

The Cosmic Conference - 7th Edition

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS
Leading Organizations
that Survive & Thrive

Key Takeaways & Insights

Hi there,

I'm Marilyn, Founder & CEO of Cosmic Centaurs and I'm so glad you're here.

The seventh edition of our annual Cosmic Conference was one of the most meaningful learning journeys we've embarked on yet. This year's theme explored how leaders keep organizations steady when the world around them isn't, and how they create direction, provide reassurance, and move forward with clarity and confidence in the face of ongoing uncertainty.

Grounded & Limitless: Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive was a three-week exploration of how leaders help their organizations endure, adapt, and ultimately thrive. 25 leaders, experts, academics, and practitioners came together to make sense of what leadership demands in a prolonged crisis, across three themes: Endure, Adapt, and Thrive.

The theme builds on the 2025 Cosmic Conference, where we explored how leaders move from reacting to challenges to designing the systems that shape performance, learning, and resilience. Through The System is the Strategy: How the most effective leaders shift from firefighting to future building, we reflected on how organizations evolve when leaders move beyond solving for the immediate and begin shaping the conditions that enable long-term success.

We're deeply grateful to everyone who joined us and helped shape this experience. Because we believe knowledge should be shared, we compiled the key insights and takeaways from each speaker in this document. We hope it will help you step back, make sense of what you're navigating, and move forward with clarity and confidence.

If you'd like to explore how these ideas apply to your organization, I'm always happy to continue the conversation. Feel free to reach out and book a 1-on-1 with me.

With gratitude,
Marilyn



CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs

Conference Overview

For the seventh edition of the annual Cosmic Conference, we explored how leaders help their organizations navigate change, adapt to shifting realities, and continue moving forward with clarity and confidence.

Click below to jump to the relevant section:

Opening Keynote

Understanding how leaders operate in continuous uncertainty:

From acknowledging reality, to balancing short-term pressure with long-term positioning, and building resilience as an organizational capability that enables teams to act, learn, and adapt in motion.

Week 1: Endure

Surviving Periods of Uncertainty: How leaders face reality, preserve stability, and protect what matters most while strengthening human connection and leading with clarity and compassion under pressure.

Week 2: Adapt

Building Engines of Change: How organizations institutionalize creativity, strengthen relationships, and sense emerging shifts to maintain growth, relevance, and alignment under pressure

Week 3: Thrive

Scaling Performance: How organizations integrate the lessons of crisis into resilient operating models, strengthen communication, and design for sustained performance and long-term impact.

The Closing Keynote

Leadership at the edge of uncertainty:

How leaders and directors move beyond trying to predict the future to designing the conditions for action, challenging the limits of traditional management models, and enable organizations to operate responsibly and effectively in an unknowable world.

The Cosmic Conference is produced by [Cosmic Centaurs](#)

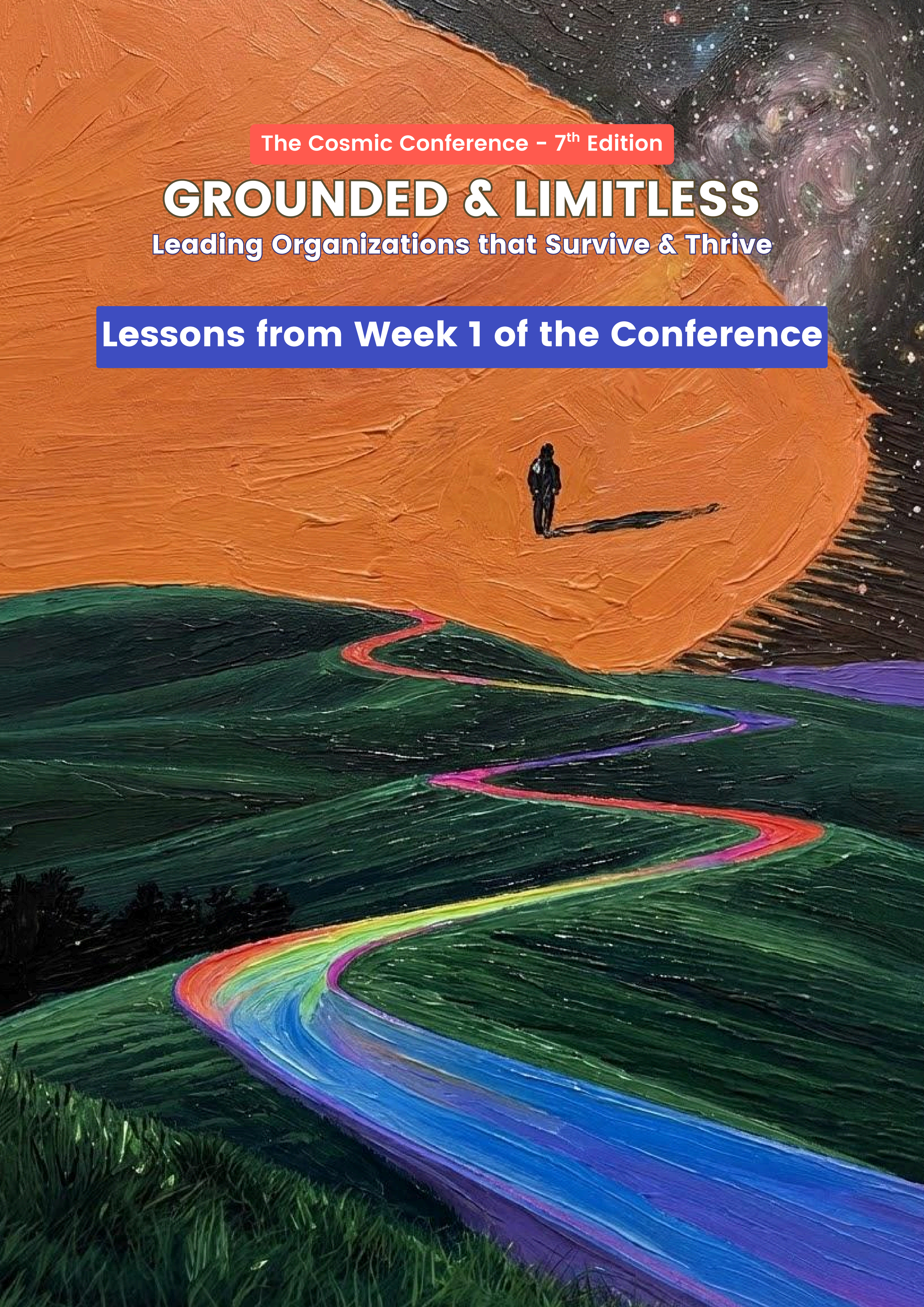
We are a holistic organizational and leadership development consultancy helping leaders make better decisions about work and the workplace and effect sustainable change.

The Cosmic Conference – 7th Edition

GROUND & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

Lessons from Week 1 of the Conference



GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Opening Keynote: Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs

About the Session

In this opening keynote, Marilyn unpacks the realities of the uncertainty leaders are navigating today and introduces practical frameworks to help organizations build resilience and move forward with clarity and intention.

Rewatch
the Session



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the Podcast
Version



We asked leaders, “What are the most pressing challenges facing you or your organization today?”

Top themes that emerged from their responses:

- Navigating Uncertainty & Constant Change
- Team Motivation & Well-being
- Strategic Planning & Future Readiness
- Financial Pressure & Business Sustainability

47% of respondents also identified acting decisively amid uncertainty as the hardest tension to navigate, reinforcing uncertainty as the most pressing leadership challenge.

Key Takeaways

1. Acknowledge the reality we are operating in

- Lead with the assumption of ongoing, layered uncertainty
- Make timely decisions even with incomplete information
- Recognize the impact of sustained pressure and fatigue on both you and your teams
- Provide clear direction without creating false certainty

GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Opening Keynote: Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Avoid overcorrecting toward survival

- Do not default to across-the-board cost-cutting or frozen investment
- Avoid delaying decisions in search of clarity that may not come
- Be deliberate in trade-offs, not reactive under pressure
- Ensure short-term actions do not weaken long-term positioning

3. Lead with a dual focus: protect and build

- Protect what is essential: cash, delivery, and core client relationships
- Continue building what is next, even in small, deliberate ways
- Avoid pausing all investment while waiting for clarity
- Make decisions that strengthen both your current position and your future readiness

4. Build resilience as an organizational capability

- Move from individual judgment to structured and collective decision-making
- Establish fast feedback loops: decide → test → adjust
- Capture lessons learned and embed them into how the organization operates
- Create conditions where risks and issues are surfaced early

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

What the Research Tells us: How to Build Resilient Organizations

Resilient organizations do not rely on instinct alone. Research shows they consistently apply four disciplines that enable them to navigate disruption while continuing to move forward:

1. Strengthen Financial Resilience

The Altman Z-Score shows that sustainable performance in disruption comes from balancing protection with the ability to invest and grow. For leaders, this means:

- Protecting margin quality while actively reinforcing revenue streams
- Preserving the capacity to invest, even under pressure
- Making trade-offs that support both current performance and future positioning

2. Face Reality with Discipline

The Stockdale Paradox demonstrates that resilient leaders confront the facts of their situation clearly, without losing the ability to act. For leaders, this means:

In practice, this looks like:

- Confronting facts early, especially when they are uncomfortable
- Creating channels where risks and bad news surface without delay
- Acting with discipline in ambiguity, rather than waiting for certainty

3. Anchor in Purpose

In moments of strategic inflection, as described by Andy Grove, where the fundamentals of the environment shift, purpose provides the direction that strategy alone cannot. For leaders, this means:

- Using purpose to guide priorities and trade-offs
- Aligning teams around what matters most in moments of uncertainty
- Reinforcing a shared sense of direction to sustain momentum

4. Ritualize Ingenuity

Coutu's concept of bricolage highlights that resilient organizations move forward by recombining what they already have, rather than waiting for ideal conditions. For leaders, this means:

- Leveraging existing capabilities before pursuing new investments
- Encouraging teams to adapt and recombine available resources
- Enabling experimentation and progress within real constraints

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE - SESSION #2

Leading Self

CLARITY & COURAGE

Emotional Regulation in a Crisis



Sandra Salame

CEO & Founder
@Siira

About the Session

In this webinar, Sandra explores the emotional realities leaders face in times of crisis and how these influence their teams and organizations, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, regulation, and clarity, and reinforcing that how leaders show up creates the stability others need to move forward.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. What Leaders Are Experiencing Right Now

Siira has been hosting dialogue circles for leaders in response to the current war, creating space to process what many are experiencing but not always able to voice.

Many are experiencing a mix of fear, frustration, and hope at once. They are expected to provide steadiness and direction for their teams, often without clear answers.

2. Lead from Within: The Inner Work of Leadership

A leader's emotional state directly affects their decisions and behavior. When emotions are not managed, they influence decisions and team dynamics. Effective leadership in crisis starts with self-awareness and emotional control. Under pressure, leaders respond in three common ways:

| Archetype | How it shows up: | What to do: |
|-----------|--|---|
| Fight | Overreacting, urgency, making fast decisions, trying to control outcomes | Pause before acting. Delay major decisions. Focus on what is truly urgent |
| Flight | Avoidance, distraction, disengagement, focusing on less critical tasks | Return to priorities. Limit noise. Anchor yourself in what matters most |
| Freeze | Inaction, indecision, feeling stuck or overwhelmed | Start small. Take one step. Create structure through simple actions |

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE - SESSION #2

Leading Self

CLARITY & COURAGE

Emotional Regulation in a Crisis



Sandra Salame

CEO & Founder
@Siira

Key Takeaways (Continued)

3. Leading Organizations Through It

We are experiencing the “winter” of leadership: a period focused on protecting people, maintaining stability, and ensuring continuity, rather than driving growth.

Clear communication is critical. Leaders need to state what is known, what is not, and what is being / should be prioritized. Decision-making should shift to shorter cycles: observing what is happening, adapting quickly, and involving others rather than acting alone.

At the team level, consistency matters. Regular check-ins, simple routines, and shared spaces help reduce isolation.

A leader’s state shapes the organization. How leaders manage themselves directly influences how teams respond and perform.

4. Vulnerability and Trust

Only 24% of senior leaders allow themselves to be vulnerable at work, often out of fear of losing trust. In reality, employees are 5.3x more likely to trust leaders who show vulnerability, and 7.5x more likely when leaders acknowledge mistakes.

Intentional vulnerability builds connection and credibility and saying “we don’t have all the answers” can create clarity rather than uncertainty.

5. Lightning Round

The session closed with a few personal reflections from Sandra

What keeps you grounded? Faith, and giving meaning to what she is going through

What helps you be limitless? A strong sense of mission and being of service to others

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Resilience, especially the ability to scenario plan, stay creative, and keep going through uncertainty

Based on the conversation, what are the top three things leaders should do right now?

- 1. Fill your own cup first
- 2. Recognize that this is a winter phase, and lead accordingly
- 3. Lean on others and build a support system

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

EMPATHY & DIRECTION

Leadership Communication in Times of Crisis



Claire Furlong

Partner
@ FGS Global

About the Session

In this session, Claire examines how leaders navigate crisis through the balance of empathy and direction, using communication as a critical lever to build trust and stability. She underscores the role of transparency, alignment, and timeliness in helping leaders reassure, align, and guide their organizations through uncertainties.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
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Key Takeaways

1. What builds trust: The UAE as a best-in-class example

Amidst the recent geopolitical tensions, the UAE offers a strong example of how leadership presence, consistency, and communication can reinforce trust and stability in times of uncertainty.

Trust Through Clairty & Consistency

- Trust was built through alignment between what was said and what was done, reinforced consistently over time.
- Credibility came from years of consistent leadership through prior crises, not just the current response.
- Communication struck the right balance of enough clarity to reassure, without overwhelming people with information.

Unified Leadership Voice

- A “chorus of voices” amplified the same message across leaders, creating coherence while allowing for different tones and styles.
- This reflected a leadership team that showed up united as a front, rather than as individual voices.

Owning the Narrative

- In a crisis, communication shapes a long-term narrative, not a momentary response.
- Early missteps can be corrected. Leaders who acknowledge, pivot, and take accountability can rebuild trust and regain control of the narrative.

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

EMPATHY & DIRECTION

Leadership Communication in Times of Crisis



Claire Furlong

Partner
@ FGS Global

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Communication as a Leadership Lever

In times of uncertainty, communication becomes a leader's most powerful tool.

Creating clarity without certainty

- Communication is the primary way leaders reduce uncertainty and steady people, even when answers are incomplete.
- Saying something early, even if partial, is more effective than waiting for full clarity.

How communication actually lands

- Tone signals intent. People assess honesty and credibility through how something is said
- Presence matters. Communication is not just words, it is how a leader shows up in the moment.

Listening as a Core Component

- Communication is a two-way street, listening is as important as speaking.
- Leaders need to design intentional mechanisms (e.g., small groups, anonymous channels) to hear from beyond the most vocal voices.
- Not all employees are looking for solutions, often, they simply need to feel heard and acknowledged.
- Effective leaders take the time to understand what their teams need in the moment, whether it is support, clarity, or action.

Audience-Centric Communication

- Communication needs to be audience-centric. The same message lands differently across groups, especially in cross-cultural contexts
- Frameworks like Erin Meyer's Culture Map highlight how differences in communication styles, trust, and hierarchy shape interpretation.
- This is something we often explore in strategic storytelling. Understanding your audience is what allows communication to land with clarity and intent

3. Balancing Empathy & Direction

- **Empathy** is about acknowledging what people are experiencing, without absorbing it entirely
- **Direction** comes from maintaining structure, clarity, and expectations, even in difficult moments. Providing direction and sustaining performance is not only critical for the business, it also gives people structure, purpose, and a sense of stability in times of uncertainty.
- Work can act as a stabilizing force, offering rhythm, focus, and motivation when everything else feels uncertain. Leaders need to distribute the emotional load, building support systems within teams to avoid over-reliance on a single leader.

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Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

EMPATHY & DIRECTION

Leadership Communication in Times of Crisis



Claire Furlong

Partner
@ FGS Global

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. From Reactive to Structured Communication

Effective crisis communication is not improvised. It is built on preparation, alignment, and disciplined execution.

What Enables Alignment

- Preparation matters. Crisis playbooks, scenario planning, and pre-defined roles allow leaders to move faster and stay aligned.
- Strong communication reflects how well a leadership team is built to operate together, with shared language, clear roles, and the ability to align quickly under pressure.
- The ability to show up as a united leadership front is not created in the moment, it is built over time through alignment and trust.

How to Execute Effectively

- Use simple structures:
 - Stakeholder mapping and clear ownership.
 - Messaging frameworks to maintain consistency.
- Build cadence, not one-off updates.
- Stay connected to the external environment through horizon scanning and active listening.
- Tailor communication based on audience and channel, rather than relying on a single message for all.

5. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded? Lifting weights and seeing a sunrise or sunset

What helps you be limitless? My Curiosity

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world others can learn from? Relationships and trust

What should leaders focus on right now?

- Show up: Focus on steadying people as much as informing them
- Be human in how you communicate
- Do not wait for certainty before speaking

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Teams

PRESENT & CONNECTED

Human Connection in Uncertain Times



Dr. Connie Noonan Hadley

Founder of Institute for Life
at Work & Research Associate Professor
@Boston University, Questrom School
of Business

About the Session

In this session, Connie examines how leaders can sustain human connection in times of uncertainty by strengthening psychological safety, cultivating social confidence, and shaping the use of AI with intention. She underscores that connection is not a nice-to-have, but a foundational driver of performance, engagement, and resilience.

Rewatch
the Session



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the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Staying Present & Connected in Times of Dual Disruption

Organizations today are navigating a dual disruption, external geopolitical and economic uncertainty and rapid AI-driven transformation.

- As uncertainty rises, people are more likely to withdraw, disengage, and avoid speaking up, reinforcing silence over contribution.
- Despite increased connectivity, disconnection is growing:
 - 76% of globally distributed employees struggle to feel connected
 - 52% of employees using AI report moderate to high loneliness
- The risk extends beyond technological change to include emotional withdrawal and reduced connection.
- The core shift is clear: performance, technology, and human connection are now inseparable.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Teams

PRESENT & CONNECTED

Human Connection in Uncertain Times



Dr. Connie Noonan
Hadley

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Psychological Safety Enables Voice, Learning & Performance

In times of uncertainty and loss, people naturally retreat into fear, silence, and risk avoidance. That's why leaders must deliberately create environments where speaking up is both safe and expected.

- Without psychological safety, employees hide mistakes and avoid risks—blocking learning and innovation.
- The real threat to performance isn't failure. It's the absence of learning and adaptation.
- A practical model for building safety:
 - **Rationale:** Clearly articulate why speaking up, challenging ideas, and taking risks matter for business outcomes.
 - **Invitation:** Create real opportunities to contribute through feedback channels, 1:1s, and social interaction.
 - **Reinforcement:** Actively recognize and reward speaking up, while avoiding incentives for “safe” agreement.
- Normalize uncertainty by acknowledging that no one has all the answers and mistakes are part of progress.

3. Rebuild Connection by Designing for Social Confidence

Connection at work is not just about opportunity. It depends on people's confidence and ability to engage, which can be shaped by the environment leaders create.

- Around 1 in 4 employees feel socially awkward at work, even among experienced professionals
- Social confidence is partly environmental, meaning leaders can actively develop it as a capability.

How Leaders Enable Social Confidence

- Create environments where people feel safe to engage and clear on how to participate
- Reinforce participation through 1:1 conversations and positive acknowledgment, helping individuals build confidence over time.

The Role of Team Rituals

- Rituals provide a structured way to build connection and reduce social friction.
- They take two forms:
 - Professional rituals (e.g., stand-ups)
 - Personal rituals (e.g., sharing stories or informal moments)
- Both contribute equally to engagement, productivity, retention, and overall satisfaction
- Rituals create predictability and clarity, which helps individuals feel more comfortable participating.

Shared Ownership Matters

- Building connection is not solely the leader's responsibility.
- Leaders should enable the system, while giving teams ownership to plan, facilitate, and sustain these rituals, strengthening both participation and accountability.

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Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Teams

PRESENT & CONNECTED

Human Connection in Uncertain Times



Dr. Connie Noonan
Hadley

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Use AI Intentionally to Strengthen Human Connection

AI is already being used as a source of social and emotional support, but without intention, it can accelerate disconnection.

- 74% of employees report using AI for support typically provided by humans (e.g., advice)
- While helpful, over-reliance risks reducing real human interaction and reinforcing isolation.
- Leaders must actively monitor and understand how AI is shaping connection within their teams.

How to Use AI as an Enabler of Connection

- Use AI to free up time from tasks, then intentionally reinvest that time into human interaction and collaboration.
- Guide how AI is used so it augments, not replaces, relationships:
 - Prompt AI to encourage reflection and follow-up thinking rather than just giving answers
 - For example, instead of asking AI for a solution, ask it to suggest questions to explore with a colleague or ways to approach a conversation
- **Use AI to actively support connection by:**
 - Helping employees prepare for conversations and build confidence
 - Encouraging networking and relationship-building
 - Supporting the planning of team moments and social interactions
- The goal is intentional use of AI to strengthen human connection rather than substitute it.

5. Address Loneliness as a Leadership Responsibility

Loneliness is a growing workplace challenge that directly impacts engagement, trust, and performance.

- 76% of globally distributed employees struggle to feel connected, and 52% of AI users report moderate to high loneliness
- Work structures often reinforce disconnection by being overly task-driven and limiting informal interaction
- In uncertain environments, people may also avoid connection due to fear of differing views

What Leaders Can Do

- Treat connection as something that must be intentionally created, not assumed
- Create space for informal interaction and relationship-building, not just task execution
- Recognize that connection drives outcomes. Research shows that employees with a best friend at work are 7x more engaged
- Pay attention to individuals already withdrawing, as AI can amplify existing isolation patterns

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Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

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Leading Teams

PRESENT & CONNECTED

Human Connection in Uncertain Times



Dr. Connie Noonan
Hadley

Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Combine Psychological Safety with Accountability & Agency

Supporting people emotionally is not enough. Leaders must also encourage ownership, action, and forward movement.

- Psychological safety enables people to express concerns openly and navigate uncertainty together
- Leaders should acknowledge fears around AI and job displacement without dismissing or suppressing them, while guiding conversations toward solutions
- Focus on practical paths forward, such as:
 - Reskilling and role evolution
 - Involving employees in shaping how AI is used in their work

From Passive to Active Mindset

- Encourage a shift from “this is happening to me” → “what can I do with this?”
- Introduce the concept of Shrinking (withdrawal, passivity, and avoidance) vs. Expanding (ownership, initiative, and growth)
- Leaders play a key role in helping individuals reinterpret uncertainty as opportunity, while reinforcing that safety must be paired with accountability and action.

7. Lightning Round

What are 5 things leaders can do now?

Follow the UNITE framework:

- Understand — educate yourself on loneliness and psychological safety at work
- Normalize — openly share your own experiences to create space for honest conversations
- Invest — intentionally create opportunities for people to connect and speak up
- Trial-and-error — experiment with different approaches and adjust based on what works
- Evaluate — measure impact and continuously refine your approach

What keeps you grounded? My four sons who keep me humble and grounded

What helps you be limitless? Meditation creating space to quiet my mind and expand my perspective

One mindset shift for leaders? Connection is infrastructure, not a perk, even in an AI-driven world

Biggest mistake companies make with AI? Over-optimizing for efficiency while neglecting relationships and human experience

One thing leaders should do tomorrow? Start open conversations about how AI is changing human interaction and gather real feedback

What role should AI play? A coach and enabler, not a replacement for human connection

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

DECISIVE & COMPASSIONATE

Leadership in Downsizing



Rabih Brair

Managing Partner @Tandem
CFO & Co-founder @Miivo

About the Session

In this session, Rabih explores how leaders can navigate downsizing with clarity and care, bringing structure to decisions that are often driven by urgency and uncertainty. He highlights the importance of grounding actions in fundamentals, while recognizing the very real human impact these decisions carry.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. This Crisis Requires Leaders to Respond Differently

The “wait and see” phase is over; we are in a state of prolonged uncertainty. Unlike COVID, where regulation forced revenue to zero in many sectors, today’s environment still allows for continued (though reduced) economic activity. Leaders must shift from pure cost-cutting to creative adaptation, finding ways to sustain revenue rather than assuming shutdown. Businesses that recognize this difference early can pivot faster and stay active in the market.

Most organizations are now taking action, but often at two extremes: paralysis or panic. Neither serve leaders nor their organizations. Paralysis causes stagnation, but panic, or rushed decisions, carry hidden costs:

- Financial: immediate layoffs triggering high cash outflows
- Operational: gaps in ownership and rushed transitions
- Cultural: loss of trust and stability

Balancing urgency and care is key today. Leaders must avoid emotional or reactive decisions and maintain a view beyond the next 2–3 months to ensure decisions today do not compromise future recovery.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Organizations

DECISIVE & COMPASSIONATE

Leadership in Downsizing



Rabih Brair

Managing Partner @Tandem
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Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Bringing Structure to Financial Reality

In moments of uncertainty, the most effective approach is to return to fundamentals:

- How much cash do we have, and how long will it last?
- What will realistically be collected (receivables)?
- Where can we delay or renegotiate (payables)?

Leaders should start by quantifying risks and avoid over-planning by focusing on what is known and what cannot wait. Small, practical actions matter:

- Renegotiating payments
- Accelerating collections
- Revisiting existing opportunities

3. Decisiveness with Compassion

Strong leaders recognize that downsizing impacts lives, not just P&Ls, especially in a job market where re-employment may be difficult. Downsizing is often the first lever, but not always the best one. Leaders have more options than immediate layoffs:

- Mutually agreed salary reductions
- Reduced hours or shifts
- Asking employees to take paid leave
- Repurposing roles based on current needs

The most effective approaches:

- Distribute the burden, rather than concentrate it (leadership taking larger cuts)
- Involve employees in decisions and give them visibility and, when possible, choices
- Communicate openly and honestly, acknowledging reality rather than hiding it

Compassionate leadership means doing what's needed while trying to "ruin as few lives as possible."

4. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded? Confidence in the UAE's resilience and ability to bounce back and recover

What helps you stay limitless? Using the extra time that uncertainty creates to step back, think, and work on things that usually get pushed aside

What is a leadership quality emerging from the Arab world today that the rest of the world can learn from? Compassion and approaching decisions with a human lens

Looking ahead, what are the three things leaders should focus on today?

- Assess and quantify risks
- Avoid emotional or rushed decisions
- Think beyond the immediate crisis and protect long-term survivability

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Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Community

HIKMA

Indigenous Wisdom for Uncertain Times



Rama Chakaki

President @ Qatar Science
& Technology Park

About the Session

In this session, Rama Chakaki explores how indigenous wisdom from the Arab world can inform leadership, resilience, and innovation in times of uncertainty. She highlights that many practices considered modern are deeply rooted in our cultural systems, and calls for evolving this wisdom to shape more grounded and contextually relevant leadership models.

Rewatch
the Session



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the Podcast
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Key Takeaways

1. Global Models vs. Local Realities

Much of what we call “modern management” or “innovation” is imported. Our region has operated sophisticated systems for centuries. For example, social entrepreneurship has long been a pillar of our societies, rooted in collective support and shared value creation. Take the old souks of Aleppo: Merchants didn’t compete endlessly for profit. Once they reached their share for the day, they redirected customers to neighboring vendors.

Acknowledging the values embedded in our heritage is increasingly urgent in a time of uncertainty and rapid change, where disruption exposes the gaps in many global frameworks. For example, the tension between work and life, especially for women from this region who have greater family responsibilities and are struggling to compete with women from cultures with nuclear family structures. This invites us to move toward leadership systems rooted within our context, where value is collective, relational, and sustainable.

2. Indigenous Leadership Wisdom

Leadership in our culture has never been confined to formal titles or positions; it has emerged from the wisdom embedded in everyday life. This wisdom lives in:

- **Souks, majales, and homes** - everyday spaces where people learn how to negotiate, build trust, exchange ideas, and navigate relationships through real interactions.
- **Elders and craftsmen** - individuals who carry deep knowledge developed over years of practice, observation, and lived responsibility
- **Oral traditions** - where wisdom is passed down through proverbs, poetry, and faith, shaping how people think, make decisions, and relate to others.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Community

HIKMA

Indigenous Wisdom for Uncertain Times



Rama Chakaki

President @ Qatar Science
& Technology Park

Key Takeaways (Continued)

Today, much of this wisdom remains undocumented and at risk of being lost. There is a pressing need to capture and translate this intelligence into modern formats such as AI, storytelling, and digital archives, not as an act of nostalgia, but as a critical foundation for shaping future leadership and organizational models.

3. Resilience as a Cultural Capability

Resilience in our region is a deeply embedded cultural capability shaped by history, community, and lived experience. It shows up as:

- **Social cohesion:** where communities organically self-organize to share information, resources, and support. For example, in times of conflict, women played a central role in sustaining communities by maintaining communication networks and offering mutual aid.
- **Collective endurance:** where resilience is not carried by individuals alone but distributed across families and communities, allowing societies to absorb and navigate shocks together.
- **Humour as a coping mechanism:** dark humor and sarcasm are culturally accepted ways to deal with hardship.

There is also a distinct cultural framing of adversity:

“أجر و عافية” reflects the belief that hardship carries meaning, dignity, and reward, shaping how challenges are perceived and endured.

Implication for organizations: Organizations must now translate this understanding into practice, building resilience as a collective capability rooted in strong social ties and cultural intelligence, where teams draw on connection and shared context to navigate uncertainty.

4. Homegrown Innovation

There is an untapped opportunity in innovation and entrepreneurship that reflects our cultural context, identity, and heritage. It shows up as:

- **Cultural and linguistic gaps in modern tools**, where global platforms and tools like Canva and AI systems offer limited representation of Arabic scripts, geometries, and visual identity
- **Untapped environmental intelligence**, reflected in the region’s rich biodiversity and generational knowledge around cultivation, land stewardship, and resource preservation
- **A “tinkering” mindset**, where individuals continuously adapt and create within imperfect or constrained systems, developing practical and resourceful solutions over time.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

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Leading Community

HIKMA

Indigenous Wisdom for Uncertain Times



Rama Chakaki

President @ Qatar Science
& Technology Park

Key Takeaways (Continued)

One way to address this gap is to broaden participation in solution design. Rama emphasized that more rooted and effective solutions emerge when innovation includes not only technical experts but also those closest to the context, like farmers, artisans, and local communities.

5. Leadership as an Expression of Indigenous Wisdom

For leadership to embody this indigenous wisdom, it calls for a continuous practice of alignment, awareness, and intentional choice. A place to start is to ground leadership in values, where decisions are guided by our personal value system rooted in humanity, rather than external labels or affiliations.

6. Lightning Round:

The session closed with a few personal reflections from Rama:

What keeps you grounded? connecting with loved ones

What helps you be limitless? The firm belief that we create the reality around us and the unwavering focus on what we want to see happen

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Presence

Looking ahead, what are the three things leaders should focus on today?

1. Find a path to nature at least once a day
2. Be present with loved ones
3. Read a paragraph or more from your history “We can’t build the future without knowing our past.”

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Community

FOOD & SOLIDARITY

Responding to Crisis One Meal at a Time



Aline Kamakian

WCK Chef Corps
Founder of Mayrig
and Batchig Restaurants

About the Session

In this session, Aline reflects on what it means to lead through continuous crisis, drawing from her experience building and sustaining both businesses and community-driven initiatives in Lebanon. She shares how staying anchored in core values, listening deeply, and acting with intention allows leaders to respond in real time while preserving dignity, quality, and hope.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Leading in Crisis Requires Continuity

In environments where instability is constant, leadership is about maintaining movement and holding direction even when conditions are unclear. Resilient leaders expand their reach across different environments. They don't depend on a single source of stability and avoid being consumed by external noise.

2. Core Values as Decision-making Compass

In moments of pressure, leaders tend to move from strategic thinking to reactive behavior. This is where values become critical. Aline's philosophy is consistent: "Stay within your values, and you can always catch up."

Decisions grounded in values allow leaders to act quickly without losing direction.

3. Leadership Begins with Protecting People

Strong leadership recognizes that organizations are sustained by people, not structures. At the heart of Aline's approach is a simple principle: the team comes first. During crises, this means:

- Prioritizing salaries and stability where possible
- Shielding people from unnecessary negativity
- Creating a sense of safety in uncertain conditions

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

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Responding to Crisis One Meal at a Time



Aline Kamakian

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. From Business Leader to Community Builder

Leadership does not stop at the boundaries of the business. In times of crisis, it extends into the wider ecosystem. This means recognizing the interdependence between: Businesses, Communities and Local economies.

Leaders should anchor their business in a strong “why” because what keeps resilient leaders going is the strength of their purpose.

Leaders are required to think in terms of systems by creating networks of support, strengthening relationships across stakeholders, and designing solutions that serve multiple needs simultaneously.

Support, especially in times of crisis, is about how basic needs are met and how dignity is preserved. Maintaining dignity requires:

- Attention to quality and care
- Respect for people’s identity and pride
- Thoughtfulness in execution, not just speed

5. The Inner Work of Leadership

Leadership in crisis begins with acknowledging reality, even when it is difficult. Accepting what is happening allows decisions to be grounded in what is truly happening rather than what is wished for.

Sustained leadership requires managing exposure to information, filtering noise and negativity to preserve clarity and focus.

Leaders must intentionally create space to regulate their energy, ensuring they can continue operating effectively over time.

When creativity is limited in crisis, relying on pre-existing structures and captured ideas enables continued action.

Effective leadership requires listening beyond words, understanding the context and emotions driving reactions.

Respecting personal limits is essential to sustaining leadership. The ability to lead others depends on the ability to manage oneself and maintain internal balance.

GROUND & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Community

FOOD & SOLIDARITY

Responding to Crisis One Meal at a Time



Aline Kamakian

WCK Chef Corps
Founder of Mayrig
and Batchig Restaurants

Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Lightning Round

The session closed with a few personal reflections from Aline:

What keeps you grounded? My partner

What helps you be limitless? Every time someone tells me “You cannot”

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Leading by example

Be Part of the Response

If you would like to contribute in a meaningful way: **Donate at sofraleb.com.**

Sofra connects restaurants, NGOs, and donors to deliver hot meals to displaced families across Lebanon, while keeping local kitchens active and livelihoods sustained.

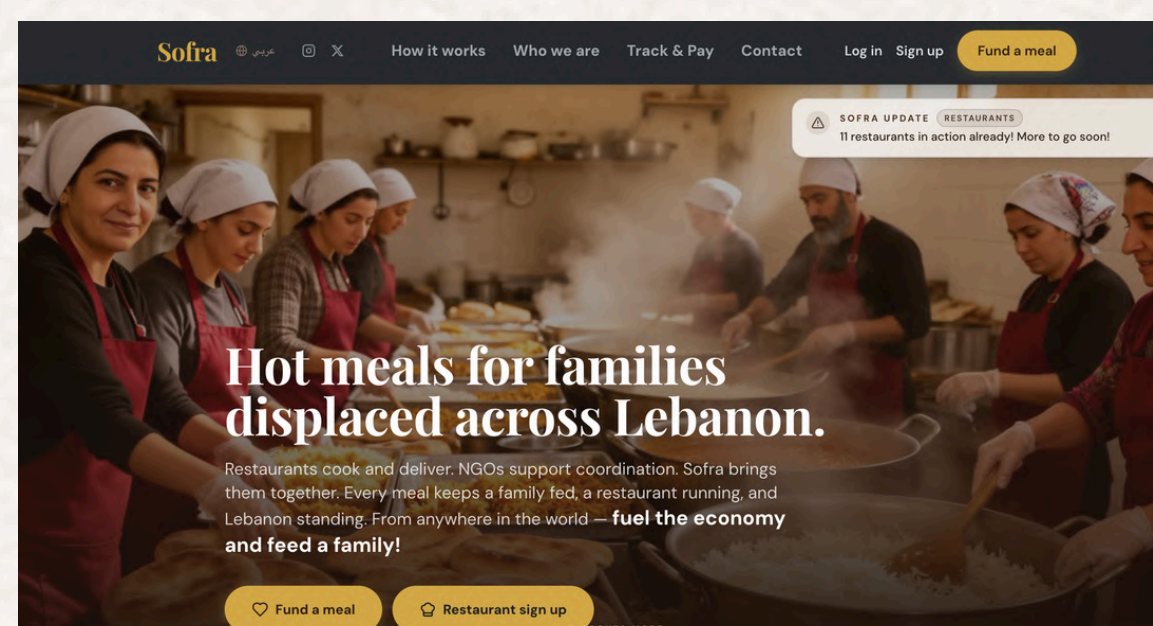
Instead of building parallel systems, it activates existing kitchens and local businesses, ensuring support reaches people quickly and effectively. Each meal is tracked, with a focus not only on access, but on quality, dignity, and care.

Your support helps provide meals, sustain local restaurants, protect jobs, and strengthen the broader ecosystem.

In times of crisis, support sustains lives and protects what holds them together.

PLATFORM TOTALS

| | | |
|--|---|-------------------------------|
| 51,676 Total Meals Delivered | \$191,773 Confirmed Funds | 108 Restaurants |
| 78 Shelters | 28 NGOs | 161 Donors |



GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Self

SELF & SYSTEM

When the Ground Moves: Leading Across Different Realities in the GCC



Ghida Barakat

Managing Director
@ Leap Leadership

About the Session

In this session, Ghida Barakat reflects on leading through layered complexity in the GCC, where conflicting pressures shape both leaders and teams. She explores the shift from reactive to creative leadership and how leaders can create stability, connection, and clarity across self and system in uncertain times.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Leading in Layered Complexity

Leaders in this region are navigating a uniquely layered moment. What makes this moment particularly difficult is that each layer is pulling in a different direction. War pushes leaders toward safety and cost control, while national visions push toward investment and growth. AI disruption requires reinvention, while uncertainty demands stability.

Leadership today is not about choosing one path over another. It is about holding these contradictions at the same time, while still moving forward.

2. The Inner Shift: From Reactive to Creative Leadership*

Under pressure, most leaders default to a reactive state. This is driven by fear and the need for control. It often shows up as micromanaging, over-planning, or withdrawal. In times of uncertainty, this becomes the dominant mode for the majority of leaders.

Creative leadership, by contrast, is more grounded and intentional. It allows leaders to hold multiple perspectives, stay connected, and respond rather than react.

The shift between the two is not about having the right answer. It starts with awareness. Noticing the internal narrative (“I have to,” “I must”), and creating space between trigger and response. As Ghida highlighted, you cannot think your way out of reactivity, you have to regulate your way out of it. That pause is what allows leaders to choose how they show up, rather than defaulting to survival patterns.

*The [Leadership Circle Profile](#) (LCP) is a leadership assessment that maps how a leader’s inner beliefs and assumptions drive both their reactive (fear-based) and creative (purpose-driven) behaviors and effectiveness.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Self

SELF & SYSTEM

When the Ground Moves: Leading Across Different Realities in the GCC



Ghida Barakat

Managing Director
@ Leap Leadership

Key Takeaways (Continued)

3. The Room Within the Room: Holding Multiple Worldviews

In diverse environments like the GCC, teams are not experiencing the same reality. A key lens Ghida introduced comes from Jason George's framework on three dominant worldviews, each shaping how people interpret reality, relate to others, and respond to uncertainty:

- **Guilt-Innocence:** a legalistic lens, focused on right and wrong, rules, and accountability
- **Honor-Shame:** a relational lens, focused on dignity, reputation, and maintaining respect
- **Power-Fear:** a survival lens, focused on safety, control, and navigating uncertainty or threat

These worldviews shape how people communicate, give feedback, and make meaning. When these differences remain unspoken, they create misalignment beneath the surface. Leadership, therefore, is not about eliminating differences, but about making them visible and productive.

This starts with observing patterns: who speaks, who stays silent, how feedback lands. And then naming what is happening, creating space for dialogue, and designing how the team wants to work across those differences.

4. The Creative Leadership Strengths of this Region

Based on research, some of the defining strengths of this region is its relational and systems orientation. Leadership here is deeply rooted in community, connection, and collective responsibility.

In moments of uncertainty, people are not only looking for direction, they are looking for belonging, reassurance, and shared understanding. This shows up in how teams support one another, how information flows informally, and how resilience is distributed across the system rather than carried by individuals alone.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 1: ENDURE

Leading Self

SELF & SYSTEM

When the Ground Moves: Leading Across Different Realities in the GCC



Ghida Barakat

Managing Director
@ Leap Leadership

Key Takeaways (Continued)

5. Creating Stability in Uncertain Times

When the external environment is unpredictable, leaders create stability through what they can control, such as creating a predictable rhythm. Regular check-ins, consistent communication, and honest updates (including what is unknown) reduce anxiety and build trust.

Leadership in these moments comes down to simple practices done consistently. Small actions, repeated over time, are what create stability, trust, and ultimately, performance.

6. Lightning round

The session closed with a few personal reflections from Ghida:

What keeps you grounded? Walking meditation late at night

What helps you be limitless? “You can't raise the ceiling but you can raise the floor”
I focus on developing myself, my competence, and my capacity.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Relationship building and Adaptability

Looking ahead, what are the three things leaders should focus on today?

1. Stay grounded and self-aware
2. Be transparent
3. Strengthen your connection with the people around you and with yourself

The Cosmic Conference – 7th Edition

GROUNDNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

Lessons from Week 2 of the Conference



GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

MANAGER MAILBAG

Answering your Questions about Leading in the Middle



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs



Tala Odeh

Capability Development Lead
@ Cosmic Centaurs

About the Session

In this session, Marilyn and Tala explored the everyday challenges middle managers face, especially in uncertain times, including low team energy, pressure to deliver, stepping in too much, and not having clear answers about the future. They also shared practical ways to support teams and sustain momentum.

Rewatch the Session



Listen to the Podcast Version



Key Takeaways

1. Polarity Framing

The questions submitted by managers did not point to isolated challenges. They reflected recurring tensions in how leadership is experienced day to day.

These are best understood as leadership polarities. They are not problems with a single solution, but interdependent dynamics that require ongoing navigation.

Effective leadership, particularly in uncertain contexts, depends on the ability to move between both sides with intention, rather than defaulting to one.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs



Tala Odeh

Capability Development Lead
@ Cosmic Centaurs

MANAGER MAILBAG

Answering your Questions about Leading in the Middle

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Engagement | Performance

In periods of uncertainty, a gap often emerges between expectations and capacity. While performance targets remain stable, team energy and focus may fluctuate.

Managers often respond by stepping in, reworking outputs, and carrying more of the load to maintain delivery. While this protects performance in the short term, it is difficult to sustain and can create dependency over time.

A more effective response is to redefine performance in context. This means being explicit about what matters most, where high standards must hold, and where flexibility is acceptable.

Engagement is part of this equation. Teams are more likely to sustain performance when there is structure, predictability, and space to be honest about capacity. Consistent check-ins and clear daily priorities help maintain both alignment and momentum.

3. Control | Empowerment

Under pressure, managers tend to step in. Fixing issues directly often feels like the fastest way to move work forward.

Over time, however, this reduces ownership within the team and increases reliance on the manager. What creates speed in the moment can limit the team's ability to deliver independently.

Effective leadership requires a more deliberate balance. Managers need to stay close to high-risk or critical work, while creating space for ownership elsewhere.

Empowerment does not mean stepping away entirely. It relies on clear expectations, defined outcomes, and regular check-ins that support progress without taking over. Where rework is recurring, the issue is rarely effort alone. It usually points to gaps in clarity, process, or capability that need to be addressed at the system level.

The goal is to make intentional choices about where to stay closely involved and where to step back. Managers who balance both build teams that can operate without constant rescue.

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs



Tala Odeh

Capability Development Lead
@ Cosmic Centaurs

MANAGER MAILBAG

Answering your Questions about Leading in the Middle

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Managing Up (Control | Empowerment within the System).

Many managers are close enough to the work to see risks and opportunities early, but not always in a position to make decisions.

This creates a tension between ownership and authority.

Influence in this context depends less on pushing ideas and more on how they are framed. Senior stakeholders respond to clarity on trade-offs, risk, and impact rather than operational detail.

Managers who can translate observations into structured options, and connect them to broader priorities, are more likely to move decisions forward.

In practice, this shifts the role of the manager from execution alone to acting as a bridge between what is happening on the ground and what needs to be decided at the top.

5. Present | Future

Managers are often expected to provide direction without having full visibility on what lies ahead.

In practice, stability comes less from having answers and more from how uncertainty is handled.

Effective leaders separate what is known, what remains unclear, and what is within the team's control. This helps teams stay focused without creating false certainty.

In these moments, it is often more useful to anchor on what protects performance today, such as delivery, customers, and priorities, while continuing to surface open questions upwards.

Consistency in how leaders show up creates the stability teams need to keep moving forward.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs



Tala Odeh

Capability Development Lead
@ Cosmic Centaurs

MANAGER MAILBAG

Answering your Questions about Leading in the Middle

Key Takeaways (Continued)

7. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded?

Staying connected to life outside of work. Family, community, and a clear sense of purpose.

What helps you be limitless?

Curiosity, continuous learning, and surrounding yourself with people who expand your thinking.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from?

A strong emphasis on relationships, community, and showing up for one another.

What are the top three things leaders should do right now?

1. Clearly articulate the challenge
2. Maintain your own energy and stability
3. Act with intent where you can have impact

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

RELATIONSHIPS & RESULTS

Business Development in a Prolonged Crisis



Emad Odeh

Managing Director
@ EOR Energy Resources

About the Session

In this session, Emad shared insights on how leaders can navigate business development in uncertain markets, from reading shifting market signals and adapting how they approach growth to building strong relationships that sustain long-term opportunity.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Opportunities shift before they become visible

The market is slowing, with longer sales cycles, delayed decisions, and lower conversion, even if pipelines remain active. This creates the impression that growth has stopped. In reality, opportunity has shifted and requires a sharper lens to see it.

Leaders need to read patterns, not just react to surface signals. Each crisis behaves differently. The 2008 crisis exposed overleveraged models. COVID exposed lack of adaptability. The current crisis is regional, evolving, and harder to interpret in real time..

Like Alice in Wonderland, leaders have entered a world where the usual rules no longer apply. The way forward is not to force old logic, but to pause, observe, and separate signal from illusion.

Leaders need to look outward to spot shifts in demand and inward to assess whether their business model is still relevant. The focus shifts from where value exists today to where it could emerge next.

To put this into action:

- Look for patterns across past crises to understand how opportunities shift
- Challenge your assumptions and test where you may be wrong
- Track changes in customer behavior and buying pace
- Monitor regulatory and financial signals that may unlock movement
- Reassess your business model to stay relevant to what is coming next.

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

RELATIONSHIPS & RESULTS

Business Development in a Prolonged Crisis



Emad Odeh

Managing Director
@ EOR Energy Resources

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Growth requires protecting today while building tomorrow

Growth becomes more selective in uncertain markets. It shifts toward where demand is most resilient and where businesses stay relevant. Leaders need to operate on two fronts at the same time. Protect existing revenue while actively positioning for new opportunities.

Existing clients are the first line of stability. Trust is already built, which creates space to deepen relationships, expand scope, and stay close to evolving needs. This is where revenue is defended and often quietly grown.

At the same time, new opportunities continue to emerge. In difficult periods, more deals come to market as companies restructure, seek support, or look for new partners. Entry points also shift. They may come through banks, legal advisors, or new intermediaries rather than traditional channels.

This creates a dynamic where leaders need to stay present in both spaces. Protect what is working, while staying visible and available to capture what is changing. The balance shifts over time, and strong leaders keep adjusting based on how the market evolves.

3. You don't stop selling, you change how you sell

Selling continues, though the approach becomes more grounded in how clients think and decide. Clients move more cautiously. Decisions take longer, commitments get smaller, and conversations shift toward risk, efficiency, and immediate value. This changes how leaders need to engage.

Large, long-term deals will slow down. Breaking work into smaller, lower-risk entry points makes it easier for clients to move forward. This reduces hesitation and keeps momentum alive. Conversations also need to shift. Instead of leading with what is being sold, leaders should focus on what the client is trying to protect or solve. This could be cost, stability, or operational continuity. Speaking to these priorities makes the offer more relevant.

Presence matters as much as the offer itself. Showing up without pushing a transaction, listening closely, and sometimes advising against a deal strengthens credibility. It positions the leader as a partner rather than a vendor.

“Productizing differently” means reshaping what is offered to match current needs. This could mean simplifying the scope, adjusting pricing models, or reframing services around immediate problems clients are facing. The goal is to make it easier for clients to say yes to something that feels useful and manageable now.

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

RELATIONSHIPS & RESULTS

Business Development in a Prolonged Crisis



Emad Odeh

Managing Director
@ EOR Energy Resources

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Opportunities require perspective, patience, and simplicity

Opportunities in uncertain markets are rarely visible at first. They require leaders to step back, question assumptions, and separate real signals from noise.'

A practical approach is to simplify. Occam's Razor reminds leaders that the simplest explanation is often the right one. In business development, this means cutting through complexity, focusing on what clients actually need, and avoiding overengineered solutions.

5. Relationships are integral to business development.

Emad shared how his father built businesses through daily conversations at home and in the community café Central. By staying close to people and listening to what they needed, he was able to understand real demand and build businesses around it, including a road construction company, an engineering office, and a construction materials business.

This shaped how Emad approaches business development today. He created his majlis as a way to stay consistently connected to people and the market. Through regular gatherings and ongoing conversations, he listens, exchanges perspectives, and taps into collective insight to understand what is emerging.

Business development is driven by proximity, listening, and staying present in the right circles. It is also about being in the right rooms, knowing who to speak to, and filtering signal from noise through conversation.

Trust is also built in the absence of a direct transaction. It grows through small, consistent touchpoints such as checking in, listening, and showing up without an agenda. When relationships are built this way, opportunities follow naturally when the time is right.

GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

RELATIONSHIPS & RESULTS

Business Development in a Prolonged Crisis



Emad Odeh

Managing Director
@ EOR Energy Resources

Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded?

- Reminding myself that “this too shall pass,” and that everything is temporary
- The idea of the “pale blue dot,” introduced by astronomer Carl Sagan, shows Earth as a tiny point in a vast galaxy, reminding me how small any single crisis is in the bigger picture.

What helps you be limitless? My father taught me that “The day you stop learning you start growing older, and the day you keep learning you stay young”

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Wisdom, patience, and the belief that “وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ”, you may dislike something while it carries good for you.

What are the top three things leaders should do right now?

1. Look for patterns in the business and market
2. Simplify decisions and cut through complexity
3. Stay calm and composed under pressure

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Community

DIGNITY & HOSPITALITY

Turning Crisis into Community Infrastructure at Scale



Maya Ibrahimchah

Founder
@Beit el Baraka & Beit Kanz

About the Session

In this session, Maya shared insights on what it means to lead and build in times of continuous crisis, drawing from real decisions and ways of operating. She also explored how to design solutions that preserve dignity and lead effectively when navigating between long-term thinking and rapid response.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. From One Story to 300,000 Impacted: How Beit el Baraka Was Built

Maya did not start with a plan to build an organization. The work began with a single encounter that revealed a much larger reality: an elderly woman who, after retirement, could no longer afford basic needs but refused to relinquish her dignity. Maya partnered with this woman and went out to meet retirees across Lebanon. She discovered that many were living in extremely difficult conditions, despite having been part of Lebanon's intellectual and professional elite. Beit El Baraka began with the question: how do we help people in a way that allows them to remain fully human and dignified in the process?

From there, the response unfolded step by step:

- Building a database to understand who and where people were
- Creating a free supermarket where people could shop using points instead of receiving aid
- Expanding into food production by securing land and growing food locally
- Supporting access to education when families could no longer afford schooling

2. What Dignity Teaches Us

The way support is delivered has a direct impact on how it is experienced and accepted. This became clear in the decision to create a free supermarket, where people could choose what they need instead of receiving aid.

Dignity is not a "nice to have" and is not preserved through intention alone. It is embedded in the structure, the space, and the choices people are allowed to make.

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Community

DIGNITY & HOSPITALITY

Turning Crisis into Community Infrastructure at Scale



Maya Ibrahimchah

Founder
@Beit el Baraka & Beit Kanz

Key Takeaways (Continued)

3. Linking Dignity To An Economy of Care

Organizations often respond to challenges through isolated actions. These may create temporary relief and solve the immediate issue but rarely address the root cause. Beit El Baraka offers a strong reminder that one-off interventions are never enough in prolonged uncertainty. A single encounter revealed a hidden population of retirees living without income or recognition.

Effective models connect different parts of the ecosystem so that value circulates within the system. For instance, Maya's response evolved from a free supermarket into a broader model that links food support, agriculture, health, education, and livelihoods.

This reflects an important leadership principle: sustainable care requires connecting parts of the system. When one part reinforces another, support becomes resilient.

A defining strength of Maya's model is that it creates economic pathways around emergency support. Agriculture feeds the supermarket. The social enterprise restaurant helps sustain the wider mission. Women producers across villages become part of the value chain. Students are guided toward sectors that can strengthen Lebanon's future.

4. Leadership in Uncertainty Requires Balancing Structure and Speed

Maya's story shows that uncertainty demands two very different leadership capacities. One is the ability to build systems, governance, and professional structures. The other is the ability to act quickly when reality shifts, whether during war, collapse, or sudden emergency.

Her approach reflects disciplined adaptability. Decisions move quickly, roles stay clear, and people remain aligned around the mission even when the situation changes overnight.

Strong leadership in uncertainty depends on building enough structure to stay grounded and enough flexibility to respond without delay.

GROUNDED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Community

DIGNITY & HOSPITALITY

Turning Crisis into Community Infrastructure at Scale



Maya Ibrahimchah

Founder
@Beit el Baraka & Beit Kanz

Key Takeaways (Continued)

5. Community As A Survival Infrastructure

Community is not an abstract ideal. It is what keeps people going when formal systems fail. It creates continuity, belonging, and practical support in moments when institutions can no longer carry the load alone. What makes Beit El Baraka so compelling is its authenticity. It was built from lived reality, from daily contact with people's needs, and from a refusal to separate compassion from operational rigor.

This is an invitation for leaders navigating uncertainty to treat community as infrastructure, build it intentionally, and recognize that collective care is often what allows people and systems to endure.

6. People Are The Foundation Of Any System

In difficult moments, the instinct is often to optimize for cost or efficiency. Strong leadership does the opposite. It protects and leverages people because in uncertainty, people become more sensitive, reactive, and exposed. And leadership must account for the reality that systems only work if people do. Strong leadership ensures that:

- People are protected and supported during uncertainty
- Teams are redeployed based on need, not reduced by default
- A sense of purpose is maintained, even under pressure

7. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded? My mother, husband and daughter

What helps you be limitless? The way my brain functions. I keep envisioning and predicting.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Humanity, kindness and wanting for people what you want for yourself.

"Kindness is the highest form of human development."

What are the top three things leaders should do right now?

- Create enough distance from the situation to maintain emotional clarity and avoid absorbing every reaction
- Maintain humanity in how they lead because employees are carrying their own heavy burdens
- Stay hopeful, because difficult periods don't last forever

GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

CONTAINMENT & AMBITION

Delivering Visionary Impact in a Complex World



Wissam Adib

Executive Coach & Advisor

About the Session

In this session, Wissam Adib shared his perspective on leading through ambition and uncertainty, introducing the concept of containment as a leadership capability. He explored how leaders can manage the anxiety that comes with transformation, and how to create the conditions for teams to stay productive, adaptive, and grounded in complex environments.

Rewatch the Session



Listen to the Podcast Version



Key Takeaways

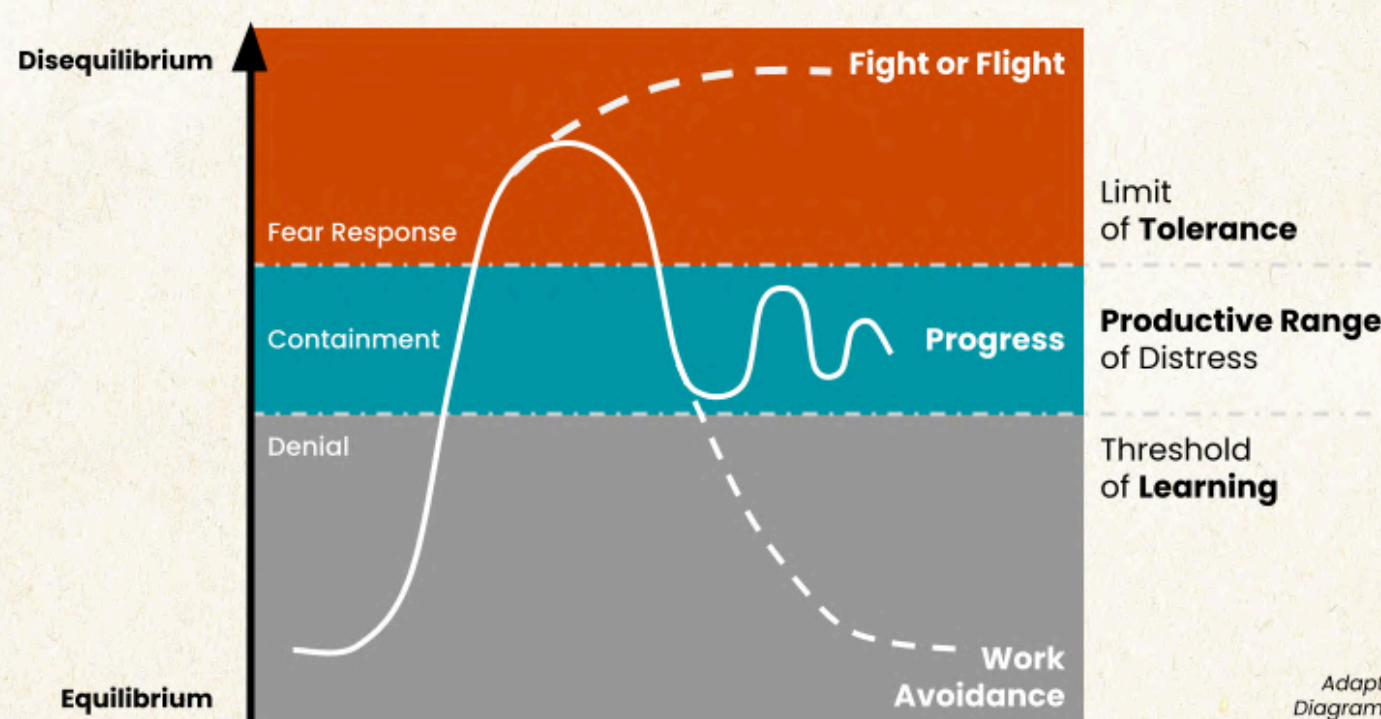
1. Leading in Layered Complexity

High ambition naturally creates anxiety. When leaders ask teams to deliver what has never been done before, move at unprecedented speed, or operate in uncertainty, the first response is often fear. This was evident in Wissam's experience working on the redesign of Dubai Government, where a transformation expected to take years was compressed into months, creating immediate pressure and uncertainty for the team.

In a region defined by bold visions and accelerated transformation, this tension is not an exception, it is the operating reality. The leadership challenge is not to reduce ambition, but to expand the capacity to hold what it generates.

When anxiety is not contained, it overwhelms the system. When it is held well, it becomes the very condition that enables focus, adaptability, and sustained performance at scale.

Containment is about maintaining the right emotional climate



Adapted from Disequilibrium Diagram - Adaptive Leadership

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

CONTAINMENT & AMBITION

Delivering Visionary Impact in a Complex World



Wissam Adib

Executive Coach & Advisor

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Containment vs. control: leading in complexity requires a different response

Complicated challenges are largely predictable. They can be addressed with expertise, planning, and disciplined execution. In these environments, control is effective.

Complex challenges are defined by uncertainty, shifting conditions, and outcomes that cannot be fully anticipated. Here, control often amplifies anxiety and constrains the very adaptability required to move forward.

Containment offers an alternative. It is the capacity to receive the anxiety generated by uncertainty, process it, and return it in a form that allows productive work to continue. Rather than rushing to provide answers or impose order, the role of leadership becomes creating the conditions for experimentation, learning, and ongoing adjustment.

While containment is a well-established concept in psychological literature, the distinctive contribution here is Wissam's application of it as a core leadership capability for navigating complexity, articulated through four interconnected layers of containment: inner, relational, systemic, and symbolic contaminant.

3. Inner containment: leaders must first regulate themselves before they can steady others

Wissam identifies 4 levels of containment, the first being inner containment. Inner containment is a leader's capacity to hold fear, pressure, and uncertainty without becoming reactive.

Leaders cannot contain others if they cannot first contain themselves. This starts with awareness, noticing how one behaves under pressure, and developing a "balcony lens": the ability to observe oneself while in action.

At the core of this is negative capability: the ability to stay with uncertainty without rushing to premature action or false certainty. In complex situations, the instinct is to move faster, but effective leadership often requires slowing down to allow better responses to emerge.

A clear example is how the UAE approached recent geopolitical tensions, where Her Excellency Reem Al Hashimy emphasized a measured and restrained response, prioritizing calm and wisdom in public communication. This reflects the ability to hold uncertainty without rushing into action, allowing more considered responses to emerge.

At the same time, this raises an important question: who contains the container? Leaders need their own spaces and relationships to process what they carry, whether through peers, coaches, or trusted counterparts.

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Organizations

CONTAINMENT & AMBITION

Delivering Visionary Impact in a Complex World



Wissam Adib

Executive Coach & Advisor

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Relational containment: leaders shape the emotional climate around the team

Relational containment is about what happens between a leader and their team, not just what gets done, but how people feel while doing it.

Under pressure, people naturally look to authority for answers and reassurance. If leaders rush to provide direction or take over, it can actually increase dependency and anxiety. What's needed instead is helping people stay steady enough to think and contribute.

This is especially relevant in high power distance environments like in the Arab world, where respect for authority is strong. While this enables speed, it can also limit challenge and honest feedback. Leaders need to actively create space for people to speak up, sometimes even outside formal settings. At the team level, small habits matter. Taking a few minutes to reflect on how the team showed up and what could be done differently helps contain pressure early, before it builds up.

In practice, this means slowing things down when teams move too quickly to solutions, protecting time to think, and taking responsibility for failure so others can stay focused on the work. It also shows up in presence, as seen in how UAE leadership engaged publicly during crisis, helping people feel reassured.

5. Systemic containment: organizations need structures that support experimentation, not just protection

Systemic containment is about how the organization is set up to handle pressure, change, and ambition.

In complex environments, performance cannot rely on individual effort alone. The system has to support it. If an organization claims to value innovation and speed, but operates through heavy approvals and rigid processes, the system is working against the goal.

Over time, organizations tend to drift from focusing on the primary task to focusing on the primary risk. One mistake leads to more controls, and gradually, energy shifts from delivering outcomes to avoiding errors.

Leaders need to actively reset this. That means looking at rewards, processes, structures, and decision-making to ensure they enable experimentation, not just compliance. In moments of high ambition or crisis, more of the system needs to operate in an experimental mode.

Dubai's transformation is a clear example of systems evolving to match ambition, including deliberate efforts to reduce bureaucracy and keep the system adaptive.

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Wissam Adib

Executive Coach & Advisor

Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Symbolic containment: people can endure uncertainty when they believe in a larger mission

Symbolic containment is about meaning, stories, purpose, and shared identity that hold people steady under pressure.

It shows up in how an organization talks about itself, what it stands for, and the sense of mission it creates. During Dubai's transformation, what sustained people was not just structure or policy, but the feeling of being part of a shared mission, a once-in-a-lifetime effort to build something that mattered.

This symbolic layer becomes especially important in difficult periods. It helps people connect day-to-day effort to something bigger than operational pressure. But the discussion also made clear that this cannot be manufactured through empty reassurance. A narrative only works when it feels credible.

Credibility comes from clarity: what do we stand for, and why does it matter? It also requires self-awareness from leaders, understanding what drives them and what they are trying to bring into the world. That deeper self-awareness helps leaders articulate a mission that people can actually believe in.

7. Leading through fast change: hold the system steady while it adapts

Leading through fast change is less about pushing execution and more about managing how the system responds under pressure. It starts with recognizing the nature of the challenge. In complex situations, planning alone is insufficient. Progress comes through experimentation, learning, and adjusting as conditions evolve.

A key signal is where energy is going. When teams focus on approvals, managing the leader, or avoiding mistakes, anxiety has taken over. The leader's role is to absorb that pressure and redirect attention back to the primary task.

This requires shaping the environment: creating space for experimentation, protecting thinking time, and adjusting decision-making rhythms. It also requires working with context. In high power distance and high agreeability environments, people may hesitate to challenge or speak up, especially when stakes are high. Leaders must actively create space for honest input.

What ultimately differentiates effective leadership in these moments is not speed or control, but the ability to read the system and intervene in the right place, at the right time.

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Wissam Adib

Executive Coach & Advisor

Key Takeaways (Continued)

8. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded?

- Creating moments for reflection
- Staying connected to a few trusted people who give honest, direct feedback with care
- Stepping away from noise and constant connectivity

What helps you be limitless?

- Setting a clear intention (e.g., making risk-taking a deliberate focus)
- Holding myself accountable to that intention
- Noticing when I fall back into comfortable patterns and actively pushing beyond them

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from?

“The more in a hurry you are, the more you need to walk slowly,” as shared by His Excellency Mohammad Al Gergawi. It reflects a leadership approach of staying calm and deliberate in moments of intensity to enable more effective action.

What are the top things leaders should do right now?

- Build self-awareness
 - Invest in understanding how you think, react, and show up
- Engage with people as humans, not just roles
 - Connect with teams, clients, and stakeholders on a personal level
 - Understand what they are going through, not just what needs to be done

GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 2: ADAPT

Leading Teams & Organizations

TRUST & TENSION

How Leadership Teams Do Their Best Work



Daher

CEO @AstroLabs

About the Session

This session explores how leadership teams truly perform under pressure by looking at three interconnected levels: the leader, the leadership team, and the system.

Through Roland Daher's experience scaling AstroLabs, the conversation unpacks how trust and tension shape high-performing teams, why systems become essential as organizations grow, and what leaders must change in themselves to enable collective performance.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Leadership Starts With What You Can Control

Fundamentals often sound unremarkable, but they are what transform performance.

In uncertainty, leaders must focus their energy on two areas: what they can control, what they can influence, and ignore what they can't control.

Roland pointed to a set of very simple disciplines that are fully within a leader's control:

- How you show up calm, clear and consistent
- How you communicate
- How you translate priorities into simple, short-term goals

These actions may seem basic, but their consistency compounds and shapes performance over time. He described this as one of the biggest lessons of the past year: "boring" things work. Individually, they may not feel impactful, but when they work together, they transform the organization by creating a system that holds under pressure.

This is why leading AstroLabs through the recent regional crisis felt, in some ways, easier than leading during previous periods of rapid growth. The underlying discipline had already been built. Teams knew how to operate, how to communicate, and how to stay aligned without needing constant intervention.

Resilience, in that sense, is not built in the moment of crisis. It is built beforehand, through the quality and consistency of everyday operating habits.

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Roland Daher

CEO @AstroLabs

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Scaling Leadership Means Shifting From Founder-driven Execution To System-driven Performance

What built the company at one stage will not sustain it at the next. Roland described the early phase of AstroLabs as one powered by founder energy, willpower, and direct involvement in everything. That approach helped build the organization, but at a certain scale, it stopped working. The shift began when the gap kept growing between what he knew needed to happen and what was actually happening across the company. The issue was that too much still lived in people's heads, and the business was relying on instinct and energy that could not scale.

The turning point was moving from implicit understanding to explicit clarity: (re)defining what the company is about, who it serves, what winning looks like over the next two to three years, where resources go, and where they do not.

“You can't scale energy and telepathy. What scales is clarity, accountability, and cadence.”

3. Accountability And Cadence Are The Infrastructure Of Execution

Clarity alone is not enough. Once strategic direction is clear, it has to be translated into owned outcomes, with the right people, authority, teams, and resources behind them. Roland described this as a progression. First comes clarity on strategy. Then comes defining success at every level: individual, team, unit, and company.

What is often missing most is the discipline of returning to those commitments through clear cadences, such as weekly leadership meetings, bi-weekly performance reviews, monthly readouts. Many of these moments might have existed informally or reactively. What changes is making them explicit, predictable, and consistently upheld.

The objective is not to introduce complexity or bureaucracy, but to create predictability. In a fast-moving environment, predictability becomes a source of stability. When people know when decisions will be made, when performance will be reviewed, and how progress will be tracked, they are able to focus their energy on execution rather than coordination. And that's when the system starts carrying the company and execution no longer relies on individual effort alone.

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Roland Daher

CEO @AstroLabs

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Building a Leadership Team that Operates As One

Roland made a clear distinction between a leadership team that looks aligned and one that operates as one. Many leadership teams function as a group of strong individuals, each driving performance within their own area. While this can work at a certain stage, it limits growth as performance becomes fragmented and cross-functional work slows down.

Building a real leadership team requires two shifts.

1) Ensuring the right people are in the right seats for the company's stage. For example, AstroLabs had people with strong "zero to one" DNA, but the business needed more "ten to one hundred" leadership capacity, leaders able to build systems that scale. Sometimes that means coaching people to grow into the stage. Sometimes it means parting ways respectfully.

2) Changing how the team works together. Real shared ownership comes from deliberate handshakes between functions, explicit conversations about what could go wrong, clear ownership, and basic project management discipline when work crosses boundaries.

5. Trust Is not The Absence Of Conflict

Trust in leadership teams is often misunderstood. Leaders often think that it's reflected in how well people get along, when in fact it's better reflected in how willing they are to engage in open and honest disagreement. A lack of visible conflict can create the illusion of alignment, while in reality, important conversations are being avoided. When leaders prioritize comfort over candor, they tend to hold back, minimize disagreement, and stay within their own areas. Over time, this leads to silos, slower decision-making, and weaker execution.

Strong teams create an environment where differing perspectives are surfaced early, discussed openly, and resolved with clarity.

This requires both a team and leadership shift. At the team level, it means moving from avoiding tension to using it productively. At the leadership level, it requires awareness of how individual tendencies shape team dynamics. A natural inclination toward harmony, for example, can unintentionally suppress the level of challenge and debate needed for the team to perform at its best.

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Roland Daher

CEO @AstroLabs

Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Becoming The CEO Means Letting Go Of Being The Hero

Early on, Roland's value came from being the person who solved everything. He had touched nearly every part of the company himself. Over time, that became the very thing holding the company back. In his words, there is a painful identity shift from believing your success comes from getting things done yourself to realizing that, at a certain stage, if you are still doing them yourself, you are failing in the role.

Roland described the transition through a sports metaphor: first, the leader is the star player, then a player-coach, and eventually, the coach on the sideline. The hardest adjustment is accepting that the best scoring now happens when you are no longer on the field.

This creates a fundamental shift in how leadership value is defined. Success is no longer measured by what the leader delivers directly, but by what the organization is able to deliver without them. This transition is deeply personal. It requires letting go of an identity built around being the problem-solver, and resisting the instinct to step in when something is not working.

7. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded?

- Personal discipline through sleep, workouts, and spiritual practice
- Surrounding myself with the right people who keep me grounded, challenged, and uncomfortable
- Getting out of my head by validating my thinking with others

What helps you be limitless? Continuous learning and the belief that I can always rebuild and improve myself.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Resilience under ambiguity. The ability to keep operating and moving forward even when the environment is unstable.

What are the top three things leaders should do right now?

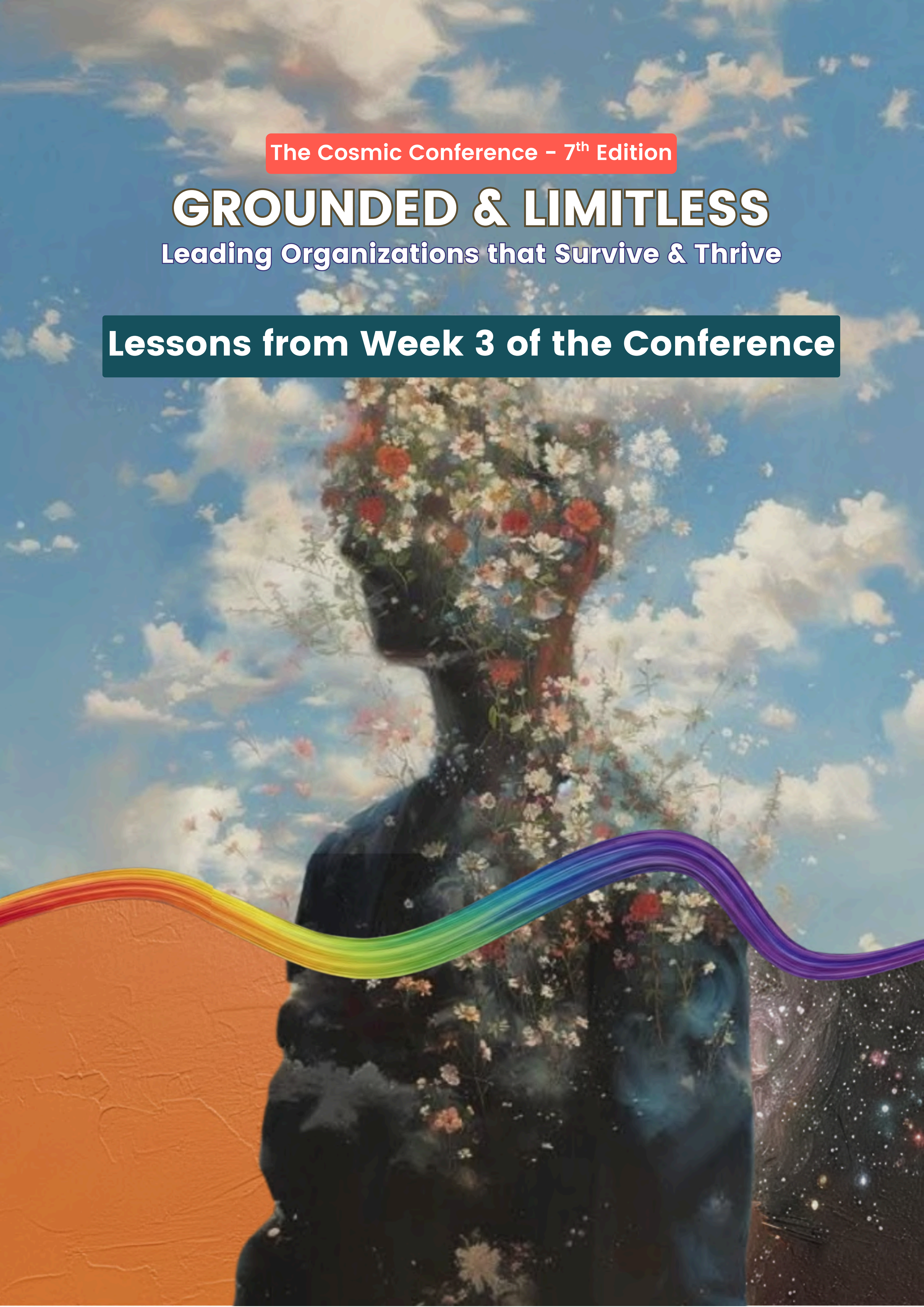
- Take care of themselves. They can't lead effectively if they are burned out
- Use crisis as an opportunity to build and improve
- Not do it alone. They should invest in their leadership team and surround themselves with strong advisors

The Cosmic Conference - 7th Edition

GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

Lessons from Week 3 of the Conference



GROUNDLED & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 3: THRIVE

Leading Organizations

PRESENT & FUTURE:

Leading When the Crisis Doesn't End



Claudia Zeisberger

Professor of Entrepreneurship
and Family Enterprise
@ INSEAD

About the Session

In today's environment, uncertainty is no longer a phase to navigate through, it is the condition leaders are operating within. There is no clear end point, no stable ground to return to, and no precedent to rely on. The challenge is no longer how to get through disruption, but how to lead within it.

This session explored how leaders rethink their business, make decisions without precedent, and balance immediate pressures with long-term positioning.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways (1 of 4)

1. When Crisis Doesn't End: What Changes in a Prolonged Shock

In a prolonged crisis, the risk lies in waiting for a return to normal that may never come. When that happens, organizations end up solving for the wrong outcome.

The critical shift for leaders, then, is to move away from asking "*when will things go back to normal?*" and instead confront a more difficult question:

What is the new normal, and are we building for it?

Over time, temporary responses harden into permanent ways of operating. Decisions made in urgency become embedded in the system. This is why prolonged crises require not just discipline, but rethinking.

At the same time, crisis also creates a unique opening. It allows leaders to challenge assumptions that may have gone unquestioned for years. In that sense, it is not only a moment of pressure, but a moment of possibility.

2. Stepping Back: Rethinking the Business Under Pressure

Periods of disruption create the conditions for deeper reflection, but only if leaders intentionally create the space for it.

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Claudia Zeisberger

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

Rather than focusing solely on immediate survival, this moment can be used to question the fundamentals of the business: what it is built on, what assumptions it relies on, and whether those assumptions still hold.

This requires a level of honesty that is often difficult to sustain. Leaders must confront their own biases, preferences, and default ways of thinking, especially under pressure. Without that awareness, teams tend to revert to familiar patterns - often addressing a version of the crisis they are more comfortable with, rather than the one that is actually unfolding.

A critical capability in this context is scenario planning.

Vulnerabilities exist in every business, but they tend to remain hidden in stable conditions. Crisis surfaces them. Strong organizations make those vulnerabilities explicit by asking:

- What would happen if a key part of our system failed?
- Where are we most exposed?
- What would a significant revenue shock look like in real terms?

The goal is not to predict the future, but to be prepared for multiple versions of it. When those scenarios are thought through in advance, leaders are able to respond with greater speed and clarity when disruption hits.

Another important insight is that many of the answers already exist within the organization. Often, there are ideas, warnings, or insights that were raised earlier but not acted upon. Crisis creates an opportunity to revisit them.

Ultimately, rethinking the business is not an individual exercise. It is a collective one. It requires bringing people together, surfacing different perspectives, and challenging what has long been taken for granted.

3. The Present and the Future: Which Crisis Are You Actually Managing?

One of the most subtle but critical leadership challenges in prolonged uncertainty is this: leaders often find themselves managing the crisis they wish they had, rather than the one that is actually unfolding.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

This happens because uncertainty is uncomfortable. Faced with ambiguity, teams tend to default to familiar frameworks, past experiences, or known playbooks. But in rapidly changing environments, those references can quickly become outdated.

The role of leadership, then, is to ensure that the organization remains anchored in reality. This requires keeping “eyes wide open”, continuously reassessing what is actually happening, rather than relying on assumptions.

A key enabler of this is information flow.

Organizations that adapt well are not necessarily those with the best strategies, but those that are able to surface and act on information quickly. In many cases, the insights needed to navigate the crisis already exist within the organization. The challenge is ensuring they reach the right people.

This is why culture becomes a differentiator. In high-performing organizations:

- **Information flows upwards, not just downwards**
- **People feel permitted to raise concerns early**
- **Leaders actively seek out perspectives from across the system**

Practices such as informal conversations, small group discussions, or structured feedback channels can significantly strengthen this flow. What matters most is not the tool itself, but the consistency and intent behind it.

In parallel, organizations need to create space for innovation. This is not about large, risky bets, but about enabling experimentation in a structured way. One effective approach is to establish a “sandbox”: a protected space with dedicated resources where ideas can be tested without being constrained by the core business.

4. Acting in Uncertainty: Discipline, Communication, and Trust

In environments where clarity is limited and time is constrained, leadership becomes an exercise in disciplined action.

Decisions often need to be made without complete data or clear benchmarks. Waiting for perfect information is rarely an option. As Claudia put it, leaders must become comfortable being “often right” rather than “exactly right.”

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Claudia Zeisberger

PRESENT & FUTURE:

Leading When the Crisis Doesn't End

Key Takeaways (Continued)

In this context, a few practices become non-negotiable:

- **First, cash discipline remains foundational.** Leaders must have a clear understanding of their financial position and model realistic scenarios. This includes stress-testing the business against significant revenue shocks and understanding the implications in concrete terms.
- **Second, communication becomes critical.** In times of uncertainty, silence creates anxiety. People naturally fill gaps in information, often with worst-case assumptions. This is why leaders must communicate more, even when they do not have all the answers.
- **Equally important is creating an environment where bad news can travel quickly.** Organizations that perform well under pressure are those where people feel safe raising issues early. The leader who hears the truth fastest is the one best positioned to respond effectively.
- **Finally, leadership requires the ability to step back.** In a context where everything feels urgent, creating space to think becomes a strategic act. Leaders who are able to disconnect, reflect, and regain perspective are better equipped to navigate complexity and make sound decisions.

Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded? I stay active through sports, and if I can I spend time with my horses.

What helps you be limitless? My students. For over 20 years, I've been teaching groups of 26–29-year-olds, they don't age, but I do. They come with fresh questions, and those questions keep me on my toes. They give me a real sense of how this generation (and the next) is thinking.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Staying calm under pressure.

What are the top three things leaders should do right now?

1. Prepare for immediate shocks to your business. Be very clear on your cash position and stress-test your model using real numbers and real scenarios (not just estimates).
2. Create permission within your organization for bad news to travel upwards. This needs to exist both in good times and in times of stress.
3. Be deliberate about what you are building in this moment. Build for the future, not for a past that the environment may never return to.

GROUND & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 3: THRIVE

Leading Community

INDIVIDUAL & COLLECTIVE

The Power of Community



Wafa Al Obaidat

Founder & CEO @ PLAYBOOK

About the Session

This session explores the power of community in helping leaders navigate uncertainty, shifting the focus from individual resilience to collective strength. Wafa's experience building PLAYBOOK, highlights how intentional design, shared contribution, and trust turn community into a practical lever for leadership, decision-making, and growth.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Collective Resilience: Why Community Matters Now

At the heart of this conversation is a simple distinction. Networks connect people, while communities are formed through shared purpose and the way people show up for one another. A community is not just a group of people to whom one belongs, but one they participate in, where mutual support flows and members take responsibility for one another. Data shows that only 11% of millennials actively engage with the membership programs they join, revealing a deeper gap between membership and participation. Most "communities" are experienced as passive affiliations where people are technically connected but not meaningfully involved.

This is not a failure of people but of design. Communities require intentional structures that invite contribution, create ownership, and make participation meaningful. When this is in place, the community becomes a source of collective resilience. It creates a space where leaders can test their thinking, ask for perspective, and move forward with greater clarity, even when answers are not immediately available.

You see the value of this clearly in uncertain contexts when leaders are required to make decisions without full information, often under pressure and with real consequences. In those moments, the ability to think with others becomes critical. As the situation across the GCC began to unfold, PLAYBOOK shifted its focus to supporting members in real time, bringing people together to make sense of what was happening and navigate it collectively.

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Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

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Leading Community



Wafa Al Obaidat

Founder & CEO @ PLAYBOOK

INDIVIDUAL & COLLECTIVE

The Power of Community

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. What Makes A Community Work

The strength of a community lies in how members show up. What emerged from the conversation is that effective communities are not accidental. For PLAYBOOK, some of these dynamics echo values often associated with Arab societies, such as hospitality and a strong orientation toward supporting others.

Together, these elements create an environment where participation is active, learning is accelerated, and contribution is expected regardless of seniority.

| Shared purpose & relevance | Reciprocity & Contribution | Safety to Contribute Openly | Diversity of Members & Perspectives |
|---|--|--|--|
| A community is anchored in a clear, shared purpose that shapes how members engage. PLAYBOOK for example is a space where women can openly ask questions, discuss money and investments, and seek support. | A strong community is built on reciprocity, where members contribute as much as they receive. In practice, this includes mentoring, sharing knowledge, and actively supporting others. | Communities work when people feel safe to speak openly. At PLAYBOOK this is enabled when vulnerability is modeled and supported through intentional structures such as check-ins and curated interactions. | A mix of backgrounds and experience levels strengthens a community. More experienced members offer guidance and access, while others bring fresh perspectives and questions. |

3. The Compounding Effect of Community

Community creates value when it moves beyond support and begins to compound. At a broader level, impact emerges when participation leads to contribution, and contribution leads to outcomes. This is reflected in how BNI members generated \$26.5 billion in closed business in 2025, demonstrating how structured participation can translate into tangible value at scale.

As individuals engage, act, and share what they learn, value starts to circulate within the system rather than remaining individual. Over time, this creates a reinforcing loop where knowledge, access, and opportunity build on one another. This is where community shifts from connection to momentum. In practice, this showed up in PLAYBOOK when relationships translated into action. Members moved from connecting to collaborating, forming partnerships, becoming co-founders, or stepping into new roles. In some cases, access to trusted peers enabled individuals to take steps they would not have taken alone, such as making their first investment. As trust deepened, the dynamic evolved further. Members began contributing back into the system, opening doors and creating opportunities for others, reinforcing the cycle over time.

For leaders, the implication is clear: the value of a community lies not just in who is part of it, but in whether it is designed to circulate value. When participation leads to contribution, and contribution leads to outcomes, the community becomes a mechanism for scaling impact.

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Leading Community

INDIVIDUAL & COLLECTIVE

The Power of Community



Wafa Al Obaidat

Founder & CEO @ PLAYBOOK

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Community as a Leadership and Organizational Lever

Community becomes a leadership lever by expanding how leaders think and act in uncertainty. Wafa emphasized that leadership is often isolating and that leaders need spaces beyond their own teams to seek advice, test thinking, and explore different scenarios. Within PLAYBOOK, this took the form of curated groups, such as the chief-level group, where leaders facing similar challenges could work collaboratively and share their perspectives.

At the organizational level, community becomes a lever for responsiveness. As conditions shifted, Playbook redirected its focus toward delivering a wellness series addressing fear, uncertainty, and members' real-time challenges, guided by continuous engagement and direct feedback. For leaders, this highlights that an engaged community acts as a real-time feedback system, enabling faster, more relevant decisions for their people.

More broadly, community expands how leaders think and act in uncertainty. It provides access to diverse perspectives, enables faster decision-making, and mobilizes collective capability. When actively leveraged, it becomes an embedded system that strengthens how organizations learn, adapt, and move forward.

5. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded? My kids, my morning ritual that resets my nervous system, and my daily workouts that keep my energy high and able to show up fully for my business, team, and community.

What helps you be limitless? Being an avid reader, applying what I learn, and staying off social media to keep my thinking expansive.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? Our warmth and hospitality, being natural hosts who prioritize others, and having a relationship-driven mindset that is non-transactional and focused on building deep, lasting roots.

What are the top three things leaders should do right now?

- Learn to pivot through side hustles and investing
- Find something that excites you, personally or professionally
- Stay connected to experts and advisers and build your own advisory circle

GROUNDING & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 3: THRIVE

Leading Organizations

CRISIS & CREATION

Keynote: Building Organizations That Renew



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs

About the Session

This session explores the gap between what leaders understand and how organizations actually operate. While leaders recognize the need to balance short-term demands with long-term thinking, most organizations are designed to prioritize what is immediate, measurable, and predictable often at the expense of adaptation and learning.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. The Tension Between What Leaders Know and How Organizations Work

In complex environments, leaders operate in a constant tension between delivering in the present and preparing for the future. Most recognize this and understand the need to balance both. The real challenge is translating that awareness into how the organization actually operates. In practice, organizations reward what is immediate, measurable, and predictable, causing execution to dominate while exploration gets crowded out. Over time, this makes organizations highly efficient at what they already know, but less able to adapt to what is changing. The focus gradually shifts from creating value to protecting what already exists.

2. The real barrier is not information, but the organization's ability to work with uncertainty

Many organizations believe they struggle with communication or execution. In reality, information may exist, but it does not travel far enough, arrives too late, or gets dismissed as noise. Even when insight is accessible, action does not follow. This is not just a process gap. It reflects a deeper logic: organizations are designed to execute against certainty, not to respond to what is still emerging. As a result, uncertainty is filtered out rather than worked with.

GROUND & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

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CRISIS & CREATION

Keynote: Building Organizations That Renew



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs

Key Takeaways (Continued)

3. Innovation in uncertainty requires a shift from planning to learning

In stable environments, progress follows planning: analyze, forecast, execute. In uncertain environments, this breaks down. Information is incomplete, and the most important signals only appear after action.

Resilient organizations shift from planning to learning forward: acting on what they know, testing ideas, and refining based on what they learn. Clarity comes through action.

This is how Cosmic Centaurs were built during the COVID crisis. It did not start with a fixed plan. As <https://www.cosmiccentaurs.com/post/crisis-creation-building-organizations-that-renew-keynote-with-marliyn-zakhour-2026-cosmic-c> described, it emerged from listening to what was happening, making sense of evolving market needs, and acting on them. Today, new offerings continue to come from these signals, rather than from a predefined strategy.

4. Resilience is a continuous capability, not a reaction to crisis

Gary Hamel describes organizational resilience as the capacity to continuously reinvent the business, to adapt, evolve, and change direction before circumstances force you to.

This positions resilience as an ongoing capability, built over time through how the organization operates every day, rather than something activated only in moments of crisis. This relies on three capabilities:

- Listening: staying close to real signals from customers and the market.
 - At **Microsoft**, Satya Nadella introduced “customer empathy” by having teams observe customers directly using their products, removing filters and grounding decisions in real problems.
- Making sense: turning different perspectives into shared understanding.
 - At **Intel**, “constructive confrontation” allowed assumptions to be challenged openly, preventing false alignment and enabling better decisions.
- Acting: moving without full certainty, with a focus on enabling small, low-risk experiments that generate learning, rather than waiting for fully validated ideas before taking action.
 - At **Shell**, the GameChanger program gives employees small budgets to run initial experiments based on a simple hypothesis, without requiring a full business case.

These capabilities, in combination, shape how organizations continuously adapt, evolve, and renew themselves.

GROUND & LIMITLESS

Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 3: THRIVE

Leading Organizations

CRISIS & CREATION

Keynote: Building Organizations That Renew



Marilyn Zakhour

CEO & Founder
@ Cosmic Centaurs

Key Takeaways (Continued)

5. Designing Resilient Organizations: The Omnichannel Organization[®] Framework

Listening, making sense, and acting are outcomes of how the organization is designed. Most organizations fall short because they have not built the conditions that enable these capabilities at scale.

The Omnichannel Organization[®] framework translates this into practice. It maps the key levers that determine whether the organization is designed for adaptation or against it, and shows how agility can be embedded into everyday operations.

| | Strategy | Structure | Process | Control | People | Culture |
|---------|--|--|--|---|--|---|
| Framing | Are you continuously integrating new signals, or operating on fixed assumptions? Strategy evolves with signals and treats decisions as bets. | Does exploration have its own address? Organizations design separate structures for exploration and execution. | Are there rhythms for experimentation, reflection, and knowledge sharing? Learning is built into regular cycles. | Do your metrics support learning as well as performance? Measurement shapes behavior. | Do your people have the capacity to operate in uncertainty? Capability comes from exposure and reflection. | Can your organization hold tension rather than resolve it? Innovation requires balancing opposing forces. |
| Example | Spotify's DIBB model turns signals into action. Cosmic Centaurs built new offers from client conversations within days. | IBM created a separate PC unit. Skunk Works operated independently for innovation. | 3M's 15% time and Atlassian's ShipIt Days enable experimentation. Grow Day at Cosmic Centaurs builds reflection. | Haier uses market-based metrics. Cosmic Centaurs includes learning in performance reviews. | Toyota's andon cord empowers employees. Cosmic Centaurs builds comfort with ambiguity through stretch work. | Pixar's Braintrust enables candid feedback. Cosmic Centaurs balances connection, excellence, and innovation. |

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Resilience Is a System Capability

Resilience Is Built Through Design, Not Intent

Resilience does not come from a single initiative or a fixed model. It is built through the continuous design of the organization across strategy, structure, processes, control, people, and culture. These are not one-time decisions, but ongoing choices that shape how the organization adapts over time. Most organizations do not struggle with knowing what needs to change. The real challenge is creating the conditions that allow that change to happen consistently, beyond moments of crisis.

How Resilience Emerges Over Time

Resilience is rarely visible while it is being built. It becomes clear in retrospect, through the accumulation of small decisions: staying close to the market, protecting space for new ideas, making learning a rhythm, and measuring what matters. What anchors this evolution is clarity of purpose. At Cosmic Centaurs, the “why” remains fixed while everything else stays flexible, allowing the organization to continuously reinvent what it offers without losing direction.

What Defines Enduring Organizations

Organizations that endure are not defined by having the best plan, but by their ability to keep learning, adapting, and building, even without full clarity of what comes next.

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Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

WEEK 3: THRIVE

Leading Organizations

RIYĀDAH

ريادة

From National Vision to Global Impact



Rajit Nanda

CEO @DataVolt

About the Session

This session explores what it means to lead at the intersection of national ambition and global impact. It unpacks how leaders build, integrate, and scale simultaneously in environments where systems, talent, and industries are still evolving.

At its core, it reframes leadership as the ability to navigate complexity, align diverse worlds, and act without precedent.

Rajit is the CEO of DataVolt, a tech scaleup pioneering the development and operations of next-generation data centers. He has over 28 years of experience driving transformative change across multiple organizations. Previously, as the CIO of ACWA Power and one of the founding employees, he played a pivotal role in taking it from a handful to more than 4,000 employees, and scaling the company's global presence, overseeing its remarkable growth and innovation.

Rewatch
the Session



Listen to
the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. The Difference Between Clarity and Uncertainty

Leaders operating in high-growth environments are often required to build and scale at the same time. A key distinction in these environments is that clarity does not always mean certainty. Clarity is about having a strong sense of direction grounded in values and first principles, even when data is incomplete.

In Rajit's experience, this means providing directional confidence to teams without waiting for perfect answers, while creating a culture where ambiguity is normalized and ownership is distributed.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Crisis as a Catalyst: From Reaction to Opportunity

In moments of crisis, effective leadership is less about reacting quickly and more about responding structurally. The ability to break down complexity, mobilize teams, and explore multiple pathways becomes critical.

During COVID, Rajit and his team were managing large-scale infrastructure projects amid severe global supply chain disruptions. Instead of reacting defensively, they created a dedicated crisis response structure, met regularly, and broke challenges into smaller, solvable components.

The lesson is clear: confidence in uncertainty does not come from having the answer, but from building the capability to find one.

3. Cherish: The Dimension Beyond Thriving

Beyond enduring, adapting, and thriving, Rajit offered a fourth dimension: cherish.

“As leaders, we often focus on what needs to be delivered next and forget to reflect on what has already been built,” Rajit explained that what truly matters over time is not just performance, it is the institutions, trust, and collective belief that are created along the way.

Leadership should be measured by what endures beyond a leader’s tenure.

Protecting culture and values is not a byproduct of success; it is part of the work itself.

Rajit defined cherishing as pausing to recognize what has been built, and ensuring that it continues to hold meaning and strength for those who come after.

4. Building from the Region to the World

Building globally today is about navigating fundamentally different systems, expectations, and ways of operating. The GCC offers a unique starting point for this, with its convergence of vision, capital, and execution speed. Increasingly, organizations from the region are not just participating in the global economy, but shaping it.

However, scaling globally from this context requires more than ambition. It demands the ability to balance a global mindset with strong local roots and values. A defining characteristic of this model is a long-term orientation (often described as “patient capital”), which allows organizations to operate with consistency and conviction over time.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

When scaling globally, leaders also navigate differences in worldviews. In the GCC region, business is relationship-led, whereas elsewhere it may be transactional or process-driven. These differences influence communication, leadership style, and decision-making.

The role of leaders, then, is not to eliminate these differences, but to integrate them - creating a shared direction where these tensions become a source of strength, not friction.

6. Designing Culture & Capability for Scalable Global Integration

Culture, Not Structure, Is the Binding Mechanism at Scale

As organizations expand across domains and geographies, the primary integration challenge shifts from technical coordination to cultural cohesion.

In DataVolt's case, bringing together teams across energy, data centers, and computing required more than aligning expertise; it required creating conditions for mutual understanding, cross-domain learning, and effective collaboration. Integration, therefore, becomes a sustained leadership discipline, not a discrete initiative.

Talent Scarcity Forces a Shift from Hiring to Capability Building

Global expansion is increasingly constrained by access to specialized talent, particularly in emerging and highly technical fields.

In Rajit's experience, expansion decisions were driven by a global shortage of specialized talent. Rather than relying solely on hiring, the focus shifted to building global capability centers in key markets. For example, in Mumbai, a high-performing team was established within a year, not just through recruitment, but through deliberate integration.

Integration Extends Beyond Onboarding into System Design

Traditional onboarding models are insufficient in distributed, fast-scaling organizations. Sustained integration requires continuous mechanisms such as structured interactions, off-sites, and deliberate cross-team engagement. This is coupled with a conscious effort to remove hierarchical distinctions (e.g., "back office"), reframing all roles as equal contributors to the organization's objectives.

Culture Building Is an Active, Ongoing Leadership Act

In increasingly diverse and distributed environments, culture does not emerge organically. Leaders actively design and reinforce a shared identity, ensuring individuals feel valued, connected, and aligned to a common mission. The objective moves beyond coordination toward creating a cohesive system where collaboration is both enabled and expected.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

7. Leadership Lessons from the Region

From Rajit's experience in the region, several leadership principles stand out to him:

- Boldness in vision is essential. Execution follows vision.
- Speed is a strategic advantage and a key differentiator.
- Relationships matter deeply. They shape trust, reputation, and long-term success.

As Rajit reflects "counterparties remember the quality, dedication, and authenticity of how you show up. Over time, this becomes a powerful foundation for future opportunities."

8. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded?

Remembering the responsibility you have - for the vision and for the people.

What helps you be limitless?

There are two things:

- From within, it is curiosity and the power of imagination that I bring to the table.
- From the outside, it is about surrounding yourself with people who challenge you, who bring diverse views, and who you recognize as smarter than you. That should not create insecurity; it should be something you learn to leverage as a leader.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from?

- Patience, combined with ambition
- Respect for relationships. Understanding the power of relationships is critical.
- I would also add hospitality. The importance of hospitality in this culture is something very unique, and it teaches you trust and respect in a very profound way.

Based on our conversation, what are the top three things you would advise leaders to do right now?

- First, recognize that uncertainty is part of the game. It is important to embrace it rather than be afraid of it.
- Second, invest in people and systems that outlast the cycle - that is your path to creating something enduring.
- Third, have a long-term vision and be very consistent in how you communicate it. Over time, you will find the right people who believe in it and will help you realize it.

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Leading Organizations



Dr. Saleh Altamimi

CEO @Riyadh First Health Cluster

PRESSURE & PERFORMANCE

How Crisis Reshapes the System, the Organization, and the Leader

About the Session

This session explores how pressure shapes systems, organizations, and leaders, showing how crises can unlock hidden capacity, drive innovation, and strengthen collective purpose. Through Dr. Saleh's experience leading the Riyadh First Healthcare Cluster, it highlights how clarity of purpose, system design, and human-centered leadership turn pressure into performance and long-term resilience and innovation.

Rewatch the Session



Listen to the Podcast Version



Key Takeaways

1. Crisis Activates Hidden Capacity and Builds Lasting System Strength

The COVID crisis at the Riyadh First Healthcare Cluster revealed that organizational capability often remains underestimated until it is tested. Under immediate and intense pressure, the system was pushed to its limits and proved it could absorb far more than expected. ICU capacity was doubled, and staff were rapidly redeployed and trained into critical roles. These capabilities did not emerge overnight. They were built over years and only became visible under pressure, showing that crisis is where the true strength of a system is tested.

At the human level, pressure reshaped how people showed up. Individuals moved beyond fear and acted with a clear sense of purpose, continuing to serve despite personal risk. Many isolated themselves from their families, reinforcing their commitment to their role. This shared experience strengthened bonds across teams, deepened trust, and created a strong sense of unity around a common purpose.

This became a period of accelerated learning. The cluster scaled under extreme conditions, building a model for future shocks and strengthening its ability to expand capacity, sustain pressure, and adapt in real time. This strengthened both operational capacity and human connection, leaving the system more agile, aligned, and confident in navigating uncertainty.

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PRESSURE & PERFORMANCE

How Crisis Reshapes the System, the Organization, and the Leader



Dr. Saleh Altamimi

CEO @Riyadh First Health Cluster

Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Limited Resources Push Systems to Innovate and Scale

Operating with limited resources is becoming the norm, not the exception. This reality pushed the Riyadh First Healthcare Cluster to innovate in ways that maximize impact and scale despite constraints. What enables such a shift is having a clear goal combined with openness in how to achieve it. The cluster aims to increase life expectancy to 80 years, which led it to expand beyond treatment to prevention, early diagnosis, and mental and social wellbeing.

This clarity drove a shift from a reactive model to a proactive one, where the system actively reaches people rather than waiting for them to seek care. One example is outreach programs to remote areas around Riyadh, where medical teams spend time conducting screenings and providing care directly within communities. Another initiative targeted vulnerable populations in partnership with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, identifying individuals on social assistance, reaching them at home, and enrolling thousands into healthcare programs with dedicated support.

Innovation also extended into how the cluster operates. Through a partnership with a UK-based startup to adopt AI tools that convert doctor-patient conversations into structured medical reports, improving efficiency and decision-making.

These efforts show how constraints combined with a clear end in sight accelerated a more agile and outward-looking system, where innovation is driven by clear purpose, openness, and the ability to scale solutions beyond traditional models.

3. Efficiency and Innovation Complement Each Other

Dr. Saleh emphasizes that efficiency and innovation are not opposing forces. They operate together through a dual focus: exploiting existing capabilities to improve efficiency, while exploring new technologies and methods to deliver greater value. Relying on the same approaches leads to repeated outcomes, while innovation introduces new ways to improve performance at scale.

Using telemedicine is one example at the Riyadh First Healthcare Cluster, where virtual care replaced the need for patients to travel long distances for short appointments, improving access while optimizing system capacity.

Another example is the shift in the healthcare funding model. The system is moving from fixed annual budgets, which encourages full spending, to a capitated model where the cluster receives a fixed amount per beneficiary and can retain savings when performance targets are met, on the conditions that savings are reinvested in innovation programs.

This creates stronger incentives for efficiency while maintaining quality outcomes. It encourages teams to deliver care at lower cost, reinvest savings into improvement, and continuously evolve how the system operates.

By aligning efficiency with innovation through both practice and incentives, the system becomes more scalable, adaptive, and capable of sustaining performance over time.

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Dr. Saleh Altamimi

CEO @Riyadh First
Health Cluster

PRESSURE & PERFORMANCE

How Crisis Reshapes the System, the Organization, and the Leader

Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Trust and Alignment Are Built Through Leader Proximity and Accessibility

Managing the emotional and psychological reality of change at scale requires an approach grounded in engagement, respect, and empowerment. With 28,000 employees, Dr. Saleh emphasizes that trust cannot be built at a distance, which is why he remains visible through regular visits to facilities, engaging directly with managers and frontline teams. In these interactions, he asks for support rather than mandating action, reinforcing a mindset of shared responsibility.

Leadership accessibility is also central. Dr. Saleh ensures open access to him for all employees, creating a culture where people feel heard and valued, while strengthening accountability as managers become more responsive knowing issues can be escalated.

Over time, this approach builds loyalty and alignment, unlocking the full commitment of the workforce and strengthening the connection between people, leadership, and their purpose.

5. Effective Leadership Depends on Resilience, Perspective, and Personal Renewal

Leading at this scale requires managing constant pressure and maintaining personal stability. Dr. Saleh emphasizes the importance of accepting that leadership includes both success and setbacks. Resilience comes from recognizing that challenges are part of the role and staying steady through both positive and difficult periods.

This requires conscious effort. Leaders need to reflect on setbacks, avoid reacting impulsively, and focus on overall progress rather than isolated events. As long as the organization is moving in the right direction, short-term difficulties remain part of the process.

Sustained performance also depends on protecting personal energy. Time with family, rest, and moments of disconnection from work are necessary to recharge. Without this, burnout develops gradually over time and affects both the leader and the organization. Managing this balance helps maintain clarity, consistency, and long-term effectiveness.

Over time, this discipline allows leaders to focus on what matters most: building strong teams and embedding ways of working into the system. This, in return, ensures the organization continues to perform, even without constant direct intervention.

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PRESSURE & PERFORMANCE

How Crisis Reshapes the System, the Organization, and the Leader



Dr. Saleh Altamimi

CEO @Riyadh First Health Cluster

Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded? My family.

What helps you be limitless? I always ask myself “What else?” I don’t assume there is only one option or solution.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from?

The connection between spirituality and work reflects a deeper sense of purpose. Work for us is not only a job or a way to earn a living, but a mission and an act of service. It is seen as part of worship, where doing good and helping others is dedicated to God, with the belief that this brings blessing in return.

Based on our conversation, what are the top three things you would advise leaders to do right now

- Accept and learn from failure.
- Recognize that stress is part of leadership and build ways to cope and recharge.
- Trust and empower your people, and build a system that can operate without relying on you

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LIVES & LIVELIHOODS

What we can Learn from the UAE Crisis Management Playbook



Peter Zemsky

Professor of Strategy
& Innovation @INSEAD
CEO @Lexarius

About the Session

This session explored what leaders can learn from the UAE's COVID-19 response as a model for navigating uncertainty and emerging stronger. Through Peter Zemsky's research, the conversation unpacked how the UAE balanced lives and livelihoods, what organizations can apply today, from building crisis-ready systems and cultures to using AI in ways that strengthen judgment rather than replace it.

Rewatch
the Session



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the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Crisis Performance Is Built Before the Crisis

What stood out in the UAE response was not just how decisions were made during the crisis, but what had been built long before it.

Digital infrastructure, healthcare capacity, public-private partnerships, and leadership credibility were all developed in peacetime and became decisive advantages under pressure. For example:

- Digital tracking systems enabled real-time visibility on outbreaks
- Emirates' cold-chain logistics became critical for vaccine distribution
- Existing public-private coordination prevented healthcare system overload

Organizations that perform well in uncertainty are those that have already invested in the fundamentals: trust, systems, and relationships, even when the return is not immediately clear.

2. Clear Mandates Enable Fast, Aligned Decision-Making

In moments of uncertainty, leaders often face competing priorities. The UAE addressed this early by setting a clear and simple mandate: **protect both lives and livelihoods**.

This framing acted as a decision filter across all levels, enabling speed without fragmentation. In contrast, many organizations struggle not because they lack data, but because they lack clarity on what matters most. Clarity reduces friction. In crisis, that becomes a competitive advantage.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

3. Effective Crisis Leadership Combines Structure and Judgment

Crisis decision-making requires a different operating model.

The UAE created:

- Centralized governance
- Expert-driven execution

This allowed leaders to **combine**:

| Speed | Expertise | Judgment |
|---|---|---|
| Centralized structures enabled fast, coordinated decisions in a rapidly changing environment. | Decisions were grounded in real-time scientific and operational input from trusted experts. | Leaders made high-stakes calls under uncertainty, balancing data with experience and context. |

Strong decision-making in crisis is not just about being fast or data-driven, it is about integrating both, while remaining adaptable.

4. Trust Is the Invisible Infrastructure of Crisis Response

Trust enabled faster decision-making, public alignment, and long-term confidence. It was built through three reinforcing elements:

Competence leaders demonstrated they could act decisively and effectively

Transparency clear communication of what was happening (e.g., data on cases, risks)

Empathy adapting policies to real human needs (e.g., vulnerable populations during lockdown)

This combination created a system where people trusted and followed the received decisions. Trust is tested in crisis and it determines how far leaders can move, how fast.

5. Crisis Reveals the Cost of Neglecting Culture and Talent

Organizations that have not invested in people, culture, and relationships find themselves struggling to respond effectively. In contrast, organizations with strong alignment were able to coordinate faster, share information more openly, and execute decisions with less resistance.

“If people don’t trust you before the crisis, you cannot build that trust fast enough during it.”

What feels like a long-term investment in stable times becomes a short-term necessity in crisis.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. The Shift from Planning to Continuous Adaptation

Traditional strategy assumes stability and predictability. In uncertain environments, leaders must shift toward:

- Rolling strategy cycles instead of annual planning
- Real-time dashboards tracking key signals (e.g., supply, pricing, sentiment)
- Continuous reassessment of assumptions

This was evident in how decisions were revisited constantly during COVID not set once and followed blindly. As highlighted in the session: The goal is to build the ability to adjust as reality evolves.

Planning still matters and adaptability matters more.

7. AI Is Not a Substitute for Thinking

AI enables faster analysis, insights, and Continuous strategy updates. It can support leaders in tracking market shifts, updating risk scenarios, and generating options quickly.

However, over-reliance creates risks of reduced critical thinking and passive decision-making. The opportunity is to enhance judgment without outsourcing it.

8. The Organizations That Thrive Will Be the Ones That Learn

Crisis is a compressed learning environment. In the UAE case leaders and teams involved in crisis response became significantly more capable because of it. Capabilities built during the crisis were reused and scaled afterward. Organizations that treat crisis as a learning opportunity:

Build better decision systems

Develop stronger leaders

Increase long-term adaptability

Those who simply try to “get through it” miss the opportunity to build capability.

9. The Leadership Imperative: Build for What Comes Next

The most important shift is forward-looking. Strengthen decision-making structures before the next crisis. Invest in trust, culture, and talent even when under pressure. Rethink systems (risk, strategy, operations). Many organizations have fragmented crisis, risk, and resilience processes, real crises cut across all of them. The next frontier is building integrated resilience systems. Because in today’s world, crisis is no longer an exception. It is the operating environment.

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What we can Learn from the UAE Crisis Management Playbook



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Key Takeaways (Continued)

10. Lightning Round

1. What keeps you grounded?

- Focusing on purpose beyond ego
- Reflecting on contribution to society (“Why am I doing this? What am I giving back?”)
- Awareness of personal privilege, which creates a sense of responsibility

2. What helps you be limitless (curiosity, imagination, long-term thinking)?

- Natural ability to imagine future possibilities and bold visions
- Staying engaged in the process of making those visions real
- Embracing the journey, including uncertainty and twists, rather than expecting a straight path

3. One leadership quality from the Arab world others can learn from:

- Consultative leadership (“Shura”) Strong top leadership combined with stakeholder consultation
- Balance between authority and inclusiveness
- Integration of expertise into decision-making, rather than separating leadership from knowledge

4. Top three things leaders should do right now:

- Prepare for turbulence Treat the current moment as a learning opportunity that shapes future leaders
- Focus on intangibles Culture, trust, commitment, and people engagement
- These are critical in crisis—not optional
- Reimagine organizational systems Reduce bureaucracy
- Rethink risk, crisis, and safety processes
- Use tools like AI to build resilience more effectively with existing resources

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Leading Organizations that Survive & Thrive

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Leading Organizations

RESILIENT & READY

Building Global Organizations that Thrive



Loic Moutault

President Global
Petcare @Mars

About the Session

This session explored what it takes to lead when disruption becomes constant. Drawing on Loic's experience leading a global organization through crises, it unpacked how leaders can move beyond prediction to building systems that respond, how organizations turn disruption into long-term strength, and what enables teams and leaders to operate with resilience and confidence under pressure.

Rewatch
the Session



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the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. From Episodic Crisis To Permanent Volatility

Crisis has shifted from being occasional and localized to continuous and global.

What was once isolated disruptions are now overlapping forces: geopolitical, technological, economic, and environmental, interacting in ways that amplify impact across entire systems.

Today, instability is structural. Organizations are affected by events they did not cause and cannot control, becoming collateral damage of broader global dynamics such as cyber warfare, regulatory shifts, or supply chain dependencies. As a result, leaders are asked to operate within permanent volatility through a dual lens: understanding global interdependencies while responding with local precision.

When volatility becomes repetitive, resilience must be designed into the organization through structure, governance, and operating models that assume disruption will continue.

2. You Can't Predict Crisis, But You Can Design for It

Leaders often fall into the trap of trying to anticipate the next disruption. But the real shift is recognizing that uncertainty is constant, and readiness must be built into the system.

Preparation is about developing organizational reflexes: protocols, decision rights, and clarity on who acts when. The first 24–48 hours are decisive because prepared teams waste less time figuring out what to do.

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Building Global Organizations that Thrive



Loïc Moutault

President Global
Petcare @Mars

Key Takeaways (Continued)

3. Resilience Is Built Across The Entire Organization

True resilience is built across the entire system as crisis impacts and strengthens multiple layers simultaneously:

- **Processes:** how decisions are made, how operations run, how recovery is structured
- **Systems:** IT infrastructure, traceability, continuity mechanisms
- **Capabilities:** crisis management, cybersecurity, business continuity
- **People & Teams:** how individuals step up, collaborate, and operate beyond hierarchy
- **Culture:** shared mindset, confidence, and the belief that “we will figure it out”

These layers are deeply interconnected, and strengthening one without the others creates imbalance. A system upgrade, for example, will not deliver impact if it is not accompanied by a shift in mindset and behavior. In the same way, strong and capable people operating without clear processes can create confusion rather than effectiveness. And capabilities, no matter how advanced, cannot scale without the right structures to support and sustain them.

4. Building The Capability To Handle Future Crises

Organizations must move beyond planning and focus on training, structure, and clarity of response. This starts with preparing teams through defined protocols, clear roles, and repeated training, so that in the first 24–48 hours they act with speed and confidence rather than hesitation.

Crisis also requires a different operating model. Decision-making shifts closer to the frontlines, where the most relevant information sits, and leadership moves away from control toward enabling action. In many situations, the CEO serves the team that leads the response.

At a more structural level, organizations must clearly define where decisions sit: what is handled at board level, what sits with management, and what is owned locally. This clarity allows for faster and more appropriate responses depending on the nature of the crisis.

5. Leadership Teams Are Built in Peacetime

Leadership teams are intentionally built before crisis hits, through:

- Time invested in alignment, not just execution
- Co-creating the agenda, not imposing it
- Establishing clear team protocols and ways of working

A critical element is ensuring that leaders enter the room as owners of the business as a whole. This shift is reinforced through structure, particularly incentives that prioritize collective performance over individual success. Trust and relationships also play a central role. Loïc highlighted the importance of “making friends before you need them” both within the organization and across key stakeholders. For example, Loïc intentionally spends around 12 days per year in person with his team to build connection. These relationships become critical in moments of crisis, when coordination and trust matter most.

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Loic Moutault

President Global
Petcare @Mars

Key Takeaways (Continued)

6. Leadership in Uncertainty Is an Inner Discipline

Sustained uncertainty requires leaders to manage both the organization and themselves. The role of the leader becomes one of absorbing pressure and translating it into direction, focus, and confidence for others. Loic described this as the ability to import stress and export clarity and calm. This requires emotional discipline, as well as the ability to distinguish between what matters and what is noise.

Not all external events are material. One of the leader's responsibilities is to filter complexity, identify what truly impacts the organization, and focus collective energy accordingly. Without this, teams become reactive and fragmented.

Energy management becomes critical:

- Knowing when not to show up until you are ready
- Creating space to step back, make sense, and refocus

7. Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded? Family, protected personal time, and stepping away from the business to think clearly.

What helps you be limitless? Thinking long-term, starting with the end in mind, and believing there is always a way forward while being courageous.

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world that the rest of the world can learn from? A strong belief in the future, combined with resilience and long-term vision and planning.

What are the top three things you would advise leaders to do right now?

- Prepare for uncertainty, even if you can't predict it. You may not know what's coming, but you can build readiness.
- Understand your value chain. Your system is only as strong as its weakest link.
- Invest in relationships and what is "important but not urgent". Strong teams, partnerships, and trust built over time become critical in moments of crisis.

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FREEDOM & CONSTRAINT

Leading & Governing at the Edge of Uncertainty



Jose Santos

Affiliated Professor of Practice
in Global Management
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About the Session

In this closing session of the Cosmic Conference, José Santos challenges one of the most deeply held assumptions in management: that the future can be predicted by doing away with uncertainty. Instead, he reframes leadership as the ability to operate within true uncertainty by designing the conditions that allow organizations to act despite not knowing. The conversation moves from redefining uncertainty, to exposing the limits of traditional models, and ultimately to equipping boards and managers with practical ways to act responsibly in an unknowable world.

Rewatch
the Session



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the Podcast
Version



Key Takeaways

1. Risk vs Uncertainty: A Foundational Distinction

The conversation begins with a distinction that seems simple, but fundamentally reshapes how we think.

In most organizational contexts, uncertainty is (mis)treated as risk: something that can be measured, modeled, and managed. But as José Santos highlights, this is a category error.

Drawing on Frank Knight's work, the difference is critical:

- **Risk** assumes we know the possible outcomes and can assign probabilities
- **True uncertainty** means we don't even know what the possible outcomes are and therefore cannot assign probabilities.

This distinction matters because most of our tools e.g. forecasting models, scenario planning, risk frameworks, are built for a world of risk, not a world of uncertainty.

The consequence is dangerous: organizations believe they are managing reality, when in fact they are managing a simplified version of it. This creates the illusion of control.

The shift, then, is about accepting that uncertainty is not an exception, it is the baseline condition leaders must operate within.

GROUND & LIMITLESS

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. How Different Cultures Perceive Uncertainty

An important nuance is that uncertainty is not experienced in the same way everywhere.

Drawing on [Hofstede's work](#) on national culture, Santos points to the idea of uncertainty avoidance: the extent to which a culture feels uncomfortable with ambiguity and seeks to reduce it through order, predictability, structure, or control. Some cultures are far more at ease with uncertainty, while others experience it as deeply destabilizing. He gives the example of Portuguese culture as one that scores relatively high on uncertainty avoidance.

This matters because uncertainty is not only a strategic condition, it is also an emotional experience. Uncertainty produces anxiety. And when leaders do not recognize this, they often mistake anxiety for poor judgment, resistance, or lack of capability. Santos suggests that one sign we may be under conditions of true uncertainty is precisely this sense of anguish or disorientation.

For leadership, the implication is significant. Leading through uncertainty cannot be universal or purely technical. It requires sensitivity to:

- how much ambiguity people can tolerate,
- how quickly they seek certainty,
- and how much reassurance, structure, or containment they may need.

This is also why serenity matters so much in leadership. In moments of crisis, people do not only look to leaders for direction; they look to them for emotional steadiness.

3. The Limits of Our Models: Why We Assume Uncertainty Away

Management theories, such as rationalism and reductionism, are built on assumptions that make the world more predictable than it really is. Rational actors. Stable environments. Known variables. These assumptions are not wrong, but they are incomplete.

These models work in contained, stable environments. They begin to fail in complex, evolving systems.

This creates a deeper problem: Leaders are trained to believe that good decisions come from analysis and prediction. But in true uncertainty, neither is sufficient.

So when reality no longer fits the model, the instinct is to add more data, refine the model, and increase control. Instead of recognizing that the problem is not the execution, it is the assumption of predictability itself.

Leaders must remain aware of what models cannot capture.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

3. Governance & Community: Creating the Space to Act

If the future cannot be predicted, then what is the role of leadership?

Santos reframes this through a more fundamental question: Why do organizations exist at all?

His answer is simple: Organizations exist because humans cannot face uncertainty alone.

They are structures that absorb uncertainty, distribute it, and make it psychologically and operationally manageable. This reframes leadership itself.

Leadership is not just about direction or decision-making. It is about containing uncertainty so that others can act.

From here, a critical distinction emerges:

- **Governance (Boards)** creates the space for action
- **Management (Executives)** acts within that space

The role of Governance is to define the boundaries within which the path can be discovered.

4. Tools for Directors: Designing the Boundaries

Santos highlights four ways in which boards can do this:

1. Precautionary Principle (Project Level)

At its core, the precautionary principle introduces a different starting point for decision-making: Not “What could we gain?” but “What could we lose that we cannot recover from?”

This principle emerged originally in German environmental policy (Vorsorgeprinzip), where decisions could create irreversible damage, but its relevance to organizations operating under uncertainty is profound.

This shifts the decision filter: From optimizing expected returns → To screening out projects with possible catastrophic loss or impact.

What this looks like in practice

Avoiding bets that could:

- Destroy trust with key stakeholders
- Create regulatory or reputational damage that cannot be undone
- Lock the organization into irreversible commitments
- Catastrophically impact the planet

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

2. Stop-Loss Rules (Project Level)

If the precautionary principle defines what should never be started, stop-loss rules define what must not be continued. It creates predefined conditions under which a project is automatically stopped and is designed to counter escalation of commitment.

These must go beyond financial metrics and include:

- Financial thresholds (budget, losses)
- Managerial attention (disproportionate time/energy)
- Relational impact (stakeholder trust)
- Systemic or ecological consequences

Once triggered, these rules are non-negotiable, removing bias and politics from decision-making.

3. Constitutional “Via Negativa” (Firm Level)

In uncertainty, strategy cannot fully define what to do. But it can define what **must never be done**.

This is the essence of *via negativa*: a concept rooted in philosophy and later popularized by Nassim Taleb in decision-making contexts: clarity through subtraction, not addition.

Instead of asking: “What opportunities should we pursue?” The organization defines: “What will we refuse, regardless of opportunity?”

This creates:

- **Identity clarity:** Knowing what you are not anchors what you are
- **Decision speed:** Entire categories of decisions are eliminated upfront
- **Protection against opportunism:** Prevents short-term gains from eroding long-term coherence

Examples of what this can sound like include “We do not enter businesses we cannot operate independently”, “We do not compromise on data integrity, even under pressure”...

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

4. Principia (Firm Level)

A concept rooted in Greek philosophy and popularized by Ray Dalio. Principia are a small set of non-negotiable guiding principles derived from the organization's core identity and early successes.

These principles:

- Remain stable even when the environment changes
- Guide decisions when prediction is impossible
- Anchor the organization across uncertain futures

Principia are operating principles that guide action when the future cannot be predicted.

What this means for Boards

These tools form a coherent system for operating under uncertainty by:

- Preventing irreversible downside
- Defining when to stop
- Clarifying what the organization will not do
- Anchoring decisions in enduring principles

In doing so, they create a bounded space in which action becomes possible.

5. Tools for Managers: Acting Without Knowing

Managers face a different challenge: How do you act when you don't know what will happen?

The answer is not to wait for clarity, but to build through action.

1. Effectuation (Start from Means, Not Predictions)

A logic of entrepreneurial thinking developed by Dr. Saras Sarasvathy, emphasizing taking action with available resources (aka Bricolage), rather than predicting the future.

Core principles of effectuation:

- **Bird-in-Hand:** Start with your means - who you are, what you know, whom you know
- **Affordable Loss:** Decide based on what you can afford to lose, not expected returns
- **Crazy Quilt:** Build partnerships early (stakeholders co-create the opportunity)
- **Lemonade Principle:** Leverage surprises instead of avoiding them
- **Pilot-in-the-Plane:** Focus on what you can control (the future is shaped by action, not predicted)

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

Tools for Managers: Acting Without Knowing (Continued)

2. Harnessing Serendipity (Learning from the Unexpected)

- Treat surprises as inputs, not disruptions
- Strategy is discovered through action

This requires: Attention to anomalies, willingness to pivot, and openness to emergent opportunities.

3. Anti-fragility (Improving Through Volatility)

A concept coined by Nassim Talib, describes the property of systems that thrive, grow, or improve when exposed to volatility and disorder.

- Go beyond resilience (withstanding shocks)
- Design systems that benefit from disorder

This means:

- Reducing fragility
- Allowing controlled exposure to stress
- Learning continuously from disruption

4. Simple Rules (Clarity in Complexity)

Based on the book “How to Thrive in a Complex World” by Donald Sull and Kathleen Eisenhardt. Replace complex plans with a small set of guiding rules.

The 6 Type of Simple Rules:

- **Boundary Rules:** Define what to pursue and what to avoid → Focus attention and resources
- **Prioritization Rules:** Rank opportunities → Ensure effort goes to what matters most
- **Stopping Rules:** Define when to exit → Prevent sunk-cost fallacy
- **How-To Rules:** Provide guidance on execution → Enable consistent performance
- **Coordination Rules:** Define how teams work together → Enable alignment without micromanagement
- **Timing Rules:** Define when to act → Critical in fast-changing environments

Simple rules create speed, alignment, and adaptability in uncertain environments.

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Key Takeaways (Continued)

What this means for Managers

Managers do not eliminate uncertainty. They move through it by:

- Acting with available means
- Learning through doing
- Adapting continuously
- Using simple structures to guide complex decisions

Lightning Round

What keeps you grounded?

- Creating moments for reflection
- Staying connected to a few trusted people who provide honest, direct feedback
- Stepping away from noise and constant connectivity

What helps you be limitless?

- Setting a clear intention (e.g., making risk-taking deliberate)
- Holding yourself accountable to that intention
- Noticing when you fall back into comfort and pushing beyond it

What is one leadership quality from the Arab world others can learn from?

- “The more in a hurry you are, the more you need to walk slowly,” as shared by His Excellency Mohammad Al Gergawi
- A leadership approach grounded in calm, deliberation, and composure under pressure

What are the top things leaders should do right now?

- Build self-awareness: Invest in understanding how you think, react, and show up
- Engage with people as humans, not just roles: Connect personally with teams, clients, and stakeholders and understand what they are going through, not just what needs to be done

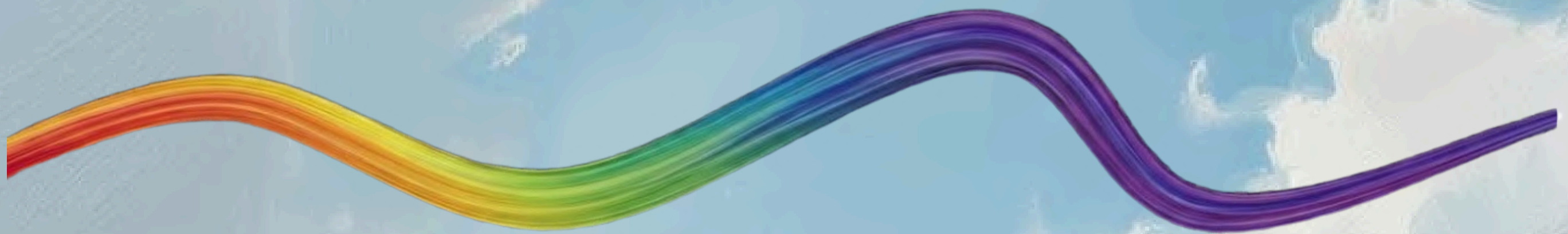
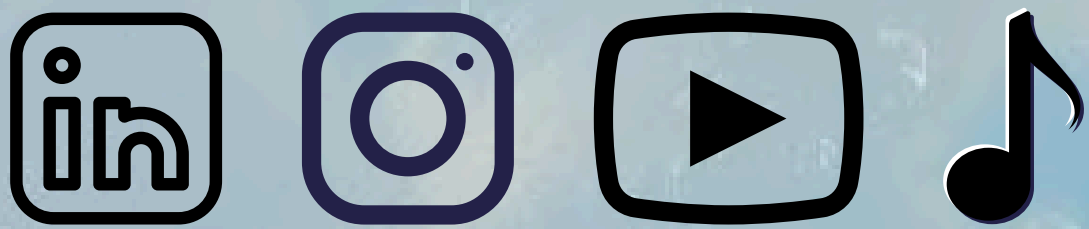


Acknowledgements

If you've made it this far, thank you!

We are so grateful to everyone who helped make the 7th edition of our annual Cosmic Conference such a memorable, insightful journey.

For more from Team Centaur follow us:



Help us Tell the Story of Leaders from the Arab World.

As part of a broader effort to research and codify what it means to lead from the Arab world, we invite you to contribute your perspective.

We are gathering insights on how leaders in our region are navigating uncertainty, drawing on their values, experiences, and cultural context.

Please take our survey and tell your story.

