

EXECUTIVE EDGE

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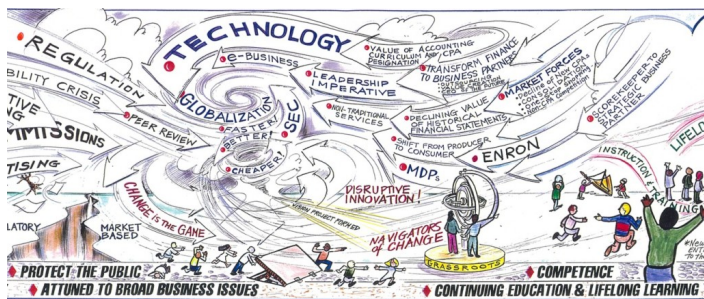


LeaderShift 2020 – Navigating the World of VUCA: How Consciousness Allows Leaders to Handle Complexity

By Joe Hunt

When’s the last time you finished something in advance of your deadline?

If you find the complexity and pace of business is accelerating, you’re not alone. While we have invented many time-saving tools to help us manage work in a 24/7 world, sometimes it can feel like we’re swimming as fast as we can just to keep pace. Getting ahead is another challenge.



There’s a deeper problem here than just getting things done. If you’re in any kind of management position, you may have noticed it’s not just the fast pace that’s accelerating. Things are getting more complex, more networked, more interdependent. Which means we have to think differently about consequences and the interplay of things. Leaders are more challenged by this complexity than ever before.

More complexity means cause and effect isn’t as simple as it used to be. Sorting out what truly matters from what we can live with, and what we know, from what we can’t yet know, is a major headache. Welcome to the World of VUCA - where we work in an escalating global environment steeped in:

- Volatility
- Uncertainty
- Complexity
- Ambiguity

The futurist Bob Johansen in his book, *Leaders Make the Future* describes a VUCA world. Robert J. Anderson and William A. Adams, authors of, *Mastering Leadership* and founders of *The Leadership Circle* agree with Johansen’s analysis, but also include a fifth variable: Market Disruption.



In 2010, IBM surveyed 1,500 global CEOs about their challenges and strategies for coping (Capitalizing on Complexity: Insights from the Global Chief Executive Officer Study). Here are the top two challenges identified by CEOs:

1. Escalating complexity.
2. Building the creative capacity in leadership to deal with it.

“Developing leaders who can navigate complexity is now a strategic priority —and, if done well, a competitive advantage. Beyond developing competency and capability, we need to develop leaders with courage and compassion, consciousness and character.” ~ Anderson & Adams, Mastering Leadership: An Integrated Framework for Breakthrough Performance and Extraordinary Business Results

These top two accurately represent the biggest challenges for all leaders. Working faster, longer, and harder isn’t going to help unless leaders are properly equipped with the capacity to handle complexity.

Pace and complexity are not likely to diminish. There’s no promise for a calmer future, even with innovative time-saving tools that promise to do more with less. How then, can we learn to handle complexity?

Leaders are already working long, hard and fast. And most of them are pretty smart to begin with. Yet some of the leaders I talk with feel like something more is needed. Some new formula, a new concept or managerial fad; something they can do to relieve the burden of stress and strain; to feel once again like they’re “in control;” on top of the incessant demands on their time, skills, and knowledge.



Some feel like they're in over their heads, while others are hoping the current challenges are just a passing phase. But pace and complexity do not let up. As one challenge passes, another pops up. The business environment is never settling down, it's only getting more creative, chaotic, and complex.

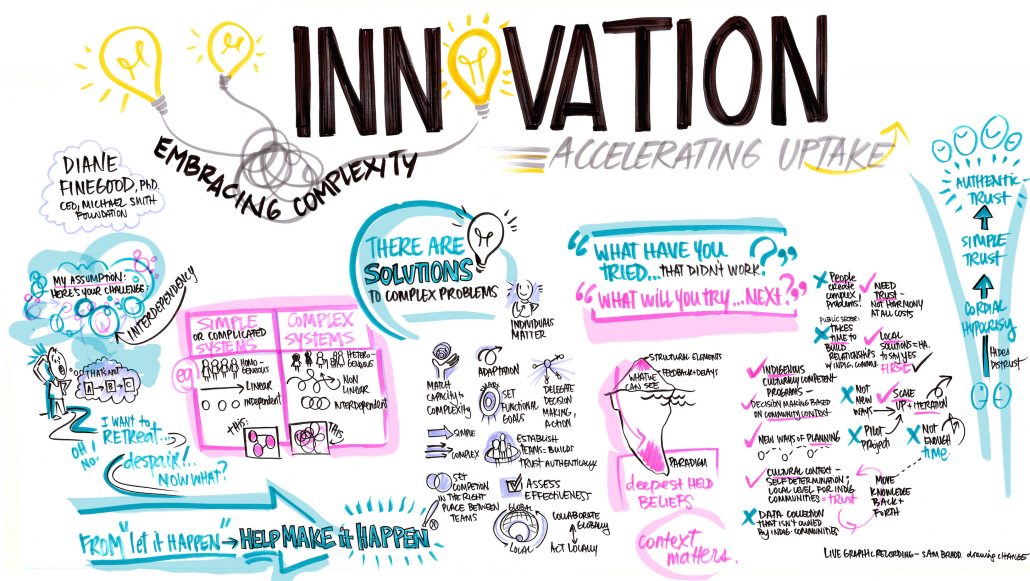
Consciousness Embraces Complexity

What if the ability of leaders to handle complexity was contingent upon one's level of consciousness? What does that even mean? What I am discovering through research and practice has inspired a new level of thinking related to leadership abilities and competencies. Everything continues to point towards one commonality: The Inner Game – a topic I've previously touched on in an earlier volume.

Psychologists have known for a long time that children progress through developmental stages, both physically and mentally. So do adults. We don't stop growing and maturing mentally throughout adulthood. However, many get stuck at certain levels. Adults progress through developmental levels not according to age, but according to their individual consciousness and maturity. A 20-year-old is capable of wisdom, just as a 70-year-old can display immaturity and egotism.

Similarly, leaders exist at different developmental levels, and can vary greatly in maturity and ability to handle challenges. Here's what "level of consciousness" means as applied to the developmental stage of leaders:

"Performance, individually and collectively, is always consistent with our level of consciousness. We cannot perform at a higher level of performance than is built into our operating system. Likewise, an organization cannot perform at a higher level of performance than the collective consciousness of its leadership." ~ Anderson and Adams



The level of maturity for leaders – both individually and collectively – must be advanced to handle the challenges facing organizations in today’s VUCA world. Consciousness of leaders must continue to evolve to higher levels to meet the complexity of 21st century business challenges.

As we begin to understand adult developmental stages as described by psychologists, we can correlate that knowledge into a better comprehension of the developmental stages of leaders. We can further apply this knowledge toward determining how leaders, at different stages of development, can positively impact business performance throughout varying levels of an organization.

Most leadership development programs are misguided. Instead of training the outer competencies like strategy, finance, and communication, perhaps more focus should be given to developing leaders’ inner games and operating systems. This type of “*leadershift*” would surely yield leaders whom possess the agility and creative capacity required to navigate the World of VUCA.

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