

Leading Without Control: What Hollywood Reveals About Leadership in an Uncertain World

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Theories about leadership have long been shaped by environments that were comparatively stable: firms with clear boundaries, predictable markets, and hierarchical authority. Today, those conditions are eroding across industries. Leaders increasingly operate in ecosystems rather than organizations, under permanent uncertainty, and with distributed expertise rather than centralized control. In this context, leadership is less about managing what is known and more about enabling collective action when outcomes are not yet very clear.

Hollywood offers a rich laboratory for understanding this shift. Beneath its glamour lies one of the most demanding leadership environments imaginable: temporary organizations assembled under extreme uncertainty, with high emotional stakes, tight deadlines, and constant disruption. Films are made with fluid teams that consist of artists with often very particular ideas that may conflict. There is no fixed hierarchy, and it is impossible to reliably forecast success. And yet, again and again, this system produces coherent outcomes.

The relevance of Hollywood is not just a metaphor. The entertainment industry has been forced to develop leadership practices that can deal successfully with volatility, interdependent networks, and creative complexity long before these issues became mainstream management theory. Studying these practices reveals a paradigm of leadership that is less about control, authority, and predictive results, and more about enabling, talent orchestration, and collaborative sensemaking.

Leadership in a World Without Stability

A major factor that impacts leadership in filmmaking is that projects cannot rely on stability - plans change, key players change, even the vision may change at times. Every production is a unique endeavor. Teams come together for a defined purpose, and they are dissolved once that purpose is fulfilled. Authority is heavily dependent on context and only temporary. Expertise of craft matters more than formal titles.

Under these conditions, traditional leadership principles, such as predictive planning, centralized decision-making, or hierarchical control, quickly break down. Instead, leadership in Hollywood is fundamentally about *creating the conditions under which others can do their best work together, even when certainty is absent*.

One major difference lies in the way collaboration is seen and treated. In most organizations, it is framed as a coordination challenge; the necessity to align tasks, reduce friction, and avoid conflict. In filmmaking, however, collaboration is understood as *the* source of value. Creative outcomes emerge exactly because of the collision of different perspectives. Each perspective

adds a valid contribution, because writers, directors, actors, editors, designers, producers, etc. each interpret the work through their own professional lens. If leadership would eliminate these tensions, it would destroy the creative process; instead, it must leverage them productively.

This has significant implications on the role of a film director. While often mythologized as auteurs, effective directors spend much of their energy listening, integrating, and calibrating. They set direction, but they also depend deeply on others' judgment. They need a cinematographer's eye, an editor's sense of rhythm, an actor's emotional truth, and all the skills of the many crafts needed to create a movie. A director's authority does not come through a formal power to command, but through credibility and trust. When that trust erodes, collaboration collapses quickly.

This offers a clear lesson for leaders in knowledge-intensive fields. When expertise is distributed in a team, leadership must become relational. Leaders must earn influence through competence, through authentic respect for people's capabilities, and the ability to integrate perspectives into a shared direction.

A second lesson relates to vision. Vision is indispensable for a movie, but it is not fixed. A film begins with an idea of what it will look like, yet that idea is continuously reshaped as production unfolds as constraints force reinterpretation and new insights emerge from practice. In such a context, leadership is not about defending an original plan but about preserving coherence while allowing the vision to evolve.

This stands in sharp contrast to many corporate settings, where strategic vision is treated as an almost holy statement that must be communicated and enforced. In today's unpredictable environments, such rigidity does not work anymore. People disengage when they feel their expertise cannot co-shape the future. The world of filmmaking shows that vision is a living narrative to which others contribute with a lens that rests in their distinctive craft.

Here, again, trust plays a decisive role. People will only challenge and refine a vision if it is safe to do so. In Hollywood, trust and respect are not just soft cultural values that are nice to have; they are fundamental functional requirements. Crews depend on each other's craft under pressure. Professional mastery is more important than hierarchy. While a director ultimately calls the shots (in a literally sense), their authority is accepted because it is perceived as serving the work - not because they are the boss.

Embracing Adversity and Disruption

As already mentioned, film productions rarely go as planned. Weather changes, locations fall through, budgets shrink, technology fails, creative assumptions collapse. In Hollywood, these disruptions are not treated as exceptions. Everybody knows they will happen – they are inherent to the nature of the business. More importantly, they are often used as catalysts for creative improvement.

This reflects the logic of antifragile systems, which are systems designed not to withstand shock (as robust or resilient systems do), but improve because of it. In the world of filmmaking, forced pivots often clarify what truly matters. A lost location leads to a stronger

narrative solution. A budget cut sharpens creative focus. *Constraint becomes a source of innovation.*

Leadership in such contexts is about helping the system learn faster under pressure. Leaders must signal that disruption is not failure, but the way the business works, that abandoning a plan is not weakness, but a new opportunity.

Traditional organizations often struggle here. Decades of management practice have trained leaders to exercise control and keep the context stable. As a result, disruption triggers defensive behavior like tighter controls, more reporting, more pressure. Hollywood has learned a different response. Here, instability is not fought, it is a creative source.

Ecosystem Leadership in Practice

This ability to grow stronger through disruption is possible only because filmmaking is embedded in a much larger ecosystem. Film professionals move easily from one project to the next. Opportunity is shaped less by formal position than by reputation and past collaboration. What keeps the system moving is informal coordination, trust, and shared professional standards. In such a setting, leadership does not stop at the boundaries of a single organization. It extends into shaping relationships across a wide network of independent actors.

Our research clearly shows that an ecosystem cannot be led the same way as a firm. There is no single center of control, no stable hierarchy to rely on. Ecosystem leadership is about relationship management, about bringing the right people together, helping them align, and enabling new combinations to form. Influence is more important than authority, and continuity is created through relationships rather than organizational structures.

Leaders in many other industries are now encountering similar conditions, as value is increasingly created across organizational boundaries. Innovation depends on partners, platforms, and communities that no single organization fully controls. The Hollywood model suggests that such systems remain effective not because they are stable, but because they can be reconfigured again and again as conditions change.

Passion and Purpose as indispensable operating condition

What ultimately holds these shifting constellations together is shared purpose and passion, which provide the deeper glue. Film projects form around an emotional commitment to bringing a story to life. Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* took 12 years to make - not because of a production issue but because of the creative decision to follow a real boy grow up. *Mad Max: Fury Road* was 16 years in the making, derailed by 9/11 and by the tragic death of the lead actor Heath Ledger briefly before shooting was scheduled to begin. Only passion - actually obsession with a dream - supplies the energy to persist under such adverse conditions. It carries people through exhaustion and the absence of guaranteed rewards.

Many organizations underestimate these forces. They invest heavily in structures, processes, and incentives and assume that alignment will follow. But compliance is not emotional

commitment. People may execute tasks, yet disengage emotionally if they cannot connect their effort to something meaningful. Purpose and passion determine whether people are willing to continue when the work becomes difficult.

In a system that is built on temporary teams, weak hierarchy, and constant recombination, purpose and passion are not just nice to have, they are fundamental operating conditions. They create commitment without control – a quality that becomes increasingly important in other industries, too.

Conclusion

It's worth to take a close look at the “Hollywood model” of leadership and organization. It offers practical lessons in leading under conditions that many industries face today: uncertainty, a weakening power of hierarchy, and value creation happening across shifting networks.

In such environments, leadership is about creating coherence through a strong vision, trust in expertise, and the ability to integrate diverse contributions. Disruption becomes a modus operandi that encourages recombination and learning. In such contexts, commitment cannot be bought or mandated; it depends on purpose and passion.

As technology, ecosystems, and AI reshape work across sectors, Hollywood's age-old leadership principles offer valuable lessons in world where we are increasingly forced to act in the context of unknown unknowns.

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DLQ issue #50, which will be published in Q2 2026, will include a more detailed version of this article, together with additional perspectives on the topic.