

Leadership Overview of the Fourth Turning & How to Prepare

Leadership is not about the next election;
it's about the next generation. -Simon
Sinek

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Top Findings

1. The emerging *Fourth Turning* in American history will present, and is presenting, crises and opportunities. Institutions and communities that see the Fourth Turning as a **once-in-a-lifetime transformation**, not just a temporary disruption, will be positioned to thrive.
2. This moment isn't just about surviving; it is about **co-shaping the future**. Those who lean into this era by anchoring business strategy in societal rebuilding, tech-enabled reskilling, and intergenerational inclusivity will emerge stronger when the next part of the historical/generational cycle (the “High”) arrives.
3. The *Fourth Turning* is catalyzing a transformation of how our society will educate and deploy our people. Businesses that invest in purpose-driven, collaborative training systems -rooted in regional needs, cross-sector alignment, and equity- will not just respond to disruption; they will help define the next era’s foundation.
4. Strauss & Howe’s generational theory offers more insight than just “Gen-Xers are cynical, and Millennials need office ping-pong tables.” The following overview suggests that Strauss & Howe’s framework offers predictive value, like elephants moving to higher ground before a tsunami or birds changing flight patterns before an earthquake.
5. Every 80 years in America there has been a war and large-scale social disruption.

Overview of the Concept of the *Fourth Turning* in American History

The Four Turnings: Cycles of History

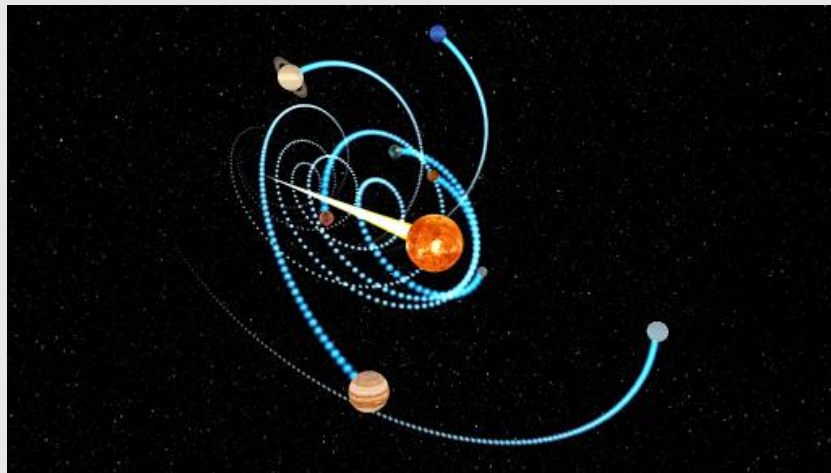
In their 1991 book, *Generations: A History of America's Future 1584 to 2069*, authors Neil Strauss and William Howe identified a recurring pattern in American history, with cycles lasting approximately 80–100 years.

Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who were on opposite sides of the political spectrum, both praised Strauss and Howe's 1991 book.

Historian David Kaiser praised the central thesis of Strauss and Howe's work. Kaiser noted, "Their critical insight, the idea that set their work apart, was that even the most stable domestic and foreign orders and the values that underlie them will die off along with the generations that created them".¹

In a 2017 article, Moshe Modeira argued for the theory's importance, stating, "Linear historical thinking has become our biggest psychological flaw as a species. Our very future may depend on beginning to see history as circular, not linear".²

I would disagree that it is circular, but more it is like we are spiraling through time, like those images of our solar system spiraling through space. It certainly is not linear.



¹ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/03/21/opinion/strauss-howe-trump-fourth-turning/>

² <https://moshemodeira.medium.com/strauss-howe-generational-theory-is-the-closest-thing-we-have-to-a-crystal-ball-part-2-f1ab886fd09>

Strauss & Howe identified a recurring pattern in American history, with cycles lasting approximately 80–100 years. Each cycle comprises four distinct parts, about 20–25 years each:

1. The High: A period of strong institutions and collective national confidence following a crisis.
2. The Awakening: An era of spiritual renewal and challenge to established norms.
3. The Unraveling: A time of individualism and weakening institutions.
4. The Crisis: A decisive period of upheaval leading to the reconstruction of societal institutions.

This sequence is likened to the seasons: spring (High), summer (Awakening), autumn (Unraveling), and winter (Crisis).³

Generational Archetypes

Strauss and Howe then note that the era in which you were born influences the character of your generation. The stress of the Depression, for example, impacted elders towards the end of their lives differently than young adults trying to start a family and a life, and differently than the children. Strauss and Howe then categorize generations into four archetypes, each recurring in a repeating order and shaped by the era in which they come of age:

- Prophet (Idealist): Born during a High; values-driven leaders who emerge during a Crisis. (Baby-boomers)
- Nomad (Reactive): Born during an Awakening; pragmatic and resilient, often skeptical of institutions. (Gen-X)
- Hero (Civic): Born during an Unraveling; collective-oriented and institution-building. (Millennials)
- Artist (Adaptive): Born during a Crisis; sensitive and process-oriented, coming of age during a High. (Gen Z)⁴

³ Strauss, William, and Neil Howe. 1991. *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584–2069*. (New York: William Morrow and Company).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strauss%E2%80%93Howe_generational_theory

⁴ <https://www.hustleescape.com/book-summary-the-fourth-turning-strauss-howe/>

<https://www.shortform.com/blog/strauss-howe-generational-theory/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strauss%E2%80%93Howe_generational_theory

Our Current Location in History

Again, applying their framework, Strauss and Howe interpret American history as a series of four cycles (from the Latin *saecula* - age):

- Revolutionary Cycle (1701–1791): Culminated in the American Revolution.
- Civil War Cycle (1792–1865): Culminated in the Civil War.
- Great Power Cycle (1866–1946): Culminated in World War II.
- Millennial Cycle (1946–2026?): Encompasses the post-WWII era to the present, with the current "Crisis" phase “potentially concluding in the 2020s.”⁵

At the beginning of each Crisis, the generations are aligned in such a way that:

- The Elders are *Idealist/Prophet* (Baby-boomers)
- The Mature Adults are *Reactive/Nomad* (Gen-X)
- The Young Adults are *Civic/Hero* (Millennials)
- The Youth are *Adaptive/Artist* (Gen-Z/Zoomers)

In each of the previous three “Turnings” there was a war along with large-scale social and economic restructuring. Is your institution or community prepared to navigate the possible scenarios for the next three to five years? It was in preparation for these times that the term “anti-fragile” was intuitively created.⁶

Regarding war and societal realignments, political scientist Robert Nisbet⁷ wrote:

*“War is by nature revolutionary in its impact upon a people. How could it be otherwise? Its values... are antithetical in the extreme to the values of kinship-based society with its consecration of tradition, conventionality, and age or seniority” and that it was von Clausewitz who “laid down the vital principle that **modern war demands a large-scale reconstruction of the society that participates in it.** [my emphasis]*

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_cycle_theory
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strauss%E2%80%93Howe_generational_theory

⁶ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012)

⁷ Robert A. Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), quoting Carl von Clausewitz.

Paradigm Shifts

Thomas Kuhn’s concept of a “paradigm shift,” introduced in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), describes how scientific progress doesn’t occur through steady, cumulative advances, but rather through periodic, radical transformations in the fundamental frameworks (or paradigms) that define legitimate scientific inquiry.

A **paradigm** is the set of shared beliefs, methods, and standards that guide a scientific community. Normal science operates within this paradigm, solving puzzles that fit its assumptions. Over time, however, anomalies —observations the paradigm cannot explain— accumulate. When these anomalies become too serious to ignore, the field enters a **crisis**. Eventually, a new paradigm emerges that better explains the data, reorganizes the field’s assumptions, and redefines what counts as valid science.

This is a “paradigm shift”—a revolutionary transformation in worldview that changes how scientists see and interpret their field. Importantly, the new paradigm is incommensurable with the old one: they use different concepts, methods, and standards, so they cannot be fully compared on neutral ground.

One famous example is the Copernican Revolution:

Under the Ptolemaic paradigm, the Earth was the unmoving center of the universe, and planets moved in complex epicycles around it.

As observational data (e.g., planetary retrograde motion) became harder to reconcile with the geocentric model, the system grew increasingly cumbersome.

Copernicus proposed a heliocentric model—placing the Sun at the center—which radically redefined astronomy. This was not just a new theory; it changed the very framework of celestial science: how motion, observation, and “center” were understood.

Kuhn uses this to illustrate that such shifts are not just about better data, they are about seeing the world differently. After a paradigm shift, scientists literally perceive and interpret phenomena in a new way.

Right now, we are in a **Crisis** stage of our society when our institutions and systems no longer solve society’s “puzzles.” The other huge systems disruption happening is that new paradigms are being tested and discussed via decentralized networks of knowledge transfer.

The change coming will not be iterative, it will be “radical transformations in the fundamental frameworks (or paradigms) that define” how our organizations function.

Implications

The current *Fourth Turning* is becoming a period of societal crisis, institutional breakdown, and systemic transformation. This carries profound implications for businesses, workforce development, and society at large. Here is how these seismic shifts are likely to play out:

1. Restructuring Institutions & Business Models

- Enhanced role for large-scale initiatives and public investment: History suggests post-crisis eras usher in major infrastructural and institutional overhauls sometimes dubbed a "Next New Deal," with sectors like renewable energy, AI, broadband, healthcare, and public works at the forefront.⁸
- Business model realignment: Companies will need to adapt to new (de)regulatory regimes, rethink corporate responsibility, and participate in shared national goals (e.g., digital, and financial equity, sustainability). These shifts create opportunities for firms aligned with public purpose and innovation, localization, and reshoring.

2. Workforce Transformation & Upskilling

- Demand for new technical competencies: Automation, AI, and the so-called "Fourth Industrial Revolution" will reshape job roles, elevating the need for digital, technical, and entrepreneurial skills.⁹
- Reskilling and lifelong learning: With jobs evolving or disappearing, businesses must invest in ongoing training, apprenticeships, and partnerships with education providers to maintain a future-ready workforce. If people cannot earn a good wage, they cannot buy things.

3. Intergenerational Dynamics

- Multi-generational collaboration: Expect workforces with five active generations - from the Silent/Boomers through Gen Alpha -requiring flexible structures and nuanced leadership models.¹⁰

⁸ <https://www.businessinsider.com/biden-new-economic-regime-fourth-turning-theory-millennials-boomers-2021-4>

⁹ <https://gbc-education.org/resources/preparing-tomorrows-workforce-for-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>

¹⁰ "The Benefits of a Five-Generation Workforce Not Truly Appreciated by Australian Business." *The Australian*, December 31, 2024.

- Reverse mentoring cultures: Younger employees can mentor older ones in digital fluency and new technologies, enriching organizational agility and innovation.

4. Shift in Corporate Identity & Purpose

- The rise of mission-driven companies: Crises often accelerate social expectations around wealth distribution, resource stewardship, and community resilience. Businesses with genuine commitments to these issues will stand out.
- Emphasis on a collective ethos: As society leans toward collective action and public purpose, corporate culture will shift from individualistic competition to shared responsibility and sacrifice -aligning with the ethos of the Fourth Turning.¹¹

5. Strategic Planning & Resilience

- Volatility as a norm: Expect economic instability, political disruption, and rapid shifts in consumer behavior. Businesses must cultivate resilience **through agile planning, scenario analysis, and diversified operations**.
- Long-term orientation: Short-term gains will be less prized than long-term stability. Companies that prioritize sustained investment in **people, systems, and purpose** will better weather crises.

Key Takeaways

Area	Challenges	Business Response
Regulations & investments	New public mandates	Partner on infrastructure, pivot models
Skill requirements	Digital automation	Upskilling, lifelong learning
Generational mix	Divergent needs	Mentorship, age-inclusive policies, and rewards
Cultural expectations	Demand for purpose	Stability, long term vision

¹¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/biden-new-economic-regime-fourth-turning-theory-millennials-boomers-2021-4>
<https://www.mauldineconomics.com/frontlinethoughts/turning-time>

Economic volatility

Instability

Diversified strategic planning

Businesses that see the Fourth Turning as a once-in-a-generation transformation, **not just a temporary disruption**, will be positioned to thrive. That means:

- Investing in people: building learning systems and cross-generational collaboration.
- Aligning with national mission: engage in infrastructure, local, sustainable initiatives, labor equity.
- Embracing resilience: prepare for volatility through scenario planning and diversification.

This moment is not about surviving; it is about creating new **paradigms** and **co-shaping the future**. Those who lean into this era by anchoring business strategy in societal rebuilding, tech-enabled reskilling, and intergenerational inclusivity will emerge stronger when the next "High" arrives.

Contemporary Examples

Contemporary examples of businesses, governments, nonprofits, and educators collaborating to shape workforce development during this “Fourth Turning” and emerge stronger:

Columbus, Ohio & JPMorgan Chase & Ohio Excels

- JPMorgan Chase has helped fund regional talent partnerships in Columbus, drawing together business, education, and public sectors to align training with employer needs—aimed at preparing 60% of workers who will need upskilling by 2027.¹²

Key takeaway: Coordinate training efforts regionally to build inclusive, resilient talent pipelines focused on living-wage jobs.

Industry-Specific Public–Private Partnerships

- ARM (Advanced Robotics for Manufacturing) Institute (Public–Private consortium in Pittsburgh): Combines Carnegie Mellon, DoD funding, and manufacturers to upskill workers in robotics and advanced manufacturing.¹³
- Permian Basin CDL Program: Permian Strategic Partnership invested \$1 million to expand commercial driver training at New Mexico Junior College (NMJC), adding infrastructure, trainers, equipment, and scholarships.¹⁴

Key takeaway: Customize training to industry demands with shared investment and resources.

School-to-Career Pipeline "Farm Systems"

- Time magazine’s “Farm System for Jobs”: Proposes K–12 through high school/college pathways with internships, credentials, and employer commitments—mirroring athletic farm systems.¹⁵
- NAF (National Academy Foundation) Career Academies: Built inside 620+ high schools, they partner with industry in finance, engineering, health, IT, hospitality—offering internships and skills aligned to local industry needs.¹⁶
- Startup High: Startup High is an immersive summer experience that introduces students to real-world businesses, industry experiences, and hands-on projects.¹⁷

¹² <https://www.axios.com/sponsored/how-one-city-is-bridging-the-gap-between-education-and-local-jobs>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advanced_Robotics_for_Manufacturing

¹⁴ <https://www.mrt.com/news/education/article/new-mexico-cdl-training-expansion-20392311.php>

¹⁵ <https://time.com/7289184/farm-system-american-jobs/>

¹⁶ <https://naf.org/our-academies/career-pathways/>

¹⁷ <https://startuphigh.com/>

Key takeaway: Early career exposure and credentials help students enter the workforce with clarity and purpose.

Free Tech Upskilling Nonprofits

- Per Scholas: Offers no-cost technical training in IT, cybersecurity, software testing—across 20+ locations—with employer partnerships, lifting participants into high-wage roles.¹⁸
- Code Louisville: A public–private coding bootcamp in Kentucky, free for residents with library cards, connected directly to local tech employers.¹⁹

Key takeaway: Barrier-free, demand-driven training for in-demand roles accelerates economic mobility and fills talent shortages.

Corporate STEM & Career Focus

- Toyota’s “Driving Possibilities” Grant: \$6.5 million to San Antonio Independent School District, engaging K–12 students and teachers in STEM, in partnership with Texas A&M and United Way.²⁰
- Veteran Training Public-Private Partnerships: Collaborations (e.g., National Veterans Training Institute) provide tech training, on-the-job experience, and credentialing for transitioning from military service).²¹

Key takeaway: Corporate grants and programs integrated with education create long-term STEM and career pathways.

Responsive Workforce Policy Frameworks

- State WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) Innovation Initiatives: Governors’ offices pooling funds, using labor data, launching pilot programs (e.g., childcare and transportation support) under WIOA to address local labor needs.²²
- Third Sector Capital Partners: Works on redesigning public systems to ensure jobseekers gain economic mobility through employer access and benefits.²³

¹⁸ <https://enterprise.perscholas.org/>

¹⁹ <https://codelouisville.org/>

²⁰ <https://www.expressnews.com/business/article/toyota-grant-ecisd-stem-education-texas-20158573.php>

²¹ <https://www.nvti.org/2024/03/14/public-private-partnerships-for-veteran-job-training-bridging-the-gap-how-public-private-collaborations-are-advancing-veteran-job-training/>

²² https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/GovernorsReshapingWorkforceDevelopment_April2025.pdf

²³ <https://www.thirdsectorcap.org/economic-mobility/workforce/>

Key takeaway: Strategic policy, data-informed workforce systems, and support services (like childcare) are key to equitable access.

How Businesses Can Act Now

Launch Industry-Aligned Training Collaborations

- Partner with community colleges, nonprofits, and regional employers to stand up or support programs like CDL training, robotics bootcamps, and STEM academies.

Sponsor “Farm-System” pipelines

- Collaborate with K–12 systems (via NAF, local school districts) to provide internships, apprenticeships, or summer clinics tied to real career paths.

Back barrier-free training nonprofits

- Provide funding and hiring pathways for nonprofits like Per Scholas or Year Up to help underrepresented talent access tech roles.

Implement internal reskilling initiatives

- Follow BCG’s model: treat reskilling as a strategic imperative, led by top execs, with clear metrics and manager involvement.²⁴

Advocate for local workforce policy integration

- Engage with city or state WIOA offices to coordinate training, support wraparound services, and use employer insights in program design.

²⁴ <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/reskilling-workforce-for-future>

Summary

The *Fourth Turning* is and will catalyze a transformation of how our society educates and deploys our people. Businesses that invest in purpose-driven, collaborative training systems -rooted in regional needs, cross-sector alignment, and equity, will not just respond to disruption; **they will help define the next era's foundation.**

There are two internal traits among rising (and established) leaders that I think will allow institutions and firms to survive and thrive in the coming years:

1. The first is the ability to understand complexity, i.e., having a cultural and historical imagination.
2. The second is a capacity to act, i.e., to care enough and to be engaged enough to act.

In 2024, only 21% of employees globally were engaged in their work, a drop from 23% in 2023. This marks only the second decline in engagement over the past 12 years.²⁵

If you are involved with state, regional and/or local business, workforce, and economic development and want to make your business and community resilient and prepared for these changes, make contact. We can find the leaders you already have to make this transition possible or advise you how to develop them and find them.

²⁵ <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/654911/employee-engagement-sinks-year-low.aspx>

PPSE

With a foundation in history and philosophy and over one hundred years combined of consulting experience, we guide leaders through crises by helping them see their challenges as part of enduring human patterns, with insight drawn from historical case studies of crisis leadership and ancient philosophical frameworks such as Aristotelian Causality.

This deep *contextual awareness* becomes the backbone for a system-oriented methodology, integrating open and complex adaptive systems thinking, so that leaders not only diagnose emergent threats but also intentionally design responsive, *agile* structures that channel organizational energy in real time.

Drawing on this *integrated paradigm*, we coach them to elevate their situational awareness, strengthen self-regulation, and cultivate connectivity—aligning stakeholders across functional silos during high-pressure moments.

Through this fusion of *narrative history*, *ethical philosophy*, and *organizational theory*, we cultivate and empower leaders to transform disruption into renewal—cultivating resilience, clarity, and coordinated purpose precisely when it matters most.

Contact



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About the Author

James McPherson is a Strategy and Operations practitioner as well as an educator, speaker, and coach. He has held founding operational, financial, and business development roles in various educational, telecommunications, and technology ventures.

James received his B.A. in Classics with honors from Johns Hopkins University where he was a Maryland Distinguished Scholar, and a Maryland General. As a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland he studied Leadership and Organizational Goals in Homer's Iliad.

James completed his M.B.A. at Duke University with a concentration in Strategy & Decision Science. At Duke he was an Executive Fellow, an Alumni Fellow, and a graduation speaker.

He edited the third edition of *On Moral Character: A Practical Guide to Aristotle's Virtues and Vices*, by Joseph Palmour, Ph.D., has published *Generational Helots*, *Elephants Fleeing the Tsunami: Indications of the Fourth Turning*, and is currently completing *Monarchy: Kingliness as a Character Trait* and *Throw Thunder: Lead Like Zeus*.
