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Leadership Agility in Uncertain Times

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The idea of living in a VUCA (*volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity*) world is nothing new – but it's possible that ours is now VUCA on steroids, which makes the concept of leadership agility important and timely. The VUCA acronym has been used for many years to characterize the times we're in – and, especially, how leaders are uniquely challenged to operate successfully.

While leaders have always needed to grapple with what could disrupt their business – the threats are now unprecedented. COVID-19 leads the list, of course, followed closely by the current economic downturn and the deepening threat of climate change, to name just a few.

In my previous article, I spotlighted resilience as a key characteristic that leaders need to possess – now more than ever before. A companion characteristic is the *ability* to lead with agility during these uncertain times. The difference is important: resilience is the ability to recover quickly from adversity, whereas leadership agility is the ability to take swift and effective action in a dynamic, uncertain, and ambiguous environment.

What Makes an Agile Leader?

The commonplace definition of agility is the ability to move quickly and easily. Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs, authors of the groundbreaking book *Leadership Agility*, defined it as the ability to take effective action under complex, rapidly changing conditions. They go on to describe this as focusing on what's most important amidst the noise, "zooming out" to take a broader perspective, and then focusing back in to take decisive action.

A key point that Joiner and Josephs make is that leadership agility is not a single competency but an interconnected set of capabilities that can develop over time. The Forbes Coaches Council offers some good advice for operating in a more agile way – such as being clear on where you're going, involving your team to get their ideas, keeping current on new developments in your industry, and learning from other leaders that are different from you.

However, just as is true in sports, some people have more innate agility than others. Here are some of the characteristics we have seen in naturally agile leaders:

They are comfortable with ambiguity.

Agile leaders look for closure but aren't upset if they don't get it right away, can make decisions without having complete information, and are comfortable taking risks. By contrast, less-agile leaders have a high need for structure, boundaries, certainty, and being in control. They tend to focus on the task at hand rather than the goal, and often pursue their plans even with the knowledge that things won't go as expected.

They suspend judgment.

They are inclined to put opinions and assumptions aside, consider possibilities, listen to others, and let new information, views, and contradictory input change their views. At the opposite end are people who are quick to criticize and judge, particularly "expert" leaders who are particularly knowledgeable and experienced, and more often find faults than offer solutions.

They collaborate in conflict.

The Thomas-Kilmann assessment measures different styles for managing conflict, and agile leaders choose the collaborative style. Although they may have a preferred answer at the outset, they try to find a solution that satisfies their concerns as well as those of others. By contrast, less-agile leaders prefer being competitive, working to satisfy their own concerns at the expense of others – in other words, to win.

They trust their intuition.

In *Thriving on Chaos*, Tom Peters called intuition one of the most important leader assets, and the more challenging the times are, the more leaders should trust it. Agile leaders balance data and analysis with intuition shaped by knowledge and experience – they don't just go with their gut alone. For example, Jeff Bezos relies on tons of data but bases many of his most important decisions on intuition – from his heart.

They are decisive.

The ability to make good decisions quickly has always been a critical leadership trait, but agile leaders get just enough information to make an informed decision and then act swiftly. Less-agile leaders either make decisions prematurely or delay until almost all of the data are in. And of course, indecisiveness makes all the other characteristics moot.

The good news about leadership agility is that it can be developed over time and working with a coach is an excellent way to help practice and reinforce new habits. In that spirit, here are some things you can do on your own or work with a coach to become more agile as a leader:

Build trust in your intuition.

Practice making small decisions based on your gut that are low cost and easily reversed if they are wrong. Know that you will never have all the data you want when attempting something that's never been done before, so building confidence in your intuitive powers will help you decide the big stuff.

Listen more, talk less.

Control your urge to jump in and offer answers before you have heard the other person out. Seek others' input on ideas that are only half-baked rather than wait until they are fully formed and then seeking confirmation. When people come to you with problems, ask them what they think they should do first before offering your solutions.

Challenge your own assumptions.

We make assumptions when we think we know what the data mean, what information is true, how others understand what they have been told, whether others are on the same page as you, and what motivates others to do what they do.

Doubt all of these assumptions and question others to check them out, remembering to keep an open mind when doing so.

Be accessible.

Working solo and keeping to yourself can give you time for focus and reflect, but beware of signals that say you don't want to be interrupted. If today's realities prevent you from getting out and about, set up regular times for "office hours" so people can call or email you with questions, concerns, or thoughts they want to share.

Take time to step back.

Joiner suggests blocking bits of reflection time on your calendar to help with this. For example, arrive to your desk early and use this time to think more strategically about your day; take 5-10 minutes after key meetings to check in with your team about what went well and what could be changed; or use a journal to note your thoughts at the end of the day.

The challenges of today are forcing everyone to deal with increasing levels of ambiguity and uncertainty, and the only real choice you have as a leader is to embrace it, not retreat from it. In this new environment, where leadership agility is fast becoming a core requirement, all of us will need to step up in ways that are strange and somewhat uncomfortable. Therefore, don't plan on the plan too much; keep your eyes on the longer-term goal; and be prepared to make the necessary adjustments to get there.

About the author

George Klemp is a consultant with the Leadership Advisory Services division of [Spencer Stuart](#), a global executive search and leadership consulting firm. He specializes in talent assessment, development, and helping organizations identify and develop people for leadership roles at all levels. He was also a founding partner at [Cambria Consulting](#), where he worked with over 100 companies in the Fortune 500 as well as colleges, universities, and federal agencies to develop talent strategies to improve organizational performance. He can be contacted at gklemp@spencerstuart.com.

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