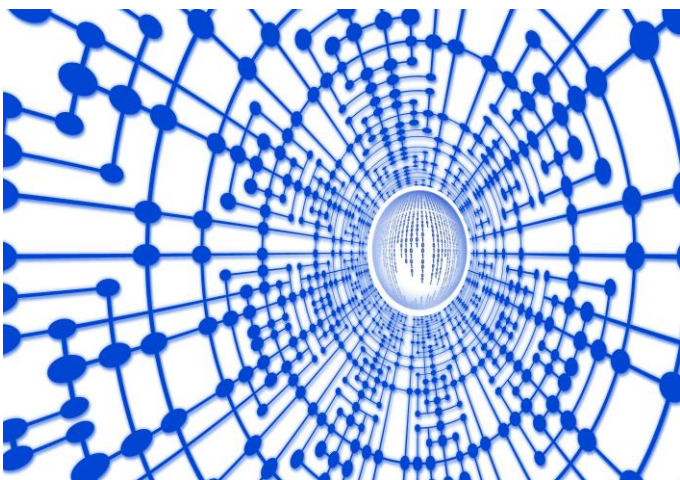


# Developing Leaders For A VUCA World

## *“Bringing The Development Back Into Leadership Development”*

*“The greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally unsolvable. They can never be solved, but only outgrown”. – Carl Jung*



In today's world, leadership is no easy feat. We navigate a landscape characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – a VUCA world that demands a new breed of leader. But how do we cultivate these leaders? The answer lies not in traditional learning, but in a profound journey of personal development, whose curriculum has largely remained hidden...up until now. Leaders and executive coaches who coach leaders, need to embrace this curriculum if they are to address the ever-widening leadership gap which exists today.

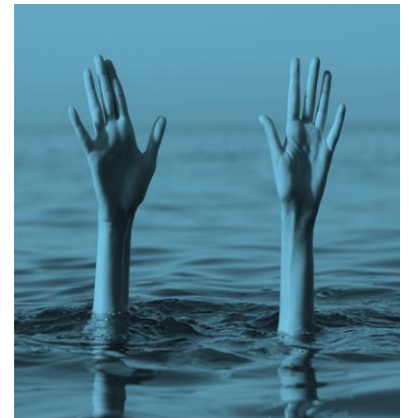
# Developing Leaders For A VUCA World

*Leadership in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment in which we live, is essentially shaping a desirable future (in the present) in collaboration with parties of diverse perspectives". - Sandra Martínez, John Agoglia, Matthew Levinger*

## The Demise of the Heroic Leader

The traditional image of the leader as a hero – a singular, all-knowing figure who stands above the fray and dictates solutions – is crumbling in the face of the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper argues that the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) landscapes leaders navigate today necessitate a paradigm shift in leadership, one that moves away from the heroic ideal and embraces a more nuanced approach as a ‘humble host’.

Leaders, burdened with the expectation of wielding control and possessing unwavering foresight, find themselves in an existential crisis. The sheer scale of the challenges they face leaves them feeling overwhelmed and *“in over their heads.”* This crisis beckons a transformation not just in our understanding of leadership, but also a transformation in our identity as a leader; of who we take ourselves to be. We must move beyond the heroic archetype and cultivate a more multidimensional view of our role as leader. The hero's journey, ironically, becomes a metaphor for this transformation – a journey of letting go of the heroic ideal to become a form of ‘*anti-hero*’ or ‘*humble host*’. Leaders must shed the mantle of the lone problem-solver and transform into facilitators who can harness the collective intelligence of their stakeholders.



This transformation is, at its core, a journey of deep and profound personal development in a way that most current leadership development only gives lip service to. The cruel irony lies in the fact that this curriculum of development remains largely hidden, especially from those who need it most. The hidden nature of this developmental curriculum results in a phenomenon of “developmental bypassing” – as leaders futilely attempt to learn and strategise their way through the complexities of VUCA environments in a vain hope to control the uncontrollable, predict the unpredictable and know the unknowable, all leading to their and their team’s burnout. What leaders should be doing is honing their inner game, their ‘*way of being*’ to cope with and even thrive in VUCA landscapes, where there is unpredictability, clashing cultures, contention, conflict, dissonance and inconsistency.

*“We are always playing two games – an outer and an inner game. The better the outer game and the more mature the inner game, the more effective is the person’s leadership.”- Bob Anderson and Bill Adams*

The path to effective leadership development in a VUCA world, in focussing on our inner game, can be summarised as a four-fold process: waking up, growing up, and cleaning up, ultimately leading to a new way of showing up – embodying a new ‘*way of being*’. These are the 4 ‘ups’, popularised by Ken Wilber and his integral theory.

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Waking up involves seeing with new eyes the VUCA landscape which surrounds us and the inherent disorientating dilemmas which leaders have to grapple with. Waking up also facilitates our becoming more conscious and present in the moment. Growing up entails confronting and dismantling our own ego-driven tendencies that hinder collaboration and shared decision-making. Cleaning up involves cultivating deep self-awareness well beyond the constructs of emotional intelligence, allowing us to exist in the present rather than being caught by unhealthy patterns of thinking, feeling and reacting honed by our past.

Consequently by acquiring a new way of showing up, leaders gain a newfound gravitas, potency and resilience. They are no longer burdened by the weight of the hero's mantle. Instead, they become adept at facilitating solutions through collaboration, drawing upon the collective wisdom of their teams, organisation and wider stakeholders.

The hero's journey in this context is not about conquering external challenges, but about conquering the internal limitations that hinder effective leadership in a VUCA world. It's a journey of deep and sometimes painful self-discovery, leading to a leader who is present, authentic and empowered to navigate the complexities of our times.

The rest of this white paper fleshes out the narrative highlighted above.

## Navigating the VUCA Labyrinth



In recent years, VUCA seems to have transcended its original meaning, morphing into a hyper-dynamic landscape that demands a constant re-evaluation. This hyper-VUCA landscape is personified in the word 'permacrisis' - a word that was chosen by Collins Dictionary as their word of 2022 and which writer David Shariatmadari describes as *"perfectly embodying the dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner"*.

The volatility of this landscape compels us to confront the illusion of permanence. Gone are the days of rigid five-year plans; the ground beneath our feet is constantly in flux. Uncertainty, the next element of VUCA, shatters the delusion of being in control. Globalisation, technological disruption, Covid and geopolitical instability collude to create an environment where external forces constantly challenge our ability to dictate outcomes.

Complexity, another facet of VUCA, demands we abandon the illusion of predictability. Linear cause-and-effect relationships vanish, replaced by intricate webs of interconnected factors, some of whose impact remains unknown. Predicting the future becomes akin to reading tea leaves in a hurricane. Ambiguity, the final VUCA element, forces us to surrender the illusion of being able to know the way out of this disorienting maze. Leadership dilemmas in this hyper-VUCA world are shrouded in a fog of *'unknown unknowns'*.

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*“Doubt is an uncomfortable condition, but certainty is a ridiculous one”. - Voltaire*

These combined forces challenge traditional heroic and egoic leadership models built around control and predictability. While having a vision for the future remains a valuable guiding light, we must recognise vision as a dynamic construct, adaptable to the ever-changing environment. A rigid, pre-defined vision risks becoming a mere fantasy in the face of VUCA's relentless dynamism.

Furthermore, the problems that arise in a hyper-VUCA world are often "wicked" – complex, interconnected and resistant to simple solutions. Our historic reliance on reductionist thinking, breaking problems down into manageable parts, fails us in the face of such intricacy. As Henry Mencken aptly stated, *“For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong”*. In a VUCA world the path forward is not a pre-defined roadmap, but rather an ongoing journey of exploration and adaptation. It is in this space of uncertainty that a hosting form of leadership emerges, guiding us not toward a pre-determined destination, but towards a future we collectively shape and re-shape in the face of the unknown. The host leader remains the prime mover in creating a new future, but no longer the sole problem solver.

So, how do we lead in this hyper-VUCA world? The answer lies in embracing agility, adaptability and a willingness not just to learn continuously, but develop continuously as well. Learning and development are two complementary, yet very different processes. Openness to new information, fostering a culture of experimentation and collaboration are crucial. Leaders must be comfortable operating in uncertainty, embracing a pluralistic "both/and" mentality instead of the limitations of "either/or." Their sanguine approach to uncertainty, is acquired not from learning, but from their willingness to undertake profound development that allows them to eventually leave their ego at the door, be accepting of disappointing people at times as well as being disappointed in some of the collective outcomes they are part of creating.

*“We don't need leaders who know about leadership – we need leaders who embody the capacity to lead in the midst of ambiguity and complexity”. - Peter Hamill*

## **The Leader's Odyssey: A Hero's Journey of Self-Development**

The VUCA environment creates an existential crisis for leaders, who are traditionally expected to be the all-knowing heroes, wielding control and charting a clear course, which in a VUCA world is constantly being rewritten. This crisis, however, is not an end point, but a starting point. It is an invitation for leaders to embark on a hero's journey of self-discovery, a process of creating new meaning and identity around their role. This heroes journey, as Joseph Campbell described, involves inevitable disorientation and struggle. The tools of the past no longer suffice and leaders grapple with "wicked problems" – complex, interconnected challenges that resist easy solutions. Through this very struggle, however, lies the opportunity for growth. The pain of feeling *“in over our heads”* invites us to continuously evolve.

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*“We may not be responsible for the world that created our minds, but we can take responsibility for the mind with which we create our world”. – Gabor Maté*

The hero's journey in leadership is paradoxical. It begins with a desire to be the hero – the sole leader with all the answers. Yet, the true hero's journey leads not to a triumphant conquest, but to a transformation: *‘from hero to host’*, a phraseology from Margaret Wheatley. The leader sheds the mantle of control and becomes a facilitator, drawing upon the collective intelligence of the team and wider stakeholders. This doesn't mean heroic leadership is obsolete. There will be times when subject matter expertise and decisiveness is required. However, the shift towards a more collaborative approach equips leaders to navigate the complex and wicked issues in VUCA landscapes.

This journey is equally a movement away from self-serving leadership, driven by ego and reputation. The true leader embraces an eco-centric perspective, prioritising the greater good. The focus becomes less about "doing" and more about "being" – cultivating a new way of existing in the world. This requires excavating and reworking our mental models and working models – the unconscious lenses through which we perceive and respond to the world. It requires our existing heroic identity to metaphorically die and give way to a new identity.

Personal development, the core of the hero's journey, differs from traditional learning. Leadership courses can teach us "what" to do and "how" to do it, but they cannot cultivate the "who" – the inner leader we need to become. This "who" of leadership – the inner development – remains largely invisible and therefore neglected. Ironically, it requires us to have travelled far on a developmental journey before we even wake up to the importance and existence of this inner game work. Once awake to it however, we must actively pursue this newfound developmental agenda.

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it's faced”.  
– James Baldwin*

*“One can choose to go back towards safety or forward towards growth. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again”.  
– Abraham Maslow*

This inner development is challenging. It demands confronting our limitations, facing into our illusions, embracing vulnerability and engaging in self-reflection, thereby seeing patterns within ourselves, some of which we might prefer not to see. It's a process of updating our internal operating system, revising our mental models (how we see the world) and working models (how we think, feel, and react in the world) to ultimately allow us to better lead across the VUCA landscape.

One of the keys to our inner development lies in what is described as the "subject-object shift." The disorienting dilemmas that once 'had' us in their grip become objects we can examine objectively. This newfound objectivity allows us to respond with greater potency and resilience. Perhaps the most impactful object to confront and make object is our own ego. By clearly seeing and acknowledging our egos limitations, we can move beyond self-serving leadership and embrace genuine collaboration.

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The hero's journey of leadership development is not a one-time event. It's a continuous process, a lifelong odyssey. Although there are no quick fixes, there exists countless "quick wins" – small steps that collectively build a leader's well-being, presence, resilience and effectiveness in a VUCA world. Leading in this complex environment demands not a singular hero, but a collective of leaders, each on their own journey of self-development, each prepared to navigate the unknown together.

## The Alchemy of Leadership Development: Waking Up, Growing Up and Cleaning Up to Show Up



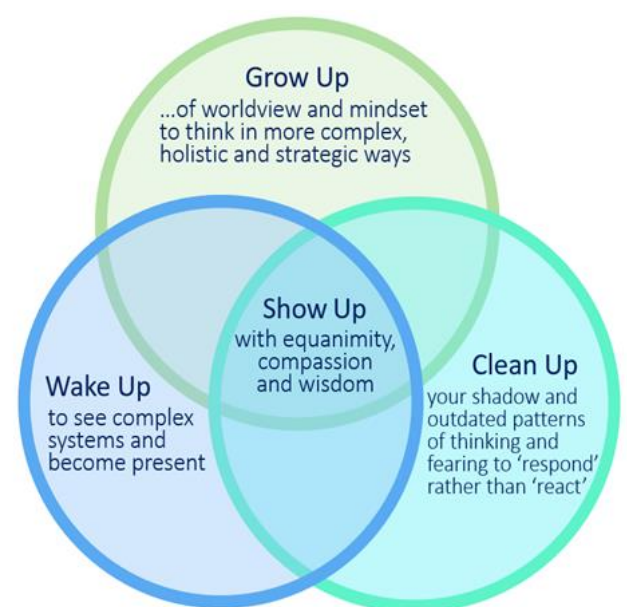
Leading in a VUCA world demands a potent version of ourselves. This potency isn't forged through external validation or heroic pronouncements, but through a dedicated process of internal transformation. This transformation from 'hero to host' is founded upon four pillars of personal development: waking up, growing up and cleaning up, ultimately culminating in a leader who shows up authentically.

Waking up involves a dual awakening: external and internal. Externally, we must shed the illusions of control and predictability that have long guided leadership narratives. We must recognise the inherent complexity of reality and the limitations of simplistic solutions. Internally, we must confront the myths of heroic leadership and cultivate

a profound level of self-awareness, self-management and self-regulation. This includes recognising the "here and now" practiced through mindfulness, allowing us to be more present in the moment.

Cleaning up is an act of befriending our inner demons. We must acknowledge the self-doubt and imposter syndrome that can plague leaders, particularly in the face of VUCA's uncertainties. This involves making our fears our allies, exploring the conditioning of our past that shapes our present and facing these limitations head-on. By acknowledging these fears, we objectify them and gain control, rather than being controlled by them.

Growing up signifies a shift in perspective. We strive to develop a nuanced way of thinking and being that mirrors the complexity of the world around us. This process, akin to Russian dolls, involves "transcending and including" our less developed perspectives. Growing up results in a leader who is agile, resourceful and adaptable. ©Baz Hartnell, 2024



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Through these interwoven processes of waking up, cleaning up and growing up, a leader develops gravitas - a powerful sense of presence. This "showing up" is the culmination of the journey, where the leader's developed "way of being" seamlessly integrates with their "way of doing." Importantly, presence isn't a skill to be learnt nor acquired, but is discovered within us, as a consequence of our deep inner game development work.

Our journey of personal development is a lifelong endeavour. There's no finish line, only continuous exploration through waking up, growing up and cleaning up. As this developmental process becomes ingrained in us, it evolves into "autopoiesis" – a state of unconscious competence in our ongoing development.

*“For most leaders, the great challenge is not understanding the practice of leadership; it is practising their understanding of leadership.” - Marshall Goldsmith*

While emphasising that fostering a "humble host" leadership style through personal development is crucial for leaders to lead in a VUCA world, there's also a place for honing our "ways of doing" through learning and acquiring new leadership tools and system frameworks designed specifically for the VUCA landscape. However, the effectiveness of these tools hinges entirely on the foundation laid by internal work. Developing the "outer game" of strategies and techniques is only potent when coupled with a well-developed "inner game" of self-awareness and authenticity. It's this potent combination that allows leaders to navigate the complexities of the VUCA world with resilience and wisdom.

## The Paradoxical Power of Presence: Leading As Host

The hero's journey of personal development from hero to host can feel Sisyphean, given the effort that has to be deployed in a never-ending developmental journey. Despite immense effort and work on our own development, we still can't achieve permanence out of impermanence, predict the unpredictable, control the uncontrollable or know the unknowable. Those disorienting dilemmas that initiated our development remain. So why embark on this seemingly futile developmental quest?



The answer lies in the transformative power of presence. Through the crucible of waking up, growing up and cleaning up, we develop a powerful "superpower" – gravitas and presence. This isn't about dictating outcomes, but about becoming more potent, resilient and catalytic in leading meaningful change. We relinquish the fantasy of controlling a future we can't predict; we no longer play out in the present our conditioned responses from our past, but instead embrace our passion for service in the present moment of the wider good.

Showing up with presence in a VUCA world demands a profound equanimity, a deep compassion for ourselves and others and a well-honed wisdom to navigate chaos and discern what we can and cannot influence. It's from this platform of a "humble host" that our true leadership potential flourishes.

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Imagine a surfer riding a monstrous wave. This is the leader with presence. They navigate the turbulence of VUCA not by attempting to control the wave, but by understanding its power and skilfully riding it. This contrasts with the heroic leader who gets pummelled by the unpredictable forces, crashing against the unforgiving shore.

The exact manifestation of a "humble host" defies easy categorisation. However, some key characteristics emerge. Inner confidence, calmness under pressure, and a demonstrable authenticity are all hallmarks. Leaders with presence also possess the courage to act even if their action disappoints some. This latter quality, while unconventional, is crucial.



*"Authenticity is not something we have or don't have. It's a practice, a conscious choice of how we want to live. Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true self be seen". - Dr. Brene Brown*

So, the leader who has embarked on this hero's journey doesn't achieve a utopian world. The disorienting dilemmas remain. However, they are no longer insurmountable obstacles. This is because once we have woken up to the VUCA world and its wicked problems, we will have made visible that which was previously invisible to us. This new awareness is amplified when operating as a humble host, where "telling and arguing" give way to "asking and questioning"

and we are able to therefore think in dialogue with others to generate new knowledge and understanding. Such dialogical thinking (thinking with others) will allow us to collectively discover temporary footholds in the VUCA world and we will be able to operationalise these footholds to make an impact to lead into fruition what we care about.

In summary, it is through deep personal development that leaders gain the profound presence, authenticity and wisdom to navigate the chaos, becoming a catalyst for positive change in the service of their passions. They are not dictators of the future, but skilful surfers riding the ever-changing waves upon the VUCA ocean.



Baz Hartnell is a coach with over 20 years' experience of coaching senior leaders in the most volatile and complex environments, notably the U.K.'s NHS and Civil Service. High levels of executive burnout exacerbated by the chaotic mess that Covid brought, has compelled him to codify his coaching practice in order that executives and their coaches can undertake this inner-game developmental agenda for themselves and at scale, to meet the incessant VUCA environment with greater equanimity, compassion and wisdom through their leadership. He has come to realise that there is a largely hidden, yet necessary inner-game curriculum that needs to be studied and experienced if leaders are to navigate the messy, disorderly and confrontational VUCA landscape. He can be contacted at [baz.hartnell@vucaleadership.co.uk](mailto:baz.hartnell@vucaleadership.co.uk) or via his website: [www.vucaleadership.co.uk](http://www.vucaleadership.co.uk).