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The Paradox of Leadership Coaching in a VUCA World

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ABSTRACT

What does it feel like to be living right in the middle of a major paradox? Disorienting? Confusing? Unbalancing? One of the definitions of a Paradox is a situation, person, or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities. For many organizational leaders today dealing with paradox has become a recurrent feature of executive life. The contradictory features may arise in the form of a choice between apparently diametrically opposed alternatives. In fact, in the worst case, the best available options might all be equally undesirable. This uncertainty over paradox seems to be reflective of the many quandaries confronted by leaders in the current era. Paradox often takes the form of how to best deal with the outwardly apparent oppositional answers to challenging organizational issues. Among these paradoxical questions are: How can leaders not only survive in tumultuous times but also thrive well into the future? And, what can leadership coaches, who work with these perplexed leaders, do to help them better understand and handle all the ambiguity and confusion that surrounds them on a daily basis? This paper will address these questions as well as offering a perspective for understanding the complex leadership quandary that many leaders now find themselves in. Additionally, positive recommendations will be provided for dealing with this difficult and challenging dilemma. Beginning with a discussion of the new term VUCA, the paper will discuss its origins and what leaders and coaches need to know about it. Next, the work will look at the threats and opportunities VUCA poses. This will be followed by sections on how VUCA might affect the leader-coach relationship and special considerations for coaches. The paper will conclude with specific guidance for coaches and a wrap-up summary.

Keywords: Coaching, Leadership, Leadership Coaching, Paradox, VUCA

INTRODUCTION

Today a growing cadre of organizational leaders find themselves the unwitting beneficiaries of an ancient Chinese curse. They are in the midst of living the often-agonizing experience of being “damned to live in interesting times.” For these leaders the times are well beyond interesting, they are painful, confusing, and uncertain. The consequences of a wrong move may be particularly dire or even catastrophic. Well-tested predictions and guideposts based on past experience no longer seem to be reliable guides to the future. Some pundits have called this curious period of history “the Age of Chaos” [1] and trying to successfully lead in it as “leading on the edge of chaos” [2], [3].

Seeking to manage at the velocity of external change, when the rate of change is itself accelerating, offers a special challenge for the embattled leader. It requires moving from orderly

incremental progression to geometric- exponential thinking. Besides being dizzying to contemplate, managing fast-tracking change may be a recipe for further insecurity, frustration and stress. Leaders while operating in this difficult environment have been likened to pilots attempting to fly a new type of hypersonic aircraft while simultaneously rebuilding its engines in flight. Yesterday's recipes for success don't seem to work especially well in a world full of relentless and tsunami-like transformations.

While contemporary leaders have been preoccupied with other things, their worlds of predictable linear change have morphed into a sticky morass of shapeshifting, complexly linked, transformations. As a result of the myriad combinations of non-linear changes, the risks of betting on an unknowable future have become both more problematic and consequential. Or, as my grandmother might have succinctly phrased it, the world appears to be "going to hell in a handbasket." The handbasket metaphor may actually be particularly appropriate as it refers to the anxious and unsettled feelings of some intrepid nineteenth century American gold miners. To get to their work of finding the precious metal, these adventurous souls were precariously lowered by hand in a wooden basket, carrying picks and shovels, into deep, dark and questionably safe mineshafts.

What Exactly is VUCA

VUCA is an acronym that stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. Where Volatility is the quality of being subject to frequent, rapid and significant change. Uncertainty is related to events and outcomes that are unpredictable; where cause and effect are not well understood. Complexity is concerned with the multiplicity of issues and factors; some of which may be intricately interconnected. Ambiguity is related to a lack of clarity and difficulty understanding exactly what the situation involves.

Considering all its various elements together, VUCA can be described as massive, turbulent, interactive waves of change that disrupt and dislocate existing conditions in the economic, social, political, technological, and environmental spheres of life. A significant detrimental byproduct of VUCA is a condition of FUD or Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt. FUD is considered to be a combination of destructive mental states that together serve to negatively influence thinking and inappropriately manipulate behavior.

What Do Leaders Need To Know About VUCA

VUCA is a relatively recent descriptive term that is being used to characterize the present world-wide tumultuous political, economic, social and technological environment [4]. Thus far it has been principally used in an attempt to simplify and understand the very complex major change phenomena occurring primarily in the developed world. VUCA is predicated on a belief that the rate of change in key areas of human progress has transitioned from being linear-arithmetic to nonlinear-geometric in nature. The direct impact of VUCA can be felt in both the professional and personal lives of leaders at all levels.

Where Did VUCA Originate

The expression was first reported being used in United States Army War College documents in the late 1980's as a short hand descriptor to characterize the complex aspects of the Cold War world. The term originally evolved as a way to help explain the level of constant unpredictable change that had become the norm in many areas of business, the military and society. The VUCA

concept was further defined in a professional paper and presentation "Developing Strategic Leadership: The US Army War College" during a 1991 international conference [5]. The authors of the paper reported being significantly influenced by American academics Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in their 2007 book: *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* [6].

What Threats Does VUCA Pose

Major dangers continue to occur across the full spectrum of political, economic, technological, and environmental areas with increasing intensity and severity [7]. The following are a sampling of some of the current dangers. In the political sphere are: escalating regional wars such as in the Ukraine and across central Africa; military tensions between major world powers like the USA, Russia, and China over resources, territorial expansion and free rights-of-passage; and the enhanced possibility of a nuclear weapons exchange initiated by the rise of rogue, militant, nuclear-capable states such as North Korea and, possibly, Iran as well as the potential for their tactical use by Russia in the Ukraine. Additionally, India and Pakistan, both nuclear equipped, are often at odds with each other.

Economic arena threats include: the growing disparity between rich northern hemisphere nations vs poor southern hemisphere countries; restricted access to capital; and major fluctuations in the value of national currencies and international money flows. In the technological category: unconstrained growth of Artificial Intelligence with particular issues related to control, privacy, bias, inequality, safety and security; snowballing thefts of intellectual property; and cyber-attacks on governments and private institutions. In the environmental grouping are: worldwide climate change including rising sea and land temperatures, unprecedented levels of flooding, wild fires, draughts, and hurricanes; global pandemics including the associated health, social and economic effects; the rapid spread of viral contagions such as COVID 19; and major population shifts such as the unrestrained immigration movement from politically and economically troubled states toward wealthier more stable ones.

What Opportunities Does VUCA Present

Given the global scope of VUCA-related issues, the major ongoing crises of the current decade provide further impetus to mount an international cooperative effort to better understand the phenomena. This critical period of history may also be a good time to look for what author Nassim Nicolas Taleb calls Antifragility options [8]. Taleb described them as particular choices that may become more viable with, and actually benefit from, rampant disorder.

How Might VUCA Impact the Leader-Coach Relationship

The impetus of strong VUCA factors may impel the use of more individual coping behavior (operating outside of personal comfort zones for a limited amount of time) on the part of the leader and the coach. Coaches will need to become more aware of when VUCA pressures may require a more thoughtful prioritization of which coaching and leader activities should be held on to, let go of, or attempted as new actions.

VUCA resolution may also benefit from the employment of quicker, more user-friendly, decision-making tools such as the four step OODA loop developed by U.S. Air Force Colonel John Boyd (Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act) [9].

Additionally, VUCA experimentation may encourage the use of approaches that enable greater leader performance by facilitating movement into the flow zone (where strengths match challenges) [10]. VUCA difficulties also offer the chance to employ new ways to reframe old unresolved quandaries by altering the way information is presented [11]. Under the prod of VUCA, the coach can enable the leader to better identify and interpret the relevance of trends and patterns in the work situation.

Considerations For Leadership Coaches

Coaches may treat the destructive fallout from VUCA as something of a wakeup call from the future to reflect on and alter their current behavior. For some coaches it may require a new appreciation that the current rate of change has up-shifted thinking to become geometric and nonlinear in nature. One implication is that, in order to continue to be effective, this shift will necessitate a change in how coaches think about and work with their leader-client. This modification of coach behavior may require a more deliberate expansion of their situational awareness to encompass a wider variety of factors. New awareness may also stimulate a greater appreciation for the wider political, economic, social and technological factors that have an impact on coaching results. Thinking about the implications of VUCA may also serve as a stimulus to move the coaching relationship to a higher and deeper level.

Some leading experts already consider the concept of VUCA to be somewhat outdated. Recently, two more descriptive expressions have been formulated to fill the ensuing time gap, BANI and RUPT. BANI is the brain child of anthropologist Jamais Cascio. BANI is an acronym made up of the words Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear and Incomprehensible [12]. The creator of this new concept is Jamais Cascio, an American anthropologist, author and futurist. The acronym RUPT, developed by the staff of the Center for Creative Leadership [13], has been proposed as a newer alternative. Where the R is for Rapid as when the changes come fast from unanticipated directions and challenge our existing assumptions. The P is for Paradoxical when we believe complex challenges have only a single correct solution rather than as polarities to be managed. The T is for Tangled or a recognition that everything is interconnected in an intricate web.

SUMMARY

In attempting to describe the extremely puzzling behavior of the Soviet Union, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once commented in a radio address that the USSR was “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Churchill’s colorful phrase also seems to be a very apt metaphor for the VUCA phenomenon. The paper has explored the often-confounding world of VUCA, attempted to define it, looked at threats, and investigated the notion that there are workable means available to help deal with the VUCA phenomenon and mitigate its effects. A number of the means have already been put into practice by leaders and coaches acknowledged as VUCA masters [14].

Another important message is that fear, anxiety and doubt are a signal our conscious minds are being overloaded with too much change information. A significant re-learning, came from the work of Alfred Korzybski, the founder of the discipline of General Semantics. Korzybski proposed the idea that “the map is not the actual territory.” This refers to the very human tendency to confuse our mental models of reality with reality itself.

An additional salient takeaway was a reinforcement of a previous learning: that hope itself is not a strategy. However, being hopeful does seem to help reduce anxiety and enable us to better deal with the fear inherent in contemplating the unknown. Another important message was to seek the simplicity beyond all of the recognized complexity and, when you find it, recognize that it is at best only a partial answer. Also, noteworthy, was the idea that exotic acronyms, like VUCA, are verbal lodestones that invite multiple interpretations. Akin to a physical magnet, VUCA inherently contains both attractive and repelling forces.

Finally, contemporary leaders of all persuasions, with the assistance of Leadership Coaches, face the daunting challenge of leading at the edge of chaos [15], [16], while concurrently surviving in a VUCA-dominated world. Along with their other manifold responsibilities, leaders are also busy attempting to prepare themselves and their organizations for an unknowable future.

Therefore, it is not surprising that many leaders still find themselves precariously balancing on the knife-edge between yesterday, today and tomorrow. All this while attempting to make sense of the human and material impact of relentless immense-scale change waves at a point in history where almost everything seems to be turned upside down. Ultimately, the reality of VUCA is that it remains a paradox, one that is both a long-term challenge and an emergent opportunity for success for both leaders and their coaches [17].

Resources

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