

Beyond the Workshop

How Aotearoa New Zealand
Organisations Really Build Leaders

What works, what does not, and what
organisations must do next.

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LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership capability is now a critical driver of organisational performance in Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet despite significant investment, many organisations remain unsure whether their efforts are genuinely shifting behaviour or improving outcomes. This study set out to understand what actually works (and what does not) in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Thirty-one Chief People Officers and heads of Learning & Development from medium and large organisations across Aotearoa and Australia were interviewed. Their insights were combined with global research to identify the conditions that make leadership development effective, sustainable, and culturally aligned.

Across sectors, the message was consistent: leadership development works when it is simple, human-centred, manager-supported and embedded into everyday practice. It fails when it is overly complex, disconnected from organisational systems, or delivered in isolation from the realities leaders face. Participants also emphasised the importance of designing for Aotearoa New Zealand's relational, small-scale environment, including leadership grounded in the principles of Te Ao Māori.

Eight themes emerged as the strongest predictors of leadership development effectiveness:

1. Leadership development only works when embedded in organisational systems.
2. Manager support is a critical success factor.
3. The biggest capability gap is at the frontline.
4. Simplicity and practicality outperform complexity.
5. Measurement should be contribution based, not attribution based.
6. Culture and executive behaviour determine whether anything sticks.
7. The Aotearoa New Zealand context shapes what works.
8. The future of leadership is increasingly human-centred.

These findings point to a clear implication: the opportunity is not to do more leadership development, but to do it differently. Organisations that focus on simplicity, relevance, system alignment, and human-centred capability, grounded in the context of Aotearoa, are better positioned to build leadership that is effective, sustainable, and fit for the future.

INTRODUCTION

We often hear that “leadership capability has never mattered more,” but in the current environment, this statement carries new weight. Organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia are navigating unprecedented levels of complexity through technological disruption, shifting workforce expectations, hybrid work, geopolitical volatility, economic uncertainty, and the accelerating influence of artificial intelligence (AI). In this context, the quality of leadership is a critical determinant of organisational performance, success, and longevity.

Yet despite significant investment in leadership development, many organisations remain unsure whether their efforts are truly effective. Leadership programmes are often well-intentioned but disconnected from organisational realities. They can be piecemeal, insufficiently embedded, or misaligned with the organisational culture and systems. And as a result, behaviour change is inconsistent, and return on investment is difficult to articulate.

While these challenges are near-universal, they are amplified in Aotearoa New Zealand, where organisations tend to be smaller, more relational, and more resource-constrained than many of our global counterparts. Because most organisations are small and structurally lean, our leaders often wear multiple hats. Compliance demands are regularly high, because many New Zealand organisations operate in heavily-regulated sectors. Front-line leaders are often responsible for meeting these requirements on top of their core operational and people leadership duties. Furthermore, cultural norms such as humility and pragmatism shape how leadership is understood and how learning must be delivered. These cultural norms mean leaders tend to downplay their own achievements, prefer learning that feels practical and unpretentious, and engage more deeply when development is framed around collective benefit rather than individual elevation.

Leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand is shaped not only by organisational realities but also by the bicultural foundations of this country. Principles

from Te Ao Māori such as whanaungatanga (relationships), manaakitanga (care), and kotahitanga (collective purpose) align strongly with the human-centred leadership capabilities organisations are now seeking.

Yet despite these unique dynamics, there has been limited research into what actually works in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

This whitepaper seeks to address that gap.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 31 Chief People Officers (CPOs) and heads of Leadership & Development (L&D) across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, and supported by a global literature review, this research explores a central question: What makes leadership development effective in Aotearoa New Zealand organisations?

The aim is not to produce another theoretical model or generic framework. Instead, this report aims to provide practical, evidence-based guidance that reflects the realities of Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces. Guidance that senior leaders, People & Culture practitioners, and learning professionals can use to design leadership development initiatives and programmes that genuinely shift behaviour and improve business outcomes.

The findings reveal a clear and compelling story. Leadership development fails when it is complex, isolated, or disconnected from organisational systems. It succeeds when it is simple, human-centred, manager-supported, embedded in everyday work, and aligned with culture.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative, multi-method design to explore what makes leadership development effective in Aotearoa New Zealand organisations. The aim was to generate rich, practice-based insights grounded in the lived experience of senior people leaders, while ensuring the findings were robust, credible, and relevant to the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Leadership Development Research Participants

Total Participants

31

Senior Leaders
CPO's, L&D Directors,
Consultants

Sector Representation

Public Sector	8
Private Sector Large Enterprise	15
Private Sector SME	5
Consulting / L&D	3

Organisation Size

> 1000	18
250-1000	9
< 250	4

Geography Participant Split

25 New Zealand

6 Trans-Tasman

Research design

The study centred on semi-structured interviews with 31 CPOs and heads of L&D from significant enterprises (i.e. organisations of 50 or more employees or with a GST turnover of over \$30million) across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. Participants represented a broad cross-section of sectors including FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods), construction, manufacturing, insurance, health, energy, retail, professional services, and government. Interviews ranged from 40 to 75 minutes and were conducted via video call or in person. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity across industry, organisational size, and leadership development maturity. The final sample included thirty-one senior people leaders representing fourteen sectors and organisations ranging from 500 to 20,000 employees. This provided sufficient variation to identify both common patterns and sector specific nuances.

Coding process

A reflexive thematic analysis approach was used, which is well-suited to complex organisational research. All interviews were transcribed, and coded using a structured mid-level coding framework developed from the first five transcripts. Coding proceeded iteratively; initial codes were refined, collapsed, or expanded as new patterns emerged. In total, one hundred and eighty-six codes were generated, which were consolidated into forty-two mid-level categories and ultimately into the eight themes presented in this report. From there, cross-case comparison was done to identify commonalities, divergences and sector nuances before this research was integrated with the global literature to contextualise Aotearoa New Zealand insights.

This approach ensured both depth (within-case insight) and breadth (across-case patterns), producing findings that are grounded, credible and practically relevant.

Saturation

Theme saturation was reached at approximately twenty-four interviews, with no new substantive codes emerging beyond this point. The remaining interviews were used to test the stability and applicability of the themes across different organisational contexts.

AI-assisted analysis

AI assisted analysis (via Microsoft Copilot) supported pattern detection, cross-case comparison, and code frequency analysis. AI was not used to generate themes; rather, it acted as a secondary analytic lens to validate

human-led coding, highlight potential blind spots, and increase reliability. All final interpretations and theme decisions were made by the researcher.

Strengths

A key strength of this study is the depth and quality of insights gathered from senior people leaders with extensive experience in leadership development, talent, and organisational culture. The semi-structured format allowed participants to surface issues most relevant to their context while maintaining consistency across interviews. Combining practitioner insight with global research strengthened the evidence base and ensured the findings are both locally grounded and internationally aligned.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings reflect the perspectives and experiences of the participants and are not intended to be statistically representative of all organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand or Australia. The study provides depth rather than breadth; it offers rich insight into how senior people leaders understand leadership development, but it cannot quantify the prevalence of these views across the wider population.

Insights are based on self reported experiences, which may be influenced by recall, organisational context, or personal interpretation. While participants were senior, experienced, and reflective, their perspectives represent one layer of the system, not the views of front-line leaders, executives, or employees more broadly.

The study identifies patterns of association rather than direct causation. Although participants linked leadership capability to outcomes such as turnover, safety, engagement and performance, the research design does not allow for causal claims. These relationships should therefore be interpreted as perceived influences rather than proven drivers.

The rapidly evolving nature of leadership development (particularly in relation to AI, hybrid work, and organisational restructuring) also means some insights may shift over time. The findings should be understood as a snapshot of current practice and sentiment, not a definitive or enduring account.

These limitations frame the study as a practice-based exploration designed to surface themes, patterns and insights that can inform organisational decision making, rather than a predictive or generalisable model.

FINDINGS

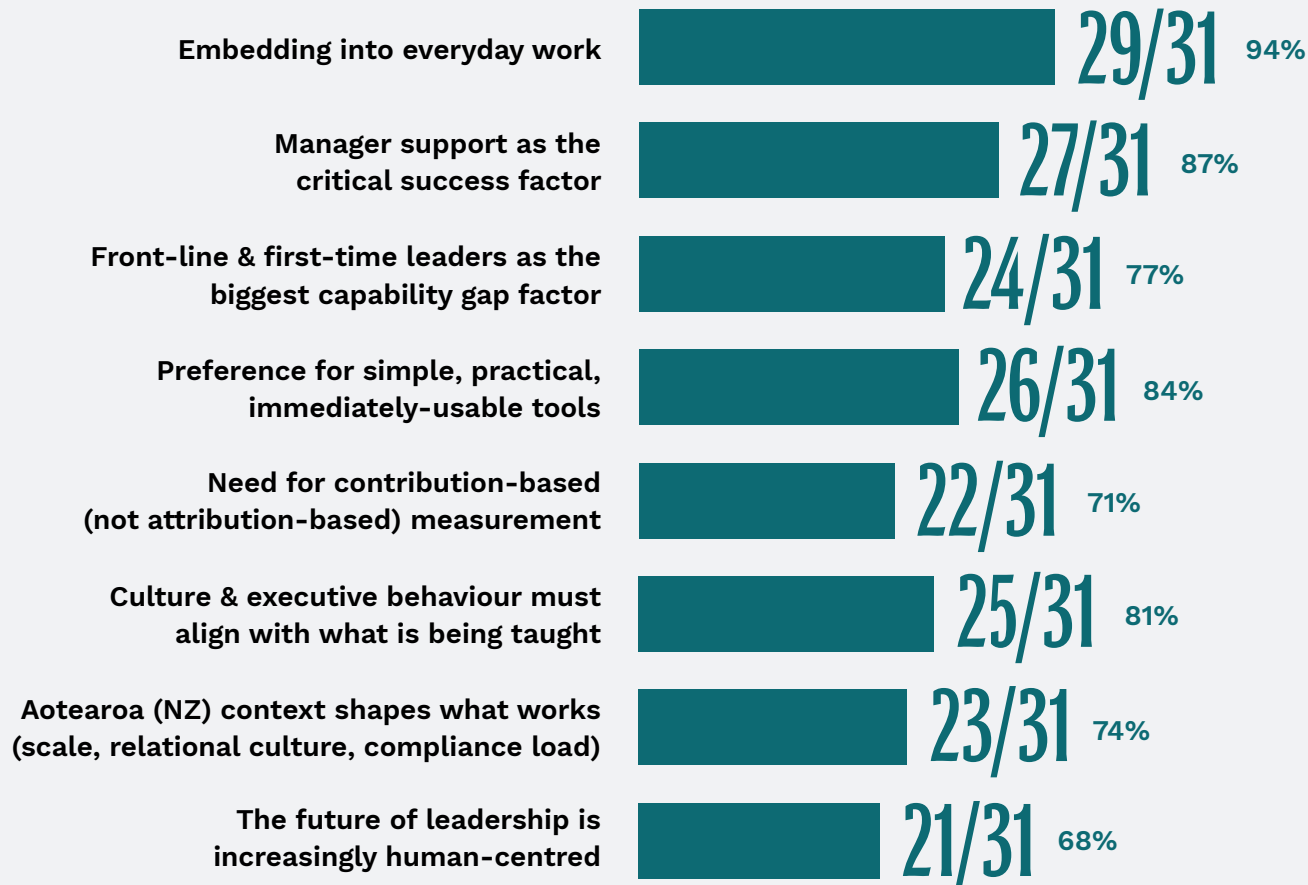
What makes leadership development effective in Aotearoa New Zealand organisations?

Despite differences in industry, scale and maturity, the patterns that emerged were strikingly consistent. Organisations are grappling with similar challenges when it comes to leadership development effectiveness in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

The findings reveal a clear picture: leadership development succeeds when it is simple, human-centred, manager-supported, embedded in everyday work, and aligned with culture and systems. It fails when it is complex, isolated, or disconnected from organisational realities.

Across thirty-one interviews, more than 80% of participants raised the same core issues – embedding, manager support, front-line capability, simplicity, culture alignment, and the need for human-centred leadership.

Leadership development effectiveness – what 31 New Zealand CPOS & L&D leaders



The following eight themes represent the strongest, most saturated insights across the dataset.

1. Leadership development only works when embedded in organisational systems

Across interviews, leaders were unequivocal: programmes alone do not create leaders; systems do. One off workshops and inspirational speakers consistently failed to produce sustained behavioural change. Participants described these approaches as “events,” not actual, lasting development.

Twenty-nine of thirty-one participants said leadership development only works when it is embedded into everyday work, not delivered as standalone workshops.

The organisations reporting the strongest outcomes were those that treated leadership development as part of the operating system rather than as an add on. In these environments, leadership expectations were woven into existing rhythms such as one-on-ones, team meetings, performance cycles, and operational routines. Leaders practised a small number of core behaviours repeatedly, supported by simple tools and spaced learning that encouraged application between sessions.

As one CPO noted: “We treat leadership like a knowledge download, not behavioural change. If we just picked *one* thing and obsessed over it for twelve months, we’d actually see change.”

The most effective organisations used short, practical modules, cohort-based learning, and real-world application rather than long theoretical sessions. What distinguished them was not the content itself, but the consistency of reinforcement through the organisation’s systems, processes, and everyday conversations. There was success when leaders were given the time and space to practise new skills and behaviours in their real work world.

Several leaders also noted that embedding leadership expectations mirrors Māori approaches to learning (*ako*), where growth happens through ongoing practice, reflection, and relationship.

Embedding leadership development into the operating system of the organisation, rather than bolting it on, emerged as the single most reliable predictor of impact across the study.

2. Direct manager support is a critical success factor

What became clear through the interviews is that the participant's direct manager is one of the biggest determinants of whether leadership development has any impact.

Organisations that reported the strongest outcomes all described active, consistent manager involvement where they set expectations, reinforced learning in team routines, and coached leaders as they applied new behaviours. Conversely, those that reported weak outcomes pointed to manager disengagement as the primary reason.

When managers show genuine interest, ask about the learning, create opportunities to apply new skills, and role model the same behaviours, it sends the message that this work is important. It also means that participants are far more likely to positively change because of their participation in development programmes. When managers are indifferent or absent, participants sense it is not valued in their context and learning quickly fades.

As one interviewee put it: "The programme is irrelevant if their manager doesn't support them. It's the number one success factor."

This finding aligns with global research, but it is amplified in Aotearoa New Zealand's smaller, relationship-driven organisational ecosystems, where the manager/employee relationship carries significant weight. In these environments, manager behaviour signals what truly matters far more than any programme content or facilitator can.

The most effective organisations in the study had clear expectations for manager involvement before, during and after learning. They treated manager support not as a "nice-to-have," but as a non-negotiable component of leadership development. Where this support was missing, even well-designed programmes struggled to gain traction.

Manager engagement is therefore not an adjunct to leadership development. Rather, it is a key mechanism through which learning is transferred, reinforced, and sustained.

"The programme is irrelevant if their manager doesn't support them."

3. NZ's biggest capability gap is front-line & first-time leaders

Across the interviews, one layer kept surfacing as both the most stretched and the most consequential: front-line and first-time leaders. In fact, twenty-four of thirty-one participants identified front-line and first-time leaders as their organisation's biggest capability gap. They are often promoted because they are technically strong or reliable under pressure, yet they step into leadership roles without the confidence, capability, or support required to lead people well. And in many organisations, they are doing this while juggling compliance demands, operational pressure, and the realities of shift based work.

This matters because front-line leaders shape the day-to-day experience of most employees. It is also the layer where manaakitanga (care and responsibility for others) is most visible in day today interactions. They influence engagement, retention, customer experience, safety outcomes, and team culture – often more than anyone else in the organisation. Several noted that the effects of poor front-line leadership appear to be reflected in those metrics, as early warning signs, often before they show up in budgets. When this layer is underdeveloped, the ripple effects are immediate, expensive and far-reaching.

Participants described front-line leaders as “drowning in compliance” and “carrying the weight of the organisation without the tools.”

As one participant noted, “Front-line leadership is where everything shows up – safety, productivity... culture. And it's the layer we've historically under-invested in.”

Many noted that these leaders often avoid difficult conversations, struggle with coaching and lack the time or headspace to practise new behaviours. Small cohort sizes of teams and high turnover make it even harder to provide consistent development.

Yet this is also where the greatest opportunity lies. When organisations invest early and deliberately in front-line leadership capability, the impact is visible quickly in team climate, confidence, clarity, and in the way that work gets done. Strengthening this layer is not just a development priority; it is a strategic lever.

“No body remembers a seven pillar model.”

4. Simplicity and practicality outperform complexity

If there was one design principle that came through loud and clear, it was that Aotearoa New Zealand leaders want leadership development that is practical, usable and immediately relevant to the work in front of them.

Aotearoa New Zealand leaders value practicality and relevance. If it does not help them solve real problems in a small, busy, multi-hat environment, it gets ignored.

Participants described long theoretical sessions as “nice ideas I’ll never use,” or worse, “content that evaporates the moment I walk out the door.”

What works here is learning that feels grounded – such as short sessions with a clear purpose, tools that fit on a single page and activities that mirror real situations leaders face every day. Leaders want to practise, not just be lectured at. They want examples drawn from their own environment, not generic case studies. And they want learning that respects the reality of their workload, not something that adds to it.

The strongest programmes in the study were those that stripped away unnecessary complexity and focused on a small number of behaviours that matter. They did not try to teach everything. They taught what leaders would actually use and created the conditions for those behaviours to be practised repeatedly.

For this reason, cohort-based learning and peer coaching were consistently highlighted as powerful options because they create connection, accountability, and a sense of shared experience. They pare the learning back from complicated theory, and down into day-to-day realities. Leaders value the chance to talk openly about what is hard, test ideas and hear how others are navigating similar challenges. These conversations often had more impact than any formal content.

As one participant put it, “Nobody remembers a seven-pillar model. But they’ll remember the one thing that helped them have a better conversation with their team this week.”

Simplicity is not a compromise. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, it is a design choice that dramatically increases transfer, confidence, and real-world application.

5. Measurement should be contribution-based, not attribution-based

Measurement came through as one of the most uneven and misunderstood aspects of leadership development. Many organisations still rely on satisfaction surveys, attendance data, or anecdotal feedback. These are metrics that say more about how people felt than whether anything actually changed. At the other end of the spectrum are attempts to calculate ROI (return on investment) in a way that isolates leadership development from every other organisational variable, which most interviewees described as unrealistic at best and misleading at worst.

As one participant noted, “We went down the path of trying to attribute performance shifts directly to the programme, but the number of organisational factors involved made the numbers feel artificial.”

The organisations making the most progress have shifted to a different mindset entirely. Instead of trying to prove that leadership development caused an outcome, they focus on whether it contributed to outcomes that leadership can reasonably influence. This approach is more honest, more credible, and far more useful for decision making.

Leaders talked about tracking indicators such as internal mobility, retention of key groups, succession depth, engagement drivers, safety outcomes, and behavioural evidence in performance conversations. None of these metrics “belong” solely to leadership development, but together they paint a picture of whether leadership capability is strengthening over time. Contribution analysis allows organisations to connect the dots without over claiming.

One participant summed it up neatly: “We’re not pretending leadership development is the only factor. But we can see where it’s making a difference. We’re not claiming causation, but we can say with confidence it contributed.”

The shift to contribution-based measurement also changes the tone of evaluation. Instead of using data to justify budgets or defend programmes, high maturity organisations use it to learn through refining design, adjusting focus areas, and understanding where leaders need more support. Measurement becomes part of the development process rather than a judgement at the end of it.

In an Aotearoa New Zealand context, where organisations are smaller and data sets can be thin, this approach is both pragmatic and powerful. It gives leaders a way to demonstrate impact without forcing the numbers to do something they were never designed to do.

6. Organisational culture & executive behaviour determine whether anything sticks

If there is an Achilles' heel in leadership development, this is it. Over and over, interviewees described beautifully designed programmes that went nowhere because the surrounding culture told a different story. When senior leaders behave in ways that contradict what is being taught, or when systems reward delivery at all costs, leadership development loses credibility fast.

Participants were clear that misaligned executive behaviour does not just undermine programmes, but it also drives disengagement, slows delivery, and increases turnover in high performing teams. In some cases, it was cited as a contributing factor in safety and compliance failures.

Twenty-five of thirty-one participants said leadership development fails when executive behaviour or organisational culture contradicts what is being taught.

Participants were blunt about this dynamic. Some spoke about executives who championed leadership development publicly but never changed their own habits. Others described cultures where poor leadership was tolerated because the individual was technically brilliant or commercially valuable. In those environments, no amount of workshops or coaching could overcome the signal that “how you lead” matters less than “what you deliver.”

One leader summed it up with a line that echoed across the dataset:

“What’s the point of a leadership programme when the person at the top behaves in the opposite way?”

Conversely, executives who demonstrate rangatiratanga (leadership grounded in integrity, humility, and service) created the cultural conditions where leadership development could genuinely take root.

The organisations that saw real impact had a very different pattern to the ones where executive behaviour contradicted what was being taught. Their executives did not just sponsor programmes; they participated in them, sharing their own learning and being willing to show vulnerability. They reinforced expectations in everyday conversations, not just at launch events. And their systems (such as performance, promotion, and recognition) aligned with the behaviours being taught, rather than undermining them.

What is becoming clear when it comes to leadership development is that culture is not a backdrop, but rather the mechanism through which leadership development succeeds or fails.

7. The Aotearoa New Zealand context shapes what works (and what does not)

One of the strongest patterns in the interviews was how deeply the Aotearoa New Zealand context influences leadership development design. It is not just a matter of scale; it is the way work gets done here, the expectations leaders hold of one another, and the cultural norms that sit just beneath the surface.

Aotearoa New Zealand organisations tend to be smaller, which means smaller cohorts, fewer layers, and limited internal mobility. Leaders often carry broad portfolios, so development has to fit around real operational pressure rather than assume spacious calendars. Compliance demands (especially in regulated sectors) can swallow time and attention, leaving little room for reflection or practise unless it is woven into existing routines.

Participants also spoke about the relational nature of Aotearoa New Zealand workplaces. Leaders value authenticity and straight talk. They want learning that feels grounded and human, not polished to the point of abstraction. Tall poppy dynamics can make self promotion uncomfortable, which means leadership development needs to create environments where people feel safe to try, stumble, and grow without feeling like they are “showing off.”

Trans-Tasman differences surfaced too. Australian organisations appear more comfortable with virtual delivery at scale, while Aotearoa New Zealand leaders still prefer some form of face-to-face connection, even if digital tools play a supporting role.

All of these factors shape what works here. Leadership development that succeeds in Aotearoa New Zealand is designed with these realities in mind, not imported wholesale from larger markets that are working with different assumptions. When programmes honour the context (its constraints, culture, and rhythms) they land. When they do not, they feel foreign and leaders disengage quickly.

“It is not just a matter of scale; it is the way work gets done here, the expectations leaders hold of one another, and the cultural norms that sit just beneath the surface.”

8. The future of leadership in NZ has a focus on human skills rather than technical skills

As technology accelerates, the qualities that distinguish effective leaders are becoming more human, not less. AI is reshaping roles, workflows and decision-making, but it cannot replace the relational, ethical, and emotional intelligence dimensions of leadership. If anything, the rise of automation has made these capabilities more visible and valuable.

Participants spoke about the increasing importance of leaders who can create psychological safety, navigate ambiguity with steadiness, and build trust in environments that are constantly shifting. Curiosity, empathy, adaptability, and presence were mentioned repeatedly – not as “soft skills,” but as core capabilities that determine whether teams feel anchored or adrift. Leaders who can listen deeply, hold difficult conversations with care, and make principled decisions under pressure are becoming ever-more crucial. These human-centred capabilities align closely with Te Ao Māori concepts such as aroha (care), whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) and wairuatanga (emotional presence and grounding).

Technical expertise still matters, but it does not guarantee leadership success. Several interviewees noted that the leaders who thrive now are those who can connect across differences, read the room, and respond to people “as people.” One CPO captured the shift succinctly: “Are you competent as a human? Do you care? That’s the future of leadership.”

Several participants observed that organisations not building these human capabilities often report rising burnout, declining trust, and teams that struggle to adapt to change. In a tight labour market, this becomes a direct retention and performance risk.

This evolution appears to be shaping promotion decisions, talent pipelines, and leadership expectations across the organisations in this study. As AI takes on more of the routine and analytical work, the human elements of leadership are becoming the differentiators. The organisations that recognise this shift early and build these capabilities deliberately will be better positioned for the future of work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

“Are you competent as a human? Do you care? That’s the future of leadership.”

As well as the findings above, it became clear through this research, the striking cost of poor leadership for organisations. Below is a capture of the significant business consequences discussed across interviews.

Business Consequences Identified Across Interviews

- Declines in team performance linked to inconsistent front-line leadership
- Higher turnover in critical roles where leaders lack confidence or capability
- Safety incidents tied to poor communication, unclear expectations, or weak coaching
- Customer complaints and service variability driven by inconsistent people leadership
- Slower delivery and reduced adaptability in teams with low psychological safety

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Across all interviews, a clear message emerged:

Leadership development in Aotearoa New Zealand is most effective when it is simple, human, embedded, manager-supported, culturally aligned, and behaviourally focused. It fails when it is over-engineered and overly theoretical, isolated from organisational systems, unsupported by direct managers and misaligned with culture.





LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT MATURITY MODEL (LDMM)

Why it matters

As well as the broad themes of the findings outlined above (and even in viewing these themes), it is helpful to look at an organisation's maturity when it comes to leadership development. Across the interviews, it became clear that Aotearoa New Zealand organisations sit at very different levels of sophistication in how they approach leadership development. Some rely on one-off workshops, others are beginning to build coherent capability frameworks, and a smaller group have fully embedded leadership development into their culture and systems.

Progression through the maturity stages is not cosmetic. Organisations operating at the lower levels reported higher turnover, weaker succession pipelines, and more variability in safety and customer outcomes. Those at higher maturity levels described more stable performance and stronger leadership bench strength.

What the model is (and is not)

The LDMM draws directly from the variation seen in the research transcripts and is supported by global evidence on learning transfer and organisational capability building. It recognises that maturity is not about size or budget, but about integration – how well leadership development is aligned with culture, performance, and everyday work.

The framework is not a ranking, but rather a diagnostic lens. It helps organisations locate themselves on the continuum (see the Toolkit section at the end of the report).

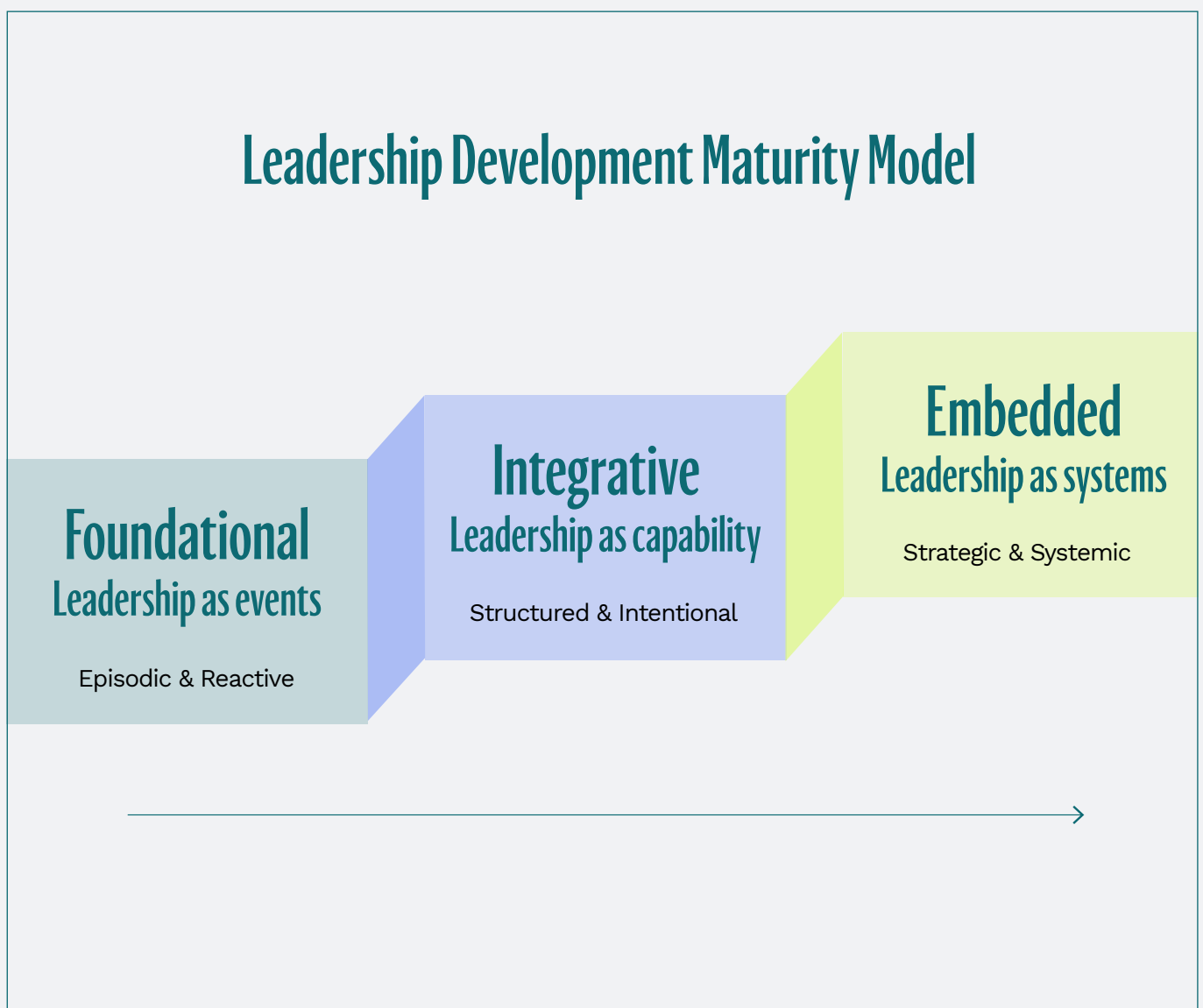
Each stage is defined by observable criteria based on how leadership development is designed, delivered, measured, and supported.

How to use the model

To make these differences visible and to provide a practical roadmap for progression, this report introduces a LDMM. The model reflects the patterns observed in the research and describes how organisations can evolve from *Foundational* to *Integrative* to *Embedded* leadership development.

By using this framework, organisations can shift the conversation from “What programmes do we run?” to “How embedded is leadership development in how we lead, manage, and measure success?” It offers a clear way for organisations to understand where they are today and what it will take to move toward a more strategic, system level approach.

The following section outlines the three stages, their defining characteristics, and provides specific recommendations for progression. In the Toolkit section at the end of this report, there is a self assessment worksheet to help organisations pinpoint their current level and plan their next steps on that basis.



The model in detail

Stage	Description	Key Indicators	How to Progress
Foundational Leadership as events	Leadership development happens in bursts. Workshops are run when issues arise, often disconnected from culture, systems and day-to-day work. The focus is on awareness rather than behaviour.	• Learning delivered through standalone sessions • Minimal manager involvement • No shared leadership expectations or framework • Success measured by attendance or satisfaction • Leadership seen as an activity owned by HR (human resources)	• Create a simple, clear leadership capability framework • Set expectations for manager involvement before and after learning • Shift measurement toward observable behaviour, not participation • Replace one off events with short, practice-focused modules
Integrative Leadership as capability	Leadership development becomes more intentional. There is a framework, managers are involved, and learning starts to connect with performance and culture. Leaders begin to see development as part of their role.	• Leadership expectations are defined and communicated • Programmes link to performance and talent processes • Managers reinforce learning in everyday conversations • Learning is practical, blended, and spaced • Early signs of embedding into team rhythms	• Strengthen embedding mechanisms (e.g., integrate behaviours into performance reviews and team routines) • Build contribution based measurement to track influence on retention, engagement, and succession • Expand cohort learning and peer coaching • Ensure executive behaviour aligns with leadership expectations
Embedded Leadership as systems	Leadership development is woven into how the organisation operates. It is not a programme, but part of the culture, the performance system, and the way leaders lead.	• Leadership behaviours embedded in performance, culture, and succession systems • Executives model and reinforce expectations • Managers coach consistently and confidently • Measurement focuses on contribution and organisational outcomes • Leadership development seen as a shared responsibility	• Maintain alignment across systems, culture, and leadership expectations • Use data and contribution analysis to refine and evolve the approach • Embed leadership development into strategic and operational planning • Extend focus to future ready capabilities (e.g., adaptability, empathy, systems thinking) • Share stories of impact to reinforce credibility and momentum

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is not enough to outline the findings from this research. It is equally important to provide organisations with recommendations and practical approaches on how to improve their leadership development efforts. That is the purpose of this section.

The findings from this research point to a clear conclusion: *Leadership development in Aotearoa New Zealand must become simpler, more human, better embedded, and more systemically supported.*

The recommendations that follow are not just about improving leadership development. They also address the organisational risks currently being driven by leadership capability gaps, including inconsistent performance, preventable safety incidents, and the loss of high value talent.

The following ten detailed recommendations translate this research into practical actions for organisations seeking to build leadership capability that drives measurable business outcomes. These recommendations are designed to be realistic, scalable, and contextually appropriate for Aotearoa New Zealand's organisational landscape.

1. Embed leadership development into the operating system

Leadership development has the greatest impact when it becomes part of how the organisation works, not an isolated programme that sits off to the side. The organisations that saw real behavioural shifts were those that treated leadership development as something leaders do in the flow of work, not something they attend that is separate or additional to the 'real work.'

An embedding checklist is provided in the Toolkit section of this report.

Here's how:

Weave leadership expectations into everyday routines – whether that be the conversations leaders already have, the decisions they already make, or the rhythms that already exist. When leadership behaviours show up in one-on-ones, team meetings, performance discussions, safety huddles, and project reviews, they stop being “extra” and start becoming a normal part of the work itself.

Give leaders tools they can use in real time. Successful embedding also requires leadership development programmes to give leaders tools they can use in real time. Simple, repeatable resources such as one-page guides, conversation prompts, short checklists etc. help leaders translate learning into action without adding cognitive load. The more practical and accessible the tools, the more likely they are to be used.

Ensure learning follows a cycle. Follow a design programme where leaders learn something new, try it, reflect on what happened and then try again. When this pattern becomes part of the organisational rhythm, leadership development shifts from an event to a habit.

Embedding leadership development in this way turns it from a programme into a practice – something leaders do every day, not once a quarter.

“Encourage managers to share their own learning or growth areas to normalise development.”

2. Make direct manager support non-negotiable

Nothing in this research was more consistent than the vital role the direct manager plays in whether leadership development succeeds or fails. When managers are engaged, curious and reinforcing the learning, participants grow and develop. When managers are absent or indifferent, the leadership learning stalls. The bottom line is that if a participant’s manager does not care, the participant will not either!

A simple before/during/after guide for managers supporting participants called the Manager Involvement Protocol is provided in the Toolkit section of this report.

Here’s how:

Set clear expectations for managers (before, during and after). Managers need to know exactly what their role is in supporting development. Leaving it to chance creates inconsistency and weakens impact. Make it explicit that supporting development is part of the manager’s job, not a favour.

- When leaders first step into the role, provide a short “Manager Guide” outlining what good support looks like.

- Ask managers to meet with participants before the programme to set goals and discuss what success looks like.
- Build manager touchpoints into the programme design (e.g., midpoint check-ins, using an agenda item in their one-on-ones to discuss progress, post-module conversations).

As one participant noted, “We tell managers: if your person is in the programme, you’re in the programme too. Your job is to help them apply it, not just send them along.”

Equip managers with simple, usable coaching tools. Many managers want to support development but do not feel confident coaching or reinforcing new behaviours. Therefore, build coaching expectations into leadership capability frameworks and give managers three to four simple coaching questions they can use regularly (e.g., “What are you practising this week?”). Offer accessible mechanisms where direct managers of participants can ask questions or get support. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, encourage managers to share their own learning or growth areas to normalise development.

“We don’t expect managers to be coaches. We just give them a few simple questions and ask them to use them consistently.”

Hold managers accountable for supporting development. Support should not be optional. High maturity organisations make it part of the system. For example, this might look like including “develops others” or “supports leadership growth” in the manager KPIs (key performance indicators), or asking managers to provide a short reflection on how they supported their team member’s learning. Purposefully recognise managers who actively reinforce development and, at the same time, address managers who consistently fail to support development – because silence signals acceptance.

We tell managers: if your person is in the programme, you’re in the programme too.

3. Prioritise front-line and operational leaders

Front-line and operational leaders carry enormous influence, often more than they realise. They shape the daily experience of most employees, and their impact shows up in engagement, safety, retention, and customer outcomes. This is the layer where manaakitanga (care, responsibility, and stewardship of people) is most visible and most needed. Yet they are also the group most likely to step into leadership without the support, confidence, or capability they need.

Investing early and deliberately in this layer pays off quickly. Development for front-line leaders needs to be practical, accessible, and tightly connected to the realities of their work. It also needs to be paced in a way that respects operational pressure.

Strengthening this layer is one of the most powerful levers an organisation can pull.

Here's how:

Make expectations clear and simple. Front-line leaders often step into the role without clarity on what “good leadership” looks like, especially in their specific operational context. Practical examples of how you can address this include providing a one-page “Front-line Leadership Expectations” guide or providing clear behavioural indicators tied to everyday tasks (e.g., running stand-ups, giving feedback, coaching, and setting priorities). Tie this into your leadership framework if you have one.

Provide bite-sized, on-the-job learning. Front-line leaders do not have time for long workshops or heavy theory. They need learning that fits around their work and short practice activities they can apply immediately (e.g., “run tomorrow’s stand-up using the clarity checklist”). 30–60-minute micro-modules delivered on shift or between operational cycles are an example of how to do this. Peer learning huddles, where leaders share what they tried and what worked, are also especially effective for these front-line leaders.

Respect operational pressure. Front-line leaders are often stretched thin. Development must fit into the rhythm of their work, not compete with it. Therefore, focus on short, predictable learning cycles (e.g., one micro-module per fortnight) and integrate leadership practice into their existing routines rather than adding in new ones. Allowing leaders to practise skills in real operational moments rather than simulations is far more effective for this leadership group.

4. Keep leadership development simple, practical and behaviour-based

While leaders everywhere prefer practical, usable learning, this preference is even more pronounced in Aotearoa New Zealand. The cultural norms of pragmatism and humility, combined with small, lean organisational structures, mean that overly conceptual or model-heavy content simply does not land.

The most effective approaches focus on a small number of behaviours that matter, as well as creating opportunities to practise them repeatedly. Short sessions, real examples, and tools that fit on a single page outperform anything that feels abstract or overly polished. Cohort learning and peer coaching also play a significant role: leaders value the chance to talk openly about what is hard, share experiences, and learn from one another.

Here's how:

Use short, practical learning bursts. Long theoretical sessions do not land. Leaders need learning that fits around real work such as 60–90-minute micro-sessions focused on one behaviour at a time. Wherever possible, use real examples from your organisation rather than generic case studies. “Try this tomorrow” activities that create immediate application are another example of how to apply this approach.

Build cohort learning and peer coaching into the design. Aotearoa New Zealand leaders value connection, honesty, and shared experience. Peer learning amplifies insights and creates a valuable platform for leaders to connect, share and reflect on their experiences. It also helps to break down organisational silos and encourage cross-organisational collaboration. In designing peer coaching cohorts, keep the sessions structured to keep conversations safe and focused and ensure that leaders discuss their real challenges, not hypothetical role plays.

“The biggest breakthroughs came from hearing each other’s stories, not from the slides.”

Prioritise repetition and practice over content. Although it can be tempting to get caught up in elaborate explanations or using “the latest model,” we know from this research and global best practice that behaviour change comes from doing, not knowing. Practice reps (e.g., giving feedback, setting expectations, having a coaching conversation) and simple scripts or prompts for common leadership moments are useful. Equally important is to provide opportunities for leaders to apply the behaviours in real work in between sessions.

As one high maturity organisation noted, “We built in practice every week. It wasn’t fancy, but it worked.”

A short word on why one off workshops do not work (except in a few specific cases)

Decades of global research on learning transfer is unequivocal in demonstrating that one-off workshops rarely lead to sustained behaviour change. Studies by the Center for Creative Leadership, the Learning Transfer Research Institute, and meta-analyses of workplace training consistently show that without reinforcement, practise, and manager support, learners forget 70–90% of new content within weeks. One off events create awareness, but not capability, because behaviour change requires repetition, feedback, and integration into real work.

Workshops can be effective, but only in a small number of cases, such as:

- Compliance or knowledge-based training, where the goal is information, not behaviour change.
- Executive alignment sessions, where the purpose is shared understanding or decision-making.
- Kick-off events that launch a longer learning journey.
- For highly-skilled or intrinsically-motivated learners who already have strong habits of self-directed practise.

Outside of these narrow contexts, the evidence is clear that leadership development must be embedded, supported, and reinforced over time for any meaningful shift in behaviour to occur.

The evidence on one-off workshops

One-off workshops don't work – and the research is clear

- ⊗ Learners forget 70–90% of content within weeks
- ⊗ No practice = No behavioural change
- ⊗ No manager support = No transfer
- ⊗ No embedding = No sustained impact

When do one-off workshops work?

- ☑ Compliance or information training
- ☑ Executive alignment sessions
- ☑ Programme kick-offs
- ☑ Highly motivated, self-directed learners

Workshops create awareness. Systems create behaviour change.

5. Measure contribution, not attribution

Measuring the effectiveness of leadership development remains one of the most misunderstood aspects of the field. Traditional ROI models (particularly those that attempt to attribute a dollar return to a specific programme) are both unrealistic and unhelpful. Global literature is clear that leadership impact is multi-causal, unfolds over long time horizons, and is heavily influenced by contextual variables such as culture, team dynamics, organisational change, and even market conditions. Attempting to isolate the effect of a single programme within this complexity creates a false sense of precision.

Instead, the most credible approach (both globally and in Aotearoa New Zealand) is contribution analysis. Rather than asking, “Did this programme cause the outcome?” contribution analysis asks, “Did this programme contribute to the outcome, alongside other factors?” This aligns with the work of the Brinkerhoff Evaluation Institute, the Center for Creative Leadership, and the Learning Transfer Research Institute, all of whom emphasise that behavioural evidence is the strongest predictor of leadership development impact. In practice, this means shifting the focus from proving causation to demonstrating influence, using a blend of quantitative indicators and qualitative insight.

Longitudinal tracking

A core component of contribution based measurement is longitudinal tracking. Leadership development is fundamentally about behaviour change and behaviour change does not only happen in the 24–48 hours after a workshop. Point-in-time evaluations (such as post-programme surveys) capture only initial reactions. They tell you whether people liked the learning, not whether they used it. If you measure leadership development immediately after delivery, you are measuring the wrong thing.

By contrast, longitudinal tracking measures what matters: whether leaders are applying new behaviours consistently and whether those behaviours are influencing team and organisational outcomes. Global research is unequivocal: behaviour change takes three to twelve months, decays rapidly without reinforcement, team outcomes lag behind leader behaviour, and the biggest predictors of success (which we now know to be manager involvement and system alignment) can only be assessed over time.

While this may sound resource intensive, it is actually more practical in Aotearoa New Zealand than in many larger markets. Our organisations tend to be smaller and more relational, leaders are closer to their teams, and data systems – while not always sophisticated – are simpler to navigate. This means organisations can track impact using simple, repeatable rhythms, not complex analytics. Quarterly check-ins on behaviour, manager

observations, engagement trends over six to twelve months, retention and mobility patterns, succession depth year on year, team climate shifts and even stories of behaviour in action all provide meaningful longitudinal insights.

These principles align strongly with the Aotearoa New Zealand context, where leaders are closer to the work, teams are smaller, and cultural dynamics are more visible. In this environment, contribution based measurement is not only more credible, but also more achievable.

A contribution analysis template is provided in the Toolkit section of this report.

Here's how:

To strengthen measurement and ensure leadership development delivers meaningful impact, organisations should focus on the following practices:

Shift from ROI to contribution-based measurement. Rather than chasing misleading ROI formulas, organisations should track indicators that leadership development can reasonably influence. These include retention of leaders and high performers, internal promotions and mobility, succession depth, engagement scores (particularly “my manager” items), psychological safety, team performance and well-being or safety outcomes. Smaller NZ organisations have a natural advantage here because patterns emerge more quickly and are easier to interpret.

Make behavioural change the primary outcome. Behaviour is the closest proxy for leadership effectiveness as well as being the most controllable. Organisations should use manager observation, self reflection tools, peer feedback, performance conversations, coaching notes, and simple “before and after” indicators to track behavioural shifts. NZ’s relational culture makes these conversations more natural and more accepted.

Build measurement into existing rhythms. Measurement fails when it becomes an add on. Instead, organisations should embed the measuring of leadership behaviours into quarterly performance reviews, monthly one-on-ones, talent and succession discussions, team retrospectives, and leadership forums. Smaller teams and flatter structures in Aotearoa New Zealand make this easier to implement and sustain.

Use qualitative evidence as a strength. Stories, examples, and case evidence are powerful indicators of cultural and behavioural change. Organisations should actively collect examples of leaders applying new behaviours, team stories of improved clarity or connection and case studies showing improved outcomes such as reduced conflict, smoother onboarding, or better change adoption. Narrative evidence resonates strongly in Aotearoa New Zealand’s trust-based leadership culture.

Track manager involvement as a leading indicator. Both global research and this research consistently show that manager involvement is the single biggest driver of learning transfer. Organisations should track whether managers set expectations before programmes, reinforce learning during delivery, follow through afterwards and create opportunities for practise. Aotearoa New Zealand's flatter organisational structures mean managers have more direct influence on day today behaviour, making this a particularly powerful lever in our local context.

Use longitudinal tracking, not one off surveys. Leadership development impact unfolds over months, not days. Organisations should track behavioural consistency, team climate, engagement trends, retention patterns, and succession readiness over time. Smaller cohorts in NZ allow for more personalised, meaningful tracking.

Rather than chasing misleading ROI formulas, organisations should track indicators that leadership development can reasonably influence.

6. Align culture, systems, and executive behaviour

Leadership development cannot succeed in a misaligned system. Even the best designed programmes will struggle if the surrounding culture, systems, and executive behaviour reinforce something different. In the highest maturity organisations, leadership development is not treated as an isolated initiative, but rather is woven into how the organisation hires, promotes, rewards, communicates and leads. Culture becomes the mechanism through which leadership development either sticks or silently fails.

To move toward an embedded, system level approach, organisations need to ensure that the expectations taught in leadership development are consistently reinforced by the environment leaders operate in.

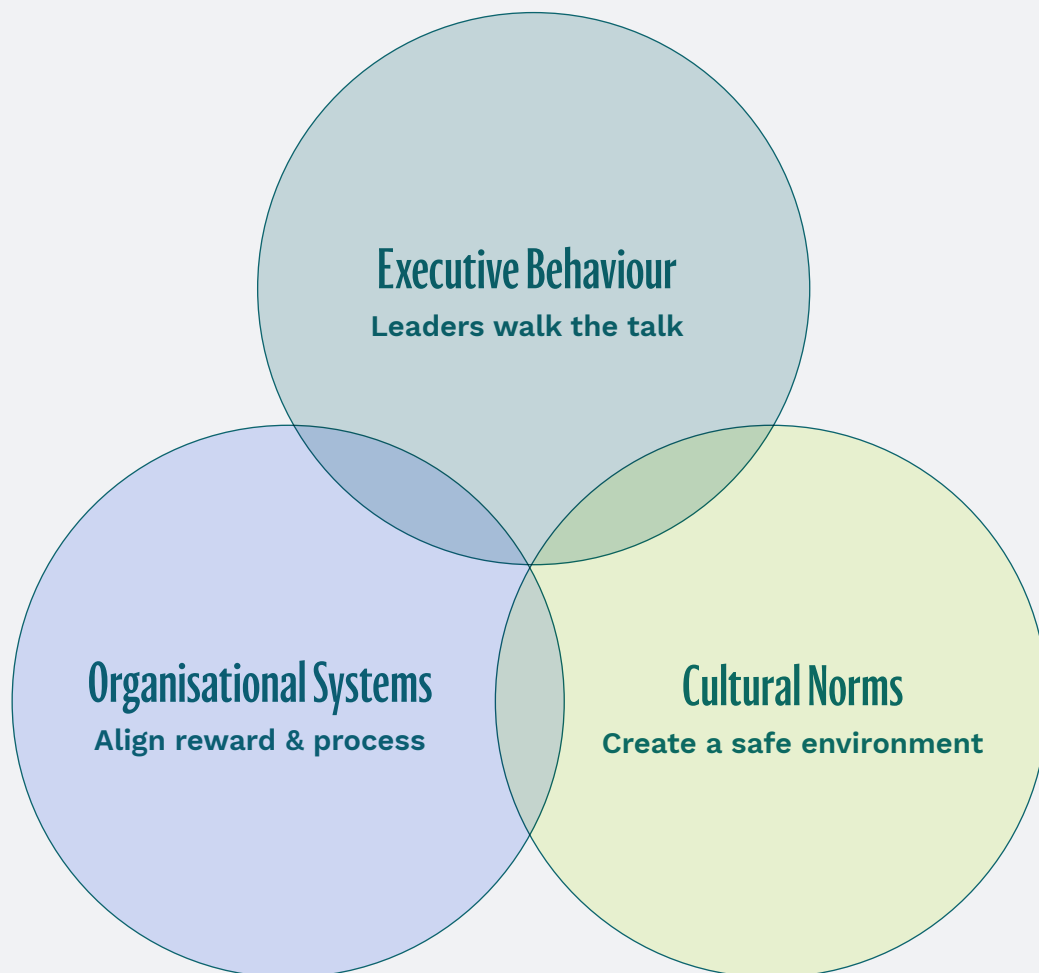
This requires alignment across three domains: executive behaviour, organisational systems, and cultural norms. The practices below map directly to these domains.

Domain 1: Executive behaviour

Ensure executives role model the behaviours being taught. Leadership development loses credibility when senior leaders behave in ways that

Aligning for leadership development

Success requires alignment across three domains



Role Model & Engage

- ✓ Lead by example
- ✓ Embed KPIs
- ✓ Provide feedback

Integrate & Reward

- ✓ Update policies
- ✓ Align promotions
- ✓ Support collaboration

Foster & Normalise

- ✓ Share stories
- ✓ Build trust
- ✓ Encourage openness

Leadership sticks when behaviour, systems & culture align

contradict the expectations being taught. Executives set the tone for what is normal, acceptable, and rewarded in an organisation, and their behaviour is arguably the most powerful signal in the system.

- Make executive participation visible not just at launch events, but in practice sessions, storytelling, sponsorship of material or modules, and follow through.
- Expect executives to share examples of how they are applying the behaviours themselves (and where they are still learning).
- Build leadership behaviours into executive KPIs and performance reviews.
- Provide coaching or feedback to executives who are misaligned.

Domain 2: Organisational systems

Align rewards, recognition, and promotion criteria. If the organisation rewards technical excellence, delivery at all costs, or individual heroics, then no amount of leadership development will shift behaviour. People do what is rewarded.

- Integrate leadership behaviours into promotion criteria and talent reviews.
- Recognise leaders who demonstrate clarity, connection, accountability, and adaptability, not just those who hit targets.
- Remove or address “brilliant jerks” quickly; they erode culture and undermine leadership expectations.
- Ensure reward systems reinforce collaboration, coaching, and people leadership.

Integrate leadership development into core people systems. Leadership development becomes embedded when it is part of an organisation’s operating system, rather than an add-on.

- Embed leadership behaviours into performance management templates and conversations.
- Use the capability framework in recruitment, onboarding, and succession planning.
- Align leadership development with talent reviews and workforce planning.
- Ensure leadership expectations are reflected in organisational values and behavioural indicators.

Domain 3: Cultural norms

Build psychological safety through storytelling and transparency. Culture shifts when leaders (particularly senior executives) talk openly about their own learning, mistakes, and growth. This normalises development and reduces defensiveness.

- Encourage leaders to share real examples of applying new behaviours, including what did not go well.
- Use storytelling in leadership forums to reinforce cultural expectations.
- Create spaces where leaders can practise new behaviours without fear of judgement.
- Model vulnerability at the executive level to signal that learning is expected, not optional.

Make leadership development part of everyday rhythms. Culture is shaped by what happens daily, not annually. The organisations that embed leadership development most effectively integrate it into the rhythms of work.

- Use team meetings, stand-ups, and retrospectives to reinforce leadership behaviours.
- Build leadership expectations into project kick-offs, change initiatives, and cross-functional work.
- Use leadership forums to revisit behaviours, share examples, and celebrate progress.

Treat culture as the delivery mechanism. Ultimately, leadership development succeeds when the culture reinforces the behaviours leaders are being asked to adopt. When culture and systems are aligned, leadership development becomes self-sustaining. When they are misaligned, programmes become isolated events that fade quickly.

7. Leadership development must reflect the realities of NZ organisations.

Leadership development is most effective when it feels authentic to the context it serves. New Zealand organisations are typically smaller, more relational, and less hierarchical than their global counterparts. They value pragmatism, humility, and connection, often operating within tight resource constraints and compliance demands. Programmes designed for large multinationals often fail to resonate here (unless they are adapted well) because they overlook these realities.

To maximise relevance and impact, leadership development in New Zealand must be modular, flexible, and grounded in the everyday rhythms of work here in our local and current contexts. Contextual relevance increases both engagement and application, as well as bringing about greater credibility.

Here's how:

Use modular, flexible design. As mentioned in previous recommendations, but worth reiterating in the context of the Aotearoa New Zealand environment, design programmes that can be delivered in smaller, adaptable modules rather than long, intensive blocks. This allows Aotearoa New Zealand organisations to accommodate small cohorts, operational pressures, and varying levels of leader availability. Modular design also enables iterative learning where leaders apply concepts between sessions and return with real examples to reflect upon and share.

Build programmes that are pragmatic and relational. Leadership development in New Zealand works best when it is practical and down-to-earth. Avoid overly-theoretical models or jargon-heavy frameworks but instead, focus on practical tools, conversations, and behaviours that leaders can use immediately. Emphasise connection, authenticity and shared learning over performative or overly hierarchical approaches.

Integrate leadership into operational routines. Address the compliance and workload pressures faced by Aotearoa New Zealand leaders by embedding leadership development into existing routines wherever possible (such as team meetings, project reviews, or performance discussions). This approach reduces time burden and reinforces learning through their work.

Acknowledge cultural norms in programme design. New Zealand's cultural landscape (which includes humility, egalitarianism and the "tall poppy" effect) shapes how leaders engage with development. Programmes should explicitly acknowledge these norms, encouraging leaders to balance humility with confidence and to see leadership as service rather than status. Incorporating bicultural perspectives and Māori leadership principles can further strengthen relevance and inclusivity.

Provide blended delivery options. Offer a mix of face-to-face (where possible and practical) as well as digital learning, but avoid relying on self-directed online content in isolation. While virtual options increase accessibility, New Zealand leaders consistently express a preference for in-person connection where feasible. Blended approaches that combine in-person and/or online workshops, as well as coaching, with self-paced digital content as reinforcement, achieve both reach and relational depth.

Te Ao Māori and bicultural leadership: a distinctive strength for Aotearoa

Although this research did not explicitly set out to examine bicultural leadership, many participants highlighted the importance of Te Ao Māori principles in shaping effective leadership in Aotearoa. The global literature increasingly recognises the value of Indigenous leadership models, and Aotearoa New Zealand is uniquely positioned to draw on a rich bicultural foundation that strengthens connection, trust, and collective performance.

Te Ao Māori offers leadership concepts that align closely with the human centred, relational, and behaviour based approaches identified throughout this study. Principles such as whanaungatanga (relational connection), manaakitanga (care, generosity, and respect), kotahitanga (unity and collective purpose) and rangatiratanga (leadership, self determination, and integrity) reinforce many of the behaviours organisations are trying to build through leadership development.

Several participants noted that when these principles are woven into leadership expectations, development design, and everyday practice, leaders become more grounded, relational, and authentic. This is particularly relevant in Aotearoa New Zealand's smaller, highly relational organisational ecosystems, where trust, humility, and connection carry significant weight.

As one CPO observed: "When we bring Te Ao Māori into leadership, people lead with more heart. It creates a different quality of connection."

The academic literature supports this. Research by Haar et al. (2023) highlights the positive impact of Māori relational leadership on well-being and trust, while Ruwhiu and Elkin (2016) show how Māori and Western leadership perspectives can converge to create more holistic, values based leadership practice.

For organisations, the opportunity is not to "add on" cultural content, but to integrate bicultural principles into the way leadership is understood, practised, and developed. This includes:

- embedding Te Ao Māori concepts into leadership capability frameworks
- using Māori models of learning and reflection (e.g., ako, pōwhiri process, hui structures)
- designing development that honours relational connection and collective learning
- ensuring leaders understand the significance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in their context
- partnering with Māori leaders, advisors, and facilitators to ensure authenticity

Done well, bicultural leadership development strengthens cultural safety, deepens connection, and builds leadership capability that is uniquely suited to Aotearoa New Zealand. It also aligns with the broader shift toward human centred leadership identified across this research.

Bicultural integration is not a separate stream of work, but rather a distinctive strength that can elevate leadership development when approached with respect, partnership, and authenticity.

8. Build the human skills needed for the future

As AI reshapes our work, the qualities that make leadership distinctly human are becoming more valuable than ever. Automation is taking over tasks that encompass data, logic, and speed. This leaves skills such as emotional intelligence, empathy, ethical judgement, adaptability and the ability and willingness to build connection as the true differentiators of effective leadership. The organisations that thrive in this new era will be those that deliberately cultivate human-centred leadership. This means leaders who can connect deeply with a wide variety of people, think critically, and create psychological safety and inclusiveness in an increasingly digital world.

Here's how:

Prioritise development of human capabilities. Leadership development should focus on the capabilities that technology cannot replicate such as empathy, emotional intelligence, curiosity, adaptability, ethical judgement, storytelling, and the ability to create psychological safety. These skills enable leaders to better navigate complexity, build trust, and lead teams through uncertainty. Programmes should integrate these capabilities explicitly, not as “soft skills,” but as strategic competencies.

Promote leaders based on relational capability, not technical expertise. In a world where technical knowledge can be automated or outsourced, relational capability becomes the defining feature of leadership effectiveness. Organisations should shift promotion criteria to emphasise how leaders build trust, coach others, and create inclusive environments. Technical excellence remains important, but it should not be the primary pathway to advancement.

Create dual career pathways. To avoid forcing technically brilliant individuals into people leadership roles they may not want or be suited for, organisations should establish dual career pathways for both technical mastery and people leadership. This approach recognises that both forms of expertise and leadership are valuable to the organisation, and it also prevents the common pitfall of promoting technical high performers into leadership roles that do not fit their strengths or desires.

Use storytelling and vulnerability as core teaching methods. Human-centred leadership is learned through connection, not instruction. Programmes should use storytelling, reflection, and vulnerability as core teaching methods. When leaders share real experiences (including

mistakes and learning moments) they model authenticity and create psychological safety. This approach builds empathy and trust far more effectively than abstract theory.

Human skills are now the primary differentiator in leadership effectiveness. As AI accelerates the pace of change, the organisations that invest in developing these uniquely human characteristics will not only future-proof their leadership, but they will also strengthen the human fabric that holds their culture together.

Human skills are now the primary differentiator in leadership effectiveness.

9. Leverage both internal capability and external solutions

Many New Zealand organisations underestimate the leadership capability that already exists within their walls. The interviews revealed a consistent pattern where internal facilitators, coaches and subject matter experts often hold deep organisational knowledge. This, combined with strong relational credibility and a practical understanding of the organisation's culture can make them a critical element in a successful leadership development initiative.

When organisations rely exclusively on external providers, they risk importing models that do not fit or diluting cultural alignment. External facilitators still have an important role to play, particularly when specialist expertise, a fresh perspective or capability building support is needed, but the most effective approach is a hybrid model. Use external partners to upskill internal leaders and trainers, introduce evidence-based methods and co-facilitate, but ensure that ongoing delivery and ownership of leadership development sits firmly inside the organisation.

Here's how:

Identify internal facilitators, coaches, and subject matter experts.

Start by mapping the internal talent that is already contributing to leadership capability building. Many organisations have experienced leaders, HR practitioners or technical experts who can facilitate discussions, coach emerging leaders, or contribute to programme

design. These individuals bring organisational context that external providers cannot replicate.

Train internal leaders to deliver modules. Equip internal leaders with the skills and confidence to deliver parts of the programme. This not only builds capability, but also signals that leadership development is owned by the organisation, not solely outsourced. Internal delivery can also help with credibility through accelerating cultural alignment and creating a shared language across different levels, divisions, and functions.

Use internal stories and case studies. Stories from within the organisation are more powerful than generic examples. They reflect the real and unique challenges facing the organisation as well as being a strong vehicle to describe successes. Incorporating internal case studies (whether that is about change, conflict, innovation, or customer impact) makes learning more relatable and offers an effective pathway to reinforce the organisation's identity and values.

Build a leadership community of practice. Create mechanisms and spaces where leaders can learn from each other and share experiences to support ongoing development. A community of practice can take the form of regular leadership forums, peer coaching groups, or cross-functional learning circles. This approach strengthens internal networks and embeds leadership development into everyday practice.

Internal capability increases both credibility and sustainability of leadership programmes. When organisations invest in their own people as facilitators and role models as well as including targeted external expertise, leadership development becomes far more relevant and enduring.

Many New Zealand organisations underestimate the leadership capability that already exists within their walls.

10. Treat leadership development as a strategic investment, not a cost

Leadership development is often one of the first areas to be reduced when budgets tighten, yet the organisations in this study that demonstrated the strongest leadership capability were those that invested consistently and deliberately over time. Leadership development is a long-term capability play – one that strengthens culture and enables strategic execution. When it is treated as a cost, it becomes episodic and reactive, but when it is treated as a strategic investment, it can be a core enabler of organisational performance. This shift is philosophical as much as it is financial. Leadership development should be positioned as a business priority, not simply an HR initiative.

Here's how:

Link leadership development to strategic priorities. Leadership development has the greatest impact when it is directly connected to the organisation's strategic goals. This means designing programmes that build the capabilities required for future growth, transformation, customer experience, or cultural change – directly aligned to the organisation's strategy. When leaders can see the connection between development and strategy, their engagement increases and the L&D investment becomes easier to justify.

Use contribution analysis to demonstrate impact. Rather than relying on traditional ROI models, organisations should use contribution analysis to show how leadership development influences outcomes such as engagement, retention, succession depth, team performance, and well-being. This approach provides credible, nuanced insight into the impact of leadership development without overstating causation. It also helps leaders understand where development is working and where adjustments are needed.

Invest consistently rather than reactively. Leadership capability cannot be built through one-off programmes or sporadic bursts of activity. Consistent investment (even at modest levels) creates momentum and builds a shared language. Reactive investment, by contrast, leads to fragmentation and lower transfer not only at an individual level, but at an organisational level. Treat leadership development as an ongoing capability stream rather than a one-off, discretionary project.

Communicate success stories widely. Sharing examples of leaders applying new behaviours, improving team culture, and navigating challenges more effectively helps build the belief that leadership development is valuable. Storytelling is also a great way of reinforcing desired leadership behaviours and strengthening cultural alignment. Highlighting internal success stories and leadership journeys (especially from respected or senior leaders) is one of the most powerful ways to build organisational commitment.

Position leadership development as a business enabler. Leadership development should be framed as a lever for performance, culture, and strategic execution, not an HR activity. This means involving senior executives in design, integrating leadership expectations into business processes, and ensuring development is seen as essential to delivering results. When leadership development is positioned as a business enabler, investment becomes a strategic decision rather than a discretionary spend.

Sustained investment in leadership development builds organisational capability as well as long term resilience. When it is treated as a strategic asset, it can become one of the most powerful drivers of organisational performance.

Leadership development should be positioned as a business priority, not simply an HR initiative.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Effective leadership development
in Aotearoa New Zealand requires:

- Embedding development initiatives into systems
- Manager support
- Front-line focus
- Simplicity and practicality
- Contribution-based measurement
- Cultural and executive alignment
- Contextual relevance
- Human-centred leadership capability
- Internal capability building
- Strategic investment





CONCLUSION

This research makes one thing unmistakably clear: leadership development in Aotearoa New Zealand is at a crossroads. Organisations are currently investing time, money, and hope into building better leaders, but the impact varies dramatically, depending on how well leadership development is integrated into the wider organisational system.

The interviews revealed a consistent pattern: when leadership development is treated as a series of events, it creates awareness, but not change. When it is treated as a capability, it begins to shift behaviour. And when it becomes part of the system, embedded in culture, performance, rhythms, and measurement, it becomes a genuine lever for organisational performance. The evidence is also clear that leadership development design (or the lack thereof) is now a material driver of underperformance in Aotearoa New Zealand organisations and one of the most powerful levers for reversing it.

Across sectors and sizes, leaders described the same challenges: limited manager involvement, inconsistent reinforcement, and a reliance on workshops that feel good in the moment but fade quickly without practice. They shared the same aspirations too: practical tools, clear expectations, human-centred capability, and leadership that reflects Aotearoa New Zealand's relational, small-scale context, including Te Ao Māori principles. The opportunity is not to do more leadership development, but to do it differently – with simplicity, relevance, and alignment to the system.

The Leadership Development Maturity Framework provides a roadmap for this shift. It helps organisations understand where they are today and what it will take to progress. Whether an organisation is operating at the *Foundational*, *Integrative*, or *Embedded* stage, the focus should be on strengthening alignment, increasing reinforcement, and assessing observable behaviour change. Leadership development becomes most powerful not when it is a programme, but rather a practice – something leaders do every day, not something they attend every once in a while.

Ultimately, this report is a call to move from activity to impact and to design leadership development that is not only well-intentioned, but well-embedded.

The challenge for organisations is to build leaders who are not only skilled, but also supported in their leadership growth at a systemic and cultural level. The opportunity for organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand is to move from seeing leadership development as an intervention, to an integrated way of working.

The organisations that make this shift will not only develop better leaders, build stronger cultures and more resilient teams, but they will foster workplaces where people can genuinely thrive.

Go well and good luck!

Suzi McAlpine



PRACTICAL TOOLS & TEMPLATES

This section provides practical tools that organisations can use to embed leadership development into everyday practice. Each template is designed to be simple, actionable, and adaptable to different organisational contexts.





Leadership Development Maturity Self Assessment Worksheet

Use this worksheet to identify where your organisation currently sits on the Leadership Development Maturity Continuum – and what actions will move you forward.

Step 1: Identify your current stage.

Stage	Description	Tick if this sounds like you
Foundational Leadership as events	Leadership development is episodic and reactive. Workshops are one-off, disconnected from systems, and focused on awareness rather than behaviour.	☐ Learning delivered through stand alone workshops ☐ Minimal manager involvement ☐ No clear leadership framework ☐ Success measured by attendance or satisfaction
Integrative Leadership as capability	Leadership development is structured and intentional. There is a clear framework, manager involvement, and alignment with performance and culture.	☐ Leadership expectations are defined and communicated ☐ Programmes link to performance and talent processes ☐ Managers reinforce learning in everyday conversations ☐ Learning is practical, blended, and spaced ☐ Early signs of embedding into team rhythms
Embedded Leadership as systems	Leadership development is strategic and systemic. It is woven into talent, culture, and operations – not a programme but a way of working.	☐ Leadership behaviours embedded in performance and culture ☐ Executives model and reinforce behaviours ☐ Measurement focuses on contribution and outcomes ☐ Continuous coaching and reinforcement

Step 2: Reflect on evidence.

What evidence supports your current stage? (List examples such as programme design, manager involvement, measurement data, or cultural indicators.)

Step 3: Identify gaps and opportunities.

Where are the biggest gaps between your current practice and the next stage?

Step 4: Plan next actions.

If you are at this stage...

Focus on these next steps

Foundational → Integrative

- Develop a leadership capability framework
- Introduce manager involvement protocols
- Shift measurement to observable behaviour change
- Pilot short, practice based modules

Integrative → Embedded

- Strengthen embedding mechanisms
- Build contribution based measurement
- Align leadership development (LD) with culture and executive role-modelling
- Integrate LD into performance and operational rhythms

Embedded
(Continuous Improvement)

- Use data to refine design
- Extend focus to future ready capabilities (adaptability, empathy, systems thinking)
- Share success stories to reinforce culture
- Sustain through continuous reinforcement

Step 5: Summarise your maturity profile.

Current Stage

Evidence

Next Actions

Target Date

Leadership Development Maturity Action Guide

This tool helps organisations translate their leadership maturity stage into one practical action per theme and is a quick guide to focus your effort where it matters most.

Focus area	Foundational	Integrative	Embedded
System Embedding	Embed one key leadership behaviour into existing routines	Align performance & talent processes	Integrate LD into strategic planning
Manager Support	Set expectations for manager involvement	Coach & support managers	Hold managers accountable
Front-line Capability	Give first-line leaders simple tools	Run cohort-based programmes	Build peer coaching networks
Simplicity & Behaviour Focus	Focus on 2–3 core behaviours	Use practice-based learning	Refine based on feedback
Contribution Measurement	Track 2–3 key indicators	Add behavioural evidence	Do contribution analysis
Culture & Executive Alignment	Leaders role model desired behaviours	Align rewards & recognition	Embed leadership values
NZ Context & Te Ao Māori	Use practical, NZ-focused learning	Integrate Te Ao Māori principles	Partner with Māori advisors
Human-Centred Leadership	Build empathy & listening skills	Develop psychological safety	Grow future-ready skills

Embedding Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure leadership development is fully integrated into your organisational system.

Area	Key Actions	Evidence of Embedding
Performance	Leadership behaviours included in performance reviews	Managers discuss behaviours in one-on-ones
Talent & succession	Leadership capability mapped to talent frameworks	Succession plans reference LD outcomes
Culture & values	LD content aligns with organisational values	Leaders role model behaviours
Operational rhythms	Learning reinforced in team meetings and stand-ups	Regular reflection or practice sessions
Measurement	Contribution metrics tracked quarterly	Data informs LD redesign

Manager Involvement Protocol

A simple before/during/after guide for managers supporting participants.

Stage	Manager Role	Example Actions
Before	Set expectations and goals	Twenty-minute conversation to clarify purpose and success measures
During	Reinforce and coach	Ask “What are you practising this week?” in one-on-ones
After	Follow through and embed	Review progress, recognise effort, integrate learning into performance

*Manager mantra:
“My job is to make the learning stick”*

Contribution Analysis Template

This template indicates a shift from ROI to contribution-based measurement.

Outcome Area	Possible Indicators	Behavioural Indicators	Data Source	Frequency
Retention	% of leaders retained post-programme	Evidence of improved clarity, connection, or coaching behaviours	HRIS	Quarterly
Promotion	Internal mobility rate	Increased readiness in behaviour-based assessments	HRIS / Talent Review	Annually
Engagement	Leadership engagement scores	Uptake of 1:1s, feedback, stand-ups	Pulse Survey	Bi-Annually
Succession Depth	Ready successors per key role	Growth in capability framework behaviours	Talent Review	Annually
Safety / Wellbeing	Reduction in incidents or stress claims	Use of safety talks, well-being check-ins, debriefs	Safety Data	Quarterly

*Track contribution, not attribution
– Focus on influence, not causation.*



About the Author

Suzi McAlpine is a leadership consultant, researcher, and founder of Suzi McAlpine Leadership. She is the author of the best-selling book *Beyond Burnout* and creator of The Leader's Map programme. Suzi's purpose is to ignite better leadership. Her research and writing draw on two decades of experience coaching senior leaders and advising organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

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