

STIJN VIAENE



**THE / DIGITAL
LEADERSHIP
PRACTICE / TEST**

**LEARNING TO THINK AND ACT
SMARTER WITH DIGITAL AND AI**

Lannoo
Campus

/CONTENTS/

/ENDORSEMENTS/	7
/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/	13
/PROLOGUE/	15

PART I/WHY DIGITAL DEMANDS A DIFFERENT KIND OF LEADERSHIP/

20

WHAT DO YOU THINK?	23
WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION LEADER?	25

PART II/MAKING DIGITAL AGILITY TANGIBLE/

36

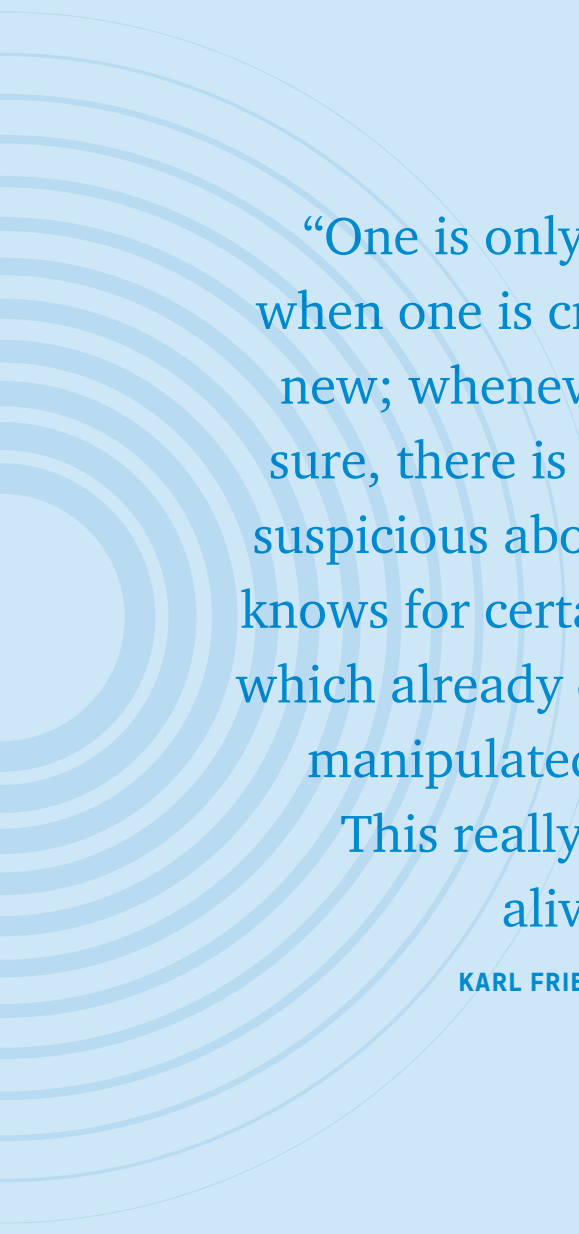
KEEPING AN EYE ON THE HORIZON: ROULARTA MEDIA GROUP	39
ACCELERATING POSSIBILITY: NIKE'S LEBRON JAMES INNOVATION CENTER	43
SHIFTING THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY: DESERET NEWS VS MICROSOFT	46
EXPANDING THE EXPLOITATION FRONTIER: PORT OF ANTWERP-BRUGES	52

PART III/REVEALING THE 4V MODEL OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION LEADERSHIP/ **56**

INTRODUCING THE 4V MODEL	59
JOBS TO BE DONE AND SIGNATURE QUALITIES FOR CONTEXTUAL 4V LEADERSHIP	67
VIGILANT LEADERSHIP AGENDA: MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD BEYOND	70
VOYAGER LEADERSHIP AGENDA: SHOWING POSSIBILITIES' VALUE IN USE	76
VISIONARY LEADERSHIP AGENDA: MAKING WINNING FORWARD-LOOKING CHOICES	81
VESTED LEADERSHIP AGENDA: SHAPING A FLUID ORGANISATION	87
BRINGING THE 4V AGENDAS TO LIFE: A CAROUSEL OF LIGHTHOUSE EXAMPLES	93
HARNESSING AI AUGMENTATION FOR 4V LEADERSHIP	114

PART IV/PUTTING THE 4V MODEL TO WORK TOGETHER/ **126**

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP, CONNECTED PORTFOLIO, GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS	129
4V OPERATING MODEL: PUTTING 4V LEADERSHIP IN MOTION	138
LOOKING BACK: LEADING FOR ORGANISATIONAL AGILITY WITH 4V DISCIPLINE	151
SOURCES	156



“One is only ever truly alive when one is creating something new; whenever one feels very sure, there is something rather suspicious about it, for then one knows for certain that something which already exists is only being manipulated, being reused. This really is a half-dead aliveness.”

KARL FRIEDRICH SCHINKEL

/ENDORSEMENTS/

“Digital transformation touches every corner of our organisations. It is complex, multidimensional, and far more than a technical equation to solve. With AI raising both the pace and the stakes of change, Stijn’s book comes at exactly the right time. It reminds us that the real work of transformation is leadership work. This book gives leaders language, structure, and practical direction to align people, choices, and investments as digital transformation unfolds.”

/ JEAN-CHRISTOPHE TELLIER • Chief Executive Officer, UCB

“Technology can trigger digital transformation, but it cannot sustain it. Lasting impact comes when leaders mobilise commitment, and the organisation turns it into everyday practice. Rather than proposing yet another digital playbook, Professor Stijn Viaene captures that reality by reframing digital transformation as a shared, practice-based leadership discipline that enables organisations to repeatedly explore and exploit digital and AI opportunities with speed, coherence, and human-centred intent.”

/ MICHAEL MAJSTER • Partner, Arthur D. Little Strategy Consulting

“*The Digital Leadership Practice Test* by Professor Stijn Viaene is an outstanding and practical guide for leaders navigating digital transformation. Drawing on an impressive research journey, it distils complex change into a clear, actionable ‘4V framework’ that I greatly appreciate and find directly applicable. The book balances strategic insight with hands-on tools, empowering leaders to turn ambition into disciplined execution. A timely and credible companion for anyone seeking to drive meaningful digital and AI change in their organisation. Highly recommended!”

/ BOUKE HOVING • Global Chief Information Officer, Wholesale Banking, ING

“This is a very rare and timely book—one that combines deep practical wisdom with strong academic grounding. Rather than offering generic solutions or heroic leadership myths, it provides orientation without closure: a framework that helps leaders design the conditions for learning, experimentation, and collective sensemaking in digital and AI-driven transformation. By framing digital leadership as a prescriptive, practice-based design challenge, the

book equips leaders to deliberately shape organisational agility under uncertainty.”

/ CHRISTOPH SECKLER • Professor of Entrepreneurship, ESCP Business School

“A must-read for every leader navigating the turbulence of the digital age. This book cuts through the noise with a clear, actionable framework that empowers organisations to think boldly and act decisively. It challenges leaders to reimagine how they create value and equips them with the practical tools to make that future real. I wish I had this book years ago.”

/ MICHAEL VERVECKEN • Managing Director, Fujitsu Benelux

“In an ever more dynamic world it can be hard to navigate your business. Prof Viaene’s book breaks it down in a clear leadership framework, with clear case studies and hands-on exercises. Once you finish the book your Digital Leadership strategy is ready to execute.”

/ STIJN CHRISTIAENS • Co-Founder and Chief Data Citizen, Collibra

“This book is an inspiring and highly practical guide to leading continuous, organisation-wide digital transformation. The book offers challenging insights. It breaks with heroic leadership myths and shows how real progress comes from collective, purpose-driven collaboration and a mindset built on agility, systems thinking, and growth. The four contextual leadership logics at the heart of the book help leaders balance critical paradoxes in practical ways as transformation unfolds. Rich case studies and hands-on exercises show how these leadership forms come to life, and how readers can apply them with confidence.”

/ SHIRLEY GREGOR • Professor Emerita of Information Systems, Australian National University

“I am not generally a fan of business books, but I gladly make exceptions for works like those of Prof. Viaene. Having worked with him for nearly a decade, I have seen firsthand his rare ability to bridge theory and practice in a way that truly resonates. This new book on leadership in the age of digital and AI, one of the defining forces of our generation, is once again deeply thought-provoking and firmly grounded in real-world experience.”

/ JULIEN CAYET • Innovation Director, ProRail

“The Digital Leadership Practice Test makes an exceptional and timely contribution. Stijn Viaene succeeds in stripping digital transformation of its buzzwords and bringing progress back to what it truly is: the everyday work of people learning to develop new ways of thinking, collaborating, and creating value. The 4V framework gives us a clear, practical, and future-proof compass to make our organisations more agile, more human-centred, and more strategic. I recognise the tensions this book articulates, because I face them myself. The book helps you work through them in practice. This is not a theoretical work. It is an invitation to lead better in a digital age. I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone who is ready to truly understand digital transformation and to make it happen.”

/ AKIN TATAR • Chief Information Officer, Solidaris

“My research and consulting have taught me that digital transformation is less a technology challenge than it is a leadership one. What this means and implies can seem vague to executives, but in this book, Stijn seeks to demystify what this entails and presents a practical path to leading in a digitally turbulent world. This is not just a book that you merely read, but one that gets you to reflect and engage with its content through guided practical exercises. Like digital transformation, be prepared to get your hands dirty!”

/ JOE PEPPARD • Professor and Academic Director, UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, Trinity College Dublin

“Stijn Viaene’s new book makes it clear that transformation is not about systems alone, but about leadership: being ready for what is coming, embracing change, and guiding organisations toward tomorrow. What I found most revealing is how he connects internal adaptation to external value, changing the organisation so customers experience lasting added value. He also shows that leadership is a shared responsibility, with each person contributing from their role and perspective, powerfully captured in his 4V framework. Transformation does not happen only in strategy sessions, but hands-on, on the ground, through conviction that helps others move. It feels like windsurfing: seeing the wave coming, choosing the right one, and staying on the board as the wave carries you forward. Grounded in a decade of research and real practice, this is not just another framework book, but a must-read for anyone who wants to lead digital transformation into the future.”

/ CAAT DEVROEDT • Director Business Excellence Transformation, Randstad Group

“All organisations are now facing rapid and turbulent technology change, forcing a need for relentless digital transformation. Thus, a key concern is leadership that can face those emerging challenges and changes, to help those organisations adapt, collaborate, and redesign. Stijn sees that digital transformation provides a unique and critical leadership context, especially as AI-driven capabilities accelerate, and he recognises those issues when he asks, “How can leadership help us stay equipped to contribute and grow as digital capabilities keep accelerating?” In response, he offers a layered, agile approach, which can guide users to their own continually unfolding organisation transformation. I think that readers will find that approach insightful and useful not only in guiding an organisation but also in guiding their lives.”

/ **DANIEL E. O’LEARY** • Ernst & Young Professor of Accounting, Marshall School of Business, and Professor of Data Sciences and Operations, University of Southern California

“*The Digital Leadership Practice Test* is a beacon of light that guides understanding of digital transformation through the contexts of 4V leadership and a practical operating model. It shows that true digital transformation succeeds only when thinking and acting, and exploration and exploitation, are held together. Stijn’s passion for transformation and his relentless drive to challenge how we lead, learn, and evolve make him a living lighthouse example of the 4V model in action.”

/ **STAYCE MURRAY** • Head of the Data Office, UCB

“This book offers a rare and much-needed bridge between rigorous research and the lived realities of digital transformation leadership. Grounded in years of close engagement with organisations, the 4V framework provides leaders with a clear, practice-oriented lens for making sense of digital and AI-driven change without reducing it to recipes or buzzwords. What makes this work particularly valuable is its treatment of leadership as a collective, situated practice, one that unfolds through concrete ways of working and learning under conditions of ongoing digital transformation(s). For practitioners, the book serves as a thoughtful guide for action, reflection, and meaning, whereas for researchers, it stands as a strong example of how theory can be developed with practice, not merely ‘about’ it.”

/ **AMIR HAJ-BOLOURI** • Professor of Informatics, University West

“This book offers a practical and insightful framework for navigating digital transformation from the perspective of those working in the trenches of data and analytics. As a data and analytics leader, I appreciate how this approach positions data teams to support digital transformation leadership in different ways: from influencing organisational strategy with an unbiased point of view to coaching people toward new ways of working. The book resonates strongly with our efforts to drive a mindset shift, especially in helping teams see that ‘customer experience is value’ also matters when those customers are within the organisation. It also highlights the importance of embracing uncertainty as part of the transformation journey. For practitioners, this book serves as a thoughtful guide for action and reflection, without reducing digital change to buzzwords or rigid recipes.”

/ TOM DELESIE • Manager Data and Analytics, Atlas Copco Group

“Digital transformation is a phenomenon in motion. Across organisations, I see major differences in how it is described and approached, and even within organisations, it can be difficult to reach a shared understanding and direction. This book offers guidance to work on exactly that. Not as a one-size-fits-all solution, but as a book that actively engages its reader and leads each person to outcomes tailored to their own context. Throughout, you feel the experience Stijn Viaene has built through years of working with organisations on this theme. Like no other, he combines solid academic research with a refreshing level of practical usability. The book asks the right questions and takes you step by step through concrete cases and pathways that help you shape an approach that fits your organisation, without ever pretending there is one universal answer.”

/ RUBEN MISSINNE • Data and Analytics Officer, Colruyt Group

“Digital transformation leadership is one of the defining issues of the next five to ten years. There is a lot of buzz about AI and digital technologies, but much of the change still centres on leading and implementing the changes needed within organisations. The book provides case examples and tools for starting or continuing one’s digital transformation journey. These are science-based, but practically applicable tools. I can, without hesitation, recommend the 4V framework and the book to all those interested in leading digital transformation.”

/ MATTI ROSSI • Professor of Information Systems Science, Aalto University School of Business

“In a world where digital leadership is often discussed but rarely practised, this book stands out. Stijn Viaene translates complex digital leadership challenges into practical, reflective tools that leaders can immediately apply. A must-read for anyone serious about leading transformation with impact.”

/ **MARLOES VAN KOOTEN** • Chief Product Officer, Witt Group

“*The Digital Leadership Practice Test* is a powerful and highly practical guide for executives navigating digital transformation, offering a clear way to assess both personal and distributed leadership practices across the organisation. Think of it as a mirror for your leadership approach: Stijn helps uncover strengths, biases, and blind spots while challenging readers to find the right balance between thinking and acting, and between exploring new opportunities and exploiting what already exists. Through concrete tests and rich case examples, the book turns reflection into action. For any leader ready to grow in the complex reality of digital transformation, this is essential reading.”

/ **LUKAS CARLIER** • Commercial Enablement Director, Barry Callebaut

/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/

Writing this book has been a long journey of inquiry, collaboration, and practice. It grew out of years of engagement with practitioners, teams, and organisations wrestling with the realities of digital transformation. Their willingness to reflect openly, experiment boldly, and share what worked and what did not has shaped the insights in these pages. I am grateful to every student and practitioner who contributed to this learning through their questions, experiences, and commitment to meaningful transformation.

My colleagues at Vlerick Business School and KU Leuven provided the academic home in which this work could develop. Their engagement and support strengthened the ideas and sharpened the argument. I am fortunate to work in communities that value relevance and rigour.

A sincere and special thanks go to my research sparring partners Hanna Buysens, Bjorn Cumps, Lieselot Danneels, Ignace Decroix, Matthias Keller, Philip Rogiers, Kristina Sen, Joachim Van den Bergh, Karlien Vanderheyden, and Kurt Verweire. They have been much more than colleagues. Their intellectual generosity, sharp questions, and steady willingness to explore, contest, refine, and rethink ideas have made this work richer than I could ever have achieved alone. Each of them, in their own way, has left an unmistakable imprint on the 4V digital transformation leadership framework.

I also wish to acknowledge the organisations whose generous sponsorship and partnership made the research journey underlying this book possible. Their willingness to support long-term transformation efforts and to collaborate under real conditions grounded this work in practice. My sincere thanks go to Arcadis, Beaulieu International Group, Carglass Germany, the Belgian Federal Public Service Policy and Support (FOD BOSA), the Flemish Public Employment Service (VDAB), Fujitsu Benelux, and UCB. I remain forever grateful for the sustained research sponsorship of Emmanuel Caeymaex, Julien Cayet, Paul Danneels, Hans Denijs, Pieter Deurinck, Pol Deturck, Jean-Pierre Filippini, Jean-Luc Fleurial, Herman De Prins, Fons Leroy, Sandra Schillemans, Bernhard Speyer, Chris Van der Auwera, Danny Van D'huynslager, and Michael Verveckken. Their belief in the value of research for guiding meaningful

organisational transformation, and their readiness to open doors and keep them open, created the inquiry and learning spaces without which this book could not exist.

Finally, I thank my family. Their patience, humour, and steady support created the space that allowed this book to come into being. They carried me through the demanding moments and reminded me why this work is so important. Katrien, Klaas, Noor, and Filou: thank you for being there. I love you.

Any remaining shortcomings are my own. My hope is that this book helps you lead your organisation with clarity, conviction, and a leadership practice that grows stronger over time.

/PROLOGUE/

When I published *Digital Transformation Know-How* in 2020, my ambition was simple: to offer practitioners, particularly my students, a compilation of workable perspectives for navigating digital transformation.¹ That book brought together research for practice, capturing insights developed with organisations on how to design strategy, customer experience, partnerships, data, and ways of working in a world increasingly shaped by digital competition.

Leadership was always part of that story. In fact, the entire book was building towards making sense of “what digital transformation leaders do”, and how that work enables organisations to scale digital-agile practices across the enterprise. But even then, it was already clear that leadership in digital transformation carried more layers that still needed to be unpacked and elaborated. This work would allow leadership to be woven more deeply into the fabric of organisations.

In that first book, I presented a particular perspective on leadership. Rather than seeing digital transformation leadership as a matter of personal traits or heroism, I positioned it as design work: the work of shaping how organisations organise, work, and learn to stay agile under conditions of digital turbulence. Adopting this perspective led me to identify four distinct but complementary digital transformation leadership contexts (Vigilant, Voyager, Visionary, and Vested), each reflecting a particular way leadership helps design and sustain new digital-agile ways of working across the organisation. In short, I treated leadership as practice: as the practical work people did together to shape how the organisation thought, acted, and learnt.

While identifying those leadership contexts was a significant step forward, it was only part of the answer. The more ambitious challenge was understanding how organisations can embed digital transformation leadership into how they work, evolve, and grow. Over the past years, my ongoing work with organisations has helped me develop and refine this understanding. This work was tested, enriched, and validated through each intervention and learning opportunity, ultimately leading to this book’s for-practice framework. The framework is practice-built and academically grounded.²

At the centre of this work sits the question that has guided me throughout: how can organisations digitally transform to achieve organisational agility with the effective guidance of leadership?

This question forms the foundation for the framework presented in this book. It is a framework shaped by years of research, practice, and close collaboration with organisations as they navigate the real-world challenges of digital transformation. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all formula, this framework helps organisations and their leaders make sense of their own transformation work. It offers structure and orientation, while leaving space to adapt to each organisation's context and needs.

Of course, while this work was taking shape, the world around it continued to move at high speed. Nowhere was that more visible than with the sudden public arrival of generative AI. When OpenAI introduced ChatGPT in November 2022, it marked a profound shift in how digital technologies entered everyday work and life. Unlike earlier forms of artificial intelligence (AI) that focused on predicting outcomes based on historical data, generative AI brought something fundamentally new: the ability to produce entirely new content, such as text, images, and code, at a level of fluency and accessibility few had imagined possible. In the space of months, organisations and individuals alike found themselves facing an entirely new layer of digital turbulence. Yet rather than displacing the framework's foundations, these shifts only made its core premise more relevant: digital transformation leadership is about creating the organisational conditions for adaptive learning, collaboration, and continual redesign in the face of turbulence, uncertainty, novelty, and ambiguity.

The growing prominence of generative AI added new urgency to my conversations about digital transformation leadership. As the pace of technological change accelerated, people across all kinds of roles increasingly questioned how they could stay relevant and contribute. Sometimes they even wondered whether it still made sense to invest in learning what machines seem to know or do far better already. One question kept surfacing: how can a leader help every person stay equipped to contribute and grow as digital capabilities keep accelerating?

I see my answer as a kind of preamble to the topic of developing digital transformation leadership, fitting for the prologue of a book on the subject. It allows me to speak to leaders and everyone trying to stay equipped for digitally turbulent times. Staying future-proof remains a responsibility for each of us and is not merely one cast upon

leaders. But leadership means extending a much-needed helping hand. It means offering guidance and support so others can confidently take up their part. In that spirit, I offer a simple three-part approach.³ It is not a quick fix, but a practical way forward for anyone seeking to adapt and thrive in the AI era:

PART 1: Discover your strengths.

Start by identifying your unique capabilities. AI's power lies in its ability to augment human potential, including critical thinking, not replace it entirely. To leverage this, you need to know where your real strengths lie, even those not fully used or visible. "Know thyself," as the inscription at Delphi still reminds us.

PART 2: Treat AI as an ally.

Ask how AI might enhance those strengths. How might tools like ChatGPT support your thinking if you excel at creative problem-solving? If you're strong in data analysis, how might machine learning help you process and interpret data faster and more effectively? Seeing AI as a partner opens up possibilities for personal and organisational growth.

PART 3: Experiment and collaborate.

The key is experimentation. Try different tools. See what works for your goals and strengths. Don't do it alone. Surround yourself with people who understand the technology. Even its creators do not fully understand how AI works, but experts can help make its use more effective.

If anything, the leadership conversations only reinforced a central idea behind my work: in digitally turbulent times, organisational digital transformation leadership ought not to rest with only a few. The challenges organisations face demand more

people ready to engage in leadership work, wherever they sit. There is simply too much to figure out and learn, and learning happens best when people collaborate, share, and build understanding together. Leadership should not be about assigning titles, but inviting broad participation in the ongoing work of helping the organisation adapt and grow. Building this shared leadership capacity has become one of the most critical success factors for digital transformation.

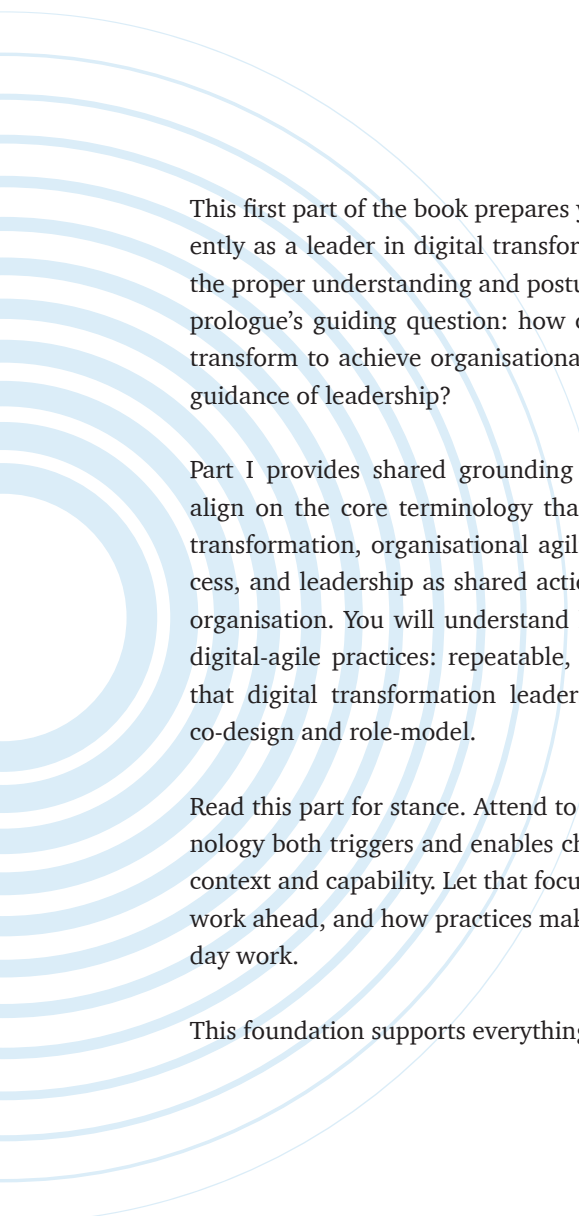
At the same time, this broad invitation to leadership comes with a necessary clarification. The leadership work we're talking about here carries particular characteristics. It is not heroic, nor purely positional. It is inclusive and inviting, drawing people in rather than limiting leadership to a few. It is collective, grounded in shared purpose and meaning, and built on helping others succeed. It is networked and learning-driven, connecting people across boundaries and continuously evolving through practice. It is generative, aimed at helping create new ways of working for organisations that need to thrive in an ever-changing digital world.

This book combines what I've learnt about developing such leadership in practice. It offers an essentials-based guide shaped by more than a decade of working alongside organisations and their leaders throughout digital transformation journeys. It serves as a resource to return to when the journey feels overwhelming, when you lose sight of the forest for the trees, or when you need to reset your compass to focus on what truly matters. It offers clear concepts, essential insights, and practical guidance for engaging with the leadership work that digital transformation demands. It is not a prescriptive recipe or fixed blueprint, but a guiding framework to help leaders effectively shape their organisation's digital future together.

I wish you an interesting read and a companion that sticks with you on your leadership journey.



**PART I /
WHY DIGITAL
DEMANDS
A DIFFERENT
KIND OF
LEADERSHIP /**



This first part of the book prepares you to think and act differently as a leader in digital transformation. It helps you build the proper understanding and posture. It connects back to the prologue's guiding question: how can organisations digitally transform to achieve organisational agility with the effective guidance of leadership?

Part I provides shared grounding for the journey. You will align on the core terminology that guides the book: digital transformation, organisational agility as the measure of success, and leadership as shared action and mindset across the organisation. You will understand how progress is driven by digital-agile practices: repeatable, situated ways of working that digital transformation leaders and their organisations co-design and role-model.

Read this part for stance. Attend to how the dual role of technology both triggers and enables change. Treat technology as context and capability. Let that focus sharpen your view of the work ahead, and how practices make leadership real in everyday work.

This foundation supports everything that follows.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Before we dive into the book's perspective on digital transformation leadership, it is essential first to take a moment to formulate your own view. This is not a theoretical exercise. It is about establishing your personal starting point for reflection and learning—one that you can revisit and build on as you work through the ideas and practices offered in the coming chapters. After all, digital transformation leadership is always personal and contextual. What matters is how you, in your own organisation, make sense of what digital transformation leadership means.

A straightforward truth helps to ground your reflection: digital transformation leaders are leaders first. Before exploring what makes them effective in a digital context, we need to step back and look at the essence of leadership.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

At its core, leadership is about helping organisations move forward and navigate what lies ahead. In times of transformation, that guidance becomes even more critical. Leaders are individuals who actively and effectively guide their organisations into the future. They do this by:

1. **Role-modelling:** demonstrating behaviours that inspire and influence others.
2. **Stimulating behaviours:** encouraging and enabling similar behaviours in others.
3. **Creating the context:** shaping an environment that supports and sustains these behaviours.

Leadership inherently involves dealing with change. But when we talk about transformation, we are not speaking about small adjustments or minor improvements. The change implied is radical. It involves a rethinking of the current design and functioning of the organisation. In digital transformation, this means reflecting on the very questions that define the organisation's value logic and identity: what is value? What capabilities do we need to build? What skills do we need to grow? At its core, this