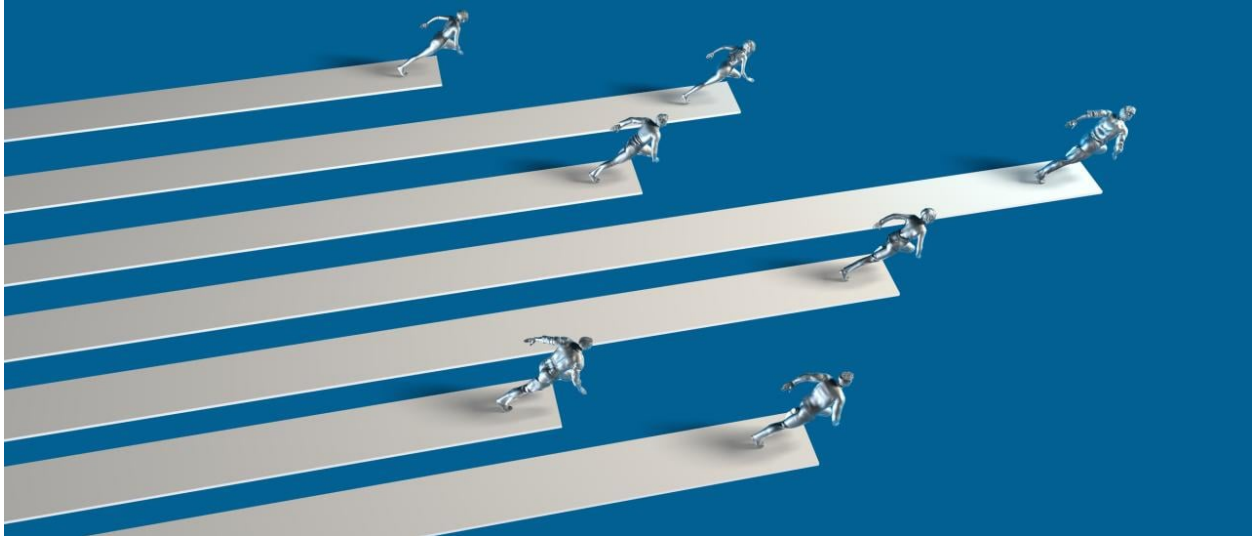

Three Dimensions of Leadership Agility



By Renita Kalhorn (INSEAD MBA '95J)

There is one certainty in a VUCA world: The solution that works today may not work tomorrow.

The concept of a VUCA world – one characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – used to be just that, an abstract concept.

With the events of 2020, however, VUCA has gone from abstraction to reality, and the very nature of leadership challenges now revolves around:

- An accelerated pace of change.
- The need for resilience and a strong organisational immune system.
- "Wicked" problems and competing demands (e.g. efficiency vs innovation, performance vs human needs).

To navigate the complexity of these challenges, leaders can't simply rely on their proven strengths and do more of what they're good at. They need to expand their range and develop a well-rounded repertoire of leadership skills and behaviours.

Because there is one certainty in a VUCA world: The solution that works today may not work tomorrow.

So, like the versatile tennis champion who can hit a powerful serve or finesse a dropshot, leaders will need to be able to toggle between seemingly contradictory competencies. This could mean switching between data-driven analysis and intuition for example, or driving execution and prioritising human connection.

Versatility alone isn't enough, however; leaders also need agility. Like a master chef who's trained in a diverse range of skills and techniques, they need to activate their repertoire based on what will produce the desired result.

Having a systematic approach to deploy what you need from your leadership toolkit *when* you need it equates to leadership agility.

Although there's no prescriptive formula – agility is about responding to unexpected information and change, after all – you can think of it in three key dimensions: leadership orientation, task function and pacing. Here's how they might play out.

Oscillating between extremes

As Chief Strategy Officer at BurnBright International, [Ozioma Egwuonwu](#) has range, moving with ease between the analytical thinking required for strategic decision making and the emotional intelligence required for human connection.

This is how she describes her approach in working with a consumer packaged goods multinational on its sustainability initiative:

“At the beginning of the innovation process, I'm seeking to understand the overarching context, synthesising an amalgam of stakeholder discussions, foundational research and existing content. Then, as I assess the landscape, I'm listening to the different narratives emerging at the cultural, organisation and customer level.

To do that, it's important to start from a space of complete openness and availability, to be fully available to whatever is arising, without judgment. Only once you're done gathering information, do you shift into a more rational thinking mode – to begin to interrogate the data and make

connections and choices based on your vision of possibility and desired level of impact."

There may be tension in shifting between such different modes of operation, Ozioma acknowledges. Leaders will want to default to their strengths and avoid exposing any weakness.

But in the same way that a tennis player can't rely solely on a powerful serve, a VUCA environment will be less forgiving of rigid adherence to one's strengths. Leaders need range so they can choose the best approach, not simply the one they're most comfortable with. The decisive CEO will have to learn how to "not know"; the CTO how to "human".

Switching context mindfully

The more volatile and uncertain the world, the more leaders need to be present and engaged so they can make thoughtful, intentional decisions. And yet, the dizzying pace of work combined with increasing complexity makes this more challenging than ever.

As co-founder of leadership app [bunch.ai](#), Anthony Reo often has 12-hour days of back-to-back meetings, shifting constantly between different contexts and modes of thinking. It can go from pitching investors and sparring with lawyers on product compliance to analysing user data, interviewing candidates and resolving team conflicts.

His worst days, he says, are when he gets caught up in reactive multitasking – tracking multiple urgent discussions on Slack while participating in a strategy brainstorm on Zoom, for example – which saps his emotional availability and leads to sub-par decision making.

Context-switching, Anthony notes, is different than trying to do more than one task at a time. It is being able to adapt to new situations and hold multiple streams of thought while gaining traction on one task at a time.

To minimise unnecessary task-switching, he takes a systems perspective, making sure he is crystal clear on high-leverage activities and designating specific days for focused thinking time, for example.

At the micro-level, I teach my clients to create more awareness and intentionality in each transition. This can be as literal as changing your physical environment, or simply saying out loud: "Now, I am going to..."

[answer this email, join this meeting].” Just as you say “I need to take this” when you get a phone call while talking to someone, the verbal cue creates intentionality and focus.

Slowing down to speed up

Brad Stevenson, CEO of Aligned Insight, was working with a global company to integrate diversity, equity and inclusion structures into its strategic planning. There was a real urgency to manifest change, to take action and transform.

Except that when he sat down to discuss the initiative with the head of HR, they asked, “Do you have any idea how much that's going to cost? If we implement even a small piece of this across our thousands of employees, that's millions of dollars.”

Cue sound of screeching brakes: What do you do when you recognise that a key functional area of your business is questioning the very premise and budgetary demands of a core organisational strategy?

Leaders who are attached to being decisive and action-oriented might simply steamroll past the question and say: “Well, this is what we're doing, so let's talk about the steps for implementation and deadlines and targets.”

But Brad had seen how much value and opportunity is squandered when leaders don't slow down. A clear example is the high-priced acquisitions that failed miserably because senior executives didn't address contentious challenges and get buy-in from those responsible for implementation.

So, he's learned the importance of taking time to connect and build cohesion before trying to push through an agenda, no matter how well meaning. The key, he says, is to recognise when you're having the “wrong” conversation, to hit pause, change gears and shift into a conversation of engagement.

The accelerated pace of a VUCA world will dramatically magnify the impact of leadership behaviours.

Put the human connection first

As with any leadership development, expanding your range requires more than intellectual understanding; it takes actual practice.

The good news: It doesn't have to take dramatic effort or 10,000 hours. What I've observed with clients is once they know exactly what to do differently, they can – with guided practice and coaching – significantly adapt their behaviours.

For example, if you find yourself gearing up for a conversation with an arsenal of rational arguments, shift your primary focus to curiosity so to understand what the other cares about. Connect first as humans. If you know you have a tendency to jump in and solve others' problems, lead them through several rounds of inquiry first ("What have you tried?" "What else did you try?") before stepping in with your suggestions.

Because in a VUCA world, it's the leaders who couple versatility with agility who will be able to develop more engaged employees, better performing teams and more resilient organisations that thrive in disruptive conditions. In short, they'll have the ultimate competitive advantage.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/three-dimensions-leadership-agility>

About the author(s)

Renita Kalhorn Renita Kalhorn (INSEAD MBA '95J) is a leadership development and executive coach.