

# Learning to Lead on Purpose

Purposeful leaders realize that the most effective way to lead in turbulent times starts with answering the most important question: “Why?” **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.

**A**s the planet we inhabit hurtles into the future at an ever-accelerating pace, leaders around the globe are required to take bold and decisive actions at a time when they feel most vulnerable. Overcoming this paradox is one of the most critical challenges we collectively face as a society today.

As I write this article, the world is facing unprecedented challenges on multiple fronts: Terrorism is centralizing its power base in the Middle East while simultaneously leveraging social media to hatch virtual nodes of an increasingly sophisticated terror network across the globe. The rise of ISIS also has played some part in creating a discontinuity for a massive global industry. In less than 350 days, the market price for a barrel of oil was cut in half, and the global oil and gas industry found itself in the midst of a significant disruption. Multiple different and unanticipated externalities such as fracking technology, battery technology, and the rise of a robust terror network fueled by Internet technology and funded by oil revenues have converged to create a massive market discontinuity that industry strategists and experts failed to identify.

Breakthroughs in technology are driving disruptive innovations that, in turn, are amplifying the positive and negative aspects of forward progress at a pace and scale the world is hard-pressed to understand. Technology is literally jerking humanity around: If leveraged for good, nuclear technology holds the promise of cleaner and cheaper energy for all of humanity. If leveraged for ill, this same technology creates the peril of mutually assured destruction for all of humanity.

The rapid-fire decisions leaders have to make about how to best navigate this intricate and complex thicket of uncertainty over the next decade will have consequences for humanity for at least the next century.

### FROM PARALYSIS TO POSSIBILITY

It is during the most difficult and challenging times that leaders must step into the breach of uncertainty and build a bridge that moves the masses from a place of paralysis and aimlessness to a place of possibility and purpose.

During times of disruption and discontinuity, leaders become the biggest levers for lasting change. Institutional and organization routines and the technology that automates them are too rigid and brittle to adapt to the jerk speed of today’s Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) world. These practices and routines were built to maximize efficiency in a world that no longer exists.

In a world of discontinuous jerk speed, change is baked into the ecosystem itself, and it is throwing off tensions and tradeoffs that must be dealt with in near real time, all the time. Today, the new normal essentially means that nothing ever actually returns to normal, but instead remains in a state of constant disequilibrium that must be attended to on an ongoing basis.

In order to lead in this new normal of constant disequilibrium, leaders increasingly are grounding themselves in purpose. Instead of honing their abilities to quickly figure out “what” is going on and rapidly determining “how” to deal with it, purposeful leaders have learned that the most effective way to lead in turbulent times starts with answering the most important question: “Why?”

As a result, purpose becomes a filter through which leaders can perceive and frame complex and unfamiliar situations more clearly. This purposeful perspective expands the consciousness of leaders to see beyond the most recent and urgent decisions, allowing them to make sense of them in a broader, more systemic context that extends beyond the present moment. Purpose-driven leadership also engages others in an authentic way. In operating from a base of shared purpose, teams are able to collaborate and choreograph actions and interactions with much more fluency and rapidity.

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Learning to lead on purpose brings vision, understanding, clarity, and agility back into the organizational frame. It could well become the difference that makes a difference in creating the kind of future we collectively seek. To begin this purposeful journey, we could all do the world a power of good by pausing for 60 seconds and asking ourselves that one simple question: “Why?” **■**