



WHY VUCA BUSINESS LEADERS END UP PARALYZED, BLIND AND DEAF

THE TRIPLE SWITCH-OFF EFFECT

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Leaders cannot orchestrate in a vacuum. In fact, they depend on others in at least three important ways:

- 1] Leaders guide, they do not execute. Therefore, they rely on others to take care of implementation.
- 2] Leaders cannot be everywhere. Therefore, they depend on others to receive information.
- 3] Leaders “don’t know what they don’t know.” Therefore, they count on loyal supporters for feedback.

So what does VUCA have to do with leaders? The acronym for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity is used to describe or reflect general conditions and situations, not people. Yet we’ve all come across leaders who trigger VUCA, or even worse – they exhibit VUCA characteristics themselves!

How do we recognize them? Typically, the shelf-life of their decisions is short: They could say white one day, gray the next, and black the day after. They praise one day and express doubts another. It is hard to make sense of the sequence of their decision-making. The same situation may elicit different responses from them at different times, often without proactive explanation. They might say one thing to one person, and could have a divergent version for someone else. VUCA leaders are not always explicit in their instructions and in defining who is responsible; they sometimes expect deliverables without necessarily providing the means to succeed. They tend to avoid communicating to the team together, preferring one-on-one interactions. When they give credit for success, it is at times ambiguous, yet they can be quick to blame publicly. You have the impression that they took a position on a given problem, but on reflection, you realize that they did not entirely and you are left with dilemmas and uncertainty. Sound familiar?

Obviously there are different positions along the VUCA leader scale. At the top, we find toxic leaders. They consciously manipulate; they are dangerous not only for the individuals who report to them but also for the entire organization. But the scale covers a whole range, and to some extent all leaders have their VUCA moments. The issue is, they do not necessarily realize that they are hurting themselves when they trigger what can be described as the “*triple switch-off effect*.” This is when their own behavior starts working against their interests by negatively impacting what they most need from others:

- 1] **Execution:** If there is a culture of fear in the organization, if there is no trust that it is safe to apply the maxim “when in doubt, do the right thing,” then employees will end-up only doing what is asked, and will require details on how to execute. In the same way as websites stop functioning when flooded by multiple simultaneous service requests (Denial-of-Service), this dynamic can paralyze leaders. In a successful setting, leaders are supported by wise and autonomous execution in the organization. They have empowered colleagues who can adapt their actions to the context, while keeping the overarching direction.
- 2] **Information:** If employees are not acknowledged when they provide input, if they are not told which data are useful and why, if they do not understand how decisions are made, then at some point they will no longer know how to contribute and will stop providing information. By doing so, they make their leaders blind. In a successful setting, leaders will receive the right information at the right time in order to make the right decisions. They have colleagues who proactively gather and deliver insightful data, which are modulated according to changes in context.
- 3] **Feedback:** The fire is burning but there’s no smoke! This is a pretty common situation; everyone talks about how bad the leader is, but no one dares to help. Often leaders only receive positive feedback on their actions and decisions because this is what they unconsciously reward. If leaders are rude or dismissive when supporters try to provide input, these colleagues will switch off on feedback – why bother? De facto, the leaders become deaf. In a successful setting, leaders receive timely warning. They have colleagues who are not afraid to provide direct – and sometimes tough – input to address a situation long before it becomes critical.

A leader who allows the triple switch-off effect somehow becomes paralyzed, blind and deaf. Business-wise, this is lethal over time. Four recommendations to prevent this happening can be summed up in the mnemonic ROCK.

Respect: In most teams, members have good intentions, are competent, and do their best. If they do not, it is more often down to management errors rather than any fault of their own. When they disagree on something, it is not for the fun of it. So respect for team members' experience, ideas and opinions, for their personalities, and for their private lives outside work (which can have their own challenges) is central to building trust. Respect is also about taking the time to explain the strategy or to discuss employees' mistakes with them rather than apportioning blame.

Openness: "What if they are right?" Having this mental reaction to subordinates' input shows intellectual openness, humility and the tangible acknowledgement that collective thinking is more powerful than individual deliberation. Openness is also about being curious, authorizing experimentation and allowing errors (provided there is learning). Last but not least, it entails accepting feedback and being genuinely grateful for it.

Coherence: Striving for coherence does not mean that leaders should be predictable or rigid. It means that even though they constantly adapt to the context, they should do so in line with communicated, overarching intentions. If the strategy changes, it needs to be explained again. But this is not all: Part of an institution's culture is defined by the worst behavior tolerated without sanction. Leaders need to be mindful of this and avoid the mistake of applying different standards depending on seniority or constituencies. I once worked with a company that terminated a very senior executive for "misalignment with the company values;" this was exactly how it was communicated. After that, I did not observe any significant behavioral issues at that organization.

Knowledge: This is about continuous competence building. Investing in employees' skills, both hard and soft, sends a powerful message that leaders care about people, beyond immediate business necessities. This point is particularly salient in the current era of digital disruption. Do leaders wait for people to become obsolete and then fire them, or do they proactively train them to make sure they keep creating relevant value? But this is not only about giving opportunities to others; if leaders work on themselves, then they signal that they have enough humility to acknowledge their own weaknesses and can strive to improve constantly. Excellence becomes everyone's focus.

The enabler of ROCK is the ability to listen. Welcoming input from others shows respect. Also, leaders can only be open and coherent if they proactively seek out other viewpoints; they can empower themselves and their employees to succeed if they are prepared to hear what colleagues, or even people outside of their own organization, are saying

The good news is that doing a good job of avoiding the triple switch-off can result in a triple boost: Boosting execution capabilities, boosting decision-making and boosting the leader's impact on the organization. Indeed, besides connecting with people, accepting feedback shows that the leader has worked to improve his or her own self-esteem. And this is a key ingredient for leadership.

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