

# HOW WILL YOU **ADAPT?**

ADAPTING TO UNCERTAINTY

DEVELOPING AGILE LEADERS

CREATING RESILIENT ORGANIZATIONS

**“LET GO OF CERTAINTY.**  
THE OPPOSITE ISN'T  
UNCERTAINTY.

**IT'S OPENNESS,  
CURIOSITY AND A  
WILLINGNESS TO  
EMBRACE PARADOX,**  
RATHER THAN CHOOSE  
UP SIDES.

**THE ULTIMATE  
CHALLENGE**  
IS TO ACCEPT OURSELVES  
EXACTLY AS WE ARE,  
**BUT NEVER STOP  
TRYING TO LEARN &  
GROW.”**

TONY SCHWARTZ

# UN- CERTAINTY

It is no surprise that in the face of today's constant volatility and uncertainty, agility is frequently cited as one of the most important attributes for leaders to be successful in growing organizations.

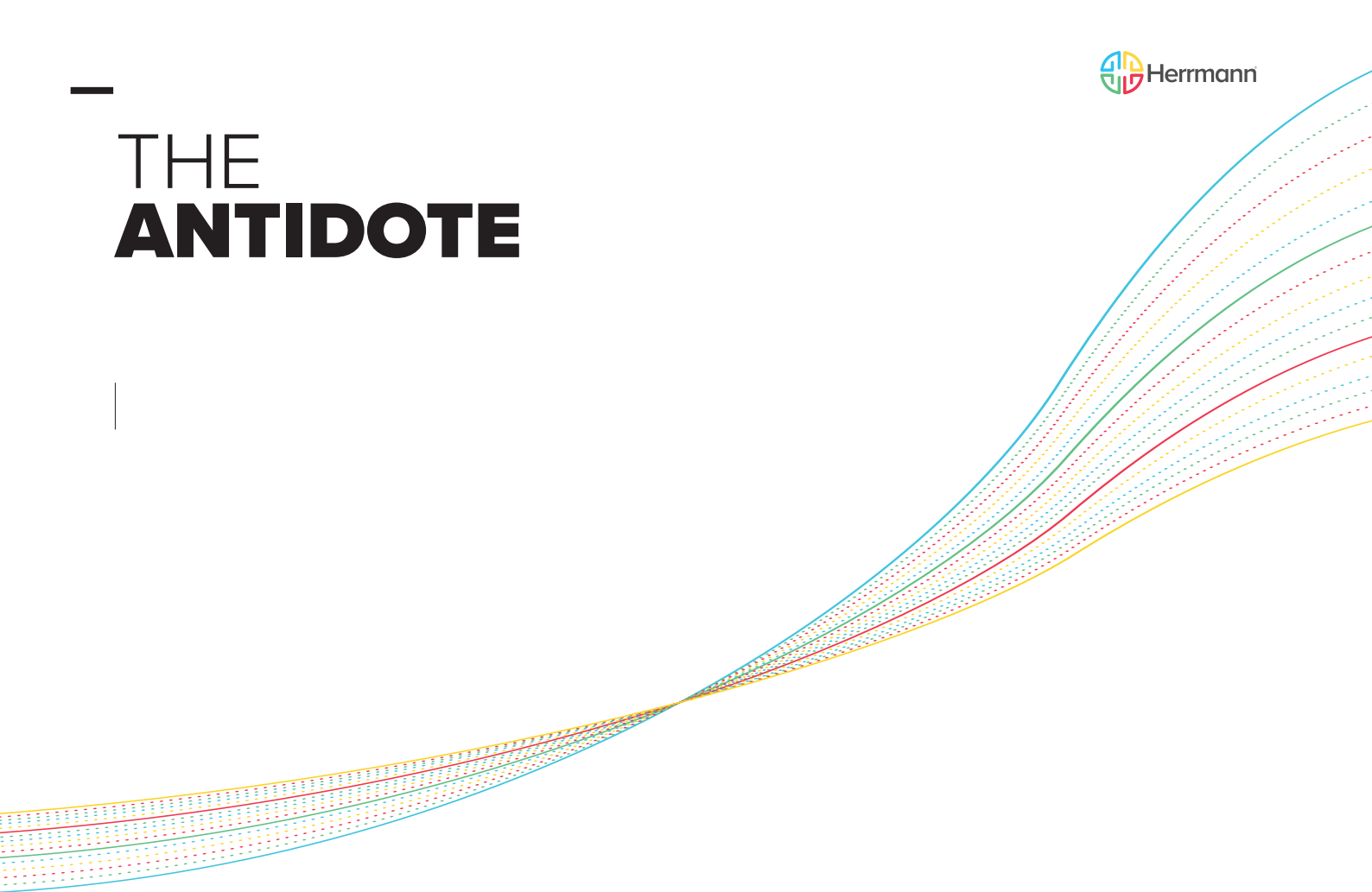
Yet most managers and leaders have not been prepared or trained for how to deliver this agility, especially in a crisis. It's one thing to have reactively put things into place in response to a new reality, often with a lag that creates competitive disadvantages. It is another to think about what's next in the midst of a crisis and stay ahead of change, rather than chasing after it.

Part of the challenge is that your brain is like an anticipation machine, constantly trying to predict the future. When we don't have a clear picture of what is going to happen, we typically rely on past experience or get lost in imagining a wide array of possible outcomes. Both approaches lead to cognitive overload, distraction and lower productivity – your brain saying “all circuits are busy.” When the outcome doesn't fit with your mind's predictive models, it creates a distinct and disconcerting feeling: **uncertainty**.

This uncertainty is uncomfortable. [Neuroscience research done at UCL](#) demonstrated that facing uncertainty can feel scarier than facing actual physical pain. The study tracked how people reacted to being told they would either “definitely” or “probably” receive a painful electric shock. Surprisingly, those who knew they would definitely receive a painful electric shock felt calmer and were less agitated than those who were told they only had a 50% chance of getting the electric shock, simply because they knew what was going to happen.

[Another neuroscience study](#) shows that when faced with unpredictability, the best outcomes come from ignoring history- and model-based strategies and embracing a stochastic approach that focuses on adapting to randomness. In other words, in uncertain times, the best results come from breaking free from old ways of thinking and building your agility to adapt, learn and understand.

# THE ANTIDOTE



# THINKING AGILITY

The ability to quickly and comfortably stretch beyond your default thinking preferences and biases to adapt to new circumstances.



## GETTING OUR MINDS INTO AN AGILE STANCE

Tennis players awaiting a serve often appear to be swaying, shifting weight back and forth from one leg to another to be ready for the ball to come from any direction, at any speed and at any time. In essence, managers and leaders need to behave like tennis players and adopt an agile stance, getting comfortable shifting back and forth between different modes of thinking to be prepared for a variety of potential situations. This thinking agility is the most powerful antidote to the “brain fog” we feel when faced with uncertainty.

The first step to building your thinking agility is to override the auto-pilot mode that our brains run on most of the time. Every day, our brains employ cognitive heuristics, or mental “short cuts,” to help manage the amount of energy they consume. In other words, our brains have evolved to be lazy and thus tend to rely on certain modes of thinking that are most comfortable and familiar to us. While these enable us to move faster under predictable circumstances, in uncertain times these heuristics actually sub-optimize our ability to adapt to changing conditions. Daniel Kahneman & Amos Tversky have conducted a wealth of groundbreaking research on this topic.

Their research, and our own, shows everyone can overcome these heuristics and access all of our thinking modes. Yet just as a tennis player plays with a dominant hand, we each have preferences for certain mental processes over others, derived from nature and nurture. For example, Tom, an executive in a large organization, is a naturally analytical thinker; it comes with ease to him. As such, it has become his mental default, the go-to thinking he uses, whether or not it

is the most effective for the situation. With all of the demands he faces every day, his default approach feels like all he can do to keep up.

However, in an uncertain environment, Tom finds himself feeling stuck. His mental models, created from observable evidence and well-reasoned assumptions, don’t provide answers in the face of seemingly random events. His management strategies don’t take into account the potential for his team members to act irrationally in times of great stress. As a result, Tom struggles to adapt his thinking to changing conditions, and his productivity (and that of his team) suffers.

Fortunately, there is nothing preventing Tom — or you — from building the agility to adapt to an uncertain environment. It just requires the proactive work of training your brain to override your default mindset and get into a stance to consciously shift your thinking when the situation requires it. This forces you to get deliberate with how you use your mental resources, and exercise your mind’s ability to stretch. Once you’ve built your thinking agility, you will find yourself better prepared to confront and adapt to the uncertainty we all face every day, not to mention some welcome relief to the chaos and noise.

The following pages outline a research-backed set of agile leadership competencies, and 4 steps you can take to help your organization’s managers and leaders to build thinking agility to successfully adapt to our uncertain world.

# FOR AGILE LEADERSHIP



## ANALYTICAL THINKING

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- Problem solving for complex, real-world business & competitive challenges
- Managing an endless stream of data, facts, & info
- Effective financial know-how & global business acumen
- Soliciting constructive criticism
- Achieving clarity of goals in an uncertain world
- Competent & decisive in both short- & long-term plans
- Leveraging new technologies & technical approaches
- Analyzing new types of global business issues with less knowledge & data

## PRACTICAL THINKING

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- Staying on task and focused in a changing world
- Mastering implementation under pressure
- Driving quality & flawless execution
- Just-in-time planning & deadlines
- Managing conflicting priorities
- Handling complex operational issues
- Simultaneous processing
- Being an effective role model
- Consistency & ethics reflected in action & speech





### EXPERIMENTAL THINKING

- Intellectual ingenuity, openness & curiosity
- Thinking as a global, holistic citizen of the world
- Decision-making in a world of great uncertainty
- Intelligent risk-tasking & acceptance of ambiguity
- Thinking around corners & strategic thinking
- Being conceptual, broad-minded & future-focused
- Conceptualizing & embracing constant, rapid change
- Creating a culture where experimentations, innovation, & creative thinking thrive

### RELATIONAL THINKING

- Emotionally intelligent, reading others' emotions
- Valuing, engaging & developing a diverse group of associates, customers & constituents
- Listening and adapting to different styles & needs
- Creating a culture of shared values
- Culturally & globally sensitive, curious & savvy
- Artfully collaborating (cross-generation, function, company, culture) & teaming in a virtual environment
- Attentive to community & environmental needs
- Reflective: self-aware, seeking feedback, learner



# REDEFINE LEADERSHIP

**"The most important component of good management, good leadership, and good stewardship is making sure that you have diversity of mind."**

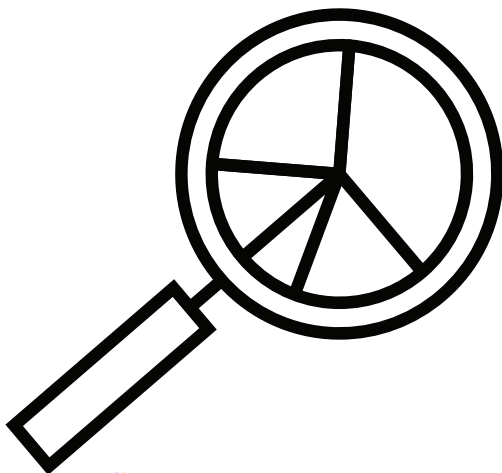
Larry Fink, CEO Blackrock

How many of your employees have the appropriate degree of agility necessary to lead your organization into the future? According to DDI, only 18% of leaders believe they have the requisite agility. Traditionally we have spent the lion's share of our training investments on leadership development, but it has not delivered, particularly for creating leaders who are suited to increasingly uncertain environments.

Where is the gap? McKinsey identified [underestimating leader mindsets](#) as one of the key reasons leadership development programs fail. Mindset is particularly critical because it affects how you frame the world, how you look at things. Your mindset is your mental default that provides your brain a path to follow in a noisy and distracting world. It takes energy to override your mindset. You have to redefine what is most important, as well as how and in what direction to shift your thinking. Most leaders today struggle to keep up with yesterday's definition of what it meant to lead, let alone shifting their thinking to what is required today—agility.

But no leader, at any level, has the luxury of being single-minded any more. When you evaluate the thinking required to be effective in today's world, it becomes clear that we need to redefine leadership. An analysis of several hundred leaders conducted by de Boer et al. using the HBDI® cognitive preference assessment and Drotter's leadership pipeline (see Figure A) shows that at every stage, leaders need to use all of the thinking modes: analytical, financial and data oriented (blue), execution-focused, structured and practical (green), engaging, communicative and empathic (red) and holistic, experimental and strategic (yellow).

Most striking from this analysis is the clear shift in emphasis from structured, execution-oriented thinking to more strategic, visionary thinking as leaders become more senior. However, in most organizations, this is not simply a matter of one type of thinking replacing another in a zero-sum fashion. Rather, for most going up the leadership pipeline, you still need to be able to "stretch" to think like someone at every level of the organization below you in order to effectively understand, deploy, empathize with and inspire them. The more senior you are, the more you need to be able to stretch; the amount of stretching needed for a leader at the top of





**Figure A**



(adapted from de Boer, Bothma & Olwagen's 2012 analysis of the HBDI® and Drotter's Leadership Pipeline with 120 leadership roles)

the leadership pipeline (“Managing the Enterprise”) to think like someone at the bottom is nearly 4x the amount needed for a first-level manager (“Managing Others”).

Bottom line, to be an agile leader at any level, you have to be consciously engaging all of your mental resources. You are expected to be results-oriented *and* performance driven *and* engagement focused *and* “big picture” strategic to differing degrees depending on the situation and who you are interacting with. Your comfort with doing so will depend significantly on your natural preferences for one type of thinking over another. This volatility of expectations is especially pronounced in times of uncertainty.

For HR, Learning & Development and Talent leaders, this has two significant implications. First, it means you should be regularly reevaluating your leadership competencies through the lens of agile thinking and

cognitive diversity. Although competency audits are often significant undertakings, think of this more as a “check in” to make sure that what you’re asking leaders to focus on is the highest priority. For example, at 84.51°, a data science and predictive analytics subsidiary of the Kroger Company, Head of Talent Michelle Krummen conducts regular audits using a “Start, Stop, Continue” framework to classify what competencies will be needed for the new normal ahead. Each competency within their framework is evaluated in light of the latest conditions and put into one of the three categories for leaders (and the Talent team members supporting them) to know where to focus. The frequency of these audits should increase with the degree of uncertainty the organization faces.

The Whole Brain® Agile Leadership Competencies (pp. 6-7) can provide a helpful reference for understanding what skills are most critical for your leaders to develop, and are organized such that you can take cognitive diversity into account. As you consider prioritizing competencies for individual leaders and groups of leaders, endeavor to understand how selected competencies map to insights on thinking preferences, and aim for a good balance between competencies that play to leaders’ natural preferences and strengths and those that will provide opportunities to stretch and grow. Pairing leaders with peers who have preferences and growth opportunities in different areas can create valuable learning. At 84.51°, Michelle Krummen also provides resources specific to competencies and encouraged peer-to-peer sharing of best practices.

Finally, as much as possible, resist the urge to take a “jack of all trades” approach as you redefine what it means to be a leader in your organization, and focus on a few critical competencies that reflect the individual that you’re working with, their unique thinking preferences, and where they are in the leadership pipeline. Especially in times of uncertainty, the ability to focus on a few things and do them very well is a gift, and your leader retention will bear the fruit of that generosity.

## REDEFINE LEADERSHIP

### CHECKLIST



Shift the way you define what's important, identifying very clearly what you're asking leaders to focus on, and what's being overlooked



Reprioritize & refresh leadership competencies frequently to adapt to rapidly changing conditions



Review Whole Brain® Agile leadership competencies, focusing on a critical few based on who you're working with and where they are in



Link competencies to cognitive diversity so leaders can own the thinking changes they need to make



Help leaders to understand their mindsets and how to shift their thinking and break out of old mindsets when required



Rethink how you design and deliver leadership development in light of leader mindsets and how those change under pressure

# ENGAGE EVERY BRAIN

Our research has shown that every organization is cognitively diverse, but most do not leverage it. One fundamental approach to building thinking agility is to ensure that leaders and managers are equipped to effectively tap into the diverse thinking of their teams and functions. This requires engaging every brain. Most leaders need to consciously make an effort to stretch out of their primary comfort zone to “speak the language” of those they lead and manage.

But is it really possible to change someone’s thinking? Absolutely! In spite of 100 years of dogma saying otherwise, we know that new neuronal connections can take place, even in the adult brain. In other words, you CAN change the brain through learning.

For the critical points you must get across, recognize it may take more time and that you may need to employ a variety of different techniques to engage everyone so they clearly understand. For example, to ensure learning sticks, there are a few brain-based design best practices that you can follow:

- Provide context
- Engage emotions
- Introduce novelty
- Create “meaty” challenges
- Provide time for processing and practice
- Stagger and repeat the message

To perform, leaders must stretch outside their mental comfort zones. That requires energy and effort! When you prepare the brain by providing context and making sure the message fits a leader or learner’s needs, they will be mentally prepared for the challenge. Even if they may not “like” the discomfort that is required to stretch, they can own the challenge by viewing learning as a victory.

Kimberly Sullivan, VP of Talent at Herrmann, has set up “stretching partners” for people with very different preferences to provide practice in connecting and communicating effectively in a safe environment. This peer-to-peer model is just one of many ways L&D can enable more thinking agility across teams.

However, engaging brains is about more than learning & development. *It’s also about engaging all the brainpower you have.* Your talent pool has a wide range of thinking skills and abilities. Capitalizing on that wealth of cognitive diversity will provide a significant competitive advantage, but only if you and your leaders see it as an asset and know how to leverage it through engagement.

Finally, when people are distracted, stressed or preoccupied, breaking through the noise and getting your point across the way in which you intended is both more challenging and more important. If your leaders understand how they and others think, they will be better able to adapt their communications to more effectively capture attention quickly and get the outcome they’re looking for.

One great example of this comes from ChristianaCare, a US-based healthcare provider with more than 11,000 employees. They focused on making sure that leaders, physicians and nurses understood their thinking preferences. Not only did engagement and retention improve across the organization, but patient satisfaction increased as well, because employees were able to use those same skills to improve their communication with patients.



## CHECKLIST

**ENGAGE EVERY BRAIN**

Develop skills training using Whole Brain® learning design techniques to make sure the essential points stick



Help leaders understand how to stretch their thinking and take on new challenges



Encourage managers to build diverse teams to practice thinking agility and help them get better results



Empower teams to use better brain engagement to adapt the way they communicate and deliver information

# FUTURE-PROOF YOUR LEADERS

**“The only way you learn to flip things is just to flip them!”**  
Julia Child, world-renowned chef, after flopping a potato pancake onto the floor during her TV show.

Have you ever noticed how easily we discount an idea if we cannot imagine how it can actually happen? That need for knowing can rapidly shut down thinking, particularly the strategic, long-term thinking required to stay ahead. Think about it: With so much ambiguity all around, how often have you found yourself putting off future oriented, strategic thinking or feeling you can't “afford” to spend the time on it? This is exacerbated by the sentiment that we can't possibly know what the future will bring so why bother?

The answer? Let go of the how. Leaders need to, as Stephen Covey said, “begin with the end in mind” instead of focusing on how to get from today to the next step. Start by changing assumptions about what you can predict. Drop the expectation for 100% accuracy—you will never get it anyway—so you can take the pressure off and free the mind up to explore options.

One great mind hack is to use stimulus to prompt your thinking. Try this: Pick something you care about and Google “the future of \_\_\_\_\_” and see what you find.

At Herrmann, we pair different functional groups together for future brainstorming sessions, and have a channel set up on our collaboration platform Slack for “ideas for the future.”

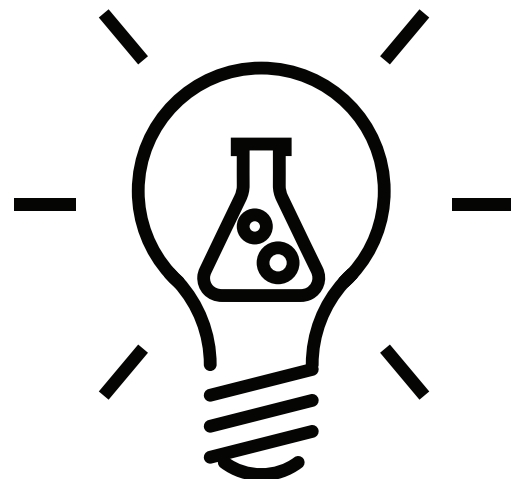
Another approach is to designate one day a week to “future day,” where everyone gets prompted to think forward. We know that **the brain has a hard time differentiating between reality and what we are**

**imagining**, so leaders who think as if they are already in the future will have a much better chance of shifting their mindsets away from today.

Our 40 years of research in Whole Brain® Creativity has shown that something as simple as asking “What if?” questions immediately shifts your thinking away from the present and into the future.

Promote a culture of experimentation by creating safety around trying things out. A “fail fast, fail cheap” approach helps make it acceptable for people to pilot ideas, to test things...and to fail. Take a page from the world of IT development where “agile” is the mantra and processes have regular checkpoints built in to allow for future-proofing the product along the way. It's a great example of an approach your leaders should adapt.

Finally, the most effective future-oriented cultures encourage leaders to lighten up. We have a Lighten Up channel on our collaboration platform. It's not only OK to laugh, **research shows it is a good way to deal with ambiguity and stress**. Wouldn't you rather work in that kind of environment?



## FUTURE-PROOF YOUR LEADERS

### CHECKLIST



Help them focus on the end goal, letting go of the how and the need for 100% accuracy



Encourage them to ask “what if...” to begin to think with a future mindset



Train them to develop a more experimental approach by making it safe to “fail forward” in your leadership development programs



Create a culture of experimentation, which invites curiosity and helps the brain open up to new options



Lighten up!

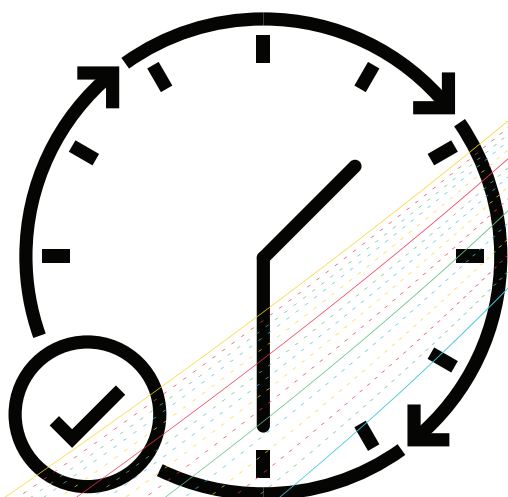
# ORCHESTRATE AGILITY

Yes, you can orchestrate agility. You can build a culture that honors and encourages cognitive diversity and thinking agility. Although you can't fight external circumstances, by being more agile in your thinking you can set the foundation for your team to thrive in the midst of confusion and uncertainty.

Consider starting with onboarding. At 84.51°, Head of Talent Michelle Krummen includes Whole Brain® Thinking as part of their Diversity & Inclusion segment in their company-wide onboarding program. This establishes, off the bat, that the expectation is to be inclusive of different thinking approaches in the culture.

The next step is being prepared for the new extreme world we live in. Disruption is everywhere and you often have less time and resources to get everything done. This means you need to get very clear and very prepared around what you believe are the biggest challenges for your leadership to grow their thinking agility in order to adapt. Use all of your own thinking resources to narrow it down:

- What is the biggest gap – where will you get the greatest yield?
- What are the logistical realities you need to consider?
- Who is or should be in the pipeline and what thinking demands will you be placing on them?
- What does the desired result look like?



Plan on having half the time and resources that you expect to have. This triggers your brain to look at new ways to get things done and reduces the inevitable surprises that will come along the way. While you're at it, have you noticed that you keep piling on the "to-do" list without ever taking anything off—even if some of the items are no longer even relevant? In order to be more agile, one of the most important questions you should be asking is: What do we need to stop doing?

When so much complexity is outside our control, this is a great opportunity for you and your leaders to simplify what you can control. Create a "not-to-do list." Get out of the auto-pilot mode of doing the things you've always been doing, and you will help leaders find the mental space to shift their thinking even more.



## ORCHESTRATE AGILITY

### CHECKLIST



Ask key questions to help simplify complexity:

- *What's critical to focus on first?*
- *What capabilities are needed?*



Plan for extreme execution; assume you'll have half the time and resources you expect



Encourage leaders to have the guts to ask, "What should we stop doing?"



Apply Whole Brain® approach to leadership development, training leaders to harness cognitive diversity across the organization



# YOU CAN **ADAPT!**

The environment isn't going to slow down. Disruption will continue to worsen. But there is a relief and remedy available to all of us that will take some of the pressure off. Now, more than ever, leaders, managers, and the training and HR professionals who support them, have both the opportunity and the obligation to make sure everyone builds the thinking agility to adapt and thrive.

## HOW WILL YOU USE THINKING AGILITY TO ADAPT?



Herrmann can help you develop greater thinking agility across your organization, bringing 40 years of experience with some of the most trusted organizations around the world.

Learn more about  
thinking agility and  
cognitive diversity at  
[thinkherrmann.com](http://thinkherrmann.com)

