



# Leadership in Extraordinary Times:

## *Where Leader Development and Performance Meet*

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### **Extraordinary Times**

We live in extraordinary times requiring extraordinary measures. According to a recently released study by IBM Corporation, leaders in the world's private and public sectors believe that *complexity* is the biggest challenge facing them today. 79% of the 1500 CEO's surveyed anticipate even greater complexity ahead. Less than 50% of the global CEO's believe that their enterprises are adequately equipped to even cope with this highly volatile and complex business environment, let alone thrive in it. Given the inherent challenges of a business world filled with complexity and volatility, the CEO's have identified creativity as the number one leadership quality that is essential for traversing this kind of environment. Creative leaders will bring qualities that are uniquely made for this kind of a business challenge. According to the study, creative leaders will seek *"disruptive innovation, consider unorthodox ways to change the enterprise, are comfortable with ambiguity, and are courageous and visionary enough to make dramatic decisions that change the status quo."*<sup>1</sup> These are lofty expectations at a time when very little of corporate leader development programs have addressed creativity and other critical leader qualities like situational awareness, mental agility, flexibility and adaptability.

We tend to think of ourselves as living in a period of unprecedented change, both in terms of velocity and complexity. A period of change? Very much so. Unprecedented? Hardly. What is different today is that the times are marked by change that is far more discontinuous and compressed in time than ever before. Discontinuous change is unpredictable. Examples at the national level are 9-11, Katrina and the Global economic crisis. And more recently, the Gulf oil spill. Sudden, unexpected, unforeseen and devastating. Likely outcomes of this kind of change are blurred vision, purpose, and direction. Witness FEMA and Homeland Security, who are still struggling with these issues. There is an element of discontinuous change in our personal lives as well. The armed forces are directly experiencing these forces of change. It is causing them to rethink how they fight the new kind of enemy. Business enterprises must also rethink how they will do business in this new global environment.

## A Different World

There is a “new world” rising and it isn’t pretty. It is a world characterized by four major barrier forces: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. These are key characteristics of today’s performance environment. They were first highlighted by the US Army War College and the National Defense University in alerting the armed forces to the nature of warfighting in the future. The acronym VUCA became a popular way of depicting the nature and impact of these forces and was integrated into the lexicon of strategic thinking and planning.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the military environment and, more recently, the CEO’s in the aforementioned IBM survey envision some of the same characteristics in the current global economy and the challenges they will bring to the business enterprises.

It is my intention to integrate these four forces into a discussion of essential leader capacities and critical mental skills essential for exceptional leader performance in extreme conditions. I emphasize *exceptional* and *extreme* because both are extraordinary, reflecting behavior and condition. Bob Johansen, a Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for the Future also has some insights on leadership in this environment. He has connected these elements with certain leader attributes: volatility and vision, uncertainty and understanding, complexity and clarity, ambiguity and action.<sup>3</sup>

**Volatility.** Explosive change. The rate and speed of change. Volatility calls for vision. Leaders need to learn to truly visualize and “see” potentialities and possibilities. Volatility impacts an organization by creating fear and an aversion to taking needed risks. Volatility leads to reverting back to basics. Peter Vail coined the phrase “permanent white water” to describe the rate of environmental change in the world as we know it

**Uncertainty.** Unpredictability of change. The lack of clarity and the sense of awareness and understanding of issues and events. Uncertainty calls for understanding. Leaders need to be comfortable being uncomfortable. Uncertainty causes paralysis by analysis.

**Complexity.** The intricacies of key decision factors. The multiplicity of forces and events and the chaos that can surround an organization. Complexity calls for clarity. Complexity causes a search for black and white solutions.

**Ambiguity.** Vagueness about the current situation and potential outcomes. Lack of certainty about the meaning of an event. Ambiguity exists when a given event or situation can be interpreted in more than one way. It is the confusion over reality and its potential for misreading events, especially over cause-and-effect. Leaders need to develop flexibility, agility and decisiveness, to exercise intuitive decision making. Ambiguity calls for action.

## The Battlefield of the Mind

So how do we operate in this environment? What do we expect from our leaders? Does this change the way we need to look at leader development? Do we place less emphasis on technical and professional competencies? It would be foolhardy to significantly alter emphasis on what has proven to be so successful in the past. These are the basic areas that must always be present in the development of our business leaders. They are based on rote repetition,

structured protocols and extensive classroom instruction. In preparation for the “new world” environment, we must decrease the number of repetitions in education and training and increase awareness with fewer repetitions. It is less about how many times you do something and more about how aware you are of what you are doing. It is more about how I am learning and less about what I am learning. The brain has an incredible capacity to learn if concentration is intense and focus is razor sharp. As far as the brain is concerned, learning is a delicate balance between repetitive experience and attention.

In a “new world” environment, decisions are really dilemmas to be addressed, not problems to be solved. Such dilemmas require a different level of judgment and intuition because they are more difficult to resolve, more difficult to communicate, more difficult to reverse, take longer to implement and are filled with ethical implications. Leadership in this environment is further complicated not only by the rate of change but by uncertainty about what the effects of even known change are likely to be.<sup>4</sup> This uncertainty results from both the complexity at the strategic level and from incomplete knowledge about the current situation at the tactical level. The resolution of decision dilemmas calls for intuitive and instinctive leadership. The traditional leader decision models emphasizing data, information and command centric decision making will not carry the day. The speed and complexity with which events unfold will require deep knowledge and broad understanding and wisdom by our leaders and our soldiers. We need to grow leaders who are flexible, highly adaptive, mentally agile and comfortable being uncomfortable, very much like how elite athletes and top coaches train themselves. These are not task competencies or capabilities. They are underlying mental capacities that can be generalized across situations.

### **Critical Leader Capacities**

The challenge of leadership is to be exceptionally effective in extreme conditions. Nothing less is acceptable. In such an environment, leaders need to be at their best on a personal level, beyond technical and professional competency. They must have certain leader capacities that emanates from critical mental and emotional strength. They need to be able to directly respond to the challenges presented by rapidly evolving, ever changing and unclear situations; they need capacities that provide a sense of control. There are few leader capacities more important for successful leadership in this “new world” than situational awareness, mental agility, learned instinct, and commander’s calm.

**Situational Awareness.** Perceiving *salient elements* of a rapidly changing environment in order to *anticipate, understand* and *act* on future events.

**Mental Agility.** Applying a *creative solution* to a *complex problem* in a *timely manner*.

**Learned Instinct.** Taking action based on *intuition* and *learned behaviors* that become *automatic* in time through repetitive practice and repeat experiences.

**Commander’s Calm.** Responding *mentally, emotionally and physiologically* in a cool, calm and composed manner.

## Root Mental Skills That Build Leader Capacity

If you want to be extraordinary, you must train extraordinarily! Einstein defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again while hoping for a different result”! If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always gotten. In this “new world”, leaders must do something new and different. They must attain and sustain an exceptionally high level of confidence, gained through self-control and self-regulation. They must train themselves to be self-aware leaders who can keep their eyes on the prize; maintain a positive, optimistic and adaptive mind-set; have razor sharp focus amidst distractions; and remain cool, calm and collected under fire. In a world of uncertainty and ambiguity, we cannot “train to the test”. We must focus on developing core root skills and then rely on the leader to be able to generalize these root skills to future situations. This differs from developing competencies and capabilities. One lesson I learned as a young Infantry Company Commander in Vietnam is that in critical situations, one action changes everything and the leader had better be prepared to be the one to make it. What good is experience if a leader does not reflect on it through the lens of confidence, self-awareness and self-control.

In this “new world”, the windows of opportunity open and close very quickly. Leaders need to prepare themselves ahead of time with root mental skills that provide them with the tools for recognizing, seizing and acting on those windows of opportunity. Certainly using the mind to envision a future is right at the top of these skills. The ability to create a clear image of the desired end-state and then articulate that vision to others is critical for alignment. By the way, the best way to communicate a vision to others is through storytelling. If the leader tells the right story at the right time in the right way, others will see the same “picture”. Fewer words, less paper! In addition, sensing a situation accurately calls for fine tuning our senses and then trusting them to provide the needed clarity for “simplifying” complex situations. The ability to be adaptive and agile, to be *comfortable being uncomfortable*, are key for timely and effective action. The new corporate “battlefield” places the mental skills that develop awareness, adaptability, agility, resilience, and self-regulation at an absolute premium.

An integrative and systematic mental skills education model and supporting training program was created at West Point in 1989 by this author through the establishment of the Performance Enhancement Center. That center evolved into the current Center for Enhanced Performance (CEP) with the integration of the academic study skills programs. That framework has proven to be highly successful in organizations and performance situations beyond the Military Academy.

The framework is the basic foundation of the work we do and has been expanded to mental skills training for business executives, military and government leaders, and elite athletes. It has also recently been adopted by the US Army in the form of the Army Centers for Enhanced Performance (ACEP). Now located on nine Army posts, the Army’s ACEP program is a powerful tool for developing the mental skills essential for exceptional combat performance. This very same concept was created and tested in a Fortune 500 company several years ago. The results were exceptional in developing business leaders who were confident, agile and adaptable, mentally and emotionally in control, and visionary.

So what are these critical root mental skills that build and develop the leader capacities that are essential for extraordinary performance in extreme conditions? And what are some of the key discoveries from the new science of the brain that impact how we develop these mental skills and how we view the mind in general?

**Goal Setting.** (*Eyes on the Prize*) Any journey starts with first knowing where you want to end up. Setting goals is relatively easy. Making them happen is not. A key part of any lasting goal setting process is the idea of a mission. Knowing and living a mission provides the motivation and perseverance to forge ahead when the going gets tough. It is much more than having a goal. Much has been written about goal setting and goal setting techniques. Our approach to setting the target is not so much about a technique as it is a process for identifying what one really wants to accomplish, the inclusive smaller steps needed to get there, and the positive mindset necessary for ensuring enduring determination. Stopping with a list of goals and objectives is just not enough. It does not activate the energy needed to see them through to completion. They must be deliberately connected to our daily thoughts. Transforming objectives, which in their simplest form are actions, into daily thoughts connects what we are thinking with what we are doing. It is the way our brains operate.

**Adaptive Thinking.** (*We Become What We Think About Most*) Confidence is a key determinant of success. It comes from within. No one can give it to you. It reflects how we view ourselves and how ready we see ourselves for oncoming challenges. We do become what we think about most. The brain learns through repetitive experience. That is true for mental skills as much as it is for physical and motor skills. People carry around images of themselves – of who they are and how they perform. These “pictures” begin at birth and continue throughout the life cycle, capturing all of our experiences. These experiences reflect both the successes and failures and the manner in which they are interpreted and stored. Much of this picture of ourselves is created by our thoughts, positive and negative, maintained and reinforced by the continuous chatter in our heads. Given the negativism surrounding our lives, keeping a positive outlook and having trust and confidence in one’s ability is really hard work.

Our brains don’t help here either. There are areas in the old brain stem (primitive brain) whose whole function is to magnify negative incoming messages and minimize positive ones. To make matters worse, the limbic system, which is the seat of emotions, floods us with negative emotions and perceptions with the primary task of predicting the worst. These brain functions carry over from our pre-historic days in the African Savannah and still function as if we were still there. It is easy to see that from the moment of birth, one of the continuing struggles is to fight these built-in mechanisms with our logical, thinking brains. Leaders can learn to shift from negative to positive patterns of thinking and to control their self-talk. Recognizing that people need to take responsibility for their thoughts, training can be provided that helps them achieve that control.

**Stress-Energy Management.** (*Thriving in Adversity*) Stress and energy go together. Anyone can perform well when everything is going just right. But what about when conditions are unfavorable, when things are going against you, when the pressure is on, when things are not according to plan? Who really delivers then? There are individuals who actually thrive under these conditions. They welcome the pressure. It drives them. It gives them energy and desire coupled with the ultimate satisfaction of having overcome all odds while doing something exceptional. These are your peak performing leaders. The debilitating effects of stress on individual and organizational performance have been well documented in recent years. In the war on terror, stress manifests itself in the form of increased rates of PTSD and TBI, among other stress casualties.

Many organizations offer stress management seminars in hopes of raising awareness about the effects of stress and providing simple coping mechanisms. However, research on peak performance in sports and the military has shown that the ability to handle oneself in high pressure and demanding situations is less about the stressors and more about the individual’s



response to them. The solution lies in a more systematic and integrated approach to providing the necessary tools for actually thriving under pressure, not just surviving. John Eliot points out in his book, *Overachievement*, that exceptional performances are not about being relaxed. They are about being energized and excited and impassioned. What needs to be learned and developed is the ability to know one's optimal arousal levels (energy) and then have the tools to go there when needed. Understanding how stress works from a neuro-physiological perspective, having means at your disposal for altering its effects, and receiving quality hi-tech feedback on how you are doing are powerful tools for learning how to thrive in pressure situations and for living your life.<sup>5</sup>

**Attention Control. (Concentration Amidst Distractions)** In their insightful book, *The Attention Economy*, Thomas Davenport and John Beck discuss how in today's attention economy "the new scarcest resource isn't ideas or talent, but attention itself." The demand for our attention in modern society is unparalleled in both scope and intensity. Yet the way in which we attend has not significantly changed over time. We still primarily learn to attend to the right things at the right time through trial-and-error and, if fortunate, through good coaching by parents, teachers, coaches, etc. Through this method, we learn what is useful for our attention and what is not as we encounter new situations. However, given today's stimulus rich environment, all competing for our attention, this is not the most efficient and effective way to learn to attend. The resultant attention deficit threatens to seriously cripple performance. In fact, a new term has been coined by the authors of *The Attention Economy: Organizational ADD*, a condition wherein there is "an increased likelihood for missing key information when making decisions, diminished time for reflection...difficulty holding others' attention...and decreased ability to focus when necessary."<sup>6</sup>

In the "new world", we must change the way we develop the ability to focus and concentrate. We need to place less emphasis on *what* to pay attention to and more on teaching our leaders *how* to pay attention. A more scientific approach to addressing attention is to recognize that attention is the result of a number of different brain areas at work, sending signals to these areas to search and integrate new information with the old. The complexity of these crossover signals provides some insight on how the brain works in filtering incoming information. Without this filtering process, we would be overwhelmed and unable to survive.

Our brains are wired to attend to one thing in one sensory mode at any one moment. This explains the little known and rarely accepted fact: THERE IS NO MULTITASKING! By multitasking, I am speaking of simultaneous execution of at least two or more tasks. Our brains simply are not wired that way. Highly effective attention requires complete immersion with a singular focus and sustained intensity. Yes, we can physically execute a number of different tasks simultaneously, but the quality of each will be severely diminished. You can easily observe this for yourself when driving and talking or even texting on the cell phone; simultaneously answering emails while engaged in a telephone conversation and typing a memo, etc. The list is almost endless.

Attention control training combines a simple but robust framework for understanding how attention works, a means for navigating that framework, and new brain wave (EEG) technologies that provide accurate feedback about attending. The key to directly improving focus and concentration is to pay attention to how we pay attention.

**Imagery. (What You See Is What You Get)** In its simplest form, this is about doing a mental "rehearsal" but in a very specific way. Imagery, commonly referred to as visualization, is a powerful tool for doing exactly that. It involves using all the senses to create or recreate an experience in the mind so vivid and powerful that you feel you are there. Everyone has an

inherent capability to image. We all use imagery in one form or another all the time. We differ, however, in its sophistication and effectiveness. Some image very effectively with no formal training while others do so only after systematic training and practice of the skill. The neurological wiring, however, is in for everyone. How well we do it is a function of our developmental experiences. The early and consistent use of imagination in play and work helps build the brain “muscles” for imaging. Imagery maximizes potential for performance by helping to develop greater confidence, energy, concentration, and feelings of success.

Imagery can be developed as a powerful mental skill that can be used to enhance performance, improve a specific skill, accelerate healing and recovery from injury, generate breakthrough ideas and create a vision. The first step is assessing how well developed an individual's imagery skill is. We have discovered through biofeedback and neurofeedback instrumentation that high quality imagery is characterized by a deep physiological and mental coherence coupled with an optimal level of alertness and concentration. The power of imagery comes from the confidence gained by sensing a successful performance in the mind before it actually happens. The resultant experience is a feeling of *“oh, I've been here before”*. The beauty is that the mind does not differentiate between real and imagined experience. The wiring is the same for both and so powerful imagery actually fires the neuron networks that are associated with the imagined event.

### **Train the Brain; Improve the Mind; Develop the Leader**

To improve the mind, train the brain. Recent discoveries about the brain are providing amazing insights into how the brain works and its direct influence on performance. These discoveries are already altering the way we view learning. Two findings that will surely change the way in which we teach and develop root mental skills discussed above are neuroplasticity and neurogenesis. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change its structure through experience. It is not a fixed entity. Not only do environmental factors influence the brain; they actually alter its structure and thus change the brain permanently. The implications of this discovery for education and training are monumental. Neurogenesis is the process whereby neurons divide and propagate just like cells in the rest of the body. This totally demolishes the longstanding “science” that the brain cells with which we are born are all that we get and no new cells are grown. Neurogenesis plays a vital role in learning. Lifelong learning is now a reality, right to the very end. This new science of the brain tells us that the brain is not static but a living, evolving, constantly changing, entity.

Training the brain directly improves the mental skills needed to develop the leader capacities that are essential for success in this “new world”. We start with training the brain using recent discoveries about the workings of the brain and the latest advances in biofeedback and neurofeedback technologies. This brain training directly impacts the complex mental processes that influence and drive everything we do. So how do the mental skills interact to best develop the leader capacities? In some ways, they all have a part in the overall development, but each root skill has a greater impact on some capacities than on others.

**Situational Awareness** requires exceptional attention control, learning to “pay attention to how we pay attention”. Imagery provides an intuitive sense for what is happening around us. It is much quicker than the normal thought processes we use for analyzing and solving problems. And speed in volatile situations is paramount.

**Mental Agility** training incorporates key elements of adaptive thinking, attention control and imagery. Flexible and fluid thinking are critical in a constantly changing situation. Staying focused on what is most important and envisioning possible outcomes before they happen provide the plasticity for rapid assessment and decision making.

**Learned Instinct** is what drives intuitive and gut-feeling types of execution. We actually operate with “three brains”: the brain in the head, the brain in the heart and the brain in the gut. Recent research has demonstrated that the heart and the gut have nervous systems and thus are able to “think”. We can become more intuitive and instinctive in our actions by listening and trusting what the heart and gut “have to say”. Imagery, attention and adaptive thinking are key skills for developing this capacity.

**Commander’s calm** can be developed by learning to control the mental, emotional and physiological responses to stressful and high arousal situations. It is not so much about trying to control events as it is about controlling yourself. We are all familiar with the cool, calm and collected leader that never seems ruffled by anything. With today’s much more sophisticated yet accessible biofeedback and neurofeedback technologies to train the brain and thus the mind, the ability to control otherwise involuntary mechanisms is a powerful tool for performing at our best when it matters the most, and it matters the most under extreme conditions.

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Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *IBM 2010 Global CEO Study*, Press Release, Armonk, NY, 18 May 2010

<sup>2</sup> *Strategic Leadership and Decision Making*, National Defense University, 1997

<sup>3</sup> Bob Johansen, *Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present*, Berrett Koehler Publishers, 2007, pp.51-53

<sup>4</sup> Johansen, *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> John Eliot, *Overachievement*, Penguin Group, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas H. Davenport & John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy*, Accenture, 2001