

# Leading in a Disruptive VUCA World

*"There are two things we can say with certainty about the future: it will be different, and it will surprise. Now, more than ever, leaders have to navigate unfamiliar, challenging times, a quickening pace of change, increasing expectations, and a rising tide of rapidly-evolving conditions. This new and different environment (VUCA) is challenging leaders to find new ways to lead their organizations and achieve sustained success. And, because of these circumstances, there is a thirst for leadership, yet leaders face a whirlwind environment laden with remarkable opportunities and daunting challenges through which to lead their people and organizations."*

—Prof Sattar Bawany et al. (2016),

Co-author, "2016 Research on Trends in Executive Development: A Benchmark Report"



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**Abstract:** Effective leadership is the process of impacting and influencing people to achieve the desired results and prepare for the future. Leading in today's highly disruptive and increasingly VUCA-driven world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) is becoming much more challenging, hence effective leadership today is becoming increasingly important.

Today, many individuals and organizations across the globe are exploiting this change to disrupt every industry. Uber, Alibaba, Airbnb, Netflix, and Tesla are just a few famous examples of companies that have transformed our lifestyles including the way we travel, shop, and stay, and there are many more.

The purpose of this article is to share various best practices approaches and frameworks to better prepare our next generation of leaders so as to succeed in our increasingly VUCA business environment by leading and engaging their people to success.

**Keywords:** Ambiguous; Complex; Disruption; Leadership; Uncertain; VUCA; Volatile

## INTRODUCTION: LIVING IN TODAY'S AGE OF DIGITAL DISRUPTION

Disruption has and will continue to fundamentally change the way we live and work. Today's society, including businesses, government, and individuals, are responding to shifts that would have seemed unimaginable or unthinkable even a few years ago. Artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are reinventing the workforce and will continue to impact the workplace for many years to come. Drones and driverless cars are transforming supply chains and logistics resulting in enhancing the quality of life. The changing consumer behavior including preferences and expectations, particularly those from the *millennial* generation (or better known as Gen Y), as well as that of *digital natives*, also known as Gen Z (those born between 1995 and 2010), who have grown up in a completely digital world. They have altered the consumption patterns and demand for everything from transportation, travel, accommodation, education, and lifestyle pursuits.



The way we live and work is about to go through a profound change. For some countries, this has already been happening for quite some time now. The rapid advances in many technologies are expected to continue disrupting many of the industries in the various economies, and the impact will be felt across the globe. Yet from the

Research by Centre for Executive Education and many other organizations, we have found that the majority of businesses and their leaders aren't prepared for the coming age of disruption—and sadly we believe many of the unprepared won't survive in the highly disruptive, intensely volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world.

Technology has long been acknowledged as a disruptive force that has radically changed the nature of work, business, and society in general. In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution altered the world and how business was being managed profoundly and permanently. Then came electrification, the automobile, and mass production, just to name a few massive technological changes, that has reshaped the twentieth century. In today's twenty-first century, powerful digital technologies and the rise of Internet connectivity have created a knowledge-driven economy, which has revolutionized to a larger extent and made a great impact and profound changes in human history toward the way we work, live, and do business every day.

We have seen a vast range of ever-improving advanced technologies that are driving the disruptive innovation that will continue to change our world and define our world. Advanced technologies can simply be defined as emerging technologies that may enable new ways of doing business that result in more economical consumer trade-offs as well as improving employees' productivity and enhancing the organization's sustainability in the longer term. Disruptive innovation, a term coined by Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen, describes "a process by which a product or service takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom of a market and then relentlessly moves up market, eventually displacing established competitors" (Christensen Bower, 1995).

Given how extensively the phrase “disruptive innovation” has been invoked in the last 20 years, Christensen revisits that most famous of innovative ideas in the article, “What Is Disruptive Innovation?” published in the December 2015 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. He asserts that the concept of Disruptive Innovation that has proved to be a powerful way of thinking about innovation-driven growth: “Many leaders of small, entrepreneurial companies praise it as their guiding star; so do many executives at large, well-established organizations, including Intel, Southern New Hampshire University, and Salesforce.com” (Christensen, Raynor, and McDonald, 2015). Regrettably, Christensen believes that the disruption theory is in danger of becoming a victim of its own success. Despite broad dissemination, the theory’s core concepts have been widely misunderstood and its basic tenets frequently misapplied. Furthermore, essential refinements in the theory over the past 20 years appear to have been overshadowed by the popularity of the initial formulation.

The root causes of these transformative trends, which are driving this current wave of disruption, include that of technology, globalization, and demographic change. We need to understand how the interaction between these forces, which has defined the present and will continue to shape the future by their impact on businesses, economies, industries, societies, and individual lives.

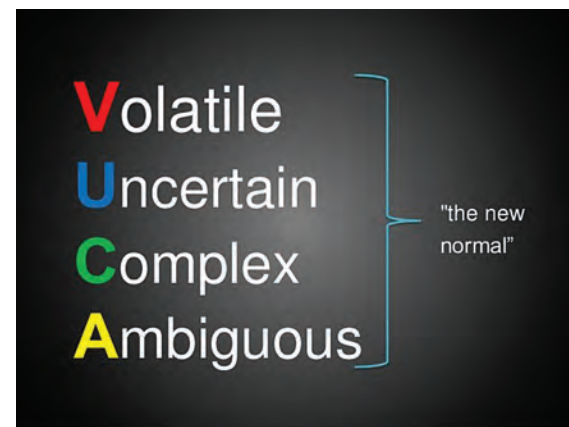
### **DEMYSTIFYING VUCA: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS**

Today, we have to acknowledge that no matter where we live, work, or manage our businesses, there are lots of uncertainties around us and these could be a result of political, economic, societal, and cultural forces. Across many industries, a rising tide of volatility, uncertainty, and business complexity is roiling markets and changing the nature of competition (Doheny, Nagali, and Weig, 2012).

VUCA is an acronym that emerged from the U.S. army (Whiteman, 1998). They described the environment as a VUCA world, meaning that it was Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. It describes the “fog of war”—the chaotic conditions that are encountered on a modern battlefield. Its relevance to leaders in business is clear, as these conditions are highly descriptive of the environment in which business is conducted every day.

It is a challenging and rapidly changing and evolving business environment where not all the facts or interrelationships can possibly be known or identified. Leaders will often have to operate or make decisions without having all the facts or fully understanding the forces that may be influencing a situation or a business problem. Hence, there is a need for leaders to develop and demonstrate relevant skills and competencies so as to operate in this *new normal* and embrace this ambiguity and lead their organization to success with the right strategy and vision despite the chaotic environment that they are operating in.

However, leadership as usual, including creating a vision, is not enough in a VUCA world. Leaders would need to understand the following implications of the characteristics of VUCA on their organization and its relevance to today’s workplace is clear, as these conditions are highly descriptive of the environment in which business is conducted every day:



### **Volatile**

Things change unpredictably, suddenly, extremely, especially for the worse. There is a phenomenal increase in four aspects of changes we face today—type, speed, volume, and scale. Challenges faced are unexpected and mostly of unknown duration. We can overcome these challenges by gaining knowledge and being well prepared with necessary information and resources.

### **Uncertain**

As a result of volatility, we are unable to predict future events. Important information is not known or not definite; doubtful, unclear about the present situation and future outcomes; not able to be relied upon. Today's business environment is constantly changing especially in this new age of technology. There is a need to keep up with the times and stay relevant. We, therefore, need to invest in information and this works best in conjunction with structural changes allowing organizations to reduce with certainty.

### **Complex**

Many different and connected parts: multiple key decision factors, the interaction between diverse agents, emergence, adaptation, coevolution, weak signals. Many situations consist of various interconnected parts and variables. Being well-informed of all these various parts can be extremely overwhelming and more often than not technical too. Organizations should develop specialists that are better able to deal with such complex issues. Building upon resources that are adequate to address complexity can go far in the success of an organization as well.

### **Ambiguous**

Open to more than one interpretation; the meaning of an event can be understood in different ways. Casual relationships are completely unclear as no precedent exist forcing you to face unknown factors. In order to tackle the issue of ambiguity, organizations should experiment and take

calculated risks. Generating hypothesis and testing them allows the business to be careful in new ventures ultimately allowing them to learn from these investments.

Leading in a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous not only provides a challenging environment for leaders to operate and for executive development programs to have an impact, it also provides a much-needed range of new competencies. The new reality is resulting in the realization that new and different capabilities are needed to succeed (Bawany, 2016).

## **THE IMPACT OF VUCA ON ORGANIZATIONAL AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS**

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The once identifiable boundaries of our marketplaces and industries have become permeable. Now they shift continuously, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, but always feeling slightly beyond our grasp. In this new business environment, leaders realize that a sustainable future is only possible if organizations can sense, adapt, and respond to change; if they can help their organizations evolve with an evolving world.

Leading in the future has seen a common theme emerge—managing challenges in a business environment that is disrupted and predominantly digital. Technological advancements in artificial intelligence, robotics, sharing platforms, and the Internet of Things are fundamentally altering business models and industries. These changes are often not only alien to businesses; they are taking place at an unprecedented speed. How do we equip and transform the next generation of leaders with the relevant skills and competencies to meet these challenges?

Today, a new set of digital business and working skills is needed. Companies should focus more heavily on career strategies, talent mobility, and organizational ecosystems and networks to facilitate both individual and organizational reinvention. The problem is not simply one of *reskilling* or planning new and better careers.



Instead, organizations must look at leadership, structures, diversity, technology, and the overall employee experience in new and exciting ways.

The reality remains that VUCA world is not going to disappear anytime soon. In fact, it is going to be more intensified in the years to come. The chaotic *new normal* in business is real. The global financial crisis of 2008 to 2009 has rendered many business models obsolete, as organizations from various industries throughout the world fell into turbulent environments. Businesses have been impacted at the same time by technological developments such as social media, which has exploded, as well as an aging workforce in some economies, simultaneous growth of population in other countries, and global disasters that disrupted lives, economies, and businesses.

This *new normal* VUCA environment is impacting organizations to the extent that their leaders' current set of skills and competencies may no longer be relevant to driving the organization to success. There is a need to continually reassess their readiness and develop the necessary set of competencies for them to lead in this volatile, unpredictable landscape. Leadership agility and adaptability along with cognitive readiness, which are crucial leadership skills, are now required if organizations are to succeed in this VUCA world. We will review this further in a later section.

It is evident that impact of the technological change will continue to be relentless in view of the constant shifting of the various business environmental forces. Leading in VUCA times becomes increasingly about creating moments of clarity and focus, while at the same time being proactive and keeping an eye on what is shifting and being prepared to respond to it. Reacting without having any vision, leaves people feeling confused and demotivated.

The Trends in Executive Development survey has been conducted by Executive Development Associates, Inc. (EDA) approximately every two years since the early

1980s, and 2016 was the first time that creating a compelling vision and engaging others around it had been the number one trend.

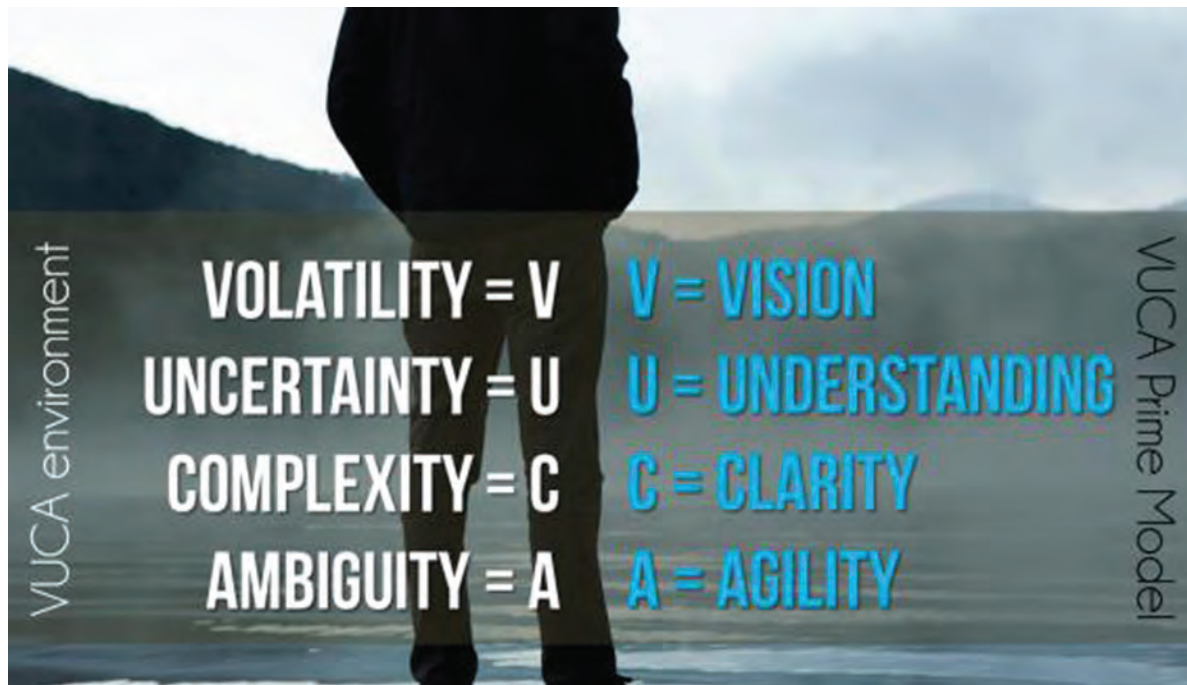
Research has shown that creating a vision is difficult for most leaders, and creating a compelling vision is profoundly difficult for almost all of them. (Hagemann and Bawany, 2016a).

In her latest book, *Leading with Vision: the Leader's Blueprint for Creating a Compelling Vision and Engaging the Workforce*, Bonnie Hagemann, CEO of EDA, has correctly identified the crucial business challenge today, that leaders are facing a ruthless, competitive climate, and to navigate a the successful route through these volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times requires a new, more thoughtful, and relevant approach. The rapid changes will most likely accelerate. With this comes the need to constantly adjust course and adapt to be agile and purposeful and to engage and develop the talents of everyone in the business. The quantitative and qualitative research indicates that there is a better and much more effective way to do this going forward—one that will ensure higher returns for organizations in talent, innovation, and competitiveness and that is connecting the heart of your people to the vision or mission of the organization and ensuring that they understand their role and feel a part of bringing it to reality (Hagemann, Vetter, and Maketa, 2017).

### **DEVELOPING THE VUCA PRIME LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES**

The VUCA model is helpful in identifying the internal and external conditions that affect organizations today. The VUCA Prime model (see Figure 1), developed by Robert Johansen, distinguished fellow at the Institute for the Future, flips the VUCA model and focuses on the characteristics and skills business leaders must develop to counter the effects of a VUCA environment. Johansen proposes that the best VUCA leaders have a vision, understanding, clarity, and agility (Johansen, 2011).

**Figure 1: The VUCA Prime Model**



In the VUCA Prime model, volatility can be countered with vision because vision is even more vital in turbulent times. Leaders with a clear vision of where they want their organizations to be can better weather volatile environmental changes such as economic downturns or new competition by making business decisions to counter the turbulence while keeping the organization's vision in mind.

Uncertainty can be countered with understanding, the ability of a leader to stop, look, and listen. To be effective in a VUCA environment, leaders must learn to look and listen beyond their functional areas to make sense of the volatility and to lead with vision.

Complexity can be countered with clarity, the process to try to make sense of the chaos. In a VUCA world, chaos comes swift and hard. Leaders, who can quickly and clearly tune into all of the minutiae associated with the chaos, can make better, more informed business decisions.

Finally, ambiguity can be countered with agility. Vision, understanding, clarity, and agility are not mutually exclusive in the

VUCA Prime. Rather, they are intertwined elements that help managers become stronger VUCA leaders.

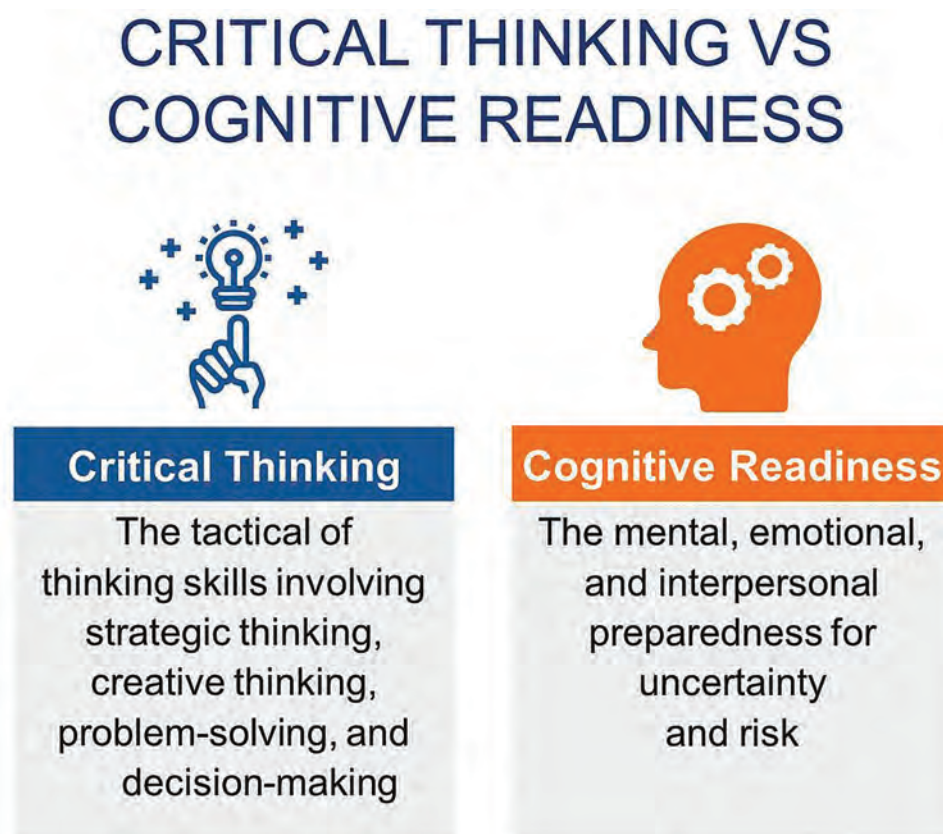
These skills and abilities are a far cry from the more function-specific skills and abilities leaders needed in the past to succeed. Business leaders must refocus their leadership skills to hone these more strategic, complex critical-thinking skills.

### **COGNITIVE READINESS—BEYOND CRITICAL THINKING COMPETENCIES**

The phrase “cognitive readiness” has its origin from the US military language, when it was cited as one of five critical research areas by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Science and Technology (Etter, 2002). According to John Morrison and J.D. Fletcher (2002), who offered one of its first definitions, cognitive readiness describes the mental preparation an individual must establish and sustain, in order to perform effectively in the complex and unpredictable environment of modern military operations.

These conditions require that all military personnel be able to think independently

**Figure 2: Cognitive Readiness vs. Critical Thinking**



and demonstrate mental, emotional, and interpersonal maturity even under the most stressful conditions. While these attributes have always been valued within the military community, new paradigms make cognitive readiness competencies a necessity (Becker and Schatz, 2010).

Cognitive Readiness is also relevant for the business world and is one of the crucial set of competencies to lead in the VUCA world. In this context, cognitive readiness could be viewed as the preparedness and agility to handle the situation at hand and still prevail. Chief among the new VUCA-related cognitive readiness competencies that leaders need to develop is a high level of mental, emotional, and interpersonal preparedness for uncertainty and risk (Bawany, 2016).

Critical Thinking, the more common and tactical of the thinking skills, involves strategic thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, and decision making (See Figure 2).

It has been a hot topic for the past six years in the EDA Research on Trends for Executive Development. In the 2016 Survey, respondents also identified the importance of developing cognitive readiness in order to be able to effectively think critically.

Organizations are prioritizing the development of cognitive readiness as the one of priority for leading in a VUCA business environment. This may reflect recognition of its importance for current and emerging leaders and a serious commitment to developing these mental capabilities, or it may simply reflect curiosity about the latest leadership development topic and a desire to avoid being left behind. Either way, two issues are present. First, organizations will need to think creatively about the processes they employ to accelerate the development of cognitive readiness in high-potential or next-generation leaders. Second, organizations may want to explain why, in practice,



cognitive readiness is important to their success and then define in much greater depth their expectations and perspective of the importance for their leaders to develop and demonstrate effectively these next-generation leadership competencies.

### ELEMENTS OF COGNITIVE READINESS COMPETENCIES

Cognitive readiness can be viewed as part of the advanced thinking skills that make leaders ready to confront whatever new and complex problems they might face. As stated earlier, cognitive readiness

is the mental preparation that leaders develop so that they, and their teams, are prepared to face the ongoing dynamic, ill-defined, and unpredictable challenges in the highly disruptive and VUCA-driven business environment.

EDA has identified the seven key cognitive readiness skills collectively known as Paragon 7, as depicted in Figure 3, which develop, enhance, or sustain a leader's ability to navigate successfully in this *new normal*.

The descriptors of each of these seven cognitive readiness competencies can be seen in Table 1.

**Figure 3: Paragon 7 Elements of Cognitive Readiness Competencies**

## COGNITIVE READINESS COMPETENCIES





**Table 1: Descriptors of Cognitive Readiness Competencies**

Metacognition	Attentional Control	Sensemaking
<p><b>Metacognition</b> is monitoring and managing your emotional and mental processes.</p> <p>Metacognition comes from the words “meta” meaning beyond and “cognition” meaning thinking. It describes the ability to control your mental and emotional processes and, in turn, manage behaviors and maximize performance. Metacognition involves self-awareness and the use of intentional strategies to self-regulate your cognition, emotions, and actions. Metacognitive individuals and organizations engage in reflective practice. They take time to plan before, during, and after situations.</p>	<p><b>Attentional control</b> (“mindfulness”) is the skill of actively managing your attention as a finite resource.</p> <p>Attentional control, or mindfulness, is the conscious control of your own attention. People or organizations with high levels of attentional control pick up on weak signals. They can direct and sustain their attention deliberately, without being diverted by distractions, and they can stay focused, even if that sustained attention becomes unpleasant. You can help develop your attentional control “muscles” by practicing attentional shifting and focusing exercises.</p>	<p><b>Sensemaking</b> is the ability to quickly connect the dots to gain understanding.</p> <p>Sensemaking is pattern-based reasoning; in other words, it’s the process of developing an understanding of an event or situation, particularly when it’s complex and you lack clear, complete, and orderly data. Good sense-makers “put the pieces together” quickly and overcome information gaps. They discern meaning from patterns and recognize how parts of a system fit into the bigger picture, how individual elements interact, and how short-term goals impact long-term strategies.</p>

Intuition	Problem Solving	Adaptability	Communication
<p><b>Intuition</b> comes from your “fast thinking” (elephant) cognitive system.</p> <p>Intuition is fast; our minds quickly generate intuitive judgments without active deliberation. We all use intuition—especially under VUCA conditions—but our intuition isn’t always reliable. It’s important to know when it can be trusted and how to best use it.</p>	<p><b>Problem solving</b> is an analytical approach to resolving difficult issues.</p> <p>Problem solving relies upon three factors: subject-matter knowledge, motivation, and problem-solving “meta-skill,” which is a mental list of problem-solving techniques and decision strategies typically associated with critical thinking and decision analysis tools.</p>	<p><b>Adaptability</b> is the ability and willingness to change with shifting conditions.</p> <p>Adaptability is the consistent willingness and ability to alter attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors to appropriately respond to actual or anticipated change in the environment. This includes flexibility, resilience, responsiveness, and agility.</p>	<p><b>Communication</b> is about conveying deeper intent and understanding.</p> <p>Communication is the conveyance of information <i>and sentiments</i>. Clear, honest, and frequent communication facilitates team performance. Beyond that, you can use linguistic tools to help increase saliency, clarity, relevance, and persuasive value.</p>

### “LEAP” FRAMEWORK FOR LEADING THROUGH THE FOG IN A VUCA WORLD

To lead successfully in the VUCA world, leaders need to LEAP through the fog and demonstrate the cognitive readiness competencies as explained in the earlier section and at the same time possesses the traits depicted in Figure 4.

**Liberal:** Open to new behavior or opinions and willing to adapt or discard existing values if and when necessary to adapt to the new world.

**Exuberant:** Filled with lively energy with a sense of passion and optimism (while grounded to reality) in engaging the team and other stakeholders.

**Figure 4: The LEAP Framework of Leading in a VUCA World**



**Agility:** Proficiently change and evolve the learning organization with next-gen leadership competencies including cognitive readiness, critical thinking, and emotional and social intelligence among others.

**Partnership:** Build a trust-based partnership with teams (by removing *silos*) as well as externally with other stakeholders including customers and suppliers.

### **SUSTAINING ORGANIZATIONAL RESULTS IN A VUCA WORLD**

Leading in a world that is highly disruptive as well as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) not only provides a challenging environment for leaders to operate and for executive development programs to have an impact, it also provides a much-needed range of new competencies. The new reality is resulting in the realization that new and different capabilities are needed to succeed (Bawany, 2016).

It is evident that conventional leadership development practices are no longer adequate. Organizations globally need to incorporate the next-generation leadership competencies in order to address the development needs of their rising leaders. This expanded group of upcoming leaders need to have a broader skill set, one that equips them to think and act globally in a VUCA business environment. They must do so while embracing cross-cultural diversity and cultivating collaborative relationships within and outside their walls. These are the hallmarks of the mindset needed to develop effective global leaders.

Today, research has shown the importance of various leadership competencies including cognitive readiness, emotional and social intelligence, managerial coaching and leading team for performance, effective negotiation and conflict management, and cross-cultural communication

and diversity management in driving results and achieving organizational success for a high-performance organization in the VUCA world (Bawany, 2016).

The business environment is continually changing, and a leader must respond in kind in the effort toward the development to be a high-performance organization (HPO) (see Figure 5).

The fundamentals remain that organizations need to continuously deliver service value and build good customer relationships in order to generate sustainable results through their satisfied and loyal customers. Employees being at the forefront of the service delivery chain hold the key to building this satisfied and loyal customer base (see Figure 6).

Employees who are engaged and motivated are instrumental in delivering the service experience for the client that will result in customer engagement. The level of employee engagement is dependent on the

*organizational climate* (sometimes known as corporate climate), which here simply refers to “how employees feel about working in the organization.” Organizational climate is the process of quantifying the *culture* of an organization. It is a set of properties of the work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by the employees, that is assumed to be a major force in influencing employee behavior and engagement (Bawany, 2014).

We know that leaders create, transform, and manage organizational cultures. The leader’s values, beliefs, and leadership styles will impact the organization’s climate. In a VUCA-driven workplace, “Level 5” leaders (Collins, 2001) are required who possess ontological humility and emotional mastery. They also need to possess essential integrity in discharging their day-to-day role and responsibilities toward engaging the employees.

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins examines how a good company becomes

**Figure 5: The High-performance Organization (HPO) Framework**





**Figure 6: The Results-based Leadership (RBL) Framework**



an exceptional company. The book introduces a new term to the leadership lexicon—Level 5 leadership. Level 5 refers to the highest level in a hierarchy of executive capabilities. Leaders at the other four levels may be successful but are unable to elevate companies from mediocrity to sustained excellence.

Level 5 leadership challenges the assumption that transforming companies from good to great requires larger-than-life leaders. The leaders that came out on top in Collins' five-year study were relatively unknown outside their industries. The findings appear to signal a shift of emphasis away from the hero to the antihero (Collins, 2001).

According to Collins, humility is a key ingredient of Level 5 leadership. His simple formula is Humility + Will = Level 5. "Level 5 leaders are a study in duality,"

notes Collins, "modest and willful, shy and fearless."

Like parenthood, leadership will never be an exact science. But neither should it be a complete mystery to those who practice it. In recent years, research has helped parents understand the genetic, psychological, and behavioral components that affect their "job performance." With the latest published research, leaders, too, can get a clearer picture of what it takes to lead effectively. And perhaps as important, they can see how they can make that happen. The business environment is continually changing, and a leader must respond in kind (Bawany, 2015).

Managers often fail to appreciate how profoundly the organizational climate can influence financial results. It can account for nearly a third of financial performance. Organizational climate, in turn, is influenced



by leadership style—by the way, that managers motivate direct reports, gather and use information, make decisions, manage change initiatives, and handle crises.

## CONCLUSION

In the challenging situation of a VUCA world, leaders need to develop and sharpen their cognitive readiness, the mindset and skill set needed to thrive in a complex and unpredictable environment. Cognitive Readiness enables leaders to recognize patterns in chaotic situations, adapt or change problem solutions based on the patterns identified, and then effectively take action to implement the new solutions.

The skills of creating a vision and engaging others around it can be powerfully developed through mentoring and managerial coaching. The *hands-on* approach of mentoring can enable leaders to observe what someone who has mastered these important skills does, and to solicit advice, input, and coaching on how to transfer what they have observed in their own work. It may be more challenging to find a mentor who has also highly developed cognitive readiness skills, so being mindful of the mentor's skill set will be a key to success.

Executive coaching also has significant potential for developing leaders' capabilities around creating a vision, engaging others around it, and the cognitive readiness skills needed for a VUCA environment. This type of coaching would need to be focused on all of the skills in an integrated manner, and the senior executives, human resources business partners, mentors, coaches, and other stakeholders involved in the leadership development program may agree on specific goals and followed by regular meetings to discuss progress.

Hour to hour, day to day, week to week, leaders must demonstrate the next-generation leadership competencies and skills necessary to lead in a VUCA world including using the right leadership styles at just the right situation and in the right measure. The payoff is in the results.

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