

Living in a Vuca World - How to be firm and flexible



Most of us have a love-hate relationship with change. In some cases, we welcome change with open arms; in other cases, we resist or try to escape it. We love it when the immediate benefits are obvious to us. We hate it when it is demanding something of us - when we feel it threatens our comfort zone, security or way of life. When we set our eyes on the future and want to do so in a sincere and meaningful way, not merely as an academic exercise, we also need to consider our emotional response to the accelerated change we experience in the 21st century and not only our rational views about the change.

From time immemorial, mankind had to deal with disruptions to their daily lives. The forces behind the disruptions or change they experienced, however, were simple and recognisable. They were mainly those experienced in nature and by hostile people competing for land and resources. Nowadays, with three industrial revolutions behind us, we can still feel reasonably comfortable because of our ability to reflect and learn from past experiences by identifying the cause-and-effect relationships. However, it is our shared experiences today that tasks that used to be obvious are no longer obvious anymore - drafting three- and five-year strategic plans now often feels like a waste of time. Everything is happening too fast, is too unpredictable and complex. And yet, we cannot be self-defeating, throw our arms up in the air or stop trying to apply our minds to what we are experiencing.

Our challenges because of change

Tackling the future head-on is strongly linked to change - how we respond to it and how we are part of it. It is interesting that when you would ask an audience "Who wants change?", most hands will be raised.

Without being provided with specifics, we assume that change will address our own needs or wants – new experiences, a bit of adventure, a better, more comfortable world to live in, etc. When we are asked “Do **you** want to change?”, only a few – if any – hands are raised. We assume that changing ourselves will probably dislodge us from our safe and stable sense of self and we don’t want to risk that. And yet, we all want to feel we have and will have value. We all want to feel relevant. So the obvious question is, if indeed we want change, who then will take the lead? Where do we expect such change will come from? The pope, the president, the governing party, the CEO, or just the non-specific ‘they’?

Mind-change

A hard, unsympathetic message you hear in this current 4th Industrial Revolution is “disrupt or be disrupted”. The time to rely on heroes and saviours who will shield us from – or gently lead us through – disruption has gone by. As the world becomes fully connected, more democratised and open to diverse ideas and influences, we are required to develop our independent and critical thinking. In other words, we need to embrace self-leadership. In leading ourselves more consciously, we develop our mind from a socialised mind to a self-authoring mind and onto a self-transforming mind (Kegan 2009). From being completely tuned in to the voices of authority figures and the collective, we develop ourselves to find our own voice and direction in an effort to write our own success stories. We then, hopefully, develop further to being willing to also listen to others for deeper understanding and with more self-reflection, which enables us to recognise the filters through which we formed our previous perceptions. To tackle the future head-on is not a task only for a few daredevils who are willing to take risks in order for the rest to follow in their footsteps. In the 21st century, change puts the magnifying glass on every one of us to be willing to develop ourselves for the challenges ahead.

Emotional and spiritual change

We are rational as well as emotional and spiritual beings. Tackling the future head-on and working through change can mess with our firmly-entrenched emotions, values and beliefs. We have already experienced the rapidly increasing accessibility of information and knowledge. We have experienced a diversity of worldviews, cultures, customs, beliefs and value systems. We probably have become less judgmental and less defensive, while those who reject change might feel threatened and become even more defensive.

However, to effectively navigate the stormy waters of change will require us to collaborate and trust others, which means that we must not only open our minds, but also our hearts. It will be difficult to effectively collaborate with others if we remain distrusting and cynical, saying one thing, but thinking and believing something else when we engage. Certainly, we carry the risk of being disappointed when we open our hearts to others, but in leadership, we expect to see both sides of trust: being trustworthy and being trusting. In true leadership, you don’t wait for others to reach out, you reach out first. For some of us, this probably means that we have to let go of whatever holds us in the grip of cynicism and

fear.

Our relationship with technology

New technology brings with it change, and many of us probably also have a love-hate relationship with technology. It is easy to hate technology when we perceive it as something threatening, something that ruins the beauty and purity of nature or something that makes us too dependent on it – we quickly feel stress when it fails us. We love technology when it makes life easier or our work efforts more productive. In this love-hate relationship, we are not always sure if we should keep technology at a distance or open the door to it even wider.

Should technology scare us? Yes and No. If, for instance, it means that technology interferes negatively in our relationships, then yes, it should scare us. If it means that it facilitates connectivity and helps us the lives of others through conquering poverty, inequality or diseases, then we should praise it. The book by Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our Brains*, articulates what many of us feel uncomfortable with – how we can be enslaved and intimidated by technology at the expense of what we value as being good for relationships, where proper attention and concentration, focus and healthy living in general are important.

However, instead of asking whether technology should scare us or not, we should appreciate who is responsible for it in the first place. Be honest with yourself: it is obviously us. Even though technology could become a threat to us in a number of ways, we should remind ourselves that we remain responsible for what we have created and how we apply it in our private and business lives. In that sense, technologies are extensions of who we are and what we do with our abilities. They are amplifications of our power, but not separate living monsters to fear or fight. Where technology presents the *how* of change, humans present the *why*. Asking why we allow or encourage change and for what purpose we will apply it will ultimately determine our well-being and what we gain from the technology.

The 4th Industrial Revolution and our response

In a nutshell, the 4th Industrial Revolution refers to the dramatic social and economic changes that are the result of an array of technological breakthroughs and inventions, which have an impact on all industries. These include technologies such as the Internet of Things, Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality and Big Data, among many others. It can be described as the revolution of digitisation and cyber-physical systems (a mechanism that is controlled or monitored by computer-based algorithms). This latest revolution was preceded by the introduction of steam power and mechanisation in the 1st Industrial Revolution; electricity and mass production in the 2nd Industrial Revolution; and the internet and automation in the 3rd Industrial Revolution.

In his book, *Shaping the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Klaus Schwab makes the important point that the 4th Industrial Revolution is much more than just a description of technologically-driven change. “We

should not resign ourselves to the inevitability of default options ... Debate values at all stages of innovation ... The benefits include spreading prosperity more widely, reducing inequality and reversing the loss of trust that is dividing societies and polarising politics." Ultimately, changes need to be human-centred or at least human-orientated. If there is no benefit gained for humans from technological development, then it should not be supported.

"Tackling the future head-on" should not be interpreted too simplistically. If it is interpreted as an encouragement to seize opportunities merely for one's own success, then it is still old paradigm thinking. The challenges and opportunities experienced in the 4th Industrial Revolution are of a global nature and can only be treated as such. While there are opportunities for great advances in all industries, the world is also facing global threats and instability. Think about climate change, potential nuclear wars and social unrest due to high levels of inequality, increasing poverty and high levels of unemployment. The fact that the richest 1% own half the world's wealth is unacceptable and a high risk to social stability. No nation can solve global existential threats on its own. No matter where you live and what work you do, collaboration will be key in responding to 21st century challenges.

The 4th Industrial Revolution will disrupt and have an impact on all areas of our lives. In the new world of work, it is expected that many jobs of a mechanical, repetitive nature will soon be done by robots. It is estimated that close to 60% of all current jobs have at least 30% of tasks that could already be performed by computers. Furthermore, an expected 35% of skills will change across industries as new technologies, business models and markets develop. Instead of panicking about potential job losses, our response should be to focus on the capabilities that will be required in the new world of work, abilities such as creative and innovative thinking beyond the scope of a computer or robot.

Reskilling, "rewiring" our brains and generally re-inventing ourselves at the *young age of fifty* will become increasingly important to remain relevant in the working environment. It will be more beneficial to think in dynamic terms about the different roles we can play at work, contributing to work organisations or society, rather than to think of jobs in static or fixed terms. The idea of "best practices" will give way to more divergent thinking, experimentation and creative solutions in a rapidly changing world.

Leadership in a VUCA world

The acronym VUCA refers to what we have come to know as features of our 21st century world, which is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. When we reflect on and discuss leadership, these descriptors need to be central in our thinking of the context within which we need to lead. Similarly, discussing our readiness for the changes, forces or challenges experienced in the 4th Industrial Revolution, leadership has to be at the core of our thinking.

Leadership incorporates leading self, others and the change. Effective leadership requires balancing and

developing all three leadership areas. In developing our leadership, we hope to remain relevant and influential, which leads us to revisit our thinking paradigms, or the lenses through which we view the world. If we recognise the patterns of our thinking as they were influenced by historical, scientific and socio-economic factors, we can match them with appropriate effective patterns of thinking for the modern world. This will highlight the shifts we need to make. One such shift is the move from convergent thinking to divergent thinking.

We use convergent thinking to analyse problems and break them down into their parts for closer inspection and to derive a conclusive judgment and decisions. It is linear and systematic. However, convergent thinking does not help us to come up with creative ideas, explore possibilities and allow ourselves the freedom to experiment. For that we need to develop divergent thinking. Improving our divergent thinking is what can help us facing the 4th Industrial Revolution. It helps us to see the connections between things, to be flexible, not obsessed with what is best, but why and how we should take creative risks. In the environment of the 4th Industrial Revolution, we are challenged to replace the need for knowledge perfection with the willingness to seize the unknown. Thinking about our education systems, this necessitates a mind shift where universities become the birthplaces of ideas rather than merely of degrees to show how much I know ... we can always google instead.

To lead effectively in a VUCA world, you will find it helpful to be more curious rather than convinced; more responsive and even proactive rather than standardised; and more passionate rather than diligent. In a global study done by IBM, creativity, integrity and global thinking were identified as the top 3 leadership qualities for the new world of work.

Schwab emphasises systems leadership and explains that it is about a shared vision of change and actions that include all stakeholders of the global society. Ultimately, as effective leaders, we need to shift the structures of our social and economic systems in an effort to deliver sustainable benefits to all citizens, including those for future generations. The scale, complexity and urgency of the challenges facing the world today call for leadership and action that are both responsive and responsible.

Conclusion

An old African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." The 4th Industrial Revolution brings with it a sense of urgency, meaning that we have to apply the principle of global thinking for relevancy. However, our sense of urgency should help us focus on how to connect, collaborate and co-innovate. This must never happen through frantic actions to save one's own skin, one's own position or company. Such actions, using technologies just because they were available would be counter-productive and short-sighted. We might succeed fast for a while, but such approach will not sustain us. Instead, we need to follow the advice by many successful leaders to integrate our ethics and values in our decision-making and apply our steps to manage change together and in the interests of the wider communities. Do not only ask if something is feasible, ask for what ultimate purpose will the

change be applied.

From the above, it is clear that your commitment to the following will serve you well in tackling the future head-on:

Be resilient (adaptive and positive)

Be collaborative

Be ethical

Be creative

Be flexible

Be agile

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