

Leaders as Levers

As the planet careens forward into a future that is increasingly data rich but certainty poor, the need for capable leaders becomes even more acute. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



Tony O'Driscoll is regional managing director of Duke CE in Singapore, where he focuses on identifying and implementing next-generation learning strategies and approaches that accelerate the development of Leadership Sense-Abilities in this rapidly growing part of the world.

Despite the global economic slowdown, the worldwide war for talent continues to rage. Institutions and organizations from Afghanistan to Zambia continuously cite a lack of skilled workers as a key constraint for growth, and leadership often is highlighted as the capability they lack most. Simply put, there are too few people who are ready to lead in our increasingly Volatile, Unpredictable, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) world.

In times of disruptive change, leaders always have emerged to bridge the gap between an untenable present and an uncertain future. They have stood ready to lead others on an uncharted journey toward a better future and—in doing so, they have made the world a better place. It perhaps could be argued that leaders themselves have been significant levers of positive change for the world. As the planet careens forward into a future that is increasingly data rich but certainty poor, the need for capable leaders becomes even more acute.

SUFFERING FROM STRUCTURAL LAG

Today's institutions and organizations are not designed to operate in a VUCA world. Most of them came into being during stable and predictable times when their primary objective was to increase the efficiency of defined and standardized practices and routines to deliver maximum productivity. Today, the core capabilities that were developed by these organizations to maximize operational efficiency have become core rigidities that limit their ability to sense shifts in the external environment and respond to them in a timely manner.

In short, today's organizations and institutions are suffering from a severe case of structural lag: Their internal time signatures are out of synch with the external pace of change, and this gap is turning into a gulf. Bridging this gulf will require a legion of leaders who are ready to lead an uncharted world. This situation begs the question: How do we create the leaders our uncertain future needs?

The unfortunate truth is that while we always have relied upon the lever of leadership to bridge the gap between an unpalatable present and an unpredictable future, there simply are not enough leaders today who stand ready to do so.

Furthermore, the VUCA nature of the environment requires that leaders lead in very different ways than they have in the past. As we move from a "Find-It-Out" world to a "Figure-It-Out" one, the role of the leader moves from one of command and control to one of connect and collaborate. To bridge the gulf, leaders will be required to act as catalysts to bring together disparate and diverse sets of people to collectively intuit the way forward in a world that increasingly is drowning in data but devoid of direction.

Simply put, the world finds itself in a situation where its dependence on leadership is greater than ever before and what is required of these leaders to succeed is significantly different than what has worked in the past.

BRINGING THE LEARNING TO THE LEADER

To address this challenge, we first must recognize that merely accelerating or augmenting the traditional practices of leadership development will not close the leadership gap. Just like the institutions and organizations we serve, the leadership development industry itself has developed a set of orthodoxies around our practices and routines where we create content, offer programs, deliver courses, select faculty, and hold leaders captive in classrooms. These orthodoxies have created a set of core rigidities that contribute to our own structural lag, and we, too, must change if we wish to remain relevant.

To add value today, we need to reframe our perspective from bringing the leader to the learning to bringing the learning to the leader. From there, we must begin to define the differences that truly make a difference in leaders who successfully lead an uncharted world. We need to understand what they do more of, better, and differently than their peers, and we then must create the contexts within which these differentiating abilities can be acquired by others at a pace and scale that is synchronized with the external environment.

In recognizing that leaders are the levers to change the world, we also must recognize that it is our responsibility as leadership development professionals to ensure there are enough of them who stand ready to lead in an increasingly uncharted world. **■**