

# The Final Frontier Between Our Ears

Next-generation leaders need to work on the space between their ears to adopt a new set of ABCs so they may boldly go where no one has gone before.

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If space is the final frontier, this edition of *Training* compellingly argues it is actually the space between our ears that requires deeper exploration.

Over the last two decades, the Worldwide Web has blanketed our planet with a digital nervous system, fundamentally and permanently altering the way we connect, communicate, coordinate, collaborate, and take collective action.

A year ago, at Duke CE, we embarked on a journey of discovery with more than 40 global chief executives to understand how this seismic shift was affecting their businesses and their approach to leadership.

These leaders characterized their current context as a new normal of constant disequilibrium where the challenges they face are less predictable and the knowledge bases they draw from are less reliable. They said it felt like they were navigating permanent white water where the volume, variety, and velocity of issues and information were creating ongoing tensions and tradeoffs that needed to be handled in real time. The principal challenge these leaders described in dealing with these ongoing tensions was rooted in cultivating the ability to become precise perceivers, subtle sensemakers, and careful choreographers.

### PRECISE PERCEIVERS

To become precise perceivers, leaders emphasized the need to frame unfamiliar situations with a beginner's mindset. They cautioned that holding on to past world views would limit a leader's ability to ask insightful questions about the future, and they warned against becoming over-reliant on applying old routines to address new and novel problems.

The key challenge with perceiving is that our brains are friendly with familiarity and pre-wired to fall into default when placed under stress. To become practiced perceivers, leaders must consciously work to rewire their brains to avoid falling into default when dealing with the stress of a new normal of constant disequilibrium.

### SUBTLE SENSEMAKERS

To become subtle sensemakers, leaders told us that thinking systemically is more important than ever and that no single person can understand the actions and interactions in a system as connected and complex as the one we inhabit today. They also said that calculated trial and error—experimenting, learning, and adapting in real-time—is critical, and that tolerance for making mistakes and resilience in recovering from them is the new cycle of value creation in today's world.

The key challenge with sensemaking is that it requires a different kind of logic. Today's complex problems require the application of abductive logic. Abduction is the process of seeking out data that might contradict preconceived ideas and existing assumptions and then trying to make sense of it. This often requires leaders to take logical leaps of faith absent complete data or confidence in the outcome.

### CAREFUL CHOREOGRAPHERS

To become careful choreographers, leaders stressed the need to recognize that the more connected we become, the less control we have. They said that hierarchies are becoming "wirearchies" where influence trumps position power. They note that industry ecosystems and the organizations within them now are operating as networks that need to be worked at multiple levels to catalyze action in a particular direction.

The key challenge with choreography is that it requires new ways of influencing that rely on a deep appreciation for context and the ability to coalesce and catalyze collectives of individuals that reside outside the leader's sphere of control.

If space is the final frontier, it is clear that next-generation leaders need to adopt a new set of ABCs:

**A**void falling into default thinking

**B**ecome comfortable with taking logical leaps of faith

**C**ounteract the urge to use position power as opposed to influence

In so doing, they may boldly go where no one has gone before! **T**