

# Adapting to Change: Leadership Lessons from Disruption in the Retail Sector

Disruption is redefining leadership across the retail sector. Drawing on insights from Jouko Pitkänen, Managing Partner of JFP Executive Search (IIC Partners: Helsinki), this report examines how retail leaders can meet the demands of an increasingly complex landscape. From the composition of boards to the competencies required of future CEOs, we highlight the qualities that distinguish those capable of driving sustainable growth.

## Retail Leadership Requires Depth of Experience

In recent years, disruption is often portrayed as a technological phenomenon. But many of history's greatest upheavals had little to do with code or connectivity. "It's not just about AI or e-commerce. True disruption often comes from unexpected places – and leaders need the range to respond," shared Jouko Pitkänen.

Retail leaders must be prepared for technological change, regulatory shifts, evolving consumer behaviors, and entirely new business models. Disruption is at the heart of consumer markets. Organizations and leaders who fail to adapt risk being left behind.

Experience across multiple industries, organizations, and disruption cycles gives leaders a broader perspective – and a stronger foundation for strategic decision-making under pressure.

## Boards Must Be Built With Precision

Department stores were once the pinnacle of retail innovation – offering self-service shopping, showcasing global brands, and even introducing products like Coca-Cola and television to the public. They were cultural institutions as much as commercial spaces.

But in recent decades, many department store groups failed to evolve. One reason: governance that lagged behind the pace of change. Boards were often filled with generalists who lacked a deep understanding of modern retail dynamics.

“Too many strategic decisions were made without retail-specific insight,” Jouko Pitkänen explained. “Each board seat must serve a clearly defined strategic function.”

Today’s most successful retail boards are built with precision. Each member contributes expertise in specific areas such as digital platforms, customer data strategy, or supply chain modernization.

Interview with Jouko Pitkänen

How is the global retail landscape changing after the rise of e-Commerce?



**Jouko Pitkänen**  
Managing Partner  
JFP Executive Search



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## Two Qualities That Define Future CEOs

Understanding skills, competencies, and leadership styles is essential to identifying future-fit leaders. Across our global network, we've seen two leadership traits consistently rise to the top:



### Growth mindset

This signals a leader's willingness to learn, evolve, and innovate. As Jouko Pitkänen emphasized, "If a CEO hasn't done anything to grow intellectually or professionally in the last 20 years, they're not ready for what's next."



### Adaptability

This includes resilience, yes – but also the ability to move fast. Leaders must pivot business models, shift team structures, and redesign value propositions in response to evolving conditions.

Having a growth mindset and being highly adaptable are essential for leaders navigating a world where disruption is the norm. Change is no longer episodic. It's continuous, accelerated, and unpredictable.

## Executive Recruitment Must Evolve Too

These insights reinforce that executive recruitment must also evolve and move beyond titles and tenure. “Expertise is the price of entry. What clients need now are leaders who can reshape their industries,” shared Jouko Pitkänen. That requires executive search professionals who can diagnose leadership gaps, assess cognitive readiness, and deliver candidates with the mindset and capability to lead in uncertain times.

We are proud that the 450+ consultants across our global network are seasoned advisors, future strategists, and thought leaders. And through international collaboration and knowledge sharing, they are empowered to translate insights into commercial strategy and help clients build leadership teams ready for the future.

Retail may be at the forefront of disruption, but the lessons apply across industries. This ongoing transformation challenges all executives to reconsider how leadership is defined, evaluated, and developed. It also reinforces our skills-based approach to search – one that prioritizes mindset, agility, and impact.



**Jouko Pitkänen**

Managing Partner, JFP Executive Search  
& Practice Group Leader, IIC Partners

## About IIC Partners

IIC Partners is a leading provider of executive search and leadership consulting services. Our expert consultants, connected across 40 offices worldwide, partner with senior executives and board directors to transform businesses and solve complex leadership challenges.

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