



Leadership is about changing YOUR mind

Whether we take our inspiration from the Olympics or the need to feel good on our upcoming summer holiday, we have, it seems, no problem with the idea of continuing our physical development.

But it's hard to imagine an equivalent spur causing people to rush en masse to develop their mental capacity in adulthood. We tend to see mental development as something that ends with our education, and react against the "elitist" idea of intellectual or emotional development that might take people beyond their peers. When we look at our own mental development, the thought of abandoning our familiar constructs and habits-of-mind discomfords us - we don't want to be "reprogrammed".

But the news about mental development is actually rather good. Unlike physical fitness, our peak performance or potential doesn't decline with age: it is possible to carry on improving your mental abilities into your seventies. And when we look at the sort of development people are capable of in adulthood, it's very different from the competitive acquisition of knowledge in early education. It's far more about broadening mental perspectives and becoming more flexible in your thinking, learning to examine and question your own beliefs and adopt different viewpoints.

For business leaders, achieving these new levels of capacity is a necessity not just for their own development but the health of their organisations. The leadership qualities and skills that got them where they are, are still essential, but are not enough to cope with the rapidly changing and complex world we live in. Leaders are increasingly finding themselves challenged by a rapidly changing world in which old certainties are fast disappearing, interconnections are multiplying and predicting what will happen next is becoming the difference between success and failure.

This state of affairs can be summed up as VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, four interlocking forces which require far more from leaders than what have been traditionally seen as leadership capabilities. This doesn't mean that the need for

'foundational' leadership skills has gone away but we need to understand why one leader operates much better than another in VUCA conditions, even though both seem to be equally intelligent, hard-working or experienced.

Developing our capacity to work within a VUCA world is about becoming "match fit" to cope with a world where it is not always clear where the winning line is or what event we are competing in. There are no medals on offer, just a more resilient and innovative organisation. At MDV, we believe that the drivers of someone's ability to stay ahead of the game as the world is changing is driven by their ability to expand their mental capacities to keep pace - to upgrade their operating system rather than just installing new apps, if you will.

Simply getting better at what we already do - acquiring more knowledge, more skills, more experience - what we might call 'horizontal development' - won't help us. We need to grow 'vertically' - and when we look at our organisations, we have to ask whether the people below us have the capacity they need to cope with the challenges they face?

Sure, we can fill those gaps with recruitment and training, but we can also use development to grow people's capacities. More good news: people are hard-wired to learn. They never stop, and even if they appear to have stopped developing in work, if you look closely, you will find they may have been constantly learning new things in their personal lives: languages, crafts and sports, the complex skills of parenting.

So why do people stop learning in work? One reason is that the organisational context they find themselves in is too sterile, too repetitive to offer them any scope to learn. Or they may have had damaging experiences, experiencing or seeing others receive negative feedback (or worse) for experimenting and failing. They start to lose confidence in their own ability to change.

It's not a question of talent or motivation. Many of these people will already have very strong "development engines": the ability to think critically about their own mental processes and a desire to learn. They just haven't been given a context or programme to develop those muscles. Some of these muscles are more 'cognitive', such as the ability to deal with information and patterns. As people develop, they increase their ability to deal with more data and different types of data - to make more connections between the hard facts of a situation, the emerging social context and the need for a new narrative. Even as data multiplies, they are not overwhelmed by it, but learn how to sift and sort and navigate the new context. And, in doing this, they are not simply relying on the maps they have drawn in the past but creating their own maps, step-by-step, as they move into unknown territory.

And some of the muscles are more related to 'emotional intelligence', such as the ability to stay resilient. The leaders we are describing know how to manage their emotions and energy levels as well as their thinking. By carefully noticing how they react in different situations, they build the capacity to make better choices around how, or whether, to respond in the same way in the future and even to 'course-correct' their response in the moment. They look serene even when they are buffeted by all kinds of heavy weather.

In the first article in this series, we described the four 'mental capacities' demonstrated by late stage leaders (complexity handling, intellectual fluidity, self-observation and perspective-taking). At MDV, we work with leaders to build those capacities and, just as importantly, we help them to improve their 'development engines' – two critical aspects known as metacognition (thinking about thinking) and learning motivation.

Meta-cognition, as it is technically known is your ability to think about your thinking or, more broadly, to be aware of your awareness. As new and previously unknown situations arise, it is vital to recognise when your old map of the world is inadequate rather than simply trying to reapply it in a more dogmatic way. Some of the recent political turbulence has resulted from the 'stickiness' of those old ideologies and meaning-making frames. Leaders who are good with VUCA are able to notice when they are

over-attached to an old set of beliefs, to let go of their maps and to invite challenges to the new maps they are drawing, even as they are drawing them.

Learning motivation, or 'learning to learn' may seem an odd requirement for VUCA leaders. Surely they have sufficiently demonstrated their learning motivation through their experience in getting to their current position?

But that is not what the new thinking about leading in complexity suggests. Dave Snowden (originator of the Cynefin model for diagnosing decision-making situations) shows us that in complex situations, we can only 'learn the way forward' – by definition, in circumstances we haven't seen before. In dealing with, say, post-Brexit Europe, the growth of the sharing economy or the new politics of populism we have no maps at all, not even old ones. We must share our data, send out 'probes' into the new environment and run 'safe-to-fail' experiments as if our organisation depended on it – which it probably does...

The good news is that the VUCA leadership capabilities are eminently learnable: they are not fixed traits or characteristics, not simple correlations with IQ or expertise.

However, this development in 'meaning making' does not happen by accident.

Leaders who have continued to develop well beyond their formal learning days often trace the most significant changes in their 'meaning making' back to transformative experiences or encounters. However, what really has made the difference is that in those situations they have focused on their learning, rather than simply rushing back to business-as-usual, seeking to look good or collapsing under the strain of the experience.

At MDV, we know that we can foster this 'capacity' development in ourselves and others by creating experiences in which we too can choose to learn, and by supporting that transition with coaching and structured interventions. So how do we build the "mind gym"? Well, just as people develop exercise programmes that use household objects like mops and chairs as 'resources to hand', organisations have many ways to create learning

opportunities using the challenges presented by the real work that people are doing day-to-day. We build our learning programmes around people's own 'leadership challenges' and then add in some specific 'accelerator activities' which fuel those development engines and help people make the most of the opportunity to learn. The idea for these differences-that-make-a-difference came originally from two articles written by Nick Petrie at CCL and we are very grateful for his insights!

The first accelerator is what Petrie calls **heat experiences** - put individuals in unusual and edgy situations where it is safe to fail and they will often find that their current meaning making is stretched to the limit. This may not be comfortable, just as the experience of stretching a muscle or pushing our aerobic limit can make us feel at an 'edge' in our fitness. But given the right mix of challenge and support, as well as time to reflect on those experiences, many people find that they start to think new thoughts (or at least challenge their old ones) in response to the novelty.

Colliding perspectives are also built into all of the leadership work we do. Just as important as ensuring leaders have 'frame-breaking' experiences is exposing them to different opinions and worldviews. That might mean encountering very different individuals - people from different industries, cultures or backgrounds - or even inhabiting their shoes for a while. External and internal views of a particular problem or initiative may differ radically, as will the view from different organisational silos. When they are exposed to these points of view, leaders learn to challenge their assumptions and hold contradictory ideas in their heads at the same time - leading to breakthrough innovations or new ways of approaching old dilemmas.

The last component of the mix is something Petrie calls **elevated sense making**. Just as a sports coach helps an athlete bring together the different aspects of training into performance, so our MDV trainers create processes which help leaders make sense of the new experiences and encounters, and show them how to put their new, expanded worldview into practice.

As you become familiar with the concept of vertical development you will learn to recognise the different

stages and characters in your workplace. One employee might be using every experience to learn. They are happy to have their preconceptions challenged, to change their mind and question their own beliefs. Another at the same level might be a high achiever but only happy when operating with familiar concepts and will view any situation in those terms. They will find it threatening to be seen as not knowing.

Clearly a one-size-fits-all, institutional development programme will not suit both individuals. As with fitness training, we know it is important to design programmes which can flex activities to a person's current capacities and the size of their 'engine'. If you overload them they will just shut down and if you under stimulate them, they will tune out and think about something more interesting instead.

Some will move faster than others, but it is important not to rush things. Like lifting heavy weights or running a marathon, deconstructing your conceptual framework is not something to be taken lightly!

Reflective exercise for leaders: How have you reacted to VUCA contexts in the past and how have they helped your development? Were there occasions where you shut down or retreated? What made the difference between a successful change in your 'meaning making' and a 'fall back' to old habits of thinking or behaving? Does your organisation offer people a chance to stretch or develop, or are they stuck on a treadmill of repetitive experiences? Is your own routine challenging or confining you? What could you do to get yourself and others learning again?

For more information please contact:

[Mike Vessey](#) or [Karen Ellis](#)

MDV

Leadership and talent consultants



Read related articles at:

www.mdvconsulting.co/experience/articles