Tasmanian® Leaders

Leading in Complexity 2024

An Initial Enquiry in Tasmania

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Tasmania is like a socio-political terrarium – fragile and complex, requiring careful stewardship to balance preservation and progress.

Leading in Complexity
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Leading in Complexity: An Initial Enquiry in Tasmania delves into the distinctive challenges and opportunities for developing leadership within the Tasmanian context.
As a foundational step, this paper explores how complexity influences leadership in the state.

Through qualitative insights gathered from an in-person cross-sectoral workshop for leaders and quantitative insights from a survey, this work aims to provide a rich foundation for understanding the unique challenges of leadership in Tasmania.

Key findings highlight the complex issues that some leaders in Tasmania face within themselves, in their relationships, in broader social systems, and in the face of challenging issues relating to ethics and truth. Participants reflected on challenges such as navigating competing goals, managing tightly interconnected systems, and addressing entrenched socio-political structures that hinder adaptability.

From technology adoption to relational courage and ethical clarity, this paper explores areas of opportunity to foster better leadership in Tasmania. It highlights fourteen essential complexity leadership skills ranging from self-awareness and resilience to systems thinking and digital competency, underscoring the need for targeted development initiatives.

Recommendations include embedding these skills into educational and leadership programs, fostering collective leadership development,

and establishing conflict resolution frameworks to address polarisation and competing priorities. By drawing on the unique context of Tasmania and providing actionable insights, this work aims to contribute to the broader understanding of leadership in complex, interconnected systems.

AT A GLANCE:

The Challenge

Tasmanian leaders grapple with complex systems, entrenched structures, and competing priorities in a tightly interconnected state.

The Cause

Outdated systems, socio-economic disparities, and limited resources hinder bold and adaptive leadership.

The Way Forward

Leaders must adopt systems thinking, collaboration, digital and techonological competency, and innovation to effectively navigate complexity while balancing preservation and economic progress.

OUR INITIAL ENQUIRY

This work marks the beginning of an exploration into the challenges and opportunities of navigating complexity in Tasmania. While complexity in leadership is a universal challenge, Tasmania's social, cultural, and political landscape presents a unique context that shapes the complex issues faced by its leaders. Tasmanian Leaders commissioned Dr Aiden M. A. Thornton who is an expert in the theory, measurement, research, education, and practice of complexity leadership, to lead this enquiry.

Our primary goal was to launch an initial enquiry about leading in complexity in Tasmania, grounded in the perspectives of leaders in Tasmania. We sought to uncover the nature of the complexities they encounter, the ways they make sense of these challenges, and the skills and support they need to navigate them effectively. The uniqueness of the Tasmanian context – the state's size, geography, and history – makes it an ideal case study for exploring complexity in leadership. We hope this work sparks further research, deepens understanding of the broader landscape in which Tasmanian leaders operate, and informs approaches to leadership and management education and development, fostering better leadership tailored to Tasmania and the unique demands of its context.

OUR APPROACH

To undertake this initial enquiry, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights from a one-day Complexity Leadership Lab that was facilitated by Dr Aiden M. A. Thornton, with quantitative data gathered via a Complexity Leadership Skills Survey. This approach allowed us to capture nuanced perspectives while identifying broader patterns that illuminate the challenges faced by leaders in Tasmania.

The Complexity Leadership Lab was based on the principles of complexity leadership, not only to introduce participants to key concepts but also to foster meaningful interactions and a cohesive group dynamic. The Lab aimed to foster a high-level understanding of how social systems (e.g., organisations, societies, etc.) demonstrate complexity, identify the types of complexity most prevalent in Tasmania, delve deeply into specific issues about which leaders felt most passionate, and hypothesise about the skills needed to navigate these challenges effectively.

There is no universally accepted definition of complexity as there are dozens of different types of complexity recognised in complexity science (Lloyd, 2001) and more than twenty complexity leadership theories. In the Lab, we defined complexity as an emergent property of social systems arising from the interplay of diverse parts and their interdependencies. These interdependencies can produce behaviours that are volatile (rapidly

> " We've been let down by our leaders. The future is not just complex. It's scary. Too many vested interests. Too much inflexibility. A changing world."
>
> *- Complexity Leadership Survey Respondent*

changing), uncertain (difficult to predict), complex (unclear connections between causes and effects), and ambiguous (lacking clear meaning) (Stiehm, 2002). This framing provided the foundation for participants to identify and explore the complex leadership challenges they face.

Seventeen participants from a diverse range of industry sectors attended the Leadership Lab, whose engagement enriched our understanding of these themes. We designed the Lab to prioritise experiential learning, creating a hands-on environment that engaged participants through physical rather than digital materials. We recorded ideas and discussions using physical media and later transcribed with generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, maintaining confidentiality by ensuring that no organisational names were included. The author reviewed all transcripts to ensure fidelity to the original discussions.

To complement the Lab, we conducted a survey focused on perceptions of complex leadership issues and complexity leadership skills. Respondents reflected on their experiences with complexity, its perceived increase over the past five years, and their personal navigation of complex challenges. The survey also explored fourteen skills; asking participants to rate the level of capability required of leaders in 2024 and beyond, their current level of capability, and the typical capability of leaders they work with. Of the 73 respondents who started the survey, 39 completed enough questions to be included in the final sample. While 41% were alumni of the Tasmanian Leaders Program (TLP) or the Industry Leadership Enterprise and Development (I-LEAD) program, the majority of respondents (59%) were not graduates of Tasmanian Leaders Programs. Geographically, participants were distributed across Tasmania, with

56.4% located in the South, 28.2% in the North, and 15.4% in the North-West. Most participants (74%) were female, 23% male and 3% preferring not to disclose their gender. Industry representation included 43.6% from the not-for-profit sector, 30.8% from the private sector, and 25.6% from the public sector. A copy of the Complexity Leadership Skills Survey can be provided upon request.

Two factors may constrain the application of findings from the survey to a broader cross-section of leaders across Tasmania. First, the sample of leaders was self-selected, comprising individuals motivated to participate in an enquiry specifically focused on complexity, which may not reflect the broader Tasmanian leadership population. Second, we deliberately limited the sample of issues explored to *complex* leadership challenges, meaning the findings may not extend to simpler or more routine leadership issues. This emphasis on complexity should not imply leaders only face complex problems; it highlights the study's focus on leading within complexity. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach provides a rich foundation for understanding the unique challenges of leadership in Tasmania and highlights critical areas for further exploration and development.

A key limitation of this enquiry lies in its reliance on the first-person perspectives and experiences of participating leaders. While this approach provides rich, context-specific insights into the complexities they navigate, it is inherently subjective and does not capture the full spectrum of challenges or the broader systemic factors influencing leadership in Tasmania. Additionally, individual biases and personal experiences shape the data, potentially limiting its generalisability to the wider leadership population. We hope this paper is a discussion starter that encourages future work on

related topics, contributing to broader understanding of leadership challenges in Tasmania.

TYPES OF COMPLEXITY REPORTED BY LEADERS IN TASMANIA

Leaders who participated in our process described a broad array of complex issues encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, systemic, and other more foundational aspects.

Survey results highlighted the pervasive nature of this complexity, with a majority of respondents (66.6%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that complexity increased over the past five years, 30.8% remaining neutral, and only 2.6% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. On a personal level, 56% of respondents reported experiencing complexity to a high or very high extent, 31% of respondents reported experiencing complexity to a moderate extent, and 13% of respondents reported experiencing complexity to a very low or low extent. These findings suggest that navigating complexity has become a critical success factor for leadership effectiveness given the evolving nature of the Tasmanian landscape.

INTRAPERSONAL COMPLEXITY

Intrapersonal complexity refers to the challenges leaders face within themselves e.g., navigating potential conflicts between their personal identity, values, and professional roles. During the Lab, some leaders shared candid reflections on experiences such as feeling like imposters in leadership roles,

cognitive dissonance, and the ongoing tension between prioritising personal health and meeting demanding professional obligations. These internal struggles appear to influence how leaders interpret and respond to the implicit cultural expectations of their state. Some leaders expressed a firm commitment to breaking the poverty mindset in Tasmania and contributing to long-term, meaningful change. Across the reflections shared in The Lab, a common theme emerged: a desire to cultivate self-awareness, courage, and purpose as essential tools for navigating complexity and driving impactful leadership in Tasmania.

INTERPERSONAL COMPLEXITY

Interpersonal complexity encompasses the relational dynamics leaders must navigate within and across organisations and communities. A recurring theme during the Lab was the tension between so-called *radical candor* and compassion, highlighting the delicate balance needed to uphold psychological safety while engaging in courageous conversations. Radical candor as described by author Kim Scott (2017), is an approach to leadership that encourages direct and honest feedback while maintaining genuine care for the people you lead. Complicating these dynamics are political biases, potential power structures, and some resistance to innovation – all of which can stifle progress and perpetuate entrenched norms. Some leaders remarked that workplace norms and legal frameworks can inadvertently hinder accountability and open dialogue.

> " We are a small community. Leading change will typically upset members of your social circle or even family. That makes leadership in Tasmania particularly challenging – but we need it!"
>
> *- Complexity Leadership Survey Respondent*

> **"** System complexity is an ever-increasing challenge for leaders, what has become very evident to me is the ecosystems we live in are becoming more complex to navigate, departments are operating in silos as much as ever and governance capacity to influence seems limited. I feel like the level of overwhelm being experienced by leaders is increasing."
>
> *- Complexity Leadership Survey Respondent*

Additionally, several leaders felt a strong responsibility to bridge generational and cultural divides, particularly between long-established residents and newcomers, while amplifying the voices of Tasmanian Aboriginal communities. In this intricate interpersonal landscape, achieving transparency, fostering open communication, and demonstrating relational courage are seen as essential but challenging components of effective leadership in Tasmania.

SYSTEMIC COMPLEXITY

Leaders in Tasmania face a mosaic of systemic complexities across technological, organisational, political, social, and environmental domains. Technological advances, while promising innovation, often bring issues like digital illiteracy, cybersecurity risks, and resistance to change. This can lead to gaps in technology take-up and strained resources.

Organisationally, limited capacity, outdated practices, and the loss of institutional knowledge complicate efforts to foster collaboration and efficiency, particularly within a two-speed economy .[1]

Politically, short-termism, party polarisation, and declining public trust hinder meaningful progress, while quieter voices frequently go unheard. Social and cultural divides, amplified by economic inequality and polarising narratives on social media, add layers of complexity to fostering cohesive communities. Environmental challenges reflect tensions between economic opportunities and ecological preservation. While these issues are not unique to Tasmania, the polarisation of views on issues like climate change and land use in the state highlight the need for nuanced, ethical leadership.

TECHNOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

Some leaders reported experiencing technological complexity as a result of rapid technological change, cybersecurity demands, and the challenge of integrating new systems with existing infrastructure. The swift pace of progress, combined with varying levels of digital literacy, creates substantial gaps, as generational and educational divides result in varying levels of comfort and understanding of emerging technologies. Some leaders reflected on the cognitive strain of staying current while addressing fear and resistance to innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI) and the electrification of transport (e.g. electric vehicles), further complicating adoption and integration efforts.

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1. The term two-speed economy can be interpreted in different ways. In the context of this enquiry, we interpret this to mean participants' experience of the distinctions between organisations with more innovative and nimble ways of working (e.g. some start up organisations) in contrast to those that have slower and more industrialist ways of work (e.g. some aspects of government).

Additionally, several leaders highlighted a potential over-reliance on technology, which they felt exacerbates issues of loneliness and human disconnectedness, sometimes leading to blurred boundaries between home and work. Cost remains a persistent concern, as adopting new technologies can strain budgets, especially for industries striving to balance green technology adoption with traditional infrastructure. Cybersecurity and data privacy further compound the challenges, requiring organisations to manage complex information and technology (IT) landscapes and facilitate data sharing, while meeting the growing need to protect personal data.

Some participants noted feeling caught between global mega-corporations driving technological trends and local industry needs, adding another layer of complexity to decision-making. The cumulative effect of these challenges underscores the importance of an adaptive approach — one that balances innovation with the preservation of Tasmania's cultural values.

ORGANISATIONAL COMPLEXITY

Leaders reported encountering organisational complexity stemming from structural, cultural, and resource-related challenges. Key contributors included skill shortages, succession planning issues, and burnout resulting from limited resources, particularly within Tasmania's two-speed economy.

The pandemic-driven shift to virtual work further disrupted team culture, reducing informal connections and making it harder to maintain cohesive team dynamics.

Simultaneously, leaders face an influx of diverse needs, such as increased demands for family and community support, which strain already limited funding. Generational divides, some outdated management practices, and the erosion of institutional knowledge due to insufficient handing down of skills and knowledge exacerbate these challenges. Navigating these complexities requires leaders to strike a balance between fostering collaboration and ensuring decision-making efficiency, all while managing expectations in a context defined by a small population base and limited growth potential.

POLITICAL COMPLEXITY

Some leaders highlighted significant political complexity within Tasmania's local and state government contexts. These challenges are characterised by the difficulty of prioritising meaningful, long-term planning over short-term, numbers-driven objectives. A decline in public trust, driven by perceptions of political spin, accountability issues, and shifting agendas, further undermines consistent progress. The adversarial two-party system frequently curtails constructive debate, with party infighting and single-issue politicians

> ❝ My complexities as a leader relate to organisational culture and introducing and managing change. I find that organisations I've worked with struggle to establish unified, culturally aligned senior leadership; therefore implementing change within teams and more broadly is difficult to achieve."
>
> *- Complexity Leadership Survey Respondent*

Image: Complexity Leadership Lab, Lousy! Creative Studio 2024

complicating holistic approaches to addressing complex issues.

Funding constraints and competition between federal, state, and local funding sources intensify these challenges, as infrastructure projects and community needs often compete for limited resources, leaving quieter voices unheard. While Tasmania's political landscape offers greater accessibility to politicians, some leaders noted that this accessibility does not consistently translate into tangible action, raising concerns about the future of democratic engagement. Leaders also face the influence of lobby groups and the challenge of aligning policy — sometimes perceived as superficial or disconnected — with local needs. Navigating the tension between state intervention and individual freedoms, addressing unintended policy consequences, and balancing competing interests between people and profit further complicate this landscape.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL COMPLEXITY

Many leaders reported encountering significant social and cultural complexity, often characterised by entrenched social divisions, economic disparity, and resistance to change. Binary thinking and polarisation were recurrent themes, manifesting in generational, geographic, and socio-economic divides. Economic inequality and cost-of-living pressures further exacerbated these divides, creating a postcode lottery[2] of uneven opportunities .

Tensions around cultural identity also persist with conflicting views on race and religion. This underscores the need to foster a sense of cohesion in the context of a socially diverse state.

Several leaders observed that social media amplifies these divisions, particularly among young people, with echo chambers and polarised narratives deepening existing fractures. Together, these dynamics create a challenging socio-cultural landscape where belonging and identity are simultaneously vital and divisive.

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2. *Postcode lottery is a term that is often used to indicate that the area in which citizens live, influences the quality of social services they receive.*

ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLEXITY

Some leaders reported encountering complex environmental challenges shaped by competing values, economic considerations, and social pressures. Environmental issues in Tasmania are often politicised, particularly around polarised views on climate change and renewable energy projects, which can hinder collaborative approaches. Land management complexities involve balancing Tasmanian Aboriginal communities' perspectives, historic attachments, and competing demands such as logging, mining, and large-scale salmon farming.

While environmental initiatives are seen as offering economic opportunities, they often conflict with perceived costs, creating tensions between profit-driven and nonprofit objectives. For example, leaders grapple with maintaining Tasmania's green image while addressing infrastructure limitations and delayed responses to issues like dying kelp forests or flood and fire risks. Additionally, some leaders noted the challenge of aligning local community priorities with global sustainability frameworks, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

FOUNDATIONAL COMPLEXITY

Tasmanian leaders navigate foundational complexities rooted in epistemic and ethical challenges. Epistemic complexity involves grappling with misinformation, limited investigative journalism, and Tasmania's unique cultural narratives, making it difficult to balance intuition with evidence-based decision-making. Ethical complexity arises from competing values, transparency issues, and balancing moral obligations with economic pressures, often in a context of inequities and generational divides. Addressing these challenges requires culturally sensitive, ethically grounded leadership that fosters dialogue, bridges divides, and integrates diverse perspectives into long-term strategies.

EPISTEMIC COMPLEXITY

Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know — essentially, it's about understanding how we acquire, evaluate, and use knowledge. For leaders, it's relevant because their decisions often rely on interpreting and trusting information from different sources.

In this context, the epistemic complexity experienced by leaders in Tasmania relates to complexity in navigating beliefs, evidence, and truth within an environment shaped by polarisation, limited media diversity, and deeply rooted local perspectives. In a post-truth era, trust in sources is increasingly questioned, with deep fakes, AI manipulation , and fake news complicating efforts to discern objective reality. Leaders must balance differing perspectives, where personal biases,

> " Generational changes are always a challenge, and more recent identity politics and the woke movement/cancel culture have happened so quickly there are many older leaders at sea to understand how to approach leadership with the younger generations."
>
> *- Complexity Leadership Survey Respondent*

political scare tactics, and the influence of lobby groups affect public discourse.

Tasmania's small population base restricts the scope for investigative journalism, creating a reliance on mainstream and social media where rumours and misinformation spread quickly, often reinforcing biases through algorithms that act as echo chambers. Local myths, traditions, and regional divisions further complicate epistemic understanding, as Tasmania's distinct cultural identity often contrasts with mainland Australia.

Epistemic complexity also includes the struggle between intuition and evidence, as leaders weigh the roles of evidence-based policy and adaptive, emergent approaches in decision-making. **In such an environment, understanding and respecting multiple viewpoints while searching for shared truths requires leaders to critically evaluate sources, remain adaptable, and foster dialogues that bridge Tasmania's social and epistemic divides.**

ETHICAL COMPLEXITY

Tasmanian leaders report that they encounter ethical complexity rooted in competing values, transparency issues, and the challenges of balancing moral obligations with economic pressures. Political donations and perceptions of corruption and nepotism erode public trust, while limited investigative journalism is seen as helping to allow questionable practices to persist.

Leaders report dilemmas over data sharing and transparency, struggling with who controls information and how this aligns with ethical standards, especially when divergent values hinder the progression of major projects.

The lack of a shared ethical framework among leaders and politicians may complicate decision-making, as generational and culturally diverse voices bring differing priorities and perspectives. Some leaders reported feeling challenged to represent marginalised voices.

Others felt that social perceptions of groups of people change when they take up the role of the squeaky wheel. Navigating these issues requires a balance between reactive and proactive choices, as well as the courage to support those in need while making ethically sound, economically viable decisions that reflect Tasmania's diverse cultural values.

MAKING SENSE OF COMPLEXITY

During the Lab, participants engaged in reflective exercises to articulate and make sense of the complex issues they encountered in their leadership roles. They considered questions such as the frequency with which they faced complex challenges, the difficulty of navigating these challenges from a leadership perspective, and the specific issues they wished to address, along with their importance. Additionally, participants explored the underlying causes of these complexities, fostering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of the issues they were navigating.

Findings suggest that leaders in Tasmania may encounter certain types of complexity with greater regularity, suggesting priority areas for attention. Intrapersonal, interpersonal, organisational, and ethical complexities were found to be the most frequent, with leaders engaging with these issues between daily to several times per week. This may suggest a need for internal resilience, relationship management, structural alignment, and moral clarity in leadership practice.

Technological, political, social, and epistemic complexities also surfaced regularly, typically between several times a week to weekly, highlighting the need for leaders to remain agile in addressing rapid technological changes, navigating politically charged landscapes, managing diverse cultural expectations, and discerning truth in a fragmented information environment. By contrast, environmental and other forms of systemic complexity appeared less frequently — between weekly to monthly — yet remained critical when they arose, demanding strategic foresight and action.

Leaders also perceived significant difficulty in managing these challenges. Political complexity emerged as the most challenging, rated between quite difficult and very difficult, potentially reflecting the intricate dynamics of governance, policy-making, and stakeholder engagement in Tasmania. Other complexities, including interpersonal, technological, organisational, social, environmental, epistemic and ethical dimensions, were rated as moderate to quite difficult, potentially underscoring the multifaceted nature of these leadership demands. Intrapersonal complexity was perceived as slightly less difficult yet remained a critical component of some leaders' daily experience.

These findings collectively paint a picture of leadership in Tasmania as a demanding and nuanced endeavour, requiring leaders to balance internal self-management with external systemic navigation.

When simultaneously considering both the frequency and difficulty of complexity, it appears that interpersonal, technological, organisational, political, social and cultural, epistemic, and ethical issues represent the most significant forms of complexity. This finding highlights a dual challenge: these domains are not only ever-present but also particularly difficult to address, requiring leaders to expend significant cognitive and emotional energy to navigate them effectively. This underscores the need for tailored support and development in these areas, as well as a more systemic approach to equipping leaders with the tools, strategies, and collaborative frameworks needed to thrive amid these challenges.

Participants in our enquiry suggest that the underlying causes of these complexities are focused on competing goals, lack of clear boundaries, and the interconnectedness of systems with which they engage. Leaders encounter conflicting priorities across economic, community, and environmental goals, often resulting in tension between short-term financial interests and long-term community and environmental needs. Political agendas and the influence of lobbyists complicate decision-making, as leaders navigate varying stakeholder interests and balance the demands of local, state, and federal bodies. The reliance of many not-for-profit organisations on government funding further constrains open discourse and autonomy, leading to a middle ground approach that prioritises consensus over bold action. This reliance on government support limits leaders' capacity to challenge the status quo, affecting the potential for transformative change in Tasmania.

Another perceived challenge is the lack of structured boundaries in roles and responsibilities, which is seen as hindering accountability and clear decision-making. Social and organisational structures reinforce this complexity, as outdated or rigid systems restrict adaptability. Data sharing and community collaboration remain limited, with qualitative insights and

The Complexity Leadership Survey invited participants to rate fourteen complexity leadership skills, aiming to identify gaps between perceived current and future requirements for effective leadership in Tasmania.

quantitative data often existing in silos, inhibiting cross-sector understanding and amplifying frustrations.

Leaders face additional hurdles with philanthropic funding, which has shifted from fixed outcomes to emergent goals, adding pressure for financial certainty in a climate of budget constraints. The cultural identity of organisations and communities becomes a focal point for change, as leaders recognise that significant transformations require shifts in core values and brand promises, which are difficult to enact.

Ultimately, leaders in Tasmania are tasked with managing these multifaceted complexities while fostering systemic change. This requires not only a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of issues but also the ability to navigate tensions between tradition and innovation, short-term pressures and long-term goals, and local and global imperatives.

From a systems perspective, Tasmania might be seen as a somewhat isolated system with relatively impermeable boundaries that limit its exposure to external influences and constrain its interaction with neighbouring systems. Within these boundaries, the state features diverse stakeholders that are sometimes vying for diverse goals and competing for limited resources, creating inherent tensions. The tightly interconnected nature of its parts means that changes in one area can ripple across the entire system, a property that is sometimes referred to as *strongly coupled* in the systems literature (Helbing, 2013).

At the same time, Tasmania's socio-political structures are often described as rigid, hindering the state's capacity to adapt to rapidly evolving internal and external conditions. **Leaders seem to face the dual challenge of maintaining internal harmony to preserve stability while simultaneously striving for transformational change to address pressing issues. These dynamics collectively evoke the metaphor of a socio-political terrarium — a self-contained system that is both fragile and complex, requiring careful stewardship to balance preservation and progress.**

TASMANIAN LEADERS' NEEDS

Leaders reported varying levels of confidence in addressing different types of complexity, which may provide critical insight into both their strengths and potential areas for growth. Overall, leaders feel quite confident to very confident in managing interpersonal, intrapersonal, organisational, and social and cultural complexities. These areas reflect their ability to handle relational dynamics, personal challenges, and structural issues, as well as to engage effectively with the cultural and social aspects of their roles. However, confidence may diminish when it comes to political, environmental, epistemic, and ethical complexities, where self-ratings fall between moderately confident and quite confident.

This may suggest less confidence in navigating governance challenges, environmental pressures, and the nuanced dimensions of ethics and truth-seeking. Technological complexity

may present the lowest confidence ratings, between somewhat confident and moderately confident, pointing to a potential gap in leaders' readiness to address digital transformation, cybersecurity risks, and the pace of technological change. Perhaps this reflects a shift in confidence once leaders are required to address domains they cannot control as directly.

To better understand the skills Tasmanian leaders may require to navigate these complexities, we integrated findings from the Lab participants with insights from other future-focused leadership skills frameworks, including the *World Economic Forum's Top Skills of 2023* (Masterson, 2023), *World Economic Forum's Key Leadership Characteristics* (Yoon, S., & Mormont, M., 2024), *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World (Johansen, 2018), a Future Capabilities Reference Framework* (The Institute for Working Futures, 2017), *and A Scoping Review of Future Skills Frameworks* (Kotsiou et al., 2022). Through this process we identified fourteen complexity leadership skills. **Table 1** (Pages 20-21) provides an outline of these skills. Tasmanian Leaders are currently iterating these skills for use in future leadership development initiatives.

The Complexity Leadership Survey (refer to Our Approach section above) invited leaders to rate fourteen key leadership skills along three dimensions: the level of capability they believe will be required for effective leadership in Tasmania in 2024 and beyond, their own current level of capability, and the typical capability level of the leaders they work with regularly. This approach aimed to identify potential gaps between current competencies and future requirements.

Findings suggest that Tasmanian leaders uniformly rated all fourteen skills as high to very high in importance for effective leadership in 2024 and beyond. However, their self-assessed capabilities fell short of these ideals, with ratings between moderate to high. Most notably, digital and technological competency was rated significantly lower than some other skills, highlighting a potential area for development. Moreover, leaders perceived the typical capability levels of their peers as even lower, between low to moderate, raising concerns about broader gaps in leadership skills.

For all fourteen skills, the required level of capability for effective leadership in 2024 and beyond was consistently rated higher than leaders' self-rated current capability, which in turn was rated higher than the perceived capability of the leaders they work with regularly. This pattern may reflect the skills of the survey respondents, who might represent particularly self-aware or highly skilled leaders. Alternatively, it could suggest a halo effect, where respondents rate their own capabilities more favourably while adopting a more critical perspective toward their peers.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate which skills their organisations were investing in from the perspective of development. The skills that attracted the highest ratings included people and team leadership (54% of respondents),

> **❝** The leadership we need will not happen by chance. There needs to be ever-stronger purposeful support and development."
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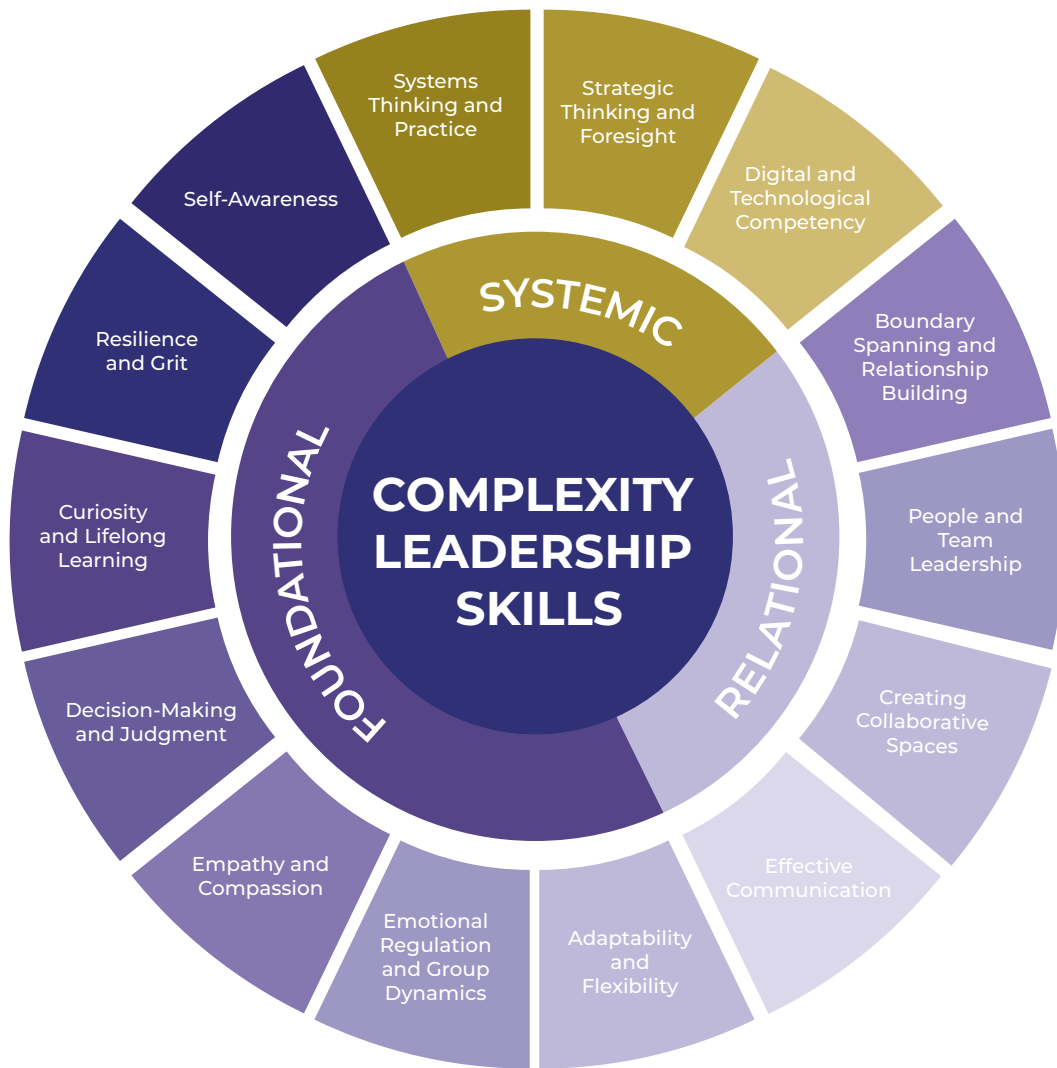> *- Complexity Leadership Survey Respondent*

Image 1. *Complexity Leadership Skills*
*(Refer **Table 1** Complexity Leadership Skills with Definitions Pages 20 - 21)*

digital and technological competency (41% of respondents), and curiosity and lifelong learning (38% of respondents).

This may indicate an organisational emphasis on fostering leadership that supports team dynamics, adapts to technological advancements, and embraces continuous learning. Conversely, skills that attracted the least number of ratings included resilience and grit (21% of respondents), adaptability and flexibility (21% of respondents), and empathy and compassion (26% of respondents). These results suggest that while some foundational interpersonal and intrapersonal skills may be recognised

as important, they may not receive as much investment relative to other areas. Additionally, it is notable that 33% of respondents indicated their organisations are not investing in any of the fourteen identified skills, potentially reflecting resource constraints, misaligned priorities, or a lack of focus on development.

These findings may point to the need for a more considered and deliberate approach to the development of leaders and leadership. Leaders require targeted support to build competencies in underdeveloped areas and organisations have a pivotal role to play in equipping their leaders with the skills necessary to

thrive in the complexity of Tasmania's environment.

Anecdotal observations from the Lab revealed a deep engagement among Tasmanian leaders with the complexities they face. Through body language, tone of voice, and group dynamics, it was clear that participants balanced a strong passion for their work with a thoughtful, reflective approach. Leaders expressed a profound connection to their communities and organisations, driven by a desire to make a meaningful difference in the state they deeply care about. While many described their experience as treading water but not drowning, their resilience and determination shone through as they navigated demanding contexts, often with limited resources and support.

Leaders seem to face the dual challenge of maintaining internal harmony to preserve stability while simultaneously striving for transformational change to address pressing issues.

Image: Complexity Leadership Lab, Lousy! Creative Studio 2024

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POTENTIAL FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of this enquiry highlight the need for a deliberate and multifaceted approach to leadership and leadership development in Tasmania. As leaders navigate the complexity of interconnected systems, competing goals, and evolving challenges, targeted strategies are essential to equip them with the skills, support, and collaborative frameworks required for success. Notwithstanding the need to test these findings on a broader and more representative sample of leaders across Tasmania, the following recommendations outline potential pathways for strengthening leaders and leadership capacity, while fostering systemic progress and innovation.

FOCUS ON COMPLEXITY LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Education and development initiatives should prioritise complexity leadership skills, such as those outlined in **Table 1**. These encompass foundational, relational, and systemic competencies, including resilience and grit, boundary spanning and relationship building, and systems thinking and practice. Integrating these skills into educational programs such as the Tasmanian Leaders Program, can equip leaders with the tools needed to navigate complexity effectively. This approach will help them address multifaceted challenges and drive meaningful, sustainable change across sectors.

SHIFT EMPHASIS FROM LEADER DEVELOPMENT TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leader development typically focuses on enhancing the mindsets, skills, and behaviours of individual leaders. In contrast, leadership development emphasises building relationships, collaborative practices, and ways of working that foster collective action (Day, 2000). Organisations may benefit from shifting their focus towards leadership development, prioritising frameworks that encourage shared responsibility and collaboration. By fostering collective leadership, teams and organisations can address complex challenges more effectively, leveraging diverse perspectives and expertise to co-create systemic solutions.

INVEST IN DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT

Leaders in this enquiry reported low confidence in their digital and technological competencies, underscoring the need for targeted investment in these areas. Training in digital literacy and emerging technology becomes critical if this finding reflects broader trends among Tasmanian leaders. Equipping leaders with the skills to navigate cybersecurity risks, integrate AI and other innovations, and manage digital tools strategically can help ensure that technological advancements are sustainable and aligned with organisational goals. Such efforts can enable leaders to harness the potential of technology to address complexity effectively and foster growth in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

EMBED SYSTEMS THINKING AND PRACTICES INTO ORGANISATIONAL PROCESSES

Incorporating systems thinking and practices into organisational processes, such as strategic planning, sensemaking, and decision-making, could significantly enhance leadership effectiveness in Tasmania's interconnected systems.

By supporting leaders in recognising interdependencies, anticipating ripple effects, and identifying leverage points for intervention, organisations can foster a more holistic approach to addressing complex challenges. This shift toward systems-oriented practices can enable organisations to navigate Tasmania's unique socio-political and environmental landscape more effectively, balancing competing goals while driving sustainable, systemic change.

ESTABLISH SHARED VISIONING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION FRAMEWORKS

To address competing goals and reduce polarisation, organisations and leaders could adopt shared visioning exercises and conflict resolution frameworks. These tools provide structured approaches to aligning diverse stakeholders around common objectives while constructively managing tensions between polarised groups. By piloting these frameworks in contentious areas such as land management, leaders can demonstrate their potential to foster collaboration, build trust, and advance progress on issues that are critical to Tasmania's future.

SO WHAT? MOVING FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

This work is more than an enquiry into complexity leadership – It is a call to action. Understanding the challenges leaders in Tasmania face and the skills they need to cultivate is just the first step; real impact comes from what happens next. The findings from this initial enquiry will directly inform the evolution of the Tasmanian Leaders Design Framework©, ensuring that leadership development in Tasmania remains aligned with the realities of an interconnected and dynamic landscape.

This work is also shaping the Leading at the Edge series – immersive one-day experiences designed to cultivate critical leadership skills. For example, systems thinking will be a core focus of the Leading Through Complexity workshop, while technological capability will take centre stage in the Business and AI workshop. These targeted initiatives reflect a commitment to equipping leaders with the skills needed to navigate complexity more effectively.

AN INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE

We invite leaders across Tasmania to engage with this work – not just as readers, but as active participants in shaping the next phase of action.

- Which insights resonate with your personal experience of leading in Tasmania?
- Which insights may describe dynamics in your personal and professional relationships?
- Which insights provide new perspectives on the systems that you participate in and lead?
- What additional opportunities or solutions do you see for strengthening leadership in Tasmania?

By integrating your perspectives with those reported here, we can drive collaboration across industries and sectors, foster innovative approaches, and equip Tasmanian leaders with the skills to navigate complexity more skilfully. Let's continue the conversation and work together to cultivate a more adaptive, resilient, and forward-thinking leadership culture.

ABOUT TASMANIAN LEADERS

Tasmanian Leaders is dedicated to amplifying purposeful and inclusive leadership for greater social, economic and environmental wellbeing.

No one understands leadership in the Tasmanian context better than us. We deliver unparalleled excellence in leadership development through our high-impact programs, equipping individuals with the skills, knowledge, and mindset necessary to positively influence our future.

For over a decade, Tasmanian Leaders has championed thought leadership for the benefit of Tasmania. In 2024, under Katy Cooper's guidance, we continued this work through a series of Leadership Labs exploring how leadership is enacted, perceived, and experienced across the state.

Recognising the growing complexity leaders face, one Leadership Lab, led by Dr. Aiden M. A. Thornton, focused on this critical topic. Beginning with a one-day event with our alumni and followed by the Complexity Leadership Skills Survey, the Lab examined how complexity manifests in Tasmanian organisations, communities, and networks, while starting to identify the essential skills needed to navigate it.

The insights gained will inform future program designs for Tasmanian Leaders, offering practical tools to help leaders address complexity. We also hope this work sparks meaningful conversations and proves valuable to others in the leader and leadership development space.

We extend our gratitude to Katy for her leadership and to Aiden for his innovation and dedication to this project. Our thanks to Nekon, our supporting partner for the Leadership in Action program.

If something here resonates or challenges you, we'd love to hear your thoughts. Have ideas for future topics? Please get in touch info@ tasmanianleaders.org.au.

Leading in Complexity is part of Leadership in Action, proudly supported by

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Aiden M. A. Thornton is a complexity leadership expert, management consultant, psychometrics entrepreneur, and street epistemologist.

As a complexity leadership expert, Aiden holds an interdisciplinary PhD in leadership, complexity, and cognition and serves as the Inaugural Menzies Senior Research Fellow in Leadership and Complexity at the Australian National University's School of Cybernetics. He is part of the ANU Complexity Leadership Lab and his work spans the theory, measurement, research, education, and practice of complexity leadership. He applies principles of cybernetics, systems thinking, and complexity science to making sense of leadership and its development.

As a management consultant, Aiden has over 25 years of international experience across Australia, Asia, and Europe, working with top-tier consulting firms and blue-chip organisations. He has led large-scale and multi-million-dollar programs, and currently runs his own consulting company that specialises in leadership development, change management, organisational culture, and organisational design..

As an entrepreneur, Aiden is establishing a psychometrics company that offers an innovative suite of instruments that measure different aspects of leadership. As a street epistemologist, Aiden's work focuses on enquiring into what people believe, why they hold those beliefs, and their underlying epistemologies.

Aiden brings a unique blend of intellectual intensity, thought leadership, pragmatism, and wicked humour to his work. He collaborates with organisational leaders, leadership service providers, and leadership researchers, helping them think integratively, inquire deeply, speak boldly, collaborate fiercely, and act adaptively.

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Table 1: Complexity Leadership Skills with Definitions

FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS	
Self-Awareness	A deep understanding of one's own strengths, growth opportunities, biases, triggers, values, influence, etc. This skill emphasises self-enquiry.
Resilience and Grit	The ability to maintain focus and determination in the face of setbacks or challenges. This skill requires grit, resilience, and a long-term focus, as well as a commitment to sustained performance.
Curiosity and Lifelong Learning	The ability to maintain a strong sense of curiosity and commitment to lifelong learning in order to stay relevant and adaptable. This skill includes a growth mindset, consistently questioning assumptions, and embracing personal and professional growth
Decision-Making and Judgment	The ability to make thoughtful, well-informed decisions, even in the face of uncertainty. It includes creating the cognitive space for reflection, making decisions guided by strong ethical values and principles, and embracing failure as part of the decision-making process.
Empathy and Compassion	The ability to understand and share the feelings of others while demonstrating compassion and humility. This skill fosters trust and helps create inclusive environments where individuals feel supported and valued.
Emotional Regulation and Group Dynamics	The ability to manage one's own and others' emotions. This skill includes self-regulation, maintaining a sense of calm in challenging situations, and helping others navigate difficult emotions in the workplace.
Adaptability and Flexibility	The capacity to change one's mindset, behaviour, behavioural style, and approach in response to changing conditions. This requires embracing uncertainty and being open to making adjustments without clinging to past methods or outcomes.

RELATIONAL SKILLS	
Effective Communication	The ability to tailor messages, communication styles and communication approaches to meet the needs of diverse audiences while ensuring transparency and clarity. This skill includes narrative building that fosters trust and resonates with others.
Creating Collaborative Spaces	The ability to establish environments where diverse perspectives are welcomed and teamwork thrives. This includes supporting others, cultivating co-created value, effectively participating in collaborative processes, and effectively facilitating collaborative processes that others may participate in.
People and Team Leadership	The ability to support, guide and develop individuals within a team. This includes line management, role modelling, creating opportunities for growth, and empowering others through effective mentoring and coaching.
Boundary Spanning and Relationship Building	The ability to build bridges across people, relationships, teams, organisations, or sectors by fostering meaningful connections. This involves holding relationships, recognising common goals, and creating partnerships that contribute to a shared purpose.
SYSTEMIC SKILLS	
Digital and Technological Competency	The ability to stay current with emerging technologies, including AI and digital tools, and understanding how they can be applied to enhance leadership and work processes. This skill includes a commitment to a proactive approach to staying technologically aware.
Strategic Thinking and Foresight	The ability to anticipate future challenges and opportunities while maintaining a focus on long-term goals. This involves staying current with issues, taking a helicopter view to consider broader contexts, and creating strategies that align with evolving needs.
Systems Thinking and Practice	The ability to see the whole system and how different parts of a system interact. This skill focuses on recognising interdependence, identifying systemic patterns, and being willing to intervene bravely when necessary for the overall health of the system.

Statistical Analyses

For each of the fourteen complexity leadership skills listed in **Table 1**, respondents were asked to respond to three survey items.

The first item was *'What level of capability do you believe will be required for leaders in Tasmania to lead effectively in 2024 and beyond?'*.

The second item was '*How would you rate your current level of capability?'*.

The third item was *'How would you rate the typical level of capability among the leaders you work with regularly?'*.

All three items were rated on Likert scale with five response categories i.e., very low, low, moderate, high, and very high. To identify potential differences between the average ratings for these skills and given the smaller and non-representative samples, relatively simple multivariate analyses were undertaken. Analyses were conducted using both parametric (one-way ANOVA) and non-parametric (Kruskal-Wallis) procedures.

Both approaches produced similar results, so only an abbreviated version of the non-parametric analyses are reported. Full details on statistical analyses can be obtained from the author upon request.

What level of capability do you believe will be required for leaders in Tasmania to lead effectively in 2024 and beyond?

There were no statistically significant differences between skills for the perceived capability level required for leaders in Tasmania to lead effectively in 2024 and beyond (χ^2=14.58, df=13, p=.34). All skills were rated between high and very high (4.38 to 4.67).

How would you rate your current level of capability?

There was a statistically significant difference between skills for perceived current level of capability (χ^2=39.09, df=13, p<.001). All skills were rated between moderate and high (3.08 to 3.92). Post-hoc analyses via Dwass-Steel-Critchlow-Fligner pairwise comparison showed that skill 12 (i.e., digital and technological competency) was rated significantly lower than skills 2, 4, 5, and 7 (i.e., resilience and grit, decision-making and judgement, empathy and compassion, adaptability and flexibility).

How would you rate the typical level of capability among the leaders you work with regularly?

There were no statistically significant differences between skills for perceived capability levels amongst the leaders that respondents work with regularly (χ^2=18.76, df=13, p=.13). All skills were rated between low to moderate (2.41 to 3.13).

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