Seco Tools & Hult Ashridge Executive Education

Strategy Lives in the Tensions that Leadership Teams must Learn to Steward

How Seco Tools' leadership team turned relational stewardship into an organisation-wide capacity for transformation

By Dr Stefan Cousquer, Hult Ashridge Executive Education, in collaboration with Seco Tools

Transformation stories are often tidied up in retrospect: the ambition was clear, an intervention was launched, and results followed. Seco Tools' experience was much more human than this – and more of a dynamic rollercoaster ride, where they held onto learning. Progress came in surges and setbacks. Familiar habits returned under pressure. At several points, continuing required more courage than beginning or ending.

This also revealed something fundamental about transformation. Strategy rarely fails, as is often assumed, because an organisation lacks a plan. Rather, it fails when its leadership team cannot collectively steward the tensions that strategy creates – over time, under pressure, and without easy answers.

In 2022, Seco – a global metal-cutting solutions business – faced an inflection point. Digital disruption, sustainability expectations and changing customer needs were challenging the logic that had made it successful. Technical excellence and product reliability remained essential, but customers increasingly needed end-to-end solutions, joint innovation and measurable sustainability outcomes. Seco sought to transition from component supplier to strategic problem-solving partner.

This was not principally a skills gap. Governance rhythms privileged urgent, controllable work. Cross-functional collaboration was inconsistent. Leaders had energy for change, but lacked shared practices for connecting future ambition with today's decisions. Another leadership programme would have added activity without changing this gravitational pull.

Instead, Seco and Hult Ashridge Executive Education treated transformation as an organisational learning process. Live strategic tensions became the curriculum, teams became the primary unit of change, and ownership progressively moved inside Seco. The aim was not to eliminate tensions, but to increase the leadership team's relational capacity to surface and steward them.

Holding the Tensions Strategy Creates

Co-inquiry through interviews, shadowing and team dialogue demonstrated how seemingly separate issues – strategic alignment, psychological safety, sponsorship, meeting quality and governance – reinforced one another. Protecting transformation time, for example, was not merely a diary problem. It exposed power, identity and trade-offs: future-focused discussion could feel risky when short-term performance was more visible and measurable.

Three recurring tensions became especially important. Leaders had to deliver performance while enabling transformation, combine efficient direction with participative sensemaking, and move from strong individual leaders towards strong collective team practices. Under pressure, the system tended to default to the first pole: short term, top down and individual.

Relational stewardship meant noticing that default position early, making competing interests and fears discussable, staying in dialogue when stakes rose, agreeing trade-offs, and revisiting decisions as conditions changed. The Seco Management Group (SMG) had to model this. The President's willingness to remain present in uncomfortable conversations legitimised vulnerability, challenge and accountability elsewhere.

None of this would have been possible without the strength of the relationship between Hult Ashridge, Seco's President and Vice President Human Resources (VPHR), and, as the work developed, the Chief of Staff & Transformation Lead. The relationship itself became part of Seco's transformation infrastructure.

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"Both parties needed to challenge each other and take relational risks. Hult Ashridge had to hold open the perspective of future aspirations and question the assumptions, priorities and leadership practices that could pull Seco back towards short-term delivery. Seco's leaders, in turn, had to challenge Hult Ashridge when its ideas risked becoming disconnected from the commercial, operational and human pressures leaders were carrying. Neither party could remain in the safety of being the expert or the client."

Victor Folkebrant, Chief of Staff & Transformation Lead, Seco Tools

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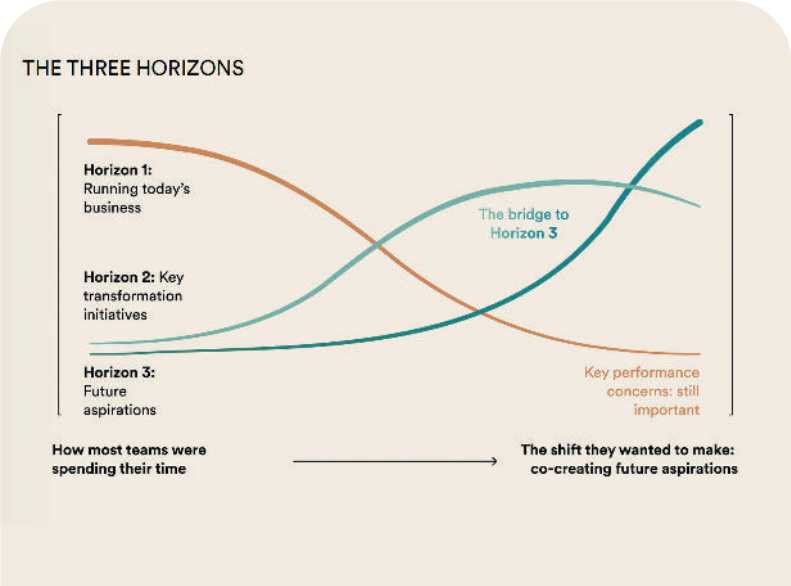
The President brought authority, visibility and a willingness to model vulnerability. The VPHR held the organisational and human dimensions of the transformation. The Transformation Office increasingly connected the work to strategy, governance and execution. Their trust in Hult Ashridge created a relational container in which difficult truths, competing agendas and power dynamics could be surfaced without weakening commitment to the work.

Holding the tension required enough trust to name avoidance, enough empathy to understand it, and enough mutual accountability not to collude with it. This reciprocal challenge enabled the partnership to withstand dips in energy, confidence and momentum – and kept future ambition connected to present reality. Relational stewardship, therefore, operated not only within Seco's leadership team but at the heart of the partnership itself.

The Three Horizons framework (Sharpe et al., 2016) gave the organisation a shared language. Horizon 1 represented current operations; Horizon 3, future aspirations; and Horizon 2, the experimental work of moving between them. Its value was in showing where attention, resources and power flowed.

The neglected middle proved pivotal. Operational delivery already had owners and measures; future aspirations were easy to endorse. Horizon 2 could belong to everyone and therefore no one. Naming this shifted the conversation from aspiration to governance: who owns transformative work, what receives resources, and where is leadership attention protected? By mid-2024, SMG meeting time devoted to transformation had risen from 23% to 45%, while attention to short-term operations fell from 72% to 55%.



From the Leadership Team to the Wider Organisation

Progression was systemic. Work began with the SMG because the wider system would not become more collaborative than the team at its apex. It then expanded to the Top 80, who applied new practices to live business issues, connecting transformation across functions and geographies. Managers carried these into meetings, customer reviews, performance conversations and plant visits. Finally, 30 cross-functional internal catalysts were prepared to sustain the work without external dependency.

95% of participants said the work connected directly to live business challenges, and 90% applied practices such as Three Horizons or team coaching within four weeks.

Teams practised honest dialogue, coaching, working with conflict, and balancing present concerns with future aspirations. Methods, including team constellations and LEGO Serious Play, made hidden assumptions visible. Learning moved out of the classroom and into the workflow.

Evidence of broader cultural change can be seen in employee data. Between 2023 and 2025, employee NPS rose from 11 to 25. Peakon employee engagement increased from 7.4 to 7.8 and understanding of strategy from 7.0 to 7.4. Organisational Health Index scores for collaboration and empowerment rose by 9-10 points. These measures do not prove that one initiative caused cultural change; they show that shifts first practised in leadership teams were increasingly experienced across the organisation.

45%

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Connecting Learning to Business Value

An Impact Triangle avoided superficial satisfaction measures and overclaiming commercial causation. It connected event quality, team practices, organisational learning and business results in a contribution chain tested over time.

The logic was straightforward: if leaders hosted better strategic conversations, teams should allocate attention differently; if governance and collaboration changed, cross-functional customer solutions should move faster; if those solutions created value, commercial and sustainability indicators should respond. Quarterly business reviews incorporated learning loops so evidence informed what to adapt next, rather than merely proving success afterwards.

The commercial signals were substantial. Seco achieved growth in new solution-

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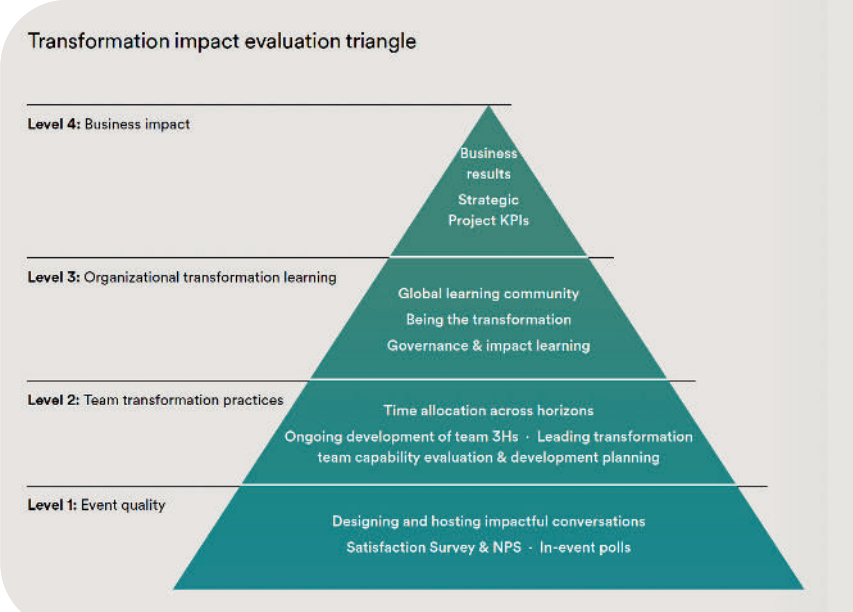
based commercial models; secured its largest end-to-end solution contract; and tripled its integrated-offer pipeline. Sustainable-solutions revenue grew, while Scope 1 and 2 emissions fell. These outcomes had multiple causes, including market and operational actions. The defensible claim is contribution: new leadership, team and governance practices helped Seco convert strategic intent into coordinated experiments, decisions and customer value.

Long-term embedding was designed in. 78% of teams now include learning reviews in quarterly cycles (up by 26%); 84% of leaders say learning and transformation are part of performance management (up by 21%); and more than 90% of Transformation Enablement members use Seco's eight transformation capabilities in their work. External support shifted from expert input to a mirror and a companion as Seco took ownership of its own learning cycles.



Pride in Perseverance

The journey was called a rollercoaster because every high seemed to be followed by a dip. Business pressure returned, excitement became fatigue, and teams did not change simply because leaders understood a model. Governance had to be simplified, modules delayed, ownership clarified, and difficult dynamics revisited.

The pivotal capability was staying present and valuing learning. Leaders learned to ask not only, "Did it work?" but "What did we learn?" 83% later said they were proud of what they had achieved together.

That pride is more than sentiment. It records a collective experience of meeting tension without retreating into control, heroic leadership or short-termism. Seco did not simply implement change; it became better able to change itself. In conditions where no transformation plan survives intact, relational stewardship and learning may be the most durable strategic capability of all.