

Leading Through Paradigm Shifts

Module Purpose

In any field — science, business, or leadership — we operate within **paradigms**: shared mental models that describe how the world works, what problems matter, and how they should be addressed.

Thomas Kuhn demonstrated that these paradigms can break down when anomalies accumulate — when reality no longer aligns with the current model. At that point, a **paradigm shift** occurs, creating a new frame of reference.

In organisations, this process is often turbulent. **Adapting Mental Models** means recognising the signs, guiding people through the disorientation, and establishing a new shared way of seeing and acting.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

1. Identify the current paradigm shaping your organisation's thinking.
2. Detect anomalies that signal the paradigm may be failing.
3. Lead sensemaking efforts when certainty is unavailable.
4. Switch between old and new mental models to bridge understanding.
5. Create a safe space for challenging the dominant frame.
6. Translate ideas between different adopter groups.
7. Contain and channel the emotional energy of change.
8. Use small experiments to prove and embed a new paradigm.

Core Concepts

Paradigm

A shared mental model, built from assumptions, examples, and methods, that defines what is “normal” and “relevant” in a given domain.

Normal Conditions

Periods when the paradigm comfortably explains events and guides problem-solving.

Anomalies

Data or events that do not fit the current paradigm. Initially ignored or explained away, but critical signals of change.

Paradigm Shift

The point at which the old model no longer serves and is replaced by a new one that better explains reality.

Kuhn's Core Insight

- **Paradigm:** The shared framework that defines what's "normal" in thinking and action.
- **Anomalies:** Signals that don't fit the current model — often dismissed until they accumulate.
- **Shift:** A new model that explains reality better, changing what's possible.

You can't lead a paradigm shift until you can see the paradigm you're in.

Leadership Capabilities for Adapting Mental Models

| Capability | Why It Matters | Practical Behaviours |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Paradigm Awareness | You can't change a frame you can't see. | Map underlying assumptions and "rules of the game." |
| Anomaly Detection | Early signal spotting prevents crises. | Look for patterns that don't fit — and take them seriously. |
| Sensemaking in Ambiguity | People need meaning before answers. | Frame uncertainty as a shared exploration. |
| Cognitive Flexibility | Multiple perspectives = better decisions. | Switch between models without bias toward one. |
| Constructive Dissent Facilitation | New ideas often come from the edges. | Invite respectful challenge and protect dissenters. |

| Capability | Why It Matters | Practical Behaviours |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Bridging Communication | Keeps everyone in the same conversation. | Translate messages for both old-paradigm and new-paradigm thinkers. |
| Emotional Containment | Change is an emotional process. | Model calm, acknowledge fear, and channel energy. |
| Experimentation Leadership | Proof reduces resistance. | Run small tests of the new model before scaling. |

The 8 Leadership Capabilities

1. **Paradigm Awareness** – See the invisible frame.
2. **Anomaly Detection** – Notice what doesn't fit.
3. **Sensemaking in Ambiguity** – Hold attention in uncertainty.
4. **Cognitive Flexibility** – Switch between models with ease.
5. **Constructive Dissent Facilitation** – Make it safe to question.
6. **Bridging Communication** – Translate across adoption groups.
7. **Emotional Containment** – Hold steady through resistance.
8. **Experimentation Leadership** – Test emerging models in low-risk ways.

Your Notes & Observations

- *Current paradigm in my area:* _____
- *Three anomalies I've noticed:* _____
- *Who holds strong to the old model?* _____
- *Who's leaning into the new model?* _____

Practice Prompts

1. **Paradigm Mapping:** What are five unspoken rules shaping decisions in your organisation?
2. **Anomaly Hunt:** Record 2 examples this month that don't fit the current frame.
3. **Translation Drill:** Write the same change message in two ways — for the old-guard and the early adopters.
4. **Mini-Experiment:** What's one safe test you could run to explore a new frame?

Reflection Questions

- Which of the 8 capabilities is already a strength for you?
- Which one would have the biggest payoff if you developed it further?
- How will you create space for others to question existing mental models safely?