



LEADING THROUGH COMPLEXITY BY USING A COACHING APPROACH

VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) is often used to describe today's business environment.

These constant conditions can lead to our feeling helpless and insecure. One of my coaching clients recently voiced what many of us are feeling: "it doesn't seem to matter what my team and I do; things are moving so quickly I always feel we're fighting fires and never focusing on the long-term. I want to, I just never have time".

Surprisingly, "VUCA" was first coined in 1987 – things have been VUCA for a while. It accurately describes our situation, but it doesn't capture any solutions. It was never intended to, of course. So, in 2016 The OCM wrote an article suggesting how leaders can move forward and turn uncertainty into a competitive advantage. This is an updated version of that article.

VISIONARY, UNCONSTRAINED, CONSIDERATE, AUTHORITATIVE

Since the first version of this article in 2016, several factors have changed the way in which we work, potentially forever. Organisations and individuals are grappling with change related to hybrid working, technological advancements and the implications of climate change. There is political conflict and instability, rising inflation, global supply challenges and competition for talent. It is no wonder that we are hearing reports of higher rates of fatigue and burnout amongst employees at a senior executive level as well as more broadly within organisations.

A business consequence of this is that many leaders are behaving in a more risk-averse way as they try to take control of an increasingly uncertain and volatile landscape. This leads to a high-demand and low-control environment – a recipe for stress and burnout for staff. As a result, we are witnessing a change in how expectations are set within organisations, between employers and employees. The challenges and the stakes for leaders are particularly high.





AGILE LEADERSHIP

Established ways of leading are no longer enough in today's climate. The long-established idea of a fixed "job" is in flux, and the nature of work is becoming more complex. Agile leadership, which holds flexibility, values, and clarity at its core, is essential when navigating a VUCA world. We need to retain the ability to execute effectively – AND also be in 'experimental' mode from time to time.

Understanding that different situations require different ways to navigate them is critical to turning volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity into a competitive advantage. So I'd like to propose a different acronym – focused on the solution, not the problem:

"VISIONARY, UNCONSTRAINED, CONSIDERATE, AUTHORITATIVE"

This isn't intended to be a "catch-all" description of what it takes to be a great leader. It's meant to be a timely reminder of what a leader can do to make the most of the opportunities that a VUCA world brings - and minimise the risks.

VISIONARY

It's easy to fall into the trap of only focusing on the short-term in uncertain times. To maintain Vision, VUCA leaders constantly put forward a clear, compelling purpose and direction for the team and the wider organisation. What are we aiming to achieve? What impact are we looking to have? Why is this exciting? What's in it for us? And they adapt the way they communicate the Vision to different people based on insight into their audience's needs and concerns. As a client of mine used to say, "Tell a story. Tell it well. Tell it often". The team needs to feel that the vision is the right one – it needs to be "sold" as well as "told".



UNCONSTRAINED

To thrive in a VUCA world, it's important to be flexible, adaptable and open to new ways of doing things. VUCA Leaders aren't constrained by their organisation's current processes, structures and norms. They are prepared to try new approaches, take calculated risks and dedicate resources to finding new ways of tackling things. Organisations and leaders who capitalise on the opportunities which change brings are constantly looking for innovation within their organisation and from outside. They often bring disparate ideas together in ways that haven't been done before. True innovation is about creativity AND execution, so it's not just about finding new ideas – it's about rigorous analysis, planning and practical application. VUCA leaders 'fail fast'; they and their teams monitor progress rigorously and make contingency plans, expecting the best but preparing for the worst. (And VUCA leaders aren't only found in the 'hierarchy', filling designated leadership roles. They can be anywhere. Self-organising teams can be a more resilient and effective unit of work than traditional leader-led structures.)





CONSIDERATE

Operating in a VUCA world can be scary - lack of certainty and being asked to change makes most of us anxious at some level. And stress levels may already be high from the pressures the team are under just trying to do the day job. VUCA Leaders take time to get to know people and their values, needs and concerns – reaching out to the different constituencies within the wider organisation. They hear and understand with openness, respect and concern. They ask for change with sensitivity and insight into their teams' world, their values and the pressures they are under.

AUTHORITATIVE

This isn't about 'my way or the highway' (that's more authoritarian than authoritative). VUCA Leaders demonstrate confidence in their skills, versatility and capability - and confidence in the potential of their organisation to thrive in a VUCA world. They also know their own personal limitations. They are open about these limitations, their development and where other team members can do a better job. They know that part of being considerate is to be clear about the changes needed and to make tough decisions kindly if people aren't able to adapt. They are open-minded but committed, listening to alternative ways of solving the problem but ruthless about finding a way to meet the challenges.



At The OCM, we work with many leaders who have all the resources, skills and potential to lead in complex and uncertain times. But often, leaders lack the knowledge or the time to develop and practise new ways of working and being. They know what they ought to be doing but can't seem to do it, focusing instead on solving short-term 'crises'. Great coaching and mentoring supports leaders to develop their VUCA behaviours quickly and for the long term so that these become habits of a lifetime. Call us to find out more about how the OCM can help your leaders and your business.

For more on this, and to organise a time to talk about how coaching can support your leaders, please contact Graham Clark, graham.clark@theoem.co.uk or 01865 338989.