

# Leading for the Future

By E. Lander Medlin

The world is changing dramatically, and at a phenomenally rapid pace. The time compression of change is dynamic and complex with even greater consequences imposed by an increasingly interdependent world. Such is the pace of decision making, with its corresponding impact on the leadership skills we must master to thrive in the unpredictable, uncertain, yet opportunity-filled years ahead.

Bob Johansen's book, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*, provides a forecast for the future, the leadership skills needed (and why they matter,) and how they are interconnected. In the book, he describes a "VUCA" world ( a military-based acronym that stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.) This lens focuses on the external future forces that will shape leadership over the next decade.

These skills are not intended to replace existing leadership models, but instead to challenge and stretch them. The book demonstrates the importance of learning to listen for future "patterns" to make decisions in the present that will positively impact our organizations' future. Novelist William Gibson said, "The future is already here—it's just unevenly distributed." The challenge is to find the best way to experience and learn from that unevenly distributed future. A synopsis of Johansen's 10 Future Leadership Skills follows:

**1. Maker Instinct**—"Ability to exploit your inner drive to build and grow things, as well as connect with others in making."

The best leaders have always been tinkerers who imagine alternative structures to see what new things they can create. Using new amazing tools and network connectivity, you can build profoundly different constructs and organizations.

**2. Clarity**—"Leaders must be clear about what they are making but flexible about how it gets made."

They find viable directions in the midst of confusion, and see hope on the other side of trouble. While tempering certainty, clarity wraps a leader's vision in practical but inspirational language that motivates people through the chaos.

**3. Dilemma Flipping**—"Ability to turn dilemmas—which, unlike problems, cannot be solved—into advantages and opportunities."

This type of mind reset requires reimagining the seemingly unsolvable challenge as an opportunity, threat—or both. And, putting together a viable strategy by perceiving the challenge in different ways through other, non-traditional lenses. The trick is to engage constructively in the tension between opposing ideas, and not be forced into a premature choice or resolution. You live with uncertainty for a while, then, decide how to form the future.

**4. Immersive Learning Ability**—"Ability to immerse yourself in unfamiliar environments to learn from them in a first-person way."

Meaning, complete engagement in that world that is different from your

own, while remaining open minded to the experience. You should feel uncomfortable, yet in constructive ways, during the process of learning from such an immersion activity. Immersive learning provides a safe environment within which to practice active attention, the ability to listen and filter, and to see patterns while staying centered – even when overwhelmed with stimuli.

**5. Bio-Empathy**—"Ability to see things from nature's point of view; to understand, respect, and learn from its patterns."

The next big wave of change will grow from biological and organic ways of thinking. Bio-empathy is grounded in an ability to empathize with nature and understand its ways, its connectivity, and its resilience. The attempt by leaders to learn from the natural cycles; to see the big picture of ecological systems; hence, the concept of sustainability is personified.

**6. Constructive Depolarizing**—"Ability to calm tense situations where differences dominate and communication has broken down—and bring people from divergent cultures toward positive engagement."

Constructive Depolarizing applies to the conflict resident in dilemmas from all sorts of diversity. It begins with making calm since conflict is rarely an either/or choice. Reverse mentoring represents a simple but powerful strategy for bridging polarities.

**7. Quiet Transparency**—*“Ability to be open and authentic about what matters—without being overly self-promoting.”*

Open-source thinking will be a fundamental driver of change in the future, and it will add to and complicate the move toward transparency. It implies that if you give ideas away, you will get even better ideas back in return. This will raise the bar for competition to greater cooperation (maybe what could be called “cooperation.”) It begins with humility, requiring us to be open, self-effacing, resilient, a good listener, and authentic, which ultimately inspires credibility and trust. Humble strength will be the best leadership profile for the future.

**8. Rapid Prototyping**—*“Ability to create quick early versions of innovations, with the expectation that later success will require early failures.”*

This skill centers on a trial-and-error mentality by starting quickly and learning continuously; emphasizing experience in the field, rather than advance planning; and putting the priority on extreme speed in learning. We must expect to fail early in the process, so we can succeed later on.

**9. Smart-Mob Organizing**—*“Ability to create, engage with, and nurture purposeful business or social change networks through intelligent use of electronic and other media.”*

It brings together large groups for a common purpose, making savvy use of available media, which amplifies their collective intelligence for greater impact. Leaders will need to develop their online presence and leadership styles, as “in-person” leadership will not be enough.

**10. Commons Creating**—*“Ability to seed, nurture, and grow shared assets*

*that can benefit all players—and allow competition at a higher level.”*

New commons are shared resources grown out of connectivity and employ a win-win logic, so that multiple parties win. Future leaders will be called to create new commons, to grow new places within which collaboration and mutual success can occur for the greater good/benefit of all.

These ten future leadership skills build from individual instinct into collective action, to make the world a better place. They will be basic to successful leadership in a “make-it-ourselves” future. ☛

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