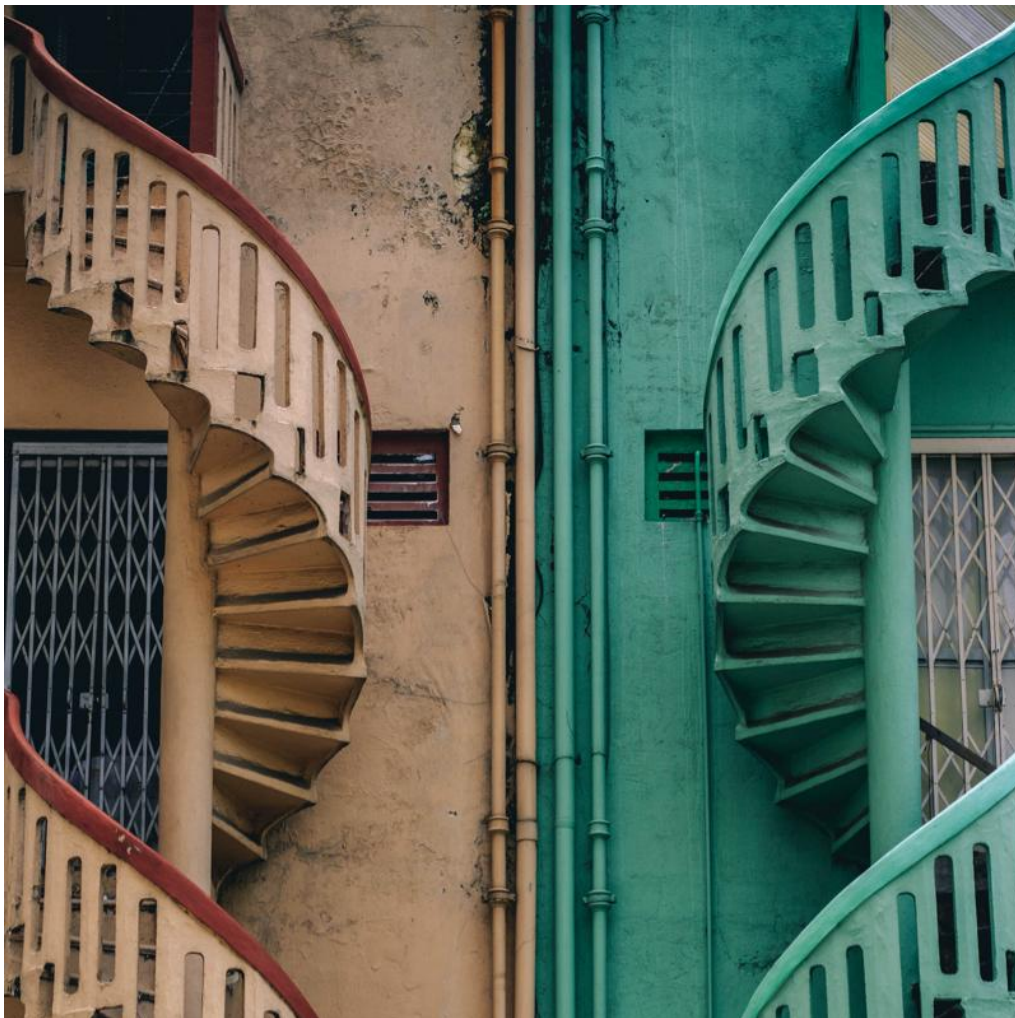


Leadership Longevity

From Assessing Talent To Understanding Trajectories.



By Simonetta Cavasin and Laura Fabbro, October 2026



Introduction

People are working for longer, navigating more transitions and seeing their skills and roles evolve repeatedly. Yet many assessment systems still rely primarily on past performance, established categories and readiness for the next level. The challenge is not to refine the framework, but to change the object of observation: from a snapshot of an individual at a particular point in time to the trajectory they may be able to sustain, in relation to a role, a time horizon and a specific set of organisational conditions. Longer working lives thus bring the limitations of more static assessment systems into sharper focus and invite us to view talent review and succession planning as matters of governance too.

The context: careers are no longer predictable sequences

Working lives are becoming longer just as the nature of work is changing at an accelerating pace. Over a career spanning forty years or more, an individual may move through periods of rapid progression, lateral moves and consolidation, as well as changes of function or sector, reskilling and phases in which they need to redefine their contribution. A career is no longer synonymous with a hierarchical ladder; it is better understood as a succession of cycles, each with a different combination of learning, performance, energy and aspiration.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating this dynamic. It is redistributing tasks, changing the relative value of skills and narrowing the gap between distinctive expertise and replicable practice. As a result, capabilities that are less readily automated are becoming more important: judgement, interpretation, decision accountability, leading change and enabling others to perform and develop.

Longevity, however, does not in itself guarantee a sustainable career. Tenure, sustained performance and willingness to stay do not necessarily tell us whether someone is still learning, sees a future within the organisation or has transferable skills. An individual may continue to deliver results while gradually losing motivation, employability or confidence in their prospects. Retaining people for longer is not the same as sustaining their contribution over time. Professional longevity does not necessarily mean staying longer with the same organisation; it means remaining able to make a relevant and transferable contribution across successive career cycles.

The paradox: dynamic careers, static assessments

As career trajectories become longer and less linear, many talent management systems continue to rely largely on static snapshots — useful in themselves, but not always sufficient to capture how an individual's contribution may evolve over time.

Performance in the current role, an overall assessment of potential and readiness for the next level are brought together in frameworks that help structure the conversation, but may not fully reflect the range of possible future paths. Performance, potential and readiness remain

important dimensions; what changes is how they are interpreted, linked to specific scenarios and revisited over time.

The paradox is clear: tools designed to provide a periodic snapshot are being asked to inform decisions in increasingly fluid contexts. Past performance may come to be seen as an indicator of future contribution, potential as a relatively stable attribute, and succession as a primarily vertical move into an already defined role. Yet, as roles and capabilities change, so too does the meaning of 'ready'. Someone may be ready for the role as it exists today, but not for the version that will emerge in three years' time. Conversely, they may not appear ready now, yet possess the learning agility to evolve faster than the role itself.

Age, too, can become an interpretative shortcut — an implicit proxy for energy, ambition, adaptability or digital fluency. Such simplification can weaken the quality of analysis and have material implications for governance. It may constrain mobility, narrow succession pools and turn untested assumptions into apparently objective criteria. In longer careers, no stage of life should be treated as a professional destination.

The shift in perspective: from talent to trajectory

The point is not to make the snapshot more sophisticated, but to change the object of observation. A **trajectory review** asks not only who is performing well or who might be ready to move up a level. It considers the degree of complexity an individual may be able to handle, the role or scope towards which they could progress, the relevant timeframe and the conditions required.

This perspective draws a clearer distinction between three dimensions:

- **Evidence** describes what the individual has already demonstrated through observable behaviour, decisions and results;
- **Potential hypotheses** offer a bounded prediction: not 'high potential' in absolute terms, but the potential to handle a specific form of future complexity;
- **Conditions for expression** clarify what needs to be in place for that prediction to materialise: experience, sponsorship, mandate, decision rights, feedback, time to learn and the quality of the surrounding context.

Potential is therefore understood not as a fixed category, but as a hypothesis to be tested. This makes assessment more rigorous, because it requires the role, timeframe and underlying assumptions to be made explicit; it also makes it less deterministic, because it recognises that people, markets and organisations change. An assessment does not close down a possibility: it defines the next meaningful career experience through which to confirm it, revise it or open up a new one.

An operational model based on five questions

Moving from a snapshot to a trajectory does not necessarily require a new process. Rather, the trajectory review brings a different discipline to interpreting information already available

through talent and succession processes. The conversation can be reframed around five recurring questions.

1. **What has genuinely been demonstrated?** Evidence should be drawn from different contexts and distinguished from reputation, seniority and simple exposure. Strong results remain essential, but they should be considered alongside how they were achieved and how transferable they are.
2. **What future complexity is at stake?** Potential becomes meaningful in relation to a particular challenge: breadth of scope, ambiguity, interdependencies, scale, transformation or technological disruption. The future role is not necessarily 'the one above', but the one in which the individual's contribution can have greater impact.
3. **What is the capacity to evolve?** Learning agility, insight and the ability to scale one's impact are particularly relevant indicators. What matters is a willingness to unlearn, the ability to interpret incomplete signals and the capacity to move from individual contribution to building collective capability.
4. **Is the trajectory sustainable?** Energy, motivation, aspirations, organisational health and employability need to be considered over time. High performance may coexist with fatigue or disengagement; a period of slower progress may precede a new cycle of growth.
5. **What conditions must the organisation create?** Every development decision should create a dual commitment: actions required of the individual and conditions to be provided by the organisation. Without mandate, sponsorship and opportunities to experiment, potential remains theoretical. Employability depends not only on an individual's willingness to learn, but also on the quality of the experiences, transitions and mobility opportunities the organisation makes available.

The trajectory review does not replace managerial judgement; it makes that judgement more transparent. It turns broad categories into testable hypotheses and connects assessment, mobility, development and succession within a single learning cycle.

AI readiness is a test of leadership, not an individual skill

Artificial intelligence brings the distinction between personal competence and the ability to lead transformation into sharper focus. Knowing how to use a tool is only the first level. For an executive, readiness spans at least three dimensions:

- **fluency** - understanding the opportunities, limitations and risks;
- **enablement** - the ability to redesign processes, roles and ways of working; and
- **governance** - clarity about what can be delegated to technology and what must remain under human accountability.

This distinction is equally important in succession planning. The right leader is not necessarily the most advanced user of the technology, but the one who can translate technological capability into capability across the organisation, while ensuring that the digital divide does

not become a source of generational or professional exclusion. The assessment question therefore becomes: can this individual rethink how their part of the organisation works while preserving quality, accountability and inclusion? Precisely because AI is changing the content of roles, the sources of value and the way people collaborate, readiness cannot be treated as a capability acquired once and for all, but as the capacity to keep evolving.

The broader implication concerns governance

If potential emerges from the interaction between the individual, the role and the context, talent management needs to extend beyond the traditional boundaries of HR policy. Decisions about leadership pipelines and succession shape the capabilities the organisation seeks to preserve, the transformations it is prepared to support and the level of continuity risk it is willing to accept.

For organisations, this means considering not only whether critical roles are covered, but also the quality of the options available: the diversity of the trajectories under consideration, the assumptions underpinning readiness, the experiences that are missing and the organisational conditions that could compromise a transition. A list of names is a starting point; a robust pipeline also requires explicit hypotheses, deliberate development experiences and alternatives that are revisited over time.

The challenge is to connect strategy, workforce planning and role architecture. If strategy changes faster than development pathways, succession may prepare leaders primarily for familiar organisational configurations. If, instead, the review starts from the capabilities required over the next strategic cycles, lateral moves, transformation assignments and time-bound responsibilities can prove more informative than linear promotion.

This perspective is particularly relevant in fast-changing contexts, such as private equity-backed businesses. It helps distinguish the ability to deliver in the current environment from the capacity to scale with the business, navigate a period of disruption or build a strong layer of leadership beneath the top team. In this sense, leadership risk stems not only from the absence of a successor, but also from dependence on individuals who are effective in only one organisational configuration.

From definitive prediction to continuous review

Over the course of a career, no assessment can be definitive. The organisation's role is not to predict, once and for all, who will succeed, but to create regular opportunities to revisit trajectories, renew learning and realign the individual, the role and the context.

The shift from **talent review** to **trajectory review** therefore goes beyond semantics. It represents an evolution in perspective: from classifying people to managing possibilities; from readiness as a state to readiness as a journey; and from development as an individual responsibility to a clear, testable compact between leaders and the organisation.

Longer working lives invite Boards and leadership teams to engage with a question that goes beyond 'who is ready today?'

The more important question is: which trajectories must we make possible if the organisation is to retain the capabilities it will need tomorrow?

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