

WHITEPAPER · PART I · 2026

The New Reality of Leadership & *Executive Search.*

A SHARPER VIEW ON LEADERSHIP, FIT AND EXECUTION

AUTHOR

Ineke Kooistra

PUBLICATION

March 2026

READING TIME

15 minutes

A WHITEPAPER BY **INEKE KOOISTRA**

Leadership is not about volume. It is about clarity of form.

Contents

- 01 Why leadership selection fails, and what high-growth companies need instead.

- 02 The problem with traditional executive search.

- 03 The shift from profile to contextual relevance.

- 04 Courage. Character. Execution. Context.

- 05 The Seasonal Leader.

- 06 Strategy is rarely the issue. Execution almost always is.

- 07 FLOW: the structural layer of execution.

- 08 BRIGHT: the behavioural layer leaders underestimate.

- 09 When tempo, not capability, is the issue.

- 10 Key takeaways for boards, investors and leadership teams.

Why leadership selection *fails*, and what high-growth companies need instead.

"Leadership is not a title.
It is the ability to create impact in a specific context."

In a market defined by change, speed, and complexity, the best leaders are not always the most obvious profiles. This paper explores why traditional search methods often miss what really matters, and what organisations should look for instead.

Over the past years, I have found myself in many boardrooms, sometimes as an advisor, sometimes as an interim CEO, and often as an executive search partner. What stands out is not a lack of ambition, nor a lack of strategic thinking. If anything, organisations are more aware than ever of what needs to change.

This paper argues that leadership selection should be based on **context, behaviour, courage, and execution power**, not just experience, titles, or network.

The most important question is no longer: *who looks right on paper?*

It is: **who can truly lead this organisation in this moment?**

The real shift is not that execution matters more.
It is that leadership can no longer outsource execution.

The problem with traditional *executive search*.

Too many leadership appointments still start with the wrong assumption: that the best candidate is the one with the most impressive background. But leadership success depends on much more than past roles.

A leader who performed well in one environment may fail in another. **A strong profile is not the same as a strong fit.**

Organisations today face constant pressure from transformation, growth, succession, restructuring and internationalisation. In that reality, the cost of a wrong leadership decision is high: lost time, weak execution, internal friction, and missed business momentum.

That is why executive search must move beyond profile matching. It must become a process of understanding **context, challenge, and leadership potential**.

The market is active, but far less forgiving. Appointments take longer. Conversations go deeper. Expectations are more explicit, and the room for an "almost right" match has all but disappeared. This does not indicate a slowing market. *It indicates a more selective one.*

NEW MARKET REALITY · 03

The shift from profile to *contextual relevance*.

The business environment has become more complex. Companies are expected to move faster, adapt sooner, and lead through uncertainty. This changes what leadership requires.

It is no longer enough to have industry knowledge or a strong track record. Organisations now need leaders who can create trust, drive change, make decisions under pressure, and build momentum in a shifting environment.

That is especially true in moments of transition: growth phases, succession situations, international expansion, private equity involvement, organisational turnaround.

In these moments, the right leader is not always the most obvious one. **It is the person who can match the phase, the challenge, and the culture of the organisation.**

The myth of the one-size-fits-all CEO no longer holds.
Leadership is contextual and seasonal.

MY VIEW · 04

Courage. Character. Execution. *Context.*

I believe leadership should be assessed in context. That means you have to look beyond the résumé. Focus on how a person leads, how they make decisions, how they create energy, and how they behave when the pressure is on.

The best leaders combine four things:

Courage.

To make difficult decisions, even in the face of uncertainty or opposition.

Character.

To build trust and foster strong relationships, essential for collaboration and influence.

Execution power.

To turn strategy into decisive action and achieve tangible results. Strategy that delivers.

Context awareness.

To deeply understand what the organisation truly needs in its specific operational environment.

A leader who succeeds is not simply someone with the right experience.

It is someone whose strengths match the specific moment of the business.

Seasonal Thinking · 05

The Seasonal Leader.

The idea that one leader can excel across all phases of an organisation is appealing, but fundamentally flawed. Every organisation moves through seasons, and each season demands a different kind of leader.

SPRING · GROWTH SPURT

The Founder.

Scale · Hire · Accelerate

Sets pace and direction from the front

Hires fast and energises early teams

Comfortable with ambiguity and white space

Builds belief faster than the org chart can keep up

SUMMER · CRISIS MODE

The Builder.

Reposition · Change · Decide

Makes calls under real pressure

Repositions in market and inside the org

Translates urgency into clarity

Comfortable cutting what no longer fits

AUTUMN · INNOVATION

The Strategist.

Structure · Align · Deliver

Builds the operating system underneath growth

Aligns leadership team around fewer bets

Turns ambition into rhythm

Knows when to slow down to speed up

WINTER · CONSOLIDATION

The Reset.

Simplify · Optimise · Discipline

Steady hand when noise is loudest

Simplifies portfolio, structure, decisions

Restores discipline without rigidity

Prepares the ground for the next spring

The mistake is rarely the leader.
It is the mismatch with the phase.

And what about you, as a leader? Are you in the right season with the right capabilities? Stay sharp and stay active. Do not wait until it is too late. Start the conversation. With yourself, and with your board or founders. Honesty is what moves you forward, and your organisation with you.

Strategy is rarely the issue. *Execution* almost always is.

In the majority of organisations I work with, strategy is not the primary problem. Strategic direction is often well thought through, clearly articulated, and broadly supported. Where things begin to break down is in the translation of that strategy into action.

What is often perceived as a strategic challenge is, in reality, an **execution gap**.

01 **Decisions are delayed.** The meeting ends, but ownership never quite lands.

02 **Priorities remain diffuse.** Everything is important, so nothing is decisive.

03 **Ownership becomes unclear.** Everyone's involved, no one's responsible.

04 **Momentum slows.** Calendars fill up but nothing actually shifts.

Organisations tend to overinvest in defining direction, while underinvesting in ensuring that direction is consistently translated into decisions and behaviour.

The problem is not strategy.
The problem is translation.

The most effective leaders I see are not pure visionaries, nor pure operators. They take strategy, break it down into decisions, structure it into rhythm, and build teams that can execute without constant intervention. **They are translators.**

Framework · 07

***FLOW*: the structural layer of execution.**

In my work as interim CEO and executive search partner, I have developed two practical frameworks to make execution tangible. **FLOW** focuses on the structural layer of execution.

F Focus

Clarity on priorities and deliberate trade-offs. What we choose, and what we let go.

L Leadership

Ownership of decisions and accountability. Who decides, and by when.

O Operating rhythm

A cadence that ensures follow-through. The meeting that actually moves the work.

W Winning teams

Alignment and strength within the leadership team. Edge, ownership, trust.

Organisations that have FLOW in place move with a sense of direction and pace that is immediately noticeable. Organisations that lack it often remain stuck, regardless of how strong their strategy appears on paper. Research consistently supports what practice confirms. According to McKinsey, approximately **70% of large-scale transformations fail**, not due to flawed strategy, but due to insufficient execution capability.

FRAMEWORK · 08

***BRIGHT*: the behavioural layer leaders underestimate.**

Execution, however, is not only structural. It is deeply behavioural. A study by Harvard Business Review found that teams with low behavioural trust operate at significantly reduced decision-making speed, in some cases up to **40% slower** than high-trust counterparts. This is not a soft finding. It has direct consequences for time-to-market, organisational agility, and the ability to execute under pressure.

B Behaviour

How people act under pressure and how fast decisions are actually made.

R Roles

Are roles clear enough to enable fast, unambiguous decision-making?

I Impact

Is everyone clear on what success looks like and what their contribution means?

G Goals

Are goals shared, understood, and actively driving daily behaviour?

H High Trust

Is there enough trust to have honest conversations and move quickly?

T Tempo

Does the pace of the team match the demands of the organisation?

In many leadership teams, misalignment is not visible in strategy documents, but in daily interactions. Decisions are revisited, accountability is unclear, and difficult conversations are avoided.

Leaders often underestimate how much **behaviour determines speed.**

A case from practice · 09

When tempo, not capability, is the *issue*.

"We are actually quite happy with our CEO. And with the team. But we are not seeing the results. Things are moving too slowly. In our reviews, looking back and looking ahead, decisions are taking too long, and the actions that are agreed upon keep getting pushed to the long term."

A supervisory board chair, in a recent conversation

This scenario highlights a common challenge: the issue is not a lack of competence or strategic vision, but rather a deficit in **tempo**. My observations confirmed the board's intuition. The team shared mutual respect and a common direction, yet genuine goodwill alone does not suffice for high performance. A management team needs ownership, edge, and the willingness to challenge each other constructively.

My approach was not to introduce a new framework or strategy, but to engage with the team's existing agenda, that is where the real work and the blockages reside. In a single day, we moved through their priorities, pushing beyond the usual meeting rhetoric to address critical questions directly:

What is the absolute priority, and what are we willing to deprioritise to protect it?

Who decides, and by when?

Who is genuinely helping whom, and where are we leaving each other to fend alone?

Does our meeting rhythm generate momentum, or consume it?

The outcome was transformative. Decisions that once took weeks now happened in days. Actions moved from aspirational long-term goals to immediate implementation. This change was noticed externally by clients, and, most tellingly, by the internal organisation itself.

The issue was never the people,
but the system they operated in.
**BRIGHT does not fix people. It
optimises the conditions for
success.**

Key takeaways for boards, investors and leadership teams.

- 01 **Executive search is more selective.** Not slowing down, but becoming more focused and discerning. Higher expectations for leadership profiles, not lower demand.

- 02 **Execution gap, not strategy gap.** The primary gap is not a lack of strategy, but a struggle in its translation into consistent execution.

- 03 **Design and deliver simultaneously.** Leadership today requires a dual capability. The traditional separation between strategic thinking and executional leadership is no longer viable.

- 04 **Context over pedigree.** The effectiveness of a leader is now primarily determined by the specific phase and challenges, rather than solely by past titles or career path.

- 05 **The rising cost of mismatch.** Selecting a leader who does not precisely fit the organisational phase creates delays and inefficiencies that organisations can no longer afford.

The executive search market is not becoming more complex.

It is becoming more precise.

What is changing is not the availability of talent, but the clarity with which leadership is evaluated. The gap between what leaders promise and what organisations experience has become visible, and in that visibility, expectations have shifted.

The best leadership decisions are rarely the most obvious ones. **They are the decisions that combine context, judgment, and courage.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ineke Kooistra

Founder · InterManage

Former Group CEO of YoungCapital and Circle8Group. Today, Ineke works as an interim CEO and executive search partner with founders, boards, investors and

leadership teams on the moments that decide whether companies grow, stall, or break. Commissioner at AFAS Software. Member of SER Topvrouwen. Columnist for MT/Sprout and BusinessWise.

INEKE@INTERMANAGE.NL · INTERMANAGE.NL · LINKEDIN.COM/IN/INEKEKOOISTRA