

# The courage to think clearly

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A manifesto for business  
leadership in fractured times



*"The Courage to Think Clearly is a timely reminder that, in moments of crisis, silence is never an option. Leadership demands that we speak, even when the truths are uncomfortable, even when the path ahead is uncertain. As this report says, we need "radical candour", but I would say we also need radical collaboration. To think clearly is to recognise the depth of the challenges we face together, but it is also for each of us to meet this moment with honesty, humility, and moral courage. Only through determined, collective leadership can we turn this moment of crisis into one of purpose and hope."*



**Mary Robinson**  
Co-founder, Project Dandelion and former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

*"In order to produce the \$100 T of the global GdP we are emitting 37.8 giga CO2eq, chopping down 11 MM hectares of native forests and keeping 3B people under poverty. That model collapsed a long time ago. Thinking clearly is using our resources in favour of the majority. Not for a self-elected few, based on violence, lies and dirty dealings. Clear thinking is thinking clean."*



**Marcelo Behar**  
COP30 Special Envoy for Bioeconomy

*"The Courage to Think Clearly is a timely and compelling call for principled leadership. It challenges business leaders to pair clarity of thought with moral courage, and to use their influence to advance the common good."*



**Dame Christiana Figueres**  
Founding Partner, Global Optimism and former executive secretary of the United Nations framework convention on climate change

*The Courage to Think Clearly' calls for leadership that enables urgent action: placing the most vulnerable at the centre of climate solutions and recognising nature as our vital shield. It also means listening to those who have long safeguarded balance with nature: Indigenous peoples and local communities. Centring their wisdom is both climate justice and the surest path to resilient, lasting solutions.*



**Wanjira Mathai**  
Managing Director for Africa and Global Partnerships at the World Resources Institute (WRI).

*"The Courage to Think Clearly delivers a vital message for a world in crisis, urging leaders to reclaim authenticity, rediscover purpose, think and act with clarity and courage. It reminds us that true leadership unites what is fragmented and reconnects what is divided, allowing a future most fit for life to emerge."*



**Sook-Yee, TAI,**  
Chairperson  
NO.17 Foundation

*"In fractured times, clarity is an act of leadership. This manifesto shows how purpose, honesty about risk, and reconciliation can restore trust, and how ideas, shared widely and tested rigorously, can move markets and minds. It's a brave, practical blueprint."*



**Andre Hoffman**  
Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors, Roche Holding Ltd.

*"In this extraordinary report Kite Insights draws on years of deep experience to argue for a new approach to thought leadership – an approach that embraces conflict and uncertainty, that welcomes inputs from multiple sources and that seeks to build reconciliation, clarity and unity in the midst of difference. A wonderful combination of practical, actionable advice and deep inspiration. Courageous business leadership can not only strengthen companies but also bridge divides. Highly recommended!"*



**Rebecca Henderson**  
John and Natty McArthur University Professor at Harvard University

*"At a time of deep uncertainty, this report makes a compelling case for thought leadership as a force for meaningful change. It is a call for courage, creativity and responsibility – to match the scale of today's crises with ideas and action equal to the task."*



**Laurence Tubiana**  
CEO of the European Climate Foundation

*"Like it or not, we live in an age of noise and clickbait. But this is precisely why so many people are hankering for thoughtful, honest and evidenced-based debate – to embrace our shared challenges, and expand our sense of what is possible. Thank you, Sophie, for the well-timed push."*



**Jeremy Oppenheim**  
Founder and Managing Partner  
Systemiq

*"We are living through a profound moment of reckoning: ecological, social, and political. The Courage to Think Clearly calls on us to face up to these crises with honesty and courage, to reconcile with one another and with nature, and to remember who we are and what we truly stand for. Only then can we build a healthy, stable and prosperous planet for all."*



**Sandrine Dixon-Declève**  
Honorary President, The  
Club of Rome & Earth4All,  
Executive Chair

*This report highlights the importance of responsible and thoughtful leadership. It acts as a roadmap for the leaders of today who must not be silent when faced with complex issues but rather be courageous in making bold and calculated decisions. It also outlines how good governance helps us focus on what truly matters and how collective action can spark positive momentum to bring others onboard.*



**Marie-Claire Daveau**  
CSO, Kering

*"Leadership is about discerning and acting — at the individual, team, or company level. Engaging in thought leadership means daring to go further: taking the necessary step to scale impact through systemic transformation. With this new report, Kite Insights once again shows a path forward — rooted in principles, informed by rigorous research, and equipped with robust tools and methods. The head, the heart, and the hand coming together."*

*"The Courage to Think Clearly is a timely reminder that leadership today must be bold. In a world of noise, businesses have a unique ability - and responsibility - to think deeply and offer new insights. This report challenges us all to lead with both conviction and humility – and to speak in a way that encourages reconciliation - qualities that will define the next generation of business leadership."*

*"As cognitive security becomes a defining frontier for global stability, The Courage to Think Clearly is a timely reminder of purpose and the power of leadership: to see and accept complexity, ground meaning in care and responsibility for choices, and choose to make sense of what matters in the midst of noise. This manifesto is a call to reclaim the collective clarity that anchors trust, coherence and our shared capacity to act wisely in uncertain times."*



**Laurence Debroux**  
Non Executive Director, CFO



**Maria Mendiluce**  
Maria Mendiluce CEO We  
Mean Business Coalition



**Kirsten Dunlop**  
CEO, Climate KIC

*"The Courage to Think Clearly is a timely and compelling call for principled leadership. It challenges business leaders to pair clarity of thought with moral courage, and to use their influence to advance the common good."*

*The role of curators, conveners and thought leaders has simply never been more critical for our society. Moreover, what we need now are thought leaders who are also embodied: leaders who are willing to be vulnerable, admit learnings and failures, and model humility. It is these qualities that will enable us as a collective to find our way together, beyond the usual posturing and performance. I am grateful to Sophie and her team at Kite for continuing to model this courage, and providing a much-needed space for sensemaking, reflection and clarity.*



**Thomas Steenbech Bomhoff**  
Vice President, Global  
Sustainability & External  
Engagement, Novonesis



**Renée Lertzman, PhD**  
Project InsideOut, Founder

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# Foreword



## The courage to think clearly

Businesses hold extraordinary power and influence, whether through the people they employ, the data they steward, the capital they direct, the supply chains they shape or the ideas they amplify.

In an age of converging crises - climate disruption, biodiversity loss, widening inequality, and deepening polarisation - that power carries a special responsibility: the courage to think clearly and speak boldly about the forces shaping our society, economy and planet.

Over the past year, these pressures have pushed many leaders into strategic silence. Yet crisis also creates a rare aperture for reflection: a moment to pause, take stock of how we got here, and decide what voice we want to have when we step forward again.

For more than ten years, I have built Kite Insights on one conviction: **evidence-based insights, when expressed with courage and clarity, can move mindsets, markets and, ultimately, the world.** At their best, they deepen understanding, inspire new ways of thinking and seed the radical ideas that move us forward. We've seen these ideas spark policy shifts, guide investment and accelerate corporate action on sustainability, equity, and resilience. This moment needs all these things - and more.

That is why we have written **The courage to think clearly: a manifesto for business leadership in fractured times.** It is both a provocation and a blueprint.

The provocation: incremental thinking is no longer enough. The challenges we face demand ideas that transform - radical enough to reshape systems, reimagine growth, and redefine what good leadership looks like.

The blueprint offers a refreshed practice of thought leadership: one that challenges convention, strengthens reconciliation, harnesses collective intelligence, and uses artificial intelligence as an accelerant.

And while this report calls on leaders to take a stand on the issues they believe in, it also sets out the enduring reasons to invest in thought leadership.

In the appendix, we revisit the founding principles, frameworks and research practices that underpin credible thought leadership: how to frame issues clearly, engage audiences thoughtfully, and approach complexity with rigour and care. **Because conviction alone is not enough, it is systematic thinking that gives it credibility and confidence.**

The risks of engagement are real, but the risks of disengagement are greater. Silence cedes the field to division and erodes the possibility of healthy debate about the paths forward. And, in simple terms, lasting business success is inseparable from the health of our societies and the stability of our planet.

I hope you read these pages with a critic's eye and a maker's resolve. Consider these ideas, adapt them, improve them, and then put them to work. In an age when conflict and chaos feel like the new normal, well-crafted insights, and the courage to act on them, may be the most purposeful noise any of us can make.

### Sophie Lambin

Founder & CEO of Kite Insights  
Curator of DEBATABLE. Creator of Hurd.



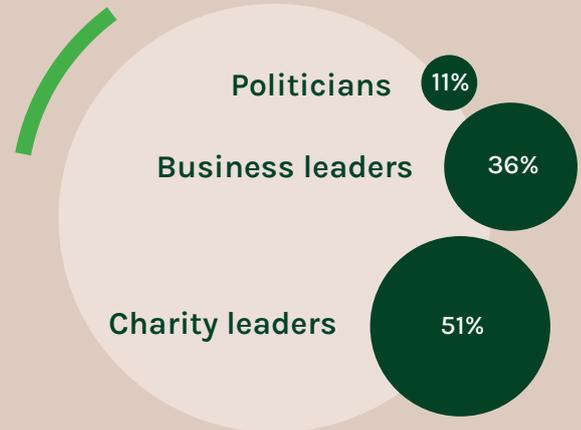
# The role of thought leadership today

## We are living through a period of profound unrest.

Trust in institutions is eroding, and confidence in governments to lead on the biggest challenges is near historic lows.

The IPSOS veracity index, for example, places politicians at the bottom of the public confidence scale, with just 11% of people trusting them. Business leaders fare slightly better at 36%, charity leaders higher still at 51%. But even at best, being trusted by half the population is a thin foundation when the challenges before us are so vast.

IPSOS Veracity Index 2024:  
public trust to tell the truth (%).



Domestically, many societies are grappling with cost-of-living pressures, strained health systems, and rising social tension.

Across borders, **geopolitical conflict and instability** are escalating to levels unseen in decades. Globally, the **climate and biodiversity crises** deepen year by year, while the rapid deployment of **AI raises urgent questions** about the future of work and even human agency. These challenges are converging with unusual speed.

Instead of uniting us, the **complexity of these crises has fuelled division**. Politicisation has left many national leaders struggling to set coherent agendas, and fragmented leadership has weakened responses at both domestic and international levels. **In this vacuum, people are looking elsewhere for guidance.**

**Business and civil society are not free of the trust deficit**, but they are often seen as more credible than governments, and they command resources and influence that few other institutions can match. That creates **both a responsibility and an opening**: to step forward with courage, not to inflame division but to help societies face tensions honestly, deepen understanding, and **generate radical new ideas for the way ahead.**



As leadership expert Professor Ranjay Gulati, recently noted,

*"courage, or the lack of it, can make or break careers, organisations and society".*

He emphasises the need for leadership strategies which don't just improve an organisation but **help to shape beliefs and actions for wider society.**

Done well, thought leadership not only brings clarity to complexity: **it reframes it.** Thought leadership enables organisations to articulate new perspectives through which to understand the major challenges of our time, and to convene others around the search for solutions.

In this paper, Kite takes a fresh look at thought leadership, setting out a new ambition for the practice, before exploring its value to organisations today. In the appendix, we outline some thought leadership fundamentals which have remained constant over time.

# What is thought leadership?

The term “thought leadership” elicits a wide range of feelings from people.

Many in the corporate world immediately see its value and aspire to embody it, hence, perhaps, the 1.5 million people who identify as thought leaders on LinkedIn. Others look upon thought leadership with a certain amount of scepticism: as if it's little more than marketing material to which an organisational leader lends their name.

In his book, *Competing on Thought Leadership* (2022), Robert Buday states thought leadership is:

*“the acclaim that an organisation or individual achieves by becoming known for providing superior expertise that solves a complex problem”.*

Buday's premise is that thought leadership is a tool which organisations and businesses can use to build their reputation within target markets. It's less about the macro issues facing society, more about the micro issues facing specific business sectors.

No matter the audience or the wider objective, in our definition, **thought leadership is the practice of influencing others through evidence-based insights and ideas that deepen understanding and contribute to positive change.**

A thought leader is someone whose ideas shape how people think and act on shared challenges and systemic complexities.

Not all thought leadership is equal, however. Over the last two decades, the fragmentation of our media and publishing landscapes has seen a boom in the number of ways that people can express their views on a topic. This ranges from informed professional opinions on social media to research-based insights that further knowledge in absolute terms.

At the same time, the volume of content has exploded. Algorithm-driven publishing now rewards speed and visibility over depth, at times, valuing reaction at the expense of reflection. AI tools, when used without intent, can accelerate this cycle, generating more words but not necessarily more wisdom.

The result is a crowded landscape where genuine insight risks being drowned out by noise.

We propose a **rethink of the way thought leadership is approached.**

Good thought leadership:

Should be as much focused on the needs of wider society as the reputational and financial benefits it might deliver an organisation.

Shouldn't aim to divide or inflame but should engage tension honestly and use it to deepen understanding and spark dialogue.

Shouldn't copy, repeat, replicate. Rather, it should offer radical new ways of thinking, new approaches for doing, and above all, new ideas for being.





# Introducing the new case for thought leadership

Over the past decade, Kite has worked with leaders and employees across sectors, helping them grapple with complex issues and refine how they think and act on them. Along the way, we have developed our own methods for good thought leadership and sharpened our sense of the role it should play.

This paper distils those learnings. The case we make is not only about method - the *how* - but also about purpose - the *why*. Its value cannot be reduced to ROI alone.

At its core, thought leadership today must face converging crises directly: advancing knowledge, surfacing tensions, and deepening collective understanding.

Those in positions of influence carry a unique responsibility. They command resources, data, supply chains, finance, and talent that can be deployed for change, sometimes within their own organisations, sometimes through collaboration across sectors. In all cases, the mandate is clear: use that power with courage, to shape ideas that move us toward better outcomes.

Influence alone is not leadership. Thought leadership earns its name only when it deepens understanding and advances common good.

## Our new case for thought leadership

Thought leadership is the disciplined practice of creating fresh, evidence-based insights that help organisations navigate complexity, challenge convention and contribute to systemic transformation.

## 1. Stand on purpose

In recent years, purpose has become the anchor of many organisations, a statement of values and intent, often framed as the reason for being. For some, it has been transformative, for others, it has struggled to move beyond words on a page.

In today's polarised environment, purpose is not diminished, it is *tested*. **When leaders stand on their purpose and use it as a foundation for taking a position on contested issues, it gains depth and credibility.** Purpose becomes both a compass for decision-making and a rallying call for employees, suppliers, and partners to act together, in

particular when uncertainty or division threatens to paralyse progress.

Moments of tension, far from weakening purpose, can reveal its truest expression. They give leaders the chance to show that their commitments can withstand scrutiny and unite people around shared goals.

Standing firm does not mean rushing into every controversy. It means discerning where an organisation's values give it both legitimacy and responsibility to speak up, and doing so with clarity and courage. In this way, **purpose evolves from an internal guide to a visible contribution to courageous leadership in fractured times.**



## 2. Confront risk, build trust

Standing on purpose is only the beginning. Acting on it, especially in a volatile world, requires both conviction and radical candour.

Governance frameworks rightly ask leaders to assess and mitigate risk. But purpose-driven thought leadership calls for something more: the ability to engage with complexity in ways that are proportionate, evidence-based and anchored in long-term values. Speaking out on difficult issues will involve some level of exposure, whether reputational, organisational, relational or personal, yet, handled with rigour, it strengthens credibility rather than undermines it.

When political leadership falls short, business can help make sense of things, by asking difficult questions, sharing insights honestly and offering constructive alternatives.

Good thought leadership is never reckless. It demands discernment: knowing when and where your voice is most legitimate, understanding the landscape, and preparing for tension rather than avoiding it. Strength lies not in courting controversy, but in bringing clarity and integrity to the conversation when it matters most.

Consider the widening gap between ambition and reality: Net Zero targets delayed, inequality rising, costs escalating. Naming these tensions is uncomfortable, but it is also what creates the conditions for collective understanding and better solutions.

Ultimately, leaders face two forms of exposure. The first comes from engagement, taking a stance, testing alliances, challenging the status quo. The second, and in our view, greater risk comes from disengagement, allowing silence to deepen division and erode trust.

## 3. Acknowledging contradiction, embracing reconciliation

The tensions that surround issues including sustainability, DEI, inequality and climate reflect deeper societal challenges that businesses can no longer ignore.

Reconciliation – in the context of these divisions – offers an opportunity for business to build courage and resilience into their strategic response.

It is not about moral atonement, or pursuit of a resolution, but about intentionally bridging opposing realities to foster innovation, trust and renewal.

In a distracted and divided world, it is impossible to achieve the radical thinking that defines thought leadership without reconciliation as a principle and foundation.

As a process, reconciliation equips leaders with the ability to define their guiding principles, speak up for what they believe in, take risks and chart new pathways.

Authentically bridging across divides requires leaders to show up with a willingness to confront tensions and contradictions.

Practically this means building capacity for courageous leadership as individuals and as organisations, so that we can influence systems change.

The first step is creating safe spaces for constructive dialogue, debate and deep listening.

These spaces should allow us to question assumptions, challenge biases and invite difference and dissent into the debate.

As we build the muscle of reconciliation, we shift from paralysis to progress, building a foundation to re-imagine future-fit organisations and strategies.

In a fractured world, reconciliation is not the soft option, but a vital capability for businesses seeking radical ideas that drive lasting change.

### Kite's understanding of radical thinking for organisations

Radical thinking for organisations refers to a mindset that seeks fundamental, transformative change: not just incremental improvement within existing systems, but a reimagining or overturning of those systems. Radical thinking implies challenging the status quo, system-level vision, radical creativity, and moral and ethical urgency. Radical thinking is about leading transformation and not just adapting to it; it is bold, future-facing and often uncomfortable. Radical thinking provides solutions that are proportionate to the scale of our collective problems.

## 4. Democratisise thought leadership

Traditionally, thought leadership has been seen as a privilege you acquired as you rose in seniority within an organisation.

While experience and insight are undoubtedly prerequisites to deep thinking and ideas, the concept that the most eminent executives or public intellectuals' ideas are more valuable, align itself with the attitudes of the pre-digital era, when access to information was a privilege that came with money and power.

We live in a different age. Access to information, ideas and opinions has never been greater. **No longer is thought leadership the preserve of the privileged few.** Self-publishing has transformed how we share our ideas. But it has also blurred the boundaries between good thought leadership, and opinion.

Kite believes that in the new case for thought leadership, we need to recognise – and embrace – this democratisation. The process of collective thinking has never been more possible within an organisation. As we grapple with a converging set of complex global challenges, **organisations must recognise that perspectives can and should be shared from across an organisation – and beyond.**

### CASE STUDY:

**Non-profits like WWF, for example, shape public debate and policy through work like the WWF Living Planet report. Thanks to the insights and expertise of 40-50 core contributors, (plus many more from the wider WWF network), the Living Planet report has changed the way policy,**

**business and NGOs talk about one of the major challenges that we face today: diminishing biodiversity. Its findings have informed EU policy. Its blend of evidence, radical vision and call to action has made it a defining piece of thought leadership which has shifted minds, mentalities and systems, not just reputations. Yet it isn't the work of an individual, but many individuals within an organisation.**

Democratising thought leadership means embedding it into the daily mindset and practice of people at all levels within an organisation. The reason is simple but transformative: when more people engage early with the big questions, they **build the habit and courage to think critically** about the role of their organisation in society.

To do this well businesses and organisations must **give people the mandate, trust and safe space to question, test and share bold ideas**, and the capacity to do it rigorously. This shouldn't be a late-career privilege; it should be an expectation from the start.

The more people think out loud together, and grapple with these issues, the stronger and more resilient the ideas and the greater the chance for transformative change.

## 5. Unlock AI's strengths

Genuine thought leadership demands fresh ideas, evidence and speed, and that's exactly where artificial intelligence, when used well, can be a catalyst for change rather than a threat.

AI can help uncover hidden patterns, stress-test assumptions, and generate provocative scenarios at a pace that human teams alone can't match. It can even draft bold 'what if?' policy ideas or simulate the ripple effects of radical proposals in real time. Used well, **AI can give leaders a safe way to pressure-test radical thinking** before it hits the real world.

This deeper use of AI doesn't just unlock new opportunities, it also exposes organisational blind spots, including:

How flawed inputs can hard-code bias at scale.

How synthetic content can spread disinformation faster than it can be corrected,

How algorithmic decisions can silently shape strategy in ways that escape human oversight.

By pushing AI to the frontier of thought leadership, rather than treating it as someone else's problem, organisations can get closer to understanding its real risks and their responsibility to put strong human guardrails in place.

**This does not mean outsourcing our critical thinking to machines.** AI is a tool, not the source of wisdom or independent thought. The responsibility for bold, rigorous, human-centred ideas still sits with us, as does the creativity that will enable these ideas. But by combining human judgement and moral courage with AI's speed and pattern-spotting power, **organisations can raise the standard and reach of their thought leadership.** Used wisely, AI is not just a topic of thought leadership, it's a powerful engine for it.



# The value of investing in thought leadership

In the insightful book *The ROI of Thought Leadership* (2025), it is suggested that globally, thought leadership drives an estimated \$265bn in spending each year, increasing to \$371bn when the direct and indirect influence of thought leadership is accounted for.

However, by focusing solely on financial returns of thought leadership, we risk ignoring its many other values. In our new case for thought leadership, we seek to deepen understanding and encourage radical new ways of thinking about the value these activities can create. With this lens, the notion of ROI reaches far beyond what can be measured in economic terms.

The enduring value of thought leadership lies in its capacity to inform, inspire and influence, to improve collective understanding and shift perspectives on the defining issues of our time.

## 1. Earn trust and legitimacy

Sharing genuinely insightful perspectives on complex topics not only demonstrates expertise and originality of thought, it signals that an organisation has principles and perspectives.

Over time, this evolves into a form of reputational equity which helps an organisation to become recognised as much for its principled thinking as the products or services it offers. This, in turn, builds brand legitimacy and strengthens confidence and trust that is a precondition to meaningful participation in conversations and decisions that shape our future path.

## 2. Strengthen relationships and growth

As trust and credibility grow, business development conversations become deeper and more meaningful, built on a shared vision and ambition rather than being based on financial transactions.

Furthermore, when framed around a mandate for change, thought leadership connects with prospects and partners on a different level; when discussion of big challenges is matched with commensurate solutions, stakeholders increasingly recognise your potential as a partner.



### 3.Accountability through engagement

Developing a culture of thought leadership helps a company to clarify what it stands for.

Organisations that make this a collective process tend to foster a workplace culture which is internally reflective, with stronger strategic coherence. Developing a collective point-of-view on key issues doesn't mean everyone has to think the same way, but it does help create a shared platform and mission to which all can speak.

### 4.Advance knowledge and drive meaningful change

By working to understand key areas of conflict and tension that society is grappling with, organisations can break through deadlock and unlock radical new ideas for change.

This builds business integrity and helps to deepen understanding. The outcome to this process is often the development of new, impactful ideas with the potential to change perspectives and, ultimately, help drive meaningful change within organisations and in their wider ecosystems.

### Measuring the value of thought leadership

How do you measure the impact of thought leadership in non-financial terms?

From building brand reputation and credibility, deepening relationships with clients or improving engagement with employees, once an organisation has agreed what its priority value drivers are, a framework of KPIs should be assigned. Kite often sets this across three levels:

Usage – how much content is read, viewed, shared or downloaded.

Engagement – how frequently your ideas are discussed with clients, within meetings, at events and within the workplace.

Influence - how much insights are cited by others, and how often leaders are invited to speak about what is seen as their area of expertise.



# Conclusion

## Take a stand on the issues that define our time.

If not now, when? If not us, who? This is a moment that demands more than commentary, it calls for courage: courage to think differently, act collectively, and use ideas as levers for change.

For decades, many businesses have viewed thought leadership through the prism of reputation and ROI, a way to signal expertise and drive sales. That still delivers value, but in an age of overlapping social, political, and planetary emergencies, it falls short. Business as usual ideas, no matter how polished, are not providing the answers society urgently needs.

Today's businesses and their leaders hold an unprecedented concentration of power, in the people they employ, the resources they command, and the ideas they help shape. With that power comes responsibility: not only to act, but to act together. No single organisation can bridge the fractures of our time alone but when leaders share insights, test ideas through constructive debate, and engage with openness across divides, collective leadership becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

**Leading through fracture is never easy. It asks leaders to hold their ground in uncertainty, sometimes alone, and still choose to speak.** It means naming contradictions even when there are no simple answers, and resisting cynicism long enough to imagine better ones. Yet courage need not be solitary. When leaders share difficult questions and create together around bold new ideas, strength multiplies.

This kind of leadership stretches many beyond what they have been trained for. But creating and convening around new ideas is no longer optional. The greater danger lies in standing still, for what organisation can thrive when society is in crisis and direction is lost?

So here is the open invitation: in five years' time, when your stakeholders look back on this volatile stretch of history, will they say your organisation and its people documented the turbulence, or that they bent the arc? Did they do what they could to bring clarity in complex times, or did they retreat into narrow self-interest?

Thought leadership can still be a badge of insight, if that is all you want. But when it is shaped with purpose and shared intelligence, it becomes something more: **a way to shift systems, bridge divides, and build the trust on which progress depends.** Above all, it is an act of leadership, thoughtful, collective, and deeply human.



# Appendix: The founding principles of good thought leadership

Years of working with businesses in the thought leadership space has taught us that there exist a series of common principles which should be followed to ensure knowledge, understanding and insights are achieved.

Set out on the pages that follow are six principles on which a credible thought leadership strategy is built. This isn't groundbreaking new information. However, using these guidelines as you seek to build out your understanding of an issue or question will help leaders find credibility in their own ideas.

Beyond the six principles of good thought leadership we set out the key frameworks for thought leadership followed by some guidelines for planning.

## 1. Audiences

All good communication is based on a solid understanding of who your audience is.

The same rule remains true in the case of good thought leadership. Key considerations include demographics, professional roles, industry pressures and emotional drivers. **It's crucial you understand the challenges your audience face, and what insights they value.**

When presenting thought leadership, you should consider format and tone. The ideas your present should be delivered in an accessible, relatable way. Messaging should be built around an overarching narrative, whilst offering new perspectives that challenge, or inspire.



## 2. Resources

Strong thought leadership begins with the tools you use to deepen your understanding of an issue.

Many organisations will have access to expertise, research, data, partnerships, and time. By prioritising investment into additional resources such as proprietary research, expert interviews and strong editorial support, a foundation of invaluable knowledge can be acquired.

Ultimately, thought leadership thrives when **supported by a well-managed balance of intellectual, operational and promotional resources**. Where possible, Kite encourages organisations to work in partnership with other organisations on thought leadership initiatives. Collective leveraging of insights, learnings, expertise and resources will likely result in **more impactful ideas which have the potential to drive change**.

## 3. Methods

High-quality work draws on rigorous, transparent methods, be this original research, expert collaboration, or data-driven analysis.

Content should be crafted using storytelling techniques, clear structures, and varied formats, from reports and articles to podcasts and events. Methods also cover how an organisation gathers insights, validates claims, and tests ideas before publication.

**The most effective thought leadership is iterative, refined through feedback and responsive to changing contexts.** The new case adds an extra dimension: methods need to be fit for a radical mandate, moving beyond incremental change to something that is **genuinely transformative**.

#### 4. Positioning

High-quality thought leadership is guided by a clear, strategic point of view that addresses unmet needs or overlooked opportunities.

It should be based on knowledge and expertise that is distinct and defined, and above all, it should add to the debate rather than to the noise. Organisations can identify their position by asking: **what conversations can we meaningfully advance**, what value can we contribute, and where are we equipped to offer credible insight?

A strong position isn't just what is said, it's how it is framed, where it is said, and how well it aligns with an organisation's wider ambition for change. In the context of the new case for thought leadership, position speaks directly to ambition: does the thought leadership exist within the parameters of business-as-usual, or **does it occupy an altogether different position that seeks to promote transformation?**

*"The new case makes challenging demands which are often better suited to working in partnership with other organisations that can all leverage their particular expertise and resources."*

#### 5. Connectedness

Thought leadership shouldn't exist in isolation. It should be meaningfully connected to wider conversations, communities, and cultural moments.

High-quality thought leadership is aware of its context, reflecting the issues, trends, and debates that matter to its audiences. It should align with the broader brand narrative, link across different content themes and engage with external voices, creating a sense of relevance and timeliness. Thought leadership also thrives through **active participation, dialogue and collaboration** within networks.

**Maintaining connectedness builds relationships, increases influence and positions** ideas as part of a living, evolving conversation rather than a static broadcast. This is of particular importance in the new case as organisations work together both within their sectors and beyond to drive important conversations around shared challenges. The broad scope of ambition will also require thought leaders to **connect with audiences over a shared vision** (rather than reducing them simply to an organisation's primary stakeholders).

#### 6. Character and story

People tend to connect with ideas which reflect integrity, humility, curiosity and courage.

High-quality thought leadership should sound human, not corporate or self-congratulatory. It should balance confidence with openness and be willing to acknowledge uncertainty or opposing views while standing firm on well-founded beliefs. Character is shaped by language, tone, and ethical standards, ensuring what's shared is **transparent, honest and respectful**.

Ultimately, people trust thought leaders who are **consistent, principled, and genuinely invested in adding value** rather than self-promotion, making character a defining element of long-term influence. The new case extends this principle by embodying a particular type of energy and urgency that is **proportionate to the challenges at hand**.

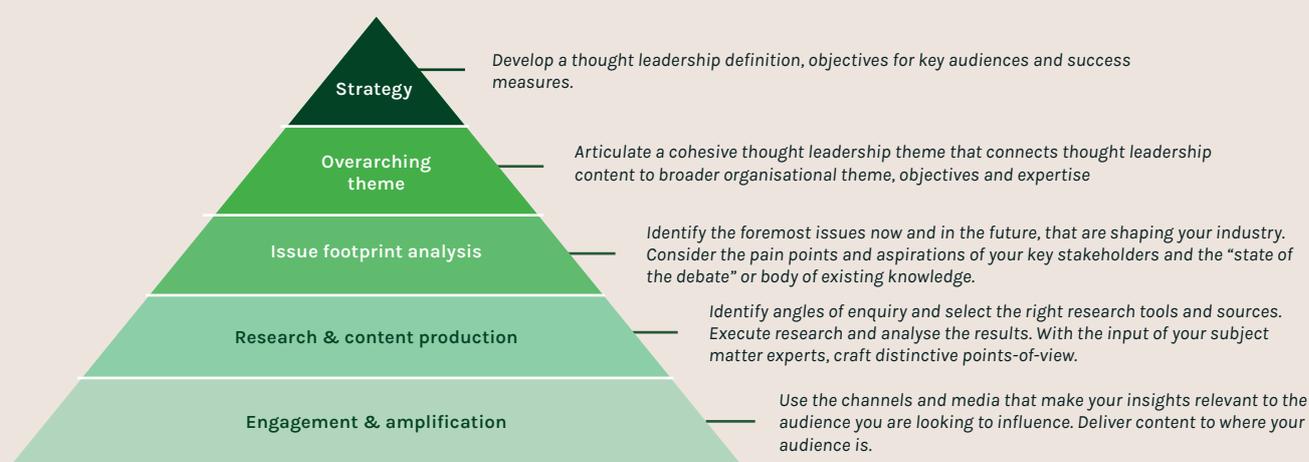


# Strategic framing: theme and issue footprint

In addition to the enduring principles of thought leadership, a credible strategy also needs a clear frame. Two tools help provide this: **an overarching theme and an issue footprint analysis.**

Together, they ensure that different thought leadership outputs, reports, articles, convenings, or

multimedia content, fit cohesively within a larger narrative. This **coherence amplifies their collective impact**, while differentiation comes from contributing fresh perspectives to the debate rather than simply adding to the noise.



## Overarching theme

Cindy Anderson and Anthony Marshall looked to define thought leadership in their book *The ROI of Thought Leadership* first by what it is not: let’s do something similar here. **An overarching theme is not:**

- A subject (such as energy or nature)
- A company tagline (such as *Just Do It*)
- A specific thought leadership asset (such an imaginary report *The Green Thread: weaving sustainability through your organisation*)

Instead, an overarching theme is a high-level lens that mobilises various subjects and acts as an umbrella for multiple outputs.

For example, let’s take our imaginary report and reverse engineer it to a hypothetical overarching theme:

- **Report:** *The Green Thread: weaving sustainability through your organisation*
- **Subjects:** green skills, organisational transformation, supply chains
- **Overarching theme:** empowering people at work and at home

A strong theme should align with broader organisational and brand strategy. It becomes both a filter, helping decide which outputs to prioritise, and a guide to ensure all content reinforces a consistent stance.

# Issue footprint analysis

While the theme provides the umbrella, the issue footprint drills down into the specific subjects your organisation wishes to address and how they manifest internally and externally.

An effective footprint analysis considers:

## Your distinctive positioning

What are your organisation's strategic priorities and your positioning in the marketplace of ideas?

- Understand the extent and focus of your thought leadership through a review of your current output.
- Assess the existing impact of your voice in the marketplace of ideas.
- Identify the gaps between your strategic objectives and your existing positioning.

## Your industry's issues

What issues will shape your sector or industry?

- Assess the impact of the global trends on your sector or industry.
- Draw out the best thinking of your organisation, from top to bottom, with workshops, interviews or surveys.

## Stakeholders' pain points and aspirations

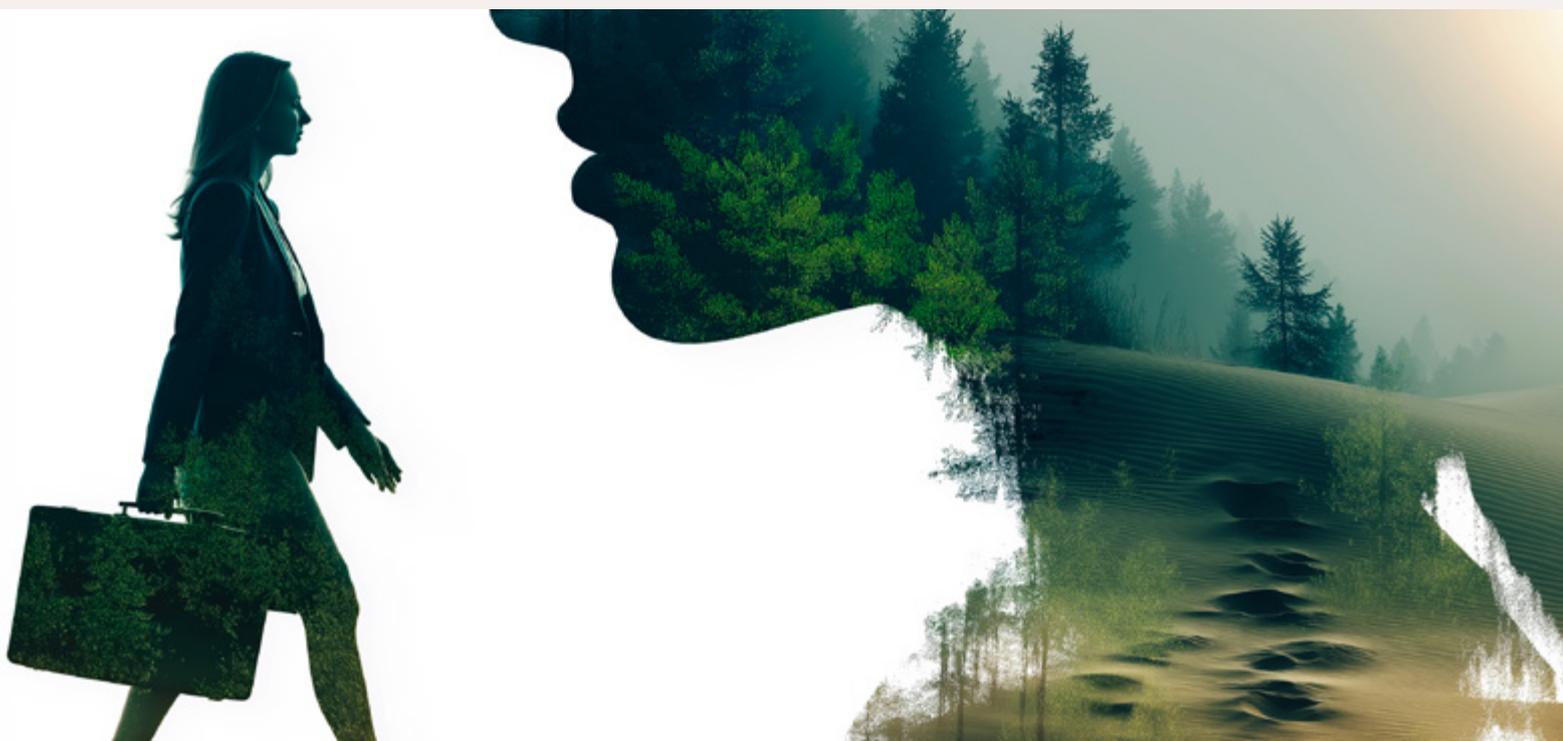
What are your key stakeholders' pain points and aspirations?

- Understand your audience(s) through primary research (interviews, surveys, workshops) of stakeholders.
- Align your insights with the needs of your audience(s) and with your strategic objectives.

## State of the debate

What is the body of existing knowledge around issues that matter to your organisation?

- Understand the 'state of the debate', with background research on select issues of interest.
- Learn from, and build on, the insights of peers and academics through interviews, surveys or workshops.
- Discover white spaces to position your own thinking in the marketplace of ideas.
- Review competitor/peer positioning on key issues.



# Thought leadership research design

The credibility of every piece of work is based on the validity and quality of its research.

Research is the “seed corn” you draw on and keep replanting. There are several methods to harvesting new data and insights, but the main requirement is that it is **fresh and evidence-based**. This requires some original primary research. Without research to support it, we move away from thought leadership to opinion, which is a different type of content.

Some examples of research methods include:

**Interview series:** revealing nuanced opinions and sparking discussions on complex topics.

**Survey research:** generate proprietary insights, benchmark industry standards, and identify gaps or opportunities.

**Scenario workshops:** vital in building up a deep understanding of future possibilities and scenarios.

**Desk-based research:** helps ground thought in established facts, identify gaps and benchmark against current knowledge.

**Data analysis:** identifies numerical and statistical patterns, correlations and insights and transforms raw data into actionable knowledge.



# The three horizons of thought leadership

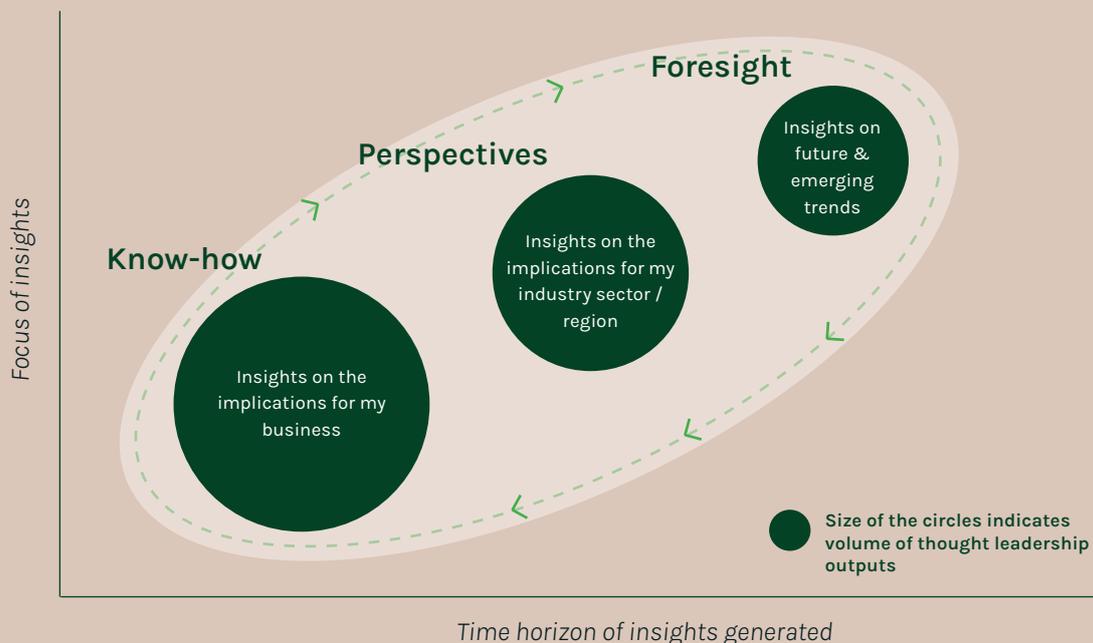
In our experience, thought leadership is most powerful when it connects long-term foresight with medium-term perspectives and immediate know-how, creating a cycle where vision informs practice and practice sharpens vision.

It is not a single moment but a rhythm across time: some insights are immediate and practical, others medium-term and systemic, and others long-term and emerging. The value lies not in focusing on one

horizon alone but in moving continually between them.

Foresight makes near-term insights timely and relevant, while near-term insights keep foresight anchored in the realities of industry and business. Thinking across this cycle is what allows thought leadership to remain both visionary and useful.

The three horizons of thought leadership



**Horizon 1** is “know-how”. It typically comprises insights on the implications of an organisation’s chosen theme. The timeline is more short-term and immediate in nature and will typically comprise the bulk of thought leadership outputs.

**Horizon 2** is “perspectives”. More overarching in nature, it typically comprises insights on the implications of a chosen theme for a sector or region. The timeline is medium-term and will typically comprise a smaller volume of thought leadership outputs than Horizon 1.

**Horizon 3** is “foresight”. Visionary in nature, it typically comprises insights on the implications of a chosen theme for future and emerging trends. The timeline is longer-term and will comprise a slightly smaller volume of thought leadership outputs than both Horizon 1 and 2.

In the new case for thought leadership, we engage all three horizons in dialogue. Social and planetary challenges often first appear in Horizon 3, through foresight, and are then explored and contextualised in Horizon 2, through perspectives. Finally, they find

practical expression in Horizon 1, through know-how. Once that translation has taken place, the insights generated can flow back again, informing foresight with grounded experience and ensuring a continuous cycle of relevance.

# Thought leadership outputs

Thought leadership is not defined by a single output or medium. Its value lies in the depth of thinking, which can be repurposed across formats and adapted to different audiences.

## Reports

Reports may appear dry, but they are still the gold standard of thought leadership outputs: while the assumption for a report may be a standard book-style page, many organisations choose to publish their thought leadership in a deck-style format which can make the content more accessible and digestible.

## Articles

Articles can be used to extract certain themes or headline statistics from the report: it is possible that a report and article may target different audiences and therefore adopt different styles and voices; for example, perhaps the core report is for policy analysts and NGOs, but the article is for businesspeople.

## Convening

Convening can be used to bring attention to thought leadership, either by presenting headlines from the findings themselves or convening discussions with peers to explore specific issues in greater depth.

In an event where peers are convened for in-depth discussion, this might offer new evidence that itself could be considered the basis for new thought leadership. In-person connections are of particular importance in the context of the new case theme of reconciliation as this, more than any other, is how people best come to understand how other people experience the world.

In other words, convening is more than just bringing attention: it gives new form to thought leadership through formats such as debates and fishbowls which offer the unique opportunity to safely explore contradictions and tensions in real time.

## Outputs for the new case: multi-media

While text-based outputs are still the foundational content of thought leadership, there are numerous other outputs that exist:

**video, audio podcasts, infographics, short-form decks and social media content, interactive web-based reports and learning content.**

Remember that all multi-media formats have their own stylistic conventions. The core content in the thought leadership report will likely need to be adapted or repurposed for different formats rather than simply replicated.

Furthermore, multi-media content tends to deploy even less information than an article.

**Distilling which elements from the original report should be highlighted is therefore of utmost importance.**



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## About Kite Insights

Kite Insights empowers businesses and people to integrate sustainability into the fabric of your organisations. Our thought leadership, live event curation, and employee engagement solutions help you make sense of sustainability and other key challenges and transform them into competitive advantages for your people, business and stakeholders.

We give you the clarity, confidence, and capabilities to lead and act on the most pressing issues of our time.

[www.kiteinsights.com](http://www.kiteinsights.com)

Collaboration often begins with a simple conversation. If you'd like to discuss any of the themes outlined in this report, please do get in touch - we'd love to hear from you.

[fly@kiteinsights.com](mailto:fly@kiteinsights.com)

### How we work with you:

We collaborate with organisations to explore complex questions, generate actionable insights and translate it into programmes that drive change.

#### Research-led strategic advisory:

Explorations of emergent issues and burning questions for organisations, using research and our experience to unpack their implications and support the development of strategies and programmes along with the assessment of existing strategies.

#### Reports and whitepapers:

Comprehensive reports suitable for business leaders, policymakers, and expert practitioners. Issue briefs and short-form content: Distilling complex ideas and concept into short, visually engaging content such as 5-6-page briefs or executive summaries designed for time-poor audiences to quickly engage with them.

### Articles, blogs and multi-media content:

Short-form content to communicate research findings effectively. This includes short articles or blogs authored by leadership, for example, as well as content like videos and infographics.

#### Presentations and workshop materials:

Interactive formats for presenting research outcomes, fostering conversation, ideation and action. These could take the form of live events or workshop discussions. We often do this so leaders can discuss the implications of our findings and agree actions to take forward.

#### Curation of thought leadership events:

Convening and editorial programming of events that both help bring attention to existing thought leadership as well as offering engaging formats such as our [DEBATABLE](#) sessions that can themselves be the source of new thought leadership.



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