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In a VUCA world, leaders must know they don't have all the answers

Legal practices that have been effective and sufficient in the past risk becoming ineffective and inefficient as a result of COVID-19-related changes unless their leaders can let go of being the experts, writes Keegan Luiters.

You may be familiar with the acronym VUCA.

It stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. The term has been around for more than 30 years and was popularised in military circles in the early 2000s as it was increasingly apparent that warfare had changed in its nature and established assumptions were not as useful as they had previously been.

It's hard to deny that the world we live in is VUCA. Our world is changing at an unprecedented rate, with technological, societal and political forces influencing what leaders need to respond to daily. This has implications for all of us and the teams that we are a part of. The rate of change means that something that has been effective for years, decades or centuries can become obsolete overnight. This means that all of us hoping to be more effective need to adjust our way of working – individually and collectively.

Fault lines become fissures

Global consulting firm McKinsey has referred to the impacts of COVID-19 as the “great acceleration”. According to a recent article, “the fault lines between industries and business models that we understood intellectually before the COVID-19 crisis have now become giant fissures, separating the old reality from the new one”. In that same article, McKinsey points to the widening gap between the best performers and even average performers across industries.

For legal firms, the great acceleration offers a point of reflection and inflection in their ways of working. Practices that have been effective and sufficient have become ineffective and inefficient through the shift in the operating environment. As offices lie dormant, no longer is a physical presence a sufficient proxy for performance and commitment. As the economy

shrinks, no longer is the promise of imminent promotion or a large bonus sufficient or sustainable for keeping high-potential employees engaged.

New ways of working can and will emerge. As highlighted in a recent study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, individual recovery from a stressful period can commence before that stressful period has finished. In other words, the actions that leaders take now can impact the trajectory of your firm's performance in the years ahead. It highlights the need for our leaders to respond in ways that challenge many established assumptions.

How to respond

In a leadership development program a few years ago, I was talking to the group about the idea of VUCA. Over lunch, I was thinking about what this meant for how the best leaders and teams respond to the VUCA world. What I came up with was unscientific, but seemed useful. Here it is for your consideration – VUCA needs VUCA.

Volatile needs Vulnerable

The rapid and unpredictable nature of changes that we are experiencing challenges us from knowing what the 'right' answer is. We are in situations that are without precedent, so we can't rely fully on history to guide us.

The fact that there may not be one right answer (there may be none, or there may be many) means that we need to open ourselves up to more possibilities and let go of being the expert. Questions become more powerful than answers.

Uncertain needs Useful

Because we are grappling with the idea that there may not be one right answer, trying to be right can feel a little like nailing jelly to the wall – difficult and not likely to last very long even if you somehow manage it.

Aiming for utility is a more productive use of our energy, attention and time. This is not to excuse behaviour that is purely short-term. Quite often, being useful in a VUCA world means being able to see the bigger picture – taking the longer, slower road that leads further.

Complex needs Curious

A hallmark of complexity is that there is not a linear relationship between cause and effect. What we need is to be able to view the whole system (or systems) that we are operating in, notice patterns and run experiments. Developing a genuine interest in what is happening is an essential skill for a VUCA world. The best tool at our disposal for this is to develop our appetite and capacity for reflection.

Ambiguous needs Adaptable

It seems obvious that, to operate in a world that is changing fast, those who can change fast will be at an advantage. Hierarchical and process-driven ways of working will struggle to respond quickly enough and often find themselves continuously one (or many) steps behind where they need to be. Operating as interdependent teams provides a way of working that is resilient in the face of change.

None of this is easy for law firms. Lawyers are paid to know the answers and to project certainty. Supporting your leaders to operate in ways that are better suited to the VUCA world is an investment in your firm's present and future.

Keegan Luiters is an independent consultant who works with leaders, teams and organisations to lift their performance. This article is based on a part of his book, Team Up – available now. Visit www.keeganluiters.com for more information or connect with him on LinkedIn.

Sources

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