

## PREPARING TODAY'S LEADERS FOR VUCA ENVIRONMENTS

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### Abstract

*Nowadays the entire world is changing so fast that it is quite difficult to realize what is happening. This world's constantly changing physiognomy determines the need to rethink the current strategies of understanding and handling with its most important challenges specific to different decision-making environments such as regional security crisis, economic degradation, global pandemic, climate change, huge population moves, deadly infectious diseases, lack of resources and so on. From this perspective, taking into consideration the high rate of changes characterizing all these decision-making environments, it is necessary that all level leaders, no matter their fields, to have the necessary abilities to adapt in the most volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) current and future environments to visualize and make sound decisions. So, for grappling with VUCA environments, leaders must be able to find answers to the following questions: How can they survive in environments where it is quite difficult to understand what is happening?; How can they prepare for acquiring success in future environments?; How should they adapt to reach the desired end-states? Furthermore, having these research questions in the loop, we will try to shape a leader model whose application gives him the ability to be flexible and agile in any VUCA environment. Also, our research will continue with identifying some strategies used by leaders so that they can cope with the most challenging decision making contexts that may be encountered in the future. Also, developing artificial intelligence (AI) as an enabler to support leaders in the decision-making process and enhancing organizational flexibility, building their agility to be flexible no matter the contexts, or setting up necessary conditions to form an expeditionary mindset for leaders are more than necessary. Having high-quality abilities, leaders will be able not only to understand current decision-making environments but also to visualize those that arise in the future, no matter their physiognomies.*

### Keywords

*VUCA environment; JIIM approach; strategic thinking; organizational flexibility; leader's agility.*

### Introduction

In any organizational context, there must be a strong correlation between the organization itself and its leadership. If leadership is applied to make dynamic decisions and design a common actionable direction for all its members, the organization must ensure different strategies for monitoring and assessing situations, as well as providing

the necessary support for decisions' making. In this context, the leader is central because he is the one who must monitor and, consequently, assume responsibility for all decision points (DP). From this perspective, further research will be focused on understanding and applying leadership as a "process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve organization" (Wade, 2017, p.1) in any challengeable VUCA environment.

### Understanding VUCA environments

Generally speaking, leaders, no matter their fields, have been experienced VUCA features almost every day. Even so, the alarming frequency of changes is increasingly transforming the worldwide landscape, overcoming the skills of traditional leadership and challenging leaders to gain new perspectives in applying leadership.

Referring to the origin of the VUCA concept, it has a military mark, being introduced by the United States (US) Army to emphasize the characteristics of the theatre of operations (TO) from Iraq and Afghanistan such as volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Later, this concept and principle have been borrowed by strategic leaders in other fields, such as business leaders, to emphasize the "chaotic, turbulent, and rapidly changing business environment that has become new normal" (Kirk, 2013, p.3). In this regard, some examples could be the financial crisis of 2008-2009, or, more appropriate, the COVID-19 pandemic which has impacted all world economies according to the evolution cycle of death and preventive or protective measures taken by national authorities.

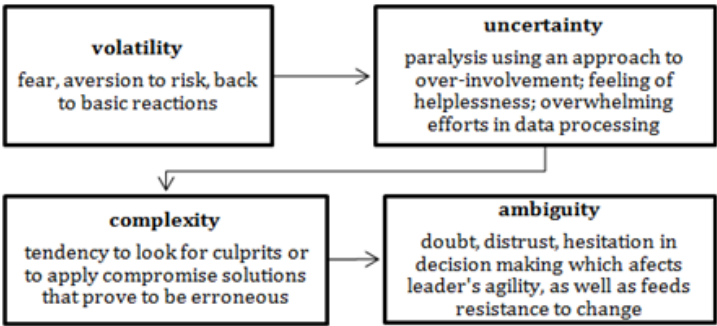
On the other hand, for this article, in Table 1, each variable of the VUCA concept is defined to understand its real meaning no matter the environment.

**Table 1. VUCA variables for all types of environments**

Variable	Description/Implications
<b>volatility</b>	"where things change fast but not in a predictable trend or repeatable pattern" (Sullivan, 2012); it is most often associated with turbulence whose factors are defined by "digitization, connectivity, trade liberalization, global competition, business model innovation" (Reeves, Love, & Mathur, 2012, p. 3).
<b>uncertainty</b>	"the lack of predictability, the prospects for surprise, and the sense of awareness and understanding of issues and events" (Kinsinger & Walch, 2012); it makes difficult to anticipate future events using past issues; from this perspective it is quite challengeable for leaders in decision making process.
<b>complexity</b>	shaped by "... numerous difficult-to-understand causes and mitigating factors involved in a problem" (Sullivan, 2012); in connection with turbulence of changes, it creates huge difficulties for all level leaders in taking bold decisions in any situational environment.

<b>ambiguity</b>	“inability to accurately conceptualize threats and opportunities before they become lethal” (Kail, 2010) or “... the causes and the "who, what, where, how, and why" behind the things that are happening are unclear and hard to ascertain” (Sullivan, 2012); broadly, it is manifested by the lack of clarity in understanding the situational contexts, affecting implicitly, the decision-making process (Tudorache, 2020, p.18).
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As we have seen, each variable from the VUCA concept presents unique challenges, and their correlation generates, simultaneously, a “change tidal wave” that threatens to overwhelm the leaders for today and, especially, those for tomorrow. Furthermore, as highlighted in figure 1, VUCA variables generate a strong impact on the organization’s members and, especially, on leaders when they face with exceeding DP.



**Figure 1. The impact of VUCA variables on leaders**  
*(Authors analysis based on data provided by Kinsinger & Walch, 2012)*

All these variables (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) are inherent features of all today’s decision-making environments, being a reality that profoundly changes not only the organizational strategies used to operate but also leaders’ adaptation to impose necessary organizational change. Consequently, the coherent understanding of VUCA environments is the first elementary step in the awareness of the needs for organizational adaptation. Also, outlined as a precondition for achieving effectiveness and efficiency in future activities/actions, visualizing the VUCA environments involves a holistic approach, involving the understanding of specific concepts, established analysis tools, specific geometry, and especially the definition of specific VUCA factors and characteristics, respectively estimating possible physiognomy.

**Strategies for leaders to gain organizational flexibility**

Having as a starting point in the previous description of VUCA environments, further research will be focused on identifying some strategies (key success factors) that can be used so tomorrow’s leaders can react effectively and efficiently to the challenges of such environments. According to Fails Management Institute (FMI) the strategies required to gain organizational flexibility are (FMI Corporation, 2012, p.3):

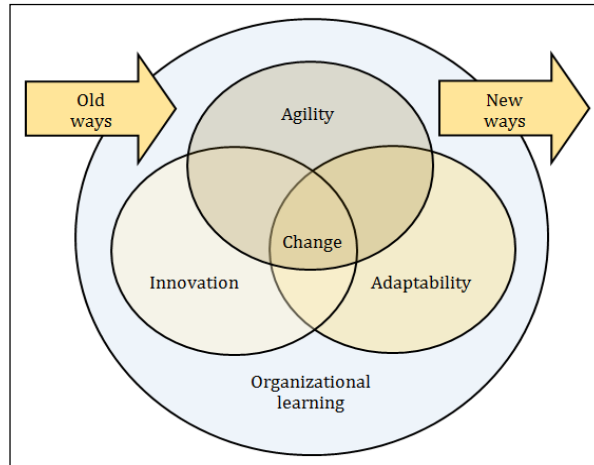
- build independent thinkers – having inside organization people who think independently and make their own decisions, in accordance with their levels of responsibility, at sensitive moments, may facilitate the way the organization itself operates; moreover, an independent thinker, manifesting a high level of initiative, assumes his responsibility for acting in high stressful situations;
- keep the big picture – it is closely connected with the continuous flow of information and the exploitation of intelligence products; on the other hand, it represents the primary condition to respond in a timely and accurate manner to ever-changing scenarios, maintaining a balanced emotional intelligence as well as a clear judgment; it is the most important prerequisite for making sound decisions;
- create an open space to think regularly – it is about not trying to be focused on immediate personal needs, but rather on planning on behalf of the organizational requirements;
- promote people rather than a hierarchy – by doing so, people will be highly motivated to fulfill specific tasks and create necessary effects which ultimately competes to attain the organization's desired end state; to do so, leaders, by encouraging cooperation and dialogue among their structures and people, will be able to allow them to think critically and creatively to share valuable opinions and recommendations without any hesitation;
- promote bold decisions – regardless of the environment's degree of uncertainty, leaders should promote audacity to make decisions but with prudent risk-assuming; in all situations, leaders must balance the results of decisions that could be obtained with the risks taken;
- keep an eye on future organization's development –to improve organization, leaders must design and support, unconditionally, a red line for future organizational development; to have this continuously enhanced, using lessons learned from previous experiences, becomes more than mandatory;
- inform and influence target audiences – if information enables involved leaders at all organizational levels to make informed decisions on the best way to apply leadership, influencing others, using the power of knowledge and gained experience during the time, is a prerequisite in attaining the desired end state;
- promote concise direction – all level leaders must visualize and express the direction to follow for all members of the organization; it can be coagulated by sharing a clear intent, setting up achievable objectives, and issuing coherent tasks to all members inside the organization.

As can be seen, these strategies can be applied to ensure prompt reactions to VUCA environments. It is difficult to estimate that by performing them completely, all challenges arising from all these contexts will be overcome. What is quite evident is the fact that leaders need a new strategic thinking mindset to grapple with VUCA decisional situations.

### **Strategic thinking mindset – leader's model for VUCA environments**

Having as main argument the continuous change of environment's physiognomy, modern countries have been looking for solutions that can be applied in the medium and long term, in relation to leaders' adaptation to the VUCA contexts. In this regard, as is stated in Joint Concept Note (JCN), the leaders' education and training from the VUCA

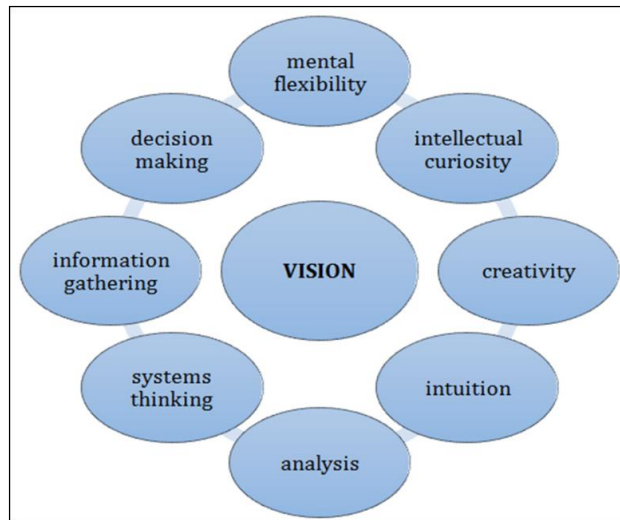
perspective must focus on building “the ability to adapt, combined with the agility to do so with relative ease” (JCN 1/17, 2017, p.6). Generating change (Figure 2), adaptability does not refer only to “adjusting to new external conditions ... It is also about our ability to respond to internal stimuli to change and to seek opportunities for advantage ...” (JCN 1/17, 2017, p.6).



**Figure 2. The model of change regarding adaptation to VUCA environments**  
(JCN 1/17, 2017, p. 7)

The model of change represented in the figure above emphasizes that in some situations adaptation is not enough and needs to be supported by innovation and agility to maintain the advantage in unfamiliar situations. If innovation, by questioning the routines/systems that support core competencies and leading to large-scale changes in principles, structure, and technology (JCN 1/17, 2017, p.6), the agility provides leaders the ability to respond quickly to unknown situations, remaining effective in difficult conditions and being flexible in overcoming the unforeseen.

Having defined the adaptability framework, further analysis continues with designing a leader’s model based on building strategic thinking which can be done through practice, discipline, and reflection. The model developed by FMI’s Center for Strategic Leadership is shown in figure 3. As can be seen, the core of the strategic thinking model is a vision that correlates an organization’s initiatives with a leader’s thinking and decision-making at a strategic level. Having a strategic mind, understood as “the ability to successfully deal with change and ambiguity through creating common purpose, buy-in, and alignment with workgroups supported by sound strategy formulation and implementation” (Kelly, Livorsi, & Magnus, 2015, p.11), it will be much easier for leaders to overcome obstacles (DP) that can be encountered at lower levels (operational, tactical). Other elements that shape a leader’s strategic thinking are mental flexibility, intellectual curiosity, creativity, intuition, analysis, systems thinking, information gathering, and decision making (Kelly et al, 2015, p. 13). The first four are internal traits which are natural abilities and can be developed in time. The last four are abilities related to intuition and insight which can be built on facts, logic, and reasoning.



**Figure 3. The model of leader - strategic thinking mindset**  
(FMI Corporation, 2012, p.4)

The correlation of these elements facilitates the leaders' capacity to visualize and become aware of the threats and opportunities facing their organizations. For a better understanding, a brief description of specific elements is required (Kelly et al, 2015, p. 13):

- mental flexibility – the ability to shift/adopt a course of action (COA) in relation to situational or decision making changes; it is useful, especially when the initial plan has been changed due to the environmental circumstances;
- intellectual curiosity – an internal impulse used to trade time and effort for learning and thinking; it is the most important in being updated with the last piece of information in the field;
- creativity – providing unique strategies and solutions which impacts positively challenges and opportunities; in high difficult situations, it represents the catalyst for adjusting decisions;
- intuition – the capacity to inspire and use it in directing the decision-making process, especially in overcoming DPs; it is directly proportional to the level of experience;
- information gathering – the ability to identify, collect and collocate necessary data to obtain desired intelligence products whose purpose consists in generating the big picture of the environment;
- analysis – the method used to interpret collected data/information to draw valuable conclusions based on facts and logic;
- system thinking – facilitates the awareness of how decisions made and actions are taken shape and influence target audiences (own organization's members, members from other organizations);
- decision making – the ability to overcome DPs in decisive situations; it is closely connected with a leader's experience/intuition, as well as with the staff's expertise for advising in high intensely emotional situations.

With these elements that build a strategic mindset, leaders will not only be thinkers, as we would be tempted to argue, but they will also be able to exercise their leadership more effectively in the context of VUCA environments.

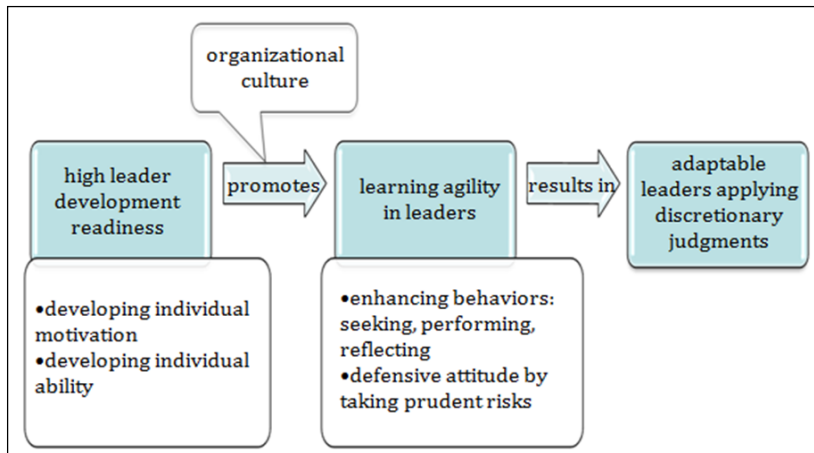
Another reference leader's model for strategic mindset, developed in the military field (table 2) is the one formalized in the United States (US) Army which is based on the principle according to which "attributes shape how an individual behaves and learns in their environment" (Wade, 2017, pp.1-18). Attributes as right character, firm presence, and sharp intellect, may facilitate a leader's competencies that must be performed more effectively and efficiently. Moreover, if the character covers a leader's identity and value system, presence is closely associated with outward appearance, actions taken, and situational behavior. The last attribute, intellect, is manifested through the way of leading based on mental and social faculties (Wade, 2017, pp.1-18).

**Table 2. US Army leader model – VUCA environments**

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>character</b>	
organizational values	principles/standards/qualities vital for leaders such as integrity, loyalty, respect, duty, selfless service, personal courage, honor;
empathy	ability to identify with and enter into other person's feelings and emotions;
service ethos	internal shared beliefs/attitudes that objectify the organizational spirit;
discipline	control of one's behavior in accordance with organizational values.
<b>presence</b>	
professional bearing	promoting professional authority's image;
fitness	demonstrating strength and endurance to sustain abilities under continuous stress;
confidence	demonstrating self-control to be extended over others' emotions;
resilience	ability to recover in a very short time from demanding situations (shock, stress) while maintaining organizational focus.
<b>intellect</b>	
mental agility	anticipating/adapting to unfamiliar or ever-changing situations;
sound judgment	a tendency to form sound opinions, make decisive decisions to act wisely in difficult situations;
innovation	ability to introduce new ideas based on opportunities/challenges;
interpersonal act	capacity to understand interactions with others;
expertise	possessing facts/beliefs/logic and understanding in key areas.

Source: Wade, 2017, pp. 1-18 – 1-19

Of all these attributes, special attention must be paid to mental agility. Understood as the ability to deal with the unknown or the “ability to think flexibly” (ADP 6-22, 2019, p. 4-1), according to Leader Development Improvement Guide (LDIG), mental agility allows leaders to “anticipate changing situations and think through second and third-order effects” (LDIG, 2018, p.169). As shown in figure 4, learning agility is driven by the need to develop a high capacity for leaders to respond to their motivation and ability to improve, enabling them to apply prior learning in unfamiliar environments to facilitate exploration, task performance, and reflection using a prudent attitude in taking risks (Reed, 2012, p.6).



**Figure 4. The model of learning agility - US Army**  
(Reed, 2012, p.7)

It can be noticed that the adjustment of the relationship between learning agility and developing the ability to react is done through organizational culture.

The presented models are just a few examples of best practices in adapting leaders to the requirements of VUCA environments. Certainly, along with the constituent elements, the leaders' disciplined emotional intelligence and their experience will make a difference in solving unique situations.

### **Strategic thinking – knowledge, skills, abilities**

The leaders' strategic thinking is promoted in all fields. For instance, specific to the military field, a strategic mindset involves a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational – JIIM) approach to cope with the most uncommon challenges specific to current and future VUCA environments. For a better understanding of JIIM domains, some theoretical clarifications are required as follows (Wade et al., 2011, p.4):

- joint – activities involving structures within the same agency;
- interagency – activities involving structures within two or more agencies to reach a mutual end state;
- intergovernmental – activities designed to enhance efforts between own agency and local, regional, and state authorities;



- multinational – activities involving national organizations and those belonging to other nations.

Returning to the purpose of this research, as it is highlighted in Table 3, a positive manifestation of strategic mindset implies a set of requirements for building and developing specific knowledge (graded “K”), skills (graded “S”), and abilities (graded “A”).

**Table 3. Knowledge, skills, abilities – strategic thinking (JIM approach)**

Domain	K/S/A
joint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specific doctrine and joint capabilities (K);</li> <li>- joint processes and organization (K);</li> <li>- strategic issues (K);</li> <li>- other services’ capabilities, culture, and processes (K);</li> <li>- joint planning processes and system (S);</li> <li>- financial resources management (S);</li> <li>- originality (A).</li> </ul>
interagency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- other governmental agencies’ capabilities, processes, and culture (K);</li> <li>- cultural metaknowledge (K);</li> <li>- governmental policy and strategy (K);</li> <li>- governmental policy, law, and processes for resource provision (K).</li> <li>- management of financial resources (S);</li> </ul>
intergovernmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- statutory, regulatory and policy environment for securing the national territory (K);</li> <li>- national crisis management system (K).</li> </ul>
multinational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- regional expertise: geography, history, culture (K);</li> <li>- friendly nations’ capabilities, culture, and processes (K);</li> <li>- governmental and nongovernmental organizations’ capabilities, culture, and processes (K);</li> <li>- instructing (S);</li> <li>- active/self-initiated learning (S);</li> <li>- change management and project management (S);</li> <li>- management and personnel resources (S);</li> <li>- employing organizational capabilities (S);</li> <li>- judgment and decision-making (S);</li> <li>- training management (S);</li> <li>- comfort with VUCA/adaptability (A);</li> <li>- conscientiousness, integrity, determination (A);</li> <li>- flexibility (A);</li> <li>- deductive, inductive argumentation (A).</li> </ul>

Source: Wade et al., 2011, p. 26

Analyzing information from table 3, it can be stated that for the joint domain the most important leaders require to understand thoroughly the organization itself and its specific processes correlated with figuring out other services’ capabilities, culture, and processes. Different from the joint domain, where the focus was on understanding other services’ capabilities, culture, and processes, for the interagency domain, leaders must be able to understand capabilities, processes, and culture belonging to other governmental agencies. Speaking about the intergovernmental domain, besides the

necessity to understand statutory, regulatory, and policy environment for securing national territory, building and maintaining personal relationships has the same importance. Obviously, for the multinational domain, leaders must be able to envision their ability to lead multinational teams, having sufficient knowledge about friendly nations, as well as regarding their capabilities and cultures.

## Conclusions

Taking into consideration the viewpoints highlighted, it becomes easily understandable that strategic leaders will grapple with current and future VUCA environments, using dedicated principles such as understanding and visualizing them, shaping target audiences, countering organizational threats, and exploiting opportunities, as well as consolidating the end state attained. Within this algorithm, environments' understanding and visualizing become essential, because both facilitate the completion of the big picture, which in turn, enhances interest audiences through constructive actions.

To have these principles settled, leaders should be educated and trained to think and act strategically, which assumes building a strategic mindset through intellectual curiosity, mental flexibility, intuition, creativity, analysis, information gathering, systems thinking, and decision making. All these elements should gravitate around an organizational vision that guides strategic thinking. On the other hand, the leaders' requirements for approaching VUCA environments consist of attributes of character, presence, and intellect, giving them the possibility to "be", "know" and "do" in all different situational contexts. For this reason, attributes as organizational values, empathy, service ethos, professional bearing, discipline, fitness, confidence, mental agility, resilience, sound judgment, innovation, interpersonal act, and expertise are required.

Moreover, strategic thinking leaders should have multi-domain (JIIM) knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). The principle is quite simple: the more diversified the KSAs, the higher the probability of countering VUCA features. This principle may work with the same performance at lower organizational levels such as tactical and operational. As was emphasized during our research, the experience represents a vital factor for a successful leader in any decision making context. Each experience gained contributes to the development of the leader's reference horizon, practically diminishing the uncertainty and ambiguity of decision-making situations.

Another key element for a leader in his fight with VUCA features is gaining flexibility within his organization. This can be done using strategies as building independent thinkers, promoting people rather than hierarchy, keeping the big picture, promoting bold decisions, creating an open space to think regularly, informing and influencing interest audiences, promoting concise direction, and focusing on further organization's development.

On the other hand, when facing difficult decision-making situations, today's leader and especially the one for tomorrow must demonstrate a high degree of agility. In turn, agility should be supported by high-quality standards such as AI integration, developing organizational flexibility, designing modular organizational structures able to sustain the versatility of organic structures and dedicated staff, and, last but not least, building

an expeditionary mentality of the organization's staff necessary to facilitate the coagulation of cohesive multinational work teams.

Consequently, as time goes on, the leader should be more and more effective and efficient, respecting the principle: "day by day better". As a result, tomorrow's leader, with abilities that today's leader does not have, should be able to act, react, or counteract in totally unknown situations, making decisions and triggering actions that today's leader cannot imagine. To come to an end, the leader must be more and more prepared when facing the unknown.

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