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whitepaper

Tariffs, tactics and turbulence

A CEO's guide to trade uncertainty in 2025.

Written by Nick Leeder
Published 2025

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Version 1.0, first published 2025. Rebranded edition, November 2026.

The home of this paper, with a summary and related reading: nickleeder.com/resources/tariffs-tactics-turbulence-ceo-guide-trade-uncertainty/

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Foreword



If the past five years have taught us anything, it's this: the days of stable, predictable trade environments are over.

Manufacturing leaders are no strangers to volatility. But 2025 feels different. The headlines are louder, the risks sharper and the margin for error smaller. In this new climate, it's not just about supply chains or cost pressures. It's about leadership.

Even by writing this guide, we are taking a risk. It is likely to be out of date before we publish it!

At Nick Leeder & Co, we work with manufacturing CEOs across the UK, Europe and North America. What we're seeing on the ground is clear: mid-sized firms are bearing the brunt of global trade disruption, often without the deep benches or policy resources of their larger peers. They're expected to move faster, absorb shocks better and lead through the fog, without a playbook.

This white paper was written to change that.

It's not a technical manual or a policy digest. It's a CEO's guide, focused on the strategic levers that matter most when trade becomes a front-line risk. We've drawn on industry data, real-world examples and the lived experience of the leaders we advise to provide practical, high-impact actions that can be taken now, not after the next tariff lands.

You'll find five interconnected moves that, together, form a system for resilience and agility:

- How to rehearse disruption, not just react to it
- Why diversification is a commercial strategy, not just a supply tactic
- What visibility really means in the boardroom
- When to prioritise agility over efficiency
- And how leadership tone sets the tempo in turbulent times

This isn't about being alarmist. It's about being ready.

Because the firms that lead through disruption don't just survive: they reshape the market while others pause.

Let's make sure you're one of them.

Nick Leeder

Founder, Nick Leeder & Co Limited

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Executive summary

Mid-sized manufacturers are under pressure. As global trade dynamics shift once again, CEOs are facing an uncomfortable reality: uncertainty is no longer a short-term disruption; it's the new business climate.

Scenario planning for tariffs

In this paper, scenario planning means rehearsing your response to a trade shock, such as a 10% tariff landing on your top-selling product, across finance, operations and sales before it happens.

From rising US tariffs and retaliatory responses to new non-tariff barriers like carbon adjustments and data localisation, trade is now a tactical challenge every board must address.

This whitepaper outlines five CEO-level strategies to help mid-market manufacturers build resilience, preserve margins and unlock competitive advantage.

With 89% of manufacturing leaders concerned about renewed trade wars in 2025 (WEF, 2024), the message is clear: preparation beats prediction. This paper provides a blueprint to help CEOs turn turbulence into tactical advantage.



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Five CEO-level strategies

- **Scenario planning:** move fast, don't freeze. Use tariff simulations to rehearse and respond before disruption hits.
- **Diversification:** spread your risk, smartly. Reduce overdependence on one market or supply route.
- **Supply chain visibility:** if you can't see it, you can't protect it. Make visibility a strategic asset.
- **Agility over efficiency:** lean is good. Flexible is better. Build systems that can pivot.
- **Leadership in the fog:** culture follows tone. Lead with clarity, calm and conviction.

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Tariffs are back on the agenda

If you're running a mid-sized manufacturing business in 2025, the trade landscape is no longer a backdrop. It's a front-line risk. So what should CEOs be doing about it?

Recent announcements around renewed US tariffs, increased subsidy regimes and retaliatory moves from trading partners are setting off alarms across boardrooms. Sectors such as clean tech, industrial machinery, semiconductors and materials are already seeing the first waves.



The scale of the problem

86%

of global manufacturers are baking geopolitical risk into their long-term supply chain strategy

Deloitte, 2024

89%

of executives are concerned about a return to widespread tariff regimes

WEF, 2024

5 to 10%

A tariff of this size can wipe out margins

For CEOs in mid-market firms, especially those without dedicated policy teams or large legal departments, this isn't about reading the headlines. It's about identifying specific exposure points and leading your business through ambiguity with clarity.

We've seen the playbook before: Brexit. US-China tariffs. The pandemic. Each disruption forced manufacturers to reassess cost,

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margin and customer loyalty, fast. But what's different now is that uncertainty is no longer episodic: it's structural. Trade has become tactical. Policy is now strategy. And that makes it a CEO-level concern.

What's at stake? Margins can be wiped out by a 5 to 10% tariff. Customer confidence can erode if delivery times become unpredictable. Your best commercial contracts may become liabilities if landed costs surge.

Most mid-sized manufacturers don't have a compliance department to model tariff impact overnight. But what they do have, if they choose to use it, is leadership agility. This paper is designed to help CEOs shift from reacting to preparing. We outline five high-leverage tactics to help you build resilience and competitive advantage under pressure:

01

Scenario planning

Anticipate tariff risks and rehearse your playbook.

02

Diversification

Spread exposure across markets and suppliers.

03

Supply chain visibility

Turn fragmented data into real-time insight.

04

Agility

Build a business that can flex without breaking.

05

Leadership

Set the tone, because how you respond matters as much as what you do.

If your leadership team is waiting for certainty, you're already behind. This isn't about being alarmist. It's about recognising that resilience is now a source of competitive advantage. The question isn't whether your business will face trade shocks this year: it's how ready you'll be when it does.

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01

Scenario planning

What happens if 10% gets added overnight?

01

Scenario planning

What happens if 10% gets added overnight?

Scenario planning has become a strategic necessity for manufacturing CEOs. In a world where trade policy can shift faster than your procurement cycle, the question isn't if a disruption will come: it's whether you'll be ready when it does.

Let's say a 10% tariff lands on your top-selling product. You have 45 days' notice. What's your move?

That's not a hypothetical. It's a real-world situation many firms faced during the first waves of the US-China trade war. And the companies that responded fastest weren't necessarily the biggest: they were the best prepared.

In 2025, scenario planning should be a standing item on your board agenda. It's not a glossy risk report: it's a live business tool. According to McKinsey, companies that run routine cross-functional scenario planning exercises are 2.5x more likely to respond profitably to external shocks (McKinsey, 2023).



Here's how to embed that thinking into your business

/ **Financial modelling:** can you simulate the margin impact of a 10% increase in landed costs? Can you reprice in time, or will you absorb the hit?

/ **Operational dependencies:** where are your single points of failure? What could you reroute or dual-source if needed?

/ **Commercial implications:** will your key accounts still buy if prices rise? Can you offer a faster

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alternative? Can your sales team have that conversation with confidence?

Critically, the CEO's role is to elevate these questions beyond the finance team. Scenario planning isn't about spreadsheets: it's about culture. Does your team know how to react under pressure? Have you rehearsed who does what? Have you identified your no-regrets moves?

And remember: perfection is not the goal. Speed and clarity are. The process of planning (challenging assumptions, mapping out options, assigning owners) is what creates readiness. Without it, you'll be reacting late. With it, you'll be leading the conversation.



At a minimum, make sure your executive team can answer these

/ Which three product lines are most exposed to US tariffs?
/ How quickly can we adjust pricing or supply chain routes if needed?
/ Do we have tiered responses prepared (for example, absorb, share, reprice, defer)?

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02

Diversification

It’s not just about China and the US.

02

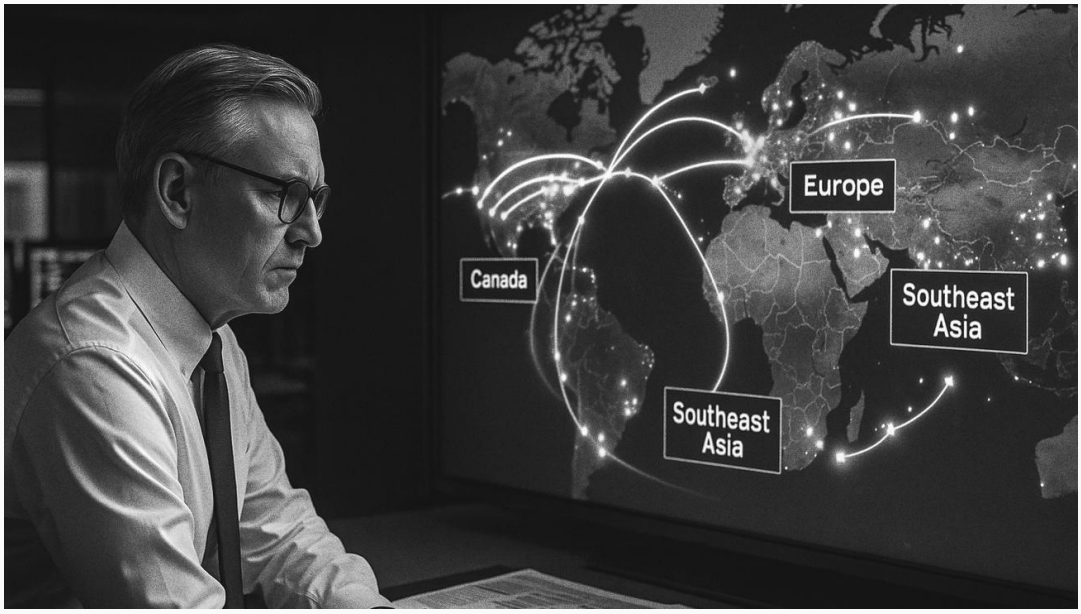
Diversification

It's not just about China and the US.

If you're overexposed to a single trade route or customer group, you're not efficient: you're vulnerable.

Mid-sized manufacturers often grow by focusing on a key product-market fit. But as trade disruptions accelerate, that same concentration becomes a risk multiplier.

It's not just tariffs. It's regulatory shifts, ESG enforcement, shipping volatility and customer consolidation. Diversification is no longer a hedge: it's a route to growth.



In 2025, CEOs must direct their leadership teams to diversify in three areas

/ **Customer and market exposure:** if more than 50% of your revenue comes from one country or sector, you're in the danger zone. Start by mapping revenue by region and segment. Ask: where are we underweight?

/ **Supplier geography and resilience:** 73% of manufacturers say they've had to change or regionalise at least one key supplier since 2022 (Forbes, 2025). Dual-source critical components. Build regional sourcing plans. Audit your Tier 2 exposure.

/ **Contractual flexibility:** review Incoterms, minimum volumes and penalty clauses. Can you pivot if a border closes? If not, renegotiate while things are calm.

Diversification isn't about planting flags in new markets. It's about

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building optionality into your revenue and cost base.

A UK industrial supplier we advised recently reduced their US concentration from 85% to 58% in 12 months, by activating distributor relationships in Canada, setting up a private label partnership in Malaysia and expanding their EU reach via a joint venture in Germany. Margins improved. Lead time risk dropped.

And the commercial team gained new leverage with key accounts.

Here's the mindset shift

/ Sales leaders must look beyond the usual suspects.
/ Procurement must be incentivised for resilience, not just price.
/ Operations must be ready for variable workflows, not just standardisation.



Ask your team

/ Where are we too dependent, by customer, region or part?
/ What would a 15% diversification shift look like?
/ Who in the business is accountable for reducing concentration risk?

Diversification isn't about chasing global scale: it's about creating strategic breathing room. And in a year where even allies are rethinking trade terms, that space could be what keeps your business moving while others stall.

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03

Supply chain visibility

From operational detail to boardroom insight.

03

Supply chain visibility

From operational detail to boardroom insight.

When supply chain visibility is low, leadership confidence collapses. And yet, too many mid-sized manufacturers are still working with fragmented spreadsheets, siloed systems and a hazy view of their extended supply base.

In 2025, supply chain visibility is not a logistics issue. It's a leadership issue. You cannot manage risk, improve margins or meet customer commitments if you don't know where your inputs come from, or what will happen if they're disrupted.



Here's the strategic shift

- Visibility isn't knowing where your trucks are. It's knowing the cost, risk and resilience of what's inside them.
- It's the difference between scrambling for alternatives and executing a pre-approved switch.
- It's what allows your board to move fast when every other firm is still asking questions.

According to the World Economic Forum, just 38% of manufacturing leaders say they have Tier 2 visibility across their critical supply chains (WEF, 2024). That means most are flying blind, and hoping conditions don't change.

What better looks like

- Map your top 10 SKUs' BoMs: trace origin, sourcing tier and delivery risk.
- Build a shared data source across operations, finance and procurement, so everyone works off the same truth.

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/ Create a “hot list” of exposed parts and assign owners to track availability, lead time and risk signals.

Better visibility isn’t just defensive: it’s a multiplier

/ It sharpens supplier negotiations.

/ It accelerates NPD cycles.

/ It underpins ESG compliance and carbon traceability.

If visibility was once a cost of doing business, it’s now a lever of performance. You don’t need an enterprise-wide overhaul. You just need to know where to look, what to track and who’s accountable.



As CEO, you should be asking

/ Which inputs are tariff-sensitive?

/ Do we know where our Tier 2 suppliers sit geographically?

/ What’s our average visibility score across the top 20% of revenue-contributing products?

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04

Agility over efficiency

How to build a flexible business.

04

Agility over efficiency

How to build a flexible business.

Lean operations helped manufacturers grow through decades of stability. But in a volatile world, efficiency without flexibility is fragility.

In 2025, agility is your competitive edge. And the CEO is the only person who can make it a strategic priority, not just an operational afterthought.

According to Capgemini (2024), manufacturers that describe themselves as “highly agile” are twice as likely to exceed their profitability targets during periods of disruption.



So what does agility look like for a mid-market firm?

- **Modular production lines** that can shift product mix without weeks of downtime.
- **Cross-trained teams** that can flex to different tasks and priorities.
- **Multi-sourced key components,** even if the second source carries slightly higher cost.
- **Live data feeds from MES or ERP systems** to inform decision-making in real time.

These are not technology choices: they are leadership ones.

Agility requires CEOs to

- Reframe flexibility as a risk reducer, not a cost centre.
- Shift incentives to reward responsiveness over strict adherence to plan.

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/ Give operations teams permission to pilot and pivot.

One UK-based manufacturer we worked with had a production set-up optimised for margin, but locked into one product. When tariffs shifted and input costs rose, they were stuck. Within 12 months, they reconfigured into three modular cells, reskilled their shift leads and rolled out a minimal MES stack. Their lead time dropped by 22%. Their team engagement scores rose. And they gained pricing leverage from being able to deliver faster than competitors.

You can't build agility overnight. But you can start by removing the friction. Because in this environment, the businesses that survive aren't always the ones that planned best. They're the ones that can act fastest, without waiting for permission.



Ask your team

/ Where do we have operational rigidity that could hurt us under pressure?

/ Are our KPIs encouraging responsiveness or blocking it?

/ What's our "time to pivot" on our top five product lines?

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05

Leadership in the fog

Why CEOs need to set the tone.

05

Leadership in the fog

Why CEOs need to set the tone.

When uncertainty dominates, people look to leadership, not for all the answers, but for direction.

In 2025, manufacturing CEOs are expected to steer through trade volatility, supply chain tension, workforce pressure and growing compliance complexity. And yet, in times of disruption, the most powerful signal you send isn't a strategy document: it's how you show up.

According to PwC's Global Manufacturing Survey (2024), 78% of employees say their trust in leadership directly influences their ability to perform under pressure. That's not about charisma. It's about consistency.



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The strongest CEOs do five things consistently in uncertainty

01

Act with 80% clarity

They move with speed, knowing the last 20% of information may never come.

02

Speak plainly

They communicate the plan, the risk and the rationale without jargon.

03

Ask better questions

They stay close to the edge of the business: the plant floor, the sales desk, the sourcing calls.

04

Focus the business

They remove distractions and double down on what matters.

05

Build muscle, not just mood

They invest in systems, skills and behaviours that make the next disruption easier to handle.

Leadership in the fog also means inviting others into the solution. That might mean:

/ Holding monthly “uncertainty reviews” with your CFO, operations and commercial leads.

/ Making scenario planning and supply chain visibility board-level metrics.

/ Setting the tone with town halls that blend realism with confidence.

Here’s what that might sound like

> *We know the landscape is shifting. Tariffs, trade deals and tensions will continue. But we’re not waiting for certainty: we’re building the ability to move. We’ll act early, act together and improve as we go.*

That tone (calm, clear and collective) does more than reassure. It unlocks action. Because teams take their cue from the top. And in a high-stakes environment, culture follows leadership.

As CEO, your job is not just to react. It’s to set rhythm, signal confidence and help your team navigate, even when the road ahead isn’t visible.

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From turbulence to transformation

Tariffs are just the latest signal. From Brexit to COVID, from chip shortages to shipping delays, trade disruption has become the rhythm of the manufacturing economy.

And mid-sized firms, without the buffers or bureaucracy of their multinational peers, are feeling it most.

This whitepaper has laid out five key moves that manufacturing CEOs can make to lead through this turbulence.



Five key moves

- **Scenario planning** to shift from reacting to rehearsing.
- **Diversification** to rebalance market and supply dependencies.
- **Supply chain visibility** to move from guessing to knowing.
- **Agility** to stay responsive when others stall.
- **Leadership tone** to align the business with pace and purpose.

Individually, each of these tactics is powerful. Together, they form a system, a way of running the business that is both strategic and resilient.

You don't need to transform overnight. You need to build the capability to respond faster, smarter and with more confidence. Because when the next shock hits, it won't be about who saw it coming. It will be about who was ready to act.

And the businesses that lead through disruption don't just survive

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it. They reshape the market while others stand still.

As CEO, the call is clear: lead early. Lead visibly. Lead forward.



Talk to us about leading through trade uncertainty

We work with manufacturing CEOs across the UK, Europe and North America to build resilience and agility under pressure.

Book at meetings.nickleeder.com
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Questions this paper answers

How should a manufacturing CEO prepare for new tariffs?

Make scenario planning a standing board item. Know which product lines are most exposed, how quickly you can adjust pricing or routes, and have tiered responses ready: absorb, share, reprice or defer.

Why does diversification matter for mid-sized manufacturers?

Concentration on one market, customer group or supply route turns disruption into a risk multiplier. Diversifying customers, supplier geography and contract terms builds optionality into revenue and cost.

What does supply chain visibility mean at board level?

Knowing the cost, risk and resilience of what is inside your trucks, not just where they are, including where Tier 2 suppliers sit and which inputs are tariff-sensitive.

Why prioritise agility over efficiency?

In a volatile world, efficiency without flexibility is fragility. Modular lines, cross-trained teams, multi-sourced components and live MES or ERP data let a business pivot when trade conditions change.

About the author



Nick Leeder is the founder of Nick Leeder & Co. An engineer by background, he has led, and been accountable for, transformation programmes in senior management roles at Dyson, SKF and Philips, across Europe, North America and Asia. He is certified in the Smart Industry Readiness Index (SIRI) and its CoSIRI framework, and is recognised by organisations including the World Economic Forum. Nick Leeder & Co is a multi-award-winning advisory and coaching business that helps manufacturing leaders turn enabling technology into measurable operational results.

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Complexity delivers nothing.

At Nick Leeder & Co, we exist to restore clarity, confidence and control for manufacturing leaders navigating digital transformation.

Our mission is to help industrial businesses unlock the real value of enabling technologies, not through hype, but through practical action that improves productivity, profitability and sustainability.

We have seen too many businesses fall into the pilot trap. Too many strategies built on buzzwords instead of business outcomes. We believe manufacturers deserve better. So we help leaders cut through the noise, uncover what really matters and build a transformation path they can trust, so they get results that stick.

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