

WHITEPAPER

How Will You Adapt?

*Thinking Agility: The Key to
Leading in a Complex World*

PAPER IN BRIEF:

Discover the impact of a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (VUCA) world on current and future leadership requirements.

Learn how thinking agility will help you and your leaders adapt, focus and get more done in a rapidly changing and increasingly noisy environment.

Explore four specific steps you can take to build your own and others' thinking agility.

Create your own action plan from the provided checklists to start putting better thinking to work for better performance and results.



Working in a VUCA World

The world we have created is a product of our thinking; it cannot be changed without changing our thinking. - Albert Einstein

As Tom headed to the elevator at 6 PM on a recent Wednesday, a colleague called out to him from his office.

“You leaving?”

“Yep, taking a half-day today,” Tom joked.

With the “[work-more economy](#)” in full swing, it’s likely Tom was only half-joking.

Without a full recovery of jobs since the economic downturn, many managers and employees have seen the work pile on, in some cases with double the load. Work hours have increased along with it, and not just during the height of the recession but well into the past year. At the same time, more than 1 in 5 respondents in a [2013 Florida State University](#) survey said the level of resources they have to do their jobs has gone down in the past two years.

The “do more with less” attitude no longer seems to be a stop-gap tactic; it’s become the everyday reality.

Other “conveniences” add to the pressure. After all, if Tom is like most employees, the work day doesn’t necessarily end when he leaves the office. Expectations have changed now that non-stop connectivity means you have instant access to nearly any piece of data you could ever need right in your pocket. Or the dashboard of your car. Or your glasses.

The removal of some of the hierarchical structures of the past has increased the flexibility and nimbleness of organizations, making it possible to rearrange and recombine teams quickly to deal with shifting priorities and needs. Even so, [according to CEB research](#), this can actually make it harder for people to complete their individual tasks, potentially adding to burden of longer hours.

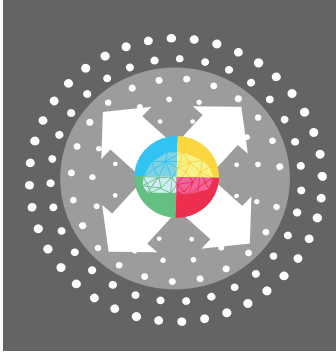
This volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world is the reality, yet speed—the ability to move fast, shift attention and think in short increments—is more critical than ever. And through all of this unpredictability and chaos, you still have to keep your eye on the future and think strategically.

It’s one thing to have adapted our structures and systems to make our organizations more efficient and competitive, better prepared to handle the daily complexities and keep up with rapid change.

But what about the leaders and workforce within that newly optimized system? How will they adapt? How will you?

The Antidote: Thinking Agility

You may think your smartphone is the most powerful device you carry with you every day, but you have another, more powerful weapon that’s always with you: your brain.



Thinking Agility:

The ability to consciously shift your thinking when the situation requires it.

In fact, it's so exquisitely designed, it allows us to run in a kind of "auto-pilot" mode, something of a double-edged sword. Every day, while you feel like you're going faster by taking "mental short cuts," in reality you're sub-optimizing the brainpower you need to adapt to a changing world.

Our research shows everyone has access to all modes of thinking. Yet just as you become accustomed to preferring one hand over the other when you sign your name, you get comfortable accessing certain mental processes more than others.

Tom, for example, is a naturally analytical thinker, an avid reader and a technology geek. This has become his mental default, the go-to thinking he uses whether it's most effective for the situation or not. With all of the demands Tom faces every day, it is all he can do to feel like he is keeping up let alone think creatively or strategically about the challenges he is working on.

Despite the brain's natural laziness and its subsequent mental traps, Tom has the ability to adapt—to shift his thinking—and so do you. But even if you do, it's usually not frequent enough, and it rarely happens as a proactive, conscious process. The result is that you can end up stuck in a thinking mode that prevents you from adapting.

"Thinking agility," the ability to consciously shift your thinking when the situation requires it, is about getting deliberate with how you use your mental resources. You can't truly adapt your behavior and become more agile if you don't have the thinking to support it. Thinking agility is the antidote—that welcome relief and remedy to the chaos and noise—that will help you better navigate and make sense of a VUCA world.

Here are 4 steps you can take to help you and your current and future leaders build the thinking agility to adapt.

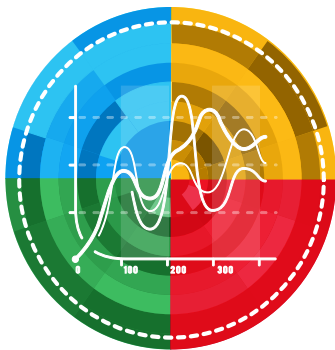
1. Redefine Leadership

How agile are you as a leader? How many of your employees have the appropriate levels of leadership agility necessary to lead your organization into the future?

According to *Forbes*, very few. The results of a Korn/Ferry study were *equally grim*. As were Bersin's *predictions* for 2014.

Numerous studies echo the dismal statistics, even as we continue to spend the lion's share of our training investments on leadership development, *according to the latest data provided by ASTD*. Where is the gap?

McKinsey & Co. recently identified *underestimating mindsets* as one of the key reasons leadership development programs fail. Mindset is particularly critical because it affects how you frame the world, how you look at things.



Why Leadership Development Programs Fail:

- Overlooking context.
- Decoupling reflection from real work
- Failure to measure results situation requires it.
- Underestimating mindsets

Your mindset is your mental default that provides your brain a path to follow in a noisy and distracting world. How often do you find yourself just going about your day, trying to keep up, not consciously processing, when suddenly you look at the time and wonder what happened to the last five hours?

It takes energy to override your mindset. You have to redefine what is most important, as well as how and in what direction to shift your thinking. Most leaders today struggle to keep up with yesterday's definition of what it meant to lead, let alone shifting their thinking to what is required today—agility.

***The Leadership Pipeline™:
A Whole Brain® View***



But no leader, at any level, has the luxury of being single-minded any more.

When you evaluate the thinking required to be effective in today's world, it becomes clear that we need to redefine leadership. An analysis of the Leadership Pipeline™ (Stephen J. Drotter & Ram Charan) shows that at every stage, leaders need to use all of the thinking modes: logical (blue), detailed (green), interpersonal (red) and conceptual (yellow). Also striking is the gradual but clear shift in emphasis from structured, execution-oriented thinking to more strategic, visionary thinking.

Bottom line, to be an agile leader at any level, you have to be consciously engaging all of your mental resources. You have to be results-oriented and performance driven and engagement focused and strategically agile. For Training and HR, this means reevaluating the competencies your leaders need going forward with thinking in mind.

CHECKLIST: Redefine leadership in your organization:

- ✓ Shift the way you define what's important:
 - Identify what you're asking people to focus on.
 - Identify what's being overlooked.
- ✓ Link competencies and thinking preferences so leaders can own the thinking changes they need to make.
- ✓ Help leaders understand their mindsets and how and when to change their thinking and break out of their mindsets.
- ✓ Review the 21st Century Whole Brain® Leadership Competencies (available in [*The Whole Brain® Business Book, Second Edition*](#)), but focus on the critical few based on who you're working with and where they are in the pipeline.



Impact of Task Switching:

- 50% longer to accomplish the task
- 50% more errors

2. Engage Every Brain (including your own)

*“If you are leading a modern corporation...
you need to know how brains work.”
– Dr. John Medina, Brain Rules*

In spite of 100 years of dogma saying otherwise, we now know that new neuronal connections can take place, even in the adult brain. In other words, you CAN change the brain through learning.

But there are plenty of brain-draining obstacles in today’s world that can get in the way. Two of the most prevalent among leaders and high-potential employees are **sleep deprivation** and **multi-tasking**, both of which dramatically impact productivity, the ability to learn and the energy required to shift thinking.

You may not be able to force people to get enough sleep but there are some things you can do to increase the effectiveness of the learning you develop and the way in which you deliver it in light of these realities.

For the critical learning points you must get across, recognize it may take more time and that you may need to employ a variety of different techniques to engage all of your leaders so they clearly understand the concepts. To make sure the knowledge sticks, there are a few best practices you can follow based on what we know about thinking and learning:

- Provide context
- Engage emotions
- Introduce novelty
- Create “meaty” challenges
- Provide time for processing and practice
- Stagger the learning



The Value of “Diverse by Design” Teams

[Read more](#) about how thinking and other aspects of diversity can improve team productivity.

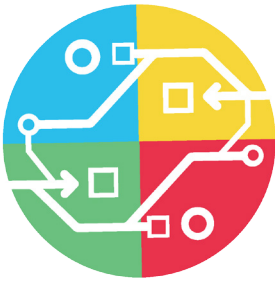
To perform, leaders must stretch outside their mental comfort zones, and that requires energy and effort. When you prepare the brain by providing context and making sure the design fits your learners’ needs, they will be mentally prepared for the challenge, and even though they may still not “like” the discomfort required to stretch, they can own the challenge and view learning as a victory.

Engaging brains is about more than learning and development, though. It’s also about engaging all the brainpower you have. Your organization has a wide range of thinking skills and ability across your talent pool. Capitalizing on that wealth of diversity of thought will provide a significant competitive advantage, but only if you and your leaders recognize it as asset and know how to leverage it through engagement.

Finally, when people are more distracted, stressed and preoccupied, breaking through the noise and getting your point across the way in which you intended is both more challenging and more important. If your leaders understand how they and others think, they will be better able to adapt their communications to more effectively capture attention quickly and get the outcome they’re looking for.

CHECKLIST: Engage every brain by helping your leaders:

- ✓ *Develop the skills they need using Whole Brain® Learning techniques to make sure the essential learning points stick.*
- ✓ *Understand how to stretch their thinking and take on new challenges.*
- ✓ *Build diverse teams to practice thinking agility and help them get better results.*
- ✓ *Use better brain engagement to adapt the way they communicate and deliver information so people will listen and understand.*



*To get clarity
in a world of
ambiguity,
leaders need to:*

1. Focus on where they want to be.
2. Let go of how they get there.

3. Future-Proof Your Leaders

“The only way you learn to flip things is just to flip them!”

- Julia Child, world-renowned chef, after flopping a potato pancake onto the floor during her TV show.

A surprising recent finding is how the need for clarity can shut down thinking, particularly the strategic, long-term thinking required to stay ahead.

Think about it: With so much ambiguity all around, how often have you found yourself putting off strategic thinking or feeling you can't spend the time on it? We need to know where we're headed. We need clarity. Without it, we feel stuck.

The answer? Let go of the how.

Leaders need to, as Stephen Covey said, begin with the end in mind instead of focusing on how to get from today to the next step.

Start by changing assumptions about what you can predict. Drop the expectation for 100% accuracy—you will never get it anyway—so you can take the pressure off and free the mind up to explore options.

Our 30 years of research in Whole Brain Creativity® has shown that something as simple as asking “What if?” questions immediately shifts your thinking away from today to the future.

Promoting a culture of experimentation, by creating safety around trying things out, is equally important in helping to future-proof your leaders. A “fail fast, fail cheap” approach helps make it acceptable for people to pilot ideas, to test things...and to fail.

Take a page from the world of IT development where “agile” is the mantra and processes have regular checkpoints built in to allow for future-proofing the product along the way. It's a great example of an approach your leaders should adapt.

Finally, the most effective future-oriented cultures encourage leaders to lighten up!

It's not only OK to laugh, it's a good way to deal with ambiguity and tension. There's even **research** to back it up. Wouldn't you rather work in that kind of environment?

CHECKLIST: Future-proof your leaders by helping them

- ✓ *Focus on the end goal, letting go of the how and the need for 100% accuracy.*
- ✓ *Ask “what if...” to begin to think with a future mindset.*
- ✓ *Develop a more experimental approach by modeling safety in your leadership development programs.*
- ✓ *Create a culture of experimentation, which helps the brain open up to new options.*
- ✓ *Lighten up!*

4. Orchestrate Agility

Yes, you can orchestrate agility. You can't fight the external circumstances, but you can build the skills and culture that allow people to thrive in the midst of them by being more agile in your thinking.

The first step is being prepared for the new extreme world we live in. The reality is you have less time and resources to get anything done than ever before. This means you need to get very clear and very prepared around what you believe are the biggest challenges for your leadership to grow their thinking agility in order to adapt. Use all of your own thinking resources to narrow it down:

- What is the biggest gap – where will you get the greatest yield?
- What are the logistical realities you need to consider?
- Who is or should be in the pipeline and what thinking demands will you be placing on them?
- What does the desired result look like?

Plan on having half the time and resources that you expect to have. This triggers your brain to look at new ways to get things done and reduces the inevitable surprises that will come along the way.

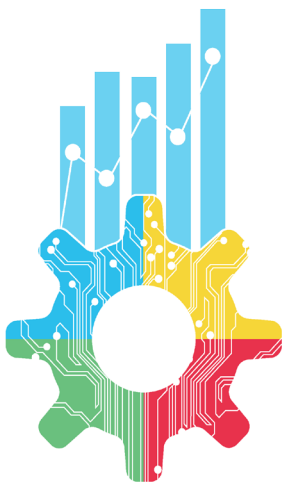
While you're at it, have you noticed that you keep piling on the “to-do” list without ever taking anything off, even if it's an old, no-longer-relevant report or an unnecessary layer of review and control? In order to be more agile, one of the most important questions you should be asking is:

What do we need to stop doing?

When so much complexity is outside our control, this is a great opportunity for you and your leaders to simplify what you can control. By getting out of the auto-pilot mode of doing the things you've always been doing, you will help leaders find the mental space to shift their thinking even more.

CHECKLIST: Orchestrate agility by:

- ✓ *Asking key questions to help you simplify in the midst of complexity:*
 - *What's critical?*
 - *What do I need to focus on?*
 - *What are the core competencies we have to figure out first?*
 - *What should we stop doing?*



Think of one thing you can you put on your “not-to-do” list.



Watch this brief video:
[“Build Your Thinking Agility”](#)

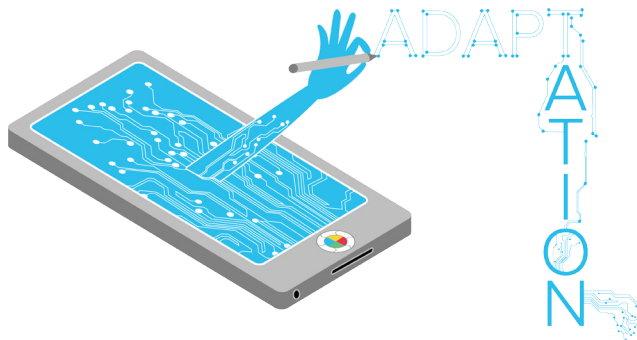
- ✓ *Planning for Extreme Execution: Plan on half the time and resources you assume you will have.*
- ✓ *Encouraging leaders to have the guts to ask, What should we stop doing?*
- ✓ *Applying a Whole Brain® approach to leadership development.*
- ✓ *Using all the tools you have, including technology, the diversity of thinking around you and your own Whole Brain® Thinking skills.*

Turn VUCA On Its Head

The environment isn't going to slow down. VUCA is going to keep getting worse. Tom will keep checking his email from home and working late hours. But there is a relief and remedy available to all of us that will take some of the pressure off.

Now, more than ever, Training and HR professionals have both the opportunity and the obligation to make sure everyone builds the thinking agility to adapt and thrive.

How will you use it to adapt?



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