

THE FUTURE BOARDROOM ADVANTAGE



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Why the next decade will reward leadership teams that integrate a wider range of cognitive strengths

The leadership environment is changing at a pace many organisations were not built for. Volatility, sharper scrutiny and rising complexity are reshaping expectations of effective leadership. Yet many of the systems used to identify and assess leaders were designed for a more predictable era. This gap now carries commercial risk. Cognitive breadth is becoming essential for executive and board decision-making, and the next decade will reward leadership teams that draw on a wider range of thinking styles.

Executive teams and boards now operate in conditions defined by technological acceleration, geopolitical volatility and heightened expectations from investors and society. These pressures require leadership capability rooted in analytical depth, disciplined judgement, systems thinking and the ability to interpret ambiguity.

As I have seen throughout my career, both as an autistic leader and as someone who advises boards on leadership capability, cognitive strengths are often misunderstood or overlooked because they do not mirror traditional expectations of how leaders should present. Yet in complex environments, these strengths become increasingly valuable.

In commentary for *The Times*, I highlighted how many neurodivergent professionals are particularly well suited to high-change, high-ambiguity conditions because of strengths in pattern recognition, focused analysis and unconventional problem-solving. These are not marginal strengths. They are directly aligned with the demands placed on senior leadership today.

Future leadership will depend far more on how leaders think than how they present. Organisations need leaders who can detect weak signals, model systems, synthesise competing variables and bring clarity to complexity. Both neurotypical and neurodivergent leaders contribute distinct cognitive strengths that are essential to effective leadership. Neurodivergent leaders often excel in deep systems analysis, identifying structural risk, resolving complex ambiguity and generating original, non-linear insights that strengthen long-horizon strategic thinking. Neurotypical leaders typically excel in organisational navigation, anticipating reputational and political implications, shaping strategic narratives and translating complex insight into coordinated action. The advantage comes from leadership teams that integrate this range of cognitive strengths. Cognitive breadth improves decision-making, strengthens innovation and reduces blind spots at board level.



HOW COGNITIVE STRENGTHS BECOME MISINTERPRETED

Many organisations still assess people against behavioural norms that have limited relevance to leadership effectiveness. Individuals with strong analytical, pattern-based or unconventional thinking styles can have their strengths misread simply because they do not fit inherited expectations of how a leader should communicate or behave.

- Direct communication may be labelled abrupt
- Precision may be interpreted as inflexibility
- Strategic intensity may be viewed as difficulty
- Non-linear thinking may be misunderstood as lack of clarity

In many leadership assessment processes, potential is still inferred from interpersonal familiarity rather than the quality of thinking behind it. This creates blind spots and means cognitively capable individuals can be underestimated simply because they do not fit inherited expectations of leadership.

This dynamic is visible in wider workplace practice. In *People Management*, I wrote about how workplace norms and leadership expectations often prioritise behavioural conformity over analytical depth and strategic thinking, particularly for neurodivergent women. When capability is judged through narrow behavioural lenses, valuable cognitive contribution is frequently misinterpreted or overlooked.

These interpretations reflect cultural expectations, not capability. When cognitive strengths are misread early in a career, the individuals who possess them become less visible within leadership pathways. Over time, this shapes perceptions of who is ready for executive roles and reduces the cognitive range represented at the top of organisations.

As competitive and operational pressures intensify across industrial and technical markets, organisations that draw on a broader range of cognitive strengths gain a clear advantage in decision quality and resilience.



OPERATIONALLY COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

Across industrial, technical and operational sectors, including manufacturing, energy, aerospace, defence, transport, supply chain and infrastructure, cognitive breadth is already central to performance. These environments rely on individuals who can interpret incomplete information, manage complex variables and make decisions with significant operational consequences. The ability to detect weak signals, model risk across interconnected systems and maintain clarity under pressure is fundamental to safe and reliable operations.

Military, intelligence and cyber environments demonstrate this particularly clearly. Operational success often depends on systems thinking, rapid pattern recognition, disciplined judgement and the capacity to act decisively in situations defined by uncertainty and time pressure. Across logistics, transport and supply chain environments, the same cognitive strengths are required to anticipate disruption, manage interdependencies and respond effectively to real-time shifts.

In these markets, the cost of misjudgement is high: disrupted networks, safety incidents, engineering failures, regulatory exposure and operational instability. Organisations that rely on narrow behavioural expectations risk overlooking the analytical depth, precision and systems intelligence required in these environments. Cognitive difference enhances capability, judgement and organisational resilience. It improves decision quality in sectors where uncertainty, complexity and operational risk are routine.

WHY EARLY OPPORTUNITY SHAPES HOW TALENT FLOWS INTO ORGANISATIONS

Early access to opportunity is uneven. Children who grow up with fewer resources, limited support or strengths that fall outside traditional academic measures often enter the world of work through narrower routes. Those who think differently, learn in non-linear ways or do not match early academic expectations may not have their strengths recognised at the point opportunities are allocated. Research consistently shows that these groups often have reduced access to enrichment, guidance and sustained support.

These early differences influence confidence, networks and career starting points, all of which affect progression. Employers cannot solve the education system, but they can address how these patterns show up in their own talent pipelines by widening what they recognise as potential and ensuring that leadership frameworks value a broader range of cognitive strengths.

HOW FUTURE-FOCUSSED ORGANISATIONS ARE ADAPTING

Organisations that are thinking ahead are beginning to reshape their leadership models so they reflect the cognitive demands of the future. They are:

- Reassessing what genuinely predicts leadership effectiveness
- Distinguishing substance from presentation in leadership assessments
- Designing interviews and development processes that reveal thinking quality rather than interpersonal familiarity
- Identifying cognitively strong talent earlier in the pipeline
- Creating cultures where different thinking styles contribute fully to decision-making

These actions strengthen leadership quality, succession capability and organisational resilience.

WHAT EXECUTIVE TEAMS AND BOARDS SHOULD CONSIDER NEXT

To build future-ready leadership pipelines, organisations can:

- Review leadership models to ensure they reflect the cognitive complexity of the next decade.
- Assess whether succession discussions prioritise thinking patterns as much as visible behaviours.
- Evaluate whether current assessments unintentionally prioritise style over capability.
- Look earlier in the pipeline for individuals whose strengths may be undervalued or overlooked.
- Treat cognitive diversity as a source of competitive advantage in strategy, risk management and performance.

In my role as Chairwoman of Holmes Noble, I see first-hand how leadership models shape board performance and how cognitive breadth strengthens the judgement of executive teams.

ONE HIGH-IMPACT PRIORITY FOR BOARDS

Update leadership assessment frameworks so they measure thinking quality directly.

This single change strengthens decision-making, protects against blind spots and expands the organisation's strategic capacity.

CONCLUSION

The organisations that will prosper over the next decade will be those that understand the value of different thinking styles in their executive teams and boardrooms. Cognitive diversity is not a challenge to manage. It is a strategic resource that broadens insight, strengthens judgement and enhances leadership capability.

By modernising leadership frameworks to recognise these strengths, organisations can build leaders with the clarity, agility and discipline required for the future boardroom.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Carson is Chairwoman and Founder of Holmes Noble, a global executive search and leadership advisory firm. She has more than thirty years' experience advising boards and senior leadership teams across listed organisations, private equity portfolio companies, private enterprises and purpose-led organisations.

Her work focuses on leadership capability, decision integrity and the design of leadership systems that support long-term organisational value. She brings a particular specialism in cognitive strengths and neuroinclusive leadership, helping boards identify high-value thinking, reduce leadership risk and strengthen performance in complex environments.

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