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This post is part of an HBR Spotlight examining leadership lessons from the military. It's the second in a series on the four aspects of VUCA, a framework used by the U.S. military to describe the environment in terms of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

The frenetic pace of our environment, brought on by volatility, also creates uncertainty, a lack of clarity that hinders our ability to conceptualize the threats and challenges facing the organizations we lead. Think back to the last time you attempted to explain a crisis or challenge to your boss, or perhaps other stakeholders not geographically co-located with you, and after a few attempts you were left to exclaim "You simply have to be here and see it to understand what's going on right now." That's uncertainty in your environment.

Uncertainty becomes increasingly dangerous when we rush to understand it with an over-reliance on what we've witnessed before. The attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11 are a tragic example of

this. An exhaustive review of cell phone and email traffic from and between leaders of organizations housed in both towers revealed that rather than wildly fleeing the buildings, many were waiting patiently for first responders to come and lead them out of the buildings in an orderly fashion. This plan was created from a thorough review of the 1993 bombing of one of the basement parking garages. That review cited the unorganized rush to leave the buildings as the source for many serious injuries. The recommendation moving forward was to have a rational and well devised plan of evacuation should such an attack occur again. So, on 9/11, a seemingly similar attack was identified. But it was a very different type of threat and a previously conceived solution, regardless of how rational, might have been somewhat dubious. We thought we had a lot more time than we did.

It is human nature to see every challenge as something similar to what we've encountered before. That's how our brains work and for good reason; if we had to assess every situation as novel we wouldn't be as efficient as we need to be. We categorize situations using mental models. We see a disheveled person mumbling and staggering towards us on a dimly lit street and within seconds our volumes of previous experiences and categorizations allow us to deduce that we should move to the other side of the street. Mental models can be very productive, especially when the consequences are high and the resource of time available to decide is low. However, relying too heavily on them might lead to the faulty assumption that yesterday's solution to a seemingly similar challenge today is appropriate.

Here are three ways to lead more effectively in an uncertain environment:

1. **Get a fresh perspective.** Find ways to challenge the appropriateness of your mental models, individually and collectively. The concept of red-teaming is helpful. Red-teaming is the use of a devil's advocate within the leadership team in order to counter the influence of group-think. Red-teamers don't simply shoot holes in a plan; they think and act as the competition requiring leaders to move beyond "that won't happen" to "what if this occurs." The red-team members have no personal investment in the plan, so they don't have problems exposing weaknesses or single points of failure. Red-team membership should be rotated and leaders must be careful to value and protect red-team members from any perceived backlash from other organizational members.
2. **Be flexible.** Detailed plans are great, but we have a saying in the military that the plan never survives first contact with the enemy. Fighting the plan and not the enemy will get you and your organization into grave trouble, on or off the battlefield. This may sound easy, but when you have a really good plan, it's hard to not be wed to it, especially when you've been involved in its creation. A plan should incorporate flexibility and options at its inception.
3. **Glance back, look ahead.** It is prudent to assess the outcomes of our plans and decisions; it's how we get better individually and collectively. However, every review must be conducted at the right level of detail, with the purpose of making the organization better as it moves forward. They should focus on what could realistically be done better in the future, rather than what could have been done in the past, had time permitted. Inquisitions bent on ensuring that bad outcomes will never happen again exhaust valuable resources — and in an uncertain environment they're ineffective anyway.

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