

WHITEPAPER · PART II · 2026

Not every great person fits every *season.*

UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE IN EVERY SEASON OF GROWTH

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A WHITEPAPER BY **INEKE KOOISTRA**

A change of season is not a verdict. It becomes one only when no one can find the words.

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The storm that comes up over *open water.*

For a long time, everything grew. The business came to us. Success had a rhythm, and we mistook that rhythm for the way good people simply are.

Then the weather changes. Not slowly, but the way a storm comes up over open water. A market shifts, a deal falls through, growth that used to arrive on its own now has to be hunted. And the very conditions that once made everyone look strong begin to expose them.

Leaders feel it first as unease. Then the unease goes looking for a name, and the easiest name is a person. People get judged more quickly and sorted into boxes. This one still fits, that one no longer does. More gets said about people than to them. And before anyone has asked the real question, the exit conversation is already being rehearsed in someone's head.

This paper is a follow-up to *The Seasonal Leader*. That paper argued that organisations move through seasons, and each season asks for a different kind of leader. This one turns the same lens one layer down, onto the team. Because the real question is not whether someone has stopped performing. It is whether the season has turned underneath them, and they have not yet found the words for it.

The most useful question is no longer: *is this person still good enough?*

It is: **is this person still in the right season, and are we honest enough to say so?**

The mistake is rarely the person.
It is the mismatch with the phase.

The labels we reach for *too quickly.*

When unease appears, we look for something to attach it to. And the easiest thing to attach it to is the person.

In boardrooms and leadership teams, people get simplified at speed. Someone becomes "not entrepreneurial enough", "too operational", "too corporate", "not scalable", or "stuck in the old way". Each label feels like an explanation. Most are simply the friction of a changed phase, given a name.

Labels are comfortable because they are tidy. They locate the problem inside one person, which conveniently means the rest of the system, including us, gets to stay the same.

Behind many of those labels is a quieter truth. People bring different energy, strengths and pace in different phases of growth. **A label describes the discomfort. It rarely diagnoses the cause.**

A label locates the problem in a person.

A season locates it in a moment.

SEASONAL THINKING · 03

Two halves of one *move.*

When the storm hits, most organisations do one sensible thing. They look at the top. They ask whether the leadership still fits the season, and often they change it. That was the argument of the first paper, and it still holds.

But changing the leader is only half the move. A new seasonal leader does not, by appointment alone, bring the organisation back to the season that matches its vision and its goals. Underneath that leader sits a whole organisation of people, and they are in seasons too.

So the real task of the seasonal leader is not only to lead differently. It is to go deeper, into the people. To understand before expecting to be understood. That is what turns a change at the top into a change that actually moves the business.

Because the same truth that applies to leaders applies one layer down. A person can be talented, loyal, experienced and genuinely capable, and still struggle, because the organisation has entered a phase that no longer fits the way they do their best work. That is not failure. **It is a seasonal mismatch.**

Some people are natural pioneers. Others create rhythm. Some bring stability and trust. Some come alive in transformation. And some carry the memory and the culture that everything else depends on. None is better than another. They are simply suited to different weather.

Changing the leader is half the move.

The other half is understanding the people.

WHAT CHANGES · 04

What actually changes when the season *turns*.

When people say someone "changed", they are almost always wrong. The person is remarkably consistent. What changed is the environment around them. Four things in particular.

Pace.

What once felt decisive can suddenly feel slow, or what felt careful can suddenly feel reckless. The clock speeds up or slows down, and the same instincts land differently.

Ambiguity.

Early phases reward people who move without a map. Later phases reward people who build the map. Comfort with the unknown becomes a liability, or an asset, almost overnight.

Structure.

Process arrives. For some it is oxygen, for others a cage. The person who thrived in open space can feel boxed in by the systems that growth requires.

Proximity.

Distance from the decision changes. People who once shaped every call now sit a layer away. The role looks similar on paper, but the experience of it is entirely different.

Take the most common version of it. For years the business arrived on its own, and people could be reactive. Then growth stops being automatic, and suddenly the same people are asked to be proactive, to go out and win the work, to sell, to do things they had never really had to do. It was in the job description, but it was never necessary, so it never became real. Faced with work they do not enjoy, cannot yet do, or quietly do not want to do, capable people freeze. **And from the outside, freezing looks exactly like failure.**

None of this is about competence. It is about the fit between a person's natural energy and what the moment now demands.

The person stayed the same.
The weather did not.

The five seasons of a *team member*.

Just as leaders have seasons, the people around them tend toward distinct kinds of energy. Most of us are strongest in one or two. The aim is not to label anyone permanently, but to understand which season a person is built for, and which one the organisation is in.

EARLY GROWTH

The *Pioneer*.

Create · Move · Risk

Energised by open space and building from nothing

Carries responsibility before structure exists

Moves fast, decides early, thrives in ambiguity

Grows restless once the work becomes repeatable

PROFESSIONALISING

The *Scaler*.

Structure · Repeat · Execute

Turns momentum into rhythm and repeatable systems

Brings operational clarity and consistent delivery

Helps a company outgrow founder dependence

Needs stability to build, strained by constant pivots

STEADY STATE

The *Stabiliser*.

Trust · Connect · Sustain

Builds trust, continuity and strong relationships

Culture sensitive and quietly dependable under pressure

Holds teams together through change

Easily underestimated in rooms that reward volume

DISRUPTION

The *Transformer*.

Reset · Decide · Rebuild

Comes alive when change becomes unavoidable

Makes hard calls with clarity and calm

Resets teams, models and direction

Can feel abrasive in settled, stable periods

MATURITY

The *Steward*.

Carry · Protect · Pass on

Holds deep organisational knowledge and memory

Loyal, principled, a carrier of culture

Anchors others through transitions

Strained when pace or direction shifts sharply

There is no best profile.
There is only the right one for the season.

Read these honestly and a familiar pattern appears. The Pioneer you adored in year one is the same person you find chaotic in year four. The Steward who

anchored you through a hard winter is the same person who feels slow the moment you accelerate. They did not move. The season moved around them.

THE REAL REASON · 06

Not underperformance. A change of *season*.

This is where the unease comes from. A Scaler dropped into a sudden crisis looks too slow. A Pioneer in a maturing organisation looks disruptive, or not a team player. A Steward in a turnaround looks like they are clinging to the past. None of them got worse at their work. The season began asking for a different energy than the one they naturally bring.

And here is the hardest part, the part we almost always miss. Often the person cannot name it either. They only feel that it no longer flows, that work which used to be effortless now drags. **That wordless feeling, on both sides of the table, is what quietly turns a change of season into a verdict.**

Left unspoken, the doubt grows. It is invisible, because there is no single event to point to. It is gradual, eroding over months. It is personal, because both sides feel judged. And it compounds, because doubt changes how we treat someone, more oversight and less room, which suppresses the very strengths we hired them for.

This is why the seasons are a more powerful force than most leaders expect. We assume performance is a fixed trait, that people either have it or have lost it. In reality, performance is contextual. **Move the same person into the right season and the old strength tends to return.**

The person didn't change.
The season did.

FROM MY OWN CHAIR · 07

I judged too quickly. It is what keeps me *sharp*.

I should be honest, because I have made this mistake myself, and it is exactly that mistake that keeps me sharp now.

I have spent most of my career inside growth companies. Growth has a culture of its own. High energy, always on, a relentless growth mindset. Live in that climate long enough and you start to believe it is simply how good people work.

Then the weather changed, and people who were brilliant when the work came to them were suddenly asked to go out and find it. They slowed down. They froze. And I judged quickly, because in the end it is always about performance, isn't it? I waited for some formal review moment to raise it, when I should simply have talked about it there and then. I did not take the time to ask which season the person was in, or which season the company had entered, and to talk about both, openly and early.

That was an earlier version of me. I have learned from it, and the lesson is simple. **Understand before you expect to be understood.**

It is also why I no longer believe in the annual appraisal, or in the performance review as a ritual. By the time you sit down for it, the moment to act has usually passed. A leader should sit with their people regularly, every month, as a matter of course. Not to judge, but to stay close.

That rhythm does not stop seasons from turning. Nothing does. What it does is make sure no one is ambushed. Most season changes announce themselves quietly, months before they become a problem. The monthly conversation is simply where you hear them in time.

Have the season conversation,
not the performance review.

FIT, and how to tell a mismatch apart.

In my work as interim CEO and executive search partner, I have learned to slow down the moment the doubt appears, and to run it through three questions before it becomes a verdict. I call it **FIT**. Its motor is the same line as before. Understand before you judge.

F Forces

What has actually changed in the business, the pace, the structure, the stakes, the distance from the work? Name the season before you judge the person.

I Identity

What kind of energy is this person built for, and when did you last see them genuinely thrive? That moment tells you their season.

T Truth

Separate capability from fit. Then be honest about what the next phase needs, with full respect for what this person has already given.

That third step is the one that matters most in practice, because underperformance and a season mismatch need opposite responses. One calls for feedback and a plan. The other calls for a different challenge, or an honest and respectful goodbye. Here is how each tends to show up.

Genuine underperformance

The struggle shows up across tasks and contexts, not just one

It was already visible before the phase changed

Feedback is heard, but behaviour does not shift

Energy is flat even in the parts of the work they once loved

A season mismatch

They were visibly thriving not long ago, same person, same skills

The struggle is specific to what this phase now demands

They come alive when the work returns to their kind of problem

The frustration is mutual, they feel the misfit too, and cannot name it

You cannot coach someone
out of the wrong season.

A case from practice · 09

The person everyone started *doubting*.

"She used to be the one I trusted most in the room. Lately I catch myself checking her work, and I couldn't tell you when that started. Nothing has gone wrong, exactly. But I'm uneasy, and I can see she feels it too."

A founder, about a long standing member of his team

The unease was accurate. The story he had attached to it was not. The company had crossed from building to scaling. She was a Pioneer, exceptional in open space, energised by ambiguity, fast where there was no map. The new phase

rewarded the opposite, process, repeatability, a predictable rhythm. Her instincts had not dulled. They had simply stopped matching the room.

We did not write a performance plan. We had a season conversation, honest, direct, and without blame. We named the season she is built for, and the season the company had entered. Two real options were on the table, and both were good ones.

Re-match her to the next piece of open space, a new market or a new product line, where her pioneering energy would be an asset again.

Part with respect, honouring what she had built rather than slowly eroding it.

In this case they chose to re-match, and within a quarter the old spark was back. But I want to be clear about something, because it is the real point. The exit could have been the right answer too. Sometimes leaving genuinely is the better choice, for the person and for the business. What made it a success was not that she stayed. It was that the choice was made in the open, with calm, with her worth intact, by two people who understood each other.

We almost performance-managed
a problem
**that was really a placement
problem.**

BOARD BRIEF · 10

Key takeaways for boards, founders and leadership *teams.*

- 01 Restlessness is data, not a verdict.** When unease appears about a once strong person, treat it as a prompt to diagnose fit, not as proof of decline.
- 02 Changing the leader is only half the move.** A new seasonal leader brings the business back to its season only by going deeper, into the people. Understand before expecting to be understood.

03 **Diagnose the season before you judge the person.** In a changing organisation, most performance problems are placement problems wearing a disguise.

04 **Mismatch and underperformance need opposite responses.** One needs feedback and a plan. The other needs a new challenge, or an honest and respectful exit.

05 **Talk monthly, not annually.** The season conversation, held early and often, is what keeps a change of season from hardening into a verdict no one saw coming.

The question is not "are they still good enough?"

It is "**are they in the right season?**"

Respecting what someone has given while being honest about what the next phase needs is one of the hardest things leadership asks of us. It is also one of the most human. If the honest conclusion is that someone no longer fits the season your company is in, that is not a failure. It is only a failure if it is never made discussable.

Name it early, keep it human, and people become more conscious of where they truly belong. Conscious people make better choices, including about themselves. **Make it discussable, and keep it human.**

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