

Have Your CAKE and Eat it Too! An Entrepreneurial Leadership Competency Model

Have Your CAKE and Eat It Too! was developed around a learning framework designed to drive advancement of essential leadership and management competencies needed to transform entrepreneurial ideas into scalable results. Anchored in the **CAKE framework-Communication, Adaptability, Kaizen Approach, and Entrepreneurial Mindset**-this leadership competency model empowers entrepreneurs to turn their vision into coordinated action by aligning people, resources, and priorities for improved decision making that creates real value.

The CAKE Framework builds on existing skills for those who want to strengthen their ability to engage in tactful, assertive communication; adapt effectively within volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, n.d.) [1] create continuous, incremental improvement; and apply an entrepreneurial mindset to manage themselves, relate effectively to others, and solve real-world problems.

Early leadership competency models emerged from behavioral science and industrial psychology, emphasizing observable behaviors over traits or intelligence and identifying what differentiates high performers from average leaders. Model such as Stephen Covey's, "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" [2], focused on innate characteristics and personal change, designed to drive values such as integrity, responsibility, and long-term thinking. While later models begin to reframe leadership as more of a process for influencing values, motivation, and purpose.

John Kotter's change leadership framework began shifting the focus to adaptability and accountability [3], while emotional intelligence models, popularized by Daniel Goleman, expanded leadership competency frameworks to include self-awareness, selfregulation, empathy, and relationship management [4].

When comparing the CAKE Framework against major, widely recognized leadership competency models, an integrative approach has been taken where insights from multiple theories, disciplines, or models have been

Research Article

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synthesized bringing together four decades of leadership research into a single, practical model built for action. Rather than focusing on assessment or theory alone, CAKE emphasizes personal agency, compounding leadership capability, and disciplined execution to help entrepreneurial leaders move decisively from insight to impact in uncertain environments. The CAKE competencies defined:

- **Communication-Tactful Assertiveness / How to navigate difficult workplace conversations with professional poise.**
- **Adaptability–Surviving the VUCA environment**
- **Kaizen Approach–Cultivating continuous, incremental improvement**
- **Entrepreneurial Mindset–Focus on accountability and strategic thinking to problem solve and create value as a business owner or as a team member within an organization**

CAKE Competency	Behavioral / Competency Models (McClelland / Spencer)	Transformational Leadership (Burns / Bass)	Emotional Intelligence (Goleman)	Change Leadership (Kotter)	Enterprise Models (Korn Ferry Lominger)	Future Focused Models (World Economic Forum)
C - Communication	Emphasizes observable communication behaviors that distinguish high performers	Inspirational motivation; vision articulation	Relationship management; social awareness; influence	Communicating urgency, vision, and progress	Communicates effectively; instills trust; persuades	Leadership and social influence; crossboundary collaboration
A - Adaptability	Contextspecific competencies; situational effectiveness	Intellectual stimulation; flexibility in leading followers	Adaptability; emotional selfcontrol	Leading through uncertainty; navigating resistance	Manages ambiguity; situational adaptability	Resilience, flexibility, learning agility
K - Kaizen (Continuous Improvement)	Focus on developing competencies through application	Continuous development of people and ideas	Growth mindset; self development	Generating shortterm wins; sustaining momentum	Optimizes work processes; drives results	Lifelong learning; continuous upskilling
E - Entrepreneurial Mindset	Achievement orientation; initiative	Idealized influence; purpose driven action	Achievement motivation; initiative	Personal accountability for change leadership	Action oriented; takes ownership; courage	Initiative, agency, responsible leadership
Underlying Assumption	Leadership effectiveness is behaviorbased and measurable	Leadership transforms people and organizations	Emotional competence underpins effectiveness	Leadership is central to successful change	Leadership can be systematically assessed and developed at scale	Leadership must evolve to meet complexity and global disruption
Primary Contribution	Differentiates high vs. average performance	Elevates motivation, ethics, and vision	Humanizes leadership and relationships	Provides structure for executing change	Enables scalable assessment and succession	Anticipates future skill and mindset demands
CAKE ValueAdd	Integrates behaviors into a cohesive leadership system	Grounds inspiration in execution and agency	Embeds EI within actionoriented leadership	Balances structure with adaptability	Simplifies complexity into an actionable framework	Operationalizes future skills into daily leadership practice

Table 1. Comparative Mapping: CAKE Framework vs. Major Leadership Competency Models (1980–Present)

Note: The CAKE Framework is an original leadership competency synthesis developed by Simon and informed by competency-based leadership theory [5,6], transformational leadership [7, 8] emotional intelligence [4], change leadership [3], enterprise competency models [9], and future-focused workforce frameworks [10].

Navigating difficult workplace conversations requires clarity of purpose, emotional discipline, and strategic intent. Effective leaders approach these conversations grounded in facts, aligned to organizational values, and focused on outcomes rather than emotions or personalities. They listen actively to understand impact and perspective, communicate expectations with calm authority, and model respect, even when under pressure. By balancing candor with empathy, executives use difficult conversations not to win arguments, but to protect

trust, reinforce accountability, and move the organization forward.

Often times, these difficult conversations arise because of challenges and changes that cause a shift, requiring others to adapt. Adaptability is difficult for many people not because they don't want to change, but because change challenges how we are used to thinking and introduces uncertainty in what may have been perceived as a stable environment.

In a VUCA environment, adaptability helps you to:

- Respond calmly to change and disruption
- Learn new skills as roles emerge and/or evolve
- Solve problems when answers aren't obvious
- Stay employable and relevant
- Maintain confidence during uncertainty

Organizations value adaptable people because they help teams move forward-even without perfect information.

As we adapt, we gain knowledge and experience that can often lead to innovation. A common challenge can be the inability to shift focus from working towards the 'big breakthrough', to celebrating the small wins as we gain momentum slowly. The Kaizon Approach leans towards continuous improvement where every day, every process and every person can get a little better. Leaders can become so consumed with the vision that they fail to realize and acknowledge that improvements come from the people doing the work, not just top leadership. Focusing on process and not blame for failures as well as steady refinements as opposed to giant transformations, is how improvements are realized. Entrepreneurial Leaders understand that continuous improvement is a habit, not a project.

Transforming from information to impact is how ideas and innovation are turned into action. An entrepreneurial mindset promotes critical thinking and problemsolving by training people to question assumptions, analyze realworld situations, and act under uncertainty rather than waiting for perfect information or predefined answers. It begins with responsibility and is sustained by accountability. Accountability is tightly linked to an entrepreneurial mindset because entrepreneurship requires ownership of both decisions and outcomes. An entrepreneurial mindset shifts responsibility inward-away from external control and toward personal agency-making accountability a core operating principle rather than a compliance requirement.

The Entrepreneurial Mindset Profile assessment [11] is a researchbased tool designed to measure the attitudes, behaviors, and skills associated with an entrepreneurial mindset. It is commonly used in education, workforce development, leadership training, and entrepreneurship programs to help individuals understand how they think, act, and respond in opportunitydriven and uncertain

environments. It not only assesses how people approach problems, but it also measures 14 dimensions, grouped into two categories: Entrepreneurial Traits (who you are) and Entrepreneurial Skills (what you do).

The Entrepreneurial Mindset Profile is commonly used to:

- Support selfawareness in entrepreneurship programs
- Guide coaching and reflection
- Inform curriculum and program design
- Measure growth before and after instruction
- Support leadership and workforce development

Yet there is room for potential limitations in all leadership competency models because leadership does not occur in a vacuum. Industry conditions, culture, power dynamics, crisis vs. stability, timing, and the specific context in which the model was developed all influence effectiveness and application. Even a strong, integrative model like CAKE can create blind spots if applied rigidly or overconfidently. Leaders might confuse action with effectiveness such as acting too quickly without sufficient reflection or data. It's not about just getting things done by doing something, but through critical thinking and collaboration, doing the right things that align with organizational strategies.

In economics, most assets depreciate. Skills are one of the few assets you can repeatedly use to create opportunity-and they never get used up. Unlike money, time, or physical resources, skills grow stronger the more you apply them, allowing you to expand your capacity. The CAKE entrepreneurial competency model is especially powerful when applied consistently because it strengthens relationships, improves decision-making, increases entrepreneurial potential and supports success in any industry or organization. Entrepreneurial leadership and management require a combination of vision, influence, and operational discipline to enable ventures to grow and stay resilient in fastmoving, uncertain markets. Leaders must continually investigate the long-term impact of treating improvement as a habit not a project with an understanding that adaptability can be difficult for many since it challenges how we are used to thinking and disrupts perceived stability.

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