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This is the last 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.



Diversity and global reach introduce ambiguity to the environment; therefore opportunities and challenges must be appreciated from multiple aspects, not just our own personal leadership lens. Whereas the frustration we experience from volatility, uncertainty, and complexity might leave us feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, ambiguity leads primarily to inefficiency and missed opportunities. Toleration of either will leave us surviving at best, and we want to lead our organizations to thrive.

There are a few things we know about ambiguity; it is one of the leading causes of conflict within a business unit, impossible to diagnose from a singular perspective, and its second- and third-order effects are capable of dismantling an organization. Two symptoms are frequently associated with

ambiguity: the inability to accurately conceptualize threats and opportunities before they become lethal and increasing frustration that compartmentalized accomplishments don't add up to comprehensive or enduring success.

Leaders must provide clarity so that work assignments and goals are not as ambiguous as the environment. Ambiguity doesn't paralyze workers; it makes them insecure and stirs them up. Competent employees, when faced with ambiguity, will do what they are most comfortable doing in order to feel as if they are contributing something appropriate. Doing something, whether it's helpful or not, makes us feel good. A leader must provide clear direction and synchronize the efforts of others while continually communicating any adjustments.

In one of the most high pressure leadership roles I've had, I routinely crafted a notional and unique crisis action scenario for me and my staff to work through together. I temporarily isolated us from other parts of our organization and allowed no cell phones and only one laptop computer in the room. Immediately after I announced the crisis at hand, everyone wanted to be the one to power up the laptop and start building a spreadsheet or slide presentation; unproductive busy work without direction. Invariably, one of my staff members became uncomfortable enough to speak up and ask for clarification on what exactly it was we were trying to achieve. That's when the real learning and development started. The lessons we learned together while working through ambiguity paid off big time. We became more efficient and collaborative communicators, and I became increasingly confident in my staff's ability to function very well (and yes, sometimes even better) in my absence. I had some great emerging leaders on that staff, far more talented than I'll ever be, and I know they're developing their next generation too.

I offer three ways to lead more effectively in an ambiguous environment:

1. Listen well.

There is a difference between listening and waiting to speak, and those communicating with you can tell when you are doing either. Give special attention to questions like "What are we doing?" and "What's our goal?". Your initial reaction might be to treat someone asking these questions as if he or she is not on board with your plan, but ambiguity may drive a leader in an ineffective direction, and people want to be part of a meaningful work effort. In order to draw strength from diversity, all voices must be heard, and my experience tells me that subordinate leaders will listen to others only as well as we listen to them. Don't create your own friction by hearing just what you want to hear from diverse voices representing valuable perspectives.

2. Think divergently.

Openness to new ideas is a leadership characteristic highly correlated with effectiveness. This means seeing past your own ideas. It requires confidence born of competence to care more about a great idea gaining a voice rather than whose voice gets credit. Diversity of race and gender are most certainly important in order to provide role models for emerging leaders. But we must look for diversity in other ways as well. The days of one best solution are gone for good; see the second- and third-order opportunities inherent in equally attractive solutions.

3. **Set up incremental dividends.**

Celebrating success is important, especially in an ambiguous environment. When the way ahead is not clear, it is reassuring to have tangible proof that we are moving in the right direction. Our stakeholders need to know that we can achieve small gains over the long term; setting and achieving incremental dividends is a great way to build and maintain momentum, confidence and trust, in both the leader and the organization. A series of intermediate objectives afford us the opportunity to continually assess our environment from a position of relative control and strength: a true luxury in any environment.

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