

An article by Martin Russell Hughes FIMI

co-owner and Financial & Operations Director of T10 Automotive Ltd © 2020

Is the company you own or work for an established organisation with a great product and track record but is now facing new and unprecedented challenges in the VUCA world?

VUCA (Volatile Uncertain Complex Ambiguous) is an acronym which has been around since the 1980s and is credited as a description of the new world in military terms immediately after the end of the Cold War – a time of re-evaluation not just for the military but also a time of change in politics and international trade.

I'm writing this article in unprecedented VUCA times in July 2020 when restrictions relating to the COVID-19 lockdown are slowly being lifted and businesses are changing the way they operate and deliver their products or services to customers.



My own business has gone through a period of reflection in terms of bringing forward ideas and plans which before March this year were in its 12-24 months journey.

LMS is curriculum driven and learners progress in a linear journey to complete a course or programme. LXP is student driven from a flexible Netflix style portal where learning is chosen and has recommendations for similar content e.g. if you liked this module, here are some more which are related.

Twelve months ago, we had a strategic plan to expand through more structured online learning through an LXP – a Learning Experience Platform which for anyone unfamiliar with this, is the evolution of a Learning Management system (LMS).

face learning and continue in business as usual mode. It took several weeks investment in time and finance to bring forward our capability to meet the different needs and operational methodology brought about by something so few companies had a contingency for.

The realisation that our new platform wasn't ready in March meant we didn't have an immediate alternative to switch from face-to-

The stark reality of the effect of lockdown has been devastating for so many companies. Every week it seems another brand has gone into administration or even disappeared completely.

For companies that are weathering the storm, they are finding new ways to trade. My local chip shop now has an ordering system which you call, place the order and they give you a time to collect your pie and chips from within perspex screened booths at the counter. The owner told me waiting times have dropped and trade has actually increased because he thinks customers feel safer in this altered environment.

The need for strength in leaders and managers is now more critical than at any time in the past two decades.

For businesses which are still operating, the responsibility for these types of changes rests with management. Those with significant control of the business may have had to look at their operational model or processes and restructure their people whose job it is to make new processes work not only for the business but for the customers as well. These people will inevitably need leadership and coaching to support them in the implementation of new processes and customer engagement.

Leadership in an organisation could be in conflict. There could very well be historical data back to 2005 that says the organisation’s approach works. There may be shareholders who simply say the company needs to work with what it has got and just get teams working to sell stuff so that the company can continue making a profit. The other side of this coin is likely to be concerned with making the necessary changes to make sure this happens.

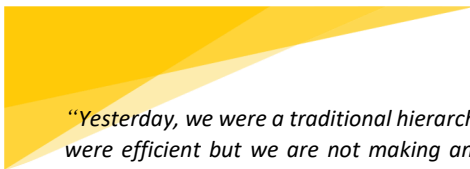


In his 2000 Harvard Business Review article Leadership that Gets Results, Daniel Goleman suggested that there are six ways you can lead, and that emotional intelligence will help you decide which to use when and how and with whom.

Visionary	Inspire for the future
Harmonious	Care for all – keep people happy
Democratic	Vote on decisions – majority rules
Command	Tell and demand
Pace setting	Show and do – get in close
Coaching	Reflective, developing people

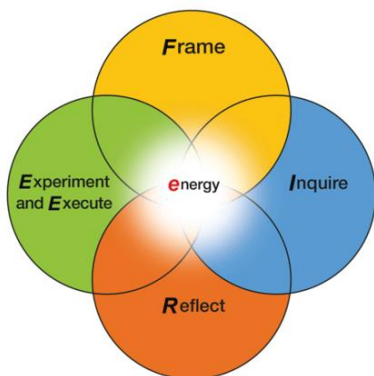
A case study of a company in Melbourne, Australia observed its market share was shrinking despite its suite of products and services growing organically. It was being left behind due to how slowly it had reacted to the changes needed to get its products out there.

The CEO took the step of engaging an external executive coach to help understand how embracing coaching as a leadership model and mindset for engaging its staff could move it from evolutionary to revolutionary thinking. The coach suggested a different approach could change the status quo and breath new life into what he perceived to be a stagnant environment which, if it didn’t change and move forwards from a “*but this is how we’ve always done it*” attitude, the business could fold.



“Yesterday, we were a traditional hierarchical bureaucracy. We were efficient but we are not making an impact in the VUCA world today. Tomorrow, we are a coaching culture.”

He understood the company was doing its best and that they already had a preferred coaching model in GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) which is great but was it flexible enough, was it too prescriptive where it needed increased flexibility and able to react to changes sometimes on a daily basis?



He suggested a different model called eFIRE which to quote the author – “*moves away from the idea that there is one solution to a problem situation.*” “*With complex challenges, the approach is to have a variety of methodologies, to seek connections between them and go where there is traction. However, there also needs to be intentional action to ensure focus and progress.*”

Embedded in the non-linear model is the assumption that organisational life is not predictable, and that leadership requires agility and flexibility to be effective.

Most leadership coaching models used in organisations come from life coaching or executive coaching where an outsider with a fresh set of eyes helps someone to enact change of some kind. eFIRE references these models but takes a perspective of the leader-coach. The leader has a point of view which in some cases might outweigh the point of view of the person being coached. This is the reality of organisational life. As Peter Drucker said, *“The people with the power make the decisions.”* Paradoxically though, eFIRE hands power to the person being coached — giving control in order to gain it. The five elements are:

Energy from values, purpose and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is exciting about this? • Why is this important to you right now? • What does a great day at work look like? • If you achieved success and were having fun, what would that mean?
Frame for intention, creative tension and boundaries with curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would you like to think about in this conversation? • What is important about this right now? • If you got exactly what you want, what would that look like? • If you achieved success, what would others notice?
Inquire through systemic exploration of multiple perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What’s happening now that is related to this issue? • What are your strengths / opportunities that help to achieve success? • How are you currently approaching things – what’s working and what isn’t? • What are the unexpected things that are happening?
Reflect on exciting possibilities using strengths and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are all of the possibilities you can think of? • What strengths of yours will help you? • What are some radical or unexpected options that might help? • If there were no constraints, what would you do?
Experiment and Execute for maximum impact through intentional action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is going to do what? • What might be the obstacles in your way? • Which way forward is the most exciting? • What specific steps come next? • How could you test out and experiment some options?

The key characteristics of the model

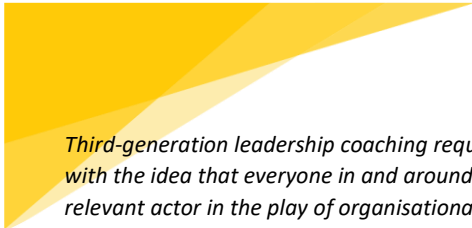
1. Assumes change is the norm in organisational life.
2. Embraces the emergent and unexpected.
3. Are non-linear — moves back and forth through five elements, noting that VUCA worlds are non-linear, so the coaching model needs to accommodate this.
4. Encourages a system and cultural view.
5. Takes conversations to deeper levels.
6. Works for single and multiple conversations.
7. Places energy in the middle — generated from meaning and purpose, values and relationships.
8. Requires a mindset of curiosity and experimentation.

With the complex and constantly changing challenges in a VUCA world, there need to be a variety of approaches, to seek connections between them and to go where there is traction in a spirit and practice of experimentation.

Leadership coaching in these turbulent times is now more critical than ever before.

Third Generation Leadership There have been two critical leadership approaches. First Generation Leadership (command and control) was the dominant model until the 1940s. Second Generation Leadership (compliance coupled with rewards and consequences) is still dominant today. This approach is now being rejected by companies needing strong leaders to make changes and keep it operational and competitive when outside influences threaten the longevity of organisations entrenched in traditional and inflexible methods of operations without a recognition that things have to change.

Third Generation Leadership acknowledges the need for a leadership approach that elicits engagement, commitment, and enhanced personal, group, and organisational accountability.



Third-generation leadership coaching requires engagement with the idea that everyone in and around an organisation is a relevant actor in the play of organisational and societal sustainability

The eFIRE approach requires leaders to coach from a mindset that will generate productive dialogue and not lead to formulaic approaches which leave conversations on the surface. The elements required are: Growth mindset, Reflective practice, Open, Pragmatic and Paradoxical, Ethical and Relational.

Sample coaching questions from the model include:


- What would you like to think about in this conversation?
- What is important about this issue right now – for you, others and the company?
- How does the issue fit with the various priorities and strategies of our team, division or organisation?
- At the end of our conversation, what would you like to be different?
- What are the consequences of not acting to change the situation?
- How is this issue/intention meaningful to you personally?

Complex challenges or problems are those that have many interrelated parts and can't be fully solved. An example is the challenge for a business to find a suite of services that will make the company successful. The global marketplace is too large and too complex to find a solution that will work in all situations. And even if there was such a solution, the VUCA world of change would soon make it obsolete unless the challenges were addressed appropriately and in a timely fashion.

Real time feedback is one of the most valuable functions of a leader-coach can use to feedback about performance that the coachee can use to calibrate where he or she is in relation to development objectives and the level of performance in relation to expectations.

There are many people working in organisations who go for years without hearing very much specific feedback at all – positive or negative. They are passed over for promotion without ever knowing why. They are therefore denied an opportunity to leverage strengths – and also to address what might be 'fatal flaws' as they seek to progress. Leader-coaches who are trusted and come from a position of care are uniquely positioned to give people real-time and authentic feedback. From this position, positive feedback is believed and can be used to inspire greatness, and negative feedback can be heard, processed and used to generate thinking and actions to remove blockages and promote development. The leader is noticing what is going on and reflecting back to the person what is going on from the leader's perspective. Then, the discussion opens up new possibilities using strengths and resources.

Jeff Weiner, CEO of LinkedIn, is an advocate of coaching in leadership. He talks of the need for leaders to let go of trying to know and do everything and to engage their staff so that the knowledge and power in the organisation can be leveraged to keep the organisation fresh and relevant. Similarly, Richard Branson is an advocate of engaging staff in a coaching style – while remaining an inspiring and powerful leader.



If it's so effective and relevant to the VUCA world, why is it that many managers don't choose to coach their teams?

Many factors influence whether or not a leader will embrace a coaching mindset and/or a methodology on a day-to-day basis. Leaders don't always choose to coach. It is not easy to lead in a way that is consistent with the eFIRE model. At the heart of the matter is the degree to which leaders trust themselves, their colleagues and the organisational context to a sufficient degree for them to engage in real conversations.

They may also have a fear of consequences related to issues discussed in a coaching session. Many managers voice concerns that when they open up conversations, they don't know what their team might do or say. They feel safer in containing the conversation to task completion. In the vast majority of cases, opening up difficult conversations – with an empathetic mindset – will result in a positive outcome.

I know of several examples of different workplaces where managers have emerged to say to their executive coach something like, 'Well, I had that tough conversation, and it turned out really well. What I hadn't realised was ...'.

It just goes to show, doesn't it? A colleague always used to say "don't email or text, pick up the **** 'phone." When you speak with someone, you engage with them on a different and more meaningful level and then each person has an opportunity to express things in ways they can't or won't in electronic form.

That's what it's all about – engaging with people. eFIRE accommodates this and is well worth a try in this ever changing world.

Thoughts and suggestions

Accept reality, embrace change and the different environment we now work in.

The business world is different in so many ways now, so our methods of operation need to reflect this.

The people at the heart of any business need to meet these new challenges in ways they haven't previously considered.

Things aren't as linear as they used to be and as changes will invariably occur more frequently, the role of a leader-coach will influence the people who deliver on behalf of your company.

Flexible thinking and constant re-evaluation must be fundamental for a business to not only to survive, but to prosper.

About the author Martin has worked in the automotive sector since leaving school at the age of sixteen. He started his career as an apprentice vehicle technician, winning student of the year in his first year at college. He became a master technician for several brands, then in management roles of service manager and on to regional aftersales manager for a retail group.

He spent a number of years in manufacturing leading a team of trainers for a global brand.

In between, he has worked as a college lecturer and spent time outside of automotive within commercial property in senior management and project management roles as well as a Learning & Development consultant in the financial and banking sectors and as a non-executive director in the third sector.

He is now financial & operations director at T10, a business providing automotive related learning and development to some of the best-known global brands.

Acknowledgements

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