

ARTICLE

The changing leadership styles of supply chain executives

Over the past nine years, we have tracked changes in the leadership styles most often used by supply chain executives.



Since 2016, more than 5,000 supply chain executives have taken a proprietary Heidrick & Struggles survey¹—the combined results of which highlight how much each leader tends toward each of the eight styles of leadership (see chart, “Changing leadership styles of supply chain executives, 2016–2024”).

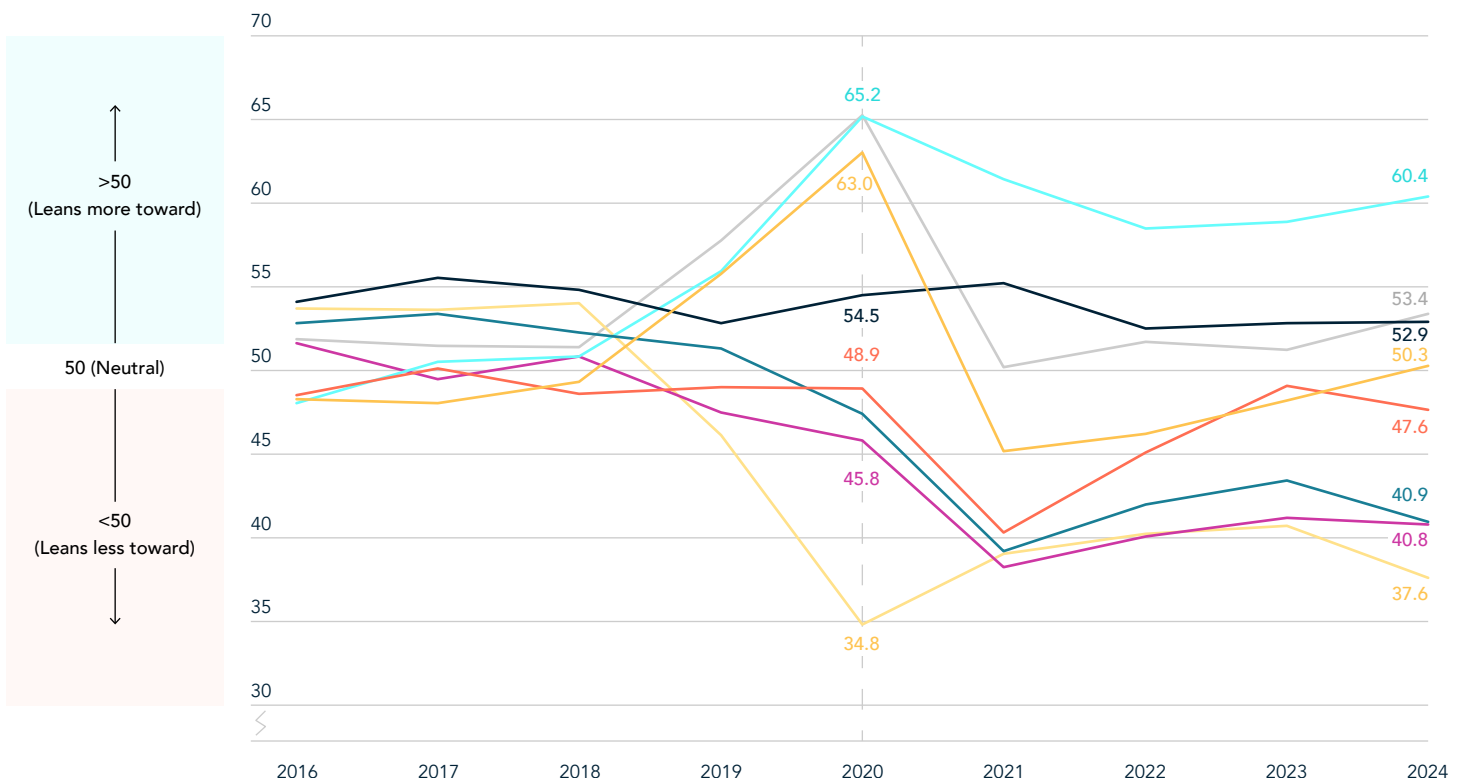
In 2016, the scores across styles varied little, meaning that supply chain leaders overall used a broad range of styles. Between 2016 and 2019, the share of executives who were more often working as collaborators, energizers, and harmonizers grew fairly steadily, while those tending toward being composers, forecasters, and pilots fell. The core executional focus, which sits with the producer style, changed little.

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The shock of the pandemic hit supply chain executives as hard as any, as industries from consumer goods to agriculture scrambled to provide for unforeseen needs and work in life sciences took on unprecedented urgency. As a result, the supply chain function became more strategically important in most companies and the previous leadership trends accelerated significantly: we saw that the collaborator, the energizer, and the harmonizer leadership styles had become significantly more common among the executives we surveyed. And these leadership styles, though having declined in need somewhat as the world has adapted to the impacts of the pandemic, have remained more common to this day, pointing to a new normal for leadership in the supply chain function.

Changing leadership styles of supply chain executives, 2016–2024

Collaborator Develops others, team builder, empathetic, attracts talent	Composer Independent, creative problem solver, decisive, self-reliant	Energizer Charismatic, inspiring, connects emotionally, provides meaning	Forecaster Depth and breadth of knowledge, anticipatory, conceptual thinker
Harmonizer Creates positive, stable environments, reliable, diligent, spots inconsistencies	Pilot Strategic vision, manages complexity, team builder, clear POV	Producer Execution and task focused, linear thinker, structured, loyal to tradition	Provider Intellectually confident, operates with conviction, driven to provide for others



1 To learn more about Heidrick & Struggles’ Leadership Signature survey, see Karen Rosa West, “What’s your leadership signature?” Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

Some key facts about chief supply chain officers (CSCOs)

As of December 29, 2024, there were 637 CSCOs in the Fortune 1000, up from 578 CSCOs in May 2024.

- Prior experience as a CSCO
 - » 80% are first-timers
 - » 20% have prior experience as a CSCO
- Promotion versus hire
 - » 59% are internal appointments
 - » 41% are external appointments
- Average tenure in role is 4.1 years, slightly down from 4.9 years in May 2024.

The **composer** mindset, while still relevant, has become less dominant as supply chain functions evolve from a back-end focus to a more collaborative approach. Today's CSCOs must work seamlessly with other business functions to drive a unified strategy.

The **forecaster's** depth of knowledge remains valuable, but the rapidly changing market demands leaders who are agile and adept at addressing new challenges as they arise.

The **pilot** mindset has also seen a reduced emphasis, similar to the forecaster, as leaders focus on resolving existing backlogs and managing immediate priorities. Only after addressing these challenges can they fully transition to a future-oriented perspective.

In 2020, we hypothesized that the need for supply chain leaders who can transform both their supply chains and their functions would further increase, and that this new generation of leaders would need to be able to navigate constantly changing technology, automation, and engineering tools, as well as adeptly use data and analytics to drive decisions. We argued that this increasing need would be driven by omnichannel consumer requirements and e-commerce-driven supply, along with the entry of new competitors into virtually every sector—making it harder for companies to accurately build supply and demand forecasts (especially in long lead time manufacturing environments).

While this still holds true, it is notable that we have seen the **collaborator** leader rise in prominence once more, pointing to the growing need for strong people leaders as well. The collaborator, with their empathy and team-building skills, is a leader who can create unity through transition and drive a purpose-driven organizational culture through a focus on developing others.

And, while operations have somewhat stabilized post-pandemic, the **harmonizer's** ability to create and sustain a high-energy culture remains a priority as a supply chain executive for driving engagement, productivity, and transformation. The harmonizer, whose reliability and diligence work together to create a stable environment, is, unsurprisingly, particularly valuable in uncertain economic and geopolitical conditions, not to mention in the face of looming challenges and disruptions caused by climate change.

Finally, we have also noted that **producer** leadership has become more common—that is, leaders who are execution and task focused, linear thinkers, structured, and loyal to tradition—suggesting that traditional leadership skills are still highly valued in the function.

The chief supply chain officer's knowledge of the intricacies of the function must now be matched with their ability to navigate an uncertain future and keep up with fast-moving digital and technological innovations. Agility will be key, as will communication skills. Leaders and aspiring leaders can best position themselves for the future by examining their own leadership styles and strengths and considering how they can develop those to adapt to a broadening scope of responsibility.

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Supply Chain & Operations Officers Practice

Heidrick & Struggles' global Supply Chain & Operations Officers Practice has a well-established track record for recruiting top strategic leaders as well as serving a demanding client base. Because our team of experts has operations backgrounds, they provide superior leadership counsel and bring a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by clients as well as the competencies needed to excel in today's fast-paced and demanding world.

Complex, global, time-sensitive supply chains and their increasing strategic importance have raised the bar for supply chain executives everywhere. Because our practice proactively builds its own talent networks, we know who they are and where they are. Thus, we can quickly present targeted candidates to our clients.

Our experts are strategically located in the world's principal cities and specialize in the following areas:

- Supply and demand planning
- Strategic sourcing and procurement
- Manufacturing operations
- Distribution
- Warehouse and inventory management
- Transportation and logistics

We have extensive experience recruiting senior leaders, including: chief supply chain officers, chief procurement officers, SVPs and VPs of supply chain planning, procurement, manufacturing, inventory management, logistics, distribution, transportation, customer service, quality and engineering.

Leader of Heidrick & Struggles' Supply Chain & Operations Officers Practice

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