The Necessity of Effective Leadership in a VUCA Environment: A Conceptual Discussion.

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Abstract

The current global operating environment is characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). If organisations are to survive and prosper in this VUCA environment, effective leadership is a necessity. This paper is a conceptual discussion which positions effective leadership as necessary for survival and success in a VUCA environment. Although it is the responsibility of leaders to ensure that their organisations are responding effectively to the requirements of the VUCA environment, scholars have found a deficit of leadership competencies necessary for people to work in a VUCA world. Leadership models and tools that effectively worked in the past cannot be effectively inferred to the present and the time has come for new leadership models that are compatible with the requirements of the VUCA world. Sustainable success requires leaders who are able to come up with a compelling vision and then articulate that vision to all stakeholders. Effective leadership in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment demands men and women with a strong character. Contemporary leaders should be flexible and quick to change their plans, work schedules and leadership styles as the situation demands. Leaders should prioritise the acquisition of new and relevant skills and sustain their physical, mental and emotional fitness so that they effectively deal with the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations they face.

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1.0   Introduction

The world is changing in a faster way that it is becoming difficult to understand what is happening (Tudorache, Ispas & Barsan, 2020). It is filled with chaos and turbulence, with unpredictability becoming the order of the day (Sinha & Sinha, 2020). This calls for a radical rethinking of the strategies of understanding and handling the ever-changing environment. The world has been grappling with security challenges, economic turbulence, climate change, global pandemics and many other challenges emanating from globalisation, population dynamics, rapid technological innovation and a deficit in leadership talent (Jain, 2015). The leadership deficit is likely to get worse as many aging leaders and managers retire from their positions in a very short space of time. The current worldwide operating environment can be characterised as being volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, popularly known by the acronym VUCA. If organisations are to survive and prosper in this VUCA environment, effective leadership is a necessity. Although this applies globally, it is more pronounced in Africa, a continent beleaguered by many leadership challenges (Nemashakwe, Zinyemba & Gumbe, 2022; Nemashakwe, 2021; Bailie, 2018; Moghalu, 2017). This paper is a conceptual discussion which positions effective leadership as necessary for survival and success in a VUCA environment. The discussion will proceed as follows; firstly, the VUCA concept will be defined followed by a discussion on what the VUCA environment entails. Then, leadership in the context of the VUCA environment will be outlined followed by a conversation on the necessity of effective leadership in a VUCA environment. The paper will proceed to outline how effective leadership in a VUCA environment should be like before proposing a conceptual framework detailing the proposed essential elements of effective VUCA leadership. The paper concludes with a guideline for future research.

2.0   The concept of VUCA

The VUCA concept is believed to have been invented by the United States military to describe an environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Sarkar, 2016; Jain, 2015). It was coined to describe an entirely new situation that arose after the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Eastern bloc (Wolanin, 2022). As the cold war ended, expectations were very high for stability and

normalcy. However, instead of stability and normalcy, volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity emerged (ibid).

The VUCA concept has been borrowed by leaders in other disciplines such as business to signal "chaotic, turbulent, and rapidly changing business environment that has become the new normal" (Tudorache et al., 2020). Recent chaotic and turbulent occurrences include the 2008-2009 global financial crisis (Das & Ara, 2014) and the 2019-2022 COVID-19 pandemic (Ramakrishnan, 2021). VUCA symbolizes an operating environment which constantly changes in a dramatic and relentless way (Rimita, 2019). It signifies a change in the business' operating environment which requires astute responses (Mwinga & Mwenje, 2021). Organisations which operate in a world order characterised by advanced technological developments, rapid digitalization and the elimination of global boundaries cannot escape from dealing with complex and sometimes confusing issues.

Several studies focusing on understanding VUCA as a phenomenon have been carried out, although most of them have been confined to North America and other developed regions (Rimita, 2019). This can equally be said of papers focusing on management and leadership in the VUCA world which have been published over the last decade (Krawczynska-Zaucha, 2019). As a result, it can be concluded that a sufficient gap exists for studying VUCA as a phenomenon and its implications on management and leadership in Africa.

3.0   What VUCA environment entails

We are living in a world where everything is changing (Jain, 2015). Economies are changing, businesses are changing, principles are changing, ideas and many more things are changing. The world is experiencing big and small, predictable, and unpredictable, and positive and negative changes in a rapid way (Sinha & Sinha, 2020). These environments increasingly impede the capacity of many leaders to understand, decide, communicate and act decisively (Casey, 2020). Many leaders are becoming intimidated by the uncertainty and ambiguity of the prevailing situations that they decide not to act for fear of making a mistake. The section below explains what the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment involves.

3.1 Volatility

Volatility means the turmoil caused by the continually increasing change and the speed of the change (Michel, 2016). Ciceklioglu (2020) asserts that the change is unpredictable and non-constant. Since the change is rapid, it becomes difficult for the average person to cope with its speed. With volatility, established order is disturbed resulting in unexpected events (Wolanin, 2022). As such, there is an emergency of new concepts which people are not sure whether they are correct and are unaware of how they are applied.

3.2 Uncertainty

Uncertainty refers to the decrease of expectedness of decision-making phases of organisations and individuals (Michel, 2016). Organisations are finding it difficult to understand with certainty issues such as customer preferences, industry, and markets because of lack of clear conditions (Ciceklioglu, 2020). This has made collaborations and interpersonal relationships more fragile. Wolanin (2022, p. 176) asserts that "uncertainty nullifies the sense of control". It makes forecasting and decision-making challenging because of lack of predictability in issues and events. The volatile environment has made it difficult for leaders to rely on past events to predict future outcomes (Lawrence, 2013). This has made forecasting and decision-making very difficult.

3.3 Complexity

The contemporary world is becoming more and more complex as each day passes. Complexity emanates from impenetrable knowledge in today's business world which arises from the external environment and interweaves without fluctuating effects (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). It is becoming increasingly difficult for things to become unequivocally clear or exactly determinable (Sinha & Sinha, 2020). With complexity there exists many possible causes of an event (Wolanin, 2022). This has resulted in leaders having more than one problem or solution.

3.4 Ambiguity

Ambiguity refers to the confusion associated with the cause and effect of situations (Guterman & King, 2014). It explains the likelihood of misjudging events and situations

and the obscuring of facts. The division between what is good or bad, right, or wrong becomes unclear. People cannot agree on one version of what they see, hear, or perceive (Wolanin, 2022).

4.0   Leadership in the context of the VUCA environment

4.1   The concept of leadership

Leadership is one of the most important topics in human sciences (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). However, it has been very difficult to define and understand (Silva, 2016; Peretomode, 2012). This has resulted in many definitions and explanations emerging (McCleskey, 2014). Northouse (2015, p. 3) defined leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal". It has also been defined by Ramakrishnan (2021, p. 95) as "the art of influence and nurturance of positive changes in a complex adaptive system". Casey (2020) adds an important dimension by asserting that in addition to influencing people to achieve defined goals, leadership prepares people and organisations for the future.

The survival and growth of organisations depends on good leadership (Lekhanya, 2015). This is because the behaviour and attitudes of employees are influenced to a larger extent by the leadership exercised. Researchers have found leadership to be the most momentous aspect contributing to the performance of an organisation (Rahim, Abidin, Mohtar & Ramli, 2015). Having right leadership behaviours enhance the viability and success of an organisation (Arham, Boucher & Muenjohn, 2013). Exercising right leadership behaviours mollifies an organisation from failure (Madanchian & Taherdoost, 2017). Effective leadership moves both the organisation and its people towards a better future (Ramakrishnan, 2021). However, the problems that today's leaders face in a VUCA environment have no clear solutions (Ciceklioglu, 2020). This threatens the business' future and the leaders' careers.

4.2   The necessity of effective leadership in a VUCA environment

Although the term VUCA has become increasingly related to expectations for leaders to combat all types of crisis circumstances with intelligence and courage (Mishra, 2020), Hameed & Sharma (2020) and Wolfe (2015) concur that there is a deficit of leadership competencies necessary for people to work in a VUCA world. This has been supported by Ramakrishnan (2021) who asserted that the few leaders who are

available are unprepared to lead effectively. The leadership and management models that we have relied on for a very long time are quickly losing their validity (Ciceklioglu, 2020). The traditional models have proved insufficient for both organisations and people to manoeuvre in a VUCA world (Hameed & Sharma, 2020). Leaders find themselves without enough time to reflect resulting in them either acting too quickly or too late because they get trapped in analysis paralysis (Ramakrishnan, 2021).

Bennis (2007) articulated four major threats to world stability which included nuclear or biological calamity, a worldwide pandemic, tribalism and the leadership of human institutions. He asserted that to solve the first three problems, exemplary leadership was a necessity. The emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed a dearth of global leadership. Instead of being transparent and spearheading collective leadership, most leaders opted for the traditional authoritarian leadership. Resultantly, they failed to instill confidence in the people they led with disastrous consequences. Ramakrishnan (2021) has argued that leaders who were able to implement collective leadership; bringing in their political opponents were able to cope up with the COVID-19 pandemic effectively.

It is fundamental for leaders to be equipped in today's rapid pace of VUCA disruption to handle the innumerable changes that VUCA brings (George, 2017). A VUCA world requires a better quality of leadership (Hameed & Sharma, 2020). Leaders should devise ways of becoming comfortable in an uncomfortable VUCA world. This environment demands leaders who are prepared to take significant risk and formulate new strategies. It is critical that organisations modify their practices in line with this new normal (Ramakrishnan, 2021). This no longer requires leaders who only think outside the box but who remove the box entirely.

It is the responsibility of leaders to ensure that their organisations are responding effectively to the requirements of the VUCA environment (Ramakrishnan, 2021; Raghuramapatruni and Kosuri, 2017; Sarkar, 2016). There is consensus that in times of turmoil, leadership becomes essential to business survival and success (Mwinga and Mwenje, 2021). Business leaders should play a vital role in facilitating the viability of their businesses when they are operating in a VUCA environment. However, it has been noted that most organisations misunderstand and undervalue the importance of leadership in such circumstances.

A study conducted on 13124 leaders showed that the most daunting challenge facing leaders in the 21st century was operating in a VUCA environment (Rimita, 2019). The study further indicated that only 18% of leaders had the capacity to lead in a VUCA world. This clearly shows that only few leaders are ready to lead in a VUCA environment, with most of the leaders ill prepared to deal with VUCA challenges and headaches.

Leaders irrespective of their field of specialisation have been experiencing the VUCA features almost daily (Tudorache et al., 2020). Unfortunately, the frequency and the magnitude of the change is surpassing the skills that leaders possess, which calls for new perspectives on leadership and the upgrading of skills. Leadership rules that effectively worked in the past cannot be effectively inferred to the present (Sinha & Sinha, 2020). The time has come for new leadership models that are compatible with the requirements of the VUCA world.

4.3   Effective leadership in a VUCA environment.

Effective leadership in a VUCA environment demands a holistic shift in how organisations are led. If organisations are to survive and prosper in this current environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, new ways of leading and new skills are a necessity. What has made organisations succeed in the past will not guarantee success in the future. The following section theorises how effective leadership in a VUCA environment should be like. It details what contemporary leaders are expected to do and the skills they should possess if they are to lead their organisations to success this 21st century.

There is need for leaders who have the capability to visualize the future (Jain, 2015). When an organisation is undergoing a period of rapid change, stakeholders need direction, although, with the possibility of an adjustment in the route (Raghuramapatruni and Kosuri, 2017). It is the responsibility of effective leaders to provide such direction. They should have the bravery to act with conviction in the face of ambiguity and risk and the character to do the right thing in tough times. Contemporary success requires leaders with the vision to see opportunities in challenges. They should visualize opportunities where others are constantly seeing challenges. In the same way a magnet works, the greatness of a vision will attract the

different forces around it (Nurbantoro, 2021). Ciceklioglu (2020) believes that coming up with a compelling vision is necessary where volatility is present. Leaders should develop the ability to communicate the vision to all stakeholders so that they drive everyone towards the achievement of the vision (Ramakrishnan, 2021).

Strong organisations are built by leaders with strong values. Followers trust leaders of character because they believe the leaders are not selfish and will do the right thing for the organisation especially when the going gets tough. Casey (2020) believes that trust is the glue which binds the organisation together. An effective leader should have the character to do the right thing for the organisation especially in very difficult situations and when what is right is unpopular.

Contemporary leaders should not only believe in change but should also embrace it (Jain, 2015). They should develop agility (Tudorache et al., 2020). People, especially leaders need the flexibility to react to whatever outcome or situation. Flexibility enables leaders to recognise and acclimatize to the demands of a situation quickly by addressing both the bigger picture and its individual elements (Krawczynska-Zaucha, 2019). If organisations are to survive and succeed in this VUCA environment, leaders should be flexible and quick to make decisions revolving around making necessary shifts in people, process, technology, and structure (Das & Ara, 2014). Agility calls for leaders to be quick in changing their plans, work schedules and leadership styles (Ramakrishnan, 2021). Leaders who will lead their organisations to sustainable success in this VUCA environment are those who are able to work with anyone; what is known as people agility (Nurbantoro, 2021). Resources should be directed towards building capacity for future flexibility (Ciceklioglu, 2020).

There is need for leaders to create sound collaborations with stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers, shareholders, and society (Sarkar, 2016). The partnerships must be based on trust (Ramakrishnan, 2021). Nemashakwe, Zinyemba & Gumbe (2023) have argued that employees are key to the success of an organisation and as such leaders should allow them to freely express themselves without any fear of negative retribution. Ramakrishnan believes that for wise decision making, VUCA times call for collaboration from diverse groups. To deal with volatile situations, relationships between individuals connected to the organisation should be maintained at the highest level (Ciceklioglu, 2020). Leaders need to put more

emphasis on connections and effective communication with stakeholders. They should understand that the higher they go on the organisational hierarchy, the more time they need to spend influencing people outside their control to support their efforts. Wolanin (2022) believes that top executives should spend most of their time on external contacts appreciating their importance and power.

To succeed in a VUCA environment, the focus must be on collective as compared to individual leadership. This calls for leaders who are prepared to exercise responsible leadership for the sake of the survival of their organisations. Sarkar (2016) is of the view that responsible leadership combines the central qualities of the servant, authentic and transformational leadership styles. Responsible leaders encourage teamwork while at the same time setting high-performance targets (Ramakrishnan, 2021).

Although leaders must accept that their environments will be volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, they should never accept results dictated by external factors. As such, they should be at the forefront of creating the future they desire for their organisations irrespective of the challenges they will experience. To achieve that, leaders should focus their energy and time on those issues which bring the highest payoff for their organisations. This is not easy because in most instances, the situation keeps diverting the leader's attention from these crucial activities. These highest payoff activities are the hardest to do and as such, they require extreme commitment and a lot of energy on the part of the leader.

There is need for development of leaders at all levels all the time (Ramakrishnan, 2021). In fact, the development of leadership capacities in the VUCA environment should be the norm. This becomes more critical during the management of a crisis where the decisions made by leaders have far-reaching consequences. Traditional leadership development methods such as on-the-job training, coaching, mentoring and job assignments have been found to be falling short in developing the capabilities necessary to succeed in a VUCA environment (Lawrence, 2013). The methods have been found to be at odds with the demands of leadership in a VUCA world. As such, it is necessary for human resources and talent management professionals to reframe leadership development activities taking into consideration the VUCA world. Contemporary leadership development must increasingly focus on learning strategic

thinking, self-awareness, and agility. Successful leadership development must shift focus from behavioural competencies to complex thinking abilities and mindsets leaving leaders comfortable with ambiguity.

In order to achieve success in the VUCA world, leaders should obtain new skills and abilities (Johansen, 2012). Conciliatory skills will help to balance and eliminate polarization around the organisation (Ciceklioglu, 2020). Leaders with effective conciliatory skills will be able to calm down tense situations in which communication is interrupted and differences triumph (Johansen, 2012). It is imperative that they develop superior conceptual and social skills. Leaders with these skills and other extremely developed competencies guarantee the continued success of an organisation in times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

One of the toughest challenges for leaders operating in the VUCA environment is to sustain their physical, mental, and emotional fitness in a way that allows them to deal with the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous situations they face (Casey 2020). Effective leaders are the ones who can function at their best. To do that, Ramakrishnan (2021) advises them to focus on their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Leaders should find time to read to stimulate new insights, get new ideas and develop their intellectual capacity. They should develop the capacity to vigorously test prevailing ideas in the context of the emergence of new competing models (Nurbantoro, 2021). Leaders should also develop a regular exercise regimen to avoid fatigue, burn stress and frustrations, and build resilience necessary for the VUCA environment. They should also not overlook spending time with their families and periodically recharging because it builds in them capacity to successfully run the business' grueling marathon race.

Leaders should be in possession of as much information as possible for them to anticipate events and influence decision making (Wolanin, 2022). When leaders are in possession of information, they can predict what will happen, when and why. However, having more information on its own is not enough, necessary tools and skills should be at the leader's disposal to enable them to process the vast amount of information quickly and infer conclusions which will benefit the organisation. As we are operating in the digital era where information is widely available to such an extent that organisations may suffer from information overload, contemporary leaders must

develop special skills to process the complex information (Nurbantoro, 2021). In order not to be lost in the flood of information leaders find at their disposal, they need to develop clarity about what is right or wrong, true or false, and trustworthy or not.

To lessen ambiguity, leaders should allow experimentation (Bennet & Lemoine, 2014). It is only with intelligent experimentation that leaders will be able to deduce strategies that are beneficial or not especially in situations where former rules of business have ceased to apply. Uncertainty and complexity will not disappear even for the best prepared leaders. They should be ambassadors of change and forerunners of the future (Wolanin, 2022). Although, it can be difficult for leaders to predict the future, they can at least make sense of it. Leaders must be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel when others are only seeing darkness in the tunnel. They should then devise the path to take the entire organisation from the tunnel where there is darkness to its end where there is light.

When undergoing a bad situation, followers desire and expect leaders who are compassionate and walk in the shoes of those affected by the situation. Ramakrishnan (2021) believes that leaders should exhibit hope that together with the followers they can manage the crisis despite not knowing everything about the prevailing situation. To do that, they should be open about the nature and severity of the situation. They should always project hope that normalcy will return soon.

Having leaders who are relevant for the VUCA world begins at the selection stage with the hiring of leaders with the requisite skills. During the selection process, a structured interview must be designed to assess agility, complex thinking skills, self-awareness, openness to change and ability to collaborate (Horney, Pasmore & O'Shea, 2011). After attracting the leaders with these skills into the organisation, continuous development and refresher programmes are necessary especially in the critical areas of scenario planning. Leaders should be trained to anticipate future possible challenges and come up with possible solutions (Lawrence, 2013). This is meant to make leaders confident as they encounter a new situation. Sinha & Sinha (2020) propose simulations as a powerful learning tool for VUCA leaders because it allows leaders to practice skills in a non-threatening and safe environment.

5.0   Proposed conceptual framework.

Having discussed how effective leadership in a VUCA environment should look like to engender sustainable success, the authors propose the following conceptual framework. The framework depicted in figure 1 below symbolises the VUCA leadership necessary to take organisations to the next level and engender sustainable success.

Figure 1: Effective VUCA leadership
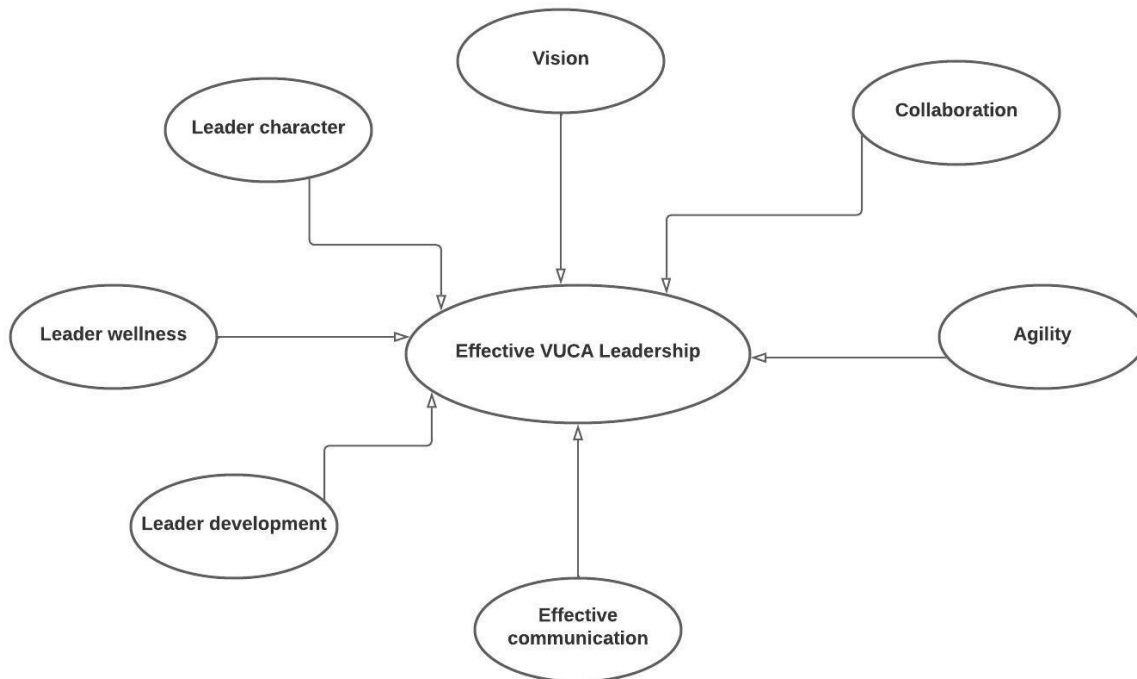
Sustainable success in a VUCA environment requires leaders who can come up with a compelling vision for their organisations. They should be effective communicators who articulate the vision to stakeholders so that everyone knows the direction the organisation is taking and works towards the achievement of the vision. Effective leadership in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment demands men and women with a strong character. It requires people with strong values, who are not selfish and who are prepared to do the right thing even when doing the right thing is unpopular. Contemporary leaders should be agile. They should be flexible to react to whatever outcome or situation. The leaders should be quick in changing their plan, work schedules and leadership styles. The VUCA environment demands the creation of effective collaborations with stakeholders such as employees, suppliers,

customers, shareholders, and communities based on trust. Leaders should put more emphasis on the creation and maintenance of these vital connections.

The only constant thing about the VUCA environment is change. What is only certain is that the world will keep on changing. Leaders should be prepared to change as the environment changes. This will only be possible if organisations prioritise the development of their leaders. This responsibility should not only be left to organisations but leaders should take the responsibility and initiative of self-developing themselves through the acquisition of new and relevant skills. Leaders operating in the VUCA environment should sustain their physical, mental, and emotional fitness so that they effectively deal with the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations they face. They can do this by maintaining a regular exercise regimen, read extensively to develop their intellectual capacity, spend quality time with their loved ones and have enough rest.

6.0   Conclusion and guidance for future research

The paper positioned effective leadership as necessary for survival and success in a VUCA environment. Effective VUCA leadership involves leaders coming up with a compelling vision. It also involves leaders who are agile and who possess a strong character. Effective leaders should sustain their physical, mental, and emotional fitness so that they effectively deal with the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations they face.

The paper has proposed a conceptual framework detailing essential characteristics of effective VUCA leadership. Future researchers may empirically test the proposed elements with the aim of either proving or disproving them as essential elements of effective VUCA leadership.

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