

Seth Kahan's Disruption Playbook



Executive Leadership in Turbulent Times

In volatile times, hesitation opens the door for faster, bolder players to win business you haven't secured. Sit still, and you risk being forgotten while others move ahead and make their mark.

For over 25 years, I've helped CEOs and executive teams lead through crisis, supporting organizations from the World Bank and Royal Dutch Shell to 100+ nonprofits with revenues up to \$500M. I've guided leaders through 9/11, the mortgage crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's landscape is no less turbulent: tariffs, regulatory swings, politicized business norms. What follows is a playbook for those ready to lead through it.

These seven elements form the core of effective leadership in turbulent times: **Situational Awareness, Strategic Agility, Stakeholder Alignment, Values-Driven Decisions, Visibility and Voice, Culture of Adaptation, and Systemic Foresight.**

Each one strengthens a critical dimension of organizational resilience and influence. Alone, each is powerful; together, they create a comprehensive, dynamic approach to leading through disruption. When fully integrated, they turn uncertainty into momentum and position leaders not just to respond but to lead transformation. Let's get started.

Seth Kahan's Disruption Playbook

1. Situational Awareness

Leadership Insight: You can't lead what you don't see.

Executives must have a high-resolution view of the shifting environment. That means tracking political, social, and economic trends, all the while working to understand how those forces intersect with your mission.

In a fast-moving world, static snapshots aren't enough. Leaders need a live feed. That means zooming out to track political, economic, and social forces, and zooming in to understand how they collide with your mission.

During the pandemic, Peloton experienced explosive growth as consumers turned to at-home fitness, but the company misread the surge as a permanent shift. It over-invested in manufacturing and inventory, only to face plummeting demand as gyms reopened resulting in layoffs, leadership changes, and a crashing stock price. In contrast, Zoom recognized early that its pandemic-fueled growth would taper. The company pivoted strategically by expanding into enterprise solutions and building out a full communications platform. While Peloton scaled unsustainably, Zoom adapted with foresight. The difference lay in situational awareness. Zoom read the post-crisis landscape accurately, Peloton did not.

Actions to Take Now:

- **Commission a weekly briefing** that synthesizes regulatory, legislative, and public opinion trends relevant to your business.
- **Convene a diverse roundtable**, including voices from outside your usual circle, to provide perspective and challenge assumptions. If not a formal body, make sure you are talking regularly to people who can help you understand the potential impact on your organization.

2. Strategic Agility

Leadership Insight: Agility isn't speed. It's nimble responsiveness.

To stay competitive in volatility, leaders must move from static plans to dynamic, scenario-based thinking. This means preparing for multiple outcomes and building in the flexibility to pivot when the ground shifts.

Static plans break under pressure. Smart leaders plan for multiple futures. They think in scenarios, build in flexibility, and empower quick pivots when the ground shifts.

During the 2008 financial crisis, IBM demonstrated strategic agility by accelerating its shift from hardware to high-value services like consulting, analytics, and cloud infrastructure. It focused on helping clients reduce costs and optimize operations, positioning itself as essential during

Seth Kahan's Disruption Playbook

economic uncertainty. In contrast, Circuit City failed to adapt to shifting consumer behavior and rising online competition. Its cost-cutting move to lay off top sales staff backfired, weakening the customer experience. While IBM leaned into transformation, Circuit City clung to outdated models. One emerged stronger; the other disappeared.

Actions to Take Now:

- **Create three alternative scenarios** for how current dynamics could affect your organization in the next 12 months.
- **Empower a rapid-response team** to test solutions and make time-sensitive decisions without red tape.

3. Stakeholder Alignment

Leadership Insight: In disruption, alignment is your stabilizer.

People want to know where you stand and where they fit in. Involving stakeholders early and often creates resilience and cohesion in uncertain times.

When everything feels uncertain, people need to know where you stand and where they fit in. Alignment isn't just about agreement. It's about shared direction.

During the pandemic, Microsoft quickly aligned employees, customers, and partners around a unified remote work strategy, expanding access to Teams, Azure, and digital tools for businesses, schools, and governments. Its clear communication and coordinated support deepened trust and rapidly grew its user base. In contrast, Hertz struggled to unify its stakeholders amid collapsing travel demand. It failed to coordinate effectively with creditors, customers, and leadership, resulting in a chaotic bankruptcy. While Microsoft gained market share through alignment, Hertz lost ground through confusion and fragmentation. One built resilience; the other unraveled.

Actions to Take Now:

- **Host a listening session** with key stakeholders to surface concerns, aspirations, and feedback on your organization's direction.
- **Develop a shared language of purpose** that aligns your messaging across leadership, staff, and partners.

4. Value-Driven Decisions

Leadership Insight: Your values are your compass.

When the world feels unstable, people look to leaders who act with integrity and consistency. Rooting decisions in values builds trust even when the choices are difficult.

Seth Kahan's Disruption Playbook

In times of upheaval, trust comes from consistency. It's not the easy decisions that define us. It's the hard ones made with integrity.

During the 2008 financial crisis, Patagonia stayed true to its environmental and ethical values, continuing to invest in sustainable practices and launching bold campaigns like "Don't Buy This Jacket" to promote mindful consumption. Rather than cut corners, it reinforced its mission and customers rewarded that integrity with loyalty. In contrast, AIG prioritized short-term profits over prudent risk management, selling complex financial products without adequate oversight. When the housing market collapsed, AIG's decisions led to a near-total failure and a \$180 billion government bailout. Patagonia built long-term trust by standing firm on its values; AIG nearly collapsed by abandoning theirs.

Actions to Take Now:

- **Clarify and publish your organization's core values** as decision-making guideposts for internal and external audiences.
- **Run your next big decision** through a "values lens" discussion with your executive team. What's the ethical story behind your choice?

5. Visibility and Voice

Leadership Insight: Silence creates confusion while presence creates confidence.

In times of disruption, your stakeholders are watching more closely. What you say or don't say shapes your relevance, authority, and trustworthiness.

In disruption, your audience widens. People are watching what you say... and what you don't.

During the pandemic, Marriott demonstrated powerful visibility and voice when CEO Arne Sorenson delivered a candid video message about the company's challenges, speaking with transparency and compassion even while undergoing cancer treatment. His honesty and humanity reinforced trust across employees and customers alike. In contrast, Robinhood faltered during the GameStop trading frenzy, abruptly restricting trades without clear, timely communication. Users felt blindsided and betrayed, damaging the company's reputation as a champion for everyday investors. Marriott's leadership leaned in with openness; Robinhood stayed silent until the damage was done. One built credibility in crisis and the other lost it.

Actions to Take Now:

- **Draft and pre-approve statements** on likely political or cultural flashpoints aligned with your mission and values.
- **Post a public leadership message** reinforcing your organization's role and priorities in the current climate.

Seth Kahan's Disruption Playbook

6. Culture of Adaptation

Leadership Insight: Adaptive cultures outperform reactive ones.

To thrive in disruption, organizations must foster environments where innovation, dissent, and real-time learning are not only allowed, but expected.

The best organizations aren't frozen by uncertainty. They evolve with it. That only happens when innovation, dissent, and experimentation are part of the DNA.

During the pandemic, Spotify embraced a culture of adaptation by implementing a flexible "Work from Anywhere" policy and rapidly expanding into podcasting, acquiring key platforms to diversify its offerings. This agility allowed Spotify to grow its audience and revenue even as media habits shifted. In contrast, AMC Theatres struggled to adapt, initially resisting industry changes like streaming and clinging to outdated business models. Rather than innovating, AMC focused on fighting studios over release windows. Spotify leaned into change and thrived; AMC resisted and stumbled. One adapted with vision while the other reacted too late.

Actions to Take Now:

- **Initiate a "speak freely" forum** where staff can raise ideas and concerns about external disruption and internal response.
- **Incentivize adaptive behaviors** by recognizing individuals or teams who take smart risks or quickly learn from failure.

7. Systemic Foresight

Leadership Insight: The best way to predict the future is to have a hand in creating it.

Rather than reacting to every shock, top leaders step back, zoom out, and use disruption as a gateway to systemic innovation.

Disruptors don't just react, they reimagine. They use chaos as a canvas for bold ideas and systemic innovation.

During the pandemic, Amazon showed systemic foresight by rapidly scaling logistics, hiring hundreds of thousands of workers, and expanding AWS to meet surging digital demand. It anticipated long-term shifts in behavior and invested early, positioning itself as essential infrastructure. In contrast, Boeing entered the crisis weakened by a short-term focus on cost-cutting and stock buybacks, with little preparedness for prolonged disruption. When travel collapsed, Boeing lacked the resilience and trust needed to weather the storm. Amazon planned ahead and thrived; Boeing ignored the signals and faltered.

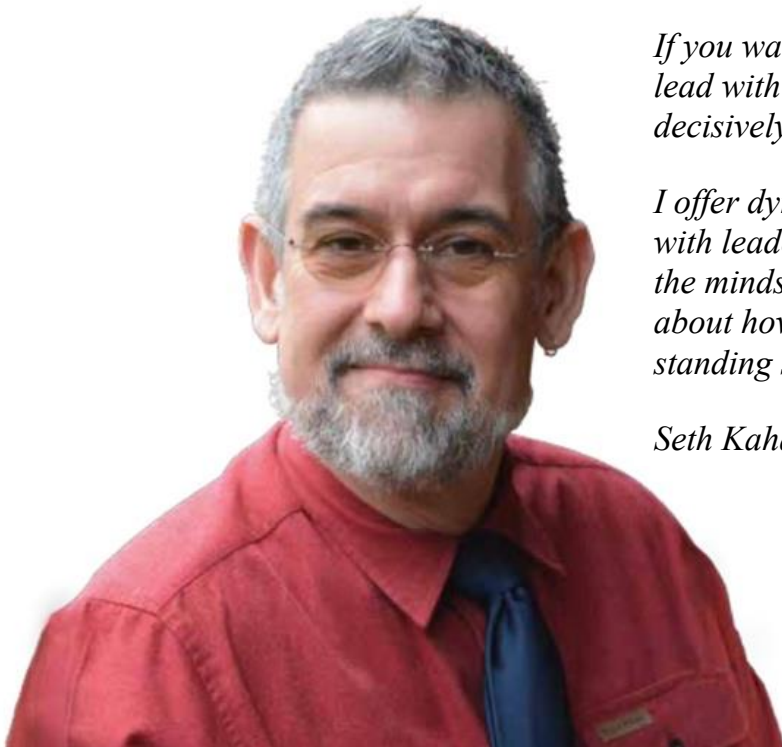
Seth Kahan's Disruption Playbook

Actions to Take Now:

- **Identify one legacy practice or assumption** in your organization that needs to be questioned and lead that inquiry personally.
- **Launch a “future-fit” partnership** with an organization outside your sector to co-create a bold solution for an emerging challenge.

In today's unpredictable environment, leadership requires more than resilience. It demands energy, intention, clarity, and adaptability. This Disruption Playbook offers a roadmap for executives ready to lead with foresight and integrity through political volatility, cultural shifts, and systemic uncertainty.

By sharpening situational awareness, embracing strategic agility, aligning stakeholders, making value-based decisions, maintaining a visible voice, fostering adaptive cultures, and advancing systemic foresight, organizations can transform disruption into opportunity. These are not just survival strategies, they are leadership imperatives for those determined to stay relevant and impactful in a rapidly shifting world.



If you want your staff to engage, your senior team to lead with confidence, and your organization to move decisively during this turbulent time, I can help.

I offer dynamic presentations, deep-dive work sessions with leadership teams, and executive coaching to build the mindset and momentum needed now. Let's talk about how I can help you step ahead while others are standing still.

Seth Kahan.