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Leadership in a VUCA World

Change. We encounter this word everywhere we turn. It was even the major theme in this year's US presidential election. Over the years, businesses have emphasized its importance with phrases like "change agent", "managing change", "leading change", and so forth. In the past, change was definable and predictable, following a path of continuous change. But we are in a new world where we face unprecedented socio-economic and political challenges on a global scale, much of it unforeseen and unpredictable. How do you lead in a world of *discontinuous change*? What does that world look like?

Here is what COL H.R. McMaster had to say in describing the world in which the military must operate, "We need to reject the assertion that future war will differ fundamentally from recent and ongoing conflicts in order to protect future commanders from what could become a tendency toward risk aversion and over-control. Assuming information superiority might lead some commanders to conclude that making near-perfect decisions based on near-perfect intelligence is the essence of command. Commanders must be capable of **conceptual thought** and have the ability to **communicate a vision** of how the force will achieve its objectives." (*COL H.R. McMaster, Learning from Contemporary Conflicts to Prepare for Future War, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2008*)

These words aptly describe the environment in which business leaders at all levels must operate as well.

The VUCA World. VUCA stands for **volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity**. The common usage of the term surfaced in the late '90's from military vocabulary and has since been used in emerging research, strategic leadership and a variety of organizations from corporations to the government to education. The Wikipedia encyclopedia describes these conditions as follows:

- **Volatility.** The nature and dynamics of change, and the nature and speed of change forces and change catalysts.
- **Uncertainty.** The lack of predictability, the prospects for surprise, and the sense of awareness and understanding of issues and events.

- **Complexity.** The multiplex of forces, the confounding of issues and the chaos and that surround an organization.
- **Ambiguity.** The haziness of reality, the potential for misreads, and the mixed meanings of conditions; cause-and-effect confusion.

The challenge of leadership then is to be exceptionally effective in these conditions. In a VUCA world, leaders need to be at their best on a personal level. They must attain and sustain a level of self-control and self-regulation. They must train themselves to be self aware leaders who can keep their eyes on the prize, maintain a positive and optimistic outlook, stay focused amidst distractions, and remain cool, calm and collected under pressure. In critical situations, one action changes everything, and that action must come from the leader. In a VUCA world, the windows of opportunity open and close very quickly. Leaders need to prepare themselves ahead of time with the mental skills to seize those windows of opportunity.

Bob Johansen, a Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for the Future has some insights on leadership in this environment as well. He has connected the VUCA elements with several leader capabilities: volatility and vision, uncertainty and understanding, complexity and clarity, ambiguity and action. (*Bob Johansen, Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007, pp. 51-53*)

So what does this mean for leader self-development? **Volatility** calls for vision. Vision relies on a leaders learning to use their brain to "see the play before it happens". The ability to create a clear image of the desired end-state and then articulate that vision to others is critical for organizational alignment. **Uncertainty** calls for understanding. To understand others and then lead them requires understanding yourself first. Self-awareness is a key element of confidence and composure in tough situations. It also builds empathy, a key trait for today's new leaders. **Complexity** calls for clarity. Sensing a situation accurately calls for situational awareness through heightened attention and focused concentration. It calls for training the brain to sense clearly and simply. It requires the ability to pay attention to how you pay attention. **Ambiguity** calls for action. The ability to exercise adaptive thinking and mental agility are the core skills needed here. Leaders again, need to train the brain, to be prepared for alternative realities and unprecedented challenges.

Behind this simple acronym is a body of knowledge and experience that have addressed the critical mental and emotional skills needed for leaders in a VUCA world - awareness, readiness, adaptiveness, resilience, and perseverance. APEX teaches and trains these mental skills in a systematic and integrated way using the latest knowledge about the brain, tried and true practices in sport and the military, and biofeedback and neurofeedback technologies that enhance the acquisition and development of these skills, the skills needed to be at your best when it matters the most.

Have a Wonderful Holiday Season!

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