



THE DECISIVENESS CRISIS

Why **two thirds** of your leaders choose a bad outcome under uncertainty - and what to do about it.

THE DECISIVENESS CRISIS



3,159

PROFESSIONALS

25

ORGANISATIONS

Based on five years of research, this paper focuses on a subset of 3,159 professionals and 25 organisations responding to the state of uncertainty survey (May 2026).



**WHY YOUR ORGANISATION REWARDS THE WRONG
RESPONSE TO UNCERTAINTY; AND WHAT THE DATA
REVEALS ABOUT THE LEADERS ALREADY RESISTING IT.**

Sam Conniff, Uncertainty Experts

WHO IS THIS PAPER FOR?

This paper is written for the people inside organisations who are responsible for other people's leadership.

Chief People Officers. HR Directors. Heads of Learning and Development. Innovation, transformation and change leaders.

Anyone whose job description contains some version of the phrase "building the next generation of leaders", and who has ever wondered, quietly, whether the current generation is quite the one.

It is also written for the amplifiers - the coaches, network-builders, podcasters and journalists who shape the conversation about leadership and culture in public.

There is a proper reference list at the back, and it holds up under scrutiny. Part Two of this paper exists for you.

AND IT IS, OBLIQUELY, WRITTEN ABOUT THE DIRECTORS, VICE-PRESIDENTS, AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBERS WHO WILL RECOGNISE THEMSELVES UNCOMFORTABLY IN THE DATA. BUT THEY ARE NOT THE PRIMARY READER. YOU ARE.

A SHORT GUIDE, IF YOU ARE PRESSED FOR TIME:

* IF YOU WANT **THE FINDING**, READ **THE FIRST SECTION**.

* IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT TO **ACTUALLY DO ON MONDAY**, READ **THE FOURTH**.

* IF YOU WANT THE **THING THAT WILL CHANGE HOW YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP PIPELINE**, READ **THE SECOND**.

* IF YOU WANT A **PRACTICAL DIAGNOSTIC TO TAKE INTO YOUR NEXT MEETING**, READ **THE THIRD**.

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INTRODUCTION

I am going to give you the finding first, because it is the kind of finding that should land before anything else does. Sixty-five per cent of professional leaders, asked in confidence whether they would rather appear decisive and get a bad outcome, or appear uncertain and get a good one, pick the first.

Two out of every three people in your next leadership meeting. Three thousand, one hundred and fifty-nine respondents. Twenty organisations. Five years of data collection. Every sector we have reached into, including, almost certainly, yours. **Hold that for a moment.** It is not a statistic about personality. It is not about gender or age or culture.

It is not about who is smart and who is not.

It is a statistic about how organisations reward the visible performance of judgment more reliably than they reward judgment itself.

THE ANNUAL COST OF THE DECISIVENESS CRISIS TO THE UK ECONOMY IS APPROXIMATELY £20 BILLION.

And how quickly people who want to succeed inside those organisations learn what to perform. And it is costing you. Our own conservative estimate, anchored against established UK economic research and has been stress-tested by senior economists, puts the annual cost of the Decisiveness Crisis to the UK economy at approximately £20 billion. A defensible bracket sits between £12.6 and £25.2 billion per year.

We show the working inside Act 1, so you can see for yourself how we got there. If you are responsible for developing leaders, there is a version of this finding that should trouble you more than the headline does. The people most likely to choose appearance over outcome in our data are not the Chief Executives.

They are not your junior staff. They are the Senior Leadership Team, the Directors, and the Manager layer - the precise group most leadership development programmes are designed to grow.

We return to that finding in the second section of this paper, because it is the single most important practical insight in our data.

THE LARGEST WORKPLACE DATASET ON DECISIVENESS PREFERENCE

A brief word on how this paper exists at all.

Uncertainty Experts has been running the State of Uncertainty Survey (SOUS) for five years - a short, anonymous diagnostic we administer to the leaders we work with, before any training or language or framework gets introduced. The point has always been to capture the unprimed answer. What people actually think, not what they have learned to say.

Last year we joined the Mediazoo group, which for the first time gave us access to the kind of data infrastructure that makes a dataset of this size properly interrogable. This paper is the result.

Until someone shows us a bigger one, it is the largest workplace dataset on decisiveness preference we are aware of.

The paper is laid out in four parts. The first is the problem - the preference itself, and why it is structural rather than personal.

The second is the twist - where the bias concentrates inside the organisation, which is not where most people expect.

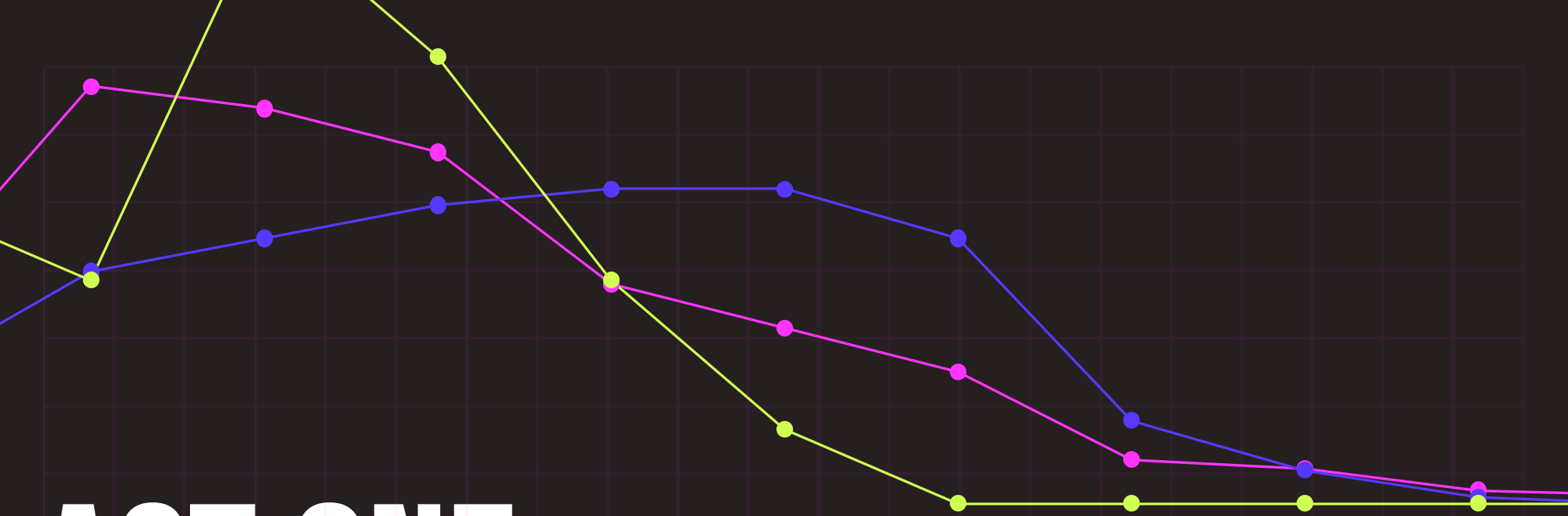
The third is the most useful and most defensible new contribution our data can offer - a three-part cognitive profile of the leaders who resist it, which we are calling the Uncertainty-Ready Leader. The fourth is what you can do about it, starting in Monday's meeting.

One last note before we begin.

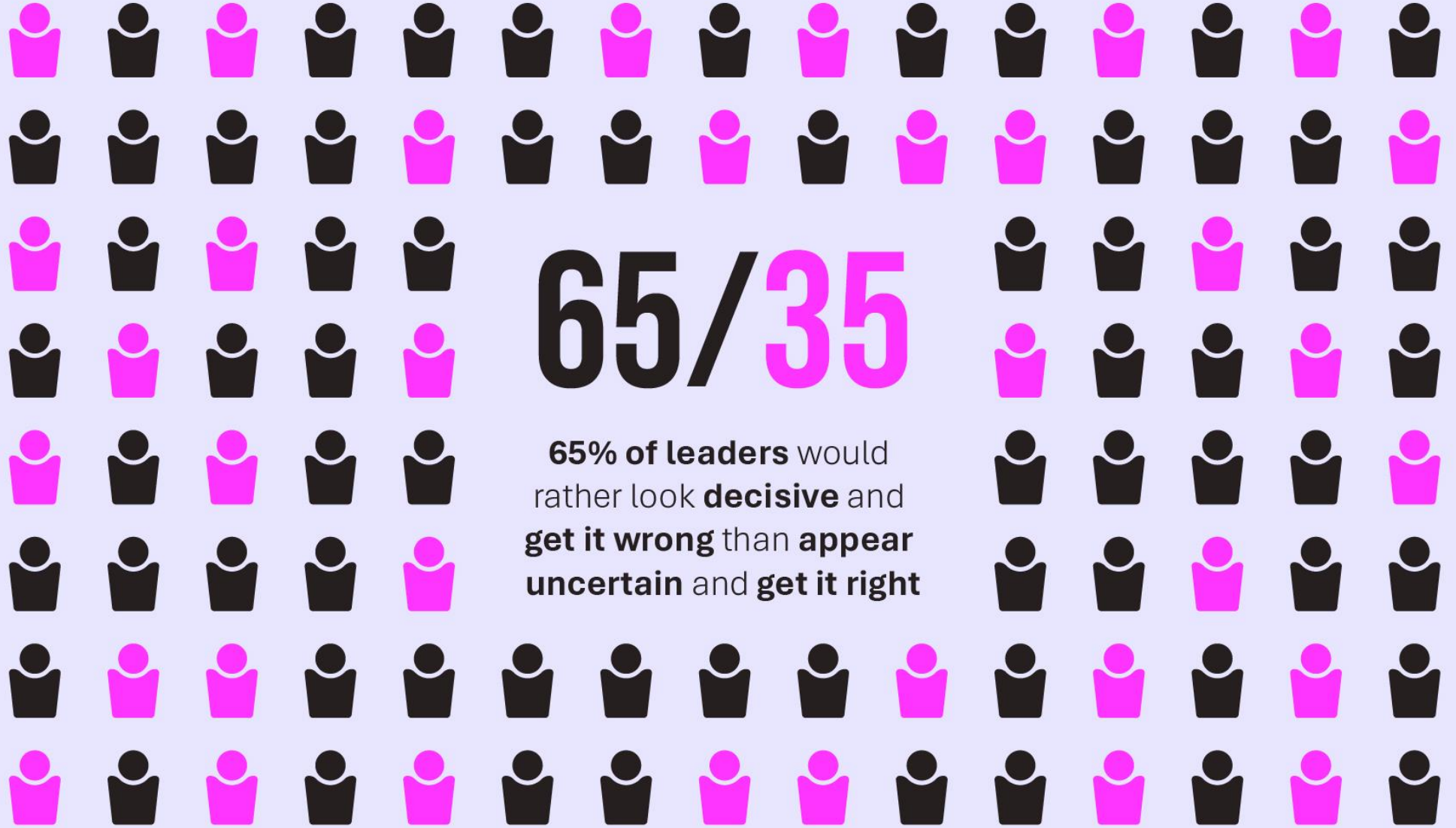
This is not a paper about uncertainty. The world is already drowning in papers about uncertainty. This is a paper about what organisations have been quietly doing with uncertainty for years, and about a small but measurable minority of leaders who have been doing something else. We think they are the people you have been looking for. And we think you have probably been accidentally promoting around them.

PART ONE

ACT 1 – ACT 4



ACT ONE: OPTIMISING FOR NEGATIVE OUTCOMES



KEY INSIGHT

Approximately 65% of professionals — the negative outcome group — prefer to be seen as decisive and get a negative outcome, rather than be seen as indecisive and get a positive outcome. This ratio is stable across 3,159 responses, 25 organisations, five years of research, and every sector and geography we have measured. It is not a personality finding. It is a systemic one. And, conservatively estimated, it is costing the UK economy in the order of **£20 billion a year.**

**65% OF PROFESSIONALS PREFER TO BE SEEN AS
DECISIVE AND GET A NEGATIVE OUTCOME,
RATHER THAN BE SEEN AS INDECISIVE
AND GET A POSITIVE OUTCOME.**

PAUSE FOR A MOMENT ON THAT SECTION TITLE...

Optimising for negative outcomes.

We are not a species that tends to do this consciously. Nobody arrives at work on a Monday morning and decides, deliberately, to make the worse decision on purpose. And yet the finding sitting at the heart of our data is that two out of three leaders, asked in private and without penalty, admit they would sacrifice the outcome to protect the appearance of having known what they were doing.

That is not a character flaw. It is not a diversity issue. It is not a problem of training, intelligence, or motivation

**THAT IS WHY
WE ARE
CALLING IT A
CRISIS, AND
NOT A BIAS.**

It is an optimisation. The entirely rational response of people working inside systems that reward the appearance of judgment more reliably than they reward the substance of it.

That is why we are calling it a crisis, and not a bias. A bias suggests something corrective - a nudge, a training programme, a workshop. What we are describing is bigger than that. It is an operating system.

THE QUESTION

Every respondent to the State of Uncertainty Survey gets asked the same question. We designed it to be uncomfortable. **There is no neutral answer.**



**WOULD YOU PREFER TO BE SEEN AS
DECISIVE, EVEN IF IT LEADS TO A
NEGATIVE OUTCOME...**

**OR INDECISIVE, EVEN IF IT LEADS TO A
POSITIVE OUTCOME?**

You either admit you would sacrifice the outcome to protect the image. Or you admit you would tolerate looking unsure in order to get something right.

Approximately two thirds pick the first. And they pick it everywhere.

In a Nordic professional services firm: 58%. In a global technology company: 76%. On a social media platform: 69%. In healthcare and education: 44%. In an FMCG brand: 73%. In an energy company: 87%. In an international development organisation: 69%. In a metropolitan police force: 50%. The mean sits at 64.2%, with enough variation to show cultural difference, and narrow enough to confirm the structural pattern.

The pre-2026 cohort (n=704) produced a ratio of 65.6%. The expanded 2026 cohort (n=455) produced 64.2%. Statistically indistinguishable.

Two and a half years of formal measurement apart. This is not a trend that is shifting. It is a stable feature of how professionals relate to uncertainty at work.

**TWO OUT OF EVERY THREE
PEOPLE IN THE ROOM
WOULD RATHER LOOK LIKE
THEY KNOW WHAT
THEY'RE DOING THAN
ACTUALLY GET IT RIGHT.**

The sector variation tells a story worth flagging. Financial services and technology produce the highest rates of performative decisiveness, some cohorts reaching 76 to 87%. Healthcare and education sit at the opposite end. The NHS and teachers cohort is the only group in our entire dataset where the majority (55.6%) chose indecisive-with-positive-outcome. These are care professions with long-term, visible, personal accountability for outcomes. When your decisions affect patients and children, and the consequences follow you home, the incentive structure shifts. The appearance of decisiveness stops being a professional advantage and starts being a professional liability.

Which tells us something rather inconvenient about the rest of the working economy. Most of it is not set up like that. Most of it rewards the performance of certainty more reliably than it rewards the reality of outcomes.

Much of it is what we've been calling **Certainty Theatre**.

CERTAINTY THEATRE IS THE PERFORMANCE OF CONFIDENCE IN THE ABSENCE OF GENUINE KNOWLEDGE.

It is the meeting where a leader is asked something they do not know the answer to, and answers anyway.

It is the quarterly review where an SLT member commits to a number they do not yet believe. It is the interview where a candidate says "leave it with me" when they mean "I will now spend three hours trying to figure out what you just asked."

It is, more than anything, the quiet gap between what organisations tell their leaders they reward, and what their leaders actually get rewarded for.

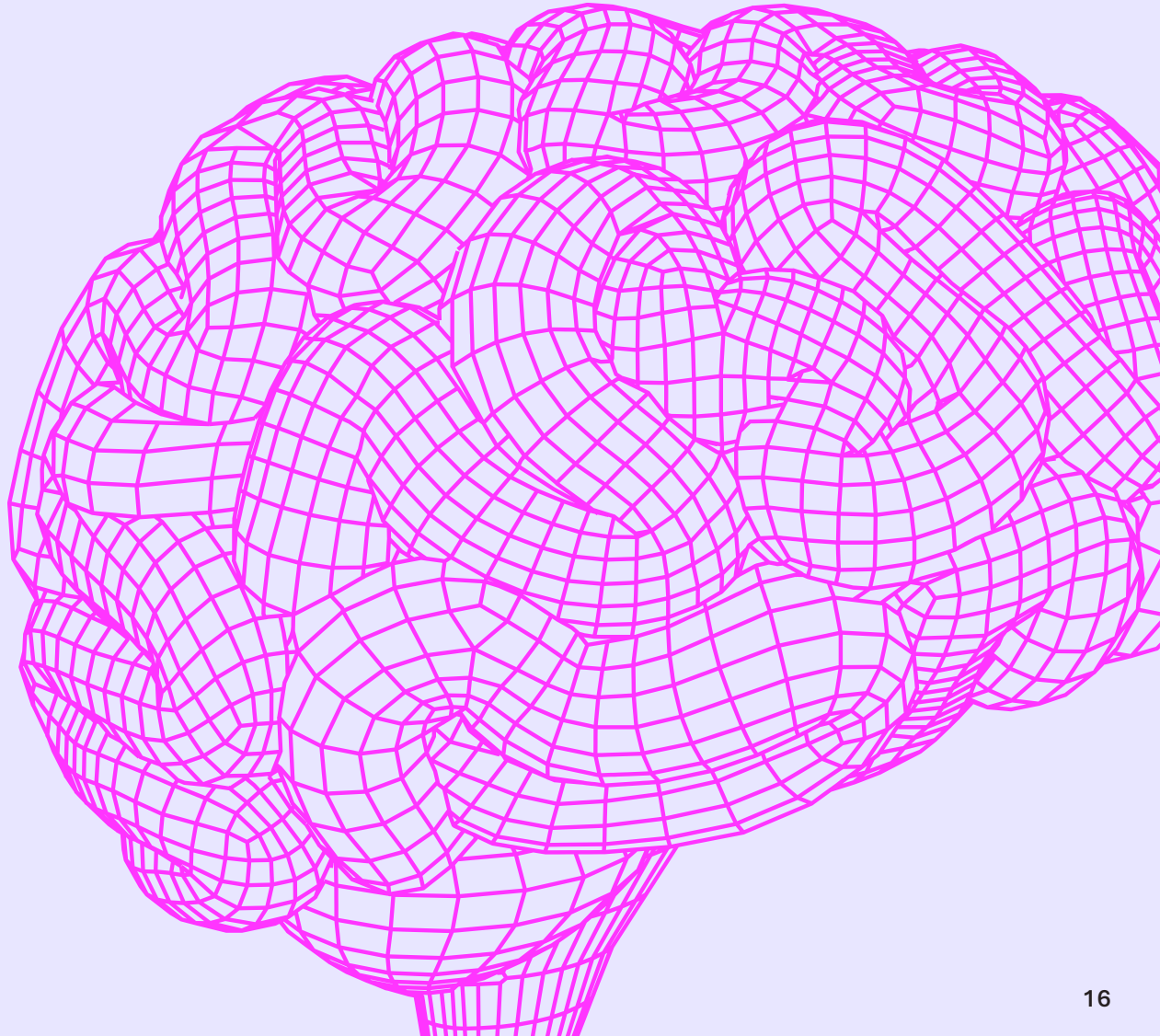
If you are a Chief People Officer reading this, the uncomfortable finding is this. Your organisation almost certainly says, publicly, that it values judgment over visible confidence.

Our data suggests that roughly two thirds of the people inside your organisation have already worked out that it doesn't. And they are behaving accordingly.

RECOMMENDATION

Before you commission any further leadership development investment this year, run a single informal test. At the start of your next senior leadership offsite, present the question from this survey. No names, no seniority capture. Anonymous vote. Before anyone has the chance to think about the right answer.

The ratio your organisation produces is a leading indicator of how it will respond under real pressure - with performance, or with inquiry. If it comes back at two thirds, you now know the size of the problem you are actually dealing with. And you know it before you spend another penny on the symptoms.



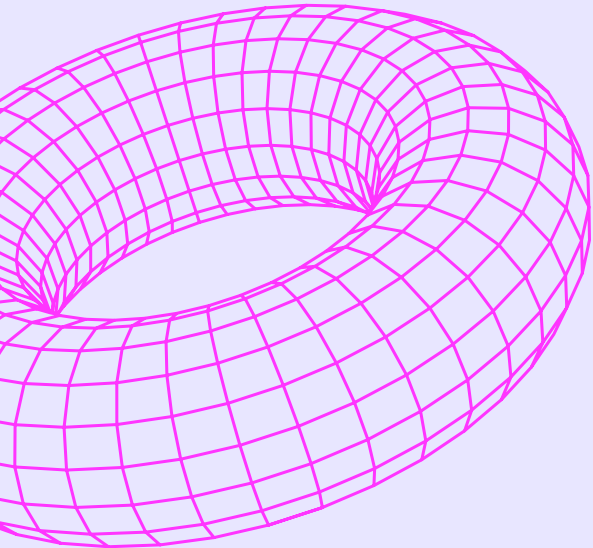
THE DECISIVENESS TAX.

£20BN

/YEAR AND COUNTING...

THE DECISIVENESS TAX

There is a bill attached to all of this. The Decisiveness Crisis is, in the first place, a behavioural finding. But behaviour has a cost, and before we move on to where the bias concentrates, we want you to see the size of what we are actually discussing.



The Chartered Management Institute established, in 2023, that poor management costs the UK economy approximately **£84 billion a year** in lost productivity, staff turnover, and disengagement. The figure was produced with academic co-authorship and independent economic review. It is cited in Parliament, in national policy, and in serious press. For our purposes, it is a conservative, well-established floor.

McKinsey's long-standing research on decision-making finds that executives spend approximately **37% of their time making decisions** - and that, in their own reporting, more than half of that time is considered ineffective by the people doing the deciding.

That gives us a chain.

If the CMI figure is robust - and it is. If the McKinsey proportion is broadly accurate - and their research consistently finds it so.

And if the decisiveness bias in our data meaningfully contributes to the ineffectiveness McKinsey identifies - which five years of data across fifteen organisations strongly suggest it does - then the share of poor-management cost attributable specifically to the Decisiveness Crisis lands squarely in the tens of billions.

THE HEADLINE

A CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATE PLACES THE ANNUAL COST OF THE DECISIVENESS CRISIS TO THE UK ECONOMY AT APPROXIMATELY £20 BILLION.

A DEFENSIBLE RANGE, REFLECTING THE PROPORTION OF DECISION-MAKING MOST DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE PREFERENCE FOR APPEARING DECISIVE OVER PURSUING GOOD OUTCOMES: £12.6 – 25.2 BILLION PER YEAR.

Call it the Decisiveness Tax. It is what your organisation is paying, quietly and continuously, to maintain the appearance of confident leadership in conditions that do not yet warrant it. Delayed course corrections. Suppressed dissent. Reduced information-gathering. The cascading cost of premature commitment in uncertain environments. None of these are line items on a P&L. All of them are real.

Here is what this figure is, and what it is not.

It is a working calculation, built openly from established economic research on UK management and on executive decision-making time. It is not a guess, and it is not marketing. It is also not, yet, peer-reviewed. The figure has been stress tested by senior figures in public and private finance institutions. As well as being in parallel conversations with

academic partners at UK business schools about formally co-authoring the methodology and submitting it for independent economic review. That process will take roughly eight to twelve weeks. We do not expect the final, peer-reviewed figure to shift by an order of magnitude from the one you are reading.

What is not in doubt is that, whatever the precise number, your organisation is paying its share.

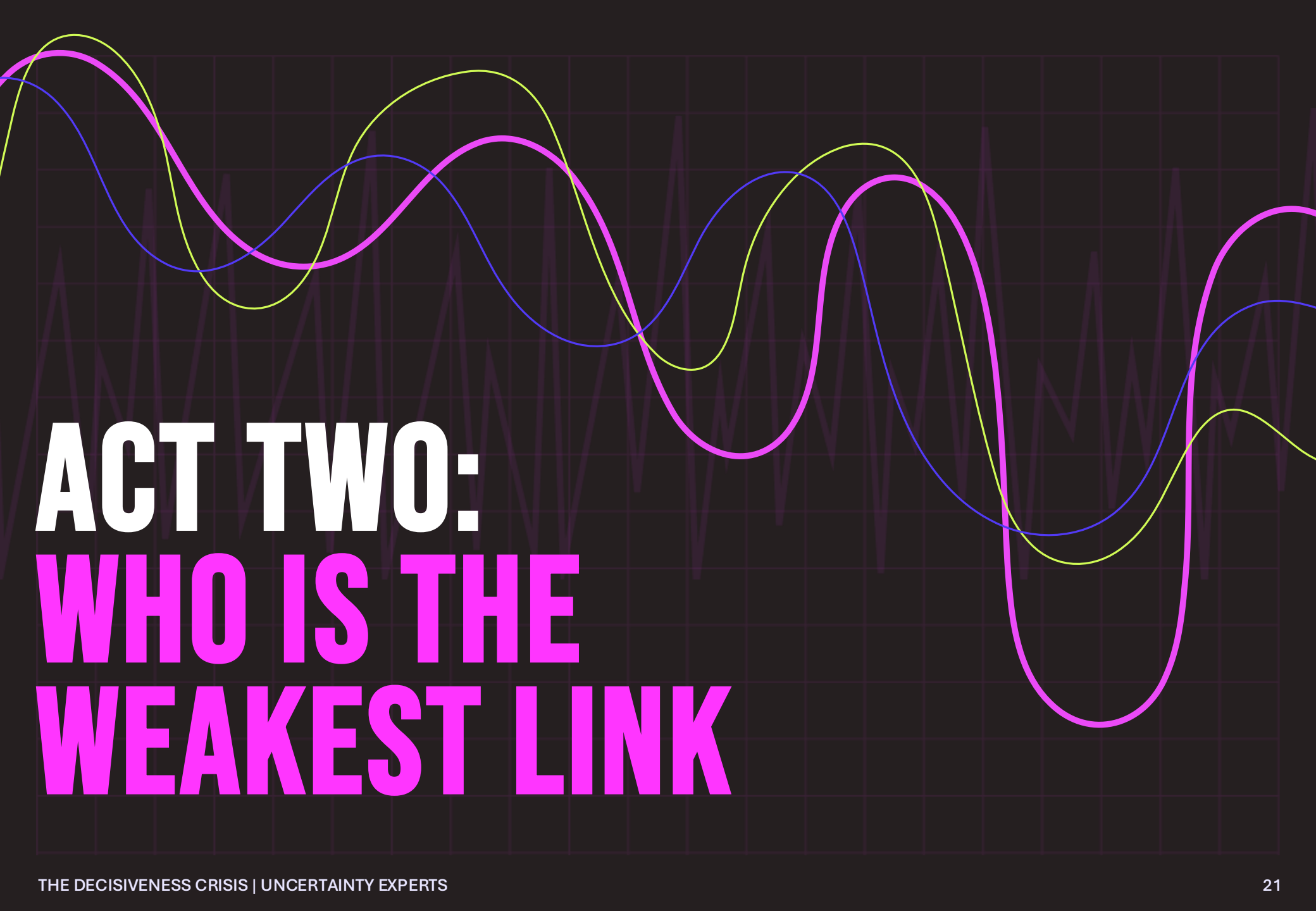
If you are a Chief People Officer reading this, you are already investing in leadership development precisely because you understand that decision-making culture has a cost. The Decisiveness Tax is the most conservative estimate we have been able to construct of what that cost looks like at national scale. Your organisation's share of it depends on your seniority mix, your tenure patterns, and how close your own culture sits to the sectoral averages in our dataset

You do not need to know the exact number to know the direction of the problem.

That is the bill for Certainty Theatre. And it is, by every honest measure we have been able to stand up in public, the most defensible conservative number we could put our name to.

The next question the data raises, of course, is the uncomfortable one. If two thirds of your leaders would sacrifice the outcome to protect the appearance of decisiveness, we should expect that bias to be concentrated somewhere specific. We should expect to find it at the top - where the pressure is greatest, where the visibility is highest, where the cost of being wrong is most public.

The data says something different.



**ACT TWO:
WHO IS THE
WEAKEST LINK**

KEY INSIGHT

C-Suite executives are the LEAST likely to prefer appearing decisive (46.9%). The Senior Leadership Team and the manager layer sitting beneath them are the MOST likely (68.9% and 72.0% respectively). The decisiveness bias does not live at the top. It lives in the layer that sets the emotional weather of the organisation, and it is statistically significant.

We asked the question the way you would ask a diagnostic question.

**WHICH LAYER IN YOUR ORGANISATION IS MOST
LIKELY TO PREFER APPEARING DECISIVE,
OVER GETTING IT RIGHT?**

Most people, when they first hear this, guess the top. They assume the pressure is greatest at the Chief Executive level. That the higher you go, the harder it becomes to admit you don't know. It is an entirely reasonable assumption. It is also wrong.

The C-Suite are the most comfortable with uncertainty of any group we have measured. Fewer than half would sacrifice outcome for appearance. These are the people who have navigated enough ambiguity to reach the top. They have earned the right to say I don't know. They have the positional authority to tolerate being seen as uncertain. And, quietly, they are the ones most often aware of how much they don't know - which, in our dataset, seems to correlate with a willingness to say it.

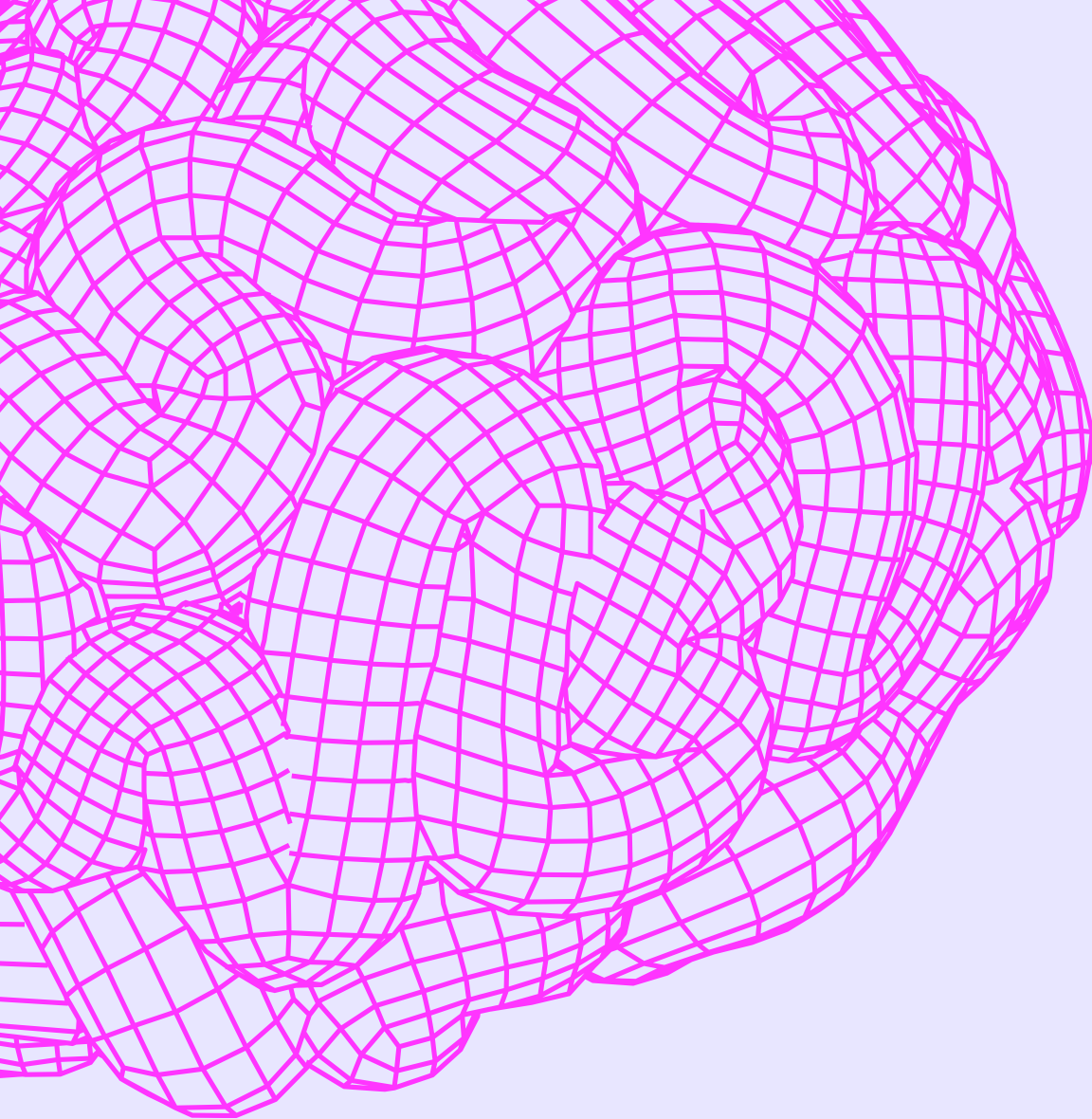
But the Senior Leadership Team - the next tier down, the Directors and Vice-Presidents, the people the rest of the organisation actually interacts

with daily - show the strongest decisiveness preference of any group we measure at senior level. At 68.9%, they are 22 percentage points more likely than the C-Suite to choose appearance over outcome. The managers sitting beneath them are higher still, at 72%. The gap between the top layer and the next is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

Approximately seven in ten, at the layer that actually runs your organisation.

This matters enormously. The SLT and manager layer are the transmission mechanism between strategy and execution. They translate direction into action. They manage the managers. They sit in the weekly meetings where priorities get set and the quarterly reviews where performance gets judged. If seven out of ten of them would rather look decisive than be right, that preference cascades through every team, every meeting, and every decision underneath them.

THE CLOSER YOU ARE TO THE TOP, THE LESS LIKELY YOU ARE TO PERFORM CERTAINTY. IT'S THE LAYER BELOW THAT'S DRIVING THE CRISIS.



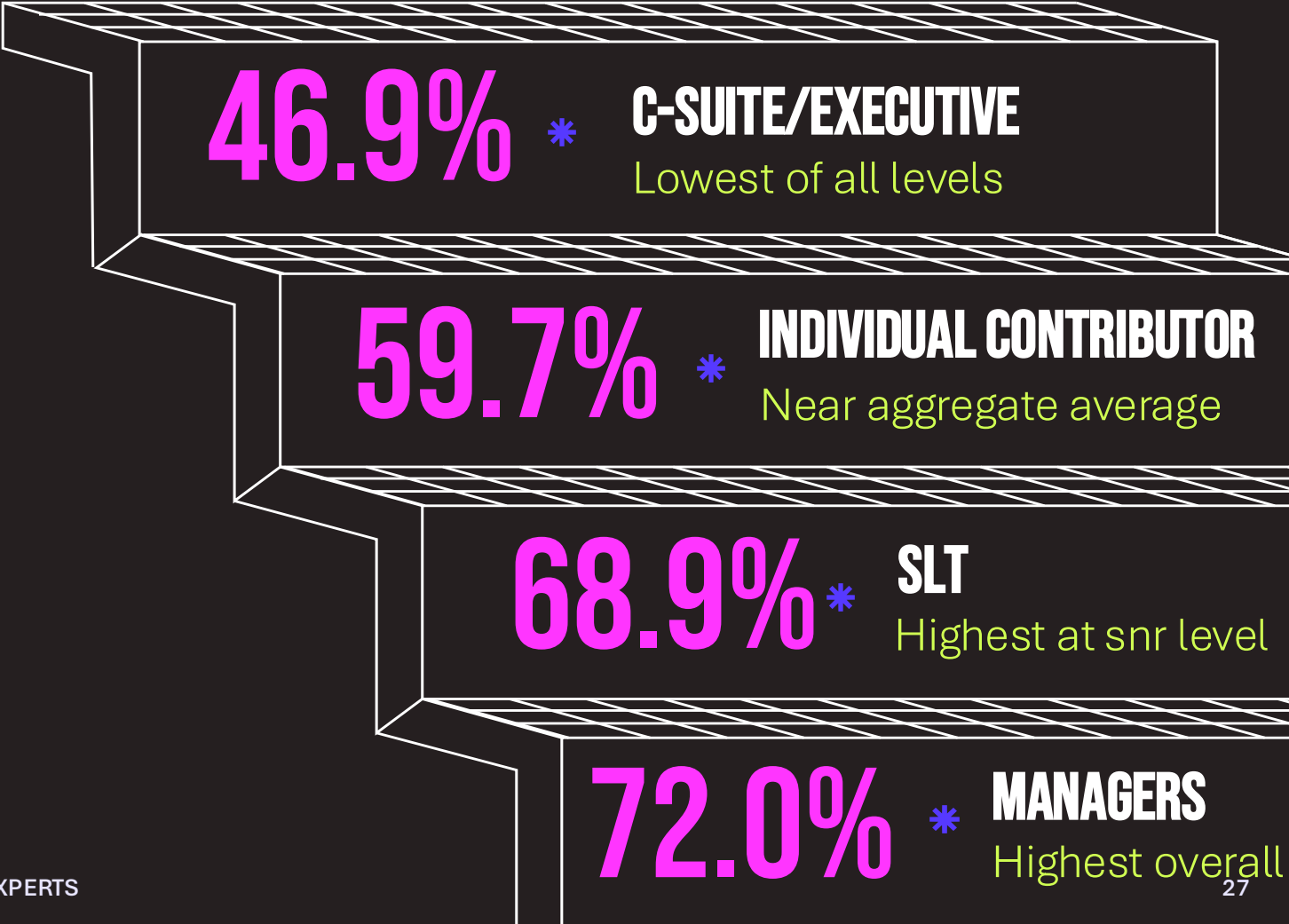
Post-Covid, this tier occupies arguably the most exposed leadership position in modern organisational life. Squeezed from above by strategic ambiguity, accountable to teams below who want clarity, navigating constant restructuring with less autonomy than the C-Suite but far more visibility than individual contributors.

They are implementing AI strategies they were not fully consulted on. Managing teams whose roles are being rewritten in real time. Answering questions they did not ask to be asked.

It is not surprising that this layer reaches for the safety of decisiveness. It is, however, deeply consequential. And if your current leadership development budget is weighted toward the top or toward the bottom of the organisation, it is almost certainly pointing at the wrong tier.

THE SENIORITY STAIRCASE

- Decisive %
- Level
- Significance



HOW ORGANISATIONS MANUFACTURE THE BIAS

There is a second finding inside the seniority data, and it is the one that tends to make Chief People Officers sit up.

The tenure effect.

Among leaders with five or more years in their current organisation, 58.2% prefer decisive. Among those with one to five years - the newer senior leaders, the ones still proving themselves - the figure rises sharply to 72.6%. A statistically significant difference.

The people who have been inside the organisation longest start to resemble the C-Suite in their comfort with uncertainty.

The newer senior leaders - often promoted or hired precisely because they have demonstrated visible confidence - are the most performatively decisive people in the entire dataset.

**ORGANISATIONS ARE
MANUFACTURING THE
VERY BIAS THAT
UNDERMINES THEM**

TENURE EFFECT

72.6%

NEW LEADERS
(1-5 YEARS)

New leaders are the **most performatively decisive**. Experience teaches them to **stop**.

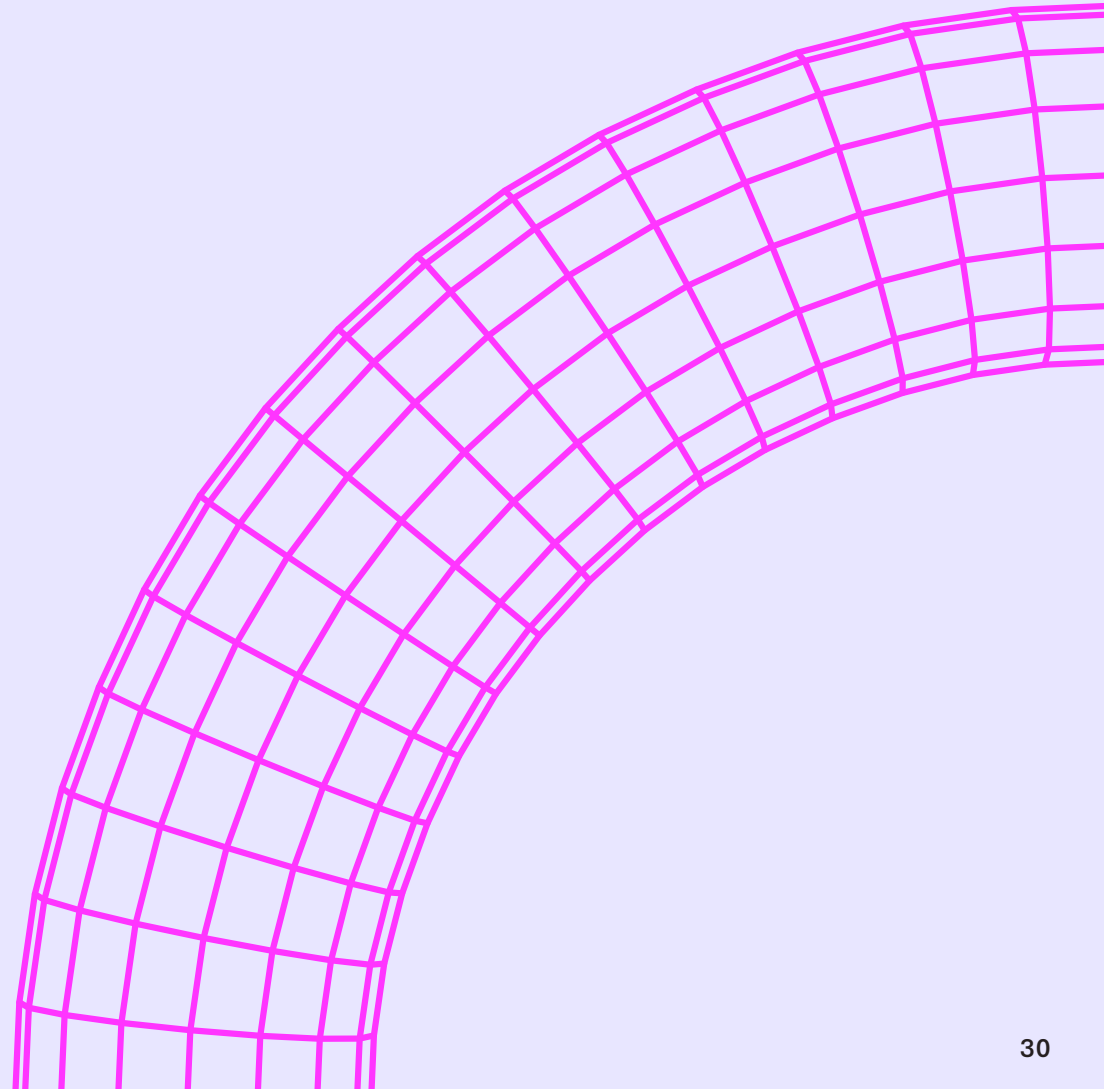
58.2%

EXPERIENCED LEADERS
(5+ YEARS)

Which suggests, uncomfortably, that organisations are manufacturing the very bias that undermines them. New leaders, anxious to establish credibility, adopt the behaviour the system appears to reward. Visible certainty. Fast decisions. Confident direction.

The longer they stay, the more they learn that uncertainty is normal and survivable. But by then, the culture has already been shaped by the anxious version of them. And a new cohort of anxious leaders has arrived behind them, doing the same thing.

The organisation is not filtering for better judgment. It is filtering for the faster performance of judgment. And once you see that pattern, it is very difficult to unsee.



WHAT THE DATA DOES NOT FIND - GENDER

IT IS WORTH NAMING WHAT DOES NOT PREDICT THE DECISIVENESS PREFERENCE. GENDER.

Men (65.2%) and women (62.9%) are statistically indistinguishable across the full dataset of 3,159 responses. At the C-Suite level, men (44.4%) and women (46.2%) show near-identical rates. At the SLT level, both genders converge on approximately 69% decisive. This finding holds at every seniority level we have measured.

This runs counter to common assumptions about gendered differences in leadership style, and it matters. It means that the decisiveness bias is structural, not demographic.

Diversity initiatives alone will not address it. The pressure to appear decisive operates equally across genders - which is both a relief and a warning.

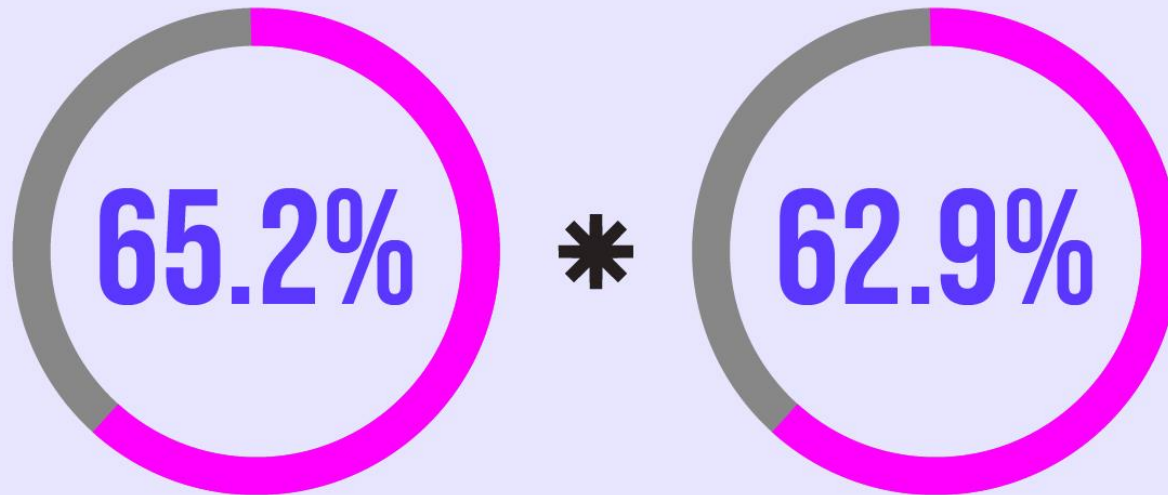
A relief because it narrows the problem. A warning because it rules out one of the most-reached-for organisational explanations.

WHAT THE DATA DOES NOT FIND - GENDER

**MEN AND WOMEN SHOW THE SAME RATES
AT EVERY SENIORITY LEVEL.**

**THIS IS NOT A GENDERED PROBLEM.
IT IS A STRUCTURAL ONE.**

THIS IS NOT A GENDERED PROBLEM.



MEN

WOMEN

IT IS A STRUCTURAL ONE.

RECOMMENDATION

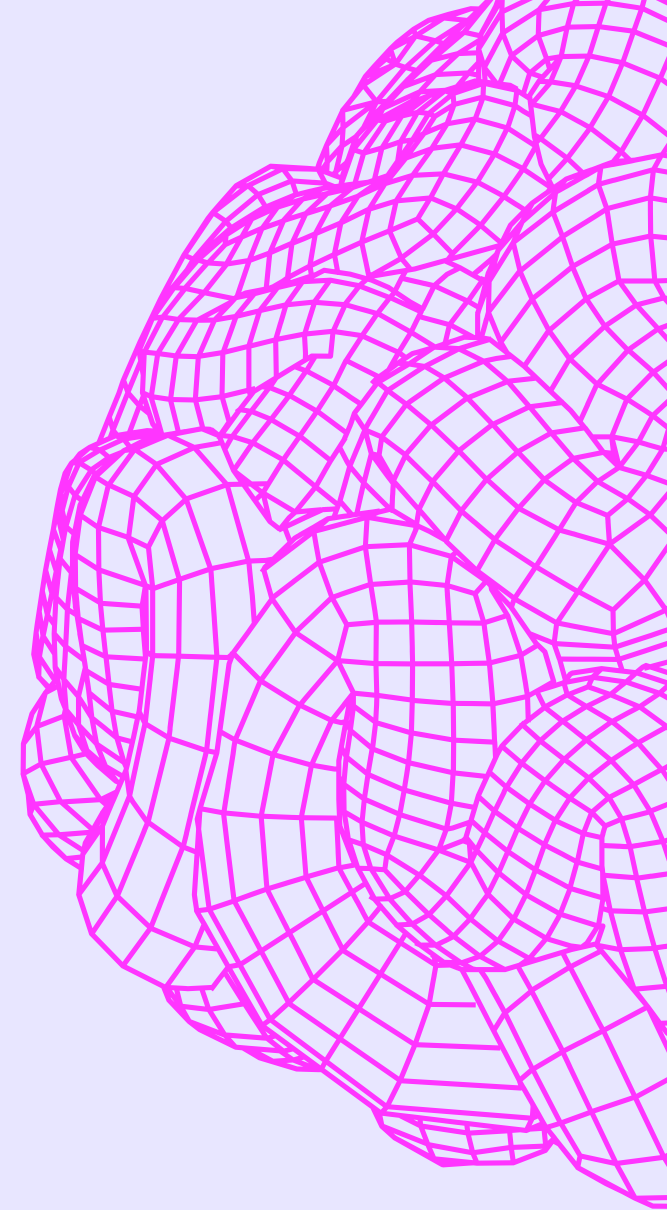
If you are designing a leadership development intervention this year, resist the temptation to start at the top or at the bottom. The C-Suite are, in most cases, doing better than you think. Individual contributors rarely get the chance to practise this work in any serious way. Start with the SLT and manager layer. Not because they are the problem. Because they are the transmission mechanism, and because they are the group most likely to be unconsciously modelling the behaviour you are trying to change.

A concrete move for next quarter: in your next leadership offsite involving SLT and managers, introduce explicit permission - and explicit protection - for the

phrase “I don’t know yet, and here is what I want to understand before I decide.” Track how many times it gets said. Track how the room responds. You will learn more in an hour than most 360 instruments will tell you in six months.

The next and most pressing question, of course, is the one the rest of this paper is designed to answer.

If two thirds of your senior leadership team is performing certainty they do not feel, what is the other third doing? What does it look like, and how do you recognise it?





ACT THREE: THE THREE ELEMENTS OF THE UNCERTAINTY- READY LEADER

KEY INSIGHT

The **35% who resist** the decisiveness bias do not simply feel differently about uncertainty. They think differently about it. Across three open-ended diagnostic questions, they consistently describe uncertainty at a higher altitude, imagine opportunity on a longer horizon, and hold themselves more accountable for their own response. These are the Three Elements of the Uncertainty-Ready Leader - **and they are three things you can listen for in any meeting.**

**THIS IS, FOR OUR MONEY,
THE MOST USEFUL PART OF THE PAPER.**

Every respondent to our survey is asked three open-ended questions about the uncertainty they face at work.

What is the biggest uncertainty currently facing your function? If it were handled well, what opportunity could it unlock? What most often gets in the way of that opportunity being realised?

Three questions. Three open-text responses. One cognitive architecture hidden underneath them.

What we found, when we read the 2026 data carefully, is that the decisive and indecisive groups do not just answer these questions differently in content.

They answer them from different altitudes, on different horizons, and with different relationships to their own role in the problem.

Three elements. One profile. And, critically for the HR reader, a set of signals you can actually listen for.

We are calling this profile the Uncertainty-Ready Leader. The 35% who got the decisiveness question right - the ones who said they would rather look uncertain and be right - are disproportionately concentrated in this profile. They are already in your organisation.

You have almost certainly met one this week. The question is whether you noticed, and whether you promoted them, or around them.

1. WHAT IS THE BIGGEST UNCERTAINTY CURRENTLY FACING YOUR FUNCTION?

2. IF IT WERE HANDLED WELL, WHAT OPPORTUNITY COULD IT UNLOCK?

3. WHAT MOST OFTEN GETS IN THE WAY OF THAT OPPORTUNITY BEING REALISED?

ELEMENT 1 - ALTITUDE: HOW THEY SEE THE UNCERTAINTY

Here is how one respondent in the positive outcome group described the biggest uncertainty facing their function:

“

How to position firm and portfolio in a rapidly changing technological environment. Generational transfer.

Here is another respondent, from the negative outcome group, answering the same question:

“

Workload.

Both are valid descriptions of uncertainty at work. But they come from fundamentally different altitudes.

Across the 2026 dataset, the positive outcome group is roughly 30% more likely to describe the uncertainty they face in external or systemic terms - politics, economics, market conditions, technology, future-of-work dynamics, cultural adaptation (39.5% versus 30.5%). The negative outcome group is approximately twice as likely to describe uncertainty in narrow, local, immediate terms - role change, deadline pressure, client retention, workload (6.1% versus 3.2%).

The difference in response length is consistent with the difference in framing. When we limit the analysis to substantive responses, the positive outcome group writes 26% longer answers to the uncertainty question (a mean of 10.7 words, compared to 8.5 words for the negative outcome group).

They are not merely wordier. They are describing a more complex object.

This pattern is recognisable in the cognitive development literature. Kegan and Lahey (2009) describe the capacity to hold multiple frames of a problem simultaneously as self-transforming cognition. Rittel and Webber (1973) drew an older and more useful distinction between tame problems - where an answer exists and merely needs finding - and wicked problems, where the problem itself keeps reshaping under inspection. The Decisiveness Crisis, read through this frame, is the organisational habit of applying a tame-problem reflex to wicked-problem conditions.

THE 65% WANT TO SOLVE. THE 35% ARE STILL MAPPING.

Another pair of verbatims to make the point concrete.

Positive outcome group:

“

How quickly our environment and the wider market is changing, and how well we are able to adapt to it.

Negative outcome group:

“

Client retention.

Both are legitimate. But one is a question about the terrain. The other is a task on a list.



DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION FOR THE HR READER

Ask your Senior Leadership Team, in the next meeting, to describe in a single sentence the biggest uncertainty facing their function. Listen for altitude. The people who describe the terrain rather than the task are the ones you most need in the room when the terrain changes.

If nobody in the room goes beyond task, that in itself is useful information - and it is information most 360 instruments will never surface.

“DESCRIBE IN A SINGLE SENTENCE THE BIGGEST UNCERTAINTY FACING THEIR FUNCTION”

ELEMENT 2 - HORIZON: HOW THEY SEE THE OPPORTUNITY

When we asked 3,159 professionals what opportunity could be unlocked if their uncertainty were handled well, almost all of them named something positive. The surprise in the data is not whether the two groups see opportunity. It is the shape of the opportunity they see.

The negative outcome group's opportunity language is short, direct, and transactional.

Representative responses:



Clearer strategic direction.



Commercial advantages on pricing.



More revenue, more opportunities for our people.

The positive outcome group's opportunity language is longer, compound, and more often concerned with things that cannot be captured on a quarterly dashboard.

Representative responses:



More long-term systemic thinking, more collaboration, increased impact, improved wellbeing, more innovation.



Greater alignment, trust, and engagement across the organisation, enabling faster decision-making and more sustainable transformation.

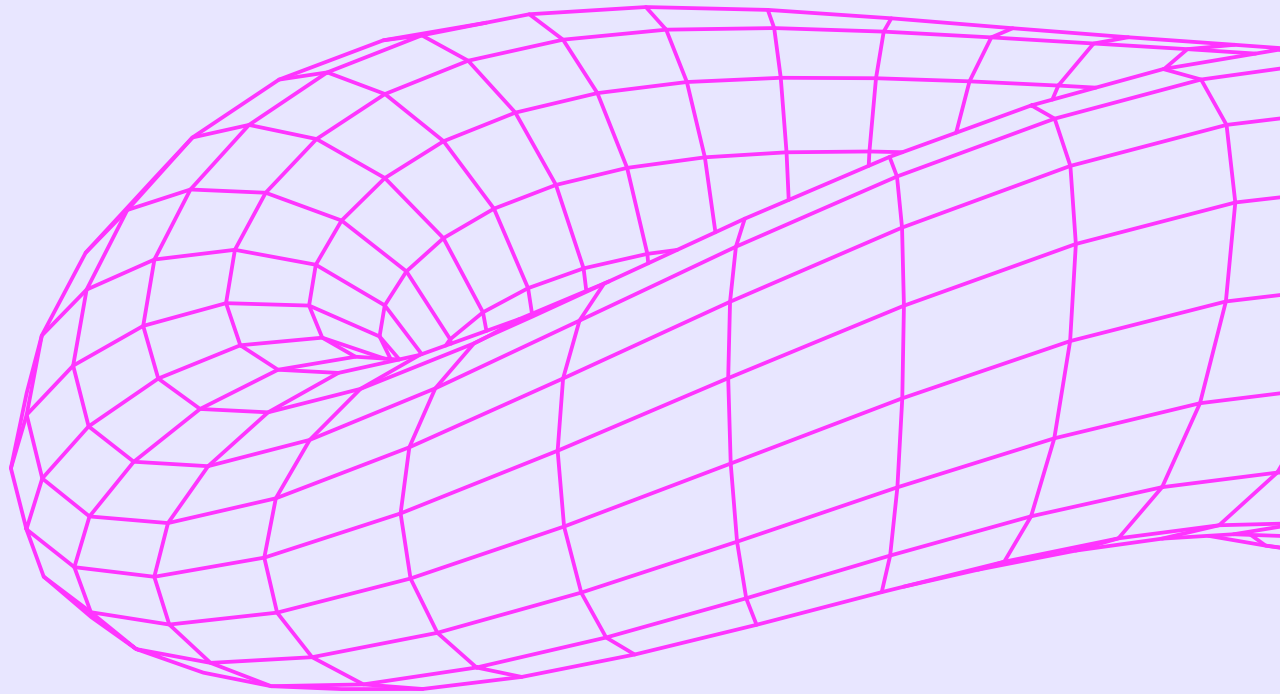


Giving a clear picture like in 2020 gives people opportunity and purpose.

Across structured coding of the open-text responses, the negative outcome group is approximately twice as likely to frame opportunity in competitive terms - growth, market share, advantage (18.8% versus 12.2%). The positive outcome group is approximately twice as likely to frame opportunity around purpose, impact, sustainability, or wellbeing (7.8% versus 3.8%). The positive outcome group is also more likely to reference long-term time horizons (15.7% versus 10.6%).

This matters for any organisation currently having a conversation about purpose, ESG, or long-term value creation. If the majority of your leaders see opportunity through a competitive, short-term lens, and the minority who think in longer, more systemic horizons are the ones being penalised for appearing indecisive, then your organisation is systematically filtering out the perspective it probably tells the world it wants.

Be careful here. Both groups want progress. Both groups name positive futures. The difference is not ambition. The difference is how expansive the future they name is, and how much of it includes things that cannot be monetised by the end of the quarter.



DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION FOR THE HR READER

When your organisation describes the upside of its current uncertainty - in town halls, in leadership away-days, in its own internal narrative - does the sentence typically end with money, or with people? Both are legitimate. But only one of them includes the things you actually hired most of your leaders to notice.

**“DOES THE SENTENCE
TYPICALLY END WITH
MONEY, OR WITH PEOPLE?”**

ELEMENT 3 - AGENCY: HOW THEY SEE THE OBSTACLE

The third element is the hardest of the three to see, and the most uncomfortable to own.

It is also, when you look carefully at the data, the one that distinguishes the rare leader from the merely capable one.

When we asked leaders what most often gets in the way of opportunity being realised, the negative outcome group identified obstacles in execution terms. Process. Approvals. Resources. Hierarchy. Time. Bureaucracy.

Representative:



Time and resources.



Bureaucratic approval processes.



Rigid decision-making structures.



The positive outcome group identified obstacles more often in epistemic terms - clarity, coordination, alignment, thinking time, and a sense that the organisation is moving before it fully understands what it faces.

Representative:



Lack of clarity and clear direction.



Too much busy work. You don't have a chance to stop and think.



Our ability to align around a strategy.

And - more quietly, and with modest but directionally consistent frequency - the positive outcome group is more likely than **the negative outcome group** to locate the obstacle inside themselves.

Self-as-barrier framing appears in approximately 8.7% of **positive outcome group** responses, compared to 6.1% of negative outcome group responses.

Representative responses from the positive outcome group:



Self-preservation.

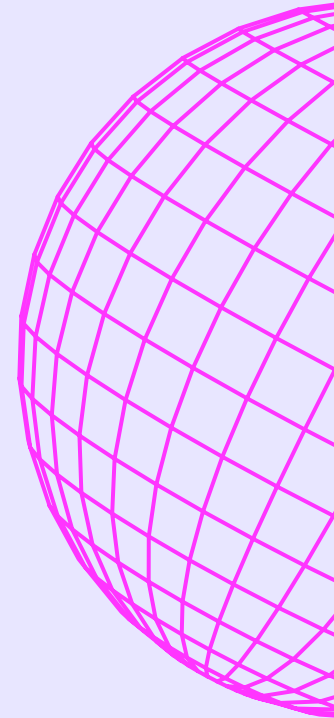


Fear of stepping out of my comfort zone.



Self-belief, mostly.

This is a softer signal than altitude. But read against the qualitative texture of the data, the direction of travel is clear. The negative outcome group tends to see the obstacle as something external to them. The positive outcome group is more likely to include themselves in the list of things that might be in the way.



This connects with two further findings. The first is what we have previously called the Recovery Gap: 61.1% of the positive outcome group report that a significant uncertainty influences their decision-making for weeks or longer, compared to 47.6% of the negative outcome group. The conventional reading would be negative - the positive outcome group dwells.

The psychological literature on extended processing suggests the opposite: longer integration of significant events is associated with deeper learning, more accurate risk assessment, and better future decision-making (Rothman and Melwani, 2017). The negative outcome group's faster recovery may be avoidance, not resilience.

The second is emotional complexity. When asked what they immediately feel when uncertainty strikes, the positive outcome group produces nearly twice the rate of mixed-valence responses (12.1% versus 7.4%).

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Where the negative outcome group tends to report single, clear emotions - anxious, stressed, frustrated - the positive outcome group more often reports combinations: anxious but curious, nervous and excited, overwhelmed but energised.

THE 35% TREAT THEIR OWN REACTION TO UNCERTAINTY AS DATA, NOT AS IDENTITY.

This is not emotional confusion. Rees, Rothman, Lehavy, and Sanchez-Burks (2013) demonstrated that ambivalence - holding mixed

feelings - is associated with more accurate judgment under conditions of uncertainty.

Taken together, the agency element describes something specific. The 35% treat their own reaction to uncertainty as data, not as identity. They notice when their first instinct is to react. They sit with mixed feelings long enough to tell the useful ones from the reflexive ones. And they are willing to include themselves in the list of things that might be in the way.

For the leader reading this, that is the hardest part of the profile. It is also, we think, the one that most reliably predicts quality of judgment under real pressure.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION FOR THE HR READER

When the people in your organisation describe the biggest obstacles to handling uncertainty well, listen for where they put themselves in the sentence. Outside it - “the process is slow, the approvals are clunky, leadership isn’t aligned” - is where most people live. Inside it - “I have not made time to think this through, and I am not being honest enough with the team about what I don’t yet know” - is rarer, and far more valuable. You do not need a personality test to find it. You need one meeting, one question, and the willingness to actually listen to the answer.

“THE PROCESS IS SLOW, THE APPROVALS ARE CLUNKY, LEADERSHIP ISN’T ALIGNED”

“I HAVE NOT MADE TIME TO THINK THIS THROUGH, AND I AM NOT BEING HONEST ENOUGH WITH THE TEAM ABOUT WHAT I DON’T YET KNOW”



**THE 35% THINK IN THREE DIMENSIONS
MOST ORGANISATIONS IGNORE.**

THE THREE ELEMENTS TOGETHER

ALTITUDE.

Separately, each is suggestive. Together, they describe a recognisable leadership profile - qualitatively different from the majority, consistent with the uncertainty literature, observable in real meetings, and almost certainly already present in your organisation.

HORIZON.

The 35% are not nicer. Not more cautious. Not slower in any way that matters. They are operating with a cognitive architecture better suited to the conditions you are probably trying to develop your leaders for.

Which brings us to the question the rest of your job depends on.

AGENCY.

WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT IT?



ACT FOUR: POST CERTAINTY: HOW TO EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

KEY INSIGHT

The **35% are a recognisable** leadership profile defined by three cognitive elements and four observable behaviours. These behaviours align with the strongest published research on decision quality under uncertainty. They are almost certainly already present in your organisation. The strategic question is whether your hiring, promotion, and development systems are currently finding them and elevating them - or filtering them out.

If we have done the first three acts of this paper well, you are probably now sitting with two reactions.

The first is recognition. You have, as you read, been mentally sorting the people in your organisation into one group or the other. That is fine. It is also, on its own, almost entirely useless

Recognition without action leaves you with a slightly better-informed version of the same problem.

The second is a question.

WHAT DO I DO WITH THIS?
THAT IS THE USEFUL ONE.

A WORKING DEFINITION

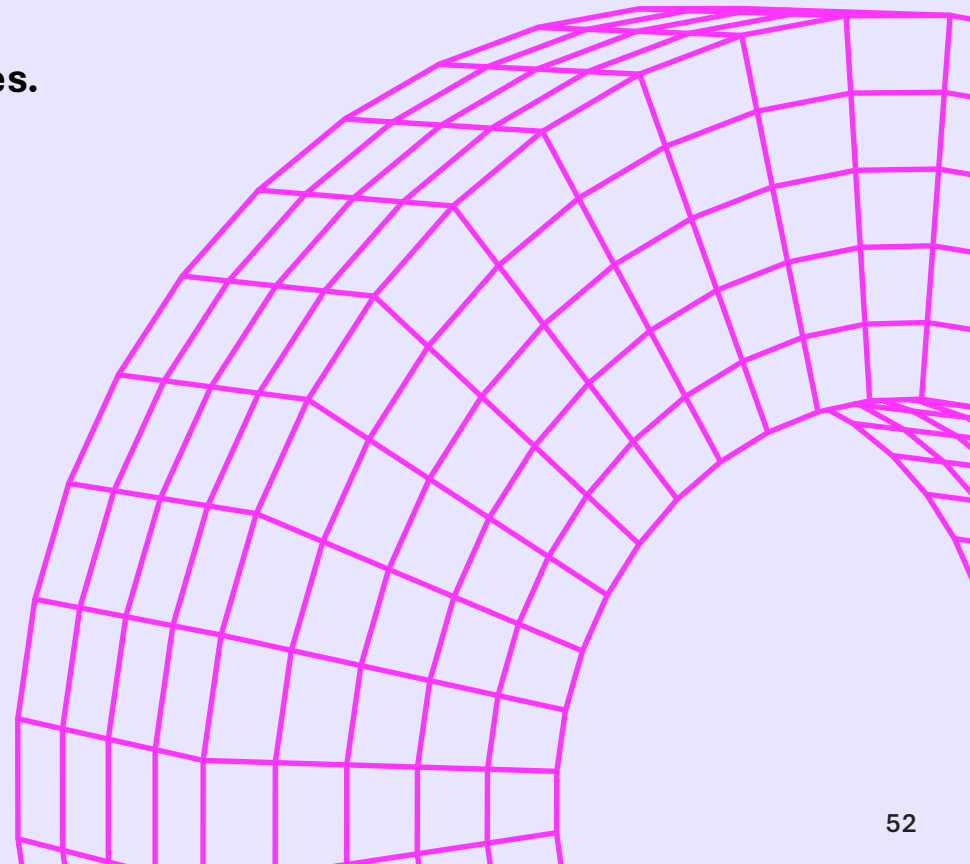
Post Certainty is not the rejection of confidence. It is the rejection of confidence as a performance metric.

It is the quiet organisational decision to stop rewarding people for sounding like they know, and to start rewarding them for behaviour that is more reliably associated with actually knowing. It is, in practice, a small number of changes to the way you hire, the way you promote, the way you run meetings, and the way you design leadership development programmes.

None of them are revolutionary. Most of them cost less than your current approach.

Collectively, they do something that most leadership investments fail to do, which is to correct the specific bias that is currently eating two thirds of your judgment capacity.

Four practical moves.



1. CHANGE WHAT YOU LISTEN FOR IN INTERVIEWS

Most leadership interviews are calibrated, consciously or unconsciously, to reward the first of the Three Elements in its wrong direction. Candidates who describe the uncertainty they face in narrow, local, task-oriented terms sound concrete. Candidates who describe it in systemic terms can sound vague.

In our data, the second group are the ones you want. Which means the interview has to change.

At the next senior hire your organisation makes, add one question and calibrate the listening around it:

TELL ME ABOUT A RECENT MOMENT AT WORK WHERE YOU DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO. WALK ME THROUGH HOW YOU DESCRIBED THE SITUATION TO YOURSELF AT THE TIME.

Listen for altitude. Listen for horizon. Listen for whether the candidate includes themselves in the sentence, or whether the obstacle is always someone or something else.

Ninety seconds of answer will tell you most of what a second-round panel will not. This is not a replacement for structured competency frameworks. It is an addition. And it costs nothing.

2. AUDIT WHO YOU PROMOTE, AND HOW FAST

The tenure effect in our data - 72.6% decisive in the 1–5 year cohort, 58.2% in the 5+ year cohort - suggests something uncomfortable about how organisations elevate people. The newer the senior leader, the more performatively decisive they are.

And because most promotion cycles run at 12–24 month intervals, the people setting the tone of your leadership culture are, at any given moment, disproportionately drawn from the group most likely to be performing confidence they do not yet feel.

The move here is not to slow down promotion. It is to be explicit, with every newly-promoted leader, that “I don’t know yet” is not a weakness. It is the behaviour the organisation has decided to reward.

Practically: add an explicit line to every senior promotion conversation that says, in effect, “this role includes the permission, and the expectation, to say you don’t know when you don’t.” It is an embarrassingly simple intervention.

Our data suggests it would outperform the vast majority of leadership development investments you will make this year.

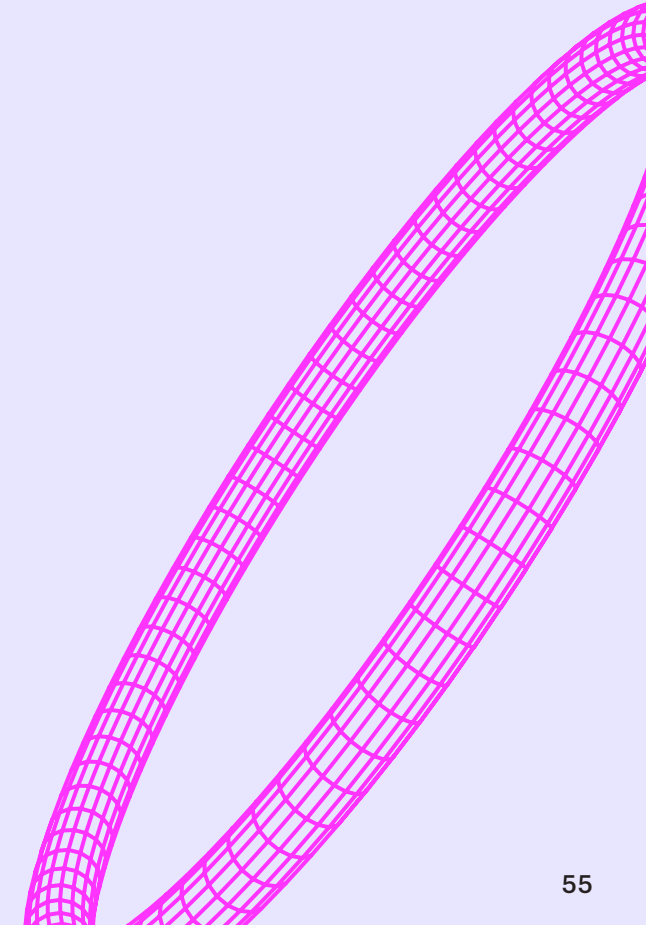
3. REDESIGN DEVELOPMENT AROUND THE THREE ELEMENTS

Most leadership development programmes teach confidence, decisiveness, and presence. These are not wrong. But they are the easy half of the job. The harder half is teaching leaders how to tolerate not-knowing long enough to get the answer right.

A practical curriculum move, which we have deployed inside client programmes and which is freely available as a framing: teach the three elements of the Uncertainty-Ready Leader explicitly. Altitude, Horizon, Agency.

Use your own organisation's language, not ours. Build the diagnostic questions from Act 3 into your 360 processes. Make altitude, horizon, and agency measurable in your leadership reviews, at whatever granularity you can reasonably capture.

This is the part of the work where we can help - through the Uncertainty Experts programme, through our scalable digital training, or just through a conversation about what would work inside your specific context. Get in touch. Or don't. Either way, do the work.



4. STOP FILTERING OUT THE 35%



This is the quietest and most important move of the four.

The leaders in your organisation who are already showing the three elements - who describe uncertainty at altitude, imagine opportunity on a longer horizon, and include themselves in the list of barriers - are often, in the cultures we measure, subtly disadvantaged. They get described as thoughtful rather than decisive. They are considered for senior individual-contributor roles rather than senior leadership roles. They are often passed over for promotions that go to more performatively decisive peers. They are, in a word, filtered.

If you are a CPO or HR Director reading this, you have almost certainly done this at least once. You have probably made a defensible-looking promotion decision in the last eighteen months that selected for visible confidence over actual judgment. This is not a character flaw. It is how the system was built to operate. But it is correctable.

The correction is as simple as a different question in the final promotion conversation. “If this person said ‘I don’t know yet’ in their first week, would we see that as a strength or a concern?”

The answer, in most organisations, is still concern. Change the answer, and a great deal of what you have been trying to fix will start fixing itself.

ALTITUDE

They gather information before they commit.

They hold mixed emotions without collapsing into one feeling.

AGENCY

HORIZON

They frame opportunity in longer, more systemic terms.

They process uncertainty for longer - and this is a feature, not a bug.

AGENCY



THE UNCERTAINTY-READY LEADER, FOUR BEHAVIOURS

Mapped directly onto the three elements above, the 35% exhibit four consistent behaviours. These are not personality traits. They are observable, trainable, and entirely consistent with the strongest published research on decision quality under uncertainty.

THE UNCERTAINTY- READY LEADER

Four behaviours, each rooted in one of the three elements:

1. THEY GATHER INFORMATION BEFORE THEY COMMIT. (ALTITUDE.)

They seek evidence, ask clarifying questions, and sit with ambiguity long enough to see the shape of the problem. Kruglanski's (2004) work on cognitive closure identifies this as the defining feature of decision-makers who perform better in genuinely uncertain environments.

2. THEY FRAME OPPORTUNITY IN LONGER, MORE SYSTEMIC TERMS. (HORIZON.)

More likely to name purpose, sustainability, or collective benefit than competitive advantage. More likely to describe outcomes that require patience, alignment, and sustained effort. More likely to think past the quarterly dashboard.

3. THEY HOLD MIXED EMOTIONS WITHOUT COLLAPSING THEM INTO ONE FEELING. (AGENCY.)

Nearly twice the rate of emotional complexity in the data. Anxious and curious. Nervous and excited. Overwhelmed and energised. This emotional architecture is linked to more accurate judgment (Rees et al., 2013; Rothman and Melwani, 2017).

4. THEY PROCESS UNCERTAINTY FOR LONGER. (AGENCY.)

Significant events influence their decision-making for weeks, not days. This is not dwelling. It is the integration of experience into future judgment - a capacity most organisations treat as slowness and reward accordingly.

These four behaviours are not abstract ideals. They are observable, measurable patterns in 3,159 professionals across twenty five organisations.

And they are precisely the capabilities the uncertainty literature identifies as predictive of better outcomes in genuinely uncertain conditions: information-seeking before commitment (Kruglanski, 2004), emotional complexity in leadership (Rothman and Melwani, 2017), tolerance of

ambiguity (O'Connor, Paunonen and Jackson, 2022; 2025), longer time horizons in strategic thinking, and the productive discomfort that diversity of perspective produces (Phillips, 2006).

**THEY ARE
OBSERVABLE,
MEASURABLE
PATTERNS IN
3,159
PROFESSIONALS
ACROSS
TWENTY FIVE
ORGANISATIONS.**

CLOSING

We have been working with organisations on their relationship with uncertainty for a decade. This dataset is the most honest picture we have yet been able to produce of what actually happens inside them, when the pressure is real, before anyone has had a chance to rehearse the right-sounding answer.

The Decisiveness Crisis is real. It is probably already in your organisation. And - more importantly - so is the 35%. They are already in your building. Some of them are in your leadership team. Some of them are in the teams beneath it. And some of them, almost certainly, are the people you have been looking for without quite knowing how to describe them.

The strategic question for the people who buy leadership development - and who have read this far - is not whether the Crisis exists. It is whether your organisation is currently finding, promoting, and growing the 35%, or whether it is quietly, consistently, and expensively filtering them out.

The paper you are reading is our best attempt at giving you the language, the framework, and the diagnostic to start finding them.

THE 35% ARE NOT THE PROBLEM. THEY ARE THE PROOF OF CONCEPT.

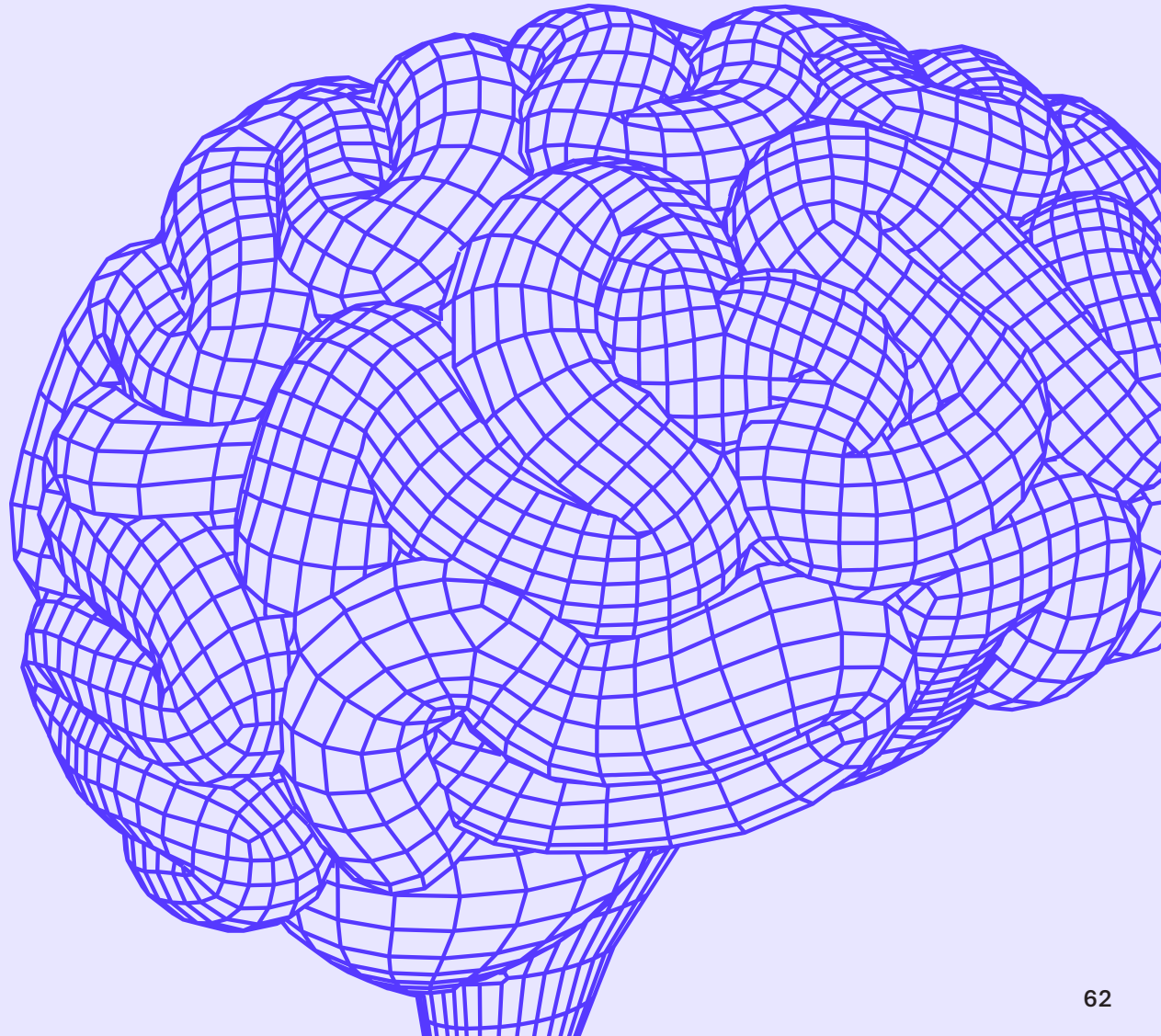
PART TWO

RESEARCH SUMMARY

RESEARCH SUMMARY

This part of the paper is where the receipts live. If you are a CPO or HR Director, you will have got what you came for in Part One and can stop here with no loss of meaning. Part Two is for the amplifier reader - the journalist, the coach, the academic, the programme commissioner - who needs to see the methodology, the sample composition, and the inferential logic before they are willing to quote from, endorse, or share the work.

We have tried to keep it honest, concise, and useful. Nothing in here contradicts Part One. It just shows the work.



METHODOLOGY

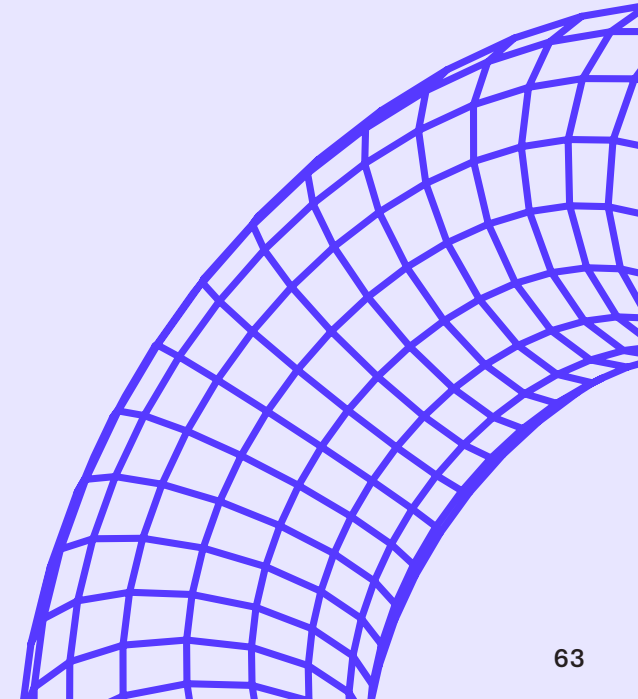
The Instrument

The State of Uncertainty Survey (SOUS) is a proprietary diagnostic tool administered immediately after an initial engagement with Uncertainty Experts, before any concepts, frameworks, or language are introduced. It is designed to capture instinctive, unprimed responses to uncertainty. The survey takes approximately five minutes to complete and is entirely anonymous.

The 2026 version of the SOUS contains 14 items across four sections: Immediate Experience of Uncertainty (3 items - think, feel, recovery duration); Perspective on the Organisation (4 items - two-word description, biggest uncertainty, opportunity, barriers);

Behaviour, Safety, and Belief (3 items - observed colleague behaviours, psychological safety rating, self and team efficacy ratings); and Demographics (4 items - organisation, tenure, seniority, gender). The decisiveness preference question sits within Section 3. The three open-text items in Section 2 are the basis of the three-element analysis presented in Act 3.

Pre-2026 versions of the SOUS varied in structure but all included the decisiveness preference question and efficacy ratings, enabling cross-cohort comparison on core measures.



Participants

The dataset comprises 3,159 valid responses from 25 organisations. The 2026 cohort (n=455) includes participants from organisations across FMCG, energy, technology, international development, cross-sector leadership programmes, and policing. The pre-2026 cohort (n=704) includes organisations across financial services, social media, technology, healthcare, education, defence, and specialist consultancy. Organisations span eight broad sectors and include both private and public institutions across Europe, the United States, and international organisations.

Within the 2026 cohort, the seniority distribution is: C-Suite / Executive (10.8%), Senior Leadership Team (22.6%), Manager / People Leader (29.0%), Individual Contributor (33.8%), and Other / Freelancer (3.7%). Gender distribution: Male (40.4%), Female (52.7%), Other / Prefer not to say (6.8%).

Analytical Approach

Quantitative analysis employs chi-square tests of independence for categorical comparisons (decisiveness preference by seniority, tenure, and gender) and Cohen's *d* effect size estimates for continuous measures (efficacy ratings, recovery duration).

Qualitative analysis uses structured coding of open-text responses across three dimensions: scope (individual to system), time horizon, and agency framing (self as barrier, environment as barrier, epistemic barrier). Emotional responses are classified as somatic, cognitive, or affective.

All tests use a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$.



QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Core Finding: The 65/35 Ratio

Across all 3,159 responses, 754 (65.1%) chose decisive-with-negative-outcome and 405 (34.9%) chose indecisive-with-positive-outcome. The pre-2026 ratio (65.6%) and the 2026 ratio (64.2%) show no evidence of temporal shift.

Moderators of the Decisiveness Preference: Efficacy and Safety Ratings

The self-efficacy finding is the only continuous measure to reach the threshold for a small effect. The negative outcome group rates their own uncertainty-handling ability approximately half a point higher on a 10-point scale.

This confidence does not extend to their assessment of colleagues, where the groups are virtually identical. The psychological safety finding is notable for its direction: the negative outcome group reports marginally higher safety, consistent with the interpretation that majority preference confers a sense of normative comfort.

Seniority-Gender Interaction

At the C-Suite level, men (44.4%, n=18) and women (46.2%, n=26) show near-identical decisiveness rates. At the SLT level, both genders converge on approximately 69% decisive (men 68.8%, women 68.0%).

The aggregate gender null finding holds at every seniority level, reinforcing the interpretation that the decisiveness preference is driven by positional and cultural factors, not demographic ones.

Qualitative Analysis

The three-element framework presented in Act 3 derives from structured analysis of three open-text items: biggest uncertainty faced (altitude), opportunity if uncertainty handled well (horizon), and barrier to realising that opportunity (agency).

Altitude - Scope of Uncertainty Described

Coded on a continuum from individual-narrow (role, workload, client, deadline) to systemic-broad (market, economy, technology, geopolitics, culture). Across the 2026 dataset, the positive outcome group was approximately 30% more likely to describe the uncertainty they face in external or systemic terms (39.5% versus 30.5%). Response length was also substantially greater in the positive outcome group on this item (mean 10.7 words versus 8.5 words for substantive responses over 20 characters).

Horizon - Orientation of Opportunity

The most notable qualitative difference emerged in orientation: 18.8% of the negative outcome group framed opportunity in competitive terms (growth, market share, advantage) compared to 12.2% of the positive outcome group.

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Conversely, 7.8% of the positive outcome group framed opportunity around purpose (impact, sustainability, wellbeing) compared to 3.8% of the negative outcome group. The positive outcome group was also more likely to reference long-term time horizons (15.7% versus 10.6%).

Agency - Location of Obstacle

The negative outcome group more frequently identifies barriers in execution terms: fear of failure, competing priorities, decision bottlenecks, approval processes. The positive outcome group more frequently identifies barriers in epistemic terms: unclear direction, insufficient understanding of the problem, and a sense that the organisation is moving before it fully understands what it faces. A softer but directionally consistent finding: the positive outcome group is more likely to locate at least part of the obstacle within themselves (self-as-barrier coding: 8.7% versus 6.1%).

This distinction between execution barriers and epistemic barriers is consistent with Kruglanski's seize-and-freeze framework, in which high need for closure drives premature commitment to a course of action.

Emotional Response Patterns

Both groups show similar distributions across somatic, cognitive, and affective categories. The most meaningful qualitative difference is in emotional complexity: the positive outcome group produces nearly twice the rate of mixed-valence responses, consistent with the emotional complexity literature and with research linking ambivalence to more accurate judgment under uncertainty (Rees et al., 2013; Rothman and Melwani, 2017).

FINDING	RESULT	SIGNIFICANCE
C-Suite vs SLT	46.9% vs 68.9%	Significant (p < 0.01)
C-Suite vs All Others	46.9% vs 66.8%	Significant (p < 0.01)
Tenure: 5+ yrs vs 1–5 yrs	58.2% vs 72.6%	Significant (p < 0.01)
Recovery: Weeks+ duration	47.6% vs 61.1%	Significant (p < 0.01)
Gender: Male vs Female	65.2% vs 62.9%	Not significant

FINDING	RESULT	SIGNIFICANCE
Self-Efficacy (2026)	Decisive 7.21 vs Indecisive 6.75	Small effect (d=0.27)
Team-Efficacy (2026)	Decisive 6.32 vs Indecisive 6.11	Negligible (d=0.13)
Psychological Safety (2026)	Decisive 6.88 vs Indecisive 6.69	Negligible (d=0.08)

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY NOTE ON THE ECONOMIC COST ESTIMATE

The £20 billion figure presented in Act 1 is built from three established sources: the Chartered Management Institute's (2023) estimate that poor management costs the UK economy £84 billion per year; McKinsey's (2019) finding that executives spend approximately 37% of their time on decision-making, of which more than half is considered ineffective; and our own dataset of 3,159 responses across 25 organisations showing that approximately 65% of professionals (rising to around 70% at SLT and manager level) prefer decisive-with-negative-outcome over indecisive-with-positive-outcome.

The conservative £20 billion estimate, and the £12.6–25.2 billion defensible range, reflect the proportion of poor-management cost most directly attributable to the preference for appearing decisive over pursuing good outcomes - including delayed course corrections, suppressed dissent, reduced information-gathering, and the cascading effects of premature commitment in uncertain environments.

The figure has been stress tested by senior figures in public and private finance institutions.

Our intended pathway to a peer-reviewed number:

(1) anchor against ONS productivity statistics and CIPD employee engagement data; (2) co-author the methodology with an academic partner at a UK business school with expertise in organisational behaviour (LSE, Oxford Saïd, or Warwick Business School shortlisted); (3) submit for independent economic review by a body such as the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR). We expect this process to take approximately eight to twelve weeks. This approach mirrors successful precedent. The CMI's own £84 billion figure was produced in partnership with academic researchers and validated by independent economists.

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