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Surviving a VUCA environment

"Ambiguity is not, today, a lack of data, but a deluge of data."
— Paul Gibbons, The Science of Successful Organizational Change: How Leaders Set Strategy, Change Behavior, and Create an Agile Culture

Our regular readers might be experiencing déjà vu, as this was the topic of our last article. So why are we coming back to the same theme? Two reasons:
1) The significant number of comments and requests for more information we received
2) 2017 started out in a very challenging manner socially, politically and economically.

For those of you reading about this for the first time, VUCA (an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) is a concept which was introduced by the US Army War College in order to define a world of discontinuity and turbulence, as a result of the end of the Cold War. Currently, VUCA is used in describing business scenarios.

This article explores some of the additional **competencies** needed to hire and develop leaders in a VUCA environment.

Connecting the dots

Regarding the quote we chose at the beginning of this article, the problem lately, is having too much information. Many times this information seems contradictory. Effective leaders are able to make sense out of this conflicting information, being able to connect the dots, seeing the big picture and taking on multiple perspectives.

Critical thinking

Edward Glaser said "Critical thinking calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends." Leaders who have developed critical thinking are able to challenge their biases, ask thought provoking questions, explore alternatives and test their conclusions.

Appetite for change

If everything around us is changing in unpredictable ways, how successful are we going to be if we continue to be stuck to the status quo? The competency to crave change is critical in all people management processes, from hiring to assessing performance and from coaching to job re-assignment. The ability to innovate and break paradigms is fundamental. Employees need to be comfortable experimenting with change, sometimes, many times, failing. Benjamin Franklyn once said: "I didn't fail the test. I just found 100 ways to do it wrong."

Make decisions faster

Yes, we know it can be daunting to analyze all the data available, and then make sense out of it and finally make a decision. In a VUCA environment this is even more challenging. Effective leaders will deal with ambiguity, which is another critical competency, and make smart decisions quickly.

Change the way you communicate

VUCA environments require leaders to look and listen beyond their functional areas of expertise to make sense of the volatility and to lead with a comprehensive vision. Therefore, effective leaders need to communicate with all levels of employees in their organization, creating synergy. Clarity and transparency becomes fundamental in helping others make sense of the chaos.

Ask different types of questions

When making hiring decisions (internal or external) managers should prepare questions addressing all the above mentioned competencies.

Feel free to use some of the following questions:

Give an example of when you had to perform in an ambiguous work environment that featured rapid change. How did you deal with this environment? What were some of the learning points?

How do you determine if you need to look for additional information before making a decision or if the information at hand is enough? Give recent situations that exemplify this dilemma.

Tell me of a situation when you had to change your leadership style to achieve a given objective. How did you change it? What was the outcome? How did you feel about it?

All of the above competencies should be used to assess leaders during the selection process as well as talent and performance reviews. We are not saying that those lacking the above referenced competencies cannot succeed. On the other hand, those who are making personnel decisions need to be clear that some people would be more at ease, less stressed and performing better in more structured environments.

MAPA Consulting can help you and your team to develop these competencies.

See you next time. As always, we welcome your feedback.