Every context requires different talents and skills, so leaders must stay deeply aware and learn to adjust themselves along the way.

Whether you are a leader of today or tomorrow – and no matter your field – thinking consciously about leadership is essential, as this will affect your choices, decisions, and performance.

In my research and teaching, I spend most of my time with very senior global C-suite executives taking courses like INSEAD’s Advanced Management Programme. Yet, when we begin a deep conversation about leadership, I like to show these highly experienced executives a simple picture of pathways in the forest.

All pathways are a little bit different. You may chance upon rock, stone, sand, grass or paving. Some pathways crisscross, some split off in multiple directions. Some pathways are easy, some are hard, and some are blocked. This metaphor of forest pathways represents one of the most fundamental insights about leadership: Leadership is a journey, not a destination.

We never actually arrive at the destination of being the very best leader that we can be. We should aspire to this, but this vision is ahead of us as our journey continues. This is not a solo journey. We make pathway decisions about the people we lead, our organisations and ourselves. There may be
decisions about a new career opportunity, a new
country to work in, a new organisation or a new
industry.

Every time we make these decisions, it sets us on a
new pathway. Our leadership and career journey
only has stopovers. On a pathway, we can also
suddenly face disruption, like technology, or an
industry-altering business model, which completely
changes the way ahead.

Well beyond VUCA

Understanding these ideas is even more important
in the 21st century, a time when the leadership
journey gets increasingly challenging. We are well
beyond the acronym VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty,
Complexity and Ambiguity). We now need to add
two Ds to the acronym to reflect the broader context
of the journey ahead. Everyone’s leadership journey
will now be in the “D-VUCAD” world. At the front,
overshadowing everything, is Disruption (whether
in the form of technology, social change, industry
reconfiguration or the like). We continue with
VUCA. Finally, we add the reality of Diversity
(including gender, cross-cultural and
intergenerational).

In the D-VUCAD world, your leadership journey will
include more frequent pathway changes, all of
which should be navigated consciously.

A key finding in my research on leadership
development, is that many leaders do not think
consciously and actively enough about the new
pathways they are embarking on when they make
leadership or career changes. They re-use the same
skills, capabilities and approaches, even when these
do not match the new situation.

Take the example of John Little (not his real name), a
very senior operating executive I worked with in a
programme. John was an exceptional leader in crisis
situations. He would frequently and successfully
head crisis project teams in his firm. In such
situations, he appropriately used an authoritative
leadership style. He was clear, precise and
energising, directing the people in his team in
delivering the solution.

Context really matters

John was eventually promoted to lead a business
unit responsible for operations in another country.
This was a steady-state business with growth
opportunities. He was entering a very different
pathway, but he didn't consciously think about it.
John told me that he felt pretty good about himself at
the time. He’d just gotten a big promotion based on
his track record. However, with no crisis in sight, he
started to create some.

He continued to use the same directive leadership
approach that had made him successful in the past.
Twelve months later, he received his performance
feedback. The feedback from his people was very
clear: “You are a micromanaging, authoritarian
dictator who never listens, consults or inspires
others.” His crisis style didn’t suit his new pathway.

John accepted the feedback and adjusted his
approach. He garnered a first and profound insight
about leadership effectiveness: In the leadership
journey, context really matters. He became more
consciously aware of himself, other people, the
context and the purpose of his leadership.

Leaders with “insightful awareness” understand
their strengths and talents, as well as what will be
their weaknesses in a given context. They
understand what will drive or block them at different
points of their leadership journey. They set
themselves development objectives and priorities
accordingly. This ensures that their “personal
leadership agenda” stays dynamic. It is consciously
re-assessed in light of the current and future
situations. They then commit to making focused and
dedicated changes, with reflection, practice,
support and feedback. They confront hard questions
such as: “Am I the right leader for this pathway?”
and “Why am I doing what I’m doing on this
pathway?”

Six As for insightfully aware leadership

Insightful leaders understand that the following six
As can help them navigate their leadership journey:

• **Awareness** – achieving profound awareness of self,
others, context and purpose as their leadership
grounding point, backed with a commitment to a
leadership development agenda or action plan.

• **Aspiration** – setting a long-term vision to be the
best leader they can be, and connecting this to their
short-term context and leadership development
agenda, reflection, coaching and feedback.

• **Authenticity** – developing and challenging
themselves using clear self-leadership with an
understanding of their personal attributes,
emotional and other intelligences, their role
modelling and engagement with others.

• **Acumen** – building personal and team capacity for
leadership judgement, agility and decision making
about business and people matters, as well as
leveraging team diversity and talents.

• **Approaches** – adopting conscious leadership
approaches that match organisational, team and
personal capabilities with the needs of the context
or situation.

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• **Altitudes** – “flying” at three distinct leadership altitudes: 50,000 feet (vision, strategic, external and organisational); 50 feet (execution, operational, teams and stakeholders); and 5 feet (self and very close personal relations with others). Thinking, acting and communicating seamlessly up and down, without getting trapped at any one altitude*.

In the D-VUCAD world, building on these As allows insightful leaders to harness the specific capabilities their teams, their organisations, their context and they themselves need.

These capabilities might include a combination of: **Competitiveness** (e.g. goal setting and technical skills); **Creativity** (e.g. innovation and curiosity); **Collaboration** (e.g. teaming and engagement); **Control** (e.g. planning and risk mitigation); **Cognitions** (utilising different kinds of thinking capacities and multiple perspectives); and effective **Communication** (intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and public).

Capabilities are not emphasised blindly. Insightfully aware leaders emphasise the capabilities required to achieve specific strategic or operational outcomes at the time or in the future. This is how they succeed on the pathway. For example, a leader in a critical operations role might emphasise control capabilities like implementation and risk management. Meanwhile, a leader developing innovative products or services might emphasise more creative capabilities such as brainstorming or ideation.

Our unconscious is filled with drivers and blockers. The key is to reflect on our leadership consciously, and in context. Every leader’s journey is a personal one – with opportunities to seize and problems to face. Assess your passions, your motivations, your talents and your skills. Match these to the pathways ahead and adjust where needed. Always be “insightfully aware” as you challenge yourself to be the best leader you can be in the journey stages that you are sharing with others.

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A TEDx talk by Professor Woodward including the topic of leadership altitudes and leadership as a journey is available [here](https://knowledge.insead.edu/blog/insead-blog/leadership-is-a-journey-not-a-destination-7581). It was delivered on 9 September 2017 at the TEDxYouth@AIS event held at the Australian International School in Singapore.

* For more information about the concept of leadership altitudes, see the INSEAD Knowledge Article, *The Three Altitudes of Leadership.*

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