



Digital Article / Digital Transformation

What It Takes to Lead Through Digital Disruption

Research suggests you need a balance of broad curiosity and focused discipline. *by Jennifer Jordan, Michael Wade, and Shih-han Huang*

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Illustration by Sandra Navarro

In 2020, Conrad*, a pharmaceutical executive, approached us with a pressing challenge. He had recently taken charge of a team tasked with using digital tools to accelerate the drug discovery and development process.

While the technical obstacles were significant, Conrad believed they paled in comparison to the leadership challenges he was up against.

He found himself in a rapidly evolving technological landscape yet surrounded by a team tethered to outdated practices, which he described as “linear, slow, and bogged down by cumbersome processes and structures.”

His question to us was clear: What does it take for a leader to successfully lead in the era of digital disruption? Scores of leaders have approached us with the same question, prompting us to conduct a multi-year research study.

In a previous HBR article, we identified seven tensions between traditional and emerging leadership styles that executives need to successfully balance in order to lead. We’ve now deepened this work to examine these tensions in a era driven by new disruptive technologies, like generative AI. Specifically, we wanted to know if certain tensions were more likely to predict leadership effectiveness during digital disruption. Based on our work consulting with dozens of companies, as well as an in-depth study of leaders from one of the largest multinational companies in Europe, the answer is yes.

Exploring the Behaviors that Really Matter

Between 2022 and 2024, we conducted 360-degree reviews of nearly 300 leaders, drawn from different divisions and geographies, whose jobs ranged from director level to the C-suite. We asked about specific behaviors associated with the seven leadership tensions, examples of which are seen in the following table.

Which Leadership Behaviors Are Effective in Leading Digital Disruption?

Researchers found that to succeed today, leaders need to balance seven tensions between traditional and emerging leadership styles. The researchers then wanted

to understand whether behaviors associated with these tensions could predict effectiveness in leading through digital disruption. This chart shows sample behaviors for each of the styles.

Tension	Traditional leadership behavior	Emerging leadership behavior
Teller/Listener	Teller: tells others about their point of view	Listener: listens to what others are saying
Intuitionist/Analyst	Intuitionist: makes decisions from the gut	Analyst: makes decisions by analyzing data
Perfectionist/Accelerator	Perfectionist: prioritizes doing it right	Accelerator: prioritizes doing it fast
Constant/Adapter	Constant: delivers a consistent message	Adapter: adapts their message when new information becomes available
Tactician/Visionary	Tactician: focuses on how to carry out a plan for the short term	Visionary: focuses on how to create a vision for the long term
Power-Holder/Power-Share	Power-holder: is comfortable holding power and authority	Power-sharer: is comfortable sharing power and authority
Miner/Prospector	Miner: can dive deeply into an idea or direction to extract the full value from it	Prospector: looks outside their immediate environment to identify potential opportunities and threats



The executives both rated themselves and were rated by their direct reports, peers, bosses, and customers. Additionally, we asked about each executive’s performance in situations with a strong digital dimension.

The Tension that Leaders Need to Get Right

We found that leaders who successfully navigated digital disruption drew from all 14 traditional and emerging leadership behaviors.

However, one tension was far more impactful than the others: the prospector-miner tension.

Prospecting, one of the emerging leadership behaviors, is about curiosity around internal and external threats and opportunities. In our study, behaviors included “is aware of what is going on inside of the organization beyond just their immediate span or responsibility” and “is conscious of the external environment and how it might affect what’s happening inside the organization.”

Leaders in our sample who scored high on this dimension were described as “focusing on the outside environment to seek inspiration.” One was described as “always coming across as curious about what goes on inside and outside of her functional area. She shows this by asking questions and trying to build bridges.” Another leader was described as “keeping himself aware and updated about the latest happenings within his area and outside the industry... this helps him in planning ahead for what may come in the future.”

By contrast, the more traditional leadership behavior of being a *miner* is about going deep into a topic or direction and deciding to invest resources, whether they be human, financial, or temporal. In our study, this included behaviors such as “knows when to pursue a concept, technology, or idea because it holds potential value” and “is able to ‘mine’ an idea in order to derive its full value or potential.”

One leader in our sample was described as being “aware if he needs to get involved in the details and to stay closer to something.” Another leader who was strong on this dimension was described as “a person who is deeply interested in researching and analyzing, even getting himself into personal experiences of [customers] to build business

knowledge. He starts brainstorming on ideas when there is true interest from the team.”

Being a strong *miner* also requires the self-discipline to develop a single idea until it produces results, resisting the temptation to abandon it when new opportunities arise. One leader in our study, who was a strong *prospector* but not such a strong *miner*, was described by a peer as “an open-minded, intelligent person who’s curious about new things and has the ability to understand them fast,” but not so good at “learning the details.” This leader needed to commit to an idea for sufficient time to allow it to develop to a point of demonstrating its potential value. This capability draws on core skills like sustained focus, unwavering dedication, and genuine interest in the concept being developed.

Going Wide, Then Deep

We found that the most successful leaders through digital disruption practiced *prospector* and *miner* behaviors as a series of repeated sequential steps. They described the process as “going wide” to see what is out there, deciding where to invest resources; “going deep” and investing; and then “coming up again for air” to see if the environment around had shifted and required new prospecting.

In the era of generative AI, mastering the tension between prospecting and mining has never been greater. The generative AI cycle is unfolding at a pace that far outstrips earlier digital waves, and the performance gap between leaders and laggards is already widening. Failing to “prospect” could mean being late to or even missing out on opportunities altogether. Failing to successfully “mine” could mean leaving value on the table or letting a project die an early death from lack of support or the wrong product-technology fit. The reward of getting AI right on the other hand, can be substantial.

So, how do organizations ensure that their leaders are both prospecting and mining?

One approach is to train leaders with the skills and behaviors to be both prospectors and miners. For example, we worked with one executive who was already a skilled *miner* but struggled with the ability to think beyond his immediate zone of focus, skills required to be a strong *prospector*. We helped this leader generate some small but compelling habits to break him out of his mental constraints, such as reading one article per day on a topic within a domain outside his core discipline and setting two meetings per month with people not from his organization but somehow related to his industry.

An alternative strategy is to deliberately staff teams with both prospectors and miners. *Prospectors* can go out and scope the opportunities and threats inherent in the surrounding environment, while *miners* take these discoveries and invest more deeply in them.

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Our research suggests that the most effective leaders demonstrate a crucial duality: the curiosity to scan broadly for emerging trends and technologies, coupled with the discipline to deeply pursue promising directions to completion. They neither chase every new innovation without follow-through nor remain so narrowly focused that they miss transformative opportunities on the horizon.

Conrad's pharmaceutical team eventually found their path forward, not by abandoning their methodical approach entirely, but by supplementing it with dedicated prospecting practices that kept them attuned to emerging possibilities. By consciously navigating the prospector-miner tension, they transformed their once-rigid processes

into an adaptive system capable of both identifying and realizing digital opportunities.

**Name has been changed.*

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