

The 2026 leadership paradox: balancing tactical survival with strategic transformation

(And why modern leadership isn't about rules)



Recruitment trends in 2026 have come to be defined by a delicate, high-stakes balancing act. The organisations we work with are caught in a perpetual motion machine: they have to respond tactically to the immediate pressures right in front of them, while simultaneously working up a much longer-term response to complex, systemic change.

This tension is reshaping internal decision-making, altering the sequencing of senior appointments, and redefining the profile of the ideal candidate. And with the upcoming Budget hanging in the balance next week, the only certainty is that the landscape is poised to shift yet again.

The tactical response: income; efficiency; agility

When the external environment becomes hostile, the immediate corporate instinct is to protect income and drive efficiency. This year, that instinct has pushed three specific functional areas to the top of our clients' wish lists.

1. The agile finance lead

Move over technical spreadsheet-whisperer; organisations are now seeking experienced, agile senior finance leads who offer clear, trusted counsel and act as robust problem-solvers. These roles have either expanded significantly, or deepened, requiring real leadership skills alongside professional capability. As boards lean heavily into risk management, these postholders also face extensive scrutiny by, and have more interaction with, non-executives. In this climate, the best candidates are demanding absolute clarity regarding the financial situation they are inheriting.

2. The tenacious fundraiser

Securing income has become an area of intense pressure and rapid change. Many organisations have spent this year restructuring their teams and looking to entirely new sectors for financial support. Where budgets are tight, senior fundraising capability is increasingly blended with marketing and communications. This is nothing new, perhaps, but the market for strong candidates who are willing to move is tighter. Clients are placing a premium on street-smart, tenacious people who can spot a passing opportunity, think creatively and execute with flair and diplomacy. Candidates are demanding the right level of pay for the challenge ahead.

3. The cultural tech expert

While CIO and CDIO roles have been popular for a few years, the briefing stage for these positions looks different in 2026. With initial digital transformation complete, and AI presenting a massive strategic opportunity, organisations need a unique blend of technical curiosity and a deep understanding of the cultural implications of change. These leaders are not managing software; they are designing and implementing entirely new operating models for whole organisations. These candidates need to know that the board they will be working with is united in its approach to change and risk appetite.

The overarching headline across all three functions is a shift in core expectations. For years, having the deep professional knowledge and experience was enough with 'leadership' assumed to happen by dint of a senior management role.

Over the past 12 months, the leadership skills and personal impact required have been much more sharply defined. This is now a non-negotiable expectation for every senior role as corporate teams work closer than ever to solve interconnected problems.

The strategic response: are we moving towards a new model of governance?

This tactical evolution is mirrored at the governance level, with a spike in organisations seeking capable non-executives in the same three areas.

Increased co-production between board and executive means committees are doing far more heavy lifting, with the board focused on 'big picture' developments and surveying the horizon. candidates with deep professional and technical backgrounds must demonstrate their ability to apply their specialism in a very different way.

Today's fundraising trustees are expected to oversee and advise on high-level engagement strategies rather than working hands-on to attract support. Similarly, newly appointed tech trustees are tasked with overseeing the implementation of wide-ranging tech-enabled innovation and evaluating the risks of rapid AI adoption.

Beyond technical expertise, generational diversity has been a significant feature of non-executive roles this year, in a deliberate push to bring younger voices into governance. This has been driven partly by the speed of AI and by a broader acknowledgement of the emerging ideals of the modern customer base.

Navigating the fine line between Chair and CEO

Naturally, the search for exceptional Chairs and CEOs remains relentless. Modern Chairs must possess personal flexibility, sharp intuition and robust independent judgement. The high degree of personal exposure they often face in 2026 demands a strong sense of identity and core belief.

There have been definitive themes for Chair recruitment this year. These include artful board leadership in our hybrid environment, strategic intelligence and foresight, well-honed problem-solving skills, and the ability to navigate the fine line between supporting a CEO and overstepping into operations.

Forget about 'rules'

Meanwhile, modern CEOs are the ultimate product of our times. It is not that the rules of engagement have changed; it is that there are no longer any fixed rules at all.

Rigid frameworks fail when there is instability and change on every axis, every day. Instead, contemporary leadership relies on sensible, notional boundaries and sound principles.

Orchestrating true system change requires the vision to see the future we want to create, the tenacity to believe we will eventually get there, and the character to weather the storm. Many modern leaders we meet have personal warmth and exceptional powers of observation. They use humour and insight to dispel tensions and restore perspective.

Certain traits will always make some individuals naturally more inspirational than others but 2026 has proven that everyone can lead in this age.

Ultimately, being an effective leader right now is about leading in the right place for you. And it's not just what you actively do that makes you successful; in these times, being an effective CEO can just as easily be about what you prevent from happening.