PIVOT PERSPECTIVE

Build agility in a VUCA world.

by Scott Beckett

Do you remember way back in 2019 when talk of tariffs and trade tensions dominated nightly news broadcasts? The volatility confronting business leaders in 2018 and 2019 was significant, to be sure, and yet with breathtaking speed the COVID-19 pandemic this year has shifted our understanding of what it means to be living in a VUCA world—volatile, unpredictable, chaotic and ambiguous.

If our perspective on what VUCA conditions look like has changed, though, the principles for responding effectively to them have not. As authors Suhayl Abidi and Manoj Joshi wrote in their 2015 book *The VUCA Company*, an organization's success in navigating through volatility, unpredictability, chaos and ambiguity will, in large part, boil down to its ability to:

1. Anticipate the issues that shape conditions
2. Understand the consequences of issues and actions
3. Appreciate the interdependence of variables
4. Prepare for alternative realities and challenges
5. Interpret and address relevant opportunities

These five capacities encompass both preparedness and responsiveness, and VUCA conditions reveal an organization's agility with each. This holds true regardless of whether the organization is a global corporation, a government, an educational institution or another entity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the precariousness of some of the structures propping up our organizations' daily operations. Consider how much weight many organizations long expected these to bear to be able to continue their work with minimal deviation from how we've always done things. These structures may be literal—IT infrastructures to allow not just some but most employees to work from home, for example, or e-commerce systems allowing customers to easily make purchases and access resources and support online. They may be social—the childcare and elder-care networks that allow employees with caregiving responsibilities to maintain the same workday as the rest of their team. Wherever investment in preparing for "what if?" has been lacking, that failure to plan is now exposed.

The silver lining, if there is one, is that

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this experience has demonstrated what is necessary for an organization to be more VUCA-ready. Most important: Build agility throughout all levels of the organization—within the senior leadership team, yes, but also among lower-level supervisors best positioned to flag evolving conditions on the ground and support local teams in responding nimbly to them.

What does this look like in practice? Agile, from a software development perspective, involves dividing tasks into short phases of work and frequently reassessing and adapting plans based on new information. This is not to diminish the importance of having a guiding long-term vision, but even best-laid plans will be disrupted. Approaching any major organizational undertaking—whether that is reopening (or reclosing) physical offices or mapping out the launch of a new business line in response to changing customer needs—from this work-reassess-adapt-repeat framework will build vital agility across

project teams. Further, hiring and promoting individuals with a demonstrated track record of adapting—and helping others adapt—to changes in direction can play a critical role in helping the organization overall become more VUCA-ready.

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Even within the radically changed business environment created by a global pandemic, flexibility is not demanded only at points A, B and C en route to some kind of "new normal." The ground does not—will not—stop shifting underfoot. Agility is an everyday imperative in a VUCA world. Insistence on sticking to the plan, even if it was only yesterday's plan, can mean missing market opportunities and, worse, damaging the trust of those who depend upon the organization. **IQ**