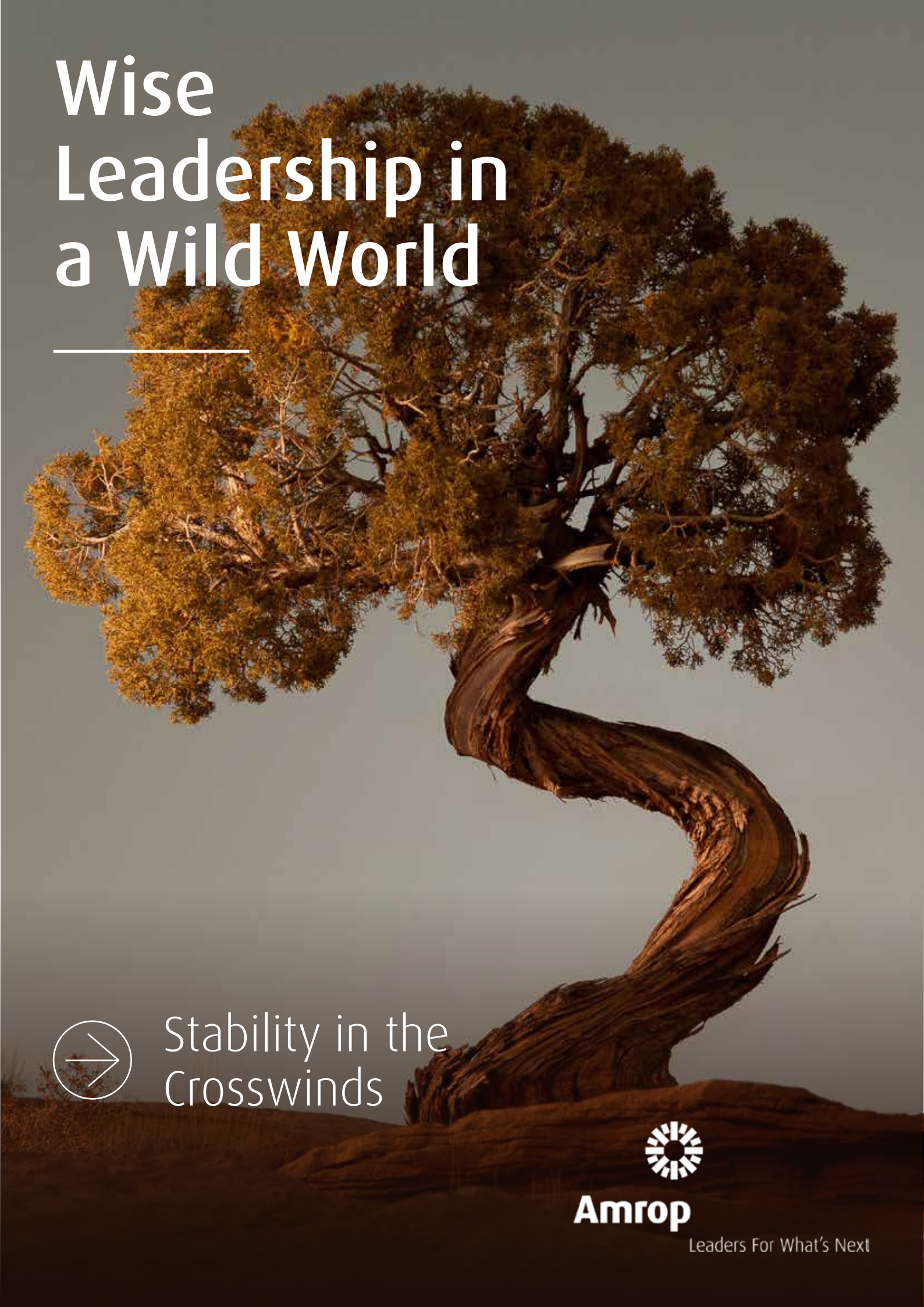
Wise Leadership in a Wild World



Stability in the Crosswinds

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Leaders For What's Next

Stability in the crosswinds

In a volatile world, it is more vital than ever for leaders to anchor their organizations in social, environmental, and business purpose. Uniting short-term interests with a long-term vision, sustainability is now a core leadership duty.

Wise leaders rise to the challenge. They address dilemmas in a holistic, responsible way. They capture value not only for shareholders but for stakeholders. They strive to meet present needs without compromising future generations.

No leader is flawless. But the journey is as important as the destination. Wise leaders strive to build organizations that can weather adversity and thrive. They are the role models who carry business and society forward.

As AI reshapes decision-making and societal expectations intensify, leaders must elevate smart intelligence to wise judgment. Not in spite of the current turbulence, but because of it.

We now drill down into the reality of leadership today. What core competencies define the wise leader? How are external pressures impacting them?

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

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"Everyone wants to do what's best until the market cools and shareholders yell about quarterly targets. Fear causes bad decisions.

Victor Reis
PARTNER | AMROP SWEDEN

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In a nutshell

1. We are in a global multi-crisis. In the collision of geopolitical conflict, post COVID fragility, economic shocks and technological disruption, many are fighting for survival.

2. Today's strategic maps are constantly shifting. Vision, courage, learning, empathy, and accountability are indispensable, yet difficult to enact.

3. Survival mode drives short termism, making purposeful leadership more essential yet harder to sustain as urgency overshadows sustainability.

4. Amplified by media and AI disruption, pervasive fear is widening the divide between adaptive learners and those who perceive innovation as a threat.

5. A vacuum of role models has emerged as political conduct erodes norms of respect, accountability, and trust.

6. Disrespect for rules in global politics spills into business, normalizing poor conduct, undermining trust, and creating a hostile economic ecosystem.

7. Declining educational standards and rising susceptibility to manipulation make it harder for business leaders to rise above the noise of echo chambers.

8. 90% of leaders see a growing case for ESG action, with $41 trillion in ESG assets under management. Yet unclear rules, skills gaps, and political resistance mean progress is uneven.

9. Despite gains, global inequality persists; climate thresholds have been breached. Billions live in countries that spend more on interest than health or education.

10. Amid global volatility, organizations who embed sustainability into their purpose, operating models, and metrics, strengthen their legitimacy, resilience, and reputation.

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Driving through a hurricane

James Bond and his Aston Martin. Herbie the Volkswagen Beetle. Miami Vice and the Chevrolet. For many countries, the automotive industry has historically been an economic mainstay – a hub of aspiration, innovation and production. A national flagship. The sector's current woes illustrate the depth of disruption caused by shifts in global markets and geopolitics.

GM made some of the most ambitious climate commitments of any US industrial company. Its sustainability agenda embraces inclusive leadership, STEM education and community investment. CEO Mary Barra has emphasized competitiveness based not only on affordability but on innovation and supply chain resilience, claiming more assembly plants in the US than any other player. "I'm very proud of the US content in our vehicles." [1]

Yet GM's US headcount fell from 53,000 in 2023 to 50,000 by end 2024. A year later, 200 salaried CAD designers were fired due to "business conditions". The company explained that it was restructuring its design engineering team "to strengthen our core architectural design engineering capabilities". The communication regarding their role elimination was made via Microsoft Teams.[2]

In September 2026, despite pressure from Lower Saxony Premier Olaf Lies, Volkswagen's Supervisory Board signed a transformation plan adding 50,000 job cuts to the 50,000 already agreed. Arriving amongst tariffs, overcapacity and Chinese market forces, this was the most extensive plan in VW's 89-year history. It included alternatives for four German plants facing staggered model phaseouts from 2031 onwards, limiting supervisory board influence on key decisions.[3]

Nor is China's automotive sector a bed of roses. Despite soaring EV production and sales volumes, the industry is under financial strain, in contrast to the country's other downstream sectors such as pharmaceuticals, computer and communications equipment. The economic slowdown is intensifying underlying structural problems in the industry: overcapacity, price wars, competition and US tariffs.[4]

Reflecting compression throughout the automotive value chain, China's industry-wide profit margin fell to 4.1% in 2025, well below historical norms, plunging to 1.8% in December 2025. Costs - especially battery materials like lithium carbonate - outstripped revenue. The Chinese government is making efforts to address excessive competition in the sector.[5]

The same week as WV's announcement, Tata-owned Jaguar Land Rover confirmed 4,000 job cuts – 10% of its global workforce. The move was part of a £1.7 bn cost saving plan amid falling sales, (especially in China and the US), competition from Chinese technology and development velocity. A 2025 cyberattack costing the company £1.9bn, energy hikes, and US tariffs joined the mix.

Unbowed, the firm, which is investing heavily in electric vehicles, is planning a partnership with Stellantis to build new Defender-badged vehicles in and for the US - steering clear of tariffs.[6,7]

The communication regarding the employees' role elimination was via Microsoft Teams.

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"Everyone can handle a certain amount of change, but eventually, people reach their limit.

Sandra Schrögenauer
MANAGING PARTNER
AMROP AUSTRIA

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Polytrauma and survival mode

Preety Kumar is the Managing Partner of Amrop in India. “Every two to three years something new happens: COVID, war, another economic cycle. Rising populism is redefining globalization, and leaders will need wise judgment to understand how their decisions impact sustainability.”

Sustainability cannot be a side order. Beyond ESG measures, “it must be hardwired into a company’s purpose, business model, operating principles, performance metrics. It is internalized, with a huge external impact on reputation and quality.” Meeting current needs, without compromising future generations.

Sandra Schrögenauer, Managing Partner of Amrop Austria, agrees. “A holistic, long-term approach requires integrating sustainability, rather than treating it as a standalone agenda. The focus is on remaining relevant, legitimate, and adaptable. Business resilience and individual leadership maturity are central. The transformation we human beings are undergoing places a premium on core emotional resources: self-awareness, reflection, the ability to see the broader context, assess a threat, and determine a response.”

A whole new level of uncertainty

Of course, the current wave of disruption is not the first, says Fredy Hausammann, Amrop’s Global Chair. But this situation is different. “It’s a toxic cocktail. One crisis is chasing the next. After COVID, we thought it was all over, then one war came, then the next. 6 years on, COVID has left visible marks and wounds.” Igor Šulik, Managing Partner, Amrop Slovakia, agrees. “We are in a global multi-crisis. For many companies, the priority is to survive. Many are becoming outdated or obsolete.”

Amrop Partners meet top leaders on a daily basis. Many are currently in survival mode. This is pushing a short-term focus, warns Sandra Schrögenauer. “Everyone wants to do what’s best until the market cools and shareholders yell about quarterly targets," says Victor Reis, a Partner with Amrop in Sweden. "Fear causes bad decisions.”

“When survival is at stake, people forget about long-term ideals,” warns Jimmy Chen, Managing Partner of Amrop in China. “In the long run, wise leadership becomes even more important.”

Unsurprisingly, fear is rife. “It is one of the most powerful drivers,” says Victor Reis, a licensed psychologist. Job insecurity is widespread. But the malaise goes deeper still, as the rise of AI leads people to question their role in society, says Sandra Schrögenauer. “Media amplifies this fear with constant images of conflict, crisis, and AI-driven disruption. Everything feels like it’s trembling. There is a split between leaders who are courageous, visionary, open to learning. Between those who see AI, for example, as an opportunity, and those who only see a threat.” Victor Reis understands their concerns. “AI delivers enormous opportunities, but also the realization that millions of others have sophisticated tools and may be running circles around you.”

> “We are in a global multi-crisis. For many companies, the priority is to survive. Many are becoming outdated or obsolete.
>
> Igor Šulik | Managing Partner | Amrop Slovakia

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Role models and muddy ripples

> "These leaders create so many ripple effects. The most unpredictable things can happen at any time.
>
> Jimmy Chen | Managing Partner | Amrop China

Where are the beacons of leadership today? We're facing a yawning vacuum, say the Amrop Partners. "There is no accountability," says Fredy Hausammann. "Political leaders were once role models for business leaders and society. Where do we get our guidance now? Some company leaders still practice wise leadership, but the picture has become fuzzy."

The disrespect for social rules in global politics is infectious. "It signals to people with less wisdom that it is legitimate to lead without respect, reliability, or trustworthiness.

"All the ingredients of wise leadership have been violated. This is a big threat to businesses and society. Today's global economic ecosystem is a theatre of war, with real and business battlefields. Poor conduct in global trade, including rule violations, have become the flavor of recent years."

"These leaders create so many ripple effects. The most unpredictable things can happen at any time," adds Jimmy Chen.

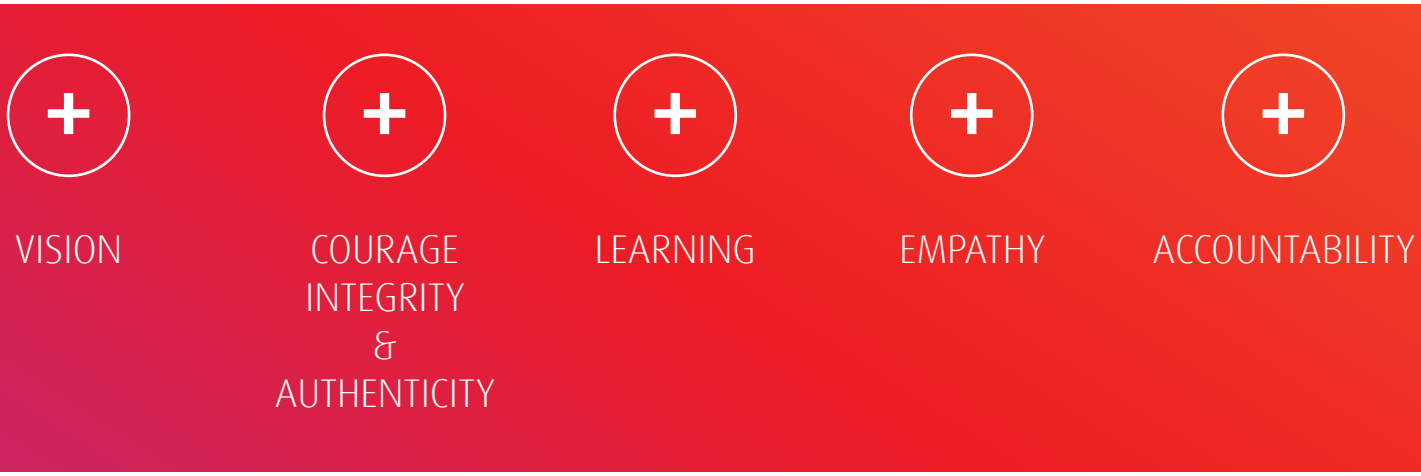
Juan-Pablo Román, Managing Partner of Amrop in Chile, agrees. "Everything depends on the person in charge. The current situation shows what happens when there is a lack of wise and purposeful leadership. Politics influence the decisions of companies and executives." Sustainable leadership is key to a positive ripple effect. "For mid- and long-term continuity, it means interacting not only with business, but with communities and the environment."

Preety Kumar sees another problem. Any decision-making demands an unerring awareness of developments outside the boardroom walls. But the mass exploitation of social media by unscrupulous governments, political parties and leaders makes it difficult to tell fact from propaganda.

When it comes to customer perceptions (and voting preferences), slipping educational standards make it all the easier to manipulate unsuspecting audiences, warns Juan-Pablo Román. Business leaders will find it increasingly difficult to rise above the noise of these echo chambers.

Health check on 5 key leadership competencies

Current pressures reinforce how important it is for leaders to raise the bar – and how difficult. As the world shakes, strategic maps are constantly reconfiguring. "Short-cycle economic events, ambiguity and risk are becoming the very definition of strategy," says Preety Kumar. In a sea of ambiguity and overload, what can leaders focus on? How does wise leadership translate into the way we think and behave?



"Everyone can handle a certain amount of change, but eventually, people reach their limit," says Sandra Schrögenauer. "At that moment, they need someone they can rely on who seems to have a plan. Something higher than disruption. Instead of pretending to know all the answers, leaders must offer a foundation that enables them to navigate. Wise, purposeful leaders with an inner compass and the right personality traits see this fundamental transformation as a challenge and an opportunity."

Good (and credible) navigators combine a helicopter view with feet on the ground, perspective with proximity, says Jimmy Chen. "Today's leaders and board members must balance the long-term and short-term, high-level and down-to-earth, visiting clients, understanding consumers, walking the shop floor."

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Vision

A wise and purposeful leader steps back from daily routine, explores approaches, solutions and points of view, focuses on the broader long-term context, with a healthy ambition. But as any swimmer hit by a big wave knows, it's hard to keep an eye on the horizon when you're gasping for breath. For the Amrop Partners, vision is the most critical competency – and the most compromised by current events.

"Many are not working with vision, just surviving the next few years," says Fredy Hausammann. Victor Reis agrees. "Anyone who has navigated on land or sea knows that a line of vision is crucial. But that line is now shorter than ever. Investors get nervous when many things happen at once; they demand data to support a leader's direction. But in a fast-moving landscape, leaders need to be wise and smart – not the same thing.

"Wisdom means being emotionally stable enough to make calculated bets and stand behind them, remaining balanced and tempered, without being reckless. Some people rush toward extremes, like "AI everywhere". As someone said, 'technology will never move this slowly again'."

"You don't want to sacrifice the long term for short-term goals," says Igor Šulik. "Many companies are continuing to invest in sustainable business. But constant change, disruptions, and unpredictability make long-term planning extremely difficult. Leaders are having to flex to changing circumstances. And sometimes the benefits of long-term thinking can't be capitalized or clearly attributed to the steps a leader takes today."

"It's harder to talk about vision when performance is weak," adds Jimmy Chen. "Even long-term-minded companies have to survive first. You can't brag about values. All the goodies become slogans on the wall until the company is healthy." Still, we shouldn't lose hope. "The values are still there. You don't forget them. The short-term emphasis just shifts."

It is not enough for leaders to simply say: "We'll survive this", says Sandra Schrögenauer. "Vision is essential. Direction. Survival mode pushes leaders toward fast, fact-based decisions."

> "Short-cycle economic events, ambiguity and risk are becoming the very definition of strategy.
>
> Preety Kumar | Managing Partner | Amrop India

Courage, authenticity, integrity

A wise and purposeful leader understands the objectives and the results of risk taking. Given this, they will willingly choose an untried approach and unconventional solutions. They commit to new, innovative and feasible products, services, solutions and processes. They make decisions that could change the image of the organization.

Amrop have long argued that regulatory compliance alone does not earn legitimacy. We propose a 4-level 'scale of moral excellence'. Reasonable organizations inhabit Level 3 or above. Sustainable ones go a level higher.

- Level 4: *moral excellence*, aiming higher than the letter and spirit of the law.
- Level 3: *moral responsibility*, obeying the letter and the spirit of the law.
- Level 2: *legal compliance*, obeying the letter of the law only.
- Level 1: *legal risk,* actively exploiting legal loopholes.

Fredy Hausammann returns to the scarcity of role models. "To survive in such an environment, corporations and individuals often resort to tactics that don't reflect integrity or even playing by the rules. It's about deals, tactics, and survival. Courage, integrity, and authenticity take a back seat. It's a downward spiral." Too many leaders are operating below the moral line.

"Regarding competencies that are affected by pressure, I gravitate toward courage and authenticity; they're so important," Victor Reis confirms.

Learning

A wise and purposeful leader integrates complex information about technology, trends, competitors and stakeholders into the company's mission. They are disciplined, motivated and perseverant learners.

Learning ability has always been a survival skill. AI is adding another layer. A leader's attitude to its advent is telling, says Sandra Schrögenauer. Do they fear the machine, or approach it with humility and curiosity? "The mindset of *"I've seen it all before"* is dangerous. Leaders must accept that knowledge moves faster than hierarchy."

Vision requires a 360⁰ view of the external landscape. But well-fed leaders may be asleep in the watchtower. "Many boards, owners, and staff take a classic view: because they are successful, they think they should only look inward," says Jimmy Chen. "Even if this is changing, we have many examples of successful companies that faced problems for this very reason."

Empathy

A wise and purposeful leader seeks to understand others' perspectives and emotions, respecting rather than judging. They encourage diversity and social awareness.

"Leaders with true empathy tend to be more resilient, and help others become more resilient. During tough times, people are uptight, pressurized, burned out. Those who care and put themselves in others' shoes go the extra mile," says Jimmy Chen.

For Sandra Schrögenauer, vision and empathy are intertwined. "Leaders must take people with them, address their fears, and make the hard decisions with humanity. Empathy is not softness; it's a stabilizing force." Igor Šulik concurs: "Without empathy, a leader cannot bring people along." But today's tough times are raising walls. "Fear impedes delayed gratification, and our ability to mentalize - to understand others' perspectives," says Victor Reis.

A recent Harvard Business Review article calls for 'wise empathy': different emotional moments need different responses. Whereas positive moments benefit from shared celebration, sharing in employees' negative emotions can cause strain and accelerate burnout. The authors distinguish empathic sharing from empathic caring: supporting with compassion, (the active desire to alleviate suffering) without over-identifying. This can protect leaders and teams, and strengthen relationships, engagement and retention.[8]

Accountability

The wise and purposeful leader takes responsibility towards stakeholders for their own actions, those of the business unit and of the entire organization. They understand how new regulations and environments impact the business. They also support colleagues in doing so, role-modeling reliability and integrity.

"If you don't get results, nothing else matters," says Jimmy Chen. "You can't hide behind culture or slogans."

Today's harsh environment encourages the opposite behavior. "Accountability is an attitude. In a culture of fear, what do you hold yourself accountable for?" asks Preety Kumar. "We deal with leaders every day. I see how they think, operate, take decisions. They drop the ball and don't have qualms. They make promises and don't keep them. Do they know what sorry means? This applies to leaders everywhere, not just in India."

"People tend to blame external factors. They hesitate to admit mistakes because they fear the consequences," agrees Juan Pablo Román.

In the race towards the bottom, accountability is often kicked into the gutter. Behavior in the political arena "sets the tone for economic and trade behavior." says Fredy Hausammann.

In our next article, we'll examine how organizational blockages impede wisdom, and what measures can be taken to minimize their effects.

> "Leaders with true empathy tend to be more resilient, and help others become more resilient. During tough times, people are uptight, pressurized, burnt out.
>
> Jimmy Chen | Managing Partner | Amrop China

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Everything depends on the person in charge. The current situation shows what happens when wise and purposeful leadership is lacking.

Juan Pablo Román
MANAGING PARTNER
AMROP CHILE

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Wisdom in action. Drilling down to ESG

Social and environmental considerations are a core pillar of purposeful leadership. ESG measures are a bellwether of its current health. What do the stats say?



Sustainability is gaining strategic importance, with many business leaders seeing a stronger case for action the past 5 years. ESG reporting is taking root and investor interest is resilient. Technology, regulation, and state-level action in the US are creating new tools - and pressure for progress. There are gains in education, healthcare, internet and electricity coverage.



Progress remains uneven. Companies face unclear rules, regional political resistance, skills gaps, and the risk of ESG being deprioritized or under-communicated. SDG delivery is still too slow, with persistent poverty, hunger, displacement, housing insecurity, and insufficient climate finance.

A 2025 survey by the UN Global Compact and Accenture reveals that nearly 90% of CEOs think the business case for sustainability has strengthened over the past 5 years. But under 15% feel well prepared for inflation, trade and climate change. As the world breaches the 1.50C threshold, a $4.3 trillion annual SDG financing gap means 3.4 billion people now live in countries that are spending more on interest than on health or education.[9]

The UN Global Compact and Accenture offer a 'pragmatic playbook' to leaders. It has 4 axes: working with regulators; meeting consumer expectations; investing in technology and skills; communicating progress credibly.[10]

The report calls on the private sector to embed sustainability into strategy and culture, scale innovation across value chains, and partner to shape rules that reward long-term business value. Companies that succeed will not only stimulate SDG delivery and whole economies, but build their own resilience and growth.

Amongst 5 keys to building momentum, including collaborating on regulation, harnessing consumer demand, expanding access to technology and upskilling, the UN Global Compact and Accenture propose "leading with credibility and purpose." [11]

Moving goalposts

"There has been a shift in ESG from good conduct to survival mode, and the rules are unclear," says Fredy Hausammann. The global picture is certainly fragmented. Mandatory sustainability disclosure is now the norm in major economies, with the ISSB standards providing a global baseline. 35 jurisdictions worldwide have now adopted them – but on a voluntary or mandatory basis, with 11 planning to do so.[12]

In the EU, things are more defined. Revised ESG CSRD directives have reduced by 80% the scope of companies affected, with a 70% cut in the number of data points.

But they are still mandatory for large EU companies beyond defined FTE levels and net annual turnover, or non-EU companies with an EU subsidiary or branch, beyond defined levels of net annual turnover.[13]

Even without hard rules, investor expectations and international standards mean large firms cannot avoid ESG reporting. Over 8,900 are setting targets as defined by the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi), up from 7,500 in 2024 and now covering 45% of global market capitalization.[14]

The truth about ESG investing

Recent setbacks for ESG investing have been widely reported. But in 2025 the Corporate Governance Institute (CGI) called them "small backflows" in comparison to the bigger wave - sustained by investor confidence in the long-term value of investments that also foster governance adaptability. $41 trillion ESG assets are currently under management gobally,[15] stabilizing after the 2023-2024 anti-ESG pushback in the US. It reminds us that most of the world's population had national elections in the past eighteen months, with most new governments committed to ESG-related principles.

Deepening regional divides

Greenwashing has a new antithesis: some corporates facing political resistance use "hushing" to avoid government criticism of their ESG activities. "Certain world leaders have said ESG is no longer important. Many companies have deprioritized it," observes Fredy Hausammann.

The CGI confirm that reporting regulations mean boards and executive teams will need new skills. The risk, strategy and finance functions will be particularly affected. Technology will lead, with AI and blockchain allowing real-time monitoring of supply chains and automated sustainability audits. Companies must also prepare for rising investor activism due to polarized attitudes around ESG.[16]

Even if the US administration has formally pulled back from the Paris Agreement and global climate finance tools, state-level progress marches on. In October 2023, the state of California (the world's fourth largest economy) enacted the Climate Corporate Data Accountability Act and Climate-Related Financial Risk Acts.[17] The move requires large public and private companies doing business there to report greenhouse gas emissions and climate-related financial risks. Following suit, the New York State Senate has passed the Climate Corporate Data Accountability Act, targeting large companies that operate or derive income from their activities in New York. The Act is now under consideration by the Assembly.[18]

When it comes to the crunch, progress is patchy

But as reported by the UN in 2025, and with the 2030 deadline looming, only 35% of SDG targets were on track, or showing moderate progress. Nearly half were moving too slowly, and 18% had regressed. 800 million people still live in extreme poverty. 1 in 11 are affected by hunger and 1.12 billion live in slums. At 120 million, the number of people forcibly displaced has almost doubled since 2015. And climate finance flows, despite hitting record highs, cannot meet the needs of developing countries.[19]

On the positive side, over 100 million children and youth can now access education. Maternal and child mortality rates have declined since 2015, with internet use rising by 70% and 92% of the global population with access to electricity.

"ESG has received reduced focus in recent years, even though long-term assessments of companies will continue to rely on it. The next generation still cares deeply about it. In the long term, ESG must be integrated - not as a standalone agenda, but as a prerequisite for business resilience. Otherwise, it risks being neglected," warns Sandra Schrögenauer.

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> ESG must be integrated - not as a standalone agenda, but as a prerequisite for business resilience. Otherwise, it risks being neglected.
>
> Sandra Schrögenauer | Managing Partner | Amrop Austria

+

$41trn

The global amount of ESG assets under management, stablized after the 2023-24 US pushback.[20]

89%

Executives in firms with annual earnings of =>$15bn ranking sustainability a top 3 priority.[21]

1/4

Organizations for whom sustainability is the top corporate priority.[22] A top priority for 67% of CXOs, (vs 22% in 2022).[23]

88%

CEOs saying the business case for sustainability has strengthened over 5 years.[24]

95%

CEOs reporting regulatory compliance as a leading priority.[25]

96%

CEOs advising their successors to embed sustainability into the vision and culture.[26]

+ -

67%

Fortune Global 500 with net-zero commitments, as do 2/3 of the world's largest companies. But only 4% have validated SBTi targets covering Scope 1-3.[27]

44%

Workers saying their company makes good on its purpose through day to day actions.[28]

41%

Workers saying that their company's stated values align with their own.[29]

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12%

CXOs completely agreeing their company regularly measures and proves ROI. Yet 46% say success depending on doing so.[30]

26%

CEOs with dedicated ESG scenario planning teams.[31]

<15%

CEOs feeling well-prepared for major macroeconomic and sustainability challenges.[32]

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Conclusion

In this global multi-crisis, purposeful and sustainable leadership is more difficult than it has ever been. But it is precisely now that it is essential. Geopolitical shocks, technological acceleration, social fragmentation and environmental strain demand leaders who can stay grounded amid fear, short term pressure, and declining trust. Emotional maturity, contextual intelligence, and courage are now vital to navigate shifting strategic maps and rising societal volatility. Although ESG momentum is real, progress remains uneven. The path forward requires leaders who integrate business performance with community and environmental stewardship, acting as stabilizing forces in an increasingly turbulent and polarized world.



In our next article, we examine how internal pressures are bearing down on leaders trying to do the right thing. Given that organizations are collectives, what are the factors that lie within a leader's scope of control?

About the contributors

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



Fredy Hausammann
Global Chair, Amrop



Preety Kumar
Managing Partner, India



Jimmy Chen
Managing Partner, China



Victor Reis
Partner, Sweden



Juan Pablo Román
Managing Partner, Chile



Sandra Schrögenauer
Managing Partner, Austria



Igor Šulik
Managing Partner, Slovakia

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Further reading from Amrop

Wise Leadership in a Wild World: From Survival to Revival
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.

www.amrop.com

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