

LEADERSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

As the world changes, organizations are asked to manage increasingly complex problems for which they generally do not have pre-established solutions. In addition to the external forces pushing them to adapt, organizations are under internal pressures as well. The focus on efficiency and quick results is proving insufficient to ensure sustainability, let alone survival in an environment that is more and more uncertain. Moreover, organizations' internal ways of proceeding and the assumptions underlying their operations are under the risk of becoming outdated. In this context, surviving in a VUCA world requires learning and adaptation and carries deep implications on how leadership is to be exercised and developed given current complexities.

MAIN IDEAS

A world with thorny challenges

Leadership nowadays is tested by a variety of complex issues that often fall outside of the current problem-solving know-how. From one side, critical challenges and crisis are more frequent and demand both agility and wisdom (balancing quick and decisive actions with slowing down and engaging in collaborative reflection before action). From the other, organisations find themselves stuck in engrained dilemmas that defy previous ways of responding. Solutions to these thorny issues are less straightforward, require perspectives from divergent parties and often call for a systemic adaptation rather than the application of a technical fix suggested by a figure of authority or an expert.

A helpful distinction in this regard has been introduced by Ronald Heifetz in his book "Leadership without easy answers" (1994), where he separated technical and adaptive challenges. Diagnosing this type of challenges and effectively leading adaptive change are explored later in the worksheet on Adaptive Leadership (see module 4).

A shift in the understanding of leadership

Leaders are becoming more aware of the need to address challenges through collaborative and interdependent work. Success in a VUCA world no longer hinges on one individual heroic performance or inappropriate expectations of authority but on the capacity to handle complexity and mobilise others in collective processes of inquiry and adaptation.

Implications on leadership development

Therefore, leadership requires capacity to be decisive and balancing risks and opportunities in the middle of confusion and chaos. Hence the focus on building competent, agile and prudent leaders guided by values and who can adapt to high-stress and highly volatile environments. When everything around is changing, only leaders of character and with a deep sense of purpose will be able to withstand the pressures.

Preparing leaders for the taxing responsibility ahead involves adapting the ways we develop their capacities and build their thinking complexity. Without being comprehensive, this includes:

- Developing leaders' abilities to handle change and tolerate ambiguity and contradictory findings (Agility). The current reality carries an invitation to accept uncertainty as a given and embrace it. The full picture that leaders may be seeking will never be perfect or clear, and that is fine. Leaders are asked to reconcile seemingly contradictory expectations: being global and local; leading perpetual change while maintaining order, focusing on tasks and figures while nurturing cohesiveness. They are called to break from the need to predict and control and learn to handle uncertainty rather than strive to eliminate it.
- Developing leaders' strategic skills but also their abilities to trust their instincts.
- Developing leaders' self-awareness. This includes developing awareness of their default reactions to uncertainty and crisis such as the tendency to be imprudent, arrogant, or overestimating one's ability to face the crisis, the tendency to be trapped/stuck, the tendency to be over emotional or shy away from the pressure (low confidence, avoidance),... Avoiding the temptation of making hasty decisions under uncertainty is key, and at the same time is as important as avoiding the trap of delaying all decision making because our awareness of the situation is not as clear as we are comfortable (the trap of the desire for perfect visibility).
- Building and connecting to a deep and wide sense of purpose (the [WHY](#)).
- Developing leaders' maturity and confidence in their own capacities and at the same time their abilities to partner with individuals at all levels.
- Developing their capacity to make complexity and living in disequilibrium easier for others. This includes realizing that when people are resisting change, they are mainly resisting the losses associated with it and growing the ability to mobilize people to face these losses.
- Developing their capacity for multiple-dimensions thinking (individually and collectively). Coaching them to intentionally seek different perspectives.
- Building system intelligence, developing their ability to integrate and connect insights, people, processes and tools to generate solutions. (Looking at the whole picture, taking a step back to see what's possible). This means developing the capacity to move from the [dancefloor to the balcony](#) and back (R. Heifetz)
- Developing creativity and learning from past events (especially from failure).
- Experimenting with a different type of questions. Jennifer Garvey Berger suggests that leaders in complex times are invited to embrace a new mindset and ask themselves a different set of questions such as:
 - How might this fail and how bad would that be?
 - What could we learn from this whether it is successful or not?
 - How might this shift the system in our desired direction, no matter what happens, exactly?

The articles in the additional resources document provide more insights on developing leadership in turbulent times. While understanding and knowing about these attitudes and skills is helpful, it is important to note that integrating and embodying them is not merely a rational exercise but involves a developmental and transformational journey towards more complex stages of maturity and meaning-making. (Fostering vertical learning not only horizontal learning limited to skills or knowledge development).

Remaining grounded in turbulent times is also often facilitated by a vibrant spiritual life (connecting to one's deepest sense of purpose, appreciating the benefits of inner freedom when it comes to uncertainty, accepting vulnerabilities as an opportunity to experience God's grace in our life and a place to reach out and connect with others who are vulnerable).

IGNATIAN NOTE

"Flexibility and adjustment to circumstances were thus inculcated from the very beginning. They were principles explicit in the text of the Exercises regarding the way in which individuals were to be guided in them. The Jesuits were certainly not the only group in the sixteenth century to advocate and practice flexibility in their undertakings. Indeed, flexibility was a quality commended by the humanistic tradition for persons in authority. There can be no doubt, however, that it was notably and strikingly explicit in the Jesuit ethos, even though sometimes in tension with countervailing tendencies. This is a feature of the charism that suggests the possibility of something genuine that is beyond the letter of the foundational documents." **John O'Malley, The Missions of the Society of Jesus**

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Understanding the implications of a VUCA world on leadership
2. Viewing change as a growing edge for leaders
3. Reflecting on how to build leadership capacity to handle increasing complexity

"The future of our organizations depends on successfully identifying and developing all leaders to higher [developmental levels] - to a place of greater authenticity so that they can respond effectively to the increasingly complex demands of our times."

K.M. Eigel & K.W. Kuhnert