

Navigating leadership challenges in the age of AI

We intuitively know that AI adds new layers and dimensions to the leadership challenges of navigating conflicting demands, but this article gives you a perspective on how to articulate the magnitude of the challenge and how leadership is mastering playing six games at the same time.



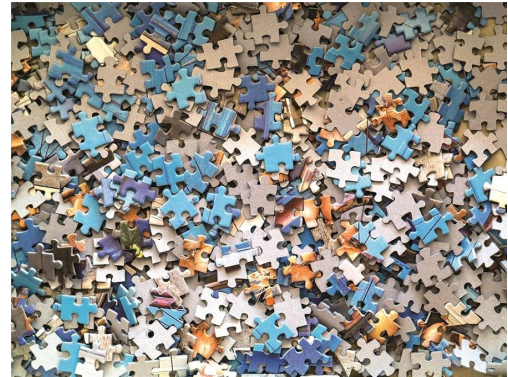
Leadership faces unprecedented challenges. They must simultaneously navigate five distinct strategic domains, each requiring different mindsets and approaches. Understanding these domains, with their conflicting demands, is crucial for success. Resolving these conflicts is far harder, but for those who do, it provides evidence of their ability to lead in uncertain times.

I am interested in strategy, leadership, game theory, scenario planning and risk through the governance lens. Our new leadership challenges will be illuminated through the metaphor of familiar games. After unpacking the “games,” I turn to how AI adds a new layer and dimension to an already fluid situation. Finally, we add Poker to the mix.

Games we have to Master

The Current Picture Game: Leadership as Information Assembly

Executives must continually piece together fragmented information to understand their current reality. Like working on a jigsaw puzzle without the box cover, we must assemble data points from market signals, internal metrics, customer feedback, and competitor movements to form a coherent picture. If one jigsaw without a box is hard, the reality is we have to sort out each puzzle piece from the jumbled mess of ten puzzles. Why ten? This is the number of people who have their own agendas and incentives, sit at your table and influence your thinking.

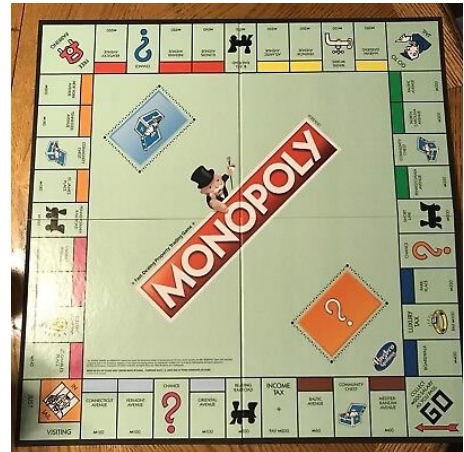


The challenge lies in determining which picture and which pieces truly matter and how to find the edges and corners - foundations. Some fragments may appear to fit but actually distort the overall image. With limited time and attention, effective leaders must decide which puzzle and which sections of the puzzle deserve sorting and focus while maintaining awareness of the emerging whole.

Governance Perspective: Robust governance frameworks provide the essential scaffolding for this information assembly process. By establishing standardised reporting structures, verification protocols, and accountability measures, governance helps leaders distinguish signal from noise. Properly designed governance mechanisms create information transparency that prevents selective data presentation while ensuring critical perspectives aren't filtered out before reaching decision-makers. This structured approach to information flow is particularly vital in complex organisations where distance from frontline operations can obscure reality. Critically, none of the jigsaws will ever be finished (complete information), the governance question is how much needs to be in place based on risk profile we want/have.

The Power Game: Navigating Structural Shifts

Like Monopoly's property trading and consolidation, business landscapes undergo fundamental transformations that redistribute power, value, and opportunity—often with elements beyond a leadership's control. These shifts may include technological disruptions, regulatory changes, new market entrants, or evolving customer expectations.



Strategic leaders anticipate these shifts, position their organisations advantageously, and know when to invest or divest. This requires both strategic patience and decisive action—understanding when to accumulate resources for future moves and when to deploy them for maximum impact. It is closely coupled with the jigsaw picture.

The marco-game of this is [the emergence of corporate-style governance in national leadership and nation-sized corporate influence in global affairs](#)

Governance Perspective: Effective governance provides the checks and balances necessary to prevent the power game from devolving into winner-takes-all scenarios. By distributing decision rights, creating transparent approval processes, and establishing ethical guardrails, governance systems ensure power shifts occur within bounds that preserve organisational integrity but are flexible enough to adapt to the new. Proper governance also creates space for long-term strategic thinking by protecting organisations from short-term power plays that might sacrifice sustainable advantage for immediate gains. This balanced approach to power distribution and delegated authority allows for both “entrepreneurial” initiatives and responsible stewardship.

The Complexity Game: Managing Dynamic Systems

Perhaps the most challenging domain involves navigating complexity (uncertainty and volatility) that changes with each decision. [Imagine solving a game of chess where the pieces change after each move or a Rubik's Cube where the colours change after each move](#) – this represents how organisational decisions trigger cascading effects that transform the very problem being solved, both internally and externally. Scenarios matter but only reach so far.



Exceptional leaders develop pattern recognition skills that work in non-linear environments. They identify leverage points where small interventions yield outsized results, anticipate unintended consequences, and maintain strategic flexibility as conditions evolve unpredictably.

Governance Perspective: Well-designed governance structures help tame complexity through deliberate simplification and strategic decomposition. By establishing clear decision-making protocols, governance creates islands of certainty within oceans of ambiguity. Sophisticated governance frameworks incorporate feedback loops that accelerate organisational learning, ensuring that each decision becomes an opportunity to better understand system dynamics. Scenario testing, stress-testing, and red-teaming processes mandated by governance can reveal hidden interdependencies before they manifest as unwelcome surprises. In complex environments, governance provides the adaptive infrastructure that allows organisations to evolve without losing coherence.

The Collaboration Game: Orchestrating Collective Intelligence

No executive or leadership succeeds alone. Like participants in an “escape room”, leaders must orchestrate diverse talents to overcome complex challenges with limited resources and time. This requires fostering psychological safety, aligning incentives, and building trust across organisational boundaries.



Success demands emotional intelligence to understand stakeholder motivations, communication skills to articulate a shared purpose, and the ability to design collaboration structures that promote collective intelligence rather than groupthink or dysfunction.

Governance Perspective: Mature governance systems serve as the architecture for sustainable collaboration by clarifying roles, responsibilities, and interfaces between teams and departments. Rather than relying solely on personal relationships that may fracture under pressure, governance establishes durable collaborative mechanisms that transcend individual personalities. Cross-functional and non-functional governance bodies create forums where diverse perspectives converge around shared objectives, while decision rights matrices prevent collaborative deadlock. Most importantly, governance creates accountability frameworks that ensure collaborative efforts remain focused on organisational priorities rather than drifting toward comfortable consensus.

The Trust Game: Discerning Authentic Relationships

In an environment where information can be weaponised and agendas hidden, executives must determine who can be trusted as advisors, partners, and team



members. Like players in "[Traitors](#)," they must discern authentic allies from those with hidden agendas, often with incomplete information.

This requires developing nuanced judgment about character and integrity, creating environments where honesty is rewarded rather than punished, and building relationship networks based on mutual value creation rather than transactional advantage.

Governance Perspective: While personal "[trust](#)" remains vital, governance structures provide institutional safeguards that reduce vulnerability to betrayal. By establishing clear ethical standards, conflict of interest policies, and whistleblower protections, governance creates conditions where truth-telling becomes the rational choice. Transparency requirements mandated by governance make hidden agendas harder to maintain, while independent oversight functions provide verification mechanisms that don't rely solely on trust. In well-governed organisations, systems are designed with the recognition that even trustworthy individuals face competing pressures; governance provides the structural support for integrity to flourish while reducing opportunities for deception.

The Meta-Challenge: Integrating Contradictory Domains

The ultimate governance and leadership challenge isn't mastering each game individually – it's playing them simultaneously while recognising their interdependencies. A move in the complexity game affects collaborative dynamics. Trust issues impact how the current picture is interpreted. Structural shifts reshape the power landscape, which in turn changes who you can trust.



What makes this particularly challenging is that some games have clear rules while others have ambiguous boundaries. The leadership games we must play often have rules we don't fully understand and boundaries that continuously shift.

Governance Perspective: The integrative power of governance becomes most apparent in addressing this meta-challenge. Comprehensive governance frameworks connect otherwise siloed domains, providing a coherent architecture that spans information flows, power distributions, complexity management, collaborative structures, and trust mechanisms. Rather than treating these as separate challenges, governance creates an integrated operating system that helps organisations navigate competing demands. Crucially, governance itself must be dynamic—continually evolving to address emerging challenges while maintaining consistent principles. This meta-level governance requires boards and executive teams to periodically reassess their governance structures against the evolving landscape of all five games.

Building Meta-Game Capability Through Governance

Tomorrow's successful executives will be those who can shift fluidly between different game perspectives, recognising when to apply which mindset and integrating these sometimes contradictory approaches into coherent leadership. It is worth noting that [governance itself is also undergoing change](#),



The path forward requires three specific actions:

- **Conduct a personal game audit with governance lens:** Assess your leadership team's strengths across all five domains, paying particular attention to how your governance structures either enable or constrain performance in each area. Identify where governance mechanisms might be overly focused on one game (often control and compliance) at the expense of others (like complexity navigation or collaboration).
- **Build complementary capabilities through governance design:** Deliberately design leadership teams and governance bodies with diverse cognitive strengths across these domains. Ensure your board composition, committee structures, and executive frameworks create balanced perspectives. No single leader excels at all five games, but well-designed governance can bring complementary strengths together at critical decision points.
- **Create integration mechanisms through governance innovation:** Establish governance forums where different game perspectives can be explicitly considered together. This might involve board-level scenario planning incorporating all five domains or decision frameworks that evaluate initiatives through multiple game lenses. Governance innovations like dynamic risk sensing, stakeholder councils, and ethical review boards can help organisations navigate the integration challenge.

Why AI crafts new problems for leadership and governance

A question we must wrestle with is [who should lead your AI initiative](#). Let's examine this through the lens of our five games:

The Current Picture Game: AI leadership requires assembling an accurate understanding of rapidly evolving capabilities, limitations, and implications – a jigsaw with constantly changing pieces. Traditional expertise quickly becomes outdated, whilst distinguishing between genuine breakthroughs and marketing hyperbole demands technical literacy that many executives lack.

The governance challenge lies in creating information systems that reliably surface AI risks and opportunities without overwhelming decision-makers with technical complexities.

The Power Game: AI represents the most significant structural power shift since the Web/ Internet revolution. It redistributes competitive advantage, transforms value chains, and creates winner-takes-most dynamics through data network effects. Leaders must navigate this landscape where power concentrates around those who control data, compute resources, and algorithmic expertise.

Effective governance must balance innovation with responsible deployment, preventing both reckless implementation and paralysing risk-aversion.

The Complexity Game: AI systems interact with organisational processes in profoundly non-linear ways. Like our chess game with changing pieces, each AI implementation alters the very problem being solved—sometimes creating cascading effects across systems never designed to interact.

Leadership requires understanding these emergent behaviours whilst establishing governance mechanisms that maintain human oversight of increasingly autonomous systems.

The Collaboration Game: Successful AI leadership demands unprecedented cross-functional collaboration. Technical teams must work seamlessly with

domain experts, ethics specialists, legal advisors, and business strategists—each speaking different professional languages.

The governance challenge involves creating collaborative structures that bridge these divides whilst ensuring accountability remains clear despite distributed expertise. Incentive structures break, KPIs fail, and dashboards prevent a new dawn. Internal conflicts, tensions and politics have to be resolved.

The Trust Game Perhaps most challenging, AI leadership requires navigating complex trust relationships with technology vendors, internal experts, and the systems themselves. Leaders must determine which AI claims to believe, which safeguards are genuine, and how to maintain stakeholder trust when systems operate as "black boxes."

Governance frameworks must create transparency that builds warranted trust whilst acknowledging the inherent uncertainties of emerging technologies.

Managing the “mega-game” ... plus AI

The meta-challenge for leadership stems from the uneven distribution of understanding across these domains. Technical experts may excel at complexity but lack appreciation for power dynamics. Business leaders may grasp competitive implications but underestimate collaboration challenges. This explains why AI initiatives often flounder — **they're addressing only fragments of the complete leadership challenge.**

Effective governance with a lens on AI requires creating integrated leadership models where authority is distributed according to domain expertise rather than traditional hierarchies. This might involve dual reporting structures, technical oversight boards with real authority, or collaborative decision frameworks that ensure all five games receive appropriate consideration.

The most successful organisations will be those that recognise AI leadership as fundamentally different from traditional technology management — requiring not just technical implementation but the orchestrated navigation of all five

leadership domains simultaneously. This suggests “open governance” should be a shared responsibility, with different leaders taking point on different games whilst maintaining collective accountability for the holistic outcome.

As we venture further into the age of artificial intelligence, perhaps the most important governance innovation will be recognising that leadership itself must evolve—becoming less hierarchical, more distributed, and explicitly designed to address the multi-game reality of AI transformation.

[Who should lead your AI initiative](#) is just not simple

What is missing?

This thinking skips over ...

- **Implementation Timeline and Adoption Challenges** There's no discussion here about the temporal aspects of AI adoption. Because this is difficult, we all struggle with questions of when to implement AI, how quickly to scale, and how to manage the transition period.
- **Resource Allocation Game** While the Power Game touches on investment decisions, a dedicated discussion on resource allocation is needed – but this demands context and details. Similar to games like “[Game of Thrones](#)”, “[Settlers](#),” or “[Risk](#)”, leaders must make strategic choices about where to invest limited resources in AI capabilities.
- **External Stakeholder Perspectives** The current framework focuses primarily on internal leadership and governance. The reality is that external stakeholders (regulators, customers, and society) need to be more complete in their understanding as they can pressure for the wrong outcomes with the best intentions. History is littered with such outcomes.
- **Culture, power and incentives.** The specifics of context really matters, and the [CEO/ CXO/ Chair power structure](#), combined with processes, remuneration, incentives, KPI and legacy craft friction, tensions and conflicts of interest that are expressed in the governance layer.
- **Playing Poker.** In poker, players must make consequential decisions with incomplete information, balancing probability assessment with strategic deception and psychological insight. Similarly, leadership requires

making high-stakes decisions amidst fundamental uncertainty – where neither outcomes nor probabilities can be fully known in advance. What is your Poker Face?

Poker Face

Effective leaders, like skilled poker players, develop intuition about when to be conservative versus when to make bold bets. They recognise when to fold early on failing initiatives, when to bluff competitors by signalling strategic intent that may differ from actual plans, and when to go "all in" on transformative opportunities despite incomplete information.



Governance Perspective: Sound governance for uncertainty management establishes clear risk appetite frameworks that define boundaries while enabling calculated risk-taking. Rather than attempting to eliminate uncertainty through rigid controls, sophisticated governance approaches differentiate between risks that must be mitigated versus uncertainties that present strategic opportunities. Effective governance includes portfolio approaches to innovation investment, allowing for multiple parallel bets with defined parameters for continuation or termination. Most importantly, governance should establish feedback mechanisms that enable rapid learning from both successes and failures without creating a blame culture that drives risk underground.

AI Dimension: AI implementation introduces profound poker-like dynamics into organisational decision-making. Leaders must decide how aggressively to invest in AI capabilities without knowing which specific applications will ultimately deliver value or whether their AI "hand" will prove stronger than competitors'. They must determine when to publicly announce AI initiatives versus developing capabilities quietly, and when to partner versus building proprietary solutions.

The ROI for AI is questionable, but that is only one dimension of a complex decision problem. An individual who sees data supports their view will only propagate narratives that align with their beliefs. Are you building the jigsaw, playing traitors, or trapped in an escape room? Unfortunately, you have to be doing them all simultaneously.

The governance challenge involves creating frameworks that enable responsible experimentation while establishing clear boundaries for acceptable risk. This might include structured stage-gate processes for AI initiatives, ethical review boards with real authority, and tiered approval requirements tied to potential impact levels. Most critically, governance must balance the existential risks of falling behind in AI capabilities against the operational and reputational risks of deploying immature AI systems.

Organisations that excel at the AI Poker Game develop "optionality thinking" – making investments that preserve future decision rights rather than committing prematurely to specific AI applications. This approach recognises that the ability to pivot quickly in rapidly evolving technological environments often proves more valuable than an early commitment to any single pathway.

Open Governance (the new dawn)

In a business environment that increasingly rewards both specialised expertise and integrative thinking, leadership teams who master these "meta-games" of orchestrating multiple strategic domains will create sustainable advantages for their organisations. The most effective leaders will be those who not only play each game well but understand how governance provides the connective tissue between these games.

By viewing governance not merely as a compliance function but as the strategic architecture that enables navigation across all six games, organisations can transform potential conflicts into complementary perspectives. In this sense, governance becomes the meta-discipline that allows leadership teams to play multiple games simultaneously without losing coherence or purpose. The organisations that thrive in tomorrow's complex landscape will be those that develop governance capabilities as sophisticated as the challenges they face.

[Tony Fish](#)

I bring something very different. I will help you and your team ask questions you did not know you had to ask. We all know we should ask questions, and then we realise we must ask better questions. Eventually, we realise we determine if we are asking the right questions—however, this demands we understand what is right (in this context) and whether we have asked the questions we did not know we had to ask.

Tony Fish is neuro-minority (diverse) and is a leading expert on decision-making in uncertain environments, corporate governance and sustainability.

He thrives in complex, ground-breaking & uncertain environments, bringing proven judgement and decision skills with cross-sectorial experience. His 30-year track record of sense-making and foresight means he has been ahead on several technical revolutions. His enthusiasm and drive are contagious & inspiring.

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