



LEADERSHIP JENNIFER DAVIES

THE INNER JOURNEY OF LEADERSHIP

PREPARING LEADERS FOR A VUCA WORLD

How do we prepare leaders for a world that is constantly changing? Jennifer Davies, the Dean of AISNSW Leadership Centre, suggests we must pay attention to the inner journey of leadership, as well as the outer journey of knowledge, skills and strategy development.

THE context in which educational leaders work is constantly changing.

Change is no longer incremental, developing along a predictable line. It is difficult to find the patterns in the exponential, multi-dimensional change that is occurring on many fronts simultaneously (Degenhardt & Duignan, 2010).

Disruptive technologies, shifting social norms, stakeholder demands on the school, compliance with older

paradigms of education competing with futures-focused learning experiences, increasing accountability for the learning experiences of children and responsibility for the social and emotional welfare of the school community shape the contemporary education landscape. These matters, and more, land in the lap of today's leaders.

Not all the skills and capabilities that worked in the past will enable leaders to thrive in the future. For example, long term five year strategies and best practice benchmarking are becoming increasingly ineffective. "If strategy was like a high stakes chess game in the past, it's more like ice hockey today - fast, risky and hard to follow" (Solomon and Ertel, 2014). Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) is the new normal. Leadership is critical.

So how do leaders need to be and what do leaders need to do so that all stakeholders (students, staff and communities) thrive in this environment?

This paper will examine the internal work involved in leading into the complexity, as well as the skills and strategies necessary to navigate a VUCA world.

Leading with the whole self – the inner journey of leadership

Today's leaders more than ever need to know who they are, what they believe and why they do what they do.

Engaging with the VUCA world requires an approach to leadership that connects the whole self – body, mind and soul (the inner journey of leadership) with the necessary knowledge, skills and strategies (the outer journey of leadership) to lead into the confusion; grapple openly with the challenges; and flip the rhetoric of VUCA from a threatening phenomenon into one that is laden with opportunity.

Leading with the whole self begins with knowing oneself. Effective educational leaders are on a continual inner journey of becoming themselves. This includes self-awareness – deep understanding of one's own values and purpose, strengths and weaknesses, needs and drives, sources of frustration, and reaction to problems; and engagement in self-transformation – openness to change, holding true to purpose in the face of challenge, and the ability to learn from experience (Degenhardt, 2015).

Warren Bennis understood leadership as self-expression and made the following observation...

No leader sets out to be a leader. People set out to live their lives, expressing themselves fully. When that expression is of value, they become leaders. So the point is not to become a leader. The point is to become yourself, to use yourself completely – all your skills, gifts and energies – in order to make your vision manifest. You must withhold nothing. You, must, in sum, become the person you started out to be, and to enjoy the process of becoming (Bennis, 2003).

Knowing oneself also means connecting deeply with one's purpose. Knowing why you do what you do – your deepest purpose – gives leaders both clarity and

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resilience. As Frankl wrote in 1984, "He who knows the 'why' for his existence will be able to bear almost any 'how'."

Finding one's deepest purpose sometimes emerges from a crucible experience which serves to illuminate a hidden and suppressed area of the soul. In their book, *Leading for a Lifetime: How Defining Moments Shape Leaders of Today and Tomorrow* (2007), Bennis and Thomas recount the story of Sidney Rittenberg's crucible experience during 16 years of unjust imprisonment in solitary confinement. Thrown into

jail, confined to a tiny, pitch-dark cell, Rittenberg did not rail or panic. Instead, within minutes, he remembered a stanza of verse, four lines recited to him when he was a small child:

He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

Rittenberg emerged from prison certain that nothing in his professional life could break him and went on to become a successful corporate leader. Today, Rittenberg is as committed to his ideals

“Today’s leaders more than ever need to know who they are, what they believe and why they do what they do.”

TABLE 1 ADAPTED FROM WHAT VUCA REALLY MEANS FOR YOU (2014)

<p>+</p> <p>HOW WELL CAN YOU PREDICT THE RESULTS OF YOUR ACTIONS? ></p>	<p>COMPLEXITY</p> <p>CHARACTERISTICS the situation has many interconnected parts and variables. Some information is available or can be predicted, but the volume or nature of it can be overwhelming to process.</p> <p>EXAMPLE changing curriculum standards, achieving benchmarks, program requirements include differentiation, rapid developments in technology, the impact of social media, student and staff well being</p> <p>APPROACH flexibility for restructure, bring in or develop specialists, and build up resources adequate to address the complexity. Seek clarity but not certainty.</p>	<p>VOLATILITY</p> <p>CHARACTERISTICS the challenge is unexpected or unstable and may be of unknown duration, but it's not necessarily hard to understand; knowledge about it is often available</p> <p>EXAMPLE extreme anti-social behaviour, natural disasters, economic downturn affecting student enrolments</p> <p>APPROACH build in slack and devote resources to preparedness—risk preparedness and risk management; futures thinking, futures funds. These steps can be typically expensive; your investment should match the risk.</p>
	<p>AMBIGUITY</p> <p>CHARACTERISTICS causal relationships are completely unclear. No precedents exist; you face 'unknown unknowns'</p> <p>EXAMPLE how well do we know how students learn? How do schools prepare students for an unknown future? You decide to move into emerging educational territory or to launch educational experiences outside your core competencies</p> <p>APPROACH experiment, understand cause and effect requires generating hypotheses and testing them. Design your experiments so that lessons learned can be broadly applied. An agile design thinking approach to experimentation is required.</p>	<p>UNCERTAINTY</p> <p>CHARACTERISTICS despite a lack of other information, the event's basic cause and effect are known. Change is possible but not a given</p> <p>EXAMPLE market conditions eliminate monopolies. Schools are required to compete for students, including from non-traditional competitors</p> <p>APPROACH invest in information—collect, interpret, and share it. This works best in conjunction with structural changes, such as adding information analysis networks that can reduce ongoing uncertainty. Scanning and gathering intelligence about competing markets is required.</p>
	<p>+</p>	<p>< HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE SITUATION? ></p>

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as he was 68 years ago, when he was so severely tested.

Fortunately, not all crucible experiences are traumatic. They can emanate from a positive but challenging experience that invokes deep reflection to discover one's higher purpose for leadership.

From the inner journey to the outer journey of leadership

From knowing oneself and one's purpose, to impact; what does an educational leader need to do to lead effectively in the contemporary context? How can a leader plan anything amidst volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity?

VUCA actually conflates the four elements of the term. By understanding VUCA in this way leaders have the capacity to identify, prepare and respond to a VUCA world. As Johansen, a futurist with the Institute for the Future (IFF) explains, "you've got to have readiness and that requires practice" (Johansen, 2013, p10) ... "In

the VUCA world you have to be an athlete to thrive; things like physical fitness and mental fitness and nutrition and healthy lifestyles have always been important, but for leaders in today's world, they are not optional" (Johansen, B., & Euchner, J. (2013).

By being prepared, he advocates:

- Volatility yields to vision
- Uncertainty yields to understanding
- Complexity yields to clarity
- Ambiguity yields to agility.

Table 1 summarises some key thoughts regarding this view in the contemporary educational context. The X axis represents a scale from decreasing to increasing knowledge of the situation. The Y axis represents a scale from decreasing to increasing predictability of the results of one's actions.

Theory to Practice

The AIS Leadership Centre's vision: Growing Leaders, Inspiring Leadership, is pursued through its purpose "to develop authentic, purposeful and visionary people who lead the learning and growth of students, staff and school communities". Central to all the Leadership Centre's work is the philosophy that leadership is as much about the 'inner journey' of ongoing self-knowledge, self-management, moral purpose and values as it is about the 'outer journey' of acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills for effective leadership.

For senior leaders considering principalship, professional learning and growth needs to be premised on this belief. Managing a budget, organising the strategic plan, managing the media, leading curriculum change and enhancing teaching and learning (the outer journey) all look quite different when viewed through the eyes of a wise, self-aware leader with a clear set of values and purpose.

An unwavering commitment to the core tenets of the inner journey is what will prepare leaders in every context

to not only face, but embrace, the ambiguities and uncertainties of this most challenging and extraordinary educational context for school leaders. ■

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- Jennifer Davies is conducting her PhD research study into the longer-term impact and outcomes of Principal preparation. The study sample includes successful participants in the AISNSW Flagship Program from three cohorts of the program (2013-2016).

In the VUCA world you have to be an athlete to thrive; things like physical fitness and mental fitness and nutrition and healthy lifestyles have always been important, but for leaders in today's world, they are not optional.