

Wise Leadership in a Wild World



From Survival
to Revival



Amrop

Leaders For What's Next

Meeting present needs, without compromising future generations.

10 years after we planted the wise leadership flag, the world has changed beyond recognition.

We have seen COVID-19 and its aftermath, swiftly followed by conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. A handful of political regimes have dramatically altered the global landscape, with renewed populism, trade wars and shifting ESG directives.

Against this gloomy backdrop, leaders and their organizations face 24/7 online scrutiny. And the inexorable rise of AI is re-defining what it means to be a leader. In this 4-part series, we examine the state of wise leadership.

Is there still a case for wisdom? Or is it a pipe dream? Do leaders really have any power, or are they the hapless victims of their context?

- + How can we define wise leadership?
- + How does it translate into purpose?
- + How can we pin down the competencies of such leaders?
- + How could external (and internal) pressures compromise them?
- + In a wild world, what remedies lie within the leader's own scope of control?

Finally we'll look at hiring for wise leadership, and whether it has a future.

**A 4-part series based on
interviews with senior Amrop
Partners from Asia, Europe and
South America.**



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How did we get here?

**Some misdemeanours are glitches.
Some herald a deeper, systemic problem.
Others are downright existential.**

"Build the future of human connection and the technology that makes it possible". This is the mission of tech giant Meta.

In August 2026, after months of lawsuits, Meta was accused of violating child online safety by several US states. It faced potential fines of up to \$1.4 trillion, close to its entire value.¹

"Consistently defending a longstanding commitment to young people," ²(and without admitting wrongdoing), Meta agreed after a five-day trial to an 18-billion-dollar settlement and new safety barriers.³

Not only was Meta's financial security at stake, its very reason for being was under threat.

Rather than building the future of human connection, is Meta actually creating one of human disconnection? How did an innocent endeavor, born in a dorm, reach this point?



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Wise leadership is a non-negotiable for sustainable success, long-term trust, and the acceptability of leadership in society.

Fredy Hausammann
GLOBAL CHAIR | AMROP



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In a nutshell

1

Wise leadership means meeting the demands of stakeholders, not just shareholders, acting with responsibility, authenticity and long term orientation.

6

Societal trust has now shifted toward employers and CEOs, increasing leaders' influence – and responsibility.

2

Sustainability is now a core leadership duty; wise leaders and boards must continue to integrate social, environmental and business purpose.

7

Imperfection is inevitable, but striving for wisdom – like NASA's moonshot – drives individual and organizational evolution.

3

Global turbulence (COVID 19, geopolitical conflict, ESG shifts, AI) has intensified pressure and scrutiny on leaders – and the importance of wise leadership.

8

Authenticity is essential amid misinformation and division; values must be lived, not brand- or AI generated.

4

Wise leadership provides direction, stability and trust in uncertain times; wisdom guides *what*, purpose guides *why*.

9

Wise, purposeful leadership strengthens resilience, enabling fairer decisions and healthier cultures during crises.

5

Leadership is a collective act. But accountability – not blame shifting – is central to wisdom.

10

AI only heightens the need for human judgment, empathy and discernment; leaders must integrate analytics with values and context.



The case in facts and figures

A compelling purpose forms an ideological contract. It can drive sustained engagement, sales and other performance metrics, buffer against employee burnout, and attract top talent.⁴ CEOs whose employees ranked them highly on character received a Return on Assets of 9.35% – 5 times that of lower-rated peers.⁵ 'Prosocial motivation' helps employees to take perspective and innovate.⁶ Companies with strong sustainable practices often outperform their peers financially, drawing investors who prioritize sustainability and responsible investment.⁷

A recent study examined the effect of corporate misconducts on the stock returns of US firms. It found a -4.1% Cumulative Abnormal Return (CAR), attributed to press coverage. The damage to the firms' value was even greater when the misconduct was blamed on the corporation, rather than a C-level individual, with the financial penalties among the factors that significantly impacted the returns. Investors recognize the importance of penalizing unethical firms in the financial markets, the authors concluded.⁸

BCG highlight 5 outcomes for emissions reductions, energy efficiency, and renewables uptake:⁹

1. Enhanced reputation
2. Compliance
3. Cost savings, improved revenue retention and growth
4. Reduced regulatory and transition risk
5. Improved employee satisfaction, safety and retention, reduced costs of hiring, training and interim replacement.

50%

The average reduction in the rate of employees seeking a new job among those with high vs. low job enjoyment.¹⁰

41%

Senior executives saying a misalignment with its mission, vision, values and/or ethics influenced their departure from their last company.¹³

\$180bn

The potential annual attrition costs that could face unempathetic organizations.¹¹

63%

Corporate leaders saying that their environmental sustainability efforts positively impact the economy.¹⁴

>80%

Senior executives citing purpose and ethical reputation as important in deciding whether to join an organization – more than cite its financial performance, growth and resources.¹²

4.3%

The rise in purchase volumes achieved by adding ESG labels to products.¹⁵



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Catastrophic events demand sustainable thinking, sound judgment, and moral courage. Rising above short-term problems, focusing not just on yourself, but on the ecosystem.

Preety Kumar
MANAGING PARTNER
AMROP INDIA



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What makes wise leaders different?



Leaders need to behave responsibly – tempering the hunt for opportunity with the risks of acting without thinking before things happen.

Victor Reis | Partner | Amrop Sweden

We have a simple distinction. Smart leaders become wise when they address business dilemmas in a holistic and responsible way. They do not only create and capture economic value, but assure a more sustainable – and legitimate – organization.

Wise leaders focus not only on capturing value for shareholders, but stakeholders. They exercise their fiduciary duty of care not only to the organization, but to all who are impacted by its activities.

They unite short-term interests with a long-term vision. They blend System 1 thinking (fast, automatic and intuitive) with System 2 thinking (slow, deliberate and analytical).¹⁶

Amrop's mission: 'shaping sustainable success through inspiring leaders,' is rooted in this concept. In 2017, we published our seminal study on 'Wise Decision-Making'.¹⁷



In reality, leadership is difficult. Our decisions are affected by unconscious biases, pressures (and incentives) from our operating context.

Our research framework focused on factors within the leader's scope of control: 'self-leadership' (how leaders exercise self-governance), 'motivational drivers' (what drives leaders' choices), and 'hygienes' (how leaders nourish their decision-making health).

Based on this model, our global study revealed four key insights:

1. Leaders are on the path from smart to wise, but missing vital opportunities
2. The moral guiding light is in sight, but often lost in the clouds
3. Leaders are driven by service, virtue and entrepreneurship – but not to the point of self-sacrifice
4. Many leaders are habitually engaging in personal mindfulness practices – but feedback is often skipped.

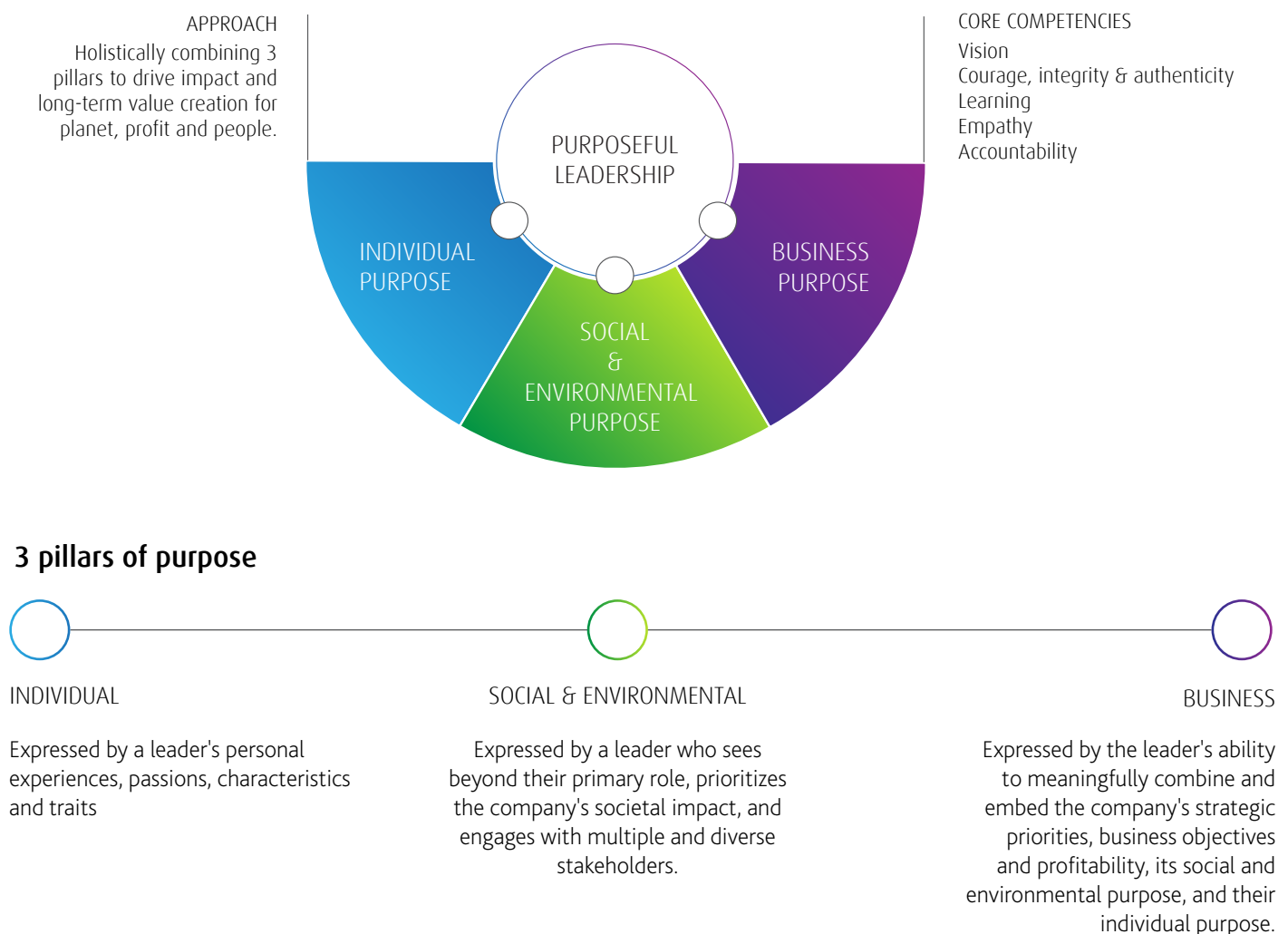
In 2023, Amrop further developed the theme. Drawing on the study findings and thousands of interactions with CXOs and boards, we translated the overarching 'wise' concept into the 'Purposeful Leadership' model.

This is a practical approach for boards, leadership hiring and development teams, and the leaders themselves (see next page).



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A practical approach to wisdom | Amrop's Purposeful Leadership Model



5 competencies and mindsets

VISION	COURAGE, INTEGRITY & AUTHENTICITY	LEARNING	EMPATHY	ACCOUNTABILITY
+ Steps back from daily routine + Explores approaches, solutions and points of view + Focuses on the broader long-term context + Is ambitious.	+ Understands the objective & results of risks taken + Willing to choose an approach not tried before, with solutions beyond convention + Commits to new innovative and feasible products, services, solutions and processes + Makes decisions that could change the image of the organization.	+ Is able to absorb complex information about technology, trends, competitors & stakeholders, and integrate them into the mission of the company + Is disciplined & motivated to learn, does not give up easily + Seeks information on technical, operational and functional matters that are useful.	+ Genuinely seeks to understand and respect others' perspectives and emotions + Encourages a culture of diversity and social awareness + Ability to sense how others see things + Stays out of judgment + Takes someone else's perspective.	+ Takes responsibility towards stakeholders for his/her own actions, those of the business unit and of the entire organization + Understands new regulations and new environments and their impacts on the business + Supports colleagues, is a role model in terms of reliability and integrity.



There is always a case for wise leadership, and always should be. We've seen the world evolve very quickly from VUCA to BANI, and from BANI to something indescribable. This is why an underlying framework is so vital.

Jimmy Chen
MANAGING PARTNER
AMROP CHINA



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There is power in individuals. Even more, in numbers.

“No man is an island.” John Donne’s statement is as valid today as 400 years ago.¹⁸ No leader can be divorced from their operating context – the board and C-suite entourage, the shareholders, multiple, wider stakeholder groups. And, unless a leader is the founder of the firm, its legacy and culture.

For an organization is a collective. “No individual leader can make things happen alone,” says Preety Kumar, Managing Partner of Amrop in India. “A CEO is a subset of the board, investors, the CXO team. Collective inputs drive outcomes.”

As part of a collective, it is easy to shrug off personal blame for failure, and leaders often do, admitting only that an error was made. “People tend to blame external factors. They hesitate to admit mistakes because they fear the consequences,” says Juan Pablo Román, Managing Partner of Amrop in Chile.

Shifting blame may sometimes seem like a smart and reasonable strategy for self-preservation. But it is not wise. By definition, a wise leader is a responsible leader. “Accountability requires separating the professional from the personal, thinking about stakeholders and society. The future depends on these decisions,” continues Juan Pablo Román.

Nonetheless, wise leadership can initially sound like a dream in the grip of reality. Many leaders feel overwhelmed by relentless pressure, haunted by burnout, redundancy, reputational or financial ruin. But there is good news. Wise, purposeful leadership boosts resilience. Not only are exemplary executives making a difference, many organizations are resisting socio-environmental counter-currents. What’s more, there are several key factors a leader can control. In this series, we present them.

“Leaders must create the conditions for success; they shouldn’t be victims of their environment,” says Jimmy Chen, Managing Partner of Amrop China. On the contrary, leaders play an increasingly important societal role.

According to the 2026 Edelman Barometer, people now position their employers and CEOs among the most trusted institutions. This signals an uptick over the past 5 years - in contrast to national government leaders, major news organizations and foreign business leaders.

CEOs who “lead by example, consult diverse groups, and engage constructively,” are particularly well-positioned to influence trust. Moreover “42% [of people] would rather switch departments than report to a manager with different values than them.”¹⁹

The greater the number of wise role models, the greater the critical mass of this force for good. Being the change we want to see in the world.

What a wise leader is not

Let’s be realistic. Leaders are human, and even the wisest exemplar will unlikely be flawless, especially given the fiendishly difficult nature of the task. Like any parent, a top executive who has never tripped up simply doesn’t exist. For one thing, no single individual can be omnipresent and omniscient: aware of what is happening in all parts of a tentacular organization, all of the time. Nor can a leader control the thousands of variables in play at any moment.

To insist on perfection would not only be naive, but daunting to the point of irrelevance.

And still, we should strive to do so. In 1960, NASA knew that a moon landing was a stretch. Nonetheless, they launched the Apollo program, and nine years later, succeeded in their quest. In the same way, we invite each leader to reach for wisdom, and hiring organizations to employ and incentivize them. To foster a culture and values that maximize the propensity for wise behavior, and minimize its opposite.

Doing the right thing may not revolutionize your organization today. But it will set an evolutionary path for tomorrow. Even (and especially) in adversity, leaders who deploy wise and purposeful practice to flex to tough conditions will spark a chain reaction: the mutations that will carry their kind forward. Ensuring the survival of the fittest. Not the biggest or strongest, but the best adapted.

Wise leadership is a fascinating and enriching journey. The road – with its mishaps, wrong turnings, learnings and adjustments – is as important as the destination.

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People are under significant stress: job security, uncertainty about the future. Leaders must establish trust, and tell the truth even when it’s difficult. People value knowing what they face. Without empathy, a leader cannot bring people along.

Igor Šulík | Managing Partner | Amrop Slovakia



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Still needed, after all these years.

For Fredy Hausammann, Amrop Global Chair, wise leadership is “a non-negotiable for sustainable success, long-term trust, and the acceptability of leadership in society.”

“Leadership boils down to two things,” reflects Victor Reis, an Amrop Partner in Sweden: “Setting a direction and getting people to move. Wisdom is critical for the first part – understanding the world, yourself, others, and what actions serve the greater good. Without that horizon, it’s hard to know what direction to move in to improve things for the planet’s inhabitants. Purpose is crucial for the second part. Without a clear “why” that resonates emotionally, people won’t accomplish great things. Emotions drive people. That’s why outstanding leadership needs both wisdom and purpose.”

“Wisdom is the prerequisite for purpose,” adds Jimmy Chen.

A north star in the stormy night

Battered by years of crises, the fear engendered by wars, inflation and recessions, questions surrounding AI, people are no longer looking for leaders who simply manage change, says Sandra Schrögenauer, Managing Partner of Amrop in Austria. “The old pillars of certainty are shaking. Everything is being questioned: companies, business models, jobs, personal identities. What we need from leaders now is direction, stability, and trust. Wise and purposeful leadership is no longer a nice-to-have for the good times. It is the north star.”

“Global developments are like a polytrauma,” says Igor Šulík, Managing Partner of Amrop Slovakia. “Global warming, for example (“we have 40 degrees outside of this building!”) is one consequence of not paying attention early enough.”

“I think there is always a case for wise leadership, and always should be,” says Jimmy Chen. “We’ve seen the world evolve very quickly from VUCA to BANI, and from BANI to something indescribable. This is why an underlying framework is so vital.”

“There are obvious issues of national security and organizational integrity,” says Victor Reis. “Leaders need to behave responsibly - tempering the hunt for opportunity with the risks of acting without thinking before things happen, not after.” The financial meltdown of 2009 exposed such flaws – and selfishness – says Preety Kumar. Catastrophic events demand a wise antidote: “sustainable thinking, sound judgment, and moral courage. Rising above short-term problems, focusing not just on yourself, but on the ecosystem.”

Why authenticity matters

Societal distrust and divisiveness are deepening, the 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer finds. 70% of people have trouble trusting those who are different to them. In some countries, insularity is at crisis level. A vicious circle is in motion, with “decreased exposure to differing political views and increased polarization, hindering societal progress.” Amongst the factors fueling the division is misinformation.

Authenticity is critical to cut through information overload and artifice, says Fredy Hausammann. “Clear and credible messages are more important than ever, keeping focus on what is truly important. Communication should carry the leader’s own signature, even if you take guidance. People must recognize the individual’s voice, not something written by AI.”

“Autocratic movements and populist extremes push away from values that transcend personal resource-gathering,” says Victor Reis. “We see companies greenwashing, and people claiming to care about greater values, but not to the point of personal sacrifices. Precisely because of these forces, we need authentic, purposeful, and wise leadership more than ever.”

Juan Pablo Román also believes in getting real. “If you truly believe in wise leadership, you must prove it is genuine, not personal greenwashing. Executives must act consistently with their stated beliefs. Decisions may differ under pressure, but the underlying framework should remain the same.”

Only with authenticity can corporate values come alive, says Victor Reis. “Values are not words. Wise leadership shows values through everyday behavior – how you prioritize and interact with others – coworkers, entry-level employees, cleaners, receptionists, customers.” Too many companies still treat values as branding, he says.

Jimmy Chen agrees. “Leaders facing adversity must be honest.” They must also be aligned. “Companies with top leaders who hold totally different personal values are bound for disaster. Equity partnerships and joint ventures break down, even with shared financial interests. Values are the foundation of personal vision and purpose.”





The old pillars of certainty are shaking. Everything is being questioned: companies, business models, jobs, personal identities. Wise and purposeful leadership is no longer a nice-to-have for the good times. It is the north star.

Sandra Schrögenauer | Managing Partner | Amrop Austria

A question of staying power

"The pillars of wise and purposeful leadership make leaders resilient in uncertain and complex times," says Sandra Schrögenauer. Juan Pablo Román observes: "In any industry, when a company does well in business and in the other principles – societal and environmental – you find good leaders. These firms are better prepared for difficult times – tough decisions like downsizing and restructuring. It makes the process easier and less damaging. With fairness, openness, and equality, difficult conversations are less harmful, in my experience. Relationships remain close."

Igor Šulik agrees. "People are under significant stress: uncertainty about the future, and fear of layoffs. Leaders must be honest, establish trust, and tell the truth even when it's difficult. People value knowing what they face. Without empathy, a leader cannot bring people along."

"During tough times, people are uptight, pressurized, burned out," warns Jimmy Chen. "Those who care and put themselves in others' shoes go the extra mile. The companies that succeed long-term are those with good governance. Then you talk about good leadership. And then good management."

"Purpose that resonates with people almost always contains stable elements, even when the world is unstable," says Victor Reis. "For example: Are we contributing to making the world better for its inhabitants? You can check actions against that question whether you were born in the 17th century or today. There are complexities, but some human elements are shared in meaningful purpose. Doing good, not harming others or the environment - these are more universal than simply generating shareholder value. There's nothing wrong with shareholder value, but people feel more fundamentally connected and positively reinforced when they contribute to the environment or society."

"In today's climate of daily uncertainty and business challenges – fresh disruptions, regulatory controls, sanctions - every day brings new headwinds," concludes Jimmy Chen. "You must focus on fundamentals that cannot change: values and objectives. In adverse situations, if it's not a crisis, you still need deep understanding. Of course, in a crisis, you have to jump straight into crisis management."

Role modeling - shaping the organizational clay

"From a psychological perspective, our surroundings and options define much of what we do," says Victor Reis. "Role models, and how we construct environments, change how we behave. We need inspiring frontrunners, and this reinforces the case for wise and purposeful leadership – a clear example with strong ethics and morals shown in everyday acts and setting the norms. Other leaders then cascade those behaviors. A glossy values poster can be a good reminder, but it won't make the difference."

"Disseminating wise leadership throughout the organization is about the signals leaders send out – their conduct, style, and communication," says Fredy Hausmann. "Can they steer in a calm and collected way? Analyze threats clearly and still mobilize people? Can they credibly communicate the belief in the goals and the future?"

Paradoxically, democratic leadership cannot be democratically decided, says Jimmy Chen. "To disseminate purposeful and wise leadership, boards and leadership teams must act top-down. When people do the wrong things right, it's value-destroying – worse than having managers who don't do the right things. Then you're in trouble."



AI is redefining leadership

The rise of AI is only intensifying the need for wisdom. “AI highlights what remains: the irreplaceable human aspect,” says Sandra Schrögenauer. “That’s where the opportunity lies.” AI emphasizes the importance of empathy – a core quality in Amrop’s purposeful leadership approach. “Without empathy, organizations risk losing their human bond. Technology influences many aspects of life, so human interactions must be grounded in kindness, closeness, and connection. These invisible ties cannot be created by structure; they must come from people. Without them, an organization becomes a machine – and machines collapse.”

Wise leaders make wise decisions. But *intelligence* – as provided by AI – doesn’t constitute *judgment*, says Preety Kumar. “AI now supports a large share of decision making, even if leaders don’t allow it to make the final call (especially given machine bias and hallucinations). A decision must flow through intelligence gathering, analytics and holistic human judgment. AI increases the need for this – integrating analytics with context, values and experience, knowledge and perspective.

“You also need a wise decision making framework to ask AI the right questions, and the discernment to interpret its output. It’s about balancing multiple factors with realism, and the principles to be able to ask: what is the right thing to do, in this context?” Given this, a new layer of leadership will emerge. “Some will use AI to elevate their judgment; others may struggle, because AI removes the analytical crutches they once relied on, exposing gaps in their higher thinking.”



If you truly believe in wise leadership, you must prove it is genuine, not personal greenwashing. Executives must act consistently with their stated beliefs. Decisions may differ under pressure, but the underlying framework should remain the same.

Juan Pablo Román,
Managing Partner, Chile

Conclusion

Wise and purposeful leadership is no longer aspirational – it is essential. In a world defined by volatility, mistrust and technological acceleration, leaders must anchor their organizations in values, authenticity and long term responsibility. Wisdom provides the horizon; purpose mobilizes people to move toward it. While no leader is flawless, those who act with accountability, empathy and clarity create cultures capable of withstanding adversity and shaping sustainable success. As AI reshapes decision making and societal expectations intensify, the call is clear: leaders must elevate judgment, embody their values, and become the role models who carry organizations – and society – forward.



In our next article, we explore the state of leadership today. How are external pressures impacting the ability of leaders to exercise the core competencies that define wise – and purposeful – leadership?



About the contributors

This series is based on in-person interviews with the following Amrop Managing Partners.



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Preety Kumar
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Jimmy Chen
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Victor Reis
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Juan Pablo Román
Managing Partner, Chile



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Managing Partner, Austria



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Further reading from Amrop

The Amrop Talent Observatory
Wise Decision-making: Stepping Up to Sustainable Performance
The C-suite Sustainability Struggle, Parts 1 and 2



About Amrop

The Amrop Partnership is a premium leadership and executive search consultancy with 72 offices in 59 countries and a global team of more than 550 professionals.

We help our clients find and develop Leaders For What's Next.

Shaping sustainable success is our mission, craft and passion.

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