THE INSTITUTE OF LEADERSHIP

The Leadership Loneliness Paradox

Why connected leaders perform better

A report from The Institute of Leadership

leadership.global/leadership-loneliness-paradox

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Executive Summary

Leadership has always involved responsibility. Today, it also brings a growing risk of isolation.

THE ISSUE

Many leaders have fewer trusted people they can speak to openly.

THE IMPACT

Loneliness can affect decision-making, creativity, engagement and performance.

THE SHIFT

Connection is becoming a strategic leadership capability.

Workplace wellbeing conversations have rightly focused on employees. But a less comfortable truth is often left unsaid. Many of the people expected to support others are struggling too. Behind the confidence leaders are expected to project can sit a quieter reality, with fewer trusted peers, decisions that cannot easily be shared, pressure to appear certain and limited space for honest conversation.

This is not simply an individual wellbeing issue. It is a leadership issue.

The evidence is increasingly clear. Loneliness affects how people think, feel and perform. Chronic loneliness has been linked to poorer physical and mental health, reduced cognitive performance, impaired decision-making, lower creativity and a higher risk of burnout. Those findings take on added significance when the people affected are also making strategic decisions, leading change and shaping organisational culture.

Many features of organisational leadership unintentionally create conditions that can become isolating. Promotion often reduces the number of trusted peers. Confidentiality limits where leaders can turn for advice. Authority changes relationships with colleagues. And the expectation that leaders should remain composed, resilient and decisive can make vulnerability feel risky, even when support is most needed. Recent research suggests that these structural features of leadership create conditions in which loneliness is not accidental, but increasingly common in senior roles.

> Yet loneliness should not be accepted as the inevitable price of leadership.

At a time when organisations are asking leaders to navigate unprecedented complexity, technological change, economic uncertainty and shifting workforce expectations, evidence increasingly suggests that connection is becoming a strategic capability, rather than simply a personal need. Leaders with trusted relationships, diverse perspectives and psychologically safe environments are better placed to make balanced decisions, show empathy, inspire confidence and sustain performance over time.

This report from The Institute of Leadership argues that loneliness is best understood not as a personal weakness but as a structural challenge created by the way many organisations design and experience leadership. It explores why leadership can feel isolating, examines the consequences for individuals and organisations, and considers what can be done to create environments where leaders are supported as effectively as those they lead.

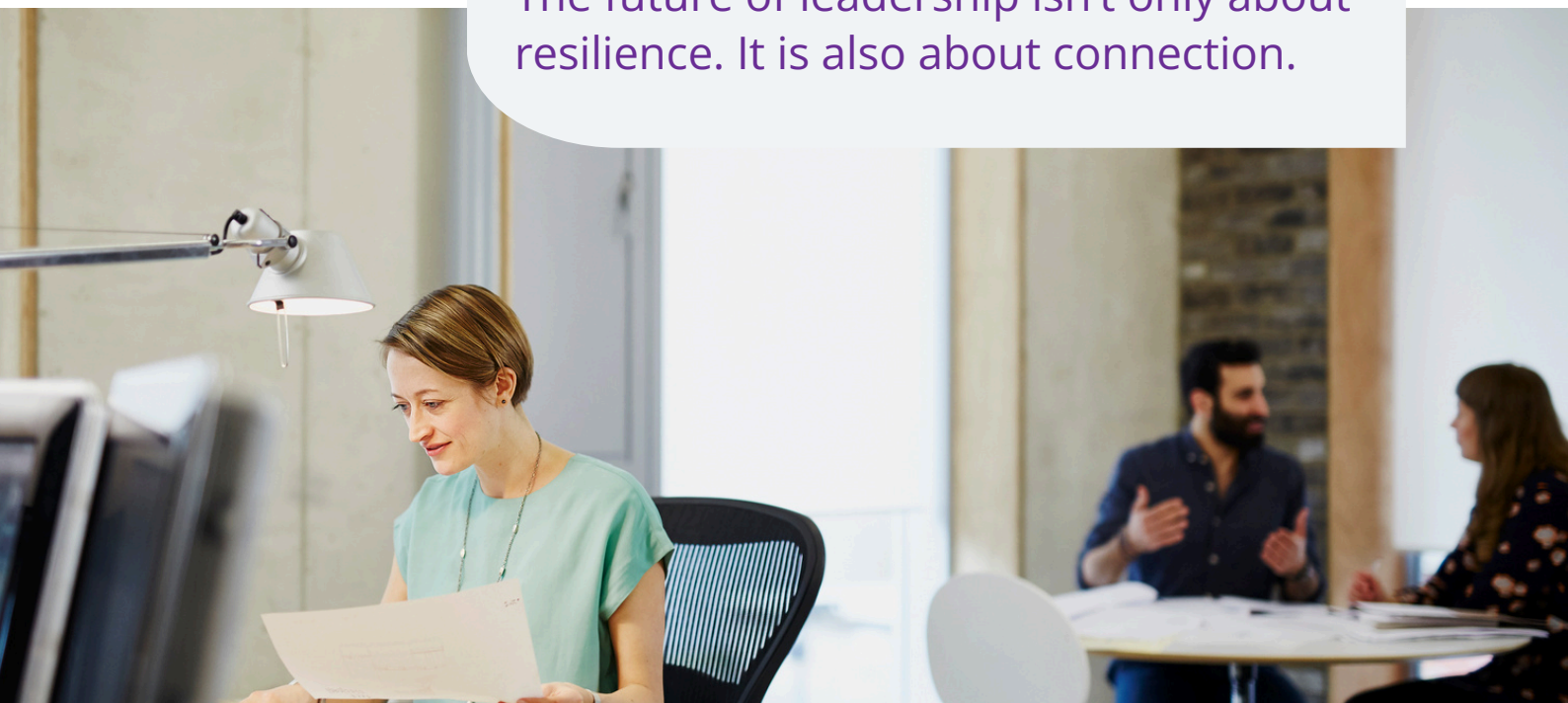
The report also presents a wider challenge. For years, leadership has been associated with independence, certainty and individual resilience. Increasingly, however, the evidence points towards a different model. The most effective leaders are not those who stand alone, but those who stay connected to colleagues, trusted peers, mentors and a clear sense of purpose.

As The Institute of Leadership's Leadership Live 2026 *Leading with Humanity* theme recognises, leadership is fundamentally about relationships. Technical expertise, strategic thinking and commercial acumen remain essential, but they are no longer enough on their own. The ability to build trust, strengthen belonging and create meaningful human connection is becoming one of the defining capabilities of modern leadership.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that leadership has never demanded more collaboration, yet many leaders have never felt more alone.

If organisations are serious about developing sustainable, high-performing leaders, they must begin by recognising that those who support everyone else also need somewhere to belong.

> The future of leadership isn’t only about resilience. It is also about connection.



01
The Quiet Epidemic at the Top

Leadership has never appeared more connected, yet many leaders report feeling increasingly isolated.

Today's leaders work in an age of constant communication. Teams collaborate across continents in real time. Calendars are full, inboxes overflow, and digital platforms keep leaders almost permanently available. Yet beneath this surface-level connectivity sits a growing paradox: many of the people responsible for bringing others together experience a deep sense of isolation themselves.

Loneliness is no longer understood only as a personal or social concern. It is increasingly recognised as a serious public health challenge. In 2023, the World Health Organization established a Commission on Social Connection to address the growing impact of loneliness on health and wellbeing. Governments and health organisations around the world have also warned that chronic loneliness is associated with increased risks of cardiovascular disease, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline and premature mortality. The message is clear. Human connection is not a luxury. It is fundamental to health, performance and our ability to succeed.

The workplace is no exception.

23%
of managers felt lonely on their previous workday.

Gallup Global Workplace Report 2025

Research suggests that around four in ten employees experience loneliness at work, but the picture becomes even more concerning when we look at managers and senior leaders. Gallup's 2025 global workplace report found that 22% of employees and 23% of managers felt lonely on their previous workday, underlining that leadership does not protect people from isolation. Recent reporting has also highlighted that more than half of senior business leaders have experienced loneliness and isolation, while one survey of senior technology leaders found that almost 97% had felt lonely as a leader at some point. In the same survey, 63.5% said they felt lonely in their current role sometimes, and almost 19% said they felt that way all of the time.

These findings challenge one of leadership's oldest assumptions.

For generations, loneliness has been regarded as an inevitable consequence of success. "It's lonely at the top" has become one of leadership's most enduring clichés, repeated so often that it is rarely questioned. It implies that isolation is simply the price of authority and something to be endured rather than understood.

But clichés have a habit of obscuring important truths.

Leadership itself is not inevitably lonely. Rather, many of the structures, expectations and behaviours around leadership create the conditions in which loneliness can take hold. As leaders become more senior, they often lose peers they can speak to openly. Confidentiality limits what they can share. Decisions carry greater consequences. Relationships shift as former colleagues become direct reports. The pressure to project confidence and certainty can also discourage honest conversations about doubt or vulnerability. These are not personal failings; they are structural realities of leadership.

Recent work by researchers at Durham University adds an important nuance. Leadership loneliness is not always a fixed condition. It can fluctuate from day to day depending on role demands, pressure, confidentiality, difficult decisions and the quality of connection available to the leader at that moment.

This matters because loneliness can be episodic and still consequential. A leader may feel well connected on one day and isolated the next, meaning organisations need to pay attention not only to chronic loneliness, but also to the everyday conditions that make connection easier or harder.

The irony is striking. Leadership has become increasingly collaborative in principle while many leaders continue to experience isolation in practice.

Modern organisations expect leaders to be visible, emotionally intelligent, inclusive and authentic. They are expected to navigate ambiguity, inspire confidence through change, create psychological safety and support the wellbeing of others. Yet many are expected to do so without equivalent opportunities to receive support themselves. In many organisations, the higher someone rises, the fewer spaces they have where they can speak candidly without judgement, political consequence or concerns about confidentiality.

This matters because loneliness is far more than an emotional experience. Research has found that it has tangible consequences for judgement, performance and organisational effectiveness. The same survey of senior technology leaders found that loneliness affected motivation and engagement for 86% of respondents, confidence in stakeholder conversations for 44%, the ability to lead teams for 34%, and productivity and delivery for 32%.

The Durham research also suggests that even short-term loneliness can affect leadership behaviour. In two studies with UK managers, researchers found that when managers felt lonely, they were less engaged with their work and their team members, and were more likely to avoid employees. This reinforces the central argument of this report. Leadership loneliness does not stay with the individual; it can shape the morale, experience and performance of the people they lead.

Research has consistently linked workplace loneliness with reduced creativity, poorer decision-making, lower engagement, increased stress and burnout, and diminished discretionary effort.

Neuroscientific research suggests that chronic loneliness can impair executive functioning, the very cognitive processes that enable leaders to think strategically, solve complex problems and make balanced decisions. When the people responsible for setting direction and making critical decisions are themselves isolated, the consequences extend far beyond the individual. They affect teams, organisational culture and ultimately organisational performance.

Employee-level evidence reinforces why this matters for leaders. A People Management poll, conducted with Attest, found that 58% of employees felt lonely at work at least some of the time, 20% felt lonely often or almost always, and 40% said loneliness had a significant or considerable effect on their motivation. The same poll found that 42% had either considered leaving or had already left an employer because of workplace loneliness. Although this evidence is not specifically about leaders, it strengthens the organisational case. Loneliness is a retention, engagement and culture risk that leaders cannot treat as peripheral.

More importantly, lonely leaders often struggle to create connected organisations.

Human beings are inherently social. We are wired to seek trust, belonging and meaningful relationships. When leaders experience isolation, it becomes harder to model openness, build authentic relationships and create the psychological safety that enables others to flourish. Loneliness can narrow perspectives, reduce empathy and reinforce a cycle of emotional distance that is felt throughout an organisation. The result is not simply lonely leaders, but workplaces where genuine connection becomes increasingly difficult for everyone.

This represents one of the defining leadership challenges of our time.

For decades, leadership development has focused on strategic capability, commercial acumen and technical expertise. More recently, greater attention has been given to resilience, wellbeing and emotional intelligence. These remain essential, but another capability is now just as important. Leaders need to create meaningful human connection, not only for others, but for themselves.

> Connection is not the opposite of leadership. It is one of its defining characteristics.

At The Institute of Leadership, we believe that leadership has always been, at its heart, a human endeavour. The most effective leaders do not succeed because they have all the answers or because they carry every burden alone. They succeed because they build trust, create belonging, seek diverse perspectives and recognise that leadership is fundamentally relational.

This report argues that loneliness in leadership is neither inevitable nor insignificant. It is a strategic issue that deserves greater attention from organisations, boards and leaders themselves. By understanding why leadership can become isolating, recognising its impact on people and performance, and designing environments where connection can grow, organisations can improve leadership wellbeing and strengthen leadership effectiveness.

The question is no longer whether leadership can be lonely, but whether we continue to accept that it has to be.

While research into leadership loneliness is still emerging, the evidence is becoming increasingly consistent. Across different studies, sectors and leadership levels, similar themes continue to appear: reduced peer support, greater responsibility, increasing confidentiality and fewer opportunities for candid conversation. Together, they suggest that leadership loneliness is neither anecdotal nor inevitable. It is a challenge that organisations can recognise, understand and address.

02
The Organisational Cost of Lonely Leadership

When loneliness affects those responsible for leading organisations, it becomes far more than an individual issue.

It is easy to frame loneliness as a personal matter, linked to individual wellbeing, resilience or mental health. But when loneliness affects those responsible for leading organisations, it becomes far more than that. It becomes an organisational issue.

Leadership decisions shape strategy, culture, performance and people's working lives. If loneliness changes how leaders think, behave and relate to others, its effects cannot stay contained within the individual. They ripple through teams, influence culture and ultimately affect organisational success.

Perhaps the greatest misconception is that loneliness is simply an emotional state. The evidence suggests otherwise. Loneliness changes how people process information, make decisions and interact with others. For leaders operating in increasingly complex and uncertain environments, those changes matter.

Better decisions depend on better connections

Leadership is rarely about having the right answer immediately. More often, it is about asking better questions, testing assumptions and bringing different perspectives together before difficult decisions are made.

Loneliness undermines this process.

Research shows that chronic loneliness is associated with reduced executive functioning, impaired reasoning and poorer decision-making. When people feel isolated, they are more likely to turn inward, become less receptive to alternative viewpoints and rely too heavily on their own judgement. For leaders, this creates a dangerous paradox. As responsibility increases, the need for diverse perspectives becomes greater. Yet the higher leaders rise, the fewer people they often feel able to consult openly.

> The result is not simply loneliness. It is poorer strategic judgement.

History offers countless examples of organisations that have suffered not because leaders lacked intelligence, but because they lacked challenge. Good leadership depends on constructive disagreement, trusted advisers and the confidence to test ideas before acting. Isolation quietly removes those safeguards.

Innovation cannot flourish in isolation

Innovation is often portrayed as the product of brilliant individuals. In practice, it is usually the result of collaboration.

New ideas emerge when people challenge one another, combine different experiences and build on existing thinking. Creativity flourishes in environments characterised by curiosity, psychological safety and meaningful relationships.

Loneliness works against each of these conditions.

Research links workplace loneliness with lower creativity, reduced discretionary effort and diminished collaboration. People who feel disconnected are less likely to share ideas, take interpersonal risks or seek out diverse perspectives.

This matters because leaders do not simply contribute ideas, they create and shape the environment in which ideas emerge.

A leader who feels isolated may unintentionally become more transactional, more cautious or more directive. Over time, this can create cultures where innovation gives way to compliance, and where employees focus on avoiding mistakes rather than exploring possibilities.

> Innovation has always been a collective endeavour. Lonely leadership makes collective thinking more difficult.

Leadership is contagious

Leadership behaviours spread.

Research into organisational culture consistently shows that the behaviour leaders model becomes the behaviour others adopt. When leaders demonstrate openness, curiosity and trust, those qualities tend to cascade through teams. When leaders appear emotionally distant, withdrawn or reluctant to seek support, those behaviours can become normal too.

Loneliness can therefore become cultural.

When leaders believe they must carry every burden alone, employees often conclude that asking for help signals weakness. When leaders feel unable to admit uncertainty, teams become less willing to challenge ideas or acknowledge mistakes.

The result is a culture where people work alongside one another but rarely connect with one another.

Ironically, organisations may invest heavily in engagement initiatives, collaboration platforms and team-building activities while overlooking the experience of those expected to model connection in the first place.

The People Management findings also underline the role of managers and organisational culture in either alleviating or worsening isolation. Contributors to the article pointed to unclear team structures, heavy workloads, lack of meaningful collaboration, poor organisational cultures, hybrid working and over-reliance on digital communication as factors that can weaken workplace connection. This widens the argument from lonely leaders to the systems leaders shape: if managers do not intentionally create connection, work can become purely functional and relationships can become increasingly transactional.

> “Culture is built from the top, but it is sustained through relationships.

Psychological safety begins with leaders

Over the last decade, psychological safety has become one of the defining concepts in organisational effectiveness.

Research led by Harvard professor Amy Edmondson has demonstrated that teams perform best when people feel able to speak openly, ask questions, admit mistakes and challenge ideas without fear of embarrassment or punishment.

Yet psychological safety cannot be created through policies alone.

It depends on leaders who are willing to demonstrate humility, curiosity and openness.

Loneliness makes this harder.

Leaders experiencing isolation often feel pressure to appear confident, decisive and emotionally self-sufficient. While understandable, this can inadvertently reduce openness and create distance between leaders and their teams.

Employees rarely expect leaders to be perfect.

They do, however, expect them to be human.

The most trusted leaders are not those who never experience uncertainty, but those who create environments where uncertainty can be explored constructively.

Burnout doesn't begin with workload alone

Leadership burnout is frequently attributed to excessive workloads, relentless change or organisational pressure. While each undoubtedly plays a role, loneliness is increasingly recognised as another significant contributor.

Feeling unsupported magnifies stress.

Without trusted relationships, opportunities for reflection or safe spaces to process difficult decisions, the emotional demands of leadership accumulate over time. Research links loneliness among leaders with emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation and burnout, alongside poorer mental wellbeing and lower job satisfaction.

Importantly, the effects may continue beyond the working day. Durham researchers found that after lonely workdays, managers were more likely to distance themselves from others in the evening, creating a loop in which loneliness could carry into the next workday. This suggests that leader loneliness can become self-reinforcing unless organisations and leaders deliberately create opportunities for reconnection and recovery.

This creates another organisational challenge.

Burnout affects judgement, relationships and performance long before it results in absence or resignation. Leaders may become less patient, less empathetic and more reactive, gradually influencing the experience of everyone around them.

Supporting leaders is therefore not simply an investment in individual wellbeing. It is an investment in organisational resilience.

The hidden cost of leadership attrition

Organisations often devote significant resources to identifying and developing future leaders. Yet comparatively little attention is given to sustaining those already in leadership positions.

> When loneliness goes unrecognised, organisations pay a hidden price.

Some leaders leave because they no longer enjoy the role. Others withdraw emotionally, becoming less engaged despite remaining in post. Many simply stop growing, relying on familiar approaches because they lack the relationships that encourage challenge and continuous learning.

Replacing senior leaders is expensive. Rebuilding trust, restoring momentum and recovering institutional knowledge can take years.

Preventing loneliness is therefore far less costly than dealing with its consequences.

From individual problem to strategic priority

Perhaps the most important shift organisations need to make is conceptual.

Loneliness should no longer be viewed as an unfortunate by-product of leadership.

Instead, it should be recognised as a risk to organisational capability.

Just as organisations now understand that employee wellbeing affects productivity, or that psychological safety influences innovation, they must also recognise that leader connection influences organisational effectiveness.

The question is not whether leaders should become more resilient in the face of isolation.

It is whether organisations should continue designing leadership in ways that isolate the very people they depend upon most.

If leadership is fundamentally about enabling others to perform at their best, then organisations have a responsibility to ensure leaders are equally equipped to do the same.

This is because lonely leaders do not just experience loneliness, they shape organisations that, however unintentionally, become a little less connected themselves.

> Leadership connection is an organisational capability, not a personal wellbeing issue.

03
Rethinking Leadership Through Connection

Connection is no longer simply a leadership style. It is becoming a strategic capability.

For a long time, leadership has been defined by independence.

The image of the decisive leader, calm under pressure, self-reliant, unwavering and always in control, has shaped how many organisations develop, reward and evaluate those at the top. Leaders are expected to absorb uncertainty, carry responsibility and project confidence, often regardless of what they are experiencing themselves.

There is value in resilience. Leadership undoubtedly requires courage, judgement and the ability to make difficult decisions.

But resilience should never be mistaken for isolation.

If the challenges facing organisations today have taught us anything, it is that effective leadership rarely comes from one exceptional individual acting alone. It grows through relationships, diverse perspectives, trusted conversations, constructive challenge and shared learning.

The future of leadership may therefore depend less on developing leaders who can stand alone, and more on developing leaders who know how to stay connected.

From individual hero to collective leadership

The traditional view of leadership places extraordinary emphasis on the individual. Success is often attributed to visionary CEOs, charismatic founders or inspirational executives.

Major decisions are shaped through discussion. Innovation emerges through collaboration. Culture develops through thousands of daily interactions rather than a handful of speeches from senior leaders.

> In reality, organisational success is almost always collective.

This shift from heroic leadership to connected leadership is already underway.

Increasingly, organisations recognise that leadership is less about having all the answers and more about creating the conditions in which the best answers can emerge. That requires curiosity over certainty, listening over telling, and collaboration over control.

Connection is no longer simply a leadership style.

It is becoming a strategic capability.

Vulnerability is not weakness

One of the greatest barriers to connection is the belief that leaders must always appear certain.

Many leaders worry that admitting doubt will undermine confidence, acknowledging pressure will signal weakness, or asking for help will diminish their credibility.
The evidence suggests the opposite.

Research into trust consistently shows that authenticity strengthens leadership when accompanied by competence and integrity. Leaders who acknowledge uncertainty, seek input and demonstrate humility are often perceived as more credible rather than less. Brené Brown's work on vulnerability similarly argues that courage is not the absence of uncertainty but the willingness to engage with it openly.

This does not mean leaders should overshare or transfer emotional burdens onto their teams.

It means recognising that humanity and professionalism are not competing qualities. In strong leadership, they reinforce one another.

> The leaders people trust most are rarely those who appear invulnerable.

They are those who remain genuine under pressure.

Belonging begins at the top

Much has been written about creating workplaces where employees feel they belong.

Less attention has been given to whether leaders experience that same sense of belonging.

This matters because belonging is not just an employee experience, it is an organisational condition.

When leaders feel connected to trusted peers, mentors and networks, they are more likely to demonstrate openness, empathy and confidence. They become better able to navigate uncertainty because they do not carry it alone.

Conversely, leaders who feel isolated may begin to withdraw, intentionally or otherwise. Relationships become more transactional. Decision-making becomes narrower. Emotional energy is consumed by managing pressure rather than building connection.

Belonging, therefore, should not stop at the executive suite.

It should begin there.

Human connection is becoming a leadership capability

For many years, leadership frameworks focused primarily on technical expertise, strategic thinking and commercial awareness.

Today, those capabilities remain essential, but they are no longer enough.

The most effective leaders are increasingly distinguished by qualities that are fundamentally relational.

The foundations of relational leadership

The ability to build trust quickly

Creating psychologically safe environments where people can contribute openly

Supporting genuine collaboration across diverse teams

Maintaining meaningful relationships despite organisational complexity

Listening with curiosity rather than simply waiting to respond

Creating a shared sense of purpose and belonging

These are often described as "soft skills."

The phrase does them a disservice.

In an era where artificial intelligence can increasingly automate technical processes, analyse data and generate information, the distinctly human capabilities of empathy, trust, judgement and connection become more, not less, valuable.

Technology can absolutely facilitate communication and support relationships, but it cannot replace the trust and mutual understanding that genuine human relationships require.

This is why leadership's competitive advantage is becoming more human.

Connection requires intentional design

Connection does not happen accidentally.

It is tempting to assume that senior leaders naturally develop strong networks simply because they occupy influential positions, but in practice, the opposite is often true.

The higher leaders progress, the fewer opportunities they may have for unguarded conversations.

Organisations therefore need to move beyond assuming leaders will "find support" and instead design connection into leadership itself.

That might include structured peer networks, cross-sector learning groups, executive mentoring, coaching, reflective practice or regular opportunities for senior leaders to learn together rather than simply report to one another.

These interventions are not perks; they are an essential part of leadership infrastructure.

Just as organisations invest in strategy, governance and financial controls, they should invest in the relational systems that enable leaders to think well, challenge one another constructively and maintain perspective.

Leadership is a relationship, not a position

Perhaps the biggest shift required is philosophical.

Leadership is often viewed as something people possess.

In reality, leadership exists only through relationships.

Without trust, there is no influence.

Without dialogue, there is no collaboration.

> “Without connection, there is no genuine leadership.

This perspective challenges organisations to rethink how they define success.

Rather than celebrating leaders who appear endlessly self-sufficient, we should recognise those who create environments where people feel seen, heard and valued, including other leaders.

We should ask not only How resilient is this leader? but Who supports them? Who challenges them? Who helps them think better?

These questions reveal something fundamental.

The most effective leaders are rarely those who carry the greatest weight alone.

They are those who have built the strongest relationships around them.

Leading with humanity

At The Institute of Leadership, we believe the future of leadership will be defined not simply by intelligence, authority or technical expertise, but by humanity.

> Humanity means recognising that leadership is fundamentally relational.

It means understanding that strength is found not only in confidence, but in curiosity. Not only in resilience, but in reflection. Not only in decisiveness, but in dialogue.

Most importantly, it means rejecting the outdated notion that leadership demands isolation.

The challenges facing organisations today are too complex for any individual to solve alone. They require leaders who can bring people together, create trust, encourage different perspectives and build communities where everyone, including those at the very top, has somewhere to belong.

That is potentially the most significant leadership shift of all.

For generations we have admired leaders because they stood apart.

The leaders who will shape the future may be those who know how to bring people closer together.

04
Building Organisations Where Leaders Don't Lead Alone

Leadership should not be a collection of individuals operating in parallel.

Recognising that leadership loneliness exists is an important first step. Addressing it requires a deeper shift in how organisations think about leadership itself.

Historically, organisations have focused on developing individual leaders while paying less attention to the environments in which leadership happens. They invest heavily in programmes that build capability, confidence and technical expertise, yet often overlook the conditions that help leaders sustain those capabilities over time.

> Leadership does not happen in isolation. It is shaped by culture, relationships and the systems that surround it.

If organisations want leaders who are resilient, collaborative and able to navigate increasing complexity, they cannot simply ask more of individuals. They must create environments where leaders are supported as intentionally as the people they lead.

The responsibility for tackling leadership loneliness therefore does not rest solely with leaders themselves. It rests with organisations.

Redesign leadership as a shared endeavour

One of the simplest but most powerful changes organisations can make is to challenge the assumption that leadership is an individual pursuit.

Leadership has traditionally rewarded autonomy. Success has often been associated with independence, decisiveness and self-sufficiency. While these qualities remain important, they can unintentionally reinforce the belief that asking for support is a sign that someone is struggling.

Instead, organisations should actively promote a more connected model of leadership.

That means creating opportunities for leaders to think together, solve problems together and learn from one another, not only during formal meetings but through regular peer dialogue and reflective practice.

Leadership should not be a collection of individuals operating in parallel.

It should be a community.

Create spaces where leaders can speak honestly

One of the recurring themes in research on leadership loneliness is the absence of safe spaces for candid conversation.

As leaders become more senior, the number of people they feel able to speak to openly often decreases. Conversations become more guarded. Political considerations increase. Confidentiality limits what can be shared. Even well-intentioned colleagues may struggle to understand the unique pressures associated with senior leadership.

Every organisation should therefore ask a simple question:

“Where can our leaders have conversations they cannot have anywhere else?”

For some organisations, that may mean executive coaching. For others, it may be facilitated peer groups, action learning sets, mentoring relationships or cross-organisational leadership networks.

The format matters less than the principle.

Every leader should have access to relationships where they can think aloud, challenge assumptions, admit uncertainty and seek perspective without fear of judgement.

These conversations are not signs of weakness - they are signs of healthy leadership.

This also means challenging the belief that senior roles require permanent availability. When leaders protect time for family, friendship and recovery, they are not stepping away from responsibility; they are maintaining the relationships and perspective that enable sustained performance.

The example of political and organisational leaders openly protecting non-work time can help normalise the idea that connection outside work is part of healthy leadership, not a departure from it.

Build connection into leadership development

Leadership development has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Emotional intelligence, coaching skills and inclusive leadership are now common features of development programmes.

The next step is to recognise connection itself as a capability that can be developed.

Future leadership programmes should place greater emphasis on helping leaders:

1. Build and sustain trusted professional networks
2. Cultivate psychologically safe relationships
3. Develop mentoring and peer support skills
4. Recognise the signs of isolation in themselves and others
5. Create cultures where asking for help is viewed as a strength

These are not peripheral skills because they underpin almost every aspect of effective leadership.

Measure what matters

Organisations routinely measure employee engagement, customer satisfaction, financial performance and operational efficiency.

Far fewer measure whether leaders themselves feel connected.

If leadership connection influences decision-making, innovation, retention and organisational culture, as the evidence increasingly suggests, then it deserves the same level of attention as other strategic indicators.

This does not necessarily require complex new metrics.

Simple questions can provide valuable insight:

- Do leaders feel they have trusted peers they can turn to?
- Do they receive constructive challenge as well as support?
- Do they have opportunities for reflection beyond operational meetings?
- Do they feel a genuine sense of belonging within the leadership community?

The answers to these questions often reveal far more about organisational health than traditional engagement scores alone.

Boards have a critical role

Leadership loneliness should not be viewed solely as an operational issue.

It is also a governance issue.

Boards rightly scrutinise financial risk, regulatory compliance and organisational performance. Increasingly, they should also consider whether the organisation is creating conditions in which leadership can really thrive.

This means asking different questions.

Not simply: "Are our leaders delivering?"

But also:

"Are they supported?"

"Do they have access to challenge?"

"Are we creating an environment where sustainable leadership is possible?"

Strong governance is not only about holding leaders to account.

It is also about ensuring they have the relationships and resources needed to succeed.

Technology should enable connection, not replace it

Technology has transformed how organisations communicate.

Hybrid working, digital collaboration platforms and artificial intelligence have created unprecedented opportunities for flexibility and productivity.

Yet it is easy to forget that technology can only facilitate connection; it cannot replace it.

A video meeting is not the same as trust, and an instant message is not the same as belonging.

Artificial intelligence can summarise information, automate routine tasks and support decision-making, but it cannot provide the empathy, perspective or reassurance that comes from meaningful human relationships.

As organisations continue to embrace digital transformation, they should resist the temptation to equate communication with connection because they are two very different activities.

This is particularly important in hybrid and digitally mediated workplaces. The People Management article argues that interpersonal connection can quietly disappear from day-to-day working life when collaboration becomes primarily digital and task based. Leaders need to design moments of genuine connection into work, rather than assume that communication volume is the same as belonging.

> The future of work will undoubtedly be more digital. It must also remain deeply human.

Creating a culture where nobody leads alone

Ultimately, addressing leadership loneliness is not about introducing another wellbeing initiative or adding another item to the leadership competency framework. It is about culture.

Organisations that successfully reduce leadership loneliness tend to share common characteristics:

- They normalise asking for support
- They encourage collaboration rather than competition
- They value reflection alongside action

They recognise that leadership is strengthened by challenge, not diminished by it.

Most importantly, they understand that connection is not something leaders create only for others.

It is something organisations must create for their leaders too.

A new leadership contract

It is time to redefine the unwritten contract between organisations and their leaders.

For many years, the implicit expectation has been clear: carry the responsibility, project confidence, solve the problems and don't let people see the strain.
That expectation is no longer sustainable and the complexity of modern leadership demands something different.

> “
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> It demands organisations that recognise leadership as a collective endeavour rather than an individual burden.

It demands cultures where support is viewed as an essential component of performance, not an alternative to it.

And it demands leaders who understand that seeking perspective is not a sign of weakness, but a hallmark of wisdom.

If organisations genuinely want leaders who are resilient, innovative and capable of leading through uncertainty, then they must stop treating connection as optional.

They must build it into the fabric of leadership itself.

The most effective organisations are not those led by extraordinary individuals, they are those where extraordinary leadership emerges from people who know they do not have to lead alone.

Five Commitments for Connected Leadership

1. Recognise loneliness as a strategic leadership issue
2. Connect through structured peer and mentoring networks
3. Develop relationship-building alongside technical leadership skills
4. Support every leader with access to coaching, challenge and reflection
5. Measure leadership connection as part of organisational health

Conclusion

For generations we have treated loneliness as part of leadership.

It is one of those phrases repeated so often that it begins to sound like fact. The higher people rise, the more isolated they become. Responsibility creates distance. Success demands sacrifice.

Perhaps we have accepted that story for too long.

The evidence explored in this paper suggests that loneliness is not an inevitable consequence of leadership. More often, it is the product of how leadership is designed, experienced and expected to be performed. Organisations have built systems that reward independence, celebrate certainty and place extraordinary demands on those at the top, often without providing the same level of support they expect leaders to offer others.

The result is not simply lonely leaders.

It is organisations that make poorer decisions, struggle to sustain innovation, find it harder to build trust and risk creating cultures where genuine human connection becomes increasingly difficult. Leadership loneliness is therefore not a personal issue confined to individual wellbeing. It is an organisational issue that influences performance, resilience and long-term success.

At a time when organisations face unprecedented complexity, the traditional image of the solitary leader feels increasingly outdated.

Today's challenges are too interconnected, too fast-moving and too uncertain for any one individual to carry alone. The most effective leaders are no longer defined only by technical expertise, strategic insight or decisiveness. They are defined by their ability to bring people together, create trust, welcome diverse perspectives and build relationships that strengthen both people and performance.

> Connection is not a distraction from leadership.

It is leadership.

This requires a shift in mindset.

Rather than asking leaders to become more resilient in the face of isolation, organisations should ask how they can create environments where isolation is less likely to occur in the first place.

Rather than viewing support as something leaders provide to others, organisations should recognise that leaders also need places where they can reflect, be challenged and receive support themselves.

Rather than celebrating leaders who appear to carry every burden alone, perhaps we should celebrate those who know when to seek different perspectives, invite challenge and build communities around them.

That is not dependency.

It is wisdom.

There is another reason this conversation matters.

The world of work is changing rapidly. Artificial intelligence is transforming how organisations operate. Automation is reshaping jobs. Digital technology continues to redefine communication, productivity and decision-making. As these capabilities evolve, many of the technical aspects of leadership will become increasingly supported by technology.

The human aspects will not.

Technology can process information.

It cannot build trust.

It can identify patterns.

It cannot create belonging.

It can generate content.

It cannot replace empathy, compassion, judgement or the reassurance that comes from knowing someone genuinely understands your experience.
In many ways, the more technologically advanced organisations become, the more valuable these uniquely human capabilities will be.

> The future of leadership will not be defined by who has access to the most information.

It will be defined by who can create the strongest human connections.

That is why loneliness deserves to move from the margins of the leadership conversation to its centre.

Not because leaders deserve sympathy, but because organisations need leaders who are able to think clearly, act courageously and build cultures where people can flourish. Leaders who feel connected are better equipped to create connected teams, and connected teams are more likely to innovate, collaborate and perform. The benefits ripple throughout the organisation.

This is not simply about reducing loneliness.

It is about unlocking better leadership.

At The Institute of Leadership, we believe leadership has always been about more than achieving results. It is about helping people flourish, creating environments where potential can be realised and leaving organisations stronger than we found them.

This belief sits at the heart of the report.

That philosophy has never been more relevant.

Leading with humanity means recognising that strength and vulnerability are not opposites. Confidence and curiosity can exist together. Accountability and compassion strengthen one another. Above all, it means understanding that leadership is fundamentally relational.

The future belongs to leaders who can combine competence with compassion, strategy with empathy and ambition with connection.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity facing organisations is not to develop leaders who can carry more on their own.

It is to build organisations where no leader ever has to.

> “Leadership was never meant to be a solitary pursuit, and the best leadership never is.

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Research Used in This Paper

It Can Be Lonely at the Top but It Doesn't Have to Be: Workplace Loneliness as Experienced by Senior Leaders and Potential Coping Strategies. Kristen Prince, University of Missouri-St. Louis (2024).

Suggested Further Reading

For readers wishing to explore the topic further:

- Brené Brown - Dare to Lead
- Amy Edmondson - The Fearless Organization
- Vivek Murthy - Together
- Herminia Ibarra - Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader
- John T. Cacioppo & Stephanie Cacioppo - Loneliness
- Gallup - State of the Global Workplace
- World Health Organization - Resources on Social Connection and Loneliness

Appendix: The Connected Leadership Framework

From leading alone to leading together.

Leadership has never been more demanding. The pace of change, the complexity of decision-making and the expectations placed on leaders continue to grow. Yet while organisations invest heavily in developing leadership capability, they often overlook one of the strongest predictors of sustainable leadership: meaningful human connection.

The Connected Leadership Framework created by The Institute of Leadership provides a practical model for creating organisations where leaders are supported, challenged and connected. It is designed for leaders, executive teams, boards and organisations that want to build leadership cultures capable of sustaining high performance over the long term.

The framework is built around five interconnected commitments.

The five commitments are:

1. Recognise loneliness as a strategic leadership issue.
2. Connect through structured relationships and peer support.
3. Develop relational capability alongside technical leadership skills.
4. Support leaders before pressure becomes crisis.
5. Measure connection as part of organisational health.

Each commitment is expanded below.

1. Recognise

Acknowledge loneliness as a strategic leadership issue.

Leadership loneliness should not be viewed as an individual weakness or an inevitable consequence of seniority. It is an organisational challenge with implications for decision-making, innovation, culture and performance.

Organisations should:

- Recognise loneliness as a leadership risk
- Include leadership wellbeing within organisational health discussions
- Challenge the belief that asking for support is a sign of weakness
- Create a culture where leaders can speak honestly about pressure and uncertainty

Ask yourself:
Do our leaders feel they have to carry leadership alone?

2. Connect

Build meaningful relationships into leadership itself.

Leadership is strengthened through trusted relationships, not isolated expertise.

Connection should be intentionally designed rather than left to chance.

Organisations should:

- Establish peer leadership networks.
- Encourage cross-functional collaboration.
- Create mentoring and reverse mentoring opportunities.
- Support external professional networks.
- Encourage regular opportunities for leaders to learn together.

Ask yourself:

Who challenges our leaders? Who supports them?

3. Develop

Teach connection as a leadership capability.

Leadership development should extend beyond strategy, finance and operational excellence.

Tomorrow's leaders will also need exceptional relational capability.

Development programmes should cover:

- Building trust
- Active listening
- Coaching conversations
- Psychological safety
- Collaborative decision-making
- Inclusive leadership
- Reflective practice
- Emotional intelligence

The most successful leaders will not necessarily be those who know the most.

They will be those who connect best.

Ask yourself:
Are we developing better managers, or better human leaders?

4. Support

Make support part of leadership, not an emergency response.

Many organisations provide support only when leaders reach crisis point.

By then, the damage is often already done.

Support should be continuous, visible and normal.

Support should also extend beyond the workplace. Trusted relationships with family, friends and wider communities can help leaders step out of the closed loop of pressure and responsibility. Durham University researchers describe these relationships as an important resource that can help managers mitigate the consequences of loneliness and prevent it from extending into the next working day.

Making time for those relationships is not incidental to leadership effectiveness. It can help leaders regain perspective, regulate stress and return to complex decisions with greater clarity.

This may include:

- Executive coaching
- Action learning sets
- Leadership supervision
- Peer reflection groups
- Leadership communities of practice
- Regular wellbeing conversations
- Safe spaces for strategic reflection

Support should be viewed as leadership infrastructure rather than an optional benefit.

Ask yourself:
Where can our leaders have the conversations they can't have anywhere else?

5. Measure

Measure connection as carefully as performance.

Organisations measure almost everything except whether leaders themselves feel connected.

If connection influences judgement, innovation and culture, then it deserves attention.

Measures might include:

- Sense of belonging
- Access to trusted peers
- Quality of collaboration
- Confidence in asking for suppor

- Psychological safety
- Leadership network strength
- Leadership wellbeing

The question should not simply be:

"Are leaders performing?"

It should also be:

"Are they connected?"

The Connected Leadership Cycle

These five commitments are mutually reinforcing.

Connection is not a one-off initiative.

It becomes part of the way leadership is designed, developed and sustained.

Questions every board should ask

Boards have a unique responsibility to shape the conditions in which leadership succeeds.

Alongside financial and operational oversight, boards should regularly consider the following questions:

- Do our senior leaders have trusted relationships inside and outside the organisation?
- Where do leaders receive honest challenge and constructive support?
- Are we creating opportunities for reflection as well as action?
- How are we measuring leadership wellbeing alongside organisational performance?
- Are our leadership structures encouraging collaboration or reinforcing isolation?
- What assumptions do we make about what "strong leadership" looks like?
- Are we investing as much in sustaining leaders as we are in developing them?

Leadership sustainability should become a governance issue, not simply an HR issue.

Reflection questions for leaders

Leadership begins with self-awareness.

These questions are designed to encourage reflection on the quality of your own leadership connections.

Relationships

- Who are the people I can speak to completely honestly?
- When did I last ask someone to challenge my thinking?
- Am I building relationships beyond immediate operational needs?

Perspective

- Am I carrying decisions that could benefit from wider discussion?
- Have I confused independence with effectiveness?
- Who helps me think differently?

Wellbeing

- When was the last time I felt genuinely supported?
- Am I creating enough space for reflection?
- Do I allow myself to ask for help?

Leadership

- What example does my behaviour set for others?
- Do people see leadership as something shared or something carried alone?
- Am I creating the kind of leadership culture I would want to work in?

The Institute of Leadership Commitment

At The Institute of Leadership, we believe that leadership is, and always has been, a profoundly human endeavour.

The organisations that are most likely to succeed in the years ahead will not simply be those with the best strategies or the most advanced technology. They will be those that understand the value of trust, belonging and meaningful human connection.

Leadership should never mean carrying responsibility alone.

It should mean having the confidence to seek different perspectives, the humility to ask for support and the wisdom to build communities where people help one another succeed. The future of leadership will not be shaped by those who stand furthest apart.

It will be shaped by those who bring people together.

Leadership is stronger when no has to lead alone.

Continue the Conversation

Explore more leadership insights, resources and opportunities from The Institute of Leadership.

Visit leadership.global