What’s the purpose of leadership? How do the best leaders really lead today? After 20+ years of studying leadership, personally leading combat and corporate teams and helping Fortune 500 executives to lead, I’ve concluded that Leadership must change.

I believe great leaders positively disrupt their environment. The purpose of leadership is to unsettle the status quo, envision a superior outcome and align actions towards producing new results.

Yet, given this purpose, there’s never been a more difficult time to be a leader. Today’s executives must learn to compassionately disrupt in an already highly Volatile, Complex, Uncertain, and Ambiguous (VUCA) business environment. We’re talking about leading change in a world where predictability and control are limited. That means pushing individuals outside their comfort zones when they are already overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious. Leaders today must learn to challenge followers to the highest levels of performance without breaking them (or themselves) in the process.

For many years, we’ve relied on what’s known as a “heroic” leadership model to do this work. I believe a new approach is needed.
What’s Worked in The Past is No Longer Effective

So how should one adapt to effectively lead today? While no one approach works universally, there’s been a shift in the last decade from heroic, authoritative, command and control approaches to more collaborative and adaptive methods. This has been a product of necessity, not some egalitarian impulse by leaders to more fully empower their people. To be effective today, smart leaders know that they need to be more strategic, flexible, and balanced. In essence, they’re learning to VUCA Proof® their leadership style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Heroic Leader</th>
<th>Modern VUCA Proof® Leader</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership purpose</strong></td>
<td>To deliver results by creating operational wins and increasing shareholder value</td>
<td>To deliver results, but never at the expense of strategic goals and key relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key attributes</strong></td>
<td>Visionary, goal-oriented, confident, decisive and authoritative</td>
<td>Self-aware, humble, empathic, inclusive and facilitative</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation to the team</strong></td>
<td>Leads from the Front...“Follow me!”</td>
<td>Leads from where they are most impactful in a given situation (front, back, middle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ways of Initiating action</strong></td>
<td>Providing clear instruction and direction</td>
<td>Inspiring ideas and providing coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision-making style</strong></td>
<td>Tells then sells</td>
<td>Consults, delegates, or builds consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation to followers</strong></td>
<td>Hires and promotes good followers that contribute to one’s heroic status</td>
<td>Works to make others the “hero” by promoting their efforts and serving them</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>When it works best</strong></td>
<td>Environment is stable, problem solving is a function of technical “know-how,” and organizational focus is on efficiency of systems</td>
<td>Environment is unpredictable, problem solving is a function of new learning, and organizational focus is on innovation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The impact of VUCA in determining a leader’s effectiveness today cannot be overstated.

When the environment is one of Stability, Predictability, Simplicity, and Clarity (SPSC), the Heroic style leader is likely to deliver high performance. Clear direction and instruction is valued. Followers are inspired by a leader’s confidence and they seek out their experience, while fully buying into their visions. Yet, as the environment gets more VUCA-like, the Heroic leadership style begins to falter. Clear direction and instruction becomes less meaningful in a constantly-changing world. Confidence (or rather, false confidence) based on past experience can actually become a liability. Authoritativeness begins to undermine organizational competitiveness.

The opposite is true of the VUCA Proof© leadership style. When the environment is one of SPSC, followers may not value a humble, questioning, and consensus-building leader. These qualities may even be interpreted as self-doubt or weakness. However, as the environment becomes more VUCA-like (as now), needs shift. Leadership becomes more about harnessing the collective smarts of the group, rather than relying on any one individual’s knowledge. Connections must be made, relationships become more significant and flexibility becomes imperative. The most effective leaders exhibit a high degree of self-awareness. They facilitate new learning to accelerate innovation and solve what Warwick Business School Professor Keith Grint terms “wicked problems.” These are problems that require changes to attitude, values, norms, or behavior to be solved. This is the world we now find ourselves in, and why a VUCA Proof© style of leadership is becoming imperative.
Adapting Your Leadership Style to a VUCA World

The journey from a low performing Heroic leadership style to becoming a high performing VUCA Proof® leader is simple, but never easy! We all have our ingrained leadership habits. Most have been formed from our familiarity with the traditional Heroic leadership style. Breaking these requires us to first acknowledge the impact of VUCA on leadership effectiveness. Things have changed and we need to acknowledge that. Armed with greater insight, we become more open to explore VUCA Proof® leadership behaviors. We can make decisions about how we intend to personally change. Then, as with all behavior change, we need to experiment, reflect, learn and repeat until we gain new levels of competence. With time and practice we can become VUCA Proof® leaders - happier, more effective and better-prepared to meet today’s business challenges.
You have probably experienced first hand significant changes in your world over the last 3-5 years. Intuitively you understand that shifts to leadership style are needed. We need a framework that outlines what we are moving towards. We require better, more specific language explaining our leadership journey. **We need to know precisely what it takes to VUCA Proof© our leadership style.**

It starts with critically looking at yourself and then building greater individual capacity in three critical behaviors: being more passionate, bold, and mindful.

1. **Be Passionate** – Inspiring change requires a transfer of energy. If one is to transfer inspirational energy to others, they must first be inspired themselves. The more passionate the leader, the more inspirational they become to others.

2. **Be Bold** – As Nelson Mandela said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.” Leadership requires us to boldly challenge our followers, This means walking with them to edge of possibility, and acknowledging our own vulnerabilities along the way.

3. **Be Mindful** – Most people practicing leadership are in positions of authority. With authority it is easy to become self-absorbed. Effective leaders must practice empathy and compassion to a greater extent than. They must constantly seek out ways to serve others before self.
Once you’ve built a strong foundation in these behaviors, they can be applied at the team and organizational level. Importantly, the behaviors intersect to form three critical competencies for effective leadership in a VUCA environment: Alignment, Activation, and Attunement.

1. **Passion + Mindfulness = Alignment** – An **Aligned** leader understands themselves and how they may best serve the business and team. By being aware of their values and where they fit in the world, they are more prepared to communicate their vision and make decisions.

2. **Passion + Boldness = Activation** – In a fast-changing VUCA world, being too comfortable can lead to trouble. An **Activated** leader abhors mediocrity, avoids safety and inspires others with challenges. They know what it takes to achieve their leadership purpose. They help others to boldly push beyond the boundaries of what they believed possible.

3. **Mindfulness + Boldness = Attunement** – Probably the biggest shift leaders must make is towards greater attunement. An **Attuned** leader recognizes the emotional impact of new initiatives on followers and others. They “feel” where there are pain points and opportunities to strengthen relationships. Most importantly, they care enough to make bold acts of compassion that keep people motivated during adversity.
Choose To Lead Differently

So the question now becomes...**how VUCA Proof**® **are you?**

Truth be told, when I first started leading, it was mostly a command and control world and I was a heroic style leader. My own transformation to a more VUCA Proof® style was born out of necessity. It was quite a journey, but I now experience the extraordinary benefits. I also see with great clarity the imperative for old-style “heroic’ leaders to change - and fast!

If you or your team is interested in walking a similar path, I am pleased to offer VUCA Proof® team training and personal coaching programs. You can [download a brochure here](#).

**About the Author**

David Spungin is a Corporate Trainer, Speaker, and Executive Coach focused on transforming managers into high performing leaders. He holds a degree in Leadership Development from the United States Military Academy at West Point, a Master of Science in Organization Development from American University, and has completed advanced leadership studies at Harvard University. A U.S. Army combat veteran with corporate leadership experience, he now consults to primarily Fortune 500 companies. He is recognized for his ability to quickly assess an organization’s culture, develop creative learning designs, and facilitate highly engaging training events. David holds expertise in the MBTI, DISC, EQ-i 2.0 and PMAI behavioral assessments, as well as in non-verbal (somatic) communication. Additionally, he is an International Coaching Federation (ICF) certified coach.

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