

Thriving in Complex Times

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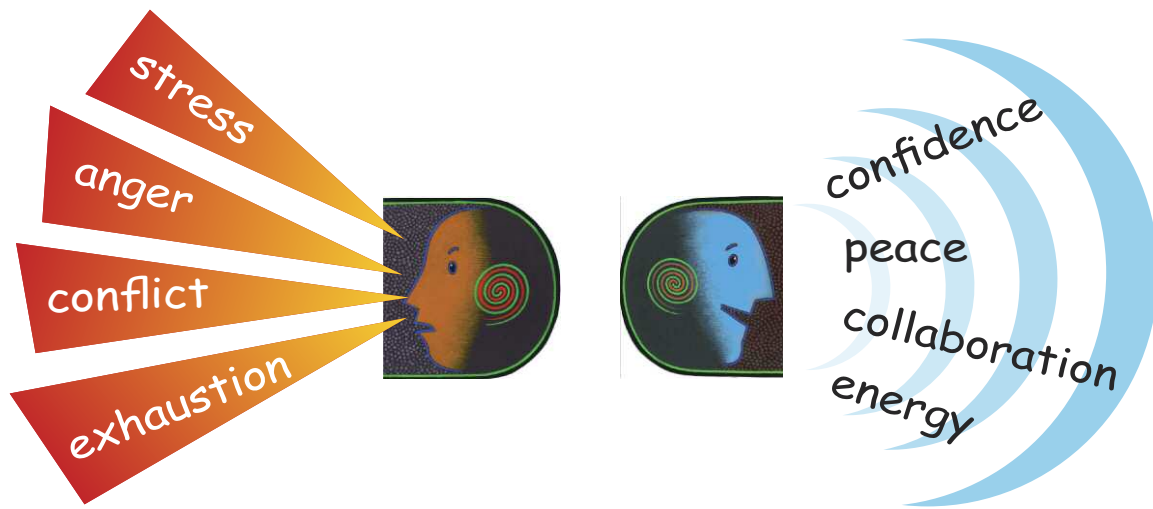
Management practices seem to change daily. These changes sometimes go unnoticed due to the much bigger changes that are occurring around us, called “VUCA times,” a term the military coined for these times of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.

To thrive in these challenging times requires our capacity as leaders to transform the world-changing VUCA elements into nearer-home VUCA factors like Vision, Understanding, Clarity, and Adaptability that will help us navigate more adeptly through powerful currents of global change in VUCA times.

CAPACITY SHRINKS WHEN WE FEEL STRESSED OR OVERWHELMED

When overwhelmed by stressful circumstances, the higher order “executive functions” of our brains literally shut down, shunting control of our critical decision making to more primitive and emotionally reactive brain centers that increase our tendency for panic and mental paralysis—responses that only exacerbate already desperate circumstances. When we are overwhelmed by stress, our level of functioning is as impaired as someone who is heavily intoxicated, and, indeed, is often compounded by relying on the consumption of alcohol and a host of other mind-numbing substances to blunt the emotional trauma. Is it any wonder that VUCA tendencies tend to become ever-more complex and overwhelming?

Sanjay Khanna, global macrotrends expert at Massey College at the University of Toronto, observes that global managers find it tremendously challenging to align short-term business and innovation realities with the dire societal implications of accelerating global climate change. “These leaders may shut down because accelerating change is by its very nature overwhelming,” he says. “That’s exactly why professional education should teach how to perceive clearly and function optimally amid massive change.” A poignant example of this was when a group of senior British Petroleum (BP) leaders from London first flew over the Alberta Tar Sands operation. A number of them became physically ill upon witnessing firsthand the devastating impact that the work and policies back at headquarters were having on the natural environment.



As advisors to hundreds of leaders around the globe, we have witnessed how deep the cognitive dissonance and soul-searching go when leaders find the courage to assess and reflect honestly on their capacity to manage their lives and lead in VUCA times.

THE NEUROPSYCHOLOGY OF EXTRAORDINARY LEADERSHIP

In an age of immediate gratification and downloadable apps, the notion of “developing capacity” is more than a mere idea. It is a concrete, measurable neurological potential waiting to be realized by anyone who is sufficiently motivated and dedicated to the disciplines necessary to realize it. The key is “neuroplasticity.”

Neuroplasticity is a process by which we train our minds and literally change our brains. As we say in the field, “what gets fired, gets wired” in the brain. What this means for the VUCA-savvy leader is that those qualities and states of mind that are cultivated—either through mindless habit or on purpose through intentional discipline—will, through repeated practice, measurably reshape and rewire our brains so that those tendencies and their associated capacities grow stronger and become more natural.

Mindfulness, the quality of intentional attentiveness so vital to executive presence, clear seeing, and deep thinking, is associated with creating changes in the nervous system that produce greater connectivity, integration, and optimal functioning in the brain. In as little as two weeks of disciplined mindfulness practice, there are measurable changes in the number of connections between neurons and the thickness of portions of the brain related to increased self-awareness, greater self-mastery, and higher mental processing.

THE VUCA ADVANTAGES OF THE NINE EXECUTIVE POWERS

Through the practice of mindfulness—intentionally being present and attending carefully, curiously, and nonjudgmentally to experiences as they arise and pass—mental and neural development are correlated with rewiring neural circuitry sufficiently to allow nine mental executive powers to emerge more fully in our lives.

With VUCA themes in mind, imagine the advantages that you would have if you were to develop these nine executive powers:

- ▶ Optimal self-regulation of your body
- ▶ Emotional balance
- ▶ Attuned communication

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- ▶ Empathy
- ▶ Courage to examine and work with fear
- ▶ Freedom from impulsiveness and reactivity
- ▶ Deeper insight
- ▶ Greater intuitive intelligence
- ▶ Moral intelligence

While virtually everyone has the potential for developing these mental and neural capacities that are so vital to being a VUCA-savvy leader, these potentials are only realized if we have the discipline to engage in the inner work to develop the requisite neural connectivity.

Mind-fitness disciplines are also measurably associated with documented improvements that any leader or organization would benefit from, including accelerated information processing; reduced vulnerability to accumulated stress and stress-related disease; increased neural connectivity across different parts of the brain; capacity for more complex analysis and thinking; greater empathy; enhanced discernment; improved memory; enhanced creativity; increased emotional and intuitive intelligence, greater wellness and happiness. Certainly all of these factors increase our resilience and capacity to live, work, and lead more effectively in VUCA situations.

INTEGRATION

The VUCA-savvy leader navigates toward what Dee Hock, founder and former CEO of VISA, described as an integrative “chaotic” state: a state with an optimal balance of freedom/chaos and constraint/order in mind, body, and behavior. Daniel Siegel, UCLA social neuroscientist, offers the acronym FACES as a mnemonic for this integrative state, explaining that we are most effective when we are Flexible, Adaptable, Coherent (i.e., having a view of circumstances that is congruent with reality), Energized, and Stable amid the ceaseless stream of complex VUCA circumstances.

When we are centered in a FACES state of being, we are in what Siegel calls “The River of Integration,” a highly functioning state free from the dysfunctional extremes of either rigidity or, at the other extreme, chaos and confusion.

THREE CORE STRATEGIES

VUCA-savvy leaders exude rare qualities to respond to the overwhelming chaos and complexity of VUCA circumstances in three ways:

First, with a clear, courageous, and realistic view of complex system dynamics at play, they strategically focus their efforts, gather their teams, and devote their valuable resources to mitigate dangers, and slow the progress of the devastation and disintegration in the world around them.

Second, VUCA-savvy leaders muster the support, resources, and collective intelligence within their organizations to open the portal to the emergence of new models. They develop the new

platforms, systems structures, solutions, and products that serve as lifeboats to leap over unsustainable systems that are no longer viable.

Third, VUCA-savvy leaders serve to raise the consciousness of those within the field of their influence to see the VUCA nature of these times. These leaders are outspoken visionaries, reformers, innovators, educators, and whistleblowers dedicated and courageous enough to step forward and focus the attention of society on the critical issues that must be attended to in VUCA times.

FRONTIERS OF VUCA-SAVVY LEADERSHIP

While VUCA trends will certainly grow over time, affecting billions of people in virtually every community and organization in the world, there is an awakening community of people and groups around the globe who are seeking to develop the conditions in which the adaptive qualities of VUCA will flourish.

At an organizational level, VUCA-savvy leaders are more aware, adaptive, courageous, confident, and empowered by VUCA forces at work and are better equipped to deal effectively with:

- ▶ The business of making sense of data streams and knowledge management
- ▶ Reading the world and anticipating emergent trends
- ▶ Managing critical processes and resources for optimal adaptability
- ▶ Increasing functional responsiveness and modeling
- ▶ Informing learning loops and process improvements at every level of influence
- ▶ Recruiting and developing VUCA-savvy senior leaders and management teams
- ▶ Creating healthy, thriving organizational cultures and inspiring people with the knowledge and skills necessary to flourish in VUCA times

At a personal level, VUCA-savvy leaders have greater capacity to:

- ▶ Demonstrate the skill, courage, and discipline necessary to be fully present, mindful, and attentive to the stream of information that flows to them and through them
- ▶ Be more discerning and realistic regarding attributing meaning to circumstances, and better able to recognize both opportunities and dangers that are present or likely to emerge
- ▶ Clearly perceive and anticipate a broader spectrum of interpretations, likely scenarios, and options for action
- ▶ Be better able to maintain their clarity and balance in the midst of highly complex, turbulent circumstances and thus be more resilient and adaptable in responding to emerging realities
- ▶ Inspire others to do all of the above through their personal integrity and example

No question, VUCA is manageable on an organizational and professional level. You can build your own capacity to cope with tumultuous change, but you can also build that of your team and company. *MW*

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