



RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Hospitality Leadership Skills

EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS REPORT

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1	3
Executive Summary	
CHAPTER 2	6
Context, Challenge, and Purpose of Study	
CHAPTER 3	9
Key Findings	
CHAPTER 4	18
Implications and Recommendations	
CHAPTER 5	22
Conclusion	

The background features a dark blue field with a complex geometric pattern of overlapping circles and small dots, creating a network-like or molecular structure. The circles are thin and light blue, while the dots are small and dark blue.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive
Summary

Today's hospitality industry is being tested by two powerful forces: rapid technological advancement, particularly artificial intelligence, and rising expectations for authentic experiences.

At the same time, the industry faces a structural challenge whereby the care extended to guests has not consistently been mirrored internally. Management systems built around efficiency and control have struggled to address demanding working conditions, contributing to persistent high turnover. As a result, human-centric leadership is now critical for retention, service quality, and brand reputation.

Current leadership models assume that skills accumulate; that stronger leaders simply possess more of them.

This assumption becomes increasingly fragile under conditions of complexity.

This study addresses a central question:

What leadership capabilities will endure in an increasingly complex, technology-enabled environment?

Drawing on decades of hospitality research and input from industry experts, our findings have identified 30 skills across four domains: **self-leadership, human connection, hospitality business, and future-ready capabilities**. Crucially, the study reframes leadership as a configuration of interdependent skills shaped by context, rather than a fixed set of competencies.



Five key insights emerge

1. Self-leadership is the non-negotiable foundation.

Capabilities such as self-awareness, learning agility, and adaptive resilience are prerequisites for leadership. They do not differentiate leaders; they enable them to function from the get-go.

2. Leadership is context-dependent.

No single skill applies universally. Role, level, lifecycle stage, and environment determine which capabilities matter. Success depends on aligning the right skills with situational demands.

3. Human connection is the relational core.

The ability to build trust, communicate across differences, recognize and respond with discernment and care remains central. These constitute the connective tissue through which other skills become visible.

4. Future-ready skills are critical but underdeveloped.

The capabilities to imagine the future and lead with foresight are widely recognized yet deprioritized in daily operations, despite their growing importance.

5. Leadership is configurational, not additive.

Skills do not operate in isolation. Their value emerges through interaction, requiring coherent patterns of capability rather than accumulated competencies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Self-leadership must be treated as both a developmental priority and a selection condition built deliberately from early career stages, and used as a threshold criterion at senior levels, not assumed to be present. Development should shift from standardized programs to configurations tailored to specific roles and contexts, with explicit attention to which combinations of skills matter at a given lifecycle stage. Assessment should move beyond aggregated scores toward pattern recognition, examining how capabilities hold under pressure, whether they fit the specific demands of the role, and whether the self-leadership foundation is genuinely active rather than assumed.



The background features a dark blue field with a complex pattern of overlapping, thin, light blue circles. Small, light blue dots are scattered throughout the field, some appearing at the intersections of the circles and others in the open spaces. The overall effect is reminiscent of a constellation or a network diagram.

**CONTEXT, CHALLENGE,
AND PURPOSE
OF STUDY**

Hospitality is the practice of welcoming and caring within a reciprocal relationship founded on trust. While the material forms of hospitality have evolved from monasteries and inns to global hospitality corporations, the normative core implied by hospes (the Latin term denoting the shared bond between host and guest) has remained stable. This heritage now collides with an industry environment shaped by artificial intelligence and the quest for authentic experiences. Automation enables scale and predictive personalization, while simultaneously reshaping the situations in which human judgement and contextual sensitivity are needed. These forces have not replaced the obligation encoded in hospes but raised the stakes of fulfilling it, and with it, the demands on the people responsible for delivering that experience.

“
Hospitality is the practice of welcoming and caring within a reciprocal relationship founded on trust.
”

Yet the same care applied to welcoming the guest was not always extended to those doing the welcoming. As organizations scaled, the industry borrowed from management principles of the time – hierarchy, standardization, control, efficiency – to manage the scaling labor rather than from hospes applied internally.

The work was already physically and emotionally demanding, with irregular hours, modest pay, and limited career prospects. The result is well documented in hospitality: high turnover has become a defining characteristic of the sector.



This makes the case for human-centric management especially acute. Retention, service quality, and brand reputation increasingly hinge on how well organizations provide supportive, fair, and meaningful work environments, and the consequences of not doing so are visible in the turnover data. The argument is not new. Advocacy for humanizing management dates back a century, surfacing in the 1920s human relations movement, which demonstrated that morale and social ties directly affect performance. This advocacy then resurfaced in the 1960s with quality of work-life approaches and recast employees as sources of motivation and innovation rather than merely costs to be controlled.

The question of how to lead the workforce in terms of leadership has never been more consequential. The 2025 WEF Future of Jobs Report highlights leadership and social influence among the core human-centered skills, which employers rate as essential today and expect to grow further in importance. The 2024 OECD analysis of online job ads shows that AI-exposed roles place particularly strong emphasis on management skills and social, people-oriented competences.

Together, these trends indicate a clear convergence: as technology assumes execution, distinctively human capacities move to the strategic center. It is precisely this inflection point that motivates this research. What are the hospitality leadership skills, and which ones will endure in our world of constant change?

This study has adopted a Delphi-inspired design, integrating systematic review and structured expert judgement. The initial phase consisted of a comprehensive literature review covering approximately four decades of hospitality leadership scholarship. This review identified more than 1,500 leadership skill statements, which were subjected to iterative coding, consolidation, and abstraction across successive analytic cycles. The outcome was a framework comprising 30 sub-skills organized into four meta skills: self-leadership, human connection, hospitality business, and future-ready skills (see Table 1).

The second phase mobilized expert judgement to interrogate this framework. Twenty-two experts took part in a structured skill-ranking exercise, followed by moderated focus group discussions. In line with Delphi logic, these discussions focused on interpreting aggregated results, explicating the rationale behind priority judgements, and examining how leadership skills combine and shift across contexts, rather than on generating additional skill items. This approach enabled systematic refinement of the framework through expert sensemaking while maintaining a clear distinction between academic construction and practitioner interpretation.



The background features a dark blue field with a complex pattern of overlapping, light blue circles. Small, light blue dots are scattered throughout the scene, some appearing to be at the intersections of the circles. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

Key Findings

KEY FINDINGS

Findings

FINDING #1: Self-leadership Skills - the Non-Negotiable Foundation

Across every focus group, self-leadership skills were described as a prerequisite for any other form of leadership to function. These skills are neither negotiable nor situational. They determine whether a person can occupy a leadership role. As one participant stated:

“

Without these root skills, it's hard to apply yourself or to drive value across different order dimensions

”

Another was equally direct: *“This is the sine qua non. It needs to be there”*(P5).

At the same time, participants were clear that self-leadership alone does not make leadership complete. It creates the conditions for leadership to become possible, but it does not substitute for leading people, navigating systems, or making decisions when the ground keeps changing. When it is present, leadership can happen. When it is absent, the rest destabilizes.

Therefore, once that threshold is met, self-leadership ceases to be a differentiator. It is not what sets leaders apart; it is what allows them to stay standing when pressure mounts. Rather than a competitive advantage, it is the price of entry.

There is extensive evidence that organizations systematically overestimate how key this foundation actually is. Research shows that while about 95% of people believe they are self-aware, only 10–15% meet objective criteria, and the gap is wider at senior levels where candid feedback becomes scarcer as power increases.¹ Behavioral ethics research demonstrates that ordinary, well-intentioned people routinely behave in ways that contradict their stated values without recognizing that they are doing so. Decades of derailment research found that self-management failures, such as difficulty regulating behavior, adapting under pressure, and sustaining accountability, rather than deficits in technical skill, accounted consistently for executive failure. Learning agility is the single best predictor of executive success, yet only around 15% of executives qualify as genuinely strong agile learners.²

“P” denotes a participant in the focus group interviews; each “P” is followed by a unique numerical identifier used to anonymize quotes.

¹ Eurich, T. (2018). *Insight: The surprising truth about how others see us, how we see ourselves, and why the answers matter more than we think*. Currency; Eurich, T. (2018). What self-awareness really is (and how to cultivate it). Harvard Business Review.

² De Meuse, K. P. (2019). A meta-analysis of the relationship between learning agility and leader success. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 19(1), 25-34.; Korn Ferry. (2026). 5 ways to showcase your agility on the job.

Evidence shows that the foundational self-leadership skills are, in practice, scarce and fragile. *“We’ve all interviewed a gazillion people over time and I think that what we’re looking for is always specific in a job description. We sort of list those qualities that are currently needed, but we’re looking for the grounding of the individuals. We’re looking for the characteristic elements”* (P15). Another reflected - *“In the minds of the respondents, these are the traits that they feel are pretty much missed in today’s industry...I don’t know, this could just be my interpretation”* (P11). These skills belong at the center of how organizations identify and cultivate leadership potential: not as downstream program outcomes to be added later, but as the root system without which the rest of the leadership profile cannot hold.

FINDING #2: Leadership Skills are Contextually Bounded

Participants across all sessions resisted the idea that any one skill is more important than others. Contingency factors such as role (operational vs. strategic), level (property, corporate, group), lifecycle (early stage, turnaround, mature), orientation (short-term survival vs. long-term focus), and environmental context (crisis vs. stability) affect the relevance of skills. For example, *“Depending on what level of leadership you’re talking about, you might need to move towards a sort of more systemic thinking or more orchestrative function and then navigate within more complex and more multi-stakeholder systems in this world of sort of geopolitical and geo-economic kind of uncertainty”* (P7).

The organizational phase represents another boundary. *“If you’re just about taking over a company that filed Chapter 11 and is going into insolvency, it’s not so much about purpose, co-creation and social savviness. You need to have critical thinking ability, you need to be able to take decisions. This set-up is something completely different than if you’re taking over a company that is already positioned as the number one brand in the world in their respective area”* (P21). Geography and market context add further variations: *“In developing economies, proactive resourcefulness is super important. It’s like, what can I do with what’s in front of me?”* (P7).



The fact that context matters is well-documented in different streams of research. In hospitality, specifically, contextual leadership research has identified four recurring factors: staff composition, task requirements, organizational structure, and the external environment, each of which shapes which competencies matter most in a given property or corporate context. Crisis and resilient leadership research in hospitality confirms a phase-dependent logic. Contingency planning, improvisation, and adaptive instructing cluster around crisis and recovery phases, while strategic foresight and future-oriented leadership actions define stable growth contexts. Research on digital transformation leadership confirms the same pattern. Different organizational phases and technology intensify the call for fundamentally different competency portfolios, and leaders who lack the strategic and technical capabilities their context requires are systematically penalized.

The capacity to read contextual changes and act accordingly demands personal awareness, learning agility, and adaptive resilience; precisely the self-leadership skills that sit at the foundation of the framework this study proposes.

Building on several decades of work on executive derailment and role transitions, recent syntheses of practitioner evidence suggest that roughly one quarter to nearly one half of senior leadership transitions are judged to be failures or serious disappointments within about two years, with some reports indicating even higher rates in particular samples.³

Across these studies, the dominant pattern is a misfit between the individual's prevailing style and the specific demands, politics, and culture of the new role. This includes the inability to adapt, interpersonal frictions, failure to build and lead teams, and failure to meet business objectives. New leaders most often derail because they underestimate how different the new role is. Therefore, they might overapply the strengths and habits that made them successful in previous contexts, and move too fast before diagnosing stakeholders, culture, and expectations.



³ Hogan, J., Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2011). Management derailment: Personality assessment and mitigation. In S. Zedeck (Ed.), *APA handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 3, pp. 555–575). American Psychological Association; McKinsey & Company. (2018). Successfully transitioning to new leadership roles. McKinsey & Company

FINDING #3: Human Connection Skills - the Relational Core of Leadership

Among the four meta skills, human connection sits closest to hospitality, defined by its principles of reciprocity, warmth, care, and trust. What distinguishes the human being from other species and machines is the capacity to see and treat the other as *el otro yo* (“the other I”); a unique person with the same inner life, moral weight, and potential as oneself, and to let that relationship change how we think and act, creating shared responsibility and a deeper sense of purpose in our work.⁴ Human connection skills enable individuals to read what is said and what is not, affirm the worth and trust of others, navigate differences without rupture, and build shared meaning, responding across all of these with discernment and care.

In an experiential and digitalized economy, the relational architecture that characterizes hospitality amplifies the importance of human connection - *“You have a guest and a guest relationship via your employees, and so you have this human triangle that you sometimes have to handle with certain stakeholders. I think that’s why interpersonal skills are probably very much timeless”* (P18). Its absence is felt visibly within the organization - *“Some general managers have never eaten in the canteen of the hotel. They have never been to the locker room or anything”* (P12). *“But if a guy [the executive] prefers to discuss with his computer and to do*

some excel sheet all day long, at the end, what is the DNA, what is the message he will give to his staff?” (P13). The gap between what organizations promote about people and what people experience inside them originates at the top and travels downward through every layer.

Among the human connection skills, contextual communication and emotional acumen did not emerge as standalone priorities, yet across every focus group, they generated the most sustained discussion of any skills area. Participants positioned them consistently as the connective tissue through which other leadership capabilities become visible. *“You have a problem of loneliness, and you have a problem of people disconnecting [...] All these personal skills without emotional acumen, without being able to relate to others, are not really useful”* (P19). *“Communication, I would argue, is the #1 priority in whatever stakeholder group you’re dealing with”* (P21).

“
*If you’re not able to
communicate your thoughts
and ideas, you’re going to be
struggling as a leader*

”

⁴ Frankl, V. E. (1963). *Man’s search for meaning* (I. Lasch, Trans.). Beacon Press. (Original work 1946); López-Jurado Puig, M. (2018). *Mirando hacia el futuro: La competencia transversal del liderazgo. Liderar... ¿para qué?* UNED; Polo, L. (1999). *Antropología trascendental* (Vol. 1). EUNSA; Scheler, M. (1954). *The nature of sympathy* (P. Heath, Trans.). Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work 1913).

FINDING #4: Future-Ready Skills - Critical but Practiced at a Distance

The focus group discussions revealed a structural gap between the recognized importance of future-ready skills and where leadership attention is directed. Two explanations surfaced. First, time orientation - *"How often do I do horizon scanning? I don't do horizon scanning every Tuesday or every afternoon. I do it less frequently, but I know that it's super important"* (P1). *"It's harder to do future thinking and planning. We're focused a little bit more on 'here and now'"* (P14). Second, task delegation - *"I have people who aggregate information for me, group it, sort it, then it's put on my desk, and then we speak about it"* (P1).

This delegation becomes more pronounced with AI. The 2025 OECD and WEF white paper, based on a survey of 167 strategic foresight practitioners across 55 countries, finds that many already use AI in their foresight work, especially to accelerate early-stage tasks such as horizon scanning, trend analysis, and data synthesis. However, the report also cautions that tools trained on existing data risk reinforcing biases and obscuring weak signals, precisely where critical sense-making matters most.

Participants were clear about the stakes - *"Our world today is changing at a pace which we have never seen before... we'll have to adapt our strategic thinking very quickly"* (P22). The constraint, however, is not awareness but what has always been considered hospitality's core advantage. In other words, being intensely present, responsive, and relational has been designed into layers of operations, leaving limited protected space for imagining what comes next.

Over time, the industry has built its strengths around human connection and operational endurance, while future-ready capabilities tend to surface where individual leaders push for them, rather than as built-in expectations. As one executive bluntly explained:

“
*Our industry has no clue
what technology is. We don't
even know how to write it.
We don't know what it is or
what it does*
”

Under day-to-day pressure, these future-oriented capabilities are the first to be deprioritized. While different industries might learn from hospitality on how to deliver outstanding human experiences, on future readiness, the learning flow might need to reverse.

FINDING #5: The Configurational Logic of Hospitality Leadership Skills

When participants were asked to visualize hospitality leadership skills as a framework, the dominant representations were interdependence: overlapping circles (an Olympic ring, a flower), concentric layers (an onion), networks (a spider's web). Skills could not be ranked separately; each required a minimum threshold and their value depended on context. *"Organizations are living creatures. They change, shift so it is being able to pull upon certain skills. Sometimes, in organizations, they are more or less important and, over time, it fluctuates a little bit. But in its totality, there needs to be a balance"* (P15). *"For me, if you look at all of them, as a good leader, you probably have to reach a certain level in all of them. Below, it gets complicated, or you have to be three times extremely strong in others to compensate one deficiency"* (P10).

Beyond interdependence, there is value in how skills work together: *"I think if you connect your circles, it's like a flower. You have exact skills that happen in the connection between the two. I think that for some of the skills, if you combine them, they give you sort of power... you unlock a new level of skills. Actually, some of the magic will happen once you own both different skills in the different bubbles"* (P16). Another participant reached for the same insight through a different image - *"I could also think about a flywheel, skills lead to one to another"* (P22).

At the intersection of human connection and hospitality business skills, a standard of excellence emerges in which relational and operational quality are inseparable. In hospitality, *"it is people serving people and people working for people with people"* (P21), so a tightly run operation that fails its people cannot be considered excellent. As one leader put it, *"You can be the best in finance, in communication, but at the end, on the floor, if it doesn't follow, you have an issue"* (P13). Quality is conditional on both dimensions: who you are with people and how you run the operation must reach a high standard together. If either side fails, the operation falls short of true hospitality.

At the intersection of human connection and future-ready skills, the capacity to relate is what turns strategic direction into collective action. *"The more fast outside the world gets and why we do certain things, the more important is to explain it internally"* (P18). When the path forward is uncertain, direction cannot simply be declared - it has to be constructed with people.⁵ Leaders who can read where people are with them and where they are not are the ones who can move an organization forward rather than simply announce a direction. As one participant observed: *"When the structure of the organization loses a lot of its intensity and starts to wobble, those who can give strong cultural leadership are doing better because there's emotional control"* (P15). Relational capacity is what makes the future actionable through people. At the intersection of future-ready and

⁵ Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

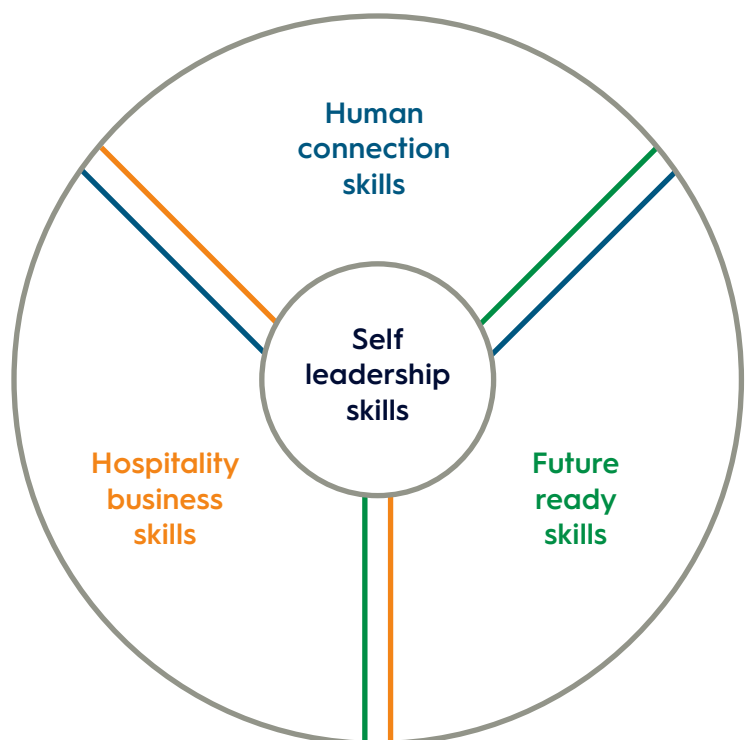
hospitality business skills, the capacity to navigate emerging complexity through operational grounding emerges. Emerging challenges do not wait for strategic planning cycles; they arrive inside the operation. As one participant noted, *“hospitality leadership is, even within the narrow definition of hospitality, to ensure good risk management in which climate risk and resource scarcity are today’s operational issues”* (P7). Yet operational demands are precisely what crowd out the space to respond to them - a catch-22 in which the leader most exposed to emerging pressures is also the most consumed by them. *“It’s not the tools and the foresight and the analytical skills, but rather the adaptive nature to a very complex environment that forces certain skills to be more prominent”* (P18). What separates those who navigate this intersection from those who are overtaken by it is the ability to hold operational grounding and future orientation simultaneously, rather than letting one displace the other.

Together, the four meta skills constitute the Hospitality Leadership Skills framework. Self-leadership provides the foundation without which the other three cannot function. Human connection, hospitality business, and future-ready skills form the interpersonal, organizational, and environmental dimensions of leadership; at their intersections, compound skills emerge.

Overall, the elements of

interdependence, threshold, context-dependence, and emergence constitute the configurational logic of the Hospitality Leadership Skills framework. Skills matter not in isolation but in the patterns they form and the capacities those patterns produce. This stands in direct contrast to how leadership capability is currently assessed and developed in practice. A dominant practitioner logic treats leadership as an additive problem: identify the skills that matter, assess potential leaders against them individually, and develop the gaps.

Figure 1:
Hospitality Leadership Skills Framework



The world's leading executive search and advisory firms, each drawing on decades of proprietary data and millions of assessments, have built their frameworks on this logic. These frameworks have significantly advanced the field by making leadership capabilities observable and measurable. Korn Ferry's Leadership Architect organizes 38 behavior-based competencies into 12 clusters and 4 factors, each assessed individually against normative standards. Egon Zehnder scores nine leadership competencies separately on a scale drawn from over 25,000 senior executive appraisals. Spencer Stuart benchmarks leaders on six capabilities individually, scoring each from functional to transformative. Heidrick and Struggles assesses four predictors of leadership agility as separate, independently measured dimensions.

While valuable, in practice, these frameworks are often applied in ways that assume that more skills, more highly developed, produce better leaders. This logic has gradually reinstated the great person view: the belief that exceptional leaders simply possess more of every desirable quality. A systematic review of 70 years of leadership research exposed the problem directly: the field has studied leadership as positively balanced bundles of behaviors, producing an ever-expanding inventory of overlapping competencies whose causal validity is fundamentally compromised.⁶ Consequently, scholars are calling for precisely the shift that participants in this study independently articulated: stepping away from additive checklists and moving toward configurations of skills studied as coherent patterns.



⁶Fischer, T., & Sitkin, S. B. (2023). Leadership styles: A comprehensive assessment and way forward. *Academy of Management Annals*, 17(1), 331-372.



**IMPLICATIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Hospitality Leadership Skills model reframes the central organizational question from “What skills do leaders need?” to “Which configurations of capability does our context require, and how do we cultivate the appropriate skills?”

DEVELOPMENT: FROM ACCUMULATING SKILLS TO SHAPING CONFIGURATIONS

Most leadership development portfolios grow by accumulation. New challenges prompt new modules, and over time, organizations end up with dense catalogues with limited clarity about how these pieces combine for any given manager. The findings of this study suggest a different approach.

The first implication concerns self-leadership. At senior levels, it functions as a selection filter: if the foundation is absent or brittle in an experienced candidate, development programs cannot compensate quickly enough to matter. But this is not an argument for accepting its scarcity; it is an argument for intervening earlier. Self-leadership must be addressed from the outset in graduate programs, supervisory development, and first-time manager pathways, so that by the time individuals enter consequential roles, the foundation is already load-bearing, not assumed. This requires reframing existing experiences through structured reflection, feedback, and stretch assignments, so they explicitly build and test self-leadership rather than leaving it as an unspoken expectation.

The second implication follows from the configurational and context-bound view. Organizations should identify a few critical role families, e.g., heads of core functions or property-level GMs, and then describe the configurations most likely to succeed in each. A general manager turning around an underperforming property or one leading a pre-opening both require complexity management skills, spanning business and future orientation, but with different emphasis on human connection. The turnaround demands emotional acumen and relational dignity: the ability to read and respond to emotions with care while affirming others’ worth through difficult restructuring conversations. The focus of the relational skill is reparative. The pre-opening demands relational credibility to earn trust quickly across diverse stakeholders and purpose co-creation to build shared meaning and direction before operations exist. The focus of the relational skill is generative.



The practical consequence is clear: stop sending high-potential managers to identical programs with identical expectations. What matters is not matching the person to an ideal leader profile but developing a coherent configuration that fits both the context and the person's developmental needs. This does not prevent managers from evolving. On the contrary, it encourages them to reconfigure consciously as they move into new roles, rather than carrying past patterns into fundamentally different contexts and hoping they will still work.

ASSESSMENT: FROM SCORES TO PATTERNS AND FIT

Most organizations assess leadership readiness by aggregating evaluations - performance ratings, 360 results, competency levels - identifying who ranks highest. This logic is typically formalized through the 9-box grid, plotting performance against potential to rank and sort the talent pool. But the grid informs the level, not the pattern. Two GMs can occupy the same top-right box with completely different configurations and self-leadership foundations, and still fit the role being considered. More critically, it cannot see the toxic high performer whose results are real, but whose pattern is eroding the culture around them. A configurational approach does not discard the 9-box. It asks the question the 9-box cannot answer: What is the pattern underneath the evaluation, does it hold under pressure, and does it fit what this specific role requires?



⁶ Fischer, T., & Sitkin, S. B. (2023). Leadership styles: A comprehensive assessment and way forward. *Academy of Management Annals*, 17(1), 331-372.

Four Steps for Concrete Assessment

1 Emphasize the stretch moments in the track record, not the stable ones. A GM who led a property through a post-crisis recovery (e.g., a flood, a forced closure) has been tested in a specific way. The evidence to look for is not whether the recovery succeeded financially. It is what happened in the first 48 hours before the path was clear: ***Did self-leadership hold as the anchor when the team had nothing else to draw on? Did human connection and operational execution work together, or did one crowd out the other?*** Stable periods reveal competence, stretch moments reveal whether the configuration holds.

2 Ask targeted qualitative questions to those who worked alongside them when it was hard. Not a 360 questionnaire producing scores, but a specific question asked in conversation: ***When the situation exceeded what the playbook could handle, what did people around them experience? Did they feel held and directed, or managed and left to absorb the uncertainty themselves? Did the team develop its own capacity through the crisis, or become dependent on theirs?*** These are configurational signals that no rating scale captures. They require someone willing to ask the question directly and listen to the pattern in the answer.

3 Conduct a structured fit conversation between the assessor and the candidate, anchored in the specific demands of the role being considered. For example, a GM whose leadership approach has proven effective in post-crisis recovery, where self-leadership provides stability and human connection enables repair, is now being considered for a strategic repositioning. The conversation is about: ***What does this role require? Future-ready thinking, the ability to lead people toward something that does not yet exist, and where does their current pattern meet that demand, and where would it be stretched?*** This is a fit conversation that names the strength of the configuration and the distance between it and what the context requires.

4 Invite the person to read themselves. ***Can they describe their own pattern in substance? Can they name what they reach for instinctively under pressure, where that has served them, and where it would not? A GM who can say “I am strong when there is something to stabilize, but I have not yet been tested in a context where the job is to unsettle and redirect”*** is demonstrating the self-leadership foundation the model requires. A GM who describes every context as similar met with the same strengths is signaling something the leadership matrix cannot catch, a configuration that has solidified rather than one that is consciously held and ready to evolve. The ability to read one’s own pattern is not just a development outcome. It is itself a reliable signal of whether the foundation is genuinely present.

The background features a complex geometric pattern of overlapping circles and dots in a light blue color against a dark blue background. The circles are arranged in a way that they overlap significantly, creating a web-like structure. Small dots are scattered throughout the pattern, often at the intersections of the circles.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This study set out to answer a simple question:

What are the hospitality leadership skills, and which ones will endure in a world of constant change?

Our findings indicate that the model is a configuration based on an interdependent, context-contingent pattern whose value derives from alignment rather than the sum of individual skills. Based on 22 expert practitioners evaluating 30 skills distilled from nearly four decades of hospitality literature, self-leadership emerged as the necessary foundation, human connection as the relational architecture that realizes hospitality's promise, and future-ready capacities as the area where attention has yet to catch up. When these meta-skills interlock, they produce emergent capacities that no single skill generates alone.

These results have direct implications for practice.

Leadership development should shift from accumulating discrete competencies to designing coherent configurations tailored to specific roles and contexts. Leadership assessment should move beyond isolated scores toward pattern reading that tests whether a configuration holds under pressure, fits contextual demands, and rests on an active self-leadership foundation rather than assuming its presence.

The next frontier of hospitality excellence is leadership and the people behind it.

TABLE 1: Hospitality Leadership Skills

Definition of 30 sub-skills, drawing from 40 years of hospitality research and clustered into four meta skills: self-leadership, human connection, hospitality business, and future-ready skills.

SELF-LEADERSHIP (individual)	<p>Personal awareness: The ability to observe oneself and one's impact on others.</p> <p>Ethical grounding: The ability to align choices with personal values and shared principles.</p> <p>Personal regulation: The ability to comply with personal and shared norms and boundaries.</p> <p>Proactive resourcefulness: The ability to identify and mobilize the means needed.</p> <p>Personal responsibility: The ability to take ownership for one's behavior and its consequences.</p> <p>Learning agility: The ability to acquire and apply new insight in unfamiliar situations.</p> <p>Adaptive resilience: The ability to maintain stability during disruption.</p>
HUMAN CONNECTION (interpersonal)	<p>Emotional acumen: The ability to recognize and respond to emotions with discernment and care.</p> <p>Relational dignity: The ability to affirm others' worth by creating a climate of respect.</p> <p>Relational credibility: The ability to earn trust through competence, benevolence, and integrity.</p> <p>Situational etiquette: The ability to act with sensitivity and consideration across contexts.</p> <p>Social savviness: The ability to navigate social dynamics with awareness and authenticity.</p> <p>Respectful disagreement: The ability to engage disagreement with civility.</p> <p>Purpose co-creation: The ability to build shared meaning and direction with others.</p> <p>Contextual communication: The ability to decode (interpret) and encode (express) meaning appropriately across contexts.</p> <p>Perspective framing: The ability to reframe situations with constructive intent and balanced perspective.</p>
HOSPITALITY BUSINESS (organizational)	<p>Hospitality literacy: The ability to comprehend how hospitality systems function within a business environment.</p> <p>Critical thinking: The ability to critically evaluate information and challenge assumptions.</p> <p>Problem-solving: The ability to identify causes of issues and design solutions.</p> <p>Decision making: The ability to select appropriate options based on evidence and context.</p> <p>Operational execution: The ability to translate plans into effective action through coordination and follow-through.</p> <p>Crisis management: The ability to respond decisively and collectively under conditions of disruption.</p> <p>Performance management: The ability to align individual and collective effort and monitor progress toward desired outcomes.</p> <p>Talent development: The ability to guide others' growth through appropriate means.</p>
FUTURE-READY (environmental)	<p>Horizon scanning: The ability to identify early signals of change in the environment.</p> <p>Analytical foresight: The ability to analyze information to imagine potential future scenarios.</p> <p>Strategic thinking: The ability to connect insights into a coherent long-term direction.</p> <p>Innovation capability: The ability to create novel ideas that generate improvement or value.</p> <p>Strategic implementation: The ability to execute strategic plans through coordinated action.</p> <p>Socio-environmental orientation: The ability to embed social and environmental systems into decisions.</p>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is based on the candid perspectives of senior executives who contributed their time and insight. Their willingness to reflect openly on the evolving demands of leadership has shaped findings that are both practical and forward-looking. We sincerely appreciate their trust and engagement.

- **Ackermann Carole**, President of EHL Board of Directors and Board of Trustees
- **Anand Satya**, Group President U.S., Canada & CALA, Marriott Hotels International
- **Balouzet Vanessa**, Chief Growth Office Officer, EHL Group
- **Binkert Markus**, CEO, SV Group
- **Bohnenberger Bernhard**, CEO, Discover Collection, EHL Group
- **Brazzola Meloney**, Chief Corporate Communications Officer, EHL Group
- **Ellis Susie**, Chairman and CEO, Global Wellness Summit and Global Wellness Institute
- **Knuff David**, Chief Strategic Partnerships Officer, EHL Group
- **Levie Michael**, Co-Founder, CitizenM
- **Marrenbach Frank**, CEO, Althoff Hotels
- **Meier Thomas B.**, CEO, Jumeirah
- **Mosimann Philipp**, Managing Director, Mosimann's London
- **Ogheard Patrick**, Dean, EHL School of Practical Arts
- **Perellon, Juan F.** Chief Academic Officer, EHL Group
- **Rinck Martin**, Managing Director, Alvarez & Marsal
- **Rushmore Steve**, Founder, HVS
- **Schmitt Achim**, Dean, EHL Hospitality Business School
- **Schröder Bernold O.**, CEO & Managing Partner, MINPER Hotels
- **Stampfer Rainer**, President Global Operations, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts
- **Tan Ming**, Chair, IAB Asia Subcommittee
- **Venzin Markus**, CEO, EHL Group
- **Zhou Wei**, Vice President, Jin Jiang International Group

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



sowon.kim@ehl.ch

Dr. Sowon Kim is Associate Professor and Founder of the Women in Leadership (WIL) initiative at EHL Hospitality Business School. Her research examines relational dynamics within contemporary work systems. Through this work, she explores how people build the interpersonal skills needed to lead effectively and strengthen the relational architecture of organizational life. Having lived and worked across East Asia, the Americas, and Western Europe in sectors ranging from FMCG to high-tech, broadcasting, and jewelry, she brings firsthand understanding of how culture shapes the way people relate, lead, and collaborate. She translates this work into executive education, using AI-powered avatars to give managers a safe, self-paced space to practice and strengthen the human skills that matter most at work.



bertrand.audrin@ehl.ch

Dr. Bertrand Audrin is Assistant Professor in Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior at EHL Business School. His research focuses on digital transformation and its impact on organizations, human resource management, and employment relationships. His current projects tackle questions on digital skills and emotional intelligence, new ways of working and AI in organizations.

Media Contacts

Carole Massanes, Head of External Communications
+41 21 785 15 76

Mathias Dussoix, External Communications Specialist
+41 21 785 10 52

communication@ehl.ch

Research Contacts

Alessandro Inversini, Associate Dean of Research and Thought Leadership
+41 21 785 10 85

Katiuska Molina-Luna, Strategic Projects and Outreach Manager
+41 21 785 10 24

Research@ehl.ch



Stay ahead of the latest hospitality trends.

[Follow the EHL Insights LinkedIn Newsletter](#)