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## ARTICLE LEADERSHIP

# Leading in a VUCA Environment: V Is for Volatility

*by Col. Eric G. Kail*

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This post is part of an HBR Spotlight examining [leadership lessons from the military](#)

*This is the first 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.*



Do challenges and opportunities that once took days or weeks to fully emerge now smack you in the face before lunch and without much discernible warning? If so, you're not alone. You're simply dealing with volatility, a state of dynamic instability brought about by drastic, violent, and rapid shifts. Problems no longer arise in the distance; they emerge for the first time in our personal space and require immediate attention.

A great example of volatility came during my time in Iraq. At 6 am, I awoke from a two-hour nap in the front seat of my combat vehicle, feeling surprisingly rested and in control of the day that lay

ahead. We were just about to push forward into Baghdad. All things considered, it was a beautiful morning: 60 degrees with a slight breeze, and the sunrise seemed to add energy to the day. Two hours later I was in a sandstorm so intense that everything turned dark orange, visibility was reduced to meters, and we were in a pretty good fight I hadn't seen coming.

Two hours later, the weather cleared, but the volatility increased. I had four radios in my vehicle and I had to monitor each for critical information and updates flowing in from units in contact with the enemy. I received two simultaneous radio transmissions; one from a young officer in the Bradley fighting vehicle 100 meters away from me. He was in an intense firefight with enemy tanks and needed guidance. The other radio call was from a young sergeant less than a mile away; he wanted to know what to do with dozens of children who had rushed out of a local elementary school, waving peace signs, to greet him. They were blocking the road; he wanted to know if he could give them candy. To put the second, seemingly benign request on hold would have meant that our entire military unit of 750 people came to a stop. You see, the children were blocking the lead vehicle in our movement formation. In the time it took to read the last three sentences, each subordinate called me twice with increasing urgency in their voices and I couldn't call a time-out.

So what does volatility look like in your life? A senior executive friend recently shared with me the events of her day. She'd come into work with a well-thought-out list of ten things she had to accomplish. The emails and phone calls she received prior finishing her first cup of coffee that morning were so urgent and so wildly unconnected, yet influential on each other, that she struggled to find five minutes to eat "lunch" and skipped dinner all together. When she left her office near midnight, she had accomplished no tasks accomplished and accumulated 20 additional ones. Her BlackBerry continued to buzz in her pocket all the way home.

Volatility can leave us feeling overwhelmed, alone, and utterly unprepared to lead effectively. In business, people's lives may not be on the line, but their livelihoods surely are. In today's economy, that makes your volatility as severe as mine.

Here are three ways to lead more effectively in a volatile environment:

1. **Ask your team to translate data into information.** We all want as many relevant facts as possible when making decisions. But if you're getting too much raw data, rather than the right data, selected and meaningfully combined into usable information, you won't have time to turn it into the understanding required to make decisions in volatile circumstances.
2. **Communicate clearly.** Buzz words, catch phrases, and one-liners fall flat in a volatile environment. A great role model is Winston Churchill. A fantastic communicator, he once said "the small words are best." Anything over three syllables didn't make his cut and neither did any statement that was not direct. Save the pithy slogans for your marketing campaign.
3. **Ensure your intent is understood.**

The challenges inherent to a volatile environment require agile leadership and flexible organizations. If your subordinate leaders fully understand your intent, they'll be better equipped to appropriately handle violent and unpredicted shifts in the environment. In the military, commanders communicate their intent in the form of a purpose, key tasks, and an end state. The purpose is a contextual frame of reference and can include moral reasoning and physical goals. Key tasks provide concrete incremental goals that if accomplished will support achieving the desired results. Finally, the end state describes what success should look like when the dust settles.

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