

The VUCA-Plus Challenges

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Obviously, there are many specific challenges that mid-21st Century citizens face as they live and work in their own communities and nations. These challenges might relate to commuting by car or train into a major city or simply finding fresh and uncontaminated water when living in a small rural community. They might be domestic challenges concerning a child going off to college or a grandparent who is struggling with dementia. These challenges are unique to each person and to each society in our world. However, there are the almost universal challenges associated with the volatility (U), uncertainty (U), complexity (C) and ambiguity (A) in our collective lives, as well as the equally as challenging turbulence and contradiction that we all encounter every day. This is the VUCA-Plus of mid-21st Century life—and it generates multiple challenges.

The VUCA Challenges

We will dwell briefly on the meaning to be assigned to each of the VUCA terms and then suggest how we might expand on VUCA. In essence, complexity concerns the many elements and dynamic interaction among elements that have to be taken into account, while Volatility refers to the rate and shifting rate of change among the elements. The other two terms have to do with epistemology (the way in which knowledge is acquired and reality is defined). Ambiguity concerns the assessment of both the evidence available regarding reality and the meaning assigned to this reality. The fourth term, Uncertainty, is about the stability of any assessment being made regarding reality. Does reality change over a short period of time? Why do an extensive assessment if our world is constantly shifting? VUCA is deservedly becoming the coin-of-the-realm among contemporary organizational analysts. Here is a bit more detail regarding each element:

Volatility

Volatility refers the dynamics of change: its accelerating rate, intensity and speed as well as its unexpected catalysts. It concerns rapid change in an unpredictable manner.

Systemic impact: Changes Everywhere – Change curves on top of change curves

Personal impact: often surprised and unprepared.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty refers to the lack of predictability, the increasing prospects for surprising, “disruptive” changes that often overwhelm our awareness, understanding and ability to cope with events. It concerns a lack of continuity and resulting lack of clarity regarding what is going to happen from day to day.

Systemic impact: hard to plan for the future or even for one or two days from now given that nothing seems to be permanently in place -- Contingency planning rather than tactical or strategic planning

Personal impact; must keep schedule and expectations quite flexible.

Complexity

Complexity entails the multiplex of forces, the apparently inconsistent information flow, the sensitive interdependence of everything we touch, leading to the sense of confusion in which it's hard to make smart decisions, steeped as we are in the moving dance of reality. It concerns the presence of many different things and events that simultaneously impact life and work.

Systemic impact: very hard to make sense of or even find meaning in that which is occurring every day. Slow thinking rather than fast thinking

Personal impact: must often spend considerable amount of time trying to figure out what is happening before making decisions or taking actions.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is the 'haziness' in which cause-and-effect are hard to attribute, relativity seems to trump established rules, weighing heavily on our ability to hold inconsistent data and still function and make choices. It concerns the presence of many things and events happening that are quite confusing and often not very easy to observe clearly and consistently.

Systemic impact: can't trust accuracy of that which we see or hear or what "experts" tell us. Social constructivism rather than objectivism

Personal impact: often must look and listen a second and third time to ensure that what is seen or heard is accurate.

The Additional VUCA-Plus Challenges

We add two other challenges: turbulence and contradiction. They are both interwoven in the fabric of VUCA and add a further layer of challenge to that now being faced by us in our mid-21st Century society.

Turbulence

Some things are moving rapidly, while other things are moving in a cyclical manner, not moving at all or moving in a chaotic manner.

Systemic Impact: four subsystems are operating at the same time. Nature of the "white water" world.

Personal impact: requires a search for balance and direction which in turn requires ongoing attention.

In describing Turbulence, we turn to a metaphor offered by Peter Vaill, who suggests that we are living in a "white water" world. We propose that this whitewater world represents a turbulent system.

Furthermore, this whitewater system incorporates four subsystems that are exemplified by the properties of a turbulent stream: (1) rapid change (flowing segment of the stream), (2) cyclical change

(the stream's whirlpools), (3) stability/non-change (the "stagnant" segment of the stream), and (4) chaos (the segment of a stream existing between the other three segments).

All four of these subsystems are operating in our current time of pandemic invasion. There is rapid change occurring as the virus rapidly spreads and communities throughout the world are massively impacted. Cyclical change is to be found in the patterned way that COVID-19 enters and spreads in a community—and tragically in the probable way in which the virus will return seasonally (until such time as there is virtually global immunity). We can find stability and non-change in the resistance to new norms and rules in virtually all societies. All of this leads to the growing presence of the fourth subsystem: Chaos. This is to be found not only in the inconsistent way we are each living our lives in response to the virus, but also in the way public policies are being formulated and revised in many countries.

Contradiction

Messages are being delivered all the time that are valid—but they often point in quite different directions.

Systemic impact: credible advice is being offered by people and institutions that can be trusted—but the advice is often inconsistent. The New Platonic Allegory of the Cave

Personal impact: must change our mind or at least be open to new perspectives and ideas.

Contradiction concerns the frequent presence of contradictory constructions and interpretations of reality and the differing meaning assigning to the reality that is being constructed. We must make decisions that take into account contradictory and polarizing values regarding thoughtful consideration and caring compassion; furthermore, these decisions are subject to frequent review and modification as we try to navigate a turbulent VUCA world.

Managing Anxiety

VUCA-Plus produces anxiety at both the individual and collective level. It seems that anxiety is quite contagious. One anxious person in an organization (or any group) can readily spread this anxiety to everyone else in the organization. In some ways this contagion is quite adaptive. When human beings were living on the African savannah, they were among the weakest and slowest creatures to populate this often threat-filled environment. It seems that we humans survived (and ultimately thrived) by working collaboratively via language and strong family and clan bonding. We all wanted to know if something was threatening one or more members of our group so that we could act together to fight or flee from the source of the threat. Anxiety served this purpose.

Anxiety as a Signal

Many years ago, Sigmund Freud wrote about the signal function of anxiety. At the time, he was pointing to the way in which anxiety alerts us to an important psychic reality: we are moving into dangerous territory regarding unconscious processes. We can expand on Freud's analysis by considering the collective signaling function served by anxiety in warning us (as families or clans) about sources of

danger that are real (such as predators, crop failure or the pending invasion of an adversarial clan)—or are anticipated or imagined.

We can probe for a moment into the neurobiological basis of collective (and contagious) signaling anxiety. In recent years, neurobiologists have recognized the very important role played by a specific neurotransmitter in the lives of human beings. This neurotransmitter is oxytocin. It is sometimes called the “bonding” and “nurturing” chemical – and we human beings have more of this chemical coursing through our brains and veins than most other animals. Oxytocin pulls us together and makes us particularly fearful of being alone and isolated from other members of our family and clan. We want to be close to others and feel threatened when others feel threatened.

This secretion of oxytocin could be considered the basis of empathy and might even be mediated by something called “mirror neurons” which are activated in us when we experience the wounding (physical or psychological) of other people. While the role played by mirror neurons is still quite controversial, there is very little dispute regarding the typical (and necessary) bonding of human beings with one another and the high level of sensitivity regarding our discomfort with witnessing the potential or actual suffering of other people with whom we are bonded – hence the contagious and signaling nature of anxiety.

Real and Imagined Lions

Clearly, we are attuned to the signal of threat transmitted by other people. This signal can be based on “legitimate” threats: the lion can be stalking us or the tribe living in the next valley can actually be plotting to take over our hunting ground or pastureland. However, as made famous by Robert Sapolsky, we are also quite adept at imagining lions—and falsely concluding that our neighboring tribe is plotting against us. Thus, there can be “false alarms” that we have to manage with just as much skill as the alarms based in reality.

Part of our challenge while living in a VUCA-Plus world is to discern the difference between valid signals and invalid signals. As parents we need to help our children sort out the difference between the “real” bad things in life and the “unreal” monsters lurking under their bed at night (equivalent in contemporary life to the imaginary lions of the African savannah). As mature adults, we similarly have to assist with addressing the imagined VUCA-Plus monsters lingering under our organizational and societal beds.

Once we discern that a “lion” is real, then we must choose how best to engage this lion. As Wilfred Bion suggests, it is tempting to choose fight, flight, or freeze. If we try to discern the best strategy of engagement in a setting that is neither stable nor safe that we are likely to regress to one of Bion’s three primitive strategies. None of Bion’s strategies make much sense as a way to confront any of the VUCA-Plus challenges. Each of these challenges signals and generates its own special form of anxiety. Volatility, for instance, signals anxiety associated with surprise, while ambiguity signals an anxiety associated with confusion, and contradiction signals an anxiety associated with tension. As a child we are frightened by the monsters of surprise, confusion and tension.

Furthermore, we can easily become anxious about becoming anxious. As adults, we are reminded of these childhood fears. We revert (regress) to an anxiousness that arises from the childhood sense of

powerlessness that comes from confronting these overwhelming anxiety-monsters. All of this occurs if we don't have an appropriate and sustained setting of safety in which to address the anxiety and the diverse challenges of VUCA-Plus. The choice of an appropriate strategy is best made in a setting that provides containment of the anxiety as well as resources for the selection of an appropriate strategy.

The Containers: Temporary Systems

The noted organizational consultant and educator Matthew Miles observed that there are a “bewilderingly wide” range and variety of temporary systems in our society. Miles mentions conferences, games, juries and love affairs. He also lists ad hoc task forces, intensive personnel assessment programs, carnivals and utopias. What about research projects, governmental terms of office, political and social demonstrations? He mentions these, as well as military battles, psychotherapy, consulting, institutions that have complete or nearly complete control over their clients (mental hospitals, prisons, welfare homes, half-way houses) and even schools and colleges (temporary for the student).

Temporary systems are among the most complex and challenging means by which one can move toward higher order learning (as I will further explore below). These systems are potentially effective in helping leaders reframe solutions. Task forces that operate as temporary systems can encourage the generation of new ideas. They also can help employees try out alternative roles, gain new perspectives from other members of the task force who come from different parts of the organization, and gain a new appreciation of their own distinctive strengths and resources.

Task forces and international assignments, for example, as temporary systems have become a common and useful talent management tool, affording the leader a chance to “test-drive” their newly acquired competencies or yet-to-be-discovered abilities. Temporary systems are “temporary” in many ways. They are often one-time events or recurring events that look different each time they are enacted. They are often quite ephemeral in nature—being based in fantasy or in play. We offer several examples to give us a clearer idea regarding how they operate.

Fantasy

Under challenging and often elusive conditions such as is often apparent with VUCA-Plus we take the opportunity to engage in flight. The “imagined lion” is too elusive to fight and too enduring to engage in flight (without major damage to our body). How do you fight against ambiguity or contradiction? How do you stay quiet when confronting an ever-changing (dancing) landscape of volatility. So, we run away and find that fantasies of many sorts provide temporary reprieve from the lion. We escape into television, our cable-provided movies and an occasional outing to the local movie theater. Some of us choose to attend live theater (at least when the virus isn't raging) or go to a concert where live music leads us temporarily into an alternative universe.

Are these fantastic voyages good for us or are they a sign of our personal and collective dysfunction? Those psychoanalytic thinkers who belong in the so-called “ego psychology” camp write about the positive aspects of these voyages—identifying them as “regression in the service of the ego.” While these analysts were more likely to focus on constructive and creative process associated with artistic

endeavors, they would probably have to admit (grudgingly) that most forms of fantasy are “healthy” – especially given the multiple challenges we are all facing in mid-21st Century life.

Furthermore, as Joseph Campbell has shown, the enactment of fantasy has always been with us.. Many forms of fantasy have provided human beings with compelling mythic structures since time immemorial. Fantasies are afoot even today. we need only point, as Campbell did, to the Star Wars series or the Marvel comic series to find mythic heroes embarking on a heroic journey, fighting off dreaded enemies. There is no ambiguity, contradiction or uncertainty. We know what is good and what is bad. There are no contradictions. Everything is predictable and positive outcomes are assured. Volatility doesn’t stand a chance. Nothing dances (other than the bullets or an occasional musical number). Things are straightforward. Complexity is also asked to leave the room (or at least the play, movie or TV series). If there are complex and contradiction-filled characters in our fantasies—then they are usually assigned to “art” theater movies and plays that we occasionally imbibe for our “character building.”

Play

For many years, psychologists couldn’t make sense of human play—a type of activity that seems pervasive in human society. This led Johan Huizinga to offer his insightful analysis, declaring that humans are *homo ludens* – the playful ones. Why do we engage in play? This seems to be an *autotelec* (self-energizing) activity. Some psychologists suggested an “arousal jag” that human beings find to be enjoyable: we get scared or excited and then find relief from this fear or excitement which is reinforcing. More recently, the research conducted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that we live for the opportunity to experience “flow” which is to be found at the threshold between anxiety and overwhelm (on the one hand), and boredom and underwhelm (on the other hand).

When we do engage in play, the mundane (boring) or challenging (anxiety-filled) world in which we operate most of the time tends to melt away. We enter the temporary state of flow and a short-term threshold of flight from both boredom and anxiety. While we might not engage regularly in something that could officially be called play (such as organized sports or community theater) or enter into play with our kids or grandkids (“playing house”, dressing up or wrestling on the living room floor), we do engage frequently in play according to Csikszentmihalyi. He notes that we engage in little playful activities such as twirling our pen or engaging in a quiet quest for a different word in writing an essay (such as my use in this sentence of the phrase “quiet quest”). He identifies these temporary playful moments as “microflows” and believes these are often primary motivators for us during a typical day. We are engaged in brief “quiet quests” for the moments of threshold between boredom and anxiety.

Festivals

While flights of fancy and moments of microflow are personal matters, there are also many collective moments of a temporary nature. During the Medieval era of European history, we find various versions of the “Feast of fools” when the poor or the women or the insane switch roles with those who are rich, who are men or who are “sane.” Today, we find something similar being enacted in the Mari gras celebrations held in New Orleans and in many European countries. These are brief episodes that exist in

societies that are firmly structured with clear lines of authority and privilege. Yet, for a few moments the residents of these highly structured communities can glimpse an alternative reality.

We propose that these festivals are held not just for the release of frustration, but also as venues for experiencing something different and envisioning an alternative reality. While some social commentators suggest that a feast of fools is just a conservative vehicle for “blowing off steam”, I believe that they point to a much more constructive purpose. The festivals provide something similar to what is offered by sanctuaries. Sanctuaries are not just for forgiveness and restoration, but also for learning of something new. Similarly, festivals are not just for letting loose, but also for testing out new ways of being while in this loosening state. There is a collective regression that truly is in the service of several collective ego-functions such as increased shared consciousness, and testing and experimenting with new ideas,

As Carl Jung has suggested, these temporary celebrative events enable all aspects of self to be engaged. The “shadow” function of the human psyche is brought to the fore and is allowed to interact playfully with the more public and usually quite rigid functions (“persona”) of the human psyche. Jung would also draw an important connection between these festive events (as well as fantasies) and the dreams we have during the night (or even the daydreams we have during the day. From a Jungian perspective, we might even identify these temporary events as “dream states” which yield valuable insights arising from unconscious processes.

Regular Public Events

There is another type of temporary system to be acknowledged. This is the scheduled public event that takes place at a specific time and in a specific location. However, like festivals, these events take people out of their normal routine and create conditions for regression in the service of the ego – or at least in service of profit or pride. While we might wish that these events (like the festivals) would go on forever, they are compelling precisely because they occur occasionally and come with considerable preparation – and often substantial promotion and publicity. One of these public events is the “game.” Sporting events of many kinds are to be found in abundance throughout the world. Humankind is not only aptly called *homo ludens* because of a desire to play games, but also because of a desire to observe others playing games.

Conclusions

Matthew Miles notes that temporary systems serve a variety of functions, including compensation and maintenance (games, vocation), short term accomplishment (task force, research project), induction of change (conference, psychotherapy), re-education (socio-drama, human relations training), and education (school, utopia). This wide range of activities and functions are subsumed by Miles under the category temporary systems because he wishes to identify several characteristics that are common to many, if not all, of these systems. We would suggest that many of these functions provide a container for VUCA-Plus anxiety and a source of learning for addressing VUCA-Plus challenges. Each of these temporary systems often provide an opportunity for exploring alternative responses for the challenges inherent in each VUCA-Plus element.

According to Miles, the distinctive input and process characteristics of temporary systems tend to yield certain distinctive outputs. He mentions changes in persons, relationships and actions. Personal changes that are produced in temporary systems often yield relatively permanent shifts in attitudes, knowledge or behavior. Relationships also tend to be altered as a result of experiences in temporary systems. People ‘can’t go home again’ after powerful, penetrating temporary system experiences. Their goals and perceptions have been reframed. At a tactical level, the skill of designing practice actions for someone to test-drive or solidify new desirable behaviors can be engaged in a temporary system. In this setting one can pilot new attitudes, new language, new behaviors, and then evaluate their effectiveness in moving them towards their desired goal.

In addition to the positive outputs of temporary systems, Miles identified several of their central problems and dysfunctions. First, he observes that these systems often produce input overload. Too much is happening in a short period of time. Dwellers in a temporary system can be overwhelmed with the challenge introduced in this system, without experiencing the support or marshalling the resources that should accompany this challenge. Participants in executive development programs, for instance, must fight for privacy and have a great deal to sort out, but no time, ironically, for reflection on their reflection. As a result, learning often is incomplete.

Second, goal setting is often unrealistic. The ad hoc character of these systems often produces a feeling of infinite possibility and an unrealistic sense that the sky’s the limit. Failure and disenchantment frequently are associated with a lack of realistic goal setting in any temporary system unless the process of designing and offering this system includes not only re-examination of context and strategy but also the regular re-examination of goals. Another frequent problem of temporary systems concerns the complex interpersonal and task related skills that are needed to run such a system. The skills needed to create new settings are not widely found or nurtured in our society—as Goleman has noted in his widely-read assessments of emotional and interpersonal intelligence.

Thus, it seems that we must enter the challenging world of VUCA-Plus with several critical skills. First, is the ability to think in a careful, systemic manner about the world swirling about us. It is easy to think quickly with nothing but a desire to make the anxiety go away. We are fleeing the lions—but to little avail. Second, we must acknowledge the stress associated with the VUCA-Plus challenges. As we have noted, a freeze response does great damage to our health—we must be mindful of the stress and find ways to reduce it while being proactive in our response to the VUCA-Plus challenges—often through entering and making full use of temporary systems.

Finally, if we are going to “fight” rather than “freeze” or engage in “flight”, this must be done in collaboration with other people. We are not strong enough to fight about the VUCA-Plus challenges alone. Furthermore, we need other people to assist us in discerning what are “real” lions and what are lions that we are only imagining. There are plenty of real lions for us to confront, so we need not invent additional ones. It is in collaborative dialogue with other important people in our life that we find the courage, clarity and strength to not just make sense of our mid-21st Century world, but also learn from the VUCA-Plus challenges, and find nourishment and sense of self-purpose in successfully confronting these challenges.