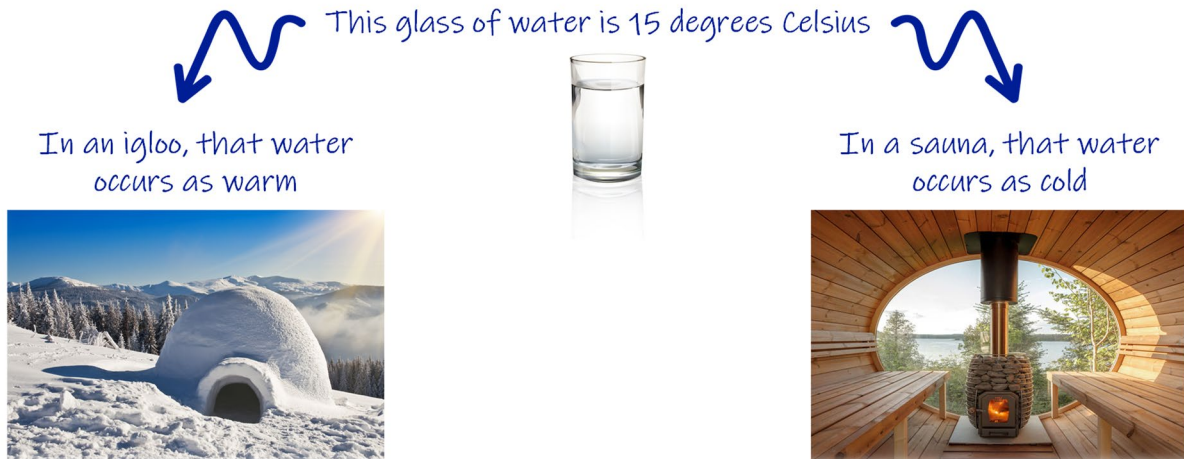
What is Context?



In the upper left, it is the same thing viewed from opposite perspectives – 6 versus 9. In the upper right, a statement of fact based on what is visible, yet we know another fact exists: most of an iceberg is below the waterline and not visible. In the lower left, cookies has a particular meaning to the Cookie Monster compared to the rest of the marketing team. In the lower right, the same experience is interpreted two different ways, leading one character to jump and the other to wait.

Context explains why two leaders, facing the same data, can take entirely different actions. One sees threat, the other opportunity. The facts are identical; the occurrence is not. What drives performance is not how it is, but how it occurs – the lived experience of those facts through mood, story, and Identity.

The same person can experience the same thing differently, depending on their context

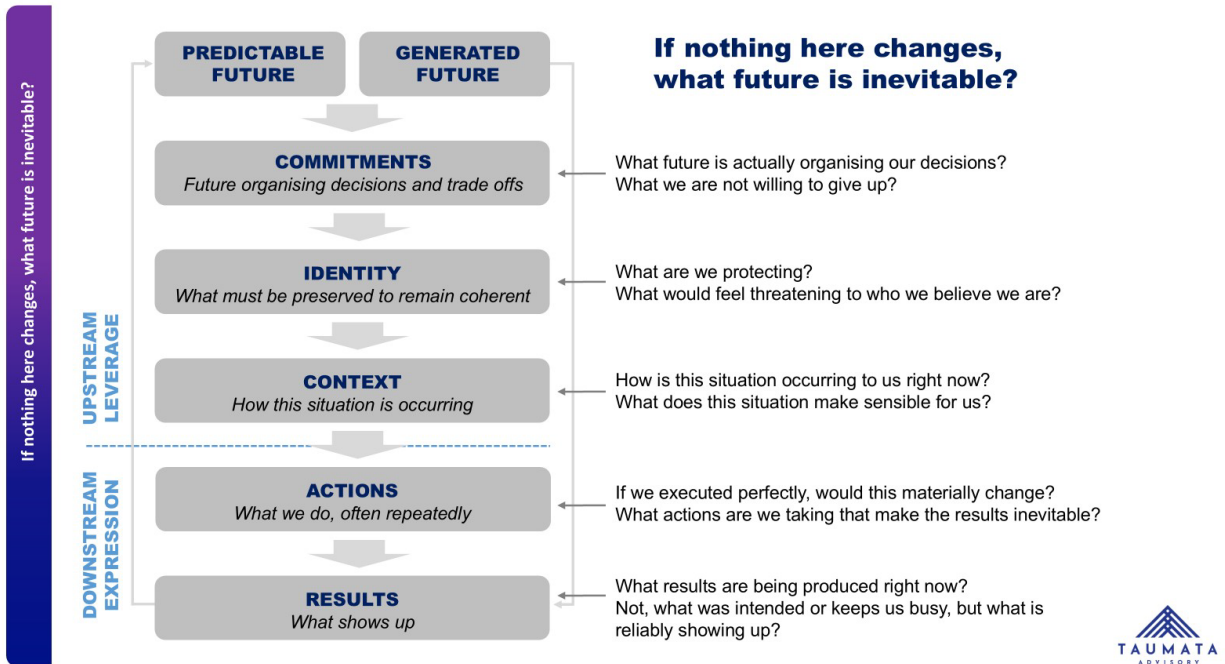


Even though the water is factually 15 degrees, it occurs as warm and soothing if you are in an igloo. The same water occurs as cool and refreshing if you are in a sauna. The disagreements that arise between people in the igloo and the sauna never involve the temperature of the water itself.

Here is the deeper claim. Commitment does not emerge in a vacuum. It arises inside Context. Identity does not operate independently of environment. It is reinforced or destabilised by Context. Breakthrough does not occur because people try harder. It occurs because their experience of the water shifts.

The Operating Primer has often been expressed as a simple sequence: Identity shapes Commitment; Commitment shapes Action; Action produces Results. That is true. But it is incomplete without Context.

Context shapes Identity. Context shapes Commitment. Context shapes what actions even appear available. And once Results are produced, they reinforce Context – stabilising the water unless deliberately disrupted.



This recursive logic explains why organisations plateau. They attempt to change Actions while leaving Context untouched. They introduce new initiatives while preserving the same interpretive frame. They escalate effort within the same water. The result is exhaustion without movement.

To lead at the level of transformation, you must learn to see Context. Then you must learn to design it. Not as manipulation – as responsibility. If Context shapes Commitment and Identity, then leaders are not merely decision-makers. They are Context carriers.

This book is about learning to see this invisible variable.

You cannot change water you cannot see. So too with Context. It is ambient, normal, unquestioned.

The invitation is simple. Pause. Look around. Notice the water.

Then decide whether you will leave it as it is – or design it.

A Note on Language

Throughout this book, certain words are capitalised: Commitment, Identity, Context, Action, and Results.

This is deliberate. When written in lower case, these words carry their everyday meaning. When capitalised, they refer to specific structural components within the Operating Primer.

Commitment is not preference or intention. It is a declared future that organises behaviour independent of circumstance. Identity is not personality or branding. It is the stabilised interpretation of self that determines what feels legitimate, possible, and necessary. Action is not activity. It is behaviour aligned with Identity and Commitment. Results are not random outcomes. They are the predictable consequence of aligned – or misaligned – layers above them.

Capitalisation signals that we are working inside a model. Precision matters because causality matters. Without that distinction, the argument collapses into abstraction. With it, the mechanism becomes visible.

*Leadership begins the moment
someone notices the water people
are swimming in.*

Chapter 1

The Invisible Variable

What water are we swimming in, and who filled the tank?

Leadership begins to change the moment people stop treating Context as background and recognise it as the invisible environment shaping what occurs.

Context as Constructed Reality

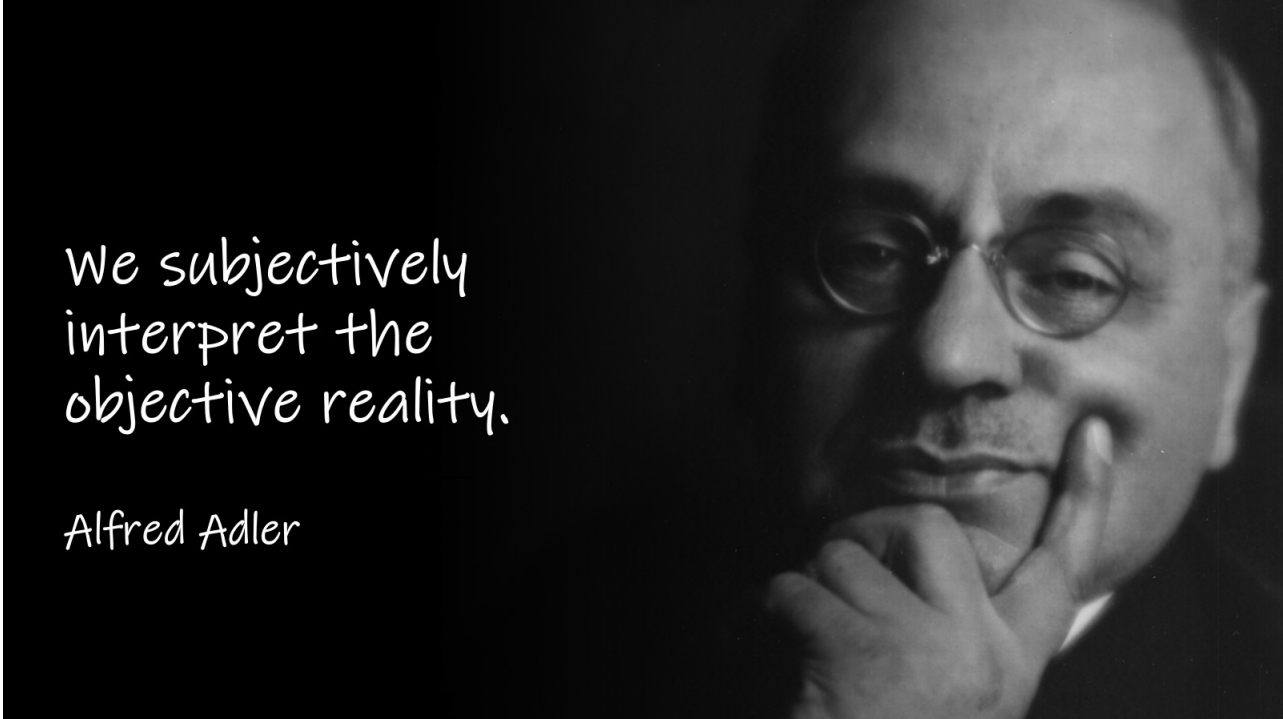
Most leaders speak as though they are responding to reality. Markets tighten, regulators intervene, customers shift, and talent becomes scarce. Strategy is framed as an adaptation to objective conditions. That assumption is rarely examined: that reality presents itself clearly, and that disciplined analysis will reveal the correct response.

Predictive processing theory proposes that the brain does not passively register the world. It actively constructs it. Rather than receiving neutral sensory input and then forming conclusions, the brain continuously generates predictions about what it expects to encounter. Incoming information is compared against those predictions. When there is a discrepancy, the brain updates the model, but only if the discrepancy is strong enough to justify the cognitive cost of revision.

Perception, in this view, is not observation. It is an inference.

The invisible variable in leadership is the predictive model through which reality is interpreted. It feels like reality itself – which is precisely why it is rarely questioned.

Alfred Adler, the founder of Individual Psychology, emphasised that people interpret their experiences and construct meaning about themselves and the world. Objective facts may exist, yet leaders and organisations experience those facts through interpretation. Behaviour is rarely driven by reality itself. It is driven by the meaning assigned to that reality.



*We subjectively
interpret the
objective reality.*

Alfred Adler

This has profound implications for leadership. If perception is shaped by prior models, then what leaders experience as “the market,” “the culture,” or “the risk environment” is filtered through pre-existing expectations. The brain privileges coherence because it prefers a stable model to a disruptive revision. In stable environments, this efficiency is adaptive. In volatile environments, it becomes constraining.

Executive teams operate with shared predictive models about their industry, their Board, their people, and themselves. These models are rarely written down. They exist as accumulated interpretations: “This sector punishes boldness.” “Our Board values certainty above growth.” “Our customers are price-driven.” Over time, these statements become Context truisms, and new information is interpreted through them. In organisations, these shared predictive models are what we usually call Context.

When results plateau, the response is typically to increase effort within the existing model. More discipline, more reporting, more cost control. The predictive frame itself remains intact, and the organisation works harder inside a model that may no longer fit the environment.

The predictive model has now become Context. Identity stabilises inside that model.

Context as Shared Prediction

To call Context “water” is useful but incomplete. Context is a shared prediction.

An executive team does not merely share information. It shares expectations about what information means. These expectations shape attention, attention shapes behaviour, and behaviour produces results that reinforce expectations.

In predictive processing terms, the organisation assigns “precision weighting” to certain signals. Some information is treated as highly reliable; other information is discounted. If the predictive model assumes that regulators are inherently restrictive, regulatory communication will be read through a lens of suspicion. If the model assumes partnership, the same communication will be interpreted as a collaborative opportunity.

The frame shapes visibility, significance, and the signal’s strength.

Understanding this dynamic clarifies why transformation is less about new content and more about revised interpretation. Data rarely compels change on its own. Change occurs when the predictive model is sufficiently disrupted to justify revision.

This disruption is uncomfortable. It creates uncertainty because it destabilises Identity and threatens coherence – the story you have about yourself. Leaders often resist it, not because they lack intelligence, but because the system seeks equilibrium.

The invisible variable, then, is not simply belief. It is the architecture of expectation that determines what counts as evidence.

Leaders who develop Context literacy recognise that they operate within predictive systems. They learn to ask not only what is happening, but what assumptions are guiding our interpretation of what is happening. They examine which signals are amplified and which are ignored. They consider whether the model that once produced success has become misaligned with current conditions.

Such inquiry is not a philosophical indulgence. It is a strategic necessity.

Two leaders can face identical facts and produce radically different results. The difference is not intelligence or resources.

It is Context.

The Stability Bias of Leadership Systems

Predictive systems favour stability. In neuroscience, this is often described in terms of minimising prediction error. The brain seeks to reduce the gap between what it expects and what it encounters. It can do this in two ways. It can update its internal model, or reinterpret incoming data to fit the existing model. The latter is less cognitively demanding.

In leadership systems, the same dynamic appears.

When a new competitor enters the market with a disruptive model, executives can update their interpretation of what competition now means, or they can interpret the competitor as an anomaly. When a high-potential executive challenges the dominant narrative, leaders can reconsider the narrative or dismiss the executive as inexperienced. When customer behaviour shifts, organisations can re-examine their value proposition or attribute the shift to temporary volatility.

Updating the model is disruptive. It threatens Identity and prior Commitment. Reinterpreting data is stabilising because it protects coherence. It is simply easier.

This is why Context inertia is powerful. The predictive frame does not announce itself. It operates quietly, shaping what is seen as credible. Over time, the model becomes self-reinforcing. Decisions made inside it generate results that appear to validate it. If an organisation believes its customers are price-sensitive, it competes on price. Customers respond accordingly. The belief hardens.

The predictive model becomes Context. Context becomes trajectory.

It is tempting to treat this as a cognitive bias problem. It is more than that. It is systemic. Structural signals reinforce the predictive frame. Incentive systems privilege certain interpretations. Governance rhythms prioritise certain questions. Relational patterns discourage certain challenges. The organisation, like the brain, minimises prediction error by protecting the coherence of its dominant story.

Leaders who do not understand this mechanism misdiagnose resistance as incompetence. In reality, the system is doing exactly what predictive systems are designed to do: preserve stability.

How Context Preloads Interpretation

Behavioural science provides another lens on the same phenomenon: Context shapes us far more than we realise. The priming effect shows that subtle environmental cues alter thought and behaviour before awareness catches up.

In workshops, I demonstrate this with a simple exercise. Participants are asked: what is 2+2, what is 4+4, what is 8+8, name a vegetable. Typically, more than 80% answer “carrot”. The sequence primes the mind toward a linear object. The response feels spontaneous, yet it has been preloaded by Context.

A boardroom full of spreadsheets primes vigilance. A meeting opened with “What went wrong?” primes defensiveness; one opened with “What surprised us?” primes curiosity. Every word, symbol, and tone of voice becomes a signal that preloads interpretation.

Leaders who understand priming realise that their true work is not only to communicate but to curate the conditions in which communication lands. The invitation to possibility starts long before the first sentence.

You are always priming others or being primed yourself. The only question is: for what?

Identity and Commitment Inside the Predictive Frame

The consequences for Identity are immediate.

Identity is not formed in isolation. It stabilises inside Context. If an organisation's predictive model assumes fragility, leaders who pursue boldness will encounter friction. Their initiatives will encounter scepticism. Budget scrutiny will intensify, and career risk will rise. Over time, individuals adapt. The bold executive moderates their ambition. The system absorbs the anomaly, and Identity realigns with Context.

Conversely, in organisations whose predictive model assumes capability and disciplined risk, leaders inhabit more expansive identities. The same individual can appear radically different across environments. What appears to be personality variation is often Context alignment.

This is not an argument against agency. It is an argument for understanding the frame within which agency operates.

In *Re-Authoring Leadership*, Identity was framed as a chosen stance, and that remains accurate. What predictive processing adds is a deeper layer: the plausibility of that stance is shaped by Context. Leaders

can declare a new Identity, but if the predictive frame does not support it, the declaration will struggle to stabilise. The system will interpret behaviour through the old model.

Commitment operates similarly. A Commitment declared inside a predictive model that assumes constraint will be interpreted as unrealistic. The same Commitment declared inside a model that assumes capability will be interpreted as direction. Words are filtered through expectation.

This recursive relationship explains why strategic resets often fail. Leaders attempt to shift direction without interrogating the predictive assumptions that will interpret the shift. The result is friction without traction.

Disrupting the Model: An Executive Example

Consider a multinational infrastructure business facing declining growth in a mature regulatory environment. Over time, the executive narrative stabilised around constraint. “Regulatory scrutiny limits innovation.” “Capital markets punish deviation.” “We must protect our credit rating above all else.” These statements were not irrational, as they reflected genuine pressures. Yet they also formed a predictive model.

When proposals for adjacent service expansion were raised, the immediate response in executive meetings was to interrogate downside exposure. What if regulators objected? What if capital costs increased? What if ratings agencies signalled concern? Over time, managers internalised the pattern. Proposals became defensive in tone, ambition narrowed, and growth stagnated. The predictive model of constraint produced cautious behaviour, which yielded limited results, thereby reinforcing the model.

A newly appointed Chief Executive chose to intervene at the level of interpretation rather than at the level of structure immediately. In early strategy sessions, she reframed the central assumption. “Regulation does not eliminate opportunity,” she stated. “It defines the boundaries within which innovation must occur.” She required executive papers to articulate both risk and strategic upside with equal rigour. She invited external regulatory experts into Board or management discussions, not as adversaries but as partners in design. Incentive metrics were adjusted to reward disciplined expansion initiatives, not only capital preservation.

The external regulatory environment did not soften, but the predictive model shifted. Within eighteen months, adjacent revenue streams began to grow. The organisation had not become reckless. It had

become Context expansive. By altering the interpretive frame, the chief executive changed the range of plausible action.

The lesson is precise: strategy did not change first. The model changed first.

Designing Context Deliberately

If Context is a shared prediction, then leadership is partly the discipline of model interrogation.

This requires intellectual humility. Predictive systems resist revision because coherence feels safe. Leaders must deliberately create moments where assumptions are surfaced and tested. This can be done structurally by separating the analysis of risk from the analysis of opportunity so that neither dominates reflexively. It can be done relationally, by inviting dissent that challenges prevailing narratives. It can be done narratively, by re-articulating the organisation's story in ways that expand possibility without denying constraint.

Importantly, Context redesign is not rhetorical reframing. It must align with structural signals. If disciplined experimentation is encouraged, governance must tolerate short-term variance. If innovation is declared essential, incentives must reward calculated initiative. Otherwise, the predictive model will default to what the system consistently reinforces.

At a personal level, leaders must examine their own predictive biases. How does volatility occur to you? As a threat or as terrain to be navigated? How does disagreement occur? As a challenge or as insubordination? Your interpretations shape your tone. Your tone shapes team response. That response reinforces your interpretation.

This recursive loop is subtle but relentless.

To shift trajectory, leaders must be willing to update their model. That is cognitively demanding and politically uncomfortable. It requires tolerating uncertainty long enough for a new interpretation to stabilise. Yet without such revision, organisations remain trapped in coherent but outdated frames.

The invisible variable is not effort. It is the model through which effort is interpreted.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

When confronting a persistent plateau, begin not with action but with examination.

Identify a repeated result. Ask what predictive assumption must be operating for that result to make sense. Is the organisation assuming fragility where capability exists? Is it assuming hostility where partnership might be possible? Is it assuming saturation where differentiation could emerge?

Then test the assumption deliberately. Seek disconfirming evidence. Adjust structural signals to support alternative interpretations, and observe how behaviour shifts.

This is Context design at work.

Reflection

- What predictive assumptions are shaping how your leadership team interprets current volatility?
- Where might your organisation be protecting coherence rather than updating its model?
- How do your structural incentives reinforce the interpretations you claim to challenge?
- If Context is a shared prediction, how deliberately are you shaping it?

The facts rarely speak for themselves. It is the model that determines what they say.

*Context determines how reality
occurs long before anyone decides
what to do about it.*

Chapter 2

Context Horizons and Identity

What happens to ambition when doubt enters the room before the plan does?

Expectation enters the room before strategy and shapes whether ambition gathers force or contracts into caution.

The Signal Beneath the Questions

Leaders rarely begin by choosing who they will be. They begin by entering a Context that quietly defines which versions of themselves are credible. Identity does not emerge independently of this environment. It forms inside it.

The executive team at a global financial institution that we will call Northbridge Financial Group had spent three months refining a growth proposal. Adjacent markets had been analysed, capital requirements modelled, and risk exposures stress-tested. The ambition was disciplined rather than reckless. The chief executive opened the Board session with clarity about both opportunity and constraint. The proposal assumed both volatility and capability.

The first Board question was measured. “How confident are you in the demand assumptions?” The second leaned further. “What would this mean for our credit metrics under a downside case?” A third director, respected for financial prudence, added, “Is this the right moment to stretch, given broader macro uncertainty?”

Individually, each question was legitimate. Collectively, they altered the frame.

The executive team sensed it immediately. Slides that had foregrounded strategic upside were reframed toward mitigation. Language shifted from “we will” to “we could, subject to.” The energy in the room

tightened. By the end of the session, the proposal remained technically viable, yet its psychological force had diminished. What had entered the room was not rejection. It was an expectation.

The Board had not said, “We doubt you.” It did not need to. Attention communicates belief. The weighting of questions communicates plausibility. The order in which risk and opportunity are explored communicates what the system expects to be true. In that room, caution was signalled as safer than ambition. Commitment softened, not because the plan was flawed, but because the expectation frame had shifted.

This is how expectation operates in senior leadership Contexts. It rarely announces itself. It is inferred through tone, sequencing, and emphasis. Over time, these signals stabilise into Context architecture. Within that architecture, Commitment either gathers force or dissipates quietly.

The mechanism has been studied extensively.

The Expectation Effect

The expectation effect demonstrates how belief and anticipation influence behaviour and outcomes.

A simple illustration shows how the mind fills gaps using expectation. The phenomenon known as typoglycaemia works because the brain does not rely only on what it sees. It relies on what it expects to see.

Research from the University of Glasgow demonstrated that when visual information is incomplete, the brain predicts what it expects to see and fills the gaps using Context cues and past experience.

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The human brain is an expectation engine. It predicts, edits, and experiences the world through the lens of what it already believes. Leaders do the same inside organisations. Their expectations become

self-fulfilling not through mysticism but through mechanism. When you expect excellence, you design for it; when you expect compliance, you get it. The Context of expectation is the seed of performance.

When we expect something to happen, our brains and bodies begin to align with that expectation – altering perception, attention, physiology, and even performance to make the expectation more likely to come true.

This dynamic is visible in performance improvement plans. When the leader does not genuinely believe recovery is possible, the process confirms the original expectation – regardless of its stated intent.

The Expectation Effect in Practice

In the late 1960s, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson conducted a study in which teachers were told that certain students were likely to demonstrate unusual intellectual growth. The students were selected at random. Yet those identified as “high potential” did in fact show greater gains.

The mechanism was straightforward. Teachers who expected growth interacted differently. They asked more challenging questions. They offered more expansive feedback. They tolerated temporary mistakes as part of development. Their expectation subtly altered the relational environment. The students responded to that environment. Performance shifted accordingly.

Leaders tend to see what they expect to see and discount contrary evidence. The process then concludes with the familiar judgment: the employee has confirmed the original expectation. Expectation modifies behaviour at the margins, and marginal shifts accumulate into measurable results. Crucially, the original expectation need not be explicitly articulated to be effective. It operates through attention.

The same mechanism operates inside organisations. Boards, executive teams, and chief executives communicate expectations constantly. They do so through the questions they ask, the behaviours they reward, and the risks they tolerate. These signals shape how the situations occur to others.

The Three Laws of Performance

In 2009, Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan published *The Three Laws of Performance*, bringing ontological ideas about interpretation and Context into the language of business. Their central insight is straightforward but powerful: performance problems are rarely caused by capability or effort.

Expectations enter the room before strategy does, quietly shaping what leaders believe is possible.

They arise from how situations occur to people. When that occurrence shifts, behaviour changes naturally. Their three laws describe how this happens.

The First Law states that how people perform correlates with how situations occur to them. Human action does not follow objective reality – it follows interpretation. Two teams can face identical facts yet perform differently because the situation occurs differently for each of them. When events occur as threatening, people protect themselves. When the same events occur as an opportunity, they create and act. Leaders often attempt to solve performance issues through targets, incentives, or pressure, but these approaches rarely address the underlying driver. Performance sits downstream of perception.

The Second Law explains where that perception comes from – how a situation occurs arises in language. Context is generated through conversation: the stories, metaphors, and declarations that give events their meaning. Language does not merely describe reality in organisations. It shapes how reality is experienced. When leaders speak about what a moment means or what the organisation is building, they influence how people interpret events and, in turn, how they act. Culture, in this sense, is conversation repeated until it feels like fact.

The Third Law introduces the role of the future. Future-based language transforms how situations occur. When leaders make a clear declaration about the future they are committed to creating, the present begins to reorganise around that Commitment. Attention, decisions, and energy align with the declared future.

Together, the laws describe the mechanics of Context. Performance follows perception. Perception arises in language. Language can originate from a declared future. The work of leadership is therefore not simply planning or control. It is designing the conversations through which the world occurs for people.

When a Board or leadership team repeatedly frames volatility as danger, volatility occurs as danger. When it frames volatility as terrain requiring disciplined navigation, the same volatility occurs differently. Expectation is not a slogan. It is language stabilised in Context.

Return to the boardroom scenario. The Board's emphasis on downside exposure communicated a model of fragility. The executive team, attuned to this model, recalibrated its Commitment. Over repeated interactions, this pattern would teach the team that ambitious proposals must first survive

scepticism before being considered. Managers observing these dynamics would internalise the lesson, and proposals would become incrementally safer by design.

Over time, the organisation would conclude that it lacks entrepreneurial capacity. In reality, the expectation frame had disciplined ambition out of the system.

Expectation as Organisational Gravity

Expectation functions like gravity. It pulls behaviour toward what becomes normal.

In a multinational consumer goods company, several years of missed innovation targets had generated quiet scepticism within the executive team. Over time, the predictive model hardened into a quiet conviction: we are not an organisation that takes risks.

When a new chief executive took over, she did not begin with a grand declaration of transformation. She intervened directly at the level of expectation. In executive reviews, she deliberately altered the sequencing of attention. “If this succeeds, what advantage does it create?” she would ask before probing downside. She required that every risk analysis be accompanied by an articulation of strategic upside. She adjusted incentives so that disciplined experimentation, even when imperfect, was recognised rather than quietly penalised.

This was not motivational rhetoric. It was structural reinforcement of a revised expectation: we are capable of disciplined stretch.

Within two planning cycles, proposals changed in substance and tone. Managers no longer assumed that ambition would be punished. They designed initiatives within a frame that expected competence. Innovation velocity increased. Not every initiative succeeded, but enough did to shift the trajectory.

The external market had not softened. The expectation frame had shifted.

Expectation shapes plausibility. Plausibility shapes Commitment intensity. Commitment intensity shapes Action. Action shapes Results. Results reinforce expectation.

Left unexamined, this loop stabilises breakthrough results as easily as mediocrity.

Commitment Inside the Expectation Frame

The preceding chapter established that perception itself is shaped by predictive models. This chapter extends that logic: Commitment is filtered through expectation before it translates into behaviour.

A chief executive may declare, “We will lead our sector in digital integration within three years.” If the prevailing expectation assumes technological fragility, the declaration is received as aspirational rather than inevitable. Questions focus on capability gaps, talent is second-guessed, and investment is moderated – the Commitment becomes symbolic.

If, however, the expectation frame assumes capability and disciplined execution, the same declaration is interpreted as direction. Attention shifts toward resource allocation. Risk is managed but not allowed to dominate. Energy gathers rather than disperses.

The words are identical. The expectation frame determines their force.

This is why transformation efforts often falter despite an articulate strategy. Leaders attempt to change direction without altering expectations. They declare ambition into a frame that predicts constraint. The system absorbs the declaration and neutralises it.

Expectation is therefore not peripheral to Commitment. It is structural.

Auditing and Designing the Expectation Frame

The practical leadership question is simple: What frame of expectations am I generating?

Begin with observation rather than aspiration. In your last executive meeting, what dominated attention? Downside exposure or strategic leverage? Were challenges framed as incompetence or as data? Did your questions communicate belief in capability or suspicion of fragility?

Expectation is communicated most powerfully through repetition. What themes recur in your language? Which risks are consistently emphasised? Which successes are celebrated, and which are quietly discounted? Over time, these patterns stabilise into Context.

Designing the expectation frame requires alignment between language and structure. If disciplined stretch is desired, incentives cannot reward only predictability. If innovation is essential, short-term variance must be tolerated. If ownership is expected, governance cannot quietly override autonomy.

At the Board level, this may require explicit calibration. Directors can examine the pattern of their questions. Does the order of inquiry privilege risk over opportunity? Does scrutiny signal disbelief? The intention may be prudence, but the effect may be contraction.

For chief executives, the discipline is similar. What assumptions about your team's capability are embedded in your behaviour? Do you default to control because you expect fragility? Or do you design systems that assume competence and hold individuals accountable accordingly?

Expectation cannot be eliminated.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Treat expectation as a design variable rather than a mood.

In your next Board or executive forum, deliberately change the sequence of attention. Begin with the strategic upside and the advantage being pursued before moving into downside exposure. Then notice what happens in the room. Does the discussion remain expansive longer, or does it contract immediately back into caution?

Next, audit the language of belief in your system. Identify three repeated questions or phrases that signal doubt, for example "Are we sure?", "Is this the right moment?", "What if this goes wrong?". Do not remove prudence. Replace habit. Rewrite the phrasing so it communicates disciplined belief as well as scrutiny, for example "What would make this robust?", "What would we need to believe is true for this to work?", "Where do we have conviction, and where do we still have unanswered risk?"

Finally, pick one structural reinforcement to align with the expectation you want to stabilise. It could be a change to meeting rhythm, a change to how proposals are framed, or a small adjustment to what is recognised and rewarded. The objective is not theatrical change. It is to make belief observable through repetition.

Reflection

- Where in your organisation does expectation subtly constrain ambition?
- What repeated questions in your executive forums communicate doubt rather than disciplined belief?
- How does your governance structure reinforce the predictive model you claim to challenge?

If Commitment is causal, what expectation frame is amplifying or diluting it?

Expectation enters the room before strategy. It determines whether ambition gathers force or dissolves into caution.

*The future people act into is rarely
the one they predict.*

*It is the one that occurs to them as
possible.*

Chapter 3

Identity Under Pressure

When performance tightens and scrutiny increases, who do leaders become?

Under pressure, leaders do not simply make harder decisions. They begin inhabiting the horizon that feels most defensible.

The Drift That Looks Like Maturity

For three years, Northbridge Financial Group had operated from a declared ambition. It would reposition itself from a mature operator to a category-defining leader. Capital had been deployed into digital capability. Investor briefings framed the strategy as disciplined expansion rather than incremental optimisation. The Board endorsed the trajectory, not as cheerleaders, but as stewards of a longer arc. People inside the organisation could feel who they were becoming, even when quarterly performance varied.

Then revenue softened.

Two consecutive quarters of decline did not trigger a liquidity crisis. It did something more insidious: it shifted the interpretation. Analysts revised forecasts downward, and the share price weakened relative to peers while investor briefing calls sharpened. Media commentary became less admiring and more sceptical. The Board's questions, still reasonable, changed their centre of gravity. They were no longer primarily about position. They were about exposure.

Nothing was formally reversed. No strategy document was torn up. Yet over successive months, the leadership team began to behave as though a different future was now the real one.

The executive meeting that used to begin with trajectory now began with variance. A growth initiative once described as “the next platform” was reclassified as “optional timing.” Hiring shifted from recruiting “builders” to recruiting “stabilisers.” Decisions were justified through the language of reassurance: “We need to restore confidence.” “We need to demonstrate discipline.” “We need to protect flexibility.”

In isolation, each move was defensible. Together, they produced a new Identity. The disciplined category shaper quietly became the cautious stabiliser. This did not occur through cowardice. It occurred through Context adaptation.

Identity in Role and the Containment of Anxiety

Tavistock systems theory is useful here because it treats anxiety as a structural rather than a personal phenomenon. In organisations, Identity is enacted in role, under authority, within systems that generate and distribute anxiety. Identity is not simply what leaders believe about themselves. It is how they function while managing the pressures of their role and the expectations of their authority.

Public companies institutionalise anxiety. Quarterly reporting cycles create recurring moments of judgment. Market capitalisation becomes a visible referendum. Directors carry fiduciary and reputational exposure. Executives operate under scrutiny from analysts and investors. Anxiety in such systems is not an occasional spike. It is ambient and not confined to directors and executives. Across the organisation, people experience their own version of this pressure.

When external pressure increases, systems seek containment. Tavistock observed that under heightened anxiety, organisations often regress toward defensive functioning. Boundaries harden, authority becomes more protective, and attention narrows. The primary task of leadership subtly shifts from generating the future to preventing loss.

This regression rarely feels like fear. It feels like responsibility. That is precisely why it is dangerous.

In the downturn scenario, the Board of Northbridge Financial Group’s increasing focus on resilience communicated a Context message: protection is now the dominant virtue. The executive team, sensing the Board’s market exposure, recalibrated its own posture. The CEO began to speak more like a custodian of downside than an author of advantage. Senior leaders mirrored the shift because

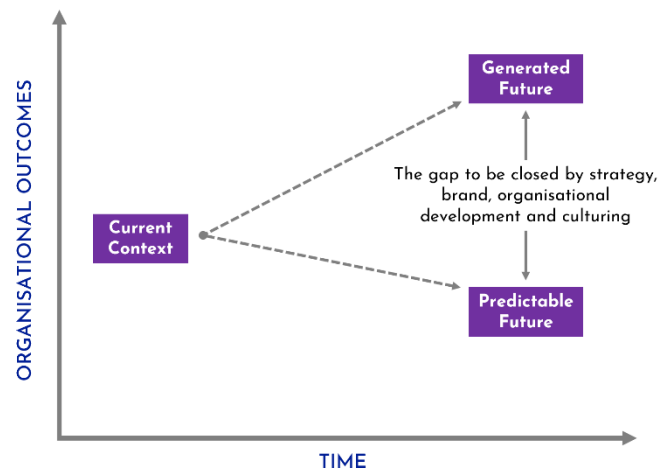
alignment with authority is itself a survival mechanism. No one announced the change, but the system signalled what kind of self was credible.

In Tavistock terms, anxiety was being contained through boundary tightening. The primary task of leadership shifted from shaping the external environment to insulating the organisation from it. What presented as prudent oversight was, in systemic terms, defensive regression.

Three Context Horizons

A practical application of Context is the Three Context Horizons model. For a successful shared future, the leadership team must operate from a clearly understood and mutually agreed Context across three horizons:

- Current Context – where you are today.
- Predictable future – the most likely plausible outcome if the trends from the current Context are extrapolated forward (say) three years, i.e., keep coming to work each day and repeating what you have been doing.
- Generated Future – the future you are committed to realising.



The Generated Future is a narrative about the Context of that future. It is written in the present tense and describes the outcomes, results, and impacts that express the Commitment being made.

The Generated Future is not strategy, organisational development, or implementation planning. Those are the deliverables that close the gap between the Predictable future and the Generated Future. They are management responses. Generating Context is leadership work.

Under stable conditions, a leadership team can inhabit the Generated horizon. They accept tension between present constraints and declared ambition. They interpret pressure as terrain to be navigated in service of the trajectory.

*Pressure does not simply test
Identity. It reveals which Identity
leaders are actually living inside.*

Under scrutiny, the Predictable horizon becomes gravitational because it offers coherence. It aligns with analyst models and is easier to justify in investor briefings. It reduces reputational strain because it rests on visible trends, whereas the Generated Future requires leaders to hold tension. It does not soothe anxiety, but it does contain it.

When markets tighten, organisations drift toward the horizon that reduces strain. The Predictable future stops being a forecast and becomes lived Context. Slower growth is treated as inevitable, margin pressure becomes the organising story, and capital preservation becomes the default decision rule. Identity adjusts accordingly, because Identity is horizon-dependent.

This is the crux. A leadership team can keep the Generated Future in its slide deck while living inside the Predictable Future in its behaviour. When that happens, Identity contracts even if the strategy language remains unchanged.

Investor signalling accelerates this Drift because it externalises judgment. Analysts do not merely ask questions. They weight reality. When questioning repeatedly focuses on resilience, the organisation learns which parts of itself are rewarded. Executives begin pre-editing ambition before it is spoken. Board papers expand in downside sensitivity analysis and contract in strategic narrative. The organisation becomes busy, professional, and governed while quietly losing altitude.

In other words, the market becomes a Context generator. It shapes what the system experiences as plausible, and plausibility shapes Identity.

The early warning sign is not a falling share price. It is the moment when leaders stop describing the future as something they are creating and start describing it as something they must endure. That linguistic shift is usually presented as realism. It is more accurately a change of horizon from what was Generated to what is Predictable.

At one earnings call, an analyst pressed the CEO: “Given the volatility in your sector, why not pause the platform investment until visibility improves?” The question was commercially reasonable. The CEO hesitated for half a beat longer than usual before responding. That hesitation signalled more than uncertainty. It signalled Identity tension. Was the organisation a steward of near-term stability or an architect of long-term position? The answer given on the call was balanced. The pause revealed that the operative horizon was no longer self-evident.

The Three Context Horizons describe where an organisation is in time – its current position, its default trajectory, and its declared destination. A related distinction describes the quality of Context an organisation is inhabiting at any given moment. The Default Context is the interpretive environment inherited and operating before any declaration is made. The Declared Context is the future announced but not yet lived. The Generated Context is the environment constructed through deliberate and repeated signals – the one leaders are responsible for designing. These three points form what this book calls the Context Spectrum. An organisation's position on that spectrum determines not only which horizon it inhabits, but which Identity is viable, which Commitment holds under pressure, and which Results are even conceivable.

Predictive Frames and the Viability of Self

An expansive Identity begins to feel discordant. Leaders who continue speaking in generative terms may be perceived as disconnected from market reality. A CEO who insists on capability building risks being seen as insensitive to shareholder exposure. An executive who advocates investment appears misaligned with sentiment.

The cost of holding an expansive Identity increases.

Over time, the system self-corrects. Proposals are pre-shaped to survive scrutiny. Ambitious initiatives are translated into incremental pilots. Recruitment favours operators over architects. Strategy becomes a function of defensibility.

This is how Identity drift embeds without any explicit directive.

In Northbridge Financial Group, capital allocation cycles had shortened. Projects once evaluated over five-year horizons were reassessed primarily on near-term return metrics. Innovation proposals were filtered through downside modelling before any upside was articulated. Board papers expanded in sensitivity analysis and contracted in narrative framing. The sequence of conversation signalled priority.

None of this looked like retreat. It looked like discipline. Yet discipline without horizon clarity becomes contraction.

The Compounding Cost of Contraction

Operating inside the Predictable future delivers short-term reassurance. Guidance becomes achievable, variance narrows, and markets reward visible control. Directors feel they are fulfilling their fiduciary duty.

Many executive teams will read this and believe they are immune because they have not formally altered their strategy. That is precisely the point. Identity contraction rarely announces itself through declaration. It manifests in sequencing, in language, in what receives unchallenged agreement. While prudence is necessary, the question is whether prudence has become the new name for retreat.

The cost emerges gradually.

When leadership teams habituate to extrapolation rather than generation, capability investment slows. Digital integration lags while customer innovation narrows. High-ambition talent recalibrates career expectations. Those who thrive in generative environments begin to feel misaligned. Some leave, and those who remain adapt to the new norm, perhaps quietly quitting.

Competitors who continue investing through volatility compound their advantage. They face the same macro conditions but inhabit a different horizon. They interpret pressure as terrain to be navigated rather than a verdict to be obeyed. Over time, capability gaps widen.

At Northbridge Financial Group, two years after the downturn, the company discovered that its preserved margins had come at the expense of position. Competitors had deepened digital capability and strengthened customer integration. The once-ambitious firm found itself reacting to moves it had intended to make.

Identity contraction had become a trajectory constraint.

The most consequential loss was not financial – it was ontological. The organisation no longer experienced itself as shaping its sector. It experienced itself as navigating volatility. That shift in self-concept altered what was considered plausible in every subsequent decision.

Identity determines trajectory because it determines the range of conceivable action.

Governance as Context Architecture

It is insufficient to locate this Drift solely within the executive team. Governance shapes the Context frame within which Identity stabilises.

Boards do not merely approve strategy. Through the pattern and order of their inquiry, they communicate what they believe the primary task of leadership to be. Under pressure, even experienced directors can unintentionally privilege short-term protection over long-term positioning.

Directors are not short-term by default. They are accountable stewards of capital. The danger lies not in disciplined oversight but in asymmetry. When scrutiny privileges protection in every interaction, generation becomes culturally unsafe. Identity contracts not because Boards demand weakness, but because the system signals that preservation is the only legitimate posture.

During the downturn, Northbridge Financial Group's Board agendas gradually shifted. Variance review dominated early discussion. Downside exposure was examined before the strategic opportunity. Sensitivity scenarios consumed disproportionate time. None of these moves was irresponsible, but together they created asymmetry.

The executive team internalised the signal. Proposals were pre-edited to minimise friction. Strategic ambition was moderated before presentation. The Board, observing more cautious proposals, interpreted this as mature leadership. The feedback loop reinforced itself.

Governance is Context architecture. Identity stabilises where authority signals it is safest to stand.

If Boards seek reassurance in every interaction, executives will inhabit an Identity oriented toward reassurance. If Boards balance scrutiny with generative inquiry, Identity viability expands accordingly.

The Predictable future embeds culturally through repeated conversational emphasis, not through formal resolution.

The Discipline of Holding Anxiety

The turning point did not come through a dramatic strategy revision. It came through diagnosis.

During a strategy session, a director asked a different question: “If we continue optimising for quarterly reassurance, what Identity are we constructing?” The question surfaced the operative horizon. It made visible what had been lived but not named.

The Northbridge Financial Group Board and executive team revisited the Generated Future explicitly. Not as aspiration, but as Context Commitment. They examined recent decisions against it. Which capital allocations advanced it? Which deferrals contradicted it?

More importantly, the Board altered its own pattern of inquiry. Agenda sequencing changed so long-term positioning preceded variance review. Risk and opportunity were examined in balance rather than hierarchy. Investor communication integrated disciplined short-term management with explicit articulation of long-term trajectory.

Anxiety was named rather than displaced. Directors acknowledged their exposure to market pressure. Executives acknowledged the tension between volatility and ambition. By recognising anxiety, the system reduced the need to discharge it defensively through contraction.

Identity viability expanded.

The organisation resumed disciplined capability investment, sequenced carefully but not abandoned. The leadership team’s posture shifted from defensive preservation to generative stewardship under constraint. Volatility remained. The horizon shifted from Predictable to Generated, and Identity expanded with it.

From Contraction to Generative Responsibility

The recovery of Identity in Northbridge Financial Group did not occur because markets improved. It occurred because leadership recognised that horizon choice is structural rather than rhetorical.

The Northbridge Financial Group executive team had never formally abandoned the Generated Future. It had simply ceased to inhabit it. Once this was surfaced, the work became less about motivation and more about Context design.

The Board and executive team reframed the primary question of leadership. Instead of asking, “How do we protect earnings this quarter?” they began asking, “How do we protect trajectory while

navigating this quarter?” The distinction is subtle but profound. The first question anchors Identity in preservation. The second anchors Identity in generative responsibility under constraint.

Generative responsibility does not deny volatility. It refuses to let volatility define the organisation.

Several deliberate shifts followed. First, capital allocation was explicitly divided into defensive and generative streams. The organisation acknowledged the need for resilience while ring-fencing investment in capabilities aligned with the Generated Future. This structural move signalled that expansion was not contingent on perfect conditions.

Second, governance inquiry was recalibrated. Directors committed to examining risk and opportunity symmetrically. Strategic upside was articulated before downside modelling. This sequencing altered what the executive team experienced as credible Identity.

Third, language was disciplined. Investor briefings integrated near-term performance with long-term narrative rather than treating them as competing frames. The company described itself as building through volatility rather than surviving it. This was not cosmetic rebranding; it was Context stabilisation.

Identity expanded because the horizon was made explicit and protected.

Identity as an Ongoing Choice

The lesson is not that leaders must maintain ambition regardless of conditions. Identity is horizon-dependent and therefore requires deliberate maintenance.

If leaders unconsciously inhabit the Predictable future, Identity contracts to management of extrapolation. If leaders consciously inhabit the Generated horizon, Identity expands to authorship under constraint.

The Predictable future will always be cognitively attractive, even if unconsciously. It is grounded in visible trends, offers apparent certainty, and aligns with consensus. The Generated Future requires disciplined tension. It demands that leaders hold anxiety rather than discharge it through contraction.

This is why Identity work in executive life is inseparable from Context work. Leaders may declare themselves bold or generative, but if the Context frame rewards caution exclusively, Identity will adjust

accordingly. Conversely, if governance and organisational signals support disciplined stretch, leaders find it viable to inhabit a larger self.

Identity stabilises where Context stabilises.

For leaders operating under scrutiny, the discipline is practical:

- Audit your operative horizon – review recent executive and Board agendas. Which horizon governs time allocation and sequencing? Horizon is visible in emphasis.
- Surface systemic anxiety – where is pressure being translated into contraction? Naming anxiety reduces its unconscious authority.
- Recalibrate governance signals – ensure that inquiry balances downside interrogation with opportunity articulation. Strategic symmetry preserves trajectory without weakening oversight.
- Align structural reinforcements – incentives, metrics, and capital sequencing must reflect the Generated horizon. Without structural backing, ambition collapses under scrutiny.
- Monitor language drift – when conversations centre on “until conditions improve,” the Predictable horizon may be displacing generation.

Identity is enacted through repeated Context cues. Change the cues and Identity will follow.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Pressure does not remove choice. It obscures it.

In your next executive or Board meeting, examine the sequence of the conversation. Which horizon receives the first thirty minutes of attention: variance in the present or position in the future?

Then review the last five major decisions taken under pressure. Were they justified primarily through the language of reassurance or through the language of trajectory? The answer reveals which horizon the organisation is inhabiting in practice.

Finally, test the system. Present one initiative explicitly framed in the Generated horizon and observe the response. Do questions explore the possibility or immediately collapse the proposal into defensibility? The reaction will reveal the operative Context more clearly than any strategy document.

Reflection

- Under current pressure, which horizon governs your behaviour?
- How has anxiety reshaped your Identity in role?
- Where have you rationalised contraction as responsibility?
- What Context signals reinforce that contraction?
- What structural adjustments would re-anchor you in the Generated horizon?

Identity is not static. It is enacted inside Context. When the horizon contracts, so does the self. When leaders deliberately inhabit the future they are building rather than merely the trajectory they are forecasting, Identity stabilises around authorship rather than preservation.

*When the pressure rises, people do
not rise to their aspirations.*

They fall back to their Identity.

Chapter 4

The Container You Inherit

What Context are you standing inside that you did not design?

Most leaders believe they are designing strategy when they are actually operating inside a container built by prior incentives, histories, and legitimacy pressures.

The Context Was There Before You

Every leadership team believes it is responding to current conditions. Markets move, regulation shifts, and competitors act. Boards set expectations, and senior leaders adjust.

What is rarely examined is the fact that the organisation you are leading was already shaped before you arrived. It was shaped by prior leaders, incentives, crises, victories, regulatory encounters, and investor conversations. Those forces left structural residue.

Context is not mood. It is not culture as values on a wall. It is the architecture that determines what is rewarded, what is punished, what is considered credible, and what is quietly dismissed.

Most leaders assume they are designing strategy. In reality, they are designing inside a container that pre-determines much of what becomes possible. Unless that container is examined, Identity work becomes cosmetic.

Industries Train Organisations to Resemble One Another

Industries quietly train firms to resemble one another over time. Regulation, professional training, peer benchmarking, analyst commentary, and investor expectations create a narrow definition of what “good” looks like. Organisations conform because legitimacy feels safer than deviation.

Directors and executive teams are not naïve about market pressure. They are legally and reputationally accountable for capital stewardship. Peer comparison is not laziness; it is part of fiduciary discipline. The difficulty arises when comparison becomes the dominant frame. When legitimacy is defined primarily by how closely you resemble the frame, deviation in pursuit of long-term advantage feels reckless, even when it is strategically necessary.

You do not need academic references to recognise the pattern:

- Banks talk like other banks.
- Telecommunications companies structure themselves like other telecommunications companies.
- Energy firms adopt similar capital logic.
- Retailers measure similar metrics.

This convergence does not happen because leaders lack imagination. It happens because deviation carries reputational and financial risk. Boards compare performance to peers, analysts benchmark ratios, and regulators reward compliance with prevailing standards. Executives are recruited from competitors and bring with them embedded assumptions about how the industry works.

Over time, conformity feels rational. The danger is that conformity can masquerade as strategy.

The Illusion of a Fresh Start

After the global financial crisis, many major financial institutions publicly committed to transformation. They would rebuild trust, reduce risk, strengthen compliance, and prioritise long-term stability over short-term gain.

New chief executives were appointed with explicit mandates to reset Identity.

In Northbridge Financial Group, capital buffers were strengthened. Risk committees were expanded. Public messaging shifted toward prudence and responsibility. Cultural programmes were launched. The Board signalled its Commitment to a different future.

Yet internally, the incentive system remained largely intact. Compensation continued to privilege annual revenue targets. High-performing dealmakers retained disproportionate influence. Promotion pathways still rewarded short-term profitability more than long-term relationship depth. Business unit reviews continued to centre on quarterly performance variance.

In executive meetings, tension surfaced repeatedly. The CEO spoke of rebuilding trust and reshaping reputation. Divisional leaders returned to revenue gaps and margin pressure. Directors asked for both prudence and competitive returns. Analysts scrutinised cost-to-income ratios.

No one was acting in bad faith. The organisation was attempting to inhabit a transformed Identity inside an inherited container.

The frame logic of financial services had not disappeared. Investors still evaluated return on equity. Competitors still fought for market share. Regulatory capital requirements constrained balance sheet flexibility but did not redefine competitive success. The system continued to reward velocity and scale.

Predictably, behaviour gravitated back toward familiar patterns. Not because leaders lacked conviction, but because Context stabilised the old Identity. The architecture of reward and legitimacy remained largely unchanged.

The governing architecture had not been redesigned.

The Illusion of Transformation

This is the structural trap. Leadership teams declare transformation. They refresh purpose statements, restructure reporting lines, and invest in leadership development. These actions matter, but if incentive logic, capital allocation rules, and governance sequencing remain constant, Identity reverts.

Boards and executive teams often underestimate this gravitational force. They approve strategy shifts while leaving reward architecture intact. They ask for cultural change while continuing to privilege short-term metrics in performance discussions. They demand prudence while benchmarking returns against peers who are still optimising for velocity.

The system receives mixed signals. In ambiguity, it defaults to the historically rewarded pattern.

Transformation without container redesign is theatre. This is not an accusation. It is a structural observation.

Leaders inherit Context long before they attempt to change it. That Context defines what is plausible, what is rewarded, and what feels legitimate. Until leaders examine that inheritance, Identity work is constrained by invisible architecture.

*Most leaders believe they are
designing strategy when they are
actually operating inside a
container they did not build.*

The real question is not, “What strategy are we pursuing?” It is, “What container is stabilising who we are being?”

Case Study: Microsoft

In 2014, Satya Nadella became the CEO of Microsoft. At the time, the company was profitable but brittle. Its culture prized competition over collaboration, and technical brilliance over empathy. The system worked, but it did not learn well. Nadella realised that the tank itself needed redesigning. He began by shifting the Context from “know-it-all” to “learn-it-all.” That phrase, quiet and almost playful, changed everything.

He redesigned the language first. Curiosity became the mark of leadership. Humility became a strength. He then reshaped space and rhythm, creating cross-functional collaboration forums that disrupted silos. Over time, the company’s diversity and inclusion work deepened the reset by forcing the system to accommodate difference rather than protect sameness. In Context terms, diversity became a mechanism for surfacing assumptions the system had stopped questioning.

This is how diversity operates when understood correctly: not as representation for its own sake, but as Context pluralism. Under Nadella, Microsoft did not simply modernise. It expanded the range of possibilities the system could hold.

The Governing System as a Single Frame

When the inherited Context is examined, it must be examined as a shared architecture.

In the post-crisis era, the Northbridge Financial Group Board and executive team genuinely intended to transform Identity. Yet in meeting after meeting, the inherited logic surfaced. Directors asked for risk reduction while also querying why returns lagged peers. Executives presented prudence while defending revenue velocity. Compensation committees reviewed pay structures that continued to place heavy weight on annual performance. Audit and risk committees expanded oversight without altering underlying capital expectations.

No one explicitly defended the old Identity. It reappeared through the governance rhythm. The agenda order signalled priority. Quarterly performance reviews preceded strategic repositioning. Incentive

discussions referenced peer benchmarks before long-term trust metrics. Investor roadshows emphasised stability before capability redesign.

This was not hypocrisy. It was structural consistency. The Board and executive team were attempting to stand in a new Identity while operating inside a container designed for the old one.

Identity Viability Inside an Inherited Container

Identity is not sustained by declaration. It is sustained by viability.

A leadership team can declare itself long-term oriented, customer-centric, risk-disciplined, or innovation-driven. Those identities will only stabilise if the container makes them viable. Viability is determined by what is rewarded, tolerated, and legitimised in governance interactions.

At Northbridge Financial Group, a senior executive proposed a structural shift in compensation: reduce short-term revenue weighting and increase deferred, long-term, trust-based metrics. The logic aligned with the declared transformation, but it triggered discomfort. Directors asked how investors would react. Executives worried about losing high performers to competitors. Advisers presented peer analysis showing that most competitors retained heavy annual weighting in bonus structures. One director asked quietly, “If we change this and they do not, how do we defend the impact on next year’s earnings?” The room fell silent. The real question was not technical. It was Context. Were they prepared to accept short-term comparative disadvantage to stabilise a different Identity?

The proposal was moderated rather than adopted. No one rejected the principle of long-term Identity. The container signalled that deviation from peer norms carried risk.

This is where institutional pressure becomes operational. Legitimacy anxiety constrains Identity expansion. Boards and executives evaluate not only what is strategically right, but what is defensible relative to the frame.

When defensibility dominates, conformity prevails.

The Architecture of Legitimacy

Every governing system operates inside a frame of legitimacy expectations. At Northbridge Financial Group, that frame includes regulators, rating agencies, institutional investors, proxy advisers, and media commentators. Each reinforces particular metrics and narratives. Return on equity, capital ratios, cost efficiency, and market share become shorthand for competence. Deviating from those metrics without a clear explanation invites scrutiny.

Boards and executive teams internalise this frame. They anticipate external reaction. They shape proposals accordingly. Over time, the anticipation becomes preemptive. Leaders self-regulate before a challenge occurs.

The result is that inherited Context becomes self-reinforcing. The governing system may believe it is acting independently. In practice, it is responding to a shared architecture of legitimacy. This does not mean deviation is impossible. It means deviation requires explicit redesign.

From Awareness to Redesign

If Context is inherited architecture, then transformation requires architectural intervention. Boards and executive teams must ask together:

- Which elements of our container were designed for a different era?
- Which incentives and measures reinforce the Identity we claim to be leaving behind?
- Which governance rhythms stabilise short-termism even as we speak of long-term ambition?
- Which peer comparisons are constraining imagination?

At Northbridge Financial Group, meaningful change began when the Board and executive team treated compensation, capital allocation, and agenda sequencing as Context levers rather than administrative processes.

The shift was not cosmetic. It altered viability. Executives who previously felt tension between declared Identity and lived incentives now experienced alignment. Directors who feared reputational risk found that clarity of long-term positioning reduced rather than increased scrutiny. The organisation did not become radically different overnight. It became structurally consistent.

The container began to stabilise a new Identity.

The Governing Loop That Recreates the Old World

The most dangerous feature of inherited Context is not that it is strong. It is that it is self-reinforcing. Boards and leadership teams become trapped in a loop:

1. External frame pressure rises – investors and analysts focus on near-term metrics. Regulators heighten scrutiny. Media narrative sharpens.
2. Legitimacy becomes fragile – the governing system experiences anxiety, even if no one names it.
3. The governing rhythm tightens – agendas move toward risk, variance, and reassurance. Decision rights are centralised. Confidence becomes the priority.
4. Incentives follow the rhythm – short-term performance is rewarded because it is visible and defensible. Longer-term capability work becomes discretionary.
5. Identity contracts – leaders enact the self the system now rewards: cautious, controlled, “realistic.”
6. External parties respond positively to the signals – short-term reassurance produces temporary relief, reinforcing the loop.

The loop is locally rational and globally destructive. It creates stability at the cost of trajectory. It also creates a moral illusion: leaders begin to equate contraction with maturity, and generation with recklessness.

This is why transformation efforts often fail. They attempt to change behaviour while leaving the loop intact.

A Practical Redesign Method Boards and Leadership Teams Can Run

If the container is architectural, the redesign must be structural. Boards and leadership teams must treat Context as something they are responsible for authoring together, not as something they are passively subject to.

The method is structural rather than motivational, and it can be run by any governing team prepared to examine what they have inherited.

Step 1: Name the inherited Identity – not the aspirational Identity, the enacted one. What does this organisation currently reward as credible? What kind of leader is promoted here? What kind of language survives in the room? If this is uncomfortable, it is probably accurate.

Step 2: Identify the stabilising levers – pick the three to five levers that most strongly keep that Identity in place. In most organisations, it is some combination of remuneration, performance measures, agenda sequencing, and decision rights. Ask a brutally practical question: if we wanted the old Identity to persist, what would we keep exactly as-is?

Step 3: Declare the future Context as already real. This is not a strategy statement. It is a description of the environment you intend to inhabit. What will be normal here? What will be easy? What will be unacceptable? What will the Board routinely ask first? What will the executive team routinely protect?

Step 4: Redesign two levers immediately. Do not attempt to redesign everything. Choose two levers with high signalling power. At Northbridge Financial Group, that meant remuneration weighting and meeting rhythm. If the first thirty minutes of Board meetings are always variance and downside, you have taught the system what matters. If remuneration still pays more for velocity than for stewardship, you have taught the system what matters.

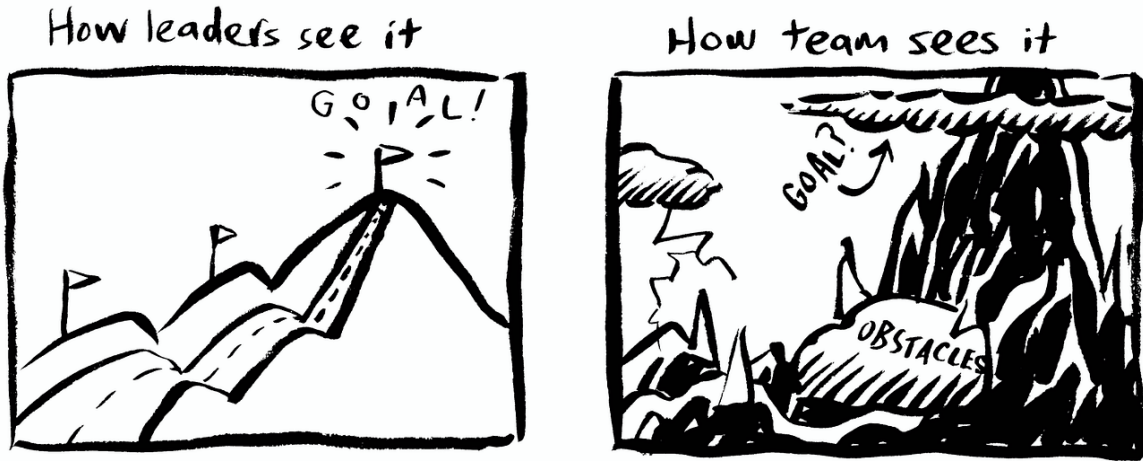
Step 5: Align external legitimacy with internal Identity – this is the step most governing systems avoid because it feels exposed. If you want a different Identity, you must explain it externally in a way that makes sense to investors and regulators. That does not mean oversharing, but it does mean coherence. The organisation must be able to say: “Here is the trajectory we are protecting, here is how we will measure it, and here is why short-term variance is a feature of disciplined investment, not a failure of control.”

Step 6: Run a quarterly Context audit – not an employee survey, but a governance audit. At the Board and executive tables, review agendas, decisions, incentives, and language. Ask: which Identity did we reward this quarter? Which horizon did we inhabit? Where did we re-enact the inherited container? Where did we author the new one?

This method is not theoretical. It is what Boards and leadership teams already do when they take risk management seriously. The difference is that Context is being treated as a design responsibility rather than as background noise.

A Default Context is already present before any conversation begins. Often, there is a sharp mismatch between the Context held by the Board and executives and the Context lived by the teams who must deliver. Sometimes the “leader” Context exists mainly in spreadsheets and slide decks, while the delivery

Context is operational friction, trade-offs, and constraints. The same words land differently because the container is different. The cartoon below captures that mismatch with uncomfortable accuracy.



Applied Leadership Inquiry

Pick one leadership forum you control (Board agenda, ELT meeting, monthly performance review, project steering group).

1. Identify the inherited “first question” in that forum. What does the meeting reliably start with? Variance, risk, reassurance, blame, control, delivery? That is the container teaching people what matters.
2. Change the sequence for four weeks. Start with the trajectory and position before the variance. Or start with what is being created before what is being protected. Then observe what shifts in tone, language, and proposal quality.
3. Choose one lever that will make the new sequence real. A single agenda item moved earlier. A single measure added. A single recognition signal changed. Not a programme. A visible repeatable cue.

You are not trying to motivate people into a new Identity. You are making a different Identity easier to inhabit.

Reflection

- What parts of your organisational container were designed for an era you no longer live in?
- Which two levers most strongly stabilise the Identity you are trying to leave behind?
- Where does the sequencing of the Board’s or executive’s agenda quietly train senior leaders to contract?
- What would it look like to make the Generated Future a lived Context rather than a declared ambition?
- What legitimacy story must you tell externally so the new Identity becomes defensible?

*There is always a Context already
present before the conversation
begins.*

Chapter 5

Designing the Container

If Context shapes Identity, who is responsible for designing it?

Leadership becomes deliberate when leaders recognise that the environment shaping behaviour is not fixed, but can be designed.

Context Is Not Background. It Is Leadership Work

Most governance and leadership systems treat Context as an outcome. Culture is reviewed annually, engagement scores are discussed periodically, and reputation is monitored through surveys and media coverage. These are lagging indicators.

If Context shapes Identity, and Identity shapes behaviour, then Context is not background. It is leadership work.

Boards and executive teams are not merely responsible for strategy and performance. They are responsible for the architecture that makes certain behaviours viable and others untenable. When that architecture is inherited, leaders often adapt to it unconsciously. When it is deliberately designed, leaders consciously author it.

The difference between those two states is not subtle. It determines the trajectory.

Designing the container is not about slogans or purpose statements. It is about the structural levers that stabilise Identity. If those levers remain aligned with yesterday's logic, tomorrow's ambition will remain rhetorical. The governing question is not "What strategy are we pursuing?" It is "What kind of Context are we making normal?"

The Illusion of Strategy Without Design

Context does not stabilise around intention. It stabilises around repetition. Many Boards and leadership teams believe they are designing Context when they approve a strategy refresh. They commission new narratives, articulate ambition, and adjust reporting lines. These are visible signals.

If remuneration continues to reward quarterly earnings disproportionately, the organisation will orient toward quarterly earnings regardless of declared long-term strategy. If Board agendas open with variance and risk before trajectory and capability, leaders will internalise what matters. If investor communication emphasises resilience without articulating the capability investment, markets will interpret it as caution rather than conviction.

In other words, a new strategy without Context redesign is fragile.

Once the Northbridge Financial Group Board and executive team recognised that they were operating inside an inherited architecture, the work shifted from narrative to design. The question was no longer, “Do we believe in long-term stewardship?” It was, “What must change structurally for long-term stewardship to be the easiest Identity to inhabit?”

That question altered the work.

The Design Variables Leaders Control

Designing the container requires clarity about which levers leaders actually control. Boards, executives, and senior leadership teams often underestimate their influence by treating certain processes as fixed.

There are six variables that consistently shape Context at the governing level.

1. Incentive architecture – what proportion of reward is tied to short-term performance versus long-term value creation? What behaviours are visibly celebrated? What careers accelerate? Incentives do not merely motivate. They signal what is legitimate.
2. Agenda sequencing – what receives attention first in Board and executive meetings? Attention is scarce. The order of discussion trains the organisation about priority.
3. Decision rights – where does authority sit when trade-offs arise between resilience and investment? If escalation consistently resolves toward caution, Identity contracts.

4. Performance measures – which metrics dominate conversation? Which are reported but rarely examined? Measures define reality.
5. External narrative – how does the organisation describe itself to investors, regulators, and employees? External narrative is not marketing. It stabilises internal legitimacy.
6. Capital allocation discipline – how explicitly are defensive and generative investments separated? Without structural protection, generative investment is always vulnerable under pressure.

These variables are not abstract. They are governance choices, and they are routinely reviewed and approved by Boards and leadership teams. Yet they are rarely examined collectively as Context design.

When these levers align with declared Identity, behaviour follows. When they contradict declared Identity, behaviour reverts predictably.

Designing for Identity Viability

Designing the container is not about forcing behaviour. It is about making the desired Identity viable.

If a leadership system declares that it wants disciplined innovation, incentive architecture must reward intelligent risk-taking over flawless caution. Meeting rhythm must allow exploration before interrogation. Capital allocation must protect experimental investment from immediate comparison with mature cash flows. External narrative must prepare investors for variance in pursuit of capability.

Without that alignment, leaders will default to the safer Identity.

The work of design begins with a disciplined question: if we wanted our current Identity to persist unchanged, what would we leave exactly as it is? The answer reveals the architecture. Boards and leadership teams must then choose which elements to redesign. Not symbolically. Structurally.

Context is not an abstract idea. It is the environment leaders create through the signals they repeat.

The most common failure is attempting to redesign too many variables simultaneously. Effective leadership systems begin with two or three levers that carry disproportionate signalling power: remuneration weighting, agenda order, and capital ring-fencing. When those shift, the system feels it. Context changes when repetition changes.

Case Study: Buurtzorg

In 2006, Dutch nurse Jos de Blok founded Buurtzorg with a deceptively simple intention: return home care to a human scale. In the Netherlands, the prevailing model had drifted toward industrial efficiency. Visits were short, scheduling was rigid, supervision was layered, and metrics counted minutes rather than meaning. Nurses were highly trained yet increasingly unable to exercise judgment. Patients became “cases” moved along a process. The Context was clear about one thing: throughput.

Buurtzorg reframed the Context. Instead of building a tighter container, it dissolved most of it. The organisation is composed of small, self-managed teams of neighbourhood nurses, typically around a dozen, who coordinate their own caseloads, set their own schedules, make hiring decisions, and design care around each client's life rather than the logic of a central plan. There is light scaffolding: a digital platform for transparency, a handful of coaches who advise rather than command, and a small back office. Authority sits with the work, not above it.

Buurtzorg is an excellent example of Context shifting Identity, not only because of its structure but because of its stance. The Context is articulated through a few quiet principles: trust professionals, put the person before the procedure, organise care around relationships, and remove anything that interrupts dignity. These are not slogans. They are permissions. They enable nurses to use judgment, to linger when conversation is the medicine, and to coordinate with family and community rather than escalate to bureaucracy. The design is less an apparatus than an invitation: freedom inside a framework of clear purpose.

Results followed, but not because the organisation managed harder. Meaning travelled through the system faster than control could. Patients experienced continuity, the same few nurses rather than a rota of strangers, and nurses experienced authorship because they could shape care rather than comply with it. Costs declined where it mattered over time: fewer preventable complications, fewer handoffs, and less administrative churn. The centre of gravity moved from compliance to care.

Leadership at Buurtzorg looks like presence without possession. De Blok's role has been to hold purpose and remove obstacles, not to specify methods. The organisation uses a minimal set of agreements, shared language, a transparent platform, and coaching that asks questions rather than gives orders, so local intelligence can flourish. When teams face dilemmas, the default response is to engage in conversation among peers rather than escalate to authority. The system carries information through visible peer practice.

The deeper lesson is about Identity beyond the Default Context. Buurtzorg does not treat its structure as sacred. It treats its purpose as steady and its structures as provisional. If a practice serves "humanity above bureaucracy," it stays. If not, it is retired. Control is sparse by design. Creation happens locally and continuously. Contribution, care that leaves people more capable, becomes the measure of success.

There is also a lesson about scale without solidity. Many self-management efforts collapse under growth because freedom without coherence fragments into confusion. Buurtzorg retains coherence not through hierarchy, but through shared narrative and visible practice. The platform makes work legible. The principles make choices comparable. Coaching renews judgment. The organisation expands without hardening because what binds it is not a wall, but a way.

Buurtzorg is proof that Context can be the system. When purpose is clear and trust is real, form can stay light. The leader's power shifts from specifying behaviour to curating conditions. When conditions are curated well, the organisation becomes locally responsive, globally coherent, and resilient.

Case Study: Z Energy – Designing the Container from the First Day

I led Z Energy from its founding in April 2010, when the company transitioned from Shell New Zealand to become an independently owned New Zealand business. What follows is drawn from that experience.

Z did not inherit a neutral container. It inherited a Shell container – global in orientation, compliance-driven, risk-managed through the logic of a multinational operating in a regulated environment, where New Zealand was just one of around one hundred downstream operating companies. The brand, the systems, the governance rhythms, and the interpretive frame were all designed for a different organisation in a different era.

The founding leadership team faced a choice that many newly appointed leaders face but rarely name explicitly: operate inside the inherited container, or design a new one from the first day.

The choice was made early and deliberately. Z would not be Shell with a different logo. It would be a genuinely New Zealand company, with a Context designed to reflect that identity – customer-focused, community-embedded, commercially ambitious, and authentically local. That declaration was not a marketing position. It was a Context commitment. It required the leadership system to ask not only what the strategy would be, but what environment would make that strategy feel natural to inhabit.

The first signal was the brand itself. Replacing Shell – one of the world's most recognised corporate identities – with a squiggly orange logo and the world's shortest email address was not a communication decision. It was a Context signal of unusual clarity. It told every employee, customer, and stakeholder that this organisation intended to inhabit a genuinely different interpretive frame. At one stage, Z ranked second equal with Toyota in New Zealand corporate reputation surveys, behind only Air New Zealand.

However, brand is surface. The deeper container work happened in three areas – language and narrative, incentive and governance architecture, and a founding declaration with structural backing.

For language and narrative, from the outset, Z used the distinction between Default Context and Generated Context as an operational discipline rather than a conceptual framework. Executive teams explicitly named the default story – the given reality inherited from Shell and from the fuel retailing industry – and then asked what the Generated Context could be. This was applied across strategy, brand, sustainability, and culture. When Z developed its first Sustainability Policy in November 2010, the executive team first documented the Default Context: we are right in the middle of the problem, we have a 30 per cent market share of New Zealand's transport fuels, sustainability comes at a cost, and whatever we do will be seen as greenwashing. That was an honest inventory of the inherited frame. The Generated Context – we can be at the heart of the solution, we have an opportunity to make a difference on a scale few New Zealand companies have – required genuine generative work. The distinction between the two became an ongoing organisational discipline rather than a one-time exercise.

For the incentive and governance architecture, the container was reinforced structurally.

Remuneration, meeting rhythm, and what received attention first in executive forums were treated as design decisions rather than administrative defaults. If the organisation claimed to value long-term

stewardship and community relevance, the governance architecture had to make those identities viable – not rhetorical. This included ensuring that strategic capability investment was visible in Board discussions alongside financial performance, and that the organisation's response to major events – including COVID-19 in 2020, where significant cost reductions were achieved in a matter of weeks with fewer than a handful of redundancies while employee engagement rose to record levels – reflected the container that had been designed rather than a reversion to the inherited one.

There was also founding declaration with structural backing. When Z committed to the energy transition, it did not manage the commitment quietly. It became the one of the founding organisations of the Climate Leaders Coalition in 2017. That public Commitment created external accountability for the internal Context. The organisation could not privately revert to the logic of a conventional fuel retailer while its leadership was publicly convening the business response to climate change. The external declaration reinforced the internal container.

The results of deliberate Context design were visible across the organisation's history. The Caltex integration in 2016 delivered all synergies in nine months – half the forecast timeframe. The IPO occurred within three years of founding – against an original investor expectation of five or more years – because the organisation had grown and evolved sufficiently to warrant taking value from the market sooner than anyone had forecast. Employee engagement remained in the top decile of global comparators across the company's independent life, including through the eventual acquisition by Ampol in 2022.

None of these outcomes were produced by strategy alone. They were produced by a container that made certain Identities viable, certain behaviours natural, and certain futures credible – and that sustained those signals consistently over time.

The lesson from Z is precise: the container must be designed before the strategy can be inhabited. When the interpretive frame is built deliberately from the first day, it does not need to be defended rhetorically later. It becomes the environment within which the organisation's best instincts feel normal rather than exceptional. For what it is worth, Context was one of the most commonly used words at Z throughout all of my 13 years there.

When Design Threatens Legitimacy

Redesigning Context is not a technical exercise. It is a legitimacy risk.

Boards and leadership teams understand how to adjust strategy. They understand how to restructure reporting lines. They understand how to recalibrate cost bases. Redesigning the container is different because it threatens the very logic that has historically conferred legitimacy.

At Northbridge Financial Group, once the leadership system accepted that the incentive architecture was misaligned with the declared Identity, the work became materially uncomfortable. Reducing annual revenue weighting in favour of deferred, long-term performance metrics would almost certainly affect short-term earnings visibility. It would also place the firm at variance with competitors who retained traditional structures.

The first resistance did not come from traders or middle management. It surfaced at the Board table. Directors asked how investors would interpret the change. Executives asked how high-performing dealmakers would respond. External advisers provided a peer analysis demonstrating that most comparable firms had not materially altered their weighting. The implicit message was clear: deviation carries exposure.

The redesign question, therefore, shifted from “Is this right?” to “Are we prepared to absorb the legitimacy tension this creates?”

This is where many governing systems retreat. They interpret discomfort as evidence that change is premature. In reality, discomfort is often evidence that the redesign touches architecture rather than surface.

The Leadership System as Author

Designing Context requires a governing system to move from responsive mode to authorship mode. Responsive mode asks, “What will the market tolerate?” Authorship mode asks, “What Context must exist for our declared Identity to be viable, and how do we make that defensible?” The difference is not merely philosophical. It changes what questions get asked and what trade-offs get made.

At Northbridge Financial Group, progress occurred when the Board and executive team reframed the conversation around trajectory rather than comparison. Instead of benchmarking remuneration against peers as the primary reference point, they articulated the long-term capability they were building and the kind of leadership behaviour required to sustain it.

They then sequenced changes deliberately. First, remuneration weighting was adjusted modestly but visibly, increasing deferred components tied to risk-adjusted and trust-based measures.

Second, they altered the rhythm of the meeting. Board agendas were restructured so strategic capability investment preceded quarterly variance review. This was not symbolic. It shifted attention and, therefore, Identity reinforcement.

Third, they separated defensive capital from generative capital in reporting. Rather than allowing capability investment to be compared directly against mature cash-flow business units, they created a transparent framework explaining why variance in those areas was an expected feature of disciplined growth.

Each move carried short-term friction. None was catastrophic. Together, they altered viability.

Executives who previously felt compelled to defend every investment decision in short-term terms now had structural backing. Directors who feared reputational risk discovered that clarity of long-term position reduced rather than increased scrutiny. Investors, when presented with a coherent explanation rather than apologetic hedging, adjusted expectations.

Legitimacy did not collapse. It recalibrated.

Resistance Patterns Inside the System

Redesigning the container exposes fault lines. Senior leaders whose success was built under the inherited architecture may experience the redesign as an erosion of status. Business units optimised for short-term performance may resist the separation of capital streams. Middle management may interpret shifts in agenda sequencing as symbolic rather than substantive.

Boards and leadership teams must anticipate this resistance not as defiance but as rational adaptation to prior signals. The system is defending coherence. The mistake that leadership systems make is to interpret resistance as evidence that the redesign is flawed. Often, it is evidence that the redesign is meaningful.

At Northbridge Financial Group, one senior executive argued that increasing deferred compensation would weaken competitiveness in hiring. The question the Board eventually asked was more clarifying: “What kind of talent are we trying to retain?” If the organisation truly intended to stabilise a long-term

stewardship Identity, then attracting individuals whose primary motivation was annual payout velocity might not be consistent with that aim.

This was not a moral judgment. It was Context alignment. Designing the container forces explicit choices about Identity viability.

A Discipline for Leadership Teams

Designing the container is not a one-off intervention. It is a recurring discipline. Boards and executive teams that treat it as a project will revert to inherited patterns as soon as pressure rises.

The discipline begins with shared authorship. Context cannot be delegated to human resources, strategy teams, or consultants. It is not a cultural initiative; it is a governing act.

A practical sequence for Boards or executive teams looks like this.

1. Make the implicit explicit. In a joint Board and executive session, articulate the Identity currently stabilised by the system, not the aspirational Identity in the strategy document, but the one enacted in performance reviews, remuneration outcomes, and decision trade-offs. Ask directly: if an external observer watched the last six months of meetings, what kind of organisation would they conclude this is.
2. Choose the levers that matter most. Attempting to redesign everything creates noise without stability. High-leverage variables are those that send strong signals quickly. Remuneration weighting, capital ring-fencing, and Board agenda structure are typically among them. When those shift, the governing system experiences itself differently.
3. Institutionalise the review process. At least quarterly, the governing system should audit its own behaviour. Which Identity did we reward this quarter? Which horizon did we inhabit in practice? Where did anxiety narrow our design choices? Without periodic review, inherited patterns resurface quietly.

This discipline is not theoretical. It is no different in structure from risk management. Boards regularly review financial exposures and compliance architecture. Context is simply a different category of exposure: exposure to Identity drift.

The Cost of Not Designing

Some leadership systems resist explicit Context design because it feels artificial. They prefer to believe culture will evolve organically once strategy is clear. That belief confuses emergence with authorship.

In the absence of design, Context will evolve – toward what feels safest, most legitimate, and most immediately defensible. Under competitive pressure, that often means convergence with peers and contraction toward the Predictable future described earlier. The cost is not immediate collapse. It is a gradual erosion of strategic distinctiveness.

When remuneration remains weighted toward short-term metrics, when Board agendas repeatedly foreground variance before trajectory, when capital allocation treats generative investment as discretionary, Identity will follow. The organisation will become disciplined at managing what already exists rather than at creating what does not yet exist.

This may satisfy markets for a period. It rarely builds a competitive advantage.

Boards and executive teams are uniquely positioned to interrupt that erosion because they control the levers that stabilise Identity. If they decline to exercise that responsibility, no amount of leadership development downstream will compensate.

From Inheritance to Intentionality

The transition from inherited Context to designed Context marks a shift in maturity for leadership systems.

In inherited mode, Boards and executive teams react to pressures and attempt to reconcile conflicting demands. In designed mode, they accept that conflicting demands are inevitable and author the environment within which those tensions are initially absorbed and then resolved.

This does not eliminate volatility. It changes how volatility is interpreted. Instead of asking, “What must we cut to reassure?” the leadership system asks, “How do we protect trajectory while navigating?” Instead of asking, “How do we compare this quarter?” it asks, “What architecture are we reinforcing through this comparison?”

Designing the container is therefore an act of stewardship. It recognises that Context is not an accident. It is the cumulative result of repeated leadership choices. Boards and executive teams cannot outsource that work. They are the designers, whether they acknowledge it or not.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Choose one Context lever you can change within thirty days and test it.

Start with the forum where your system teaches itself what matters. Board agenda sequencing, leadership team meeting rhythm, capital allocation gates, remuneration measures, and decision rights. Pick one.

Then run a four-week experiment.

- Week 1: Observe and record. What does the forum reliably start with? What does it end with? Which questions dominate? What gets rewarded explicitly or implicitly?
- Week 2: Change one cue. Move the trajectory and capability discussion before the variance and risk. Require every proposal to articulate strategic upside before mitigating downside.
- Week 3: Make the change visible. Name what you are doing explicitly – not as process improvement or cultural initiative, but as Context design. The language signals that this is governance work, not HR work.
- Week 4: Audit the effect. Did the quality of proposals change? Did people take different risks? Did the room contract or expand?

The objective is not to “get culture right”. It is to make a different Identity easier to inhabit through repetition.

Reflection

- What Identity is currently easiest to inhabit in your governing system?
- Which two design levers most strongly stabilise that Identity?
- Where does your agenda sequencing train attention toward preservation rather than generation?
- How coherent is your external narrative with the Identity you intend to stabilise?
- What would change in the next quarter if you treated Context as a design responsibility rather than a backdrop?

*Leaders rarely control behaviour
directly.*

*They shape the environment in
which behaviour occurs.*

Chapter 6

What You Notice Is Not Neutral

How does Context shape perception before judgment begins?

What leaders notice is shaped by the Context they are already standing inside.

Perception Is Not Passive

Most Boards and executive teams believe they are responding to facts. They review performance reports, examine risk dashboards, interrogate forecasts, and debate major proposals. The assumption underlying this activity is that perception precedes interpretation. First, we see clearly, then we decide.

That assumption is wrong.

Human perception is predictive. The brain does not passively receive information. It anticipates it, fills gaps, and prioritises signals consistent with what it already expects.

For leadership teams, this has profound implications. Context determines what feels plausible. If it emphasises resilience and exposure, leaders will more readily notice downside risk than generative opportunity. If it celebrates growth and expansion, leaders will more readily interpret volatility as temporary rather than structural. The same data can produce different conclusions because attention is shaped before analysis begins.

This is not a flaw in intelligence. It is how cognition works. The danger lies in mistaking Context-shaped perception for objective reality.

How the Agenda Trains Attention

Consider a Board meeting where the first part of the agenda is dedicated to variance analysis and downside exposure. Financial underperformance is dissected, risk scenarios are reviewed, and compliance updates are examined. Only later does the conversation move to strategic capability and long-term positioning.

The sequence is not neutral.

Attention is a finite resource. When early agenda time is consumed by risk and variance, leaders enter subsequent discussions primed to detect fragility. Proposals for investment are interpreted through a lens of exposure rather than opportunity. Leaders are not consciously pessimistic, but they are Context primed.

Reverse the order, and the perceptual frame changes.

When strategic trajectory and capability development are examined first, leaders enter variance discussions anchored in longer-term ambition. The same financial deviation may be interpreted as manageable tension rather than an existential threat.

In both cases, the data is identical. What differs is perceptual framing. Boards and executive teams often debate decisions without recognising that the order and emphasis of their conversations shape what they can see.

Context trains perception through repetition.

Predictive Processing in the Boardroom

The idea that perception is predictive rather than reactive is well established in cognitive science. The brain constantly generates expectations about what it is likely to encounter and updates those expectations when prediction errors occur. Under stable conditions, this process operates quietly. Under uncertainty, expectations become stronger because the brain seeks coherence.

In leadership settings, the expectations that guide perception are rarely personal alone. They are shared.

When analysts repeatedly focus on earnings volatility, the Board and executive team begin expecting volatility to signal weakness. When regulators emphasise compliance failures, leaders expect exposure to

be reputationally catastrophic. When investors reward cost discipline, leaders expect generosity in capital allocation to be punished.

These expectations operate beneath conscious reasoning. They shape which questions are asked, which proposals are trusted, and which risks are deemed intolerable.

At Northbridge Financial Group, once market sentiment turned cautious, the Board and executive team's attention narrowed. Even neutral data was interpreted as confirmation of fragility. A modest revenue shortfall reinforced the expectation of structural decline. A competitor's setback was read as evidence of industry contraction rather than isolated poor execution.

This narrowing was not incompetence. It was a prediction stabilising perception. The governing group did not simply choose caution. It perceived the world as more dangerous.

When Intelligent People See Differently

This is why disagreements in leadership rooms are often intractable. There are no disagreements about numbers. There are disagreements about what those numbers mean.

One director sees a temporary deviation from the trajectory. Another sees early signs of structural erosion. One executive interprets investment variance as expected friction. Another interprets it as evidence of a flawed strategy.

Both are intelligent and acting in good faith. Both are perceiving through a Context lens. Without surfacing that lens, the debate becomes polarised. Leaders try to persuade one another with more data, unaware that their predictive frames differ.

Context, therefore, shapes what leaders are capable of seeing before they begin to reason.

When inherited architecture privileges short-term legitimacy, leaders expect scrutiny and perceive deviations as threats. When redesigned architecture privileges long-term capability, leaders expect tension and perceive deviation as an investment cost.

Identity follows perception because Identity is enacted in response to what leaders believe they are seeing.

What leaders notice is determined before analysis begins. The frame arrives first.

How Pressure Narrows the Frame

In Chapter 3, we examined how pressure contracts Identity toward the Predictable future. The cognitive mechanism beneath that contraction is perceptual narrowing.

When uncertainty rises, predictive expectations tighten. The governing group becomes more confident in what it expects to see and less open to contradictory signals. Attention clusters around confirming evidence. Dissonant information is either discounted or reframed.

In a Board meeting under market scrutiny, this often appears as asymmetry in interrogation. Proposals that increase short-term earnings are examined for operational feasibility. Proposals that require short-term sacrifice to pursue long-term capability are examined for downside risk. The difference is subtle, but consistent.

The group is not consciously biased. It is primed by the Context, which is not always fully understood and mutually agreed.

At Northbridge Financial Group, once volatility entered the system, small pieces of information took on amplified meaning. A modest client attrition trend was interpreted as an early sign of systemic weakness. A regulator's routine inquiry was perceived as a reputational threat. Conversely, signals that might have suggested competitive opportunity were given less weight because they did not align with the dominant expectation of fragility.

The predictive frame had narrowed.

Under such conditions, even strong leaders struggle to advocate for generative investment. Not because they lack conviction, but because the perceptual environment makes their conviction feel misaligned with reality.

Shared Expectation and Collective Blind Spots

Predictive perception is not merely individual. In leadership settings, it becomes collective.

When Boards, executives and senior leadership teams repeatedly reinforce a particular narrative, it stabilises as a shared expectation. The narrative may be explicit, such as “this is a defensive period,” or

implicit, embedded in repeated emphasis on cost and control. Over time, leaders begin to anticipate one another's concerns and pre-edit their contributions accordingly.

This produces collective blind spots.

A strategy proposal that challenges the dominant expectation may never fully surface because its sponsor anticipates scepticism. A risk that contradicts the prevailing narrative may be underweighted because it does not fit the pattern the group expects.

At Northbridge Financial Group, once the narrative of fragility became dominant, discussions about expansion into adjacent markets were routinely deferred. Not formally rejected, simply postponed until "conditions stabilised." Those conditions were never clearly defined. The expectation of instability became self-sustaining.

The Board and executive team were not resistant to growth. They were operating inside a perceptual frame that made growth feel implausible.

The Illusion of Objectivity

Leaders pride themselves on objectivity. They rely on dashboards, scenario modelling, and benchmarking to discipline intuition. These tools are valuable, but they are not immune to Context.

The selection of metrics reflects expectation. The framing of scenarios reflects anticipation. The choice of comparators reflects pressure for legitimacy. If the dominant Context privileges caution, the data architecture will quietly privilege risk visibility over opportunity visibility.

For example, a dashboard may include ten risk indicators and two capability indicators. A capital review pack may contain detailed downside sensitivity analysis, but a single slide on strategic option value. No one designs this asymmetry intentionally. It accumulates through repetition.

This does not mean analysis is futile. It means that perceptual discipline must precede analytical confidence.

Interrupting Perceptual Drift

If Context shapes perception before judgment begins, then redesigning the container is only half the task. Boards and executive teams must also discipline how they attend.

One simple but underused intervention is structured contrast. When reviewing performance variance, require articulation of generative opportunity alongside risk exposure. When examining downside scenarios, require articulation of strategic positioning implications. Force the leadership room to hold both lenses deliberately rather than defaulting to one.

Another intervention is rotating primacy. Do not allow meetings to begin with the same content category every time. If risk always comes first, perception will narrow accordingly. If the trajectory occasionally comes first, attention expands.

A third discipline is explicit expectation surfacing. Before debating a proposal, ask each participant to state what they expect the outcome to be and why. This surfaces predictive assumptions and reduces the illusion of shared objectivity.

At Northbridge Financial Group, progress was made when the Board and executive team began openly setting expectations. Instead of assuming fragility, they asked whether they were interpreting data through a contraction lens. Instead of assuming investor intolerance, they tested messaging in controlled ways. Naming the expectation weakened its unconscious grip.

Perceptual redesign does not require expertise in neuroscience. It requires humility about how cognition works and discipline in structuring attention.

From Perception to Design Responsibility

If perception is predictive and Context shapes prediction, Boards and executive teams cannot treat judgment as a purely rational act. Judgment is structured by what leaders have already been trained to see.

The implication is not that leaders are biased in some simplistic sense. The implication is that perception is environmentally conditioned. Change the environment, and you change what becomes visible.

This returns us to design.

In earlier chapters, we examined inherited architecture and the need to redesign the structural levers that shape Context. Those levers do more than stabilise Identity. They stabilise perception.

If a Board consistently begins its agenda with exposure and downside analysis, it will train itself to notice threats before opportunities. If performance reviews disproportionately emphasise quarterly variance, executives will scan for short-term deviation rather than long-term trajectory. Leaders begin to perceive through the frame that the system repeats.

Conversely, when the leadership environment foregrounds trajectory and protects generative investment, leaders begin to perceive differently. They notice capability gaps earlier. They interpret volatility as investment friction rather than existential failure. They see opportunity where they previously saw only risk.

Perception changes not because leaders are persuaded, but because the frame has shifted.

Avoiding the Two Common Errors

There are two predictable errors that teams make once they understand this dynamic.

The first is paralysis. Leaders conclude that because perception is shaped by Context, objectivity is unattainable. That is equally mistaken. Predictive processing does not eliminate the possibility of sound judgment. It simply requires disciplined design.

The second error is overconfidence. Having recognised that Context shapes perception, leaders assume that simply naming the bias will neutralise it. It will not. Awareness reduces blindness, but repetition rebuilds expectation. Without structural reinforcement, perceptual narrowing returns under pressure.

Boards and executive teams do not need to become cognitive scientists. They need to accept that attention must be structured deliberately.

Practical Perceptual Discipline

A small number of practices can materially reduce perceptual drift.

1. Embed dual-lens review – for major decisions, require articulation of both preservation risk and generative opportunity. Make it procedural rather than optional.
2. Vary primacy – do not allow the same category of issue to dominate opening agenda time across quarters. Rotating emphasis prevents expectation hardening into inevitability.

3. Separate signal from narrative – when reviewing data, explicitly distinguish between observation and interpretation. Ask, “What are we actually seeing?” before asking, “What does this mean?” This simple pause interrupts automatic prediction.
4. Invite dissent before consensus – predictive frames stabilise quickly when early agreement forms. Structured dissent surfaces alternative interpretations before they are socially costly.
5. Review language – phrases such as “the market won’t tolerate” or “investors expect” should be interrogated. Sometimes they are accurate. Sometimes they are inherited assumptions masquerading as facts.

These disciplines are not elaborate. They are leadership hygiene.

You cannot control market volatility. You cannot eliminate regulatory pressure. You cannot dictate investor sentiment. However, you can design the environment within which those forces are interpreted.

That design determines whether intelligent leaders contract toward safety or expand toward authorship.

The Architecture Beneath Leadership



Results differ because Context differs



Context shapes expectations



Expectations shape Identity under pressure



Context shifts through signals, not declarations



Behaviour follows the environment people interpret events inside of

Leadership changes when leaders stop managing behaviour and start designing the Context that produces it

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Choose one recurring leadership forum where decisions are made. This may be a Board meeting, an executive meeting, or a capital allocation review.

Observe the perceptual signals embedded in that forum.

1. What information appears first in the agenda?
2. Which metrics receive the most time and interrogation?
3. Which types of proposals are questioned most aggressively?
4. Which assumptions are rarely challenged?

Then run one simple intervention. For the next four meetings, deliberately reverse one perceptual cue. Begin with the trajectory before the variance. Examine the opportunity before exposure. Ask participants to articulate expectations before reviewing data.

Observe what changes.

- Do different possibilities become visible?
- Do leaders interpret variance differently?
- Does the room become more exploratory or more defensive?

Perception does not change through instruction. It changes through the environment leaders repeatedly experience.

Reflection

- Where is your attention most predictably drawn in meetings?
- What expectations shape how you interpret variance?
- Which agenda patterns train your leadership team to see threat before opportunity?
- What simple procedural changes would widen perception without sacrificing discipline?
- If perception is shaped by Context, what Context are you choosing to stabilise?

*What people notice determines
what they believe is possible.*

Chapter 7

The Context You Did Not Know You Were Standing In

What happens when leaders are operating inside different Contexts?

Different people can inhabit the same organisation while interpreting entirely different realities.

The Context Already in the Room

Before any Board or leadership meeting begins, before any strategy discussion opens, before any declaration is made, a Context is already operating. It does not appear on the agenda, and it rarely announces itself. It is simply there.

This book has referred to three distinct positions on what it calls the Context Spectrum. The Default Context is the interpretation already running before anyone speaks. The Declared Context is the future leaders say they are committed to creating. The Generated Context is the environment constructed and sustained through deliberate, repeated signals. Most leadership conversations about performance, strategy, and transformation assume the organisation is operating at the Generated end of the spectrum. Most of the time, it is not.

Understanding where an organisation sits on the Context Spectrum – and how it moves between those positions – is the practical work this chapter addresses.

The Default Context determines what sounds reasonable and what sounds unrealistic. It determines which risks feel tolerable and which feel reckless. It determines which ambitions feel credible and which feel naïve.

It is not chosen in the moment. It is accumulated over time as a residue, some of which happened before you even joined the organisation. It is shaped by past performance, prior crises, regulatory encounters, investor reactions, leadership history, reward structures, and informal stories about what “works around here.”

It feels normal precisely because it is familiar. And because it feels normal, it is rarely examined.

When a CEO declares a new trajectory, the declaration lands inside this default frame. If the Default Context is defensive, the declaration will be heard cautiously. If the Default Context is growth-driven, the same declaration may be heard as overdue. If the Default Context is reputationally anxious, ambition will be filtered through exposure.

Nothing is heard neutrally. This is why intention so often fails to translate into change. Leaders attempt to introduce a Generated Context without acknowledging the Default one already operating. The old frame simply absorbs the new language.

How Default Context Holds

Every organisation stabilises around a dominant Default Context. It may be commercially aggressive. It may be conservatively risk managed. It may be technically excellent but relationally brittle. It may be collaborative but slow. Whatever its character, it becomes embedded in leadership architecture.

The dominant Default Context is not merely shared opinion. It is reinforced through power:

- It lives in agenda sequencing.
- It lives in remuneration weighting.
- It lives in which questions are praised in meetings.
- It lives in those who are described as “commercial” or “strategic.”
- It lives in what makes people uncomfortable.

Default Context is not neutral infrastructure. It is actively maintained by those whose Identity it validates – the leaders whose instincts it rewards, whose proposals it elevates, and whose authority it confirms. Challenging it therefore feels, to those who benefit from it, less like intellectual disagreement and more like a threat to the system itself.

Leaders whose predictive models align with the dominant Context are perceived as credible. Those whose models diverge may be experienced as difficult, unrealistic, or misaligned. This is not necessarily deliberate exclusion. It is structural coherence.

When the Default Context favours quarterly precision, leaders who advocate for long-term experimentation may be interpreted as careless. When the Default Context prioritises reputational safety, leaders who advocate for bold positioning may be interpreted as imprudent. In each case, diversity of perspective exists. What determines whether it survives is whether the container allows that divergence to be held constructively.

If the Default Context remains invisible, diversity collapses into assimilation. Competing perceptual frames are gradually trained to conform.

Diversity as Context Difference

Diversity is often discussed in terms of representation. Representation matters, but at a deeper level, diversity introduces Context multiplicity.

Individuals from different professional pathways, cultural backgrounds, or socio-economic experiences carry different predictive assumptions about how systems behave. They expect different reactions from markets, interpret volatility differently, and assign weight differently.

When those individuals enter a Board or executive room, the organisation now contains multiple Context frames.

If the Default Context is unexamined, one of two outcomes follows. Either the dominant frame absorbs alternative interpretations, narrowing perception toward conformity, or competing frames remain unintegrated, producing fragmentation and misalignment.

Neither outcome improves performance. The opportunity is not to eliminate differences. It is to surface the Default Context explicitly so that it can be held lightly rather than unconsciously defended.

Displacing Default Context

Generated Context does not automatically replace the Default Context. It must displace it deliberately.

Displacement does not mean rejection. Default Context often contains hard-won competence. It reflects how the organisation survived, but survival logic is not always the same as trajectory logic.

For leaders to shift trajectory, they must first name the Default Context they are operating inside.

- Are we operating inside a preservation frame?
- Are we optimising for legitimacy relative to peers?
- Are we quietly anchored to a prior crisis?
- Are we over-indexed to one stakeholder group?

Until these questions are asked, any attempt to design a new container will be filtered through the existing one.

Displacement begins with acknowledgement. When the Default Context is named, it loses some of its unconscious authority. Leaders can begin to examine whether it aligns with their declared trajectory or quietly constrains it.

Only then can the diversity of perception become an asset rather than a source of friction.

When Leaders See Different Organisations

Once the Default Context is recognised, a pattern becomes visible in leadership rooms. Intelligent leaders can look at the same information and draw very different conclusions. The difference is rarely in analytical capability. It is Context interpretation.

In many organisations, this shows up during moments of expansion or strategic change. The Board and executive team may agree broadly on ambition, yet disagree sharply on timing, scale, or acceptable risk. These disagreements are often framed as differences of judgment. In reality, there are differences in Context.

Consider a global consumer company expanding into emerging markets. Early results are uneven. Revenues grow quickly in some regions but fluctuate in others. Supply chains occasionally falter and regulatory conditions shift frequently.

Executives based in established markets interpret the volatility as operational fragility. Their instinct is to slow expansion, strengthen controls, and consolidate before committing additional capital.

Leaders with experience in emerging markets see something different. For them, volatility is a normal stage of market formation. Their instinct is to accelerate investment before competitors establish footholds.

The data is identical. The Contexts are not. Without naming the Context difference, debate becomes positional. One side appears cautious and disciplined. The other appears optimistic and opportunistic. Each believes the other is misreading reality.

In truth, both are interpreting reality through the Context they know.

The Gap Between Default and Declared Context

This dynamic becomes more complicated once declared Context enters the conversation.

Most organisations have a declared Context. It appears in strategy documents, investor presentations, and leadership messaging. It expresses what the organisation intends to become.

Declared Context matters. It signals direction. However, the declared Context does not automatically displace the Default Context.

In the expansion example, the company's declared Context emphasised global growth and long-term market leadership. That language appeared repeatedly in strategy documents and investor briefings. Yet in Board discussions, the Default Context remained anchored in stability and control, reflecting the company's long history of operating in mature (that is, predictable) markets.

When volatility appeared, leaders reverted to the interpretive logic of the Default Context rather than the ambition of the declared one. This is common. Organisations speak one Context and inhabit another.

Alignment does not come from agreement alone. It comes from a shared interpretation of what the situation means.

Generated Context and Leadership Choice

This is where the Generated Context enters.

Generated Context is neither inherited nor merely declared. It is constructed and reinforced through behaviour, structure, and repetition.

For a Generated Context to stabilise, leaders must first acknowledge the Default Context already operating. Without that acknowledgement, the default frame absorbs the new language, and nothing changes.

In the expansion example, progress occurred when the Board and executive team explicitly named the tension they were experiencing. They recognised that their Default Context was one of operational precision built in stable markets. They also recognised that their declared Context emphasised global growth. Those two Contexts were not aligned with the realities of the new markets they were entering.

The question therefore shifted from “Who is right?” to “What Context do we want to operate inside?”

That question reframed the discussion. Rather than debating individual decisions, the leadership group examined how their meeting rhythm, capital allocation rules, and performance expectations reinforced the Default Context of stability. They then considered what structural adjustments would be required for a Generated Context of disciplined expansion to become viable.

The debate became architectural rather than personal.

When Diversity Strengthens Perception

Once Default Context is surfaced, the divergence that previously felt like disagreement begins to function differently. Leaders with different Context experiences are not misreading the situation – they are reading it through a different frame. That difference becomes an advantage rather than a friction point.

Different Context experiences allow leaders to test whether their interpretations are constrained by the dominant frame. Instead of assuming disagreement reflects poor judgment, leaders can examine whether it reflects different assumptions and interpretations about Context.

In the expansion example, the leaders with emerging-market experience were no longer viewed as overly optimistic. They were recognised as operating with a different predictive model. Their insights became valuable signals about how the organisation might need to adapt its architecture to succeed in those environments.

The leadership room moved from argument toward inquiry. The critical shift was not the resolution of disagreement. It was the recognition that Context itself was shaping what each leader considered plausible.

Once that was visible, the group could begin designing a Context capable of holding those perspectives productively.

Designing a Context That Can Hold Differences

Once leaders recognise Default Context and the limits of a Declared Context, the work shifts toward generation. Generated Context is not simply a stronger declaration of intent. It is the deliberate creation of a frame within which multiple perspectives can coexist without destabilising direction.

This is where leadership maturity becomes visible.

In many organisations, disagreements about interpretation quickly become disagreements about loyalty. Leaders who challenge prevailing assumptions are perceived as obstructive, while those who reinforce the dominant narrative are perceived as aligned.

Generated Context changes this dynamic. When leaders consciously author the Context they want to operate within, disagreement can be reframed as information rather than a threat. Competing interpretations become signals about how different parts of the organisation experience reality.

The task of leadership is no longer to eliminate those differences. It is to design a container that sharpens perception rather than fragments it.

The Discipline of Naming the Default

The first step is explicit acknowledgement of the Default Context. Boards and executive teams rarely do this because Default Context feels obvious. It is simply “how things are done.” Yet once it is named, it becomes visible as a choice rather than a law of nature.

Leaders can ask a small set of questions that surface the default frame quickly:

- What assumptions about risk are we bringing into this discussion?
- What outcomes feel credible to us before we examine the data?
- Which stakeholder reactions are we anticipating without testing?
- What past experience is quietly shaping our interpretation?

These questions do not eliminate the Default Context. They make it examinable. Once visible, it can be held lightly rather than unconsciously defended.

Separating Declaration from Generation

The second discipline is distinguishing declaration from generation. Many leadership teams assume that repeated messaging eventually becomes reality, but declaration alone rarely displaces the Default Context. It must be reinforced through structure and behaviour.

If leaders declare a Context of disciplined growth but continue rewarding short-term optimisation, the Default Context will prevail. If leaders declare openness to challenge but visibly reward conformity, dissent will disappear.

Generation requires alignment. Meeting rhythm, capital allocation decisions, incentive structures, and leadership evaluation must all reinforce the same interpretive frame. When these elements align, leaders experience the Generated Context as real rather than aspirational.

Without alignment, Declared Context remains rhetoric. When Generated Context is genuinely present, leaders notice it not as an achievement but as a shift in what feels natural. Ambitious proposals no longer require special justification. Disagreement no longer feels disloyal. The organisation begins interpreting uncertainty as a feature of the trajectory rather than a threat to it. That shift in the texture of daily experience is the signal that the Generated Context has stabilised.

Protecting Context Breadth

The final discipline is protecting perceptual breadth. Diversity of experience expands what leadership teams are capable of seeing, but only if the container allows those differences to surface without penalty.

Some Boards and executive teams create explicit space for minority interpretations before major decisions. Others rotate who frames agenda items so that different Context perspectives lead the conversation. Some require leadership teams to articulate both the preservation logic and the generative logic of major investments.

These practices do not guarantee agreement. They ensure that perception remains wide enough to support intelligent judgment. Over time, this breadth becomes stabilising rather than disruptive. Leaders learn that disagreement about interpretation is not a threat to direction. It is how direction becomes robust.

Context as Leadership Work

The deeper lesson of this chapter is simple. Context is not a passive backdrop. It is leadership work.

The Default Context will always exist. Declared Context will always be articulated. The question that determines the trajectory is whether leaders take responsibility for generating the frame in which decisions are interpreted.

When they do, diversity strengthens perception and makes ambition credible. When they do not, the dominant Default Context quietly absorbs difference, and the organisation continues along a path that feels inevitable but was never consciously chosen.

Generated Context is therefore not an abstract concept of leadership. It is the practical work of designing the conditions in which intelligent disagreement can sharpen rather than fragment judgment.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Choose one leadership forum where direction is set. This may be a Board strategy discussion, an executive planning meeting, or a leadership offsite. Observe the signals that shape how the room interprets the future:

1. What language is used when ambition is discussed?

2. Which risks receive the most attention?
3. Which possibilities are explored briefly and then abandoned?
4. What expectations about realism or caution appear early in the conversation?

Then run one simple intervention. At the next meeting, deliberately introduce a signal that reinforces the Generated Future. Begin the discussion by outlining the trajectory the organisation intends to pursue, then examine current constraints. Ask participants to articulate what success would look like if the organisation fully pursued that direction.

Observe what changes:

- How do participants frame challenges differently?
- How do previously cautious ideas become more legitimate to explore?
- How does the room begin interpreting uncertainty as possibility rather than exposure?

Context is rarely established through a single declaration. It is stabilised through the signals leaders repeatedly introduce into the conversations where direction is set.

Reflection

- What Default Context is already shaping how your leadership team interprets risk and opportunity?
- Where does your declared Context diverge from the Context actually reinforced by incentives and decisions?
- Which perspectives inside your organisation currently sit outside the dominant interpretive frame?
- What structural changes would allow those perspectives to strengthen rather than destabilise leadership judgment?

*Different people can stand in the
same situation and experience
completely different worlds.*

Chapter 8

Shifting Context

What actually shifts Context inside an organisation?

Context shifts not through declaration alone, but through repeated changes in the signals that shape how people interpret reality.

When Saying Something New Does Not Change Anything

If Context shapes what people see, what they believe is possible, and how they interpret risk, then leadership eventually arrives at an uncomfortable realisation. Declaring a new direction is rarely enough to change anything.

Most leaders have experienced this directly. A strategy is announced. A transformation programme begins. The leadership team speaks repeatedly about the future they intend to create. Then, quietly, behaviour returns to what it was before.

Decisions follow familiar patterns. Meetings focus on the same priorities. Risk tolerance settles back to previous levels. The organisation begins to sound as though the transformation never happened.

This pattern is so common that it is often explained away as resistance to change. People, the story goes, simply prefer the familiar. While there is some truth in that observation, it misses the deeper structural explanation.

The problem is not that people resist change. The problem is that the Context did not move.

When leaders introduce a new strategy without shifting the surrounding interpretive frame, the existing Context quietly absorbs the new language. The organisation hears the declaration, but interprets it through the assumptions already present.

In other words, the Default Context remains intact.

When this happens, the strategy or transformation becomes something that is discussed but not lived. It exists as a Declared Context rather than a Generated Context.

This distinction is subtle but important. Declared Context describes the future leaders say they are committed to creating. Generated Context describes the interpretive environment people actually experience when making decisions.

Most organisations operate with a gap between the two.

The organisation therefore adapts the new language to the existing frame rather than allowing the frame itself to change.

If Context is to shift, the environment that people experience must begin to change in visible ways. The signals that tell people what matters must move. Over time, those signals accumulate into a different interpretive frame, and behaviour begins to align with the future that leaders declared.

This is the practical work of leadership.

Context does not shift because of a single speech or announcement. It shifts through repeated signals that gradually alter what people notice, expect, and believe is legitimate. Those signals are transmitted through many channels: language, decisions, stories, presence, metrics, and the organisation's physical and structural environment.

Each of these channels carries Context information. When leaders understand this, the question of transformation changes. Instead of asking how to persuade people to adopt a new strategy, leaders ask a more precise question: What signals must change for the organisation to begin interpreting the world differently?

This question moves leadership attention away from messaging and toward design.

The leader's role becomes the deliberate shaping of the environment in which decisions are interpreted. That environment determines whether ambition feels credible or unrealistic, whether experimentation feels responsible or reckless, and whether challenge feels constructive or disloyal.

Once this becomes visible, the practical challenge of shifting Context becomes clearer. Leaders must change the signals that define the environment.

Over time, several patterns appear repeatedly in organisations that successfully move their Context. Although the specific actions differ across industries and cultures, the underlying mechanisms are surprisingly consistent. Leaders shift Context by altering the cues that people use to interpret reality.

In practice, Context shifts through six consistent mechanisms. Each alters how people interpret events – and therefore how they act.

They appear in the language leaders use to frame problems and possibilities. They appear in the declarations leaders make about the future they are committed to creating. They appear in the stories and metaphors that circulate through the organisation and shape how events are understood. They appear in the mood and presence of leadership itself, which communicates emotional signals about risk and confidence. They appear in what the organisation measures, rewards, and celebrates. And they appear in the time horizons that guide decision-making and investment.

When these signals change consistently, Context begins to move. When they remain unchanged, the Default Context quietly reasserts itself.

The following sections examine these mechanisms more closely. None of them is complex. Yet together they form the practical architecture through which leaders shift the interpretive frame of an organisation.

Context moves when the environment changes. Leadership, therefore, begins not with persuasion but with design.

The Signals That Move Context

Leaders often imagine Context as something abstract, almost atmospheric. In practice, it is transmitted through a small number of repeated signals. People infer what matters by observing how leaders frame problems, how they justify decisions, and what behaviour is rewarded or challenged.

When these signals remain stable, Context remains stable. When they change consistently, the organisation's interpretive frame begins to shift.

*Declaring a new future does not
change Context. Changing the
signals people experience does.*

Across industries and leadership cultures, several mechanisms recur in organisations that successfully shift Context. Each mechanism alters how people interpret events and, therefore, how they behave in response.

Case Study: Toyota – Changing the Meaning of a Problem

In most manufacturing environments, stopping the production line is interpreted as failure. A halted line means delay, missed targets, and managerial scrutiny. Problems are managed quietly, workarounds emerge, and defects are often discovered only after products reach customers.

Toyota deliberately designed a different interpretation.

On Toyota production lines, every worker can pull a cord known as the andon cord. When the cord is pulled, the production line slows or stops and a signal alerts supervisors and nearby colleagues that assistance is required. The mechanism itself is simple. What matters is the Context surrounding it.

Inside Toyota, pulling the cord does not signify incompetence. It signifies responsibility.

Workers are expected to stop the line when they encounter a problem they cannot immediately resolve. Supervisors respond quickly, not to assign blame but to help diagnose the issue. The goal is not to restore motion as quickly as possible. The goal is to understand what the problem is revealing about the system.

This practice reframes the meaning of a problem. Instead of something to conceal, a problem becomes an invitation to learn.

The impact of that Context shift is profound. When workers know that raising a concern will be met with curiosity rather than criticism, information flows more freely. Small anomalies surface early rather than accumulating quietly. Patterns become visible before they become costly. Over time, the organisation becomes more capable not because it avoids problems, but because it sees them sooner.

The physical cord is not the insight. The insight is the interpretive environment in which the cord exists.

Toyota's production system is often described as a set of techniques: lean manufacturing, just-in-time supply chains, and continuous improvement. Those elements matter, but they depend on the Context

shift that the andon system represents. Workers are not rewarded for hiding imperfections. They are expected to reveal them.

In this environment, stopping the line does not disrupt performance. It is an expression of stewardship.

The lesson is not about manufacturing practice. It is about how meaning is constructed. A single structural signal, repeated consistently, can change how an entire organisation interprets its work.

At Toyota, a problem does not occur as a failure. It occurs as information.

Once that interpretation becomes normal, behaviour follows naturally. People surface issues earlier, collaborate more openly, and learn faster. The organisation becomes resilient not because it avoids errors, but because its Context encourages the rapid discovery of them.

Reframing Language

Language does more than describe reality. It frames how reality is understood. Language therefore shapes what leaders notice before they decide what something means.

Small shifts in language can alter how people approach problems. A team that describes an initiative as an “objective” tends to focus on completion. A team that describes the same initiative as an “outcome” begins asking whether the work actually changed anything. The word directs attention toward impact rather than activity.

The same dynamic appears when organisations shift from asking what was “wrong” to asking what was “missing.” The first framing encourages defensiveness and justification. The second encourages investigation and learning. The event being discussed has not changed, yet its interpretation becomes very different.

Leaders sometimes dismiss these distinctions as semantics. In reality, they are Context signals. Language determines whether problems are interpreted as failures, opportunities, or incomplete understanding. Over time, those interpretations shape how people respond to uncertainty.

A leader who consistently reframes language is therefore altering the Context in which decisions are made. The organisation begins to approach problems differently because the words used to describe those problems have shifted.

Declaring Possibility and Commitment

Declarations also alter Context by shaping expectations about the future. There is a meaningful difference between a leader saying, “We will try to improve performance,” and saying, “We will become the benchmark in this sector.” The first signals cautious ambition. The second signals Commitment.

Declarations create a horizon that people begin organising around. When leaders make strong declarations about the future, they implicitly redefine what counts as success and what counts as acceptable effort. People adjust their behaviour accordingly.

This does not mean declarations should be theatrical or unrealistic. In fact, the most powerful declarations are often simple and direct. What matters is that the declaration establishes a credible future that the organisation begins to treat as real.

Once that happens, decisions begin aligning with that future rather than merely reacting to present conditions.

Stories and Metaphors

Stories travel through organisations faster than strategy documents. Every organisation accumulates stories about past events. Some stories describe bold decisions that opened new opportunities. Others describe mistakes that leaders are determined not to repeat. These stories become interpretive templates. When new situations arise, people unconsciously compare them with the narratives they already know.

Leaders shape Context by influencing which stories circulate. If the dominant narrative in an organisation celebrates careful risk management, employees will interpret new opportunities cautiously. If the narrative celebrates decisive expansion, employees will interpret the same opportunities differently.

Metaphors operate in a similar way. A metaphor such as “the tank we swim in” immediately shifts how people understand organisational behaviour. Instead of blaming individuals for their decisions, attention shifts to the environment that shapes them.

Stories and metaphors, therefore, act as carriers of Context. They teach people how to interpret events before those events even occur.

Mood and Leadership Presence

Context is also transmitted through emotional signals.

Leaders often underestimate how strongly their presence influences the interpretive environment of a room. When senior leaders appear tense, impatient, or defensive, the surrounding Context becomes cautious. People narrow their thinking and minimise risk.

When leaders appear calm, curious, and confident, the range of possible interpretations expands. People become more willing to explore alternatives and challenge assumptions.

These signals are rarely intentional. Yet they are powerful because people instinctively read the emotional climate of leadership as information about what behaviour is safe.

Mood, therefore, acts as a Context cue. It tells the organisation whether to approach uncertainty with caution or curiosity.

Changing What Gets Measured and Celebrated

Few Context signals are stronger than measurement. Measurement is one of the most powerful elements of organisational architecture.

What organisations measure becomes visible. What they reward becomes legitimate. Over time, metrics quietly teach people what the organisation actually values.

If leaders speak about innovation but reward only cost efficiency, the Context message is clear. If leaders emphasise collaboration but celebrate individual heroics, the organisation will learn that collaboration is secondary.

When leaders change what is measured and celebrated, the Context begins to shift. People redirect their attention toward the outcomes that the organisation visibly values.

This is why many successful transformations eventually involve adjustments to incentives, performance measures, and recognition systems. These structural signals reinforce the interpretive frame leaders are trying to create.

Shifting the Time Horizon

The final lever is time. Short time horizons create a Context of urgency and caution. Leaders focus on immediate variance, protecting near-term performance, and minimising uncertainty. Decisions become defensive because the future is interpreted through the lens of short-term exposure.

When leadership conversations extend the time horizon, interpretation changes. Decisions are evaluated in terms of trajectory rather than immediate impact. Investments that once seemed risky now seem necessary. Temporary volatility becomes acceptable if it contributes to the longer-term direction.

Time horizon, therefore, shapes how organisations interpret both opportunity and risk.

Leaders who deliberately shift the temporal frame of conversation often discover that behaviour changes quickly. The same organisation that seemed cautious under quarterly scrutiny may appear far more ambitious when decisions are considered over several years.

Time changes Context.

Designing the Environment That Produces a Different Future

Understanding the mechanisms that move Context is useful. Applying them consistently is leadership work.

The declared ambition may be growth, experimentation, or transformation. Yet the signals embedded in meetings, metrics, and leadership behaviour continue to reinforce the Default Context. People, therefore, experience two Contexts simultaneously: the one leadership describes, and the one the environment actually rewards.

When this happens, the organisation receives mixed signals. In such situations, the environment always wins.

People learn very quickly which signals carry real authority. If a leadership team encourages experimentation but reacts defensively when an initiative fails, the Context message is clear. If

innovation is celebrated in presentations but absent from performance reviews, the organisation will interpret innovation as optional rather than essential.

Context moves when signals align. This alignment rarely requires dramatic change. More often, it emerges through a series of consistent adjustments that gradually alter how people interpret events.

Importantly, this work is not about manipulation. Leaders are not attempting to control people's thoughts. Instead, they acknowledge that interpretation is always shaped by environmental cues and take responsibility for the cues the organisation receives.

This is how the Generated Context stabilises.

Once leaders understand this, the practical question shifts again. Instead of asking how to persuade people to embrace a strategy, leaders begin asking whether the signals surrounding the organisation reinforce the future they have declared:

- Do our conversations reinforce the trajectory we claim to pursue?
- Do our metrics legitimise the behaviour we say we value?
- Do the stories we repeat describe the organisation we intend to become?

These questions move leadership attention toward the architecture of Context rather than the rhetoric of change. When leaders attend to that architecture, Context begins to move. Over time the organisation experiences a different environment. The range of what feels possible expands. Risk is interpreted differently. Initiative becomes more natural because the interpretive frame now supports it.

At that point, the Declared Context has begun to become a Generated Context. Yet even when leaders achieve this shift, the work is not finished. Context does not remain stable indefinitely. Organisations accumulate new experiences, face new pressures, and gradually reintroduce signals from the past. Without deliberate reinforcement, the environment slowly reverts toward familiar interpretations.

Context, once shifted, does not hold itself. The next chapter examines how Drift begins – and what leaders must do before they stop seeing it.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Choose one initiative in your organisation that appears strategically important but is progressing more slowly than expected. Instead of examining the plan itself, observe the Context surrounding the work.

1. How do leaders describe the initiative when it is introduced in meetings?
2. What expectations about risk, pace, or certainty appear in those discussions?
3. What informal stories circulate about previous attempts to pursue similar work?
4. Do people interpret the work as an opportunity, an obligation, or an exposure?

Then run one simple intervention. At the next leadership discussion, deliberately reshape one Context signal. Clarify the trajectory the initiative is intended to serve. Reframe the challenge as exploration rather than justification. Make explicit the expectation that learning and adjustment are part of progress.

Observe what changes:

- Where do people propose more ambitious options?
- Where do previously cautious participants become more engaged?
- Where does the conversation shift from defending progress to advancing possibility?

Plans do not generate momentum on their own. Momentum emerges from the Context in which the work is interpreted. Leaders influence that momentum by shaping the environment surrounding the conversation.

Reflection

- What Context is currently shaping how your organisation interprets risk, opportunity, and performance?
- Where does the Declared Context of your organisation differ from the Context people actually experience in meetings, decisions, and incentives?
- Which signals in your environment reinforce the Default Context you say you want to move beyond?
- Which behaviours are visibly rewarded or celebrated, and do those signals reinforce the trajectory leadership has declared?
- What time horizon dominates leadership conversations, and how does that horizon shape the organisation's willingness to invest in the future?
- If you wanted to deliberately shift the Context of your organisation, which two signals would you change first?

*Change rarely begins with
behaviour. It begins with a shift in
how the situation occurs.*

Chapter 9

The Drift You Stop Seeing

When did the standards of your organisation quietly become negotiable?

Drift begins the moment organisations stop reinforcing the signals that once made their standards feel non-negotiable.

When Nothing Is Obviously Wrong

One of the most disorienting moments in leadership occurs when an organisation is performing reasonably well, yet something about its behaviour feels different.

From the outside, the organisation may appear healthy. Revenue is stable, customers remain engaged, and the leadership team is experienced and capable. There is no crisis demanding immediate attention.

Yet leaders who have lived with the organisation for a long time notice something difficult to describe. Decisions that once felt firm are now revisited. Trade-offs that were once clear now become negotiable. Standards that were once defended strongly are occasionally softened to maintain momentum or avoid friction.

No one announces that the organisation has lowered its expectations. No policy is rewritten. The change occurs gradually through small decisions that appear reasonable in isolation.

Over time, those signals begin to change. Leadership attention moves elsewhere. New executives join with different assumptions. Market conditions shift, making previously firm standards feel inconvenient. None of these developments is unusual. Organisations evolve constantly.

This is Drift. Drift is the gradual return of behaviour to patterns stabilised by an older or Default Context, even when leaders believe they are still operating inside the new one.

Drift rarely appears as a dramatic failure of leadership. It appears as a series of small accommodations. Each one seems sensible in the moment. Taken together, they quietly alter the Context in which the organisation operates. Because these adjustments occur incrementally, they are rarely experienced as a loss of discipline. Instead, they are interpreted as pragmatism, flexibility, or maturity.

Only later does it become clear that something important has shifted.

How Drift Begins

Drift begins when the signals that stabilise a Generated Context weaken.

Leaders create Context through language, declarations, stories, incentives, presence, and time horizon. When these signals align, the organisation experiences a coherent interpretive frame. People understand what matters and how decisions will be judged. When those signals become inconsistent, the interpretive environment begins to shift. Language becomes less precise. Stories celebrating disciplined decisions are replaced by stories celebrating speed or expedience. Metrics that once guided behaviour lose prominence in meetings. Incentives subtly favour outcomes that were previously secondary.

People adapt quickly to these signals. When a previously non-negotiable standard is relaxed once or twice, the organisation learns that the standard may now be negotiable. When leaders stop challenging a behaviour, that behaviour gradually becomes normal. Over time, the Context shifts from the one leaders intentionally generated to something closer to the Default Context that existed before.

Drift most commonly follows success. When a leadership team achieves a breakthrough or stabilises performance, the discipline that produced those outcomes can begin to feel less necessary. Leaders assume the organisation has internalised the new standards and reduce the intensity with which they reinforce them. But organisations do not internalise Context permanently. Context is sustained through repetition. When reinforcement weakens, interpretation changes.

Drift also rarely affects all parts of the organisation at once. It appears in pockets. One team becomes less disciplined about planning. Another begins tolerating missed Commitments. A third lowers expectations because market conditions have become difficult. Each group experiences its adjustments as temporary and local. Yet these adjustments influence the broader Context. Stories about acceptable behaviour begin circulating informally. New employees absorb those stories and treat them as normal

practice. By the time leaders recognise the pattern, Drift has often been underway for months, if not years.

Context must be rebuilt before behaviour can stabilise again.

The Comfort of Incremental Compromise

One reason Drift is difficult to detect is that it rarely feels like failure. In many cases, it feels like progress.

Organisations that have recently achieved growth or stability often relax the discipline that produced those outcomes. Leaders feel confident that the system is working and begin allowing exceptions to rules that once seemed essential.

These exceptions are rarely reckless. They are usually made for understandable reasons. A high-performing executive is given flexibility because the team values their contribution. A deadline is extended to preserve a customer relationship. A performance measure is temporarily de-emphasised because other priorities feel more urgent.

Each decision is justified in Context. Yet the organisation is learning something with every exception. It is learning that the signals defining its environment have changed.

Over time, incremental compromise accumulates. The organisation becomes slightly more tolerant of ambiguity, slightly more forgiving of missed Commitments, slightly less disciplined about the practices that once defined its Identity.

None of these changes appears large enough to challenge directly, but collectively they reshape the Context.

When Drift Becomes the New Normal

In 2003, the space shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated on re-entry into Earth's atmosphere, killing all seven astronauts on Board. The physical cause was identified quickly. A piece of foam insulation had damaged the wing during launch. The deeper cause took longer to name: NASA had lost its Context.

A subsequent investigation revealed a pattern of communication and culture that had normalised risk. Engineers who noticed anomalies no longer felt authorised to question them. Each successful launch,

despite small warnings, reinforced a silent assumption: this is safe enough. Over time, the meaning of safety itself had drifted. The organisation still operated at the level of content, inspections, data, and reports, but the Context that gave those activities meaning had eroded.

After the disaster, NASA's new leadership reframed the agency's Context from one of technical perfection to one of systemic learning. They created forums where dissent was valued, and anomalies were treated as invitations to curiosity rather than threats to success. The work was not merely procedural. It was existential. They shifted the lens through which mission success occurred.

The most striking feature of Drift is that it eventually becomes invisible. Once enough small adjustments have occurred, the organisation adapts to the new environment. Leaders who joined recently assume that the current standards represent how the organisation has always operated. Long-tenured leaders remember a different Context but struggle to pinpoint when the shift occurred.

At this stage, Drift becomes self-reinforcing. Behaviours that would previously have triggered concern now appear acceptable because leaders interpret them through the updated frame rather than the previous one.

The organisation continues functioning, sometimes even performing reasonably well, which further reduces the likelihood that Drift will be challenged. It is only when performance eventually declines, or when an external shock exposes weaknesses, that leaders recognise how far the Context has moved.

By then, reversing the Drift often requires rebuilding signals that had gradually faded.

Drift rarely begins with failure. It begins with small accommodations that quietly redefine what is acceptable.

Preventing Drift

Once leaders recognise how Drift occurs, the natural question becomes whether it can be prevented. The answer is yes, but not through policies or exhortations. Drift is not primarily a problem of rules. It is a problem of Context.

Because Context shapes how people interpret events, preventing Drift requires leaders to maintain the signals that define the organisation's interpretive environment. When those signals remain consistent, behaviour stabilises. When they weaken, the organisation gradually reverts toward its Default Context. This means the work of leadership does not end once a new Context has been generated. In many ways it has only begun.

The first discipline is periodic re-examination of the signals shaping the organisation's environment. Boards and executive teams regularly review performance metrics, financial exposure, and operational risk. Far fewer review the signals that define Context. Yet these signals are equally consequential. Leaders can ask simple questions that reveal whether the interpretive environment remains aligned with the Identity they intend to sustain:

- What behaviours are currently being rewarded and celebrated?
- Which stories are circulating through the organisation about success and failure?
- What language dominates leadership conversations when problems arise?
- What time horizon governs decision-making?

The second discipline is visible reinforcement. Standards remain alive when leaders continue demonstrating that those standards matter. This often requires revisiting decisions that appear small in isolation but carry significant Context meaning. When a team accepts a missed Commitment without discussion, the organisation learns that Commitments may now be flexible. When leaders examine the reasons behind the miss and re-establish expectations, the organisation receives a different signal. The behaviour being reinforced is not merely completing work. It is the standard of accountability that defines the organisation's Identity.

The third discipline is reconnecting the organisation with the trajectory it intends to pursue. Drift often occurs when leaders become absorbed in immediate operational concerns and lose sight of the broader direction the organisation is pursuing. Meetings become dominated by short-term variance. Conversations revolve around managing current pressures rather than advancing long-term ambition.

When this happens, the organisation's time horizon contracts. Leaders can counteract this tendency by deliberately returning attention to the future that the organisation has declared. This does not require lengthy strategic exercises. Often, it simply means ensuring that conversations about trajectory remain present in leadership discussions. When people repeatedly connect current decisions to future direction, the interpretive frame of the organisation expands again.

Finally, leaders must accept that Drift is not a sign of failure. It is a natural property of complex systems. Organisations accumulate experiences, pressures, and new interpretations over time. Context is therefore always evolving. The role of leadership is not to freeze that evolution but to remain attentive to it. Leaders who regularly examine the signals shaping their organisation's environment are far more likely to detect Drift early. They notice when standards begin to soften, when conversations narrow, or when the signals reinforcing the organisation's Identity become inconsistent. At that point, small adjustments can restore alignment. Left unattended, Drift gradually reshapes the environment until the organisation finds itself operating inside a Context it never consciously chose.

Preventing Drift is therefore less about control than awareness.

Checking the Drift

Context rarely collapses suddenly. It drifts.

A small set of questions can reveal whether Context is still aligned with intention:

- Where is my past quietly limiting what I consider possible today?
- Where have I begun to tolerate outcomes that I once would have challenged?
- Where are circumstances overriding Commitments that were previously non-negotiable?
- Where am I explaining inaction rather than confronting it?
- If these patterns continue unchanged, what future is already becoming predictable?

These questions do not diagnose culture in the abstract. They illuminate the present Context in which decisions are occurring. They surface the assumptions that have become normal, and therefore invisible.

Leadership rarely fails because people cannot see the future. It fails because they stop questioning the present.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Choose one leadership forum where operational or strategic performance is regularly reviewed. This may be an executive meeting, a monthly results review, or a Board performance discussion.

Observe the signals that reveal where standards may be quietly softening:

1. Which performance gaps are explained rather than interrogated?
2. Which missed Commitments are accepted without examining the underlying behaviour?
3. Which issues are repeatedly revisited without clear resolution?
4. Which trade-offs are discussed but ultimately postponed?

Then run one simple intervention. At the next meeting, pause on one example that would previously have been considered unacceptable. Instead of moving quickly to explanation or recovery, ask the room to examine the standard itself.

Ask three questions:

- What standard did we once hold here that we are no longer holding?
- What signal did we send the organisation when we allowed it?
- If this continues for the next year, what new “normal” are we quietly creating?

Observe what changes:

- How do leaders become more precise about expectations?
- How do previously tolerated patterns become visible?
- How does the room begin reconnecting behaviour to declared standards?

Drift rarely begins with dramatic failure. It begins when leaders stop examining the signals that define what is acceptable.

Reflection

- When did the standards of your organisation last feel non-negotiable?
- Where have small accommodations become normal practice?
- Which behaviours are currently tolerated that would have been challenged several years ago?
- If the Context of your organisation has drifted, what signals would need to be restored for the original standard to become natural again?
- What level of Drift are you personally normalising by not intervening?

*Standards rarely collapse
suddenly.*

*They drift quietly until the new
level feels normal.*

Chapter 10

Seeing the Water

What if the most powerful force shaping behaviour in your organisation is the one you rarely notice?

Context becomes visible the moment leaders stop explaining behaviour and start examining the environment producing it.

The Moment the Water Becomes Visible

The most interesting thing about Context is how invisible it remains until someone learns how to see it.

For most leaders, behaviour appears to be the starting point. A team delivers excellent work or disappointing results. A project gains momentum or quietly stalls. A leadership meeting can produce decisive direction or dissolve into caution. The instinct is to explain these outcomes in terms of capability, effort, or motivation.

Yet once leaders begin paying attention to Context, a different pattern becomes visible.

The same team behaves differently under different conditions. The same leaders interpret the same information differently depending on how the situation is framed. The same organisation can respond to uncertainty with either creativity or caution, depending on the environment surrounding the conversation.

What has changed in these moments is not necessarily the people involved or the facts available to them. What has changed is the interpretive environment in which those facts are understood.

That environment is Context.

The metaphor used throughout this book is deliberately simple. Organisations operate in much the same way. Every organisation swims in a Context created by its history, leadership behaviour, shared stories, incentives, and expectations. People inside the organisation rarely experience this Context as something separate from reality. Instead, it becomes the background against which everything else is interpreted.

Opportunities feel either exciting or dangerous. Problems feel either solvable or threatening. Commitments feel either non-negotiable or flexible.

Those interpretations arise not only from the facts themselves but from the environment in which those facts appear. When leaders learn to notice the environment, they begin to recognise patterns that previously seemed mysterious.

They see why certain ideas gain traction in one meeting and are dismissed in another. They see why teams that appear capable on paper struggle to generate momentum in practice. They see why ambitious strategies sometimes fail to translate into decisive action.

The missing variable is often the water.

Seeing the water does not require complex analysis. It begins with a shift in attention. Instead of focusing only on what people are doing, leaders begin asking what environment is shaping those actions:

- What assumptions are people bringing into this conversation?
- What expectations are already present before anyone speaks?
- What signals have already shaped how this situation will be interpreted?

These questions reveal something important. Context is not only a property of organisations. It is a property of interpretation.

Wherever people are interpreting events, Context exists. This realisation has significant implications for how leadership is practiced.

Up to this point, much of the discussion in this book has focused on Context at the enterprise level. We examined how leadership teams generate organisational Context through declarations, language,

incentives, and stories. We examined how Default Context reasserts itself when those signals weaken, and how Drift reshapes the interpretive environment. Yet the deeper insight is that Context operates at every scale where people are making sense of what is happening around them:

- A Board discussion about strategy has a Context.
- A leadership team deciding how ambitious to be with next year's targets has a Context.
- A monthly performance review has a Context.
- A project team discussing a difficult problem has a Context.
- A project kick-off meeting has a Context.
- A regular progress check-in (WIP) meeting has a Context.

Even a short conversation between two colleagues is embedded in an interpretive environment that shapes what feels possible or appropriate to say.

Sometimes that Context is inherited from the organisation's broader culture. Sometimes it is shaped by the person leading the conversation. Sometimes it emerges from the mood of the moment. Often it simply exists unnoticed, but it is always present.

Once leaders begin seeing this pattern, leadership becomes more precise. Rather than reacting to behaviour after it appears, leaders begin paying attention to the environment in which that behaviour is occurring.

They notice when a meeting begins inside a cautious Context where people are reluctant to propose ambitious ideas. They notice when a project team has inherited an interpretive frame that treats a problem as a constraint rather than an opportunity. They notice when the emotional tone of a discussion signals that disagreement may carry risk.

These observations allow leaders to intervene earlier and more effectively. Rather than attempting to push behaviour directly, they adjust the environment in which behaviour emerges.

Behaviour is rarely the starting point of leadership. It is the outcome of the environment in which people interpret events.

They reframe a problem so that the discussion moves from blame to learning. They widen the time horizon so that the conversation shifts from short-term pressure to long-term trajectory. They make a declaration that clarifies the future the organisation intends to pursue.

These actions may appear small. Yet they change the interpretive frame surrounding the situation. And when interpretation changes, behaviour often follows.

This is the moment when leadership begins to feel different. Instead of treating Context as an abstract organisational concept, leaders begin noticing the water people are swimming in every time a conversation begins.

That awareness changes how they listen, how they frame questions, and how they guide discussions.

It also reveals something quietly powerful. Context is not fixed. Once it becomes visible, it can be shaped.

Context Is Not Only Organisational

One of the most important realisations leaders have when they begin noticing Context is that it does not only operate at the level of the enterprise.

Earlier chapters explored how leadership teams shape the Context of an organisation through declarations, incentives, language, and stories. These forces influence how people across the enterprise interpret events and make decisions.

Yet the same dynamic appears at much smaller scales. Every place where people are interpreting events has a Context. This means Context is present in far more places than leaders initially expect; basically, every conversation has a Context.

Sometimes, that Context encourages ambition and initiative. At other times, it quietly reinforces caution and compliance.

Consider the difference between these two project meetings.

In the first meeting, the discussion begins with a review of missed deadlines and budget pressure. The language used by the leader emphasises accountability and variance from the plan. The room's

emotional tone becomes cautious. Team members choose their words carefully and focus on protecting what has already been agreed.

In the second meeting, the same project is framed differently. The leader begins by asking the team what they are learning about the problem and what opportunities exist to improve the approach. The discussion shifts from defending progress to exploring possibilities.

The facts of the project have not changed. The team is the same. Yet the interpretive environment has shifted.

What has changed is the Context.

The Signals That Shape Small Contexts

Small Contexts are shaped by the same signals that shape organisations, although they operate more quickly and often more subtly. These are what matters most:

- Language – the way a leader frames a discussion determines whether people interpret a situation as a problem to defend against or an opportunity to improve something.
- Mood – the emotional presence of the person leading the conversation signals whether disagreement is welcome or risky.
- Time horizon – a meeting framed around immediate pressure produces different thinking from one framed around trajectory.
- Expectations – if the implicit expectation of a meeting is that ideas will be challenged constructively, people contribute differently than if the expectation is that mistakes will be exposed.

These signals are often established in the first few minutes of a conversation. Once the interpretive environment is set, behaviour tends to follow it.

This is why experienced leaders sometimes appear to guide discussions with relatively few words. They are not only responding to the conversation. They are shaping the environment in which the conversation occurs.

The Leadership Move

Once leaders learn to see Context at this level, a new leadership move becomes available to them. Instead of reacting to behaviour once it appears, they intervene at the level of interpretation.

If a meeting begins drifting into defensive explanations, the leader may pause and reframe the conversation around learning rather than fault. If a project team begins treating a challenge as a constraint, the leader may widen the time horizon or reconnect the problem to the broader ambition of the organisation.

These interventions do not force behaviour. Instead, they alter how the situation is understood. That change in interpretation often produces different behaviour naturally. A team that interprets a problem as a threat tends to behave cautiously. A team that interprets the same problem as an opportunity behaves creatively.

A leadership group that interprets risk primarily through the lens of short-term exposure behaves defensively. A leadership group that interprets risk through the lens of long-term trajectory behaves more strategically.

Context, therefore, becomes one of the most subtle but consequential levers available to leaders. When leaders see the water, they begin shaping it deliberately.

Artificial Intelligence and the Default Future

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming embedded in the daily work of leadership. Strategy papers are summarised in seconds. Market patterns are analysed at extraordinary speed. Financial scenarios can be modelled instantly. In many organisations, the volume of insight available to decision-makers is increasing faster than their capacity to absorb it.

At first glance, this appears to reduce uncertainty. Leaders have more information, more analysis, and more predictions about what may happen next. Yet the rise of artificial intelligence quietly introduces a Context challenge that most governing systems have not yet named.

Most AI systems are trained on historical data. Their strength lies in detecting patterns in what has already occurred and projecting them into the future. In effect, they are engines of statistical memory.

This makes them effective at identifying the most probable continuation of existing trajectories. Left uninterpreted, they reinforce the logic of the past.

From the perspective of this book, that matters enormously. Artificial intelligence can generate answers, but it cannot determine the Context in which those answers acquire meaning. More precisely, it cannot determine which point on the Context Spectrum the organisation intends to occupy – Default, Declared or Generated.

An AI model may recommend a course of action because similar organisations have historically taken that path. It may identify the most statistically likely outcome based on prior behaviour. Those outputs reflect the Context of the data they were trained on – not the Context the organisation intends to create. The Default Context has a long history and therefore a strong presence in any AI model trained on organisational data. The Generated Context, by definition, has no history. It has not yet occurred. It cannot appear in the training data and therefore carries no statistical weight.

This asymmetry has a direct governance implication.

When a Board or executive team relies on AI-generated scenario modelling for strategic decisions, the scenarios presented are built from historical distributions. They reflect what organisations like this one have done in situations like this before. They are, structurally, a sophisticated projection of the Predictable Future. The Generated Future – the future the organisation has declared and committed to – has no historical distribution to draw on. It cannot be modelled from past data because it represents a deliberate departure from past patterns.

A Board that treats AI scenario outputs as neutral analysis is therefore making decisions inside a data environment that systematically underweights the future it has declared. No one designs this asymmetry. It is simply how pattern recognition operates. However, the effect is significant: the organisation's most sophisticated analytical tools are quietly pulling its decisions toward the Default Context, even as its leadership declares commitment to a Generated one.

This is not an argument against artificial intelligence in governance. It is an argument for understanding what AI can and cannot see.

Used consciously, artificial intelligence becomes a powerful diagnostic rather than a directive. When leaders recognise that AI outputs reflect historical Context rather than instructions for the future, those outputs become useful inputs for new thinking. They reveal the assumptions embedded in past

behaviour. They surface the boundaries within which the organisation has historically operated. They make the Default Context visible in ways that human judgment alone often cannot.

At that point, the leadership question changes. Instead of asking whether the prediction is correct, leaders ask whether the Context that produced that prediction is one they intend to preserve. That single shift in framing transforms AI from a tool that reinforces default patterns into one that illuminates them.

In my work with Boards and executive teams, I have begun asking a simple question whenever AI-generated analysis is presented: What Context produced this answer, and is that the Context we intend to operate inside? The question takes less than ten seconds to ask. It consistently shifts the conversation from accepting the output to examining the assumptions beneath it. That is the discipline this moment requires.

This is why the rise of artificial intelligence does not diminish the importance of Context leadership. It increases it. The more powerful the tools for generating answers become, the more consequential the question of which Context is generating them.

Technology can analyse at scale. It cannot determine which future an organisation chooses to pursue, nor can it stabilise the Identity required to pursue that future. Those remain human responsibilities, exercised through language, design, attention, and example.

In that sense, the emergence of artificial intelligence does not replace leadership judgment. It clarifies precisely where that judgment must be exercised – at the level of Context itself.

The more powerful the tools for generating answers become, the more valuable the discipline of questioning the Context in which those answers occur.

Small Shifts, Large Effects

Because Context shapes interpretation, small adjustments can have disproportionately large effects.

A single question can shift the interpretive environment of a meeting. “What went wrong?” produces a different conversation from “What are we learning?”

A single declaration can shift how a team interprets a challenge. “We cannot afford to fail here” creates a different Context from “This is where we discover what is possible.”

Even the way a leader introduces a discussion influences how the room understands what is about to occur.

When leaders recognise these dynamics, they begin approaching conversations with greater intentionality. They become attentive to the signals that establish Context before making decisions.

This attentiveness does not require dramatic intervention. Often, it simply means naming the environment that currently exists. A leader might pause a conversation and observe that the discussion appears to be operating inside a defensive frame. By making that frame visible, the group gains the opportunity to shift it.

In this sense, the first step in shaping Context is often simply seeing it clearly.

Once Context becomes visible, it can be shaped. That is where the work begins.

Context and the Operating Primer

This is where the broader architecture of leadership becomes visible.

- Commitment establishes the direction an organisation intends to pursue.
- Identity stabilises behaviour consistent with that Commitment.
- Context shapes how people interpret the environment in which those behaviours occur.

When these elements drift apart, performance becomes harder to sustain. The organisation may still have talented people and capable leaders, yet the interpretive environment begins to pull behaviour in different directions.

The work of leadership is therefore not limited to strategy and execution. It includes attention to the invisible environment shaping how people understand what is happening around them.

That environment is Context. When these elements drift apart, the invisible architecture begins pulling behaviour in directions no strategy document intended.

Seeing the Water

The metaphor that runs through this book remains deliberately simple.

Fish rarely notice the water they swim in. Organisations operate in much the same way. Context surrounds every conversation, every decision, and every project. It influences how problems are interpreted, how opportunities are recognised, and how people choose to act. Most of the time, this environment remains invisible. Leaders who learn to see it gain a new form of leverage. They recognise that behaviour is rarely produced by instruction alone. It emerges from the interpretive frame surrounding a situation.

Once that frame becomes visible, it can be shaped.

Sometimes the change required is small: reframing a problem, widening a time horizon, clarifying an expectation. Sometimes it involves more substantial shifts in language, incentives, or leadership behaviour.

In every case, the principle remains the same.

Leadership begins the moment someone notices the water people are swimming in.

Applied Leadership Inquiry

Choose one leadership conversation scheduled in the coming week. This may be a strategy discussion, a project review, or an executive team meeting. Before the conversation begins, pause and observe the Context already present in the room:

1. What assumptions appear to shape how the issue will be interpreted?
2. What emotional tone is present before anyone begins speaking?
3. What expectations exist about what can or cannot be said?
4. What time horizon appears to be governing the discussion?

Then run one simple intervention. At the beginning of the conversation, deliberately introduce a Context shift. Name the trajectory the organisation is pursuing. Widen the time horizon of the discussion. Reframe the issue as exploration rather than evaluation.

Observe what changes:

- Do different ideas become visible?
- Do participants speak with more openness or caution?
- Does the conversation move toward possibility or toward protection?

Behaviour rarely changes through instruction alone. It changes when the environment in which people interpret a situation changes.

Leadership often begins with a simple move: noticing the water people are already swimming in.

Reflection

- Where in your organisation do people currently feel most cautious?
- What Context is shaping that caution?
- Which conversations in your leadership team operate inside a narrow interpretive frame?
- What signals are reinforcing that frame?
- If Context shapes how people interpret events, what water are you currently creating for the people you lead?

*Leadership begins the moment
someone notices the water people
are swimming in.*

Epilogue

Leadership becomes more precise when leaders recognise that authorship, Commitment, Identity, and Context form an architecture beneath behaviour.

The Architecture Beneath Leadership

Leadership often appears complex because organisations themselves are complex. Markets shift, technologies evolve, and human systems behave in ways that are not always predictable. Amid that complexity, it can be difficult to identify the few forces that consistently shape how organisations behave.

The first step in leadership is authorship. Leaders must decide what they stand for and what future they intend to create. Without that act of authorship, leadership becomes reactive. Circumstances dictate direction, and decisions are shaped more by immediate pressures than by deliberate intent. *Re-Authoring Leadership* explored this idea: leadership begins when someone chooses the future they are prepared to stand for.

Once a future has been authored, the next question becomes whether the organisation will organise itself around that direction. Commitment converts intention into priority. It clarifies what matters, what trade-offs will be made, and what will not be compromised along the way. *The Commitment Advantage* examined how organisations sustain extraordinary performance when Commitment becomes visible in their decisions and the standards they defend.

Yet Commitment alone is not enough. Organisations are constantly tested by pressure, uncertainty, and competing demands. Identity stabilises behaviour when those pressures appear. It determines how leaders act when circumstances invite compromise. *Above the Ceiling* explores how Identity operates as a governing structure for behaviour, defining the standards leaders maintain even when easier alternatives exist.

Context is the environment in which all of this occurs.

Context shapes how people interpret events. It influences whether uncertainty is experienced as risk or opportunity, whether disagreement feels threatening or constructive, and whether Commitments feel

non-negotiable or flexible. The same facts can produce very different behaviour depending on the Context in which those facts are understood.

Taken together, these elements form a simple but powerful architecture:

- Leadership begins with authorship.
- Commitment establishes direction.
- Identity stabilises behaviour.
- Context shapes interpretation.

When these elements align, organisations gain a powerful advantage. People understand where they are going. They behave consistently with that direction. They interpret events in ways that reinforce rather than undermine the trajectory they are pursuing.

When these elements drift apart, performance becomes harder to sustain. Strategy may remain sound, and talent may remain strong, yet the invisible architecture shaping interpretation begins pulling behaviour in different directions.

The work of leadership, therefore, extends beyond strategy and execution. It includes attention to the invisible forces shaping how people understand what is happening around them.

The moment leaders learn to see it, they begin noticing the subtle forces shaping behaviour across their organisations and teams.

From that point forward, leadership becomes something meaningfully different. Instead of reacting to behaviour once it appears, leaders begin shaping the environment in which it emerges.

That is where the real leverage lies.

*The future is not some place we are
going, but one we are creating.*

- John Schaar

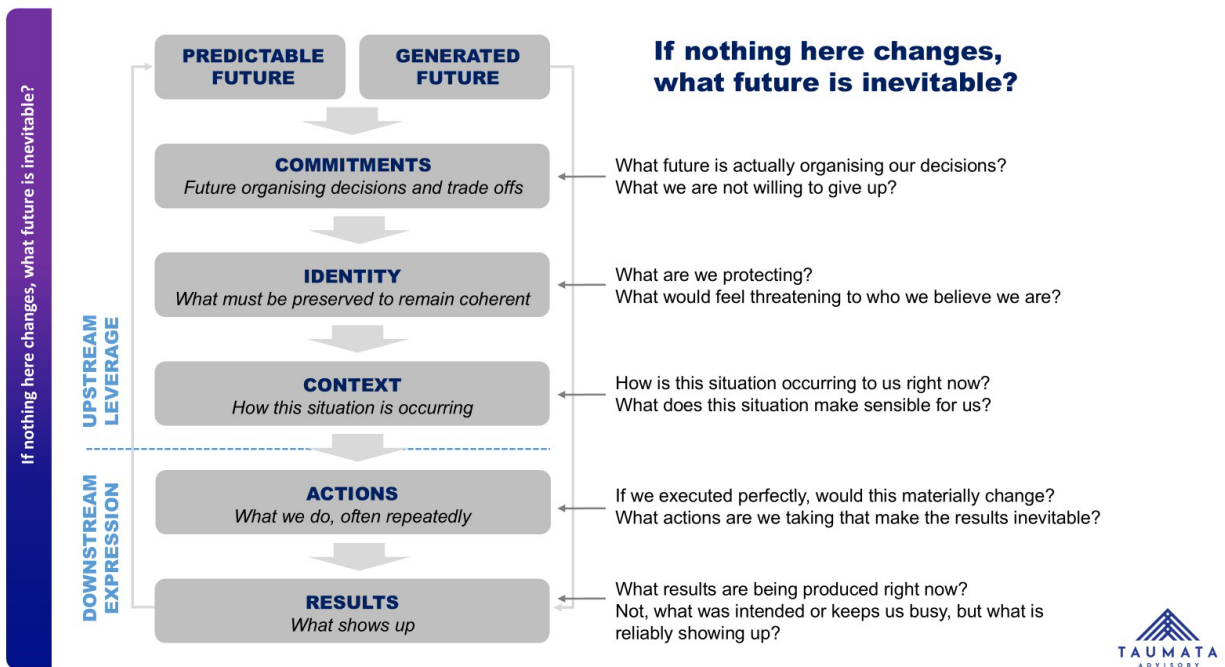
Appendix – The Operating Primer in Practice

This appendix translates the Operating Primer into a working diagnostic and design framework for leaders, teams and organisations. It is not conceptual – it is operational.

Complete this diagnostic with your executive team within the next quarter. Do not delegate it to HR. Do not soften the language. Treat it as a Board-level risk assessment.

The Core Causal Flow

The Operating Primer describes a structural sequence: Commitment → Identity → Context → Action → Results



Each layer determines the one beneath it. Results are not random – they are produced. If you want different Results, you must identify which layer is organising and producing them, without just a narrow focus on Actions.

Layer 1: Results

Start with evidence. What Results are currently being produced?

- Financial outcomes.

- Strategic progress.
- Cultural indicators.
- Talent retention.
- Decision velocity.
- Innovation cadence.

Describe them without narrative. Then ask: Are these Results predictable given how we currently operate? If the answer is yes, you are looking at a stable system. The question becomes: what is stabilising it?

Layer 2: Action

- What behaviours are consistently occurring?
- What decisions are routinely made?
- What conversations are avoided?
- Where is accountability enforced or softened?
- What trade-offs are repeatedly chosen?

Look for patterns, not isolated events. Action reveals operative Identity. If empowerment is declared but decisions are frequently reclaimed, the operative Identity is control. If long-term value is declared but quarterly optics dominate trade-offs, the operative Identity is short-term validation.

Do not argue with the data; instead, observe it. It is a signal of something, not a judgment.

Layer 3: Identity

Identity determines what feels legitimate. Ask:

- What kind of leader do I experience myself as needing to be in this system?
- What must I protect? Image? Competence? Likeability? Control?
- What feels too risky to inhabit?
- What conversations feel structurally unavailable?

Then test the gap: What Identity would be required for the future we have declared? Where is the mismatch? This is usually the hinge. Most performance ceilings are not capability gaps. They are Identity constraints.

Layer 4: Commitment

What future has been declared? Not in aspirational language. In structural terms:

- What are we willing to be measured against?
- What would make failure visible?
- What would we refuse to compromise?

If Commitment is vague, Identity will default to inheritance. If Commitment is sharp, Identity must adjust. Weak Commitment produces a moderated Identity. Clear Commitment exposes misalignment.

Layer 5: Context

Context expresses itself through patterns rather than policy. It is visible in how meetings are designed, how decisions are escalated, how performance is evaluated, how informal influence operates, and how everyday work is coordinated. These patterns either make the declared Identity easier to inhabit or quietly contradict it.

Ask: Do the daily patterns of coordination reinforce the Identity we have declared, or do they pull behaviour back toward the familiar?

Alignment is the aim.

Coaching Application

In executive coaching, the Operating Primer is used to:

1. Diagnose where Results are stabilised.
2. Surface the inherited past-based Identity.
3. Clarify declared Commitment.
4. Translate Commitment into required Identity.
5. Identify structural misalignment in Context.
6. Design behavioural experiments that stabilise authored Identity.

The work is iterative and friction is expected. The aim is not insight alone – it is sustained alignment.

Enterprise Application

In organisational transformation, the sequence is similar but scaled:

1. Declare a non-negotiable future.
2. Define the Identity the enterprise must inhabit.
3. Audit Context for structural contradiction.
4. Redesign incentives, governance and meeting architecture.
5. Reinforce behaviour publicly and consistently.
6. Measure Results against the declared Commitment.

Transformation fails when any layer is ignored.

- Action-only change stalls.
- Context-only change breeds cynicism.
- Identity-only change exhausts leaders.
- Commitment-only change remains rhetorical.

Coherence is the requirement.

Final Note

The Operating Primer is not a motivational framework – it is a structural one. If Results are predictable, the system is coherent. If you want different Results, change the coherence.

That means:

- Sharpen Commitment.
- Author Identity.
- Design Context.
- Align Action.
- Sustain under pressure.

The ceiling is not mysterious. It is mechanical. And mechanisms can be redesigned.



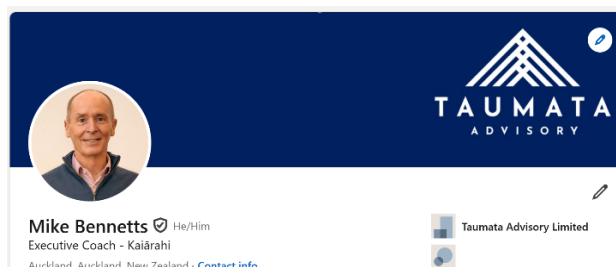
Realising Individual and Organisational Potential

Mike completed his global executive career in March 2023 and has since established his own coaching and consulting practice.

Visit Mike's website (www.taumataadvisory.com) and explore:

- Coaching – Mike can mentor or coach for any individual leadership circumstances and diverse business contexts. This mentoring or coaching can be delivered in various formats, including one-to-one sessions, team meetings, development programs, and workshops.
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For more information, please contact Mike at mike@taumataadvisory.com, including options for workshops, based on the contents of this book, that enable you and your team to develop the practices that turn your leadership into a breakthrough.



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