

# **Stepping Safely into the Unknown – Project Management in a VUCA Environment**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Currently, the biggest item on top of any CEO's to-do list is creating, shaping and transforming their organization's culture to be more responsive to permanent change. CEO's talk about the values of integrity, trust, empowerment and leader development as essential within the new damaging environment of VUCA Management. This paper will guide you through the hazards of working within this ever-changing environment to understand how to prepare, how to manage the impact of the continuing change and how to safely negotiate a passage out again. He will demonstrate how the project professionals can reinforce these values through personal example and by ensuring they cascade throughout the organization. By delivering this change through effective leadership this will help to shape and reinforce the future business culture. In the ever-changing world that we now live and work in, disruption is as great as it has ever been, meaning we are seeing all aspects of VUCA within our own environments.

## **OVERVIEW**

Katrina, Wilma, Irma and Maria. To some these seem to simply be names of innocent girls, but to others, these names leave chills down the spine with memories of fear and destruction. In 2017, two of these names were hurricanes that tore through the Islands of the Caribbean, leaving behind their trail of devastation, this was especially true about the British territory of Anguilla.

The island of Anguilla sits to the East of Puerto Rico and on the tip of the arc of the Caribbean cluster from the Dominican Republic as the most easterly island to Barbados at its most southerly point. This makes it very susceptible to the elements of the weather and in this short period in late 2017, this was demonstrated as never before for the citizens of this long forgotten paradise island.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that over 90 percent of structures on hard-hit islands were damaged or destroyed. Hurricane Irma, one of the most powerful storms ever recorded in the Atlantic, ripped through Anguilla with Category 5 strength. Impacting the island with sustained winds as high as 185 mph, this caused catastrophic damage to numerous island businesses and homes as the storm continued toward the U.S. mainland.

The winds lasted 37 hours, making Irma the longest-lived storm of such intensity

anywhere around the globe for at least the past 50 years.<sup>1</sup>

With an almost immediate response from the UK Government and from an island-wide rallying talk by its Governor, Tim Foy OBE, the recovery programme was rapid and although not ideal in places, highly impactful with its tremendous efforts of the British Armed Forces in the shape of the Royal Marines and with the islanders pulling together to get the island functioning and safe as quickly as possible.

Now, over eighteen months later, the island looks to be its idyllic self again, but with the Governor's aims for greater economic development and public safety as his driving strategy for the period of his incumbency, are there lessons we can learn from the event and towards managing post disaster recovery in the future when we walk into the VUCA Dimension of Project Management?

## **POST DISASTER VUCA DIMENSION MANAGEMENT**

The term VUCA and the art of VUCA Management was first introduced by the US Marines, upon their arrival in the Middle East in 1991. It was given this name due to the new, original nature of the extreme conditions and the nature of warfare, that they previously had not observed or been involved in. The term described the ever-changing conditions that were found in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Today, the term has evolved into mainstream business, but other than the nature of the business itself, very little has changed. In a world where it is believed that it becomes smaller every day, the VUCA dimension also looks how the world spins a little faster as well. Today's business world also offers extreme conditions, just like the US Marines discovered, however, just of a different nature.

In this ever-changing world, we have a totally new environment to contend with, where laws, rules, norms, technologies and techniques, behaviours, values and the economy are nothing like they were only a few years ago. What people used to almost guarantee or depend on to be developing and growing their business, these days, no longer exists with an environment of ever shifting sands to try and grow and develop. Put quite simply, the world as we know it, will never be the same again.

So, knowing that it is called VUCA is one challenge, understanding the four elements in a little more detail, allows us to learn how to manage this dimension so much more.

*Volatility*, something that is simply characterised by or subject to rapid or unexpected change and lack of stability. In simple terms, things that are changing continuously, weather that be the weather conditions, the financial stability of a nation, or a change in the terms of an agreement that had previously been in place, such as Brexit between the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union nations. What is currently true and dependable, may simply not be or in extreme conditions, may not even exist tomorrow. Products and services that are an absolute success today can become worthless or be removed within the same financial year.

*Uncertainty*, an indefinite that is not reliable or constant and becomes unpredictable in its nature. The lack of ability to foresee what major changes might come introduces a higher

likelihood and impact of risk around your working environment. Within a disaster zone, the unpredictability of the behaviours of the people, or the next phase of weather can make it almost impossible to make progress. In the modern world of finance and technologies, it is impossible to predict with certainty how markets will evolve. A secure stable asset within a community or fixed values in the economy and on the stock exchanges around the world can collapse and disappear overnight. Add to that, the factor which was discussed earlier, that the world seems such a smaller place these days than in the past, then due to the nature of globalization, a relatively small impact in one environment, such as within the world of finance with its financial products when it comes to changes in taxation laws etc. and how they may have huge worldwide consequences, described best as the butterfly effect.<sup>2</sup>

*Complexity*, a whole or a complete item, made up of convoluted or interrelated parts. Whether this is an endless number of weather patterns, or the solution development around a wiring or tunnel system which needs to be unraveled to be better understood, with early warning signs of success and failure. With the ever increasing numbers of systems, technologies and methodologies being offered to help resolve problems in the modern world and with the constantly new instruments and regulations to deal with, we are now, as a society in danger of become technology dependent. So many argue that technology is making life simpler, however when it is looked at closely, this is not always the case. One of the greatest methods of problem solving and solution development, is simplicity. This does not in any way mean not using technology to help and assist us, but instead to leverage the technology in our favour and to understand what the systems and tools are actually doing for us, before we blindly trust them. This is becoming more prevalent as we consciously control AI & future technologies and its impact on organizations and individuals so that they do not control us. These days, even with a world where we seem to have more experts than ever before, the world is moving and changing in ways that no one has predicted or seen before.

*Ambiguity*, a communication or environment that leaves doubt and with a capability of being read or misunderstood in multiple ways. In a world today where we have more information than ever before and we are bombarded with news and data, it becomes so much harder to decide what is relevant, what comes from a reliable source and how this information or data changes our views, behaviours or values towards situations and circumstances. Red meat and milk are good for you, or are they. Depending upon the research that you read there are arguments both ways. In a world of social media, how does the freedom of information exchange across cities or the globe influence what you are trying to achieve or perhaps ignite a new problem? Through the term of the current President of the United States, we have been introduced to a new phrase, 'Fake News', but who determines and what determines these days what is real and what is fake? Old certainties, the trust points that we used to rely on have disappeared, because of the volume and unpredictability of what we hear and say, leading to many leaders avoiding taking positions or decisions until they know more, when the problem is that they already have too much. In this ever-expanding environment of information management, it becomes increasingly more difficult to find clarity.

## **UNDERSTANDING VUCA**

Now we have a clearer understanding of the term VUCA, it is important to start to determine what it really is and how it should best be managed, for the VUCA Dimension and VUCA Management is much more than just a simple new phrase. VUCA is in essence, a contextual aberration, meaning that although wrong to the naked eye, under closer scrutiny, the aberration can seem reasonable, even rational, when it is placed into a certain context or environment.

This does not mean therefore that the aberration does not exist, just that to view it and to work within it, the people involved require a different way of thinking and behaving and to be open to change, with greater regularity and greater impact. In September 2017, at UT Dallas, I introduced a new concept to project management and from there, it has been developed and experimented by many larger organisations than my own, Innovation Project Management. (iPM). We look further into iPM later in the paper, however for now, it just leaves me to say that iPM and VUCA Dimension Management are and will further, become the future shape of Business Management in our ever changing world.

With the accelerating rate of change (volatility), lack of predictability (uncertainty), interconnectedness of cause and effect forces (complexity) and an ever stronger potential for misreads (ambiguity), the development of ideas beyond the norm will gradually become the new shape and the new norm of modern life.

## **VUCA PREPARATION – PRE PROJECT ASSESSMENT**

A firefighter never enters a burning building before they know what they are entering. This is what they are taught from the first day and it stays with them forever. In a world where disasters and change can happen at a moment's notice, being as well prepared before you start, has always been the best advice and when stepping into the VUCA Dimension, this could never be more true. Although this may take time, it is essential that it is carried out before releasing any resources into the environment. The aim of the early assessment is to reduce any situation of being 'mission blind'. It is fine saying that you are entering into a volatile situation, but what volatility and how much volatility?

If uncertainty to project managers means risk, then what are the sources and causes of the uncertainty and just how much risk is it we are taking and what is our tolerance towards risk? Hearing that a situation is complex is meaningless, unless you know what it is that makes the situation complex, is it the goals, the procedures or the people? Finally, what information do we have and what exactly are we missing or mis-understanding that makes it seem ambiguous and why?

The most commonly recognised framework that has been used for disaster management in the past, is the Faulkner Framework.<sup>3</sup> This approach was developed in 2001 and has been used to establish a safer environment particularly in the tourist industry for Disaster and Emergency Management. Faulkner uses six steps to navigate the management of potential and actual hazards and the foreseen dangers within an environment. Although there are six steps to the framework, the focus of the framework is predominantly around repair and recovery post disaster or emergency. As part of the VUCA Dimension the design of my framework, built within the VUCA preparation assessment, has a greater focus on preparedness and planning before the deployment of any resources or actions to maximize the impact of those working within the dimension and to minimize the

casualties suffered during the operations.

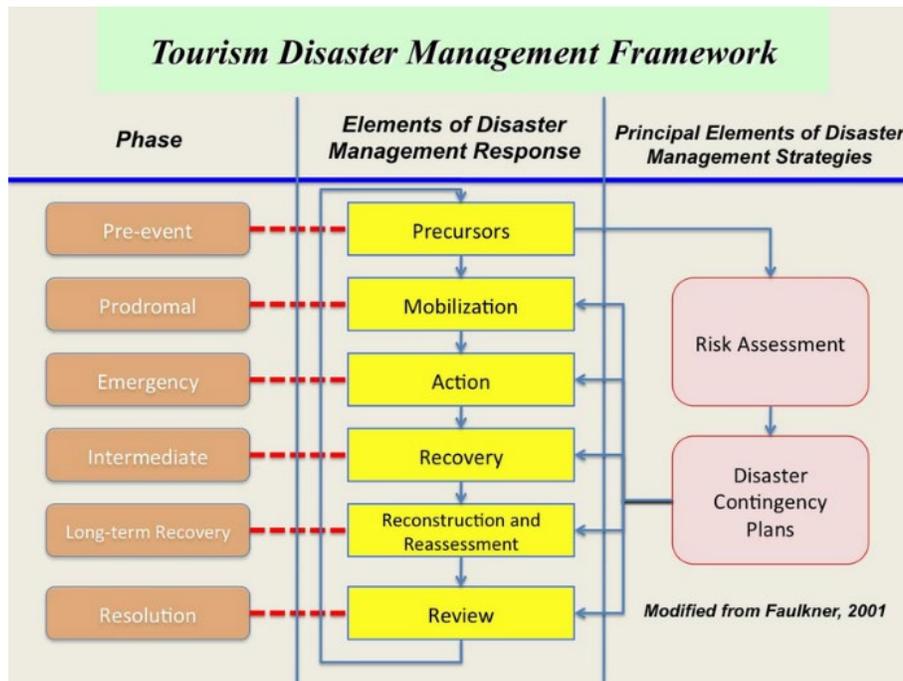


Figure 1- Tourism Disaster Management Framework (Modified from Faulkner, 2001) <sup>4</sup>

## VUCA DIMENSION FRAMEWORK – STEP ONE - PURPOSE

No one does anything without reason, so the idea of entering into a dimension that can cause so much turmoil, means that the understanding of why you are entering becomes even more prevalent. Step One of the VUCA Dimension Framework (Reeson 2019), is the purpose, or reasoning for entry into such an explosive environment. Within this first step of the process, gaining a full clarity of the scope of work and objectives to be completed should be attempted, even if the approach of how you will actually achieve those goals is not known at the time. Understanding what has to be done and what control mechanisms you are putting in place for the organisation and your team, allows for a greater robustness and trust for those involved and those impacted.

The greatest challenge of this step is to be able to envisage the end goal state, the ideal solution to the problems that you are likely to incur and the most effective resolutions to the many issues and risks that lay in waiting. However, having the vision is one thing, being able to articulate the corporate or organizational values and cultures that you stand for and for those that you may be entering into, is a further challenge. Having carried out the pre-project assessment, you should by now have a clearer indication of the context or the environment that faces you and so translating it into tangible activities and balancing this against the risks and issues within this validated approach becomes the driving factor to convince those involved that you can achieve the goals planned for within the step.

To generate the positivity in the operational tasks, the VUCA leader needs to create, to shape and to transform their team, so that they all recognise this is not a normal or routine operation, but instead something completely new, each and every time. By relaying this

understanding to the team members and those either directing the operations or to be supported during the operations, this develops and establishes the right culture amongst all those involved with a belief that success is within them. The danger that you have to be aware of at this point is that as the VUCA leader, you have to set the right tone, mindset and responsibility.

By establishing and embedding the confidence and trust within the team, you are improving the chances of success, but be wary at this point not to become too confident so as to have to team believe that no matter what the danger, they cannot fail. It is through the recognition of failure, that we improve our self-awareness around what it will take to be successful. With the culture, values and right tone set, the team and the organisation behind the team, can now become more responsive to regular and unexpected change.

## **VUCA DIMENSION FRAMEWORK – STEP TWO - RESOURCING**

The successful delivery within any VUCA dimension, needs the right people. That seems simple to say, but it is true. The old adage of the right person, doing the right thing at the right time never is stronger than within the VUCA dimension. However, identifying and then developing the right people, does not come easily and requires the development of the right talent, for the right tasks, in a timely manner with evolved leader mindsets.

One element that is crucial to success, is that those involved must be a team, where their combined force of all their elements are greater than any one singular entity. One major difference between a standard team and a VUCA prepared team, is the leader's willingness for empowerment and shared responsibility. By empowering the team resources more than within a routine environment, this will allow the resources to make decisions as and when necessary and not simple wait for one person to drive the operations forward. With this additional responsibility, this offer the opportunity for the team resources the room they need to adapt and grow into the roles that they have been deployed in.

This ability to share the decision making and the responsibilities appropriately amongst everyone, establishes and then develops further team integrity and the essential behavioural value of trust. However, this only takes the team and its ability so far and there is a further step within resourcing that must be clearly understood, by the management, the leadership and the team. Everyone working within the VUCA dimension must be prepared to mix and match their skills, resources and knowledge to ensure that the response rate aligns with the rate of change. Within this aspect of resourcing of the team, comes the strength of adaptability, not so that you are just strong and skillful within your own discipline, but that each team member can alter and adjust to secondary and tertiary roles as the changing environment demands it.

By designing and shaping the team members, this allows the leaders to build their team values around the vision and mission goals which were solidified and then approved in Step One. This allocation of the right resources, to deliver the change to the VUCA circumstances, allows the team to leverage the use of its technology, understanding what benefits can be gained with their use, but avoiding the dangers of believing that technology provides the only solution, leading the team to become technology dependent.

The final aspect of the second step, is to understand that no one person, has the answer to

every question and so by establishing a learning environment for the team to share best practice and to have the opportunity to voice their views around different challenges, this leads to the whole team proactively managing the VUCA change.

To close the step, it is also important to remember one last and crucial fact, when stepping into such a dimension, people react and change dependent upon their circumstances and emotional acceptance of the change and although this paper does not cover the important aspects of Emotional Intelligence, it is important enough to briefly mention how people react and then respond in an ever-changing environment.

As the leader of the VUCA dimension's operations, it is essential that you can first understand yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, and your needs and emotional triggers to be able to consciously navigate yourself as well as those that are inside the team. What requires constant review and reinforcement, is a set of emotional and social skills that can influence the way perform. These signs and skills are shown as the way we:

- ✓ Perceive and express ourselves
- ✓ Development and maintain social relationships
- ✓ Cope with challenges
- ✓ Use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way

The VUCA dimension and the circumstances and actions that take place within it, impact on three key levels and it is paramount that the appropriate person at the right time is reviewing how these levels are changing inside and as a result of the operational tasks. The three levels that require constant review and supervision are:

- ✓ Organisation level and how the structure is holding up against the strain of the rapid change and fluctuating circumstances
- ✓ Task level and how the work that you are committed to has and is changing and how the team carrying out the work is adapting to the change
- ✓ Personal level, effecting the values and the cultures of those involved and how they are now changing due to the environment and the results of the operation

### **VUCA DIMENSION FRAMEWORK – STEP THREE - ACHIEVEMENT**

As everyone knows, a plan is only as good as it is executed. So a strong, robust plan before entering the VUCA dimension, is a key attribute towards success. However, how do you plan for so much uncertainty and for a leap of faith into the unknown?

By establishing simulations of the various scenarios that the management and team are predicting and then practicing them in a safe environment before they are executed, allows a clearer understanding of what might have to be done to deliver success within the environment but also creates and develops a comradery within the team that is so under valued by so many people that do not understand the importance of high performance in a team.

One specific difference between a normal 'safe' environment and that of the VUCA dimension, is knowledge management and the provision of time and space to ask

questions that challenge the status quo. All too often, within the normal environment, we record of lessons and then feed them into our tasks and projects at pre-approved times or reviews weeks or months apart. The VUCA dimension does not offer the luxury of pre-approved reviews with great distances between them. No, within the VUCA environment, the team and management learn their lessons and then immediately implement them as fully as possible to maintain traction with the deliverables. One very key role that the VUCA leader has to play whilst the delivery of the tasks is being carried out, is the regular reinforcement of the mission and a reminder to the whole team of the purpose and reasoning for this commitment that they established in Step One.

This is best achieved by creating a drumbeat, a message that maintains focus and reminds the management, the team and all other involved of their responsibilities and expectations. Having now creating an environment where your team is progressing with their tasks, be ready to change at all times. Just as you feel that progress is being achieved and you can start to see the next milestone or deliverable, your VUCA environment promises you one thing, that nothing will stay as it seems. With this heightened situational awareness of constant change, it means that as the VUCA leader it is more important than ever that you ensure the right people are positioned in the right place at the crucial time.

The final element to managing this environment, is two-fold. Firstly, where we had previously mentioned emotional intelligence and lessons learned, within the Achievement stage, (Step Three), it is imperative that regular performance reviews are carried out, not simply for the drive of the project, but more importantly, for the well-being of the resources. Understanding and preparing for the well-being of your team, means that you require to plan for the second element for operational momentum, succession planning. The understanding of who fills who's shoes at a moment's notice is part of the continuous development of the team as individuals and as a group. With no succession planning and preparation, the loss of one key role can lead to a single point of failure and a rudderless team.

#### **VUCA DIMENSION FRAMEWORK – STEP FOUR - WITHDRAWAL**

No entry plan is successful without an exit. Selecting to go into a VUCA environment and knowing what you were trying to achieve within it is one aspect of success. Delivering a safe and structured withdrawal is equally as important to the plan. Dependent upon the situation, clearly situations can change, but what the VUCA leader and their team should be looking to carry out is a managed and measured removal from the environment.



*Figure 2 - VUCA Framework (Reeson 2019)*

The withdrawal should be steady and proportionate to the task, not instant or sudden, leaving the environment either panicking or back in the chaos that ensued before your arrival. It is very important within the withdrawal plan, to make the necessary decisions around what assets and resources need to be withdrawn, when and what needs to be left behind permanently to create the stability you were trying to achieve initially. The environment you depart, should be left in a stronger, better condition than on your entry.

The timing of the withdrawal will have a lot to do with the alignment of your achievements with the originally planned goals and aims. Leaving the environment, should also involve having created and being able to maintain a robust governance structure to be managed by those remaining to ensure a sustainable future with no power vacuum. As with all the steps of the framework, but more so here than anywhere else, the management, leaders and teams professional ethics will come under greater scrutiny than any other time. It is by behaving ethically and managing professionally the handover to the new owners of the environment and by transferring responsibility to them in a manner with strong decorum, that the lasting message will create the legacy of change. As the last resources are then deemed by those that now have taken over responsibility, as redundant to the services of the environment, they can be redeployed and then final closure can occur.

## **CONCLUSION – CREATING AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION**

Disasters and emergencies will continue to exist throughout the globe and this is not something that can be changed, as it is part of nature and the ever-changing planet on which we live. However, managing how we handle such dangerous and fatal events needs to change and a process of education needs to be put in place that allows everyone to believe that, should such dangers come to them, that they are suitably equipped and competent to handle the situation and to minimise the damage and restrict the loss of life.

To handle such future events, there needs to be a current and post event governance structure in place, designed with fluidity and flexibility in mind, to allow for the team to meet the needs of the environment. With the governance established, there requires a blend of tactical short-term goals which lead towards and meet the strategic aims and long-term success to create a sustainable solution for the environment.

With the development of the talent around inter-changeable assets, this leads to a team that can change to the needs of the VUCA dimension and can alter their roles and responsibilities instantaneously, adapting to the ever-changing circumstances. These assets should provide operational reinforcement to the strategic aims and tactical goals by driving the tasks forward, both effectively in what they change and efficiently in how they change them. Finally, the VUCA leadership should retain one key skill for all future operations, their endless ability to change and change again whilst under pressure, but based on sound thinking, integrity, a collaborative mindset and a cool level head.

All too often we hear of innovation and what it can do to help an environment or an industry, but we never seem to use innovation. It is only through necessity or desperation

that new ideas get generated, when the time to really think through a solution is at its lowest. Innovation should not be a last resort, but instead something that we do through choice to develop and grow opportunities. It is not until the realisation of innovative thinking, is truly appreciated and then implemented that business in general, or projects and recovery programmes can truly see its full potential.

In closing, should you look to drive forward and look to deliver VUCA Innovation and in itself, Innovation Project Management, there are four main drivers that you have to consider:

- ✓ Health, safety and well-being of those inside the dimension, both working to resolve the issue and those living inside that require the support and aid
- ✓ Efficiency Management of the processes and procedures by used in the dimension to ensure that those that are managing or delivering the change do so uses best practice
- ✓ Digital – Physical Integration of skills and abilities to maximise every opportunity by leveraging technology and utilising it in a way so that it helps and brings value to the current situation
- ✓ Sustainable Solution Development to create lasting changes as long-term goals leading towards greater stability and a higher quality of life for all living and working within the environment

To achieve such success, the *VUCA dimension*, requires a *VUCA solution*. The environment needs to change *Volatility* through *Versatility*, to reduce *Uncertainty* by developing *Understanding*, to remove *Complexity*, by demonstrating *Creativity* and to eliminate *Ambiguity* through constant *Adaptability*.

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