

# NAVIGATING UNPRECEDENTED CHANGE

HOW ARE UK BUSINESS  
LEADERS RESPONDING  
TO NEW AND VARIED  
CHALLENGES?

MANCHESTER  
1824

The University of Manchester  
Alliance Manchester Business School



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Manchester  
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# WHY WE DID THIS RESEARCH

At Alliance Manchester Business School, one of the world's leading business schools, we exist to empower individuals to lead with confidence and to enable organisations to succeed. For over 60 years, we've been leading the way – equipping future innovators, entrepreneurs and business leaders across the globe with the skills to solve issues that matter most.

This has never been more important. The world of business has changed dramatically over the past five years, and for senior executives, this has created new pressures, testing them in unforeseen ways.

Since 2020, businesses have faced numerous challenges, from the onset of a global pandemic that radically altered how and where people work, through to challenging economic conditions defined by a sharp rise in interest rates, double-digit inflation and stagnant economic growth and productivity. Additionally, the ever-evolving regulatory landscape, combined with tax reforms, the emergence of new technology and notable political turmoil (four different Prime Ministers spanning two parties), has created significant hurdles for business leaders in the UK and beyond.

Navigating such turbulence and transformation is not easy. But, from the perspective of business leadership, just how disruptive have the past five years been? What have the ramifications been on decision-making, business outcomes and workplace culture?

And, crucially, how well prepared are senior leaders to overcome the obstacles they face today?

To get the answers to these important questions, Alliance Manchester Business School has conducted an in-depth study. We commissioned leading market research agency Censuswide to conduct an independent survey of 500 senior decision-makers within UK businesses across a range of sizes and sectors.

The survey explores sentiments towards the changes that have taken place in the business world over recent years and how that has impacted their roles and the performance of their companies. It also provides timely insight into the support that has been provided and, moreover, is still needed to ensure leaders are equipped to combat the challenges they are being confronted with today.

The findings of this exclusive piece of research can be found in this report, alongside additional insight and expertise from Alliance Manchester Business School's academic, course director and senior management. We hope the report proves both interesting and valuable, allowing business leaders not just in the UK but globally to better understand how their peers are managing change.



**PROFESSOR KEN MCPHAIL**  
Head of School  
at Alliance Manchester Business School



#### About the research

The research was conducted by leading market research agency Censuswide. It surveyed 500 senior decision-makers within UK-based businesses. Their roles included managers, directors, C-level executives and owners. Respondents came from all sizes of organisations spanning a wide variety of private sectors.

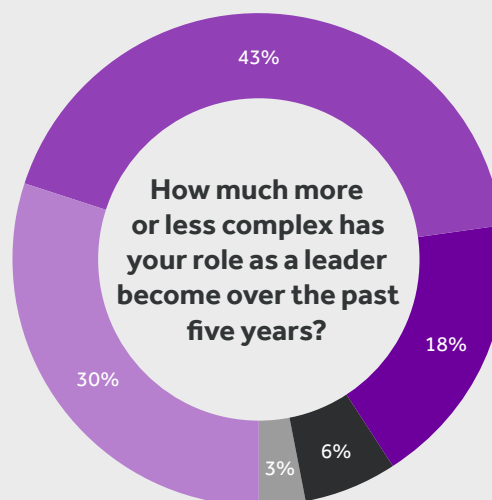
The data was collected between 12th and 20th December 2025.

Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

# BUSINESS LEADERSHIP HAS BECOME MORE COMPLEX- THIS IS WHY

Of the 500 senior decision-makers surveyed, the overwhelming majority (73%) said their roles had become more complex since 2020. This figure was notably higher among two groups: directors and C-suite executives (79%), and those working within mid-size companies that have between 100 and 249 employees (82%).

Those who said their role has become more complex were then asked what factors had contributed most to this trend. Allowed to select up to three options that they felt were most prominent, the most common selection was 'the emergence of new technologies, such as AI and other digital transformation projects' – 31% of respondents put this in their top three.



- Much more complex
- Slightly more complex
- About the same
- Slightly less complex
- Much less complex



It's clear that many senior managers require greater support. From peer-to-peer learning to formal training, organisations must consider which issues are impacting their leadership team.

**STUART WELLS**  
Managing Director of Executive Education at Alliance Manchester Business School

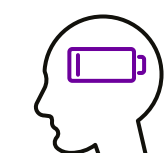


Other key factors were increased cybersecurity and data privacy risks (28%), the performance of the UK economy (27%) and new regulation and legislation (also 27%).

Meanwhile, a quarter (25%) of the business leaders surveyed said that pressure on meeting expectations around diversity, equity and

inclusion (DEI) had been a contributor to the greater complexity of their roles over the past five years. The same number (25%) cited the rise of remote working, while 21% pointed to employees' pay demands.

### What has most increased the complexity of your role as a leader over the past five years?



31%

**AI and new technologies**



27%

**UK economy**



25%

**hybrid working**

|                                                                                               |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| The emergence of new technologies, such as AI and other digital transformation projects       | 31% |
| Cybersecurity and data/privacy risks                                                          | 28% |
| The performance of the UK economy (i.e. weak GDP growth)                                      | 27% |
| New regulation and/or legislation                                                             | 27% |
| Meeting expectations around diversity, equity and inclusion                                   | 25% |
| The rise of remote and hybrid working                                                         | 25% |
| Employees' pay demands                                                                        | 21% |
| Managing reputational risk in a 24/7 media and social media environment                       | 20% |
| Increased focus on ESG, such as improving sustainability                                      | 19% |
| Supply chain disruption and global shocks (e.g. pandemics, trade tensions, natural disasters) | 19% |
| Aligning organisation's values with employees' values                                         | 18% |
| Geopolitical instability (i.e. international conflict)                                        | 12% |

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**STUART WELLS**

Managing Director of Executive Education  
at Alliance Manchester Business School

“Over recent years, significant new pressures have been placed on business leaders, and evidently, this has translated into the vast majority feeling as though their roles have become far more complex.”

“If you look at the different factors contributing to this increased complexity, you quickly appreciate just how much the business world has been transformed since 2020. The rise of remote working since Covid, the proliferation of AI tools, scrutiny over DEI, cyber threats and data privacy, and turbulence within the broader economic climate – senior decision-makers are needing to navigate an expansive spectrum of changes and challenges as they lead their teams.

That’s not easy, and we shouldn’t be surprised to see so many leaders stating that they feel their jobs have become harder this decade.”

“Regardless of experience or competence, it’s clear that many senior managers require greater support. From peer-to-peer learning to formal training, organisations must consider which issues are impacting their leadership team and take action to ensure individuals are suitably equipped to lead effectively in this rapidly changing business world.”



# THE IMPACT OF INCREASED COMPLEXITY ON BUSINESS OUTCOMES

Our research highlights that most business leaders in the UK feel their roles are becoming more complex and, moreover, that this is the result of a broad range of changes and new challenges.

The next question is how this greater complexity in business leadership translates into important outcomes for their organisations. We delved into a variety of business-critical tasks and markers for success to better understand which of those are more difficult to achieve today compared to five years ago.

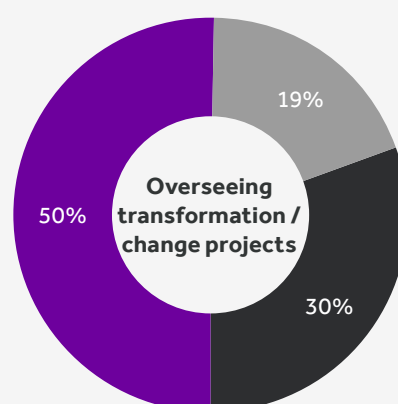
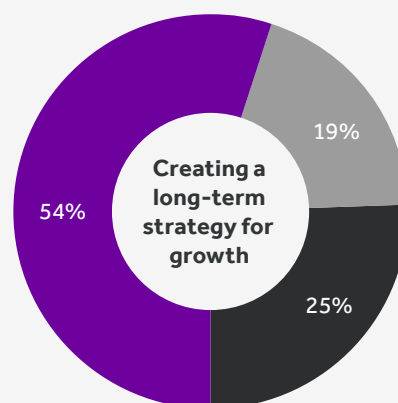
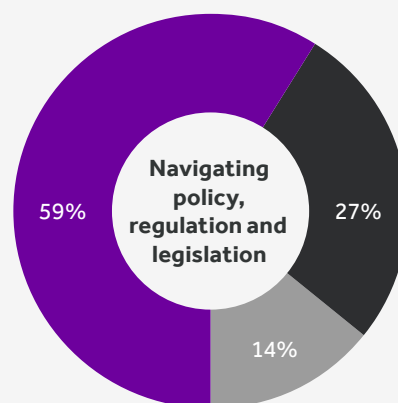
Given a list of nine common objectives and challenges that their business faces, the respondents were asked to say whether each had become easier or harder since 2020. There were many noteworthy findings.

For instance, 59% said that 'navigating policy, regulation and legislation' had gotten more difficult over the past year. That was the highest percentage of any of the options. By contrast, just 27% of respondents felt this task was now easier (the remaining 14% said it was neither harder nor easier).

Over half (56%) said 'attracting and retaining the best talent' is harder today than in 2020 (compared to 26% who said it was easier), while the same number (56%) said this about 'maintaining a competitive advantage over rival businesses' (compared to 25% who said the opposite).

Focusing in on the most essential business goals, 54% of respondents said that 'creating a long-term strategy for growth' is now more challenging, and the same number (54%) said this of 'achieving consistent growth'.

How much harder have the following challenges become in the past five years?



● Harder  
● Neither harder nor easier  
● Easier

### How much harder have the following challenges become in the past five years?

|                                                                                                    | Harder | Neither harder nor easier | Easier |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|
| Navigating policy, regulation and legislation                                                      | 59%    | 14%                       | 27%    |
| Attracting and retaining the best talent                                                           | 56%    | 17%                       | 26%    |
| Maintaining a competitive advantage over rival businesses                                          | 56%    | 18%                       | 25%    |
| Creating a long-term strategy for growth                                                           | 54%    | 19%                       | 25%    |
| Achieving consistent growth                                                                        | 54%    | 19%                       | 26%    |
| Overseeing transformation / change projects                                                        | 50%    | 19%                       | 30%    |
| Entering new markets (selling new products/services, or to new demographics or in new territories) | 49%    | 21%                       | 27%    |
| Building a loyal customer base                                                                     | 48%    | 24%                       | 27%    |
| Defining our organisation's culture and values                                                     | 45%    | 25%                       | 30%    |

Percentages will not necessarily total 100% as respondents could also opt for 'not sure'



Businesses have found themselves in the middle of a perfect storm.

**SARAH FEATHERSTONE**  
Director of Operations  
at Alliance Manchester  
Business School



“ ”



### SARAH FEATHERSTONE

Director of Operations  
at Alliance Manchester Business School

“The message from business leaders is loud and clear – they feel their roles have become much more complex over the past five years. What’s telling is how this increased complexity is then translating into business outcomes, with the majority of the leaders surveyed highlighting how critical challenges, such as regulatory compliance and talent retention, are far harder today than they were in 2020.”

“Businesses have found themselves in the middle of a perfect storm. How and where people work is changing; the economic climate has been challenging in recent years with inflationary pressures impacting businesses and consumers alike; AI is disrupting products, processes and systems; and employees’ financial and cultural demands are changing all the time. So, it is alarming that, as we will come on to explore later in the report, such a significant proportion of UK business leaders have received no formal training to enable them to execute their roles well.”

“Whether it is managing a digital transformation project or evolving a business’s proposition to gain a competitive advantage, business leaders require support if they are to excel in key facets of their job.

The key for organisations and individuals themselves is to identify what training and support will have the greatest impact and source the right ways to upskill, empowering them to lead with confidence and achieve excellence.”

# WHERE ARE BUSINESSES FOCUSING THEIR EFFORTS IN COMBATTING INCREASED COMPLEXITY?

Our research aimed to capture a detailed picture of how the business world – and, therefore, business leadership – is becoming ever-more complex. Yet it also wanted to explore what businesses are doing to attempt to counter this increased complexity.

We asked the 500 senior decision-makers about the actions their organisation had taken in the past three years to improve management and operations. Given nine options and allowed to select as many as apply, we found that 'improved collaboration and communication between teams and departments' is the most common action that UK businesses have taken since 2022 – 45% of respondents said their firm had done this, rising to 57% among those who work in businesses with over 250 employees.

The next most common action taken has been to 'invest in new technology and automation', which 40% of leaders said their business had done in recent years. This was followed by 'enhanced training programmes for complexity and risk management' (35%), 'focused more on organisational culture and employee engagement' (33%), and 'increased focus on specific, high-value markets and products' (also 33%).

Elsewhere, just over three in ten (31%) UK businesses have 'given more team members greater authority in decision-making' in order to improve management and operations, while a similar number (30%) have 'become more reliant on data to inform decision-making and strategy'.

500 Senior decision-makers told us that, in the last three years...

45%\*



improved collaboration and communication between teams and departments

40%



invested in new technology and automation



35%

enhanced training programmes for complexity and risk management



31%

gave more team members greater authority in decision-making

33%



focused more on organisational culture and employee engagement

30%



become more reliant on data to inform decision-making and strategy

\*57% among those who work in businesses with over 250 employees

Further down the list, but still with a notable number of respondents saying that these actions have been taken, were to 'restructure their organisation (e.g., flatter hierarchy, smaller teams)' (26%) and 'bring in external consulting or advisory support' (22%).

Around one in twelve respondents (8%) said their business had not taken any of the actions listed in order to improve management and operations since 2022.

“

Organisations and employees are calling for communication changes that reflect the different forms of collaboration including virtually or in-person.

**KIERAN MACCOURT**

Executive Director of Client Relations  
at Alliance Manchester Business  
School

”

**In the past three years, which actions has your organisation taken to improve management and operations?**

|                                                                        |            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Improved collaboration and communication between teams or departments  | <b>45%</b> |
| Invested in new technology and automation                              | <b>40%</b> |
| Enhanced training programmes for complexity and risk management        | <b>35%</b> |
| Focused more on organisational culture and employee engagement         | <b>33%</b> |
| Increased focus on specific, high-value markets/products               | <b>33%</b> |
| Given more team members greater authority in decision-making           | <b>31%</b> |
| Become more reliant on data to inform decision-making and strategy     | <b>30%</b> |
| Restructured the organisation (e.g., flatter hierarchy, smaller teams) | <b>26%</b> |
| Brought in external consulting or advisory support                     | <b>22%</b> |
| We have not taken any of these actions                                 | <b>8%</b>  |



### KIERAN MACCOURT

Executive Director of Client Relations  
at Alliance Manchester Business School

"How, where and with whom we collaborate is a major challenge for us all. The move away from the five-day office-based working week, towards remote and hybrid working, poses questions to leaders surrounding how they can ensure teams work together effectively when not in the same physical space."

"Organisations and employees are calling for communication changes that reflect the different forms of collaboration including virtually or in-person, so it's unsurprising that this is a focus of almost half of survey respondents."

"Investment in new technology and automation can be a potential solution to some of these challenges. We're speaking to more organisations undertaking this type of digital transformation, and the survey reflects that, with two in five UK businesses saying they have invested in new technology and automation, climbing to 51% amongst larger businesses (those with over 500 employees).

Organisations are not only refreshing their technology, but the rise of AI and sudden shift towards automation has undoubtedly increased the number of companies looking to deploy new tech solutions.

What we see and hear is supported by the survey, where 92% of organisations surveyed have taken multiple actions to improve their management and operations. In the face of such significant and rapid change, senior leadership teams have huge potential for action, by addressing potential issues and seizing potential opportunities.

From collaboration, communication, investment in teams and technologies, well-rounded strategies are required to ensure a business is constantly moving in the right direction, and this data offers great insight into exactly where those priorities lie."



# TAKING A TOLL

## BUSINESS LEADERS FEELING THE STRAIN AMIDST NEW PRESSURES

So far, we have explored businesses' challenges, outcomes and actions relating to increased complexity. There is another equally important part of this story, however, which is the effects leaders are feeling as a result of their increasingly complicated roles.

### Work-life Balance

For instance, 71% of the 500 respondents surveyed said they are happy with their current work-life balance. This figure is notably higher among those aged between 25 and 44 (74%) than it is for those aged 45 and above (63%). It was also higher for leaders in businesses with over 100 employees (73%) than it was for those with fewer than 100 (67%).

Further, that 29% are unhappy with their work-life balance is a notable finding. Additionally, two thirds (67%) of business leaders reported experiencing work-related stress at least once a week.

This time, it was the younger age group (70% of 25-44-year-olds) who were more likely to suffer from stress than their older counterparts (55% of those aged 45 and above).

### Complexity of Roles

Another key finding was that, of those 73% of business leaders who said their roles have become more complex since 2020, the majority (54%) said that this has had a negative impact on their mental wellbeing in the past 12 months.

Elsewhere, the survey uncovered that as many as two in five (40%) senior decision-makers say they regularly doubt their own judgement at work, while over half (55%) are concerned about remaining relevant and competent as the business and management world evolves.

### Our respondents told us that...

over 50%



are **concerned** about **remaining relevant and competent** as the business and management world **evolves**

73%



said their roles have **become more complex** since 2020

29%



are **unhappy** with their **work-life balance**

31%



have received **no formal training** to enable them to **manage effectively and perform well** in their role.

67%



of business leaders reported experiencing **work-related stress** at least once a week

29%



do not feel **well supported** by senior colleagues

2 in 5



of senior decision-makers regularly **doubt their own judgement** at work



### Support and Preparedness

Compounding these concerns, 29% of respondents said they do not feel well supported by senior colleagues when they have to make critical decisions. Even more (31%) stated that they have received no formal training to enable them to manage effectively and perform well in their role.

Similar results can be seen when we asked the senior decision-makers if they feel fully prepared to lead their businesses through the next three years – 72% responded positively, meaning over a quarter (25%) feel ill-prepared from a leadership perspective.

““”



### ELINOR O'CONNOR

Professor of Work Psychology  
at Alliance Manchester Business School

“Stress and responsibility are often seen as going hand-in-hand within businesses – to hold a senior management role and lead on decisions comes, many would say, with a degree of pressure and potential stress. Our research, however, highlights far deeper concerns among managers and leaders.

“As the business world evolves at pace, with new technologies, working habits and workplace cultures to contend with, there is evidently widespread fear about remaining relevant and competent. That so many (40%) regularly question their judgement might not be a bad thing – introspection can be healthy in leadership – but this is clearly coupled with worries for most (55%) about whether they will get left behind as the business landscape shifts significantly.

“The research also provides a wake-up call with regard to the need for greater support and formal training. That 29% feel that they do not have the backing of their other senior colleagues when making decisions, and even more (31%) have not received any formal training to excel in their roles, is alarming.

“Even the smartest, most committed and highly experienced of leaders still require additional training and support. From technical subjects they might not be au fait with, through to how to deliver specialist projects – such as AI implementation – there are always areas in which people can improve. Honest conversations are needed amongst leaders to ensure suitable professional development provisions are available, not just for junior staff and middle management, but also for leaders higher up the organisation.”

# WHAT TRAINING WOULD BUSINESS LEADERS MOST BENEFIT FROM?

In combination, the findings highlighted in our research warrant closer inspection. A third (31%) of the business leaders surveyed have not benefitted from any formal training in their current roles. But at the same time, so many are regularly doubting their judgements (40%) and harbouring concerns about remaining relevant and competent (55%).

Evidently, leaders require greater support and training to ensure they are fully equipped to lead confidently in the future, while at the same time helping them to manage their own self-doubts, stress and worries about their long-term performance. To dig deeper into this important topic, we asked the survey respondents about what type of formal training specifically would they see as being most valuable in their role.

Given a list of choices and allowed to select up to three, the most common choice was 'understanding AI and how best to leverage it' (40% selected this in their top three). 'Managing digital transformation projects' (32%), and 'combatting stress, improving resilience and mental wellbeing' (32%) were the next most popular options.

Only 7% of the respondents said they would not be particularly interested in receiving any type of formal training – although this view was far more common among those aged 45 and above (18%) than it was among those aged between 25 and 44 (3%).

## Looking ahead, what areas would you most want to receive formal training to help you within your job?

|                                                                  |     |             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| Understanding AI and how best to leverage it                     | 40% | <div></div> |
| Managing digital transformation projects                         | 32% | <div></div> |
| Combatting stress, and improving resilience and mental wellbeing | 32% | <div></div> |
| Motivating and engaging teams                                    | 30% | <div></div> |
| Developing commercial strategies (including sales and marketing) | 28% | <div></div> |
| Productivity coaching (for you or your team)                     | 26% | <div></div> |
| Product innovation                                               | 26% | <div></div> |
| Financial analysis                                               | 24% | <div></div> |
| None of the above                                                | 7%  | <div></div> |

“ ”



### LUCY DALY

Director of Open Programmes  
at Alliance Manchester Business School

“AI is a central theme running throughout this research. Its impact on businesses has been remarkable over the past two years, and we should expect this trend to continue for some time yet. Clearly, many business leaders are keen to get a better handle on the technology and how it could be deployed to maximum effect within their organisation. Indeed, the fact that almost a third of respondents also said they would like training on how to manage digital transformation projects shows that adopting new tech is front-of-mind for many leaders.

“But we cannot only fixate on AI. The data also shows quite an even spread across the options given – essentially, this highlights that there are a lot of different areas in which a significant proportion of business leaders would like to receive training, from people skills that would make them a better motivator through to more technical areas of training such as financial analysis.

“Ultimately, what’s important is that business leaders carefully consider what training matters most – whether that is for themselves or for a colleague or team. Every organisation is different, and relevant training programmes will be shaped by a company’s size, culture, sector, objectives and challenges.

“In many instances, we see business leaders take matters into their own hands. Some enrol on short courses to address particular knowledge and skill gaps; others go on to complete MBAs and longer courses to elevate many areas of their business acumen and develop a rounded skillset. So, while there is of course an onus on employers to invest in the training and development of their staff, it is important to remember that there are options with providers like AMBS for business leaders to choose from a wide array of courses and find one that suits their individual wants and needs.”





# THE BUSINESS WORLD WILL NEVER STAND STILL

The business world is constantly evolving. Just as regulation, tax, economic, politics and culture are ever-changing, so too does the environment in which businesses operate.

This report shows, however, just how pronounced the changes have been for UK businesses in the past five years. Things have shifted faster and more dramatically than normal, and this has translated into business leadership being more complex today than it was in 2020.

The effect this is having on companies is laid bare in this report. It is making critical business tasks more challenging, and it is taking a toll on those leading the organisations. Each business is tasked with making decisions to combat and overcome these challenges – this involves strategic decisions relating to products, processes, structures and technologies, but it also requires a careful consideration of their people, skills and cultures.

To lead competently in 2026 and into the future, business leaders require a broad range of skills, some of which they will possess and others they will not – and the research highlights that gaps in leaders' skillsets are commonplace, especially when it concerns more novel trends, such as the emergence of new technologies like AI.

We hope this report will equip leaders with valuable insight into how the business world is changing and what this means for their roles. As noted at the very start of this report, AMBS exists to empower individuals to lead with confidence, and this research offers timely guidance to business leaders as to the actions required to achieve this.





# EXECUTIVE EDUCATION TESTIMONIALS

Discover why industry leaders recommend our executive short courses.

“

As someone working at the intersection of communications, organisational psychology, and cultureTech, the Data and AI for Leaders course sharpened my approach to showing up as a leader. It explored how to design solutions that work with people, not around them.

”

**PRISCILLA KOINANGE**  
Global Head of  
Communications and  
Strategic Partnerships,  
Revaluate180.



**BARRY LEAHEY MBE**  
President,  
Playdale Playground Ltd.



“

There were several things the Strategic Productivity was great for. What I really enjoyed was learning alongside a cohort of like-minded individuals that were also craving to learn about productivity gains and knowing how to improve productivity within a leadership role.

”

“

The Unlocking Strategic Competitive Advantage course strengthened my ability to devise market-focused strategies, enabling my organisation to position itself in highly competitive markets in Africa and across the world.

”

**SUZANA AROKO**  
Communications  
Manager,  
UONGOZI Institute.



# EXECUTIVE EDUCATION TESTIMONIALS

Discover why industry leaders recommend our executive short courses.

“

The Managing Complex Business Challenges course revealed an entirely different approach to managing decisions and governance and it has been transformational in altering my thinking behind making decisions.

”



**JONATHAN FALDER**  
Director and Owner,  
HMG Paints Ltd.

**OLAWALE ODUKOYA**  
Finance Manager,  
PHD Nigeria Limited.



“

The Manchester Leadership Development Programme was a great opportunity to learn from professional minded people from a range of different backgrounds and industries.

”

“

The 4-day deep dive I took into productivity at AMBS was one of the best things I've done for myself this year. I'm really excited to bring the insights back to the team and our clients.

”

**EILEEN DONNELLY**  
CEO, Ripple & Co.



# INTRODUCING LEADERSHIP APPLIED

MANCHESTER

ORIGINAL THINKING.  
APPLIED TO TODAY'S  
ORGANISATIONAL  
CHALLENGES.

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# THE CHALLENGE LANDSCAPE



## **Performance Under Pressure**

How do we achieve more with the same resources?



## **High-Performance Culture**

How do we build accountability across modern organisations?



## **Reputation**

How do we protect trust in a world where everything is public?



## **Artificial Intelligence**

How do we create value and cut through the noise?



## **Risk & Growth**

How do we innovate without slowing down?

***GREAT ORGANISATIONS  
AREN'T BUILT BY HAVING  
ALL THE ANSWERS.***

***THEY'RE BUILT BY ASKING  
BETTER QUESTIONS.***

# WHAT MAKES LEADERSHIP APPLIED DIFFERENT?

Leadership Applied is an **active collective intelligence**. It is not about passive personal development; **it is a strategic engine for organisational impact**. By connecting cross-sector perspectives, you harness a shared intellect to solve complex enterprise challenges.



**World-leading academic insight**



**Strategic perspective**



**Peer intelligence**



**Organisational impact**



**Leaders tackling challenges as complex as your own**



**Enduring network**

Everything is applied directly to your organisation. This is the Leadership Applied difference. Rather than studying someone else's case study... you bring your own.

## ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Duration: 4 days (module one)  
+2 days (module two)

Fee: £7950

Location: Manchester

Upcoming programmes: Visit our website for the latest dates

Delivery: Face-to-face plus monthly applied learning groups between modules

FIND OUT MORE AT [AMBS.AC.UK/LAM](https://ambs.ac.uk/lam)



## FOR LEADERS WHO NEVER STAND STILL

At Alliance Manchester Business School, our short courses transform cutting-edge research into practical tools, empowering local leaders to take on tomorrow with clarity and purpose.

We're proud to offer 50% funding towards our short courses to leaders working in Greater Manchester organisations.



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OF COURSES  
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# ORIGINAL THINKING APPLIED

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