

Dealing with Change in a VUCA World

Do you have the key traits of a VUCA-proof leader?

By Zeger van der Wal

Today's nonprofit leader operates in a VUCA world, characterized by *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity*, as the acronym goes. The VUCA world offers exciting opportunities for those who embody five key characteristics. Here's how to become such a leader:

1. Be smart, savvy, and astute.

Realize that you won't thrive because of seniority, and you can't simply command respect. You'll gain respect only by being smart – at least as smart as your various counterparts, savvy – in leveraging opportunities and technologies, and astute – in securing support and funding.

Rather than using either hard power or soft power skills, you need to use “smart power” as former Harvard Dean Joseph Nye argues, combining IQ, EQ, and CQ. (EQ, or emotional intelligence, involves monitoring your own and others' emotions and using that information to guide your actions. CQ, or contextual intelligence, involves understanding the culture in which you're operating and using that information to solve real-world problems. Your EQ and CQ predict success more than your IQ, or intelligence quotient. While IQ is more or less established at birth, you can develop your EQ and CQ through training.)

2. Be entrepreneurial while maintaining a strong public-service ethos.

You have to be entrepreneurial, to some extent even commercial, in seeking out opportunities and starting ventures across sectors.

You need to walk a fine line: You can't become a full-blooded entrepreneur chasing a limited group of profitable or “easy” clients. Instead, you must target certain stakeholders – early adopters – in the early stages of new projects without losing sight of accessibility for all segments of society at a later stage.

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You must be competent in differentiating between groups of stakeholders and learning the needs of each group. Only then can you market to them effectively and achieve their objectives in the best way possible. At the same time, being a nonprofit leader requires you to focus on accessibility of services and procedural fairness beyond what private sector leaders need to do.

3. Be collaborative and connected yet authoritative in content and style.

Understand that you won't get anything done by being hierarchical, silo-ed, protectionist, or monopolistic. You have to invite others to participate in problem solving, welcome their input, and build dynamic teams.

You can fulfill your obligations only if you're granted *informal* authority by your various partners. You have to earn that authority through excellent performance, energizing leadership, and a sufficient display of expertise and knowledge.

4. Be an active anticipator of what matters now as well as in the future.

You must manage communications in an era of never-ending news cycles while building multiple long-term scenarios and analytical models to anticipate VUCA events.

You need to show key stakeholders how investing in long-term planning will also help them do better in the “now.”

You must conduct foresight exercises in a way that's accessible, meaningful, and inclusive, and tap into the opportunities that technology and crowdsourcing provide. Key here is to “sell” foresight and scenario exercises by demonstrating how they can help in the short as well as the long term.

5. Be a “generalist specialist” who never stops learning.

You need both generic and specialist skills. You must go in-depth when necessary, mastering skills such as developing social-media platforms and campaigns, designing apps for service delivery that improve user experience,

and negotiating complex partnerships with a range of stakeholders.

You must be able to switch rapidly and frequently between roles, sectors, projects, networks, and issues.

You need a mindset attuned to lifelong learning. This learning can take place through frequent executive courses (managerial and technical) and cross-sectoral job rotation. Your initial training will only partly determine where you'll end up and how your career will unfold. You can start out as a specialist while acquiring management and leadership skills through executive training during your career, or you can get a generalist degree that prepares you for a wide range of roles and then acquire technical skills through on-the-job modules. Whichever path you take, you must continue to educate yourself in a wide range of areas – not only those related to your field but also unrelated areas in order to obtain a diversity of perspectives. 

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Training for Tomorrow

Be sure your training methods keep pace with the evolving world. Here are some important keys to put in place:

Make learning more experiential and experimental. Provide rotational opportunities, including study trips, participation in peer networks, and long-term experiential training programs. Such experiences widen people's views, challenge their assumptions, and provide exposure to potential collaborators.

Assess people's skills – both generic and specific – frequently. Focus training on the results of these assessments.

Offer secondments – temporary transfers to other jobs within your organization – to employees at all levels. Also give staff and board members the chance to exchange jobs and tasks on a short-term basis with people from other organizations, sectors, and networks. Perhaps nothing spurs innovation so much as the changes in perspective these secondments and exchanges offer.

Make full use of mentoring. Also create reverse mentoring programs, in which newer employees mentor older ones. Both types of mentoring are invaluable for identifying skill gaps and training needs.

Benefit from high-quality feedback and appraisal systems. These systems should combine qualitative and quantitative assessment. They should also include individual and collective performance indicators.

When People Resist Change: The Keys to Acceptance

The VUCA environment is awash in change. To implement change smoothly, you need to know the magic formula for getting people to accept it.

Resistance to change is natural. There's no way to keep people from pushing back against you when you suggest making a change. But there are ways to diffuse that reluctance. Here are the three keys to remember:

1. Give them control. Be sure those who will be affected by the change are involved in the planning right from the beginning. Encourage their participation in the process. Ask for their input, and follow their suggestions as much as you can. Whenever possible, give them choices.

2. Give them time. Change isn't so hard if it comes slowly enough. Be sure people have plenty of time to prepare. Never spring a big change on anyone all at once. Take it one small step at a time. Provide training for whatever new skills or behaviors they'll need.

3. Give them information. Long before you implement a change, tell people what's coming. Reinforce this information often. Remember that the first time people hear about a change, they'll be too worried and anxious to take in everything you say. So repeat it again and again. Otherwise, they'll fill any perceived gaps with gossip and conjecture. And their anxiety will mushroom. Knowledge is power, so providing lots of information will strengthen their sense of control.

When people refuse to accept change at an organization, it's because one or more of the above essentials was missing. It's not the change itself that's upsetting but the speed of change, the lack of input, the inability to understand the change, or all three.

—adapted from “Eliminating Resistance to Change: The Magic Formula,” NonprofitWorld.org (Vol. 10, No. 5)

Focus on Leadership

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