

As the pace of global change accelerates, the ability to adapt and thrive in uncertainty has emerged as a defining trait of enduring organisations. Future readiness is no longer a theoretical concept – it is a critical discipline that underpins sustainable performance and long-term competitiveness.

At IMD, we work closely with global leaders and their organisations to help them develop the capabilities necessary to navigate complexity, seize opportunity and lead transformation. Future-ready organisations consistently rejuvenate their core while building new sources of advantage – balancing continuity with reinvention.

This dual imperative requires what we call **ambidextrous leadership** – the capacity to deliver on today's priorities while boldly innovating for tomorrow. Leaders must learn to shift seamlessly between roles: from operator to transformer, from implementer to experimenter, from conductor to coach. Yet research shows that fewer than 12% of executives successfully master these paradoxes. Building this ability calls for deep self-awareness, candid feedback and the psychological safety to take transformational risks.

In this new reality, **learning agility** is fast becoming the most valuable currency of leadership. Traditional success factors such as tenure or technical expertise are no longer enough. The leaders who excel are those who can scan emerging signals, reframe perspectives, adjust behaviours, and act decisively. These dynamic capabilities now sit at the core of high-performing leadership pipelines.

Organisations, too, must evolve how they assess and develop talent. **Precision talent strategies** – powered by behavioural data and digital tools – enable more

predictive, contextual and scalable talent decisions. Static potential models are giving way to iterative experimentation, where teams are encouraged to test, fail fast and scale what works.

At the cultural level, **diverse and inclusive decisionmaking** is vital. Future-ready teams embrace challenge and difference. They rely on structured norms that balance speed, consensus and expert input – essential ingredients in volatile and complex environments.

Technology, particularly AI, is now amplifying leadership potential at scale. Tools such as ChatGPT and AIenabled coaching/nudging platforms offer new avenues for personalised growth and learning. But to harness this potential, organisations must cultivate cultures where curiosity, experimentation and knowledge sharing are not just accepted – but actively encouraged.

Above all, future readiness is not a fixed destination. It is a continuous journey that requires **clarity, resilience and a long-term mindset**. Successful transformation hinges less on flawless execution and more on the ability to adapt faster and with more focus than the competition.

At IMD, we believe that future readiness is both possible and imperative. Through ambidextrous leadership, learning agility, intelligent talent practices and a culture of innovation, leaders can build organisations equipped not just to survive – but to thrive – in a fastmoving world.

Göran Folkesson, Client & Market Development Director, IMD

Christopher Hobrecker, Client & Market Development Associate Director, IMD



As the pace of business disruption accelerates, the ability to both 'perform' and 'transform' is becoming a defining characteristic of future-ready organisations. In this session, held in partnership between **IMD Business School** and CRF, senior HR and business leaders explored how to develop future-ready individuals, leaders and organisations. These notes present a summary of the key themes and action points.





Future-readiness demands ambidextrous leadership. Organisations need leaders who can both deliver today's results and innovate for tomorrow. This isn't about choosing one or the other – it's about building the situational judgment to switch between the two with fluency. Although this principle sounds simple, in practice it requires navigating complex trade-offs and paradoxes.

Organisations can produce more futureready leaders by helping leaders feel safe in taking transformational risks, encouraging them to reflect on and develop their situational judgement, and reinforcing leadership styles through ambidextrous colleagues.

Leverage diverse perspectives by building strong group norms. Diversity alone is not enough – teams must actively counteract cognitive biases, create space for dissenting views and practise active listening. Without this teamwork can amplify existing biases and lead to collective errors.

Rethink talent models for a dynamic world. Rapid skill shifts and increasing complexity demand a rethink of how we assess and develop potential. We must move from fixed personalitybased models to context-sensitive, dynamic approaches that recognise how individuals respond to evolving environments.

Adopt a precision approach to unlock wider talent. Rather than relying on a handful of 'star performers', use data to understand who can thrive in different contexts. The best performers in one environment may not succeed in another. Digital tools can help scale this.



Embrace learning agility as a cornerstone of leadership potential. The strongest predictor of long-term performance is not experience or static skills, but learning agility – the ability to acquire new capabilities, shift perspectives, adapt behaviours and take bold action when evidence supports it.





Al can amplify, not replace, human potential

Al tools can help address individual development gaps and speed up experimentation. But it's not just about the tech — organisations must create psychologically safe environments where people feel encouraged to experiment, learn openly and share what they discover.

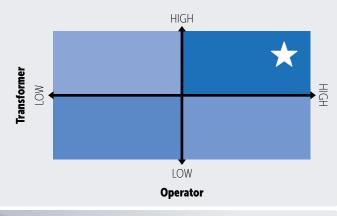


FUTURE-READY LEADERSHIP: LEANING INTO PARADOX

Future readiness can be understood as the ability to simultaneously perform and transform, i.e. optimising the business of today while investing in the business of tomorrow. Although this principle sounds simple, in practice it is subject to difficult and continuous trade-offs. In order to be future-ready, leaders must manage the following four key paradoxes:

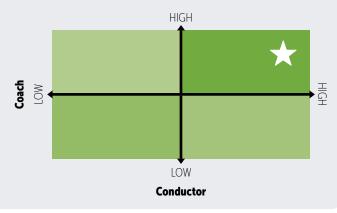
STRATEGY PARADOX: OPERATOR AND **TRANSFORMER**

Future-ready leaders must function as both **operators** (exploiting the current strategy, optimising operations etc.) and **transformers** (leads innovation, challenges the status quo etc.). As with all the paradoxes listed here, leaders need to develop the situational judgement to know when focus on one or the other.



TEAM PARADOX: CONDUCTOR AND COACH

The best future-ready leaders can flex between two leadership styles: **conductor** (directs the team and makes decisions when clarity is needed) and **coach** (empowers the team to decide on the right solution).

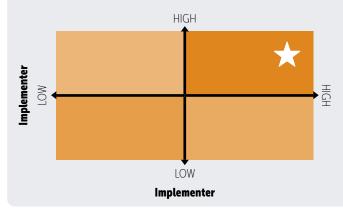




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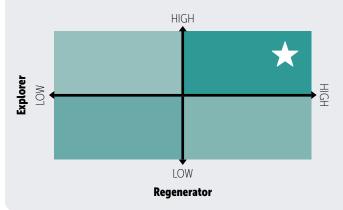
2) EXECUTION PARADOX: IMPLEMENTER AND EXPERIMENTER

Future-ready leaders operate as both an **implementer** (someone who delivers strong results with robust contingency plans in place) and an **experimenter** (someone who innovates in uncertain environments and is comfortable with failure). The difficulty of this approach is that it involves both never failing (i.e. perfect execution) and accepting failure (i.e. experimentation).



SELF PARADOX: REGENERATOR AND **EXPLORER**

The most challenging paradox is internal; future-ready leaders need to act as both **regenerators** (sustaining optimism and energy – *"it will be fine"*) and **explorers** (alert to threats and risks – *"things will fall apart unless we change"*). Leaders must develop the emotional regulation to switch between these modes whilst remaining authentic.





Humans struggle with self-assessment – most people believe they are future-ready, though evidence suggests otherwise. Few leaders achieve mastery at balancing all four paradoxes; research shows that only around 10-12% of leaders excel across all four paradoxes. The following four profiles are common leader types identified by assessment, and each progressively harder to change.

Pattern 1 Lots of Work to be Done

Strong at maximising performance, delivering on the current strategy and maintaining stability when things go wrong. This type needs to develop their ability to drive transformation, though usually shows willingness to do so.

Pattern 2 Work on Your People Behaviours

Excellent at driving transformational change and execution. However, they often direct rather than engage people, leading to burnout. They produce many ideas but have weaker execution, often as they have not fully involved their team in the transformation process.

Pattern 3 Work on Your Business Behaviours

Demonstrates outstanding interpersonal skills and able to generate positive affect in others. Whilst they have strong leadership presence, they lack the strategic vision and the ability to execute.

Pattern 4 Continue to Work on Everything

This group sits in the middle of the quadrant for each paradox, meaning they implement the right action around 50% of the time. Progress into the top right quadrant is possible but can take 2-3 years.

DEVELOPING FUTURE-READY LEADERS

As the world accelerates at breakneck speed, organisations need to produce more future-ready leaders. This can be achieved by focusing on the following four areas:

1 Perception

+ Encourage behavioural assessments over selfperception. For example, ask leaders to rate themselves based on observable behaviours (e.g. *How many new strategic initiatives did you launch last year?).* Peer and subordinate feedback can also be very powerful.

Motivation

- While most leaders want to be future-ready, transformation demands behaviours that sacrifice short-term wins for long-term gain. This motivation gap can be addressed by actions like providing formal incentives and helping leaders build 'air cover' (establishing a reputation for creativity and success so they feel safe taking transformational risks).
- It is also important to help leaders to develop authentic narratives: leaders must accept that others will encounter different versions of them (e.g. a leader moving between multiple paradoxical behaviours) and this is *not* inconsistency, but a mark of future-readiness.

Inspiration

- Help leaders develop true ambidexterity: the ability to *perform* and *transform* depending on the situation.
- Encourage them to reflect on and develop their situational judgement: How do I read the situation? Which leadership mode is needed now?
- Learn from AI systems, which can both optimise and innovate simultaneously. How can we inspire leaders to think and act more like AI in managing dual demands?

Coordination

- Leaders need sufficient ambidextrous colleagues around them to reinforce paradoxical management styles.
- Organisations should therefore develop a culture of paradoxical leadership. For example, at Lego, management paradoxes are visibly displayed on the walls and people are expected to call out one another on managing them.



BUILDING THE RESILIENCE EDGE IN THE AGE OF POLYCRISIS: **THINK AGAIN, DECIDE SMARTER**



SLIDES

ZHIKE LEI is Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior at IMD. She is an award-winning organisational scholar and an expert on psychological safety, team dynamics, organisational learning, error management, and patient safety. Lei studies how organisations, teams, and employees adapt and learn in complex, time-pressured, consequence-laden environments. As a global management educator, she has taught executives and PhD, DBA, EMBA, and MBA candidates, as well as undergraduates, and has won numerous teaching awards and recognitions.

Building organisational resilience means equipping leaders to embrace uncertainty and take informed risks. Whilst

frameworks like the Rational Decision-Making Model offer structured approaches to complex problems, real-world decision-making is rarely linear and often a team activity. Leaders may have a point of view, but will also seek input from colleagues, compare perspectives and often reach consensus or majority decision. Therefore, strong team decision-making skills are essential.

LEVERAGING DIVERSITY IN DECISION-MAKING

Leveraging diverse perspectives can help leaders to drive better decision-making. To do so effectively, leaders must consider how to calibrate differing views and track and share information across the team in fast-moving or uncertain situations.

Equally important is mastering active listening, which engages multiple senses: observing body language, maintaining eye contact to build rapport, being fully present and treating the speaker as if they were the most important person in the room.

When teams face uncertainty or must make high-stakes decisions, they often use one of the following models:



Meritocracy: Prioritising the voice with the most relevant expertise. However, defining 'merit' can be subjective and risks missing unconventional but valuable ideas.



Consensus-building: Consensus-building is valuable - it creates space for individuals to share concerns and surface blind spots. However, organisations often don't have the time that inclusive consensus-building requires.

Ideally, leaders need to leverage blend of both approaches - using expertise wisely while remaining open to a diversity of perspectives. However, group dynamics often introduce risks such as groupthink or social conformity.

GROUP DECISION-MAKING: THE RISKS

Even when individuals are working with the same data, it's common for them to reach different conclusions. Reasons for this include:

Confirmation bias: once we've formed an initial hypothesis, we look for evidence to support it and often disregard evidence that contradicts it. Under pressure, this tendency intensifies.

- Social conformity: we are influenced by the opinions of those around us.
- Emotional investment (i.e. sunk cost bias): it becomes harder to objectively reassess a decision once time and effort have been invested.
- Different risk tolerances: some industries (e.g. aviation, pharmaceuticals) are designed to prioritise reliability and minimise risk, whereas others will have a greater tolerance.

EXAMPLE 1986 NASA SPACE SHUTTLE DISASTER

Despite best intentions, systemic decision-making flaws amongst a group of NASA scientists led to a catastrophic shuttle launch failure and several deaths. In this example, technical failures were underpinned by cognitive failures such as confirmation bias and social conformity. Therefore, making a decision in a group does not necessarily guarantee a better outcome; teamwork can sometimes even amplify existing biases and lead to collective errors. To help address this, HR should have the courage to challenge whether decision-makers are appropriately qualified.

BUILDING TEAM NORMS AND CULTURE

In order to become better at group decision-making, we need to create the right group norms and culture:



Embrace uncertainty or ambiguity and become comfortable with being wrong (embrace the 'joy of being wrong,' rather than focusing on proving you are right).

- Challenge assumptions and be open to new ways of thinking, asking 'what if' questions.
- Recognise the blind spots in team dynamics (e.g. confirmation bias or social conformity).
- Pay attention to opinions which deviate from the collective.

Be aware of, and check in with, your own emotions. These can cloud your judgement required to make a sound decision.

Focus on creating psychological safety, collaboration skills and a culture where people listen and learn from each other



FUTURE-READY TALENT: HARNESSING THE FULL POTENTIAL OF YOUR PEOPLE IN A DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENT



TANIA LENNON leads the Strategic Talent team for IMD. She is an expert on future-ready talent development, including innovative assessment methods to maximise the impact of talent development on individual and organisational performance. Lennon is a 'pracademic', blending a strong research orientation with evidence-based practice in talent development and assessment.

Too often, organisations appoint someone to a role only to discover that the role itself has changed – sometimes fundamentally. At the same time, many organisations lack the tools to generate the predictive talent insight needed and often fail to fully harness the full potential of talent development.

To address these challenges, the **<u>Strategic Talent Lab</u>** was created to understand: how do we think differently about talent now? They found that:



The same organisations consistently remain at the forefront of their sectors due to their ability to excel at dual transformation.

Dual transformation is critical at the organisational level and at the leadership level: leaders must be able to perform and transform.

During the session, Tania shared evidence-based approaches identified by the Strategic Talent Lab.

CONTEXT

The world is changing rapidly:

- There has been a **183% increase** in the rate of change over the past four years.
- 85% of leaders expect technology-driven change to accelerate
- 45% of CEOs are concerned their businesses will no longer be viable beyond the next decade without reinvention.
- 61% of disruptive technologies now come from outside the industry, making sustaining success increasingly difficult.
- 39% of skills are expected to change over the next five years.

This all means that traditional approaches to assessing potential and succession planning are losing effectiveness:

Even in stable, known environments, the best prediction models only predict future role performance with 40% accuracy.

- When individuals move between organisations or countries, predictive accuracy falls to 25%.
- Skills are constantly evolving, meaning that we no longer even have the luxury of knowing what we are predicting for. This creates a significant challenge in preparing talent for future roles.

Given this context, how do we create strong talent pipelines when the tools we have relied on are declining in their effectiveness? We must rethink how we define and develop potential, moving from asking "potential for what?" to accepting the reality of "potential for who knows what?"

FIVE APPROACHES TO UNLOCKING TALENT POTENTIAL

These five approaches can help organisations unlock the full value of talent across the employee lifecycle:

Align. How do you boost your return on investment in talent development?

- + Organisations can increase the ROI of talent development by aligning development efforts with strategic imperatives.
- Focus on engaging talent with the future context, rather than trying to exactly identify what future capabilities will be.
- McClelland's motivation theory states that every person has one of the three following primary motivations. These are formed in early life and are critical for unlocking energy and motivation leaders and HR professionals should consider how they leverage these in development strategies:
 - + Achievement: The desire to constantly challenge oneself.
 - Affiliation: The desire to build strong connections with others.
 - Power/Impact: Satisfaction derived from influencing others.

Advance. How do you develop more sophisticated capabilities?

Organisations are not only facing faster skills change, but the skills themselves are becoming more complex. Skills are also only one component of expertise - true expertise includes reputation, learning, the ability to adapt and learn, and a desire to maintain skills. Methods of developing these more sophisticated capabilities include:



- + Exposure to a challenging and diverse environment.
- Cultivating supportive individual mindsets (e.g. resilience, courage, growth mindset).
- Development through others mentors, communities, feedback, observing peers etc.
- Self-awareness (e.g. understanding how you learn, what holds you back).
- Practice and repetition.
- A further challenge is that AI may take away the opportunity for individuals to practice, which is a crucial developmental stage. Organisations must now compensate for this by finding creative ways to build early core skillsets, such as:
- + Simulations to provide structured environments for skills development.
- Reciprocal learning. Younger talent can gain exposure to enterprise-level thinking by working with senior leaders, and also educate senior leaders in return.
- Rotation programmes, supported by structured reflection and knowledge capture.
- + Al coaching tools, which can reduce fears around practicing and receiving feedback. While Al coaching is not a substitute for human debate, it offers safe, scalable and cost-effective practice opportunities.
- Organisations should also be aware that, due to the rapid rate of skills change, past experience is no longer a reliable predictor of future performance.

Accelerate. How do you speed up the rate of progress through organisations?

Organisational structures have changed dramatically. Previously, employees progressed steadily through clear hierarchies. Today, flatter structures mean bigger, riskier leaps between roles, making career progression harder to predict and manage, especially for younger generations with evolving expectations.

To support talent more effectively, organisations must recognise that potential is shaped not only by individual characteristics, but also by the environment (e.g. the tools, opportunities and autonomy to act). This is represented in an evolution of psychometric assessment tools from **positivist** approaches (which seek to distil individuals into fixed personality traits or scores) to **post-positivist** models that consider the dynamic interaction between individuals and their organisational context.

As outlined during Professor Piskorski's session, organisations need to facilitate leaders to move fluidly between performing and transforming. The Strategic Talent Lab developed algorithms that assess a person's ability to operate across both domains. By analysing behavioural data, the Strategic Talent Lab created a tool that identifies where a leader has the agility to shift between performance and transformation, and highlights how to activate and strengthen this capability.

This represents a new approach to talent management – using precision data to pinpoint what will truly accelerate progression. That might mean surfacing a hidden strength, addressing a critical development gap or managing a personality trait that limits impact. Whilst such an approach was previously difficult to apply at scale, today's digital tools can help overcome this barrier.

Adapt. How do you build dynamic capabilities in leaders?

One factor remains the strongest predictor of longterm performance: General Mental Ability (GMA). GMA isn't the same as IQ – it's the capacity to learn and acquire new skills (i.e. learning agility). Therefore it is not specific skills that matter most, but the capacity to acquire new ones amidst rapid skills change.

IMD's research identified four core dimensions of learning agility:

- Acuity Am I actively scanning the environment and picking up subtle cues?
- Agility Can I shift perspective, challenge my assumptions and see different angles?
- + Adaptability Can I flex my behaviour to meet the needs of the situation, not just my preferences?
- Audacity Am I willing to act in the face of risk, when the evidence supports it?

Whilst we don't always know what the most effective future response will be, we do know that building dynamic capabilities enables leaders to adapt and make effective decisions. Moreover, having data on these capabilities allows us to make more informed decisions about our talent pipeline. There is also a reasonably strong correlation between breadth of experience and the level of ambidexterity a leader demonstrates. Generally, the broader the experience, the greater the ambidexterity.

Amplify. How do you access more of your talent?

The idea that a few 'star performers' drive most of the value isn't supported by evidence. In fact, growing research suggests that this exclusive approach to talent can be harmful – just because someone excels in one context doesn't guarantee their performance will translate to others.

Instead, there is mounting evidence that the precision approach outlined above is a more effective method of talent management. Whilst this approach can help unlock more potential across the organisation, historically we lacked the tools to implement it at scale. However, now digital tools allow us to gather better precision data on people at scale.



FUTURE READINESS: WHY DOES IT MATTER, AND HOW CAN YOU ACHIEVE IT?



SLIDES

HOWARD YU is LEGO® Professor of Management and Innovation at IMD. He leads the Center for Future Readiness, founded in 2020 with support from the LEGO Brand Group, to guide companies through strategic transformation. Recognised globally for his expertise, in 2023 he was honoured with the Thinkers50 Strategy Award, recognising his substantial contributions to management strategy and future readiness. His additional inclusion into the Thinkers50 list places him among the top global management thinkers.

There is a misconception that performance is straightforward, relating to simply cutting costs and driving efficiency. However, true performance demands creativity, asking tough questions (e.g. why do our customers stay with us? what do our competitors do better than we do?) and scaling the next growth engine before disruption hits.

Many companies also alternate between *perform* and *transform* without consistency. Yet successful transformation requires clarity, persistence and long-term commitment. So why do companies flip-flop between performance and transformation?



Fear. Fear of the material consequences of failure or failure itself – often tied to self-worth.

- **Uncertainty.** This reinforces the need for leaders with the ability to navigate multiple scenarios.
- Skills gaps. Transformation often requires different capabilities organisations must diversify rather than optimise one dominant skill.
- Short-termism: Future-readiness is limited by focusing on the urgent, rather than important tasks.
 - **Lack of focus:** It can be challenging to see a task through to completion during both good and hard times, especially in large organisations.

To truly *perform* and *transform*, leaders must have honest conversations about trade-offs and enterprise goals, and build a culture where people can disagree and then commit. Business as usual (BAU) does not mean business success – in fact, it often guarantees decline.

Individuals who exhibit 'Calm Creative' traits – those who slow down in a fast-paced world to notice what matters – are best positioned to thrive in future-ready organisations. Part of the responsibility of a learning organisation is help colleagues slow down enough to do this.

DISRUPTION EXAMPLE THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

On the surface, Tesla offers similar products and services to traditional auto manufacturers. What organisational capabilities have allowed Tesla to be more successful in terms of market value?

- + It built a direct-to-consumer model, generating vast data.
- It captured further user data when harvesting information to train its self-driving algorithm.
- + It provides flexible software, allowing user feedback to influence real user experience.

Whilst organisational growth has historically been driven by physical goods, it is now increasingly driven by data and software (i.e. gaining people's attention and extracting data and insights from their behaviour).

This example emphasises the importance of focusing on your 'swim lane' – staying passionate about your core business and continually pushing for progress. If you don't, another organisation will.

SCALING NEW CAPABILITIES

In order to scale new capabilities, businesses need to initially place many small bets and then see what shows promise. Equally critical is the speed and willingness to kill 'zombie projects' that are no longer working. When early innovation begins to show promise, organisations need to invest to scale. This can be scary and requires institutional commitment.

Whilst it's common to feel that pressure that 'you are not moving fast enough,' remember that you do not need to move at lightspeed – just faster than your competitor! And if you are falling behind, consider whether you have the right infrastructure to experiment and whether processes can be automated. Future readiness is not about perfection, but about moving ahead one inch at a time.

EXPERIMENTATION AT SCALE

The 'smartness' of a company isn't about intelligence – it's about how many experiments you can run in a given amount of time. One key advantage of experimentation is that it helps you discover new differentiators your offering when your existing product becomes commoditised.

Scaling experimentation at speed is therefore essential. The new competitive advantage is the ability to shift from sequential work to parallel experimentation. For example, NVIDIA became the third most valuable company in the world by moving from producing niche graphics chips to powering AI models like ChatGPT. They achieved this by investing in virtual machines that allowed large-scale, simultaneous experimentation. Creating a culture of parallel experimentation – where everyone experiments together at speed and scale – can help accelerate experimentation.



LEVERAGING AI TOOLS

Al can be used to augment individual weaknesses, such as helping with tasks like creating Excel sheets. Instead of struggling through technical or time-consuming tasks alone, individuals can experiment with tools like ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Manus or Originality AI. The following recommendations can help organisations create an environment that encourages this:



Encourage the behaviour of safe AI experimentation. Be technology agnostic and create a safe environment for employees to try different tools.

- R Identify and grow 'Focused Curious' individuals. These are people drawn to the right unknowns and follow their curiosity with intention rather than impulsiveness.
- Encourage employees to showcase AI work openly (rather than to be secretive).
- \bigcirc Address any culture of fear by talking openly. Start by focusing on an area you are individually interested in.
 - Be guided by employees who are energised by thinking hard about tough problems.

FURTHER READING

CRF. 2025. Research: The Changing Role of the HR Leader

CRF. 2024. A Manifesto for Future-Ready HR

CRF. 2024. Conference Retrospective: Applications and **Implications of Emerging Technologies**

CRF. 2023. Team Effectiveness

IMD. 2024. How to Develop Future-Ready Talent - and Do it Fast

IMD. 2024. Talent's New Lexicon: Agility, Adaptability and Ambidexterity

Mercer. 2025. Addressing Common Skills-measurement **Challenges**

Mercer. 2025. Rethink and Reorganise Work

COMPLEMENTARY INVITE

If interested, you're welcome to join Mercer's Transforming Business Through Talent event which will be hosted on June 3rd at the Sheraton Hotel Zurich.

EVENT MASTERCLASS

Redefining Leadership for a New Era

If you would like to access the materials from these masterclasses, please contact Mette Stern, Senior Client Manager.

CRF UPCOMING EVENTS

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE Rethink Work: Evolve or Endure Monday 6 - Wednesday 8 October



Lisbon, Portugal



Tuesday 7 October Online

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