



Leadership is about changing your mind

Whether we take our inspiration from the Olympics or Paralympics, famous sport stars and teams or we just want to 'get fit', 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 discomferts 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 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 in which 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 has been termed "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.

Certainly, we can address some 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.

Leadership is about changing your mind

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 are 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.

We name the four "mental capacities" demonstrated by later-stage leaders as: complexity processing, fluidity of thinking, self-observation and perspective shifting. At MDV, we work with leaders to build these capacities and, just as importantly, we help them to improve their development engines – two critical aspects known as metacognition and learning motivation.

Metacognition, is known in its simplest form as your ability to think about your thinking and, more broadly, to be aware of your awareness. As new, 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 social and political turbulences have resulted from the 'stickiness' of 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 must have sufficiently demonstrated their learning motivation through their experience in getting to their current position? However, this is not what more recent 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 emerging consequences of pandemics and climate change, we have no maps at all, not even old ones. We must share our data, use antennae to sense 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 such 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 this mind gym? Well, just as people develop exercise programmes that use

Leadership is about changing your mind

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 specific accelerator activities to fuel those development engines and help people make the most of the opportunity to learn. A neat articulation of these differences-that-make-a-difference came in two articles written by Nick Petrie at CCL and we absolutely agree with 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 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 being in 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 exposed to these different 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 would not suit both individuals. As with fitness training, we know it is important to design programmes that 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 to be thorough and to acknowledge this takes careful and skilful attention. 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 the VUCA conditions of the past 18 months and has this 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 falling back to old habits of thinking or behaving? Is your organisation enabling people to stretch and experiment in ways that meet current levels of challenge or are the left struggling to remain effective in the face of issues that impact the business? 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 mike.vessey@mdvconsulting.co

MDV

Leadership and talent consultants

www.mdvconsulting.co

