



# Leaders Make the Future

Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World

by Bob Johansen  
Berrett-Koehler Publishers © 2009  
194 pages

## Focus

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## Take-Aways

- True leaders do not wait for the future passively; they take proactive steps to shape it.
- The future could be a “VUCA” world of “volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity,” marked by insecurity, environmental collapse and diasporas.
- Instead, build a different VUCA future of “vision, understanding, clarity and agility” by developing 10 new leadership skills.
- Hone your “maker instinct,” your ability to improve and “clarify” your firm’s situation.
- “Flip” dilemmas to discover hidden opportunities and sharpen your “immersive learning ability” to understand your position better.
- Develop “bio-empathy,” an appreciation of nature’s “cycles of change.”
- Engage in “constructive depolarizing” to help different factions understand each another. Provide the “quiet transparency” stakeholders of the future will demand.
- Carry out “rapid prototyping” to test, fail, learn and test again.
- Harness “smart mobs” to reach your goals and create mutually beneficial “commons.”
- Problem-solving leaders are supremely uncomfortable with the idea that you cannot solve dilemmas; you can only exploit them – but that’s the truth going forward.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	7	8	8

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## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What 10 new skills leaders will need to face the uncertain future, 2) What challenges the future will pose and 3) How leaders can transform these challenges into exploitable opportunities.

### Recommendation

What do you do when, metaphorically, the ground starts to shift beneath your feet, placing you and your organization in possible jeopardy? Conventional leaders often cannot deal with such unnerving dislocation. Confused and flummoxed, they cower in the corner, afraid to move. However, savvy executives who have the skills needed to deal with volatile change see such upheaval as a special opportunity to advance their companies into the future. In this visionary book, Bob Johansen, former president of the Institute for the Future, outlines the top 10 new skills leaders will need to cope with a future characterized by volatility and uncertainty. *getAbstract* suggests that those who purchase this book might even want to read the conclusion first. That will allow you to begin with the author's series of pertinent questions you can use to assess your capabilities against the 10 new skills you will need in the future.

## Abstract

### Volatility or Vision? Uncertainty or Understanding?

Society's "natural, business, organizational and social systems" are radically changing into a "VUCA" world characterized by "volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity." Many of today's intractable problems have no solutions, but leaders still must decide how to deal with them. Some feel besieged by a sense of vulnerability, and act too hastily or too tardily. Such reactions are "understandable" but "dysfunctional." Some executives refuse to accept this new reality, assuming that these universal systems will stabilize again. This is a false hope. Things never will go back to what they were. However, proactive leaders can take advantage of the VUCA world's varied opportunities by developing 10 new, pivotal skills. Those who fail to do so will be extremely uncomfortable in the years to come, while those who do learn the necessary abilities will be able to relish the future's heady challenges. If you adopt these skills, you can shape a VUCA world where volatility cedes to vision, uncertainty yields to understanding, complexity makes way for clarity and ambiguity succumbs to agility.

Futurists like to look ahead about 10 years, the "sweet spot for forecasting." This span is distant enough to exceed most "planning horizons" and to display "clear patterns that are not visible in the noise of the present," but not so distant that predictions seem to deal in science fiction. In the coming years, expect the emergence of dramatic new physical and virtual diasporas of people who "are bound tightly by shared values." These migrations, which will shape the future, include:

- **"Climate-change diasporas"** – Weather events will uproot populations, as Hurricane Katrina did in New Orleans, where many residents dispersed across the United States. "Global climate change will shadow the next decade and beyond."

*"The purpose of forecasting is not to predict the future – nobody can do that – but to make better decisions in the present."*

*"It is hard to even think about the future if you are overwhelmed by the present, yet that is exactly the time when foresight can be most practical."*

*“The maker instinct is the most basic future leadership skill, and it energizes every other skill.”*

*“Dilemma flippers turn hopelessness into hope.”*

*“Immersive learning requires active attention, the ability to listen and filter and to see patterns while staying centered – even when overwhelmed with stimuli.”*

*“To develop bio-empathy...observe and appreciate the natural processes that are always going on around you.”*

- **“Rural-to-urban diasporas”** – As people migrate from the country to the city, many – particularly children – may be left behind. Urbanization migrations will be most notable in China, India and Africa.
- **“Bio-diasporas”** – People with the same biological concerns, such as those fighting the same disease, are coming together in strong support groups.

Other forces that will greatly influence society’s future include the complex connectivity of governments, markets and people; the climate and environment; the gap between rich and poor, which is mirrored by a health-care gap; and the conflict over food production and distribution.

While some traditional leadership techniques will be inadequate for the challenges and opportunities to come, other classic executive skills will remain essential, including:

- **“Physical and mental discipline”** – Leaders need “the ability to inspire people in a gripping way with physical and spiritual energy,” using both emotion and discipline.
- **“Active attention”** – Maintain focus in the face of a barrage of information.
- **“Readiness discipline”** – Be prepared to deal with eventualities or they will swamp you.
- **“Urgent patience”** – Know when to push others and when to back off and wait.
- **“Storytelling and listening”** – Teach and inspire others by telling meaningful stories. Become a more engaged listener.
- **“Humble strength”** – Peer into the future with humility, valor, character and clear goals.
- **“Synchronicity”** – Decipher patterns and connections that others miss.

The 10 new skills you will require in the years to come are:

1. **“Maker instinct”** – Great leaders want to make the status quo better. They like to foster growth. They believe in “do-it-ourselves leadership.” Their natural inclination is to tinker, learn how something works and then improve it. The maker instinct is ideally suited to the chaotic times to come, when new products and concepts will bubble up from everywhere, not just R&D labs, and when “customization and personalization” will be the norm. This disconcerting age of supreme uncertainty will overwhelm many people and make them feel under attack, but it will energize leaders with the maker instinct. They recognize the “stir of uncertainty as unfrozen opportunities.” Rather than sitting fearfully back, wringing their hands and bemoaning their fates, maker instinct leaders zestfully jump into the fray to turn complex situations to their advantage.
2. **“Clarity”** – As the world becomes more confusing, people will seek leaders who can clarify modern life and envision the future. These are the leaders who can cut through conflicting facts and opinions and establish a viable path to future success for their organizations. They maintain a buoyant, hopeful attitude and move ahead in the face of obstacles that block other people. Clarity does not come cheaply. It requires discipline and determination, self-knowledge, flexibility and engagement. Perceptive leaders do not deal in stereotypes, which represent “false clarity” and can deflect their path. In business, clarity is “strategic intent” – where the organization plans to go and how it will arrive there. Many businesses demonstrate clarity with the kind of statement that Columbia Business School’s Willie Pietersen calls a “Winning Proposition,” such as the slogan of branding firm Ogilvy & Mather: “The brand of choice for those who value brands.”
3. **“Dilemma flipping”** – Dilemmas do not have solutions. The best way to treat a dilemma is to “flip” it to discover an otherwise veiled opportunity. This will go against the grain of leaders who are problem solvers. First, they must understand that

*“Mimicking natural processes ensures moral and ethical boundaries for human action.”*

*“Constructive depolarization is the maker instinct applied to a conflict, an attempt to remake polarization into dialogue.”*

*“Rapid prototyping enables us to learn from failure quickly, again and again.”*

*“Try out lots of different leadership roles until you find one that really fits for you.”*

dilemmas are intractable, so they have to embrace hopelessness to find hope. This will be a tall challenge for many. Disney cannot do anything about the dilemma of long lines at its famous Orlando Walt Disney World attraction. To exploit this unsolvable problem, Disney has turned its guests’ experience standing in line into something pleasant. The company now provides video entertainment for people that are queuing. Pal Mickey, a stuffed Mickey Mouse doll that entertains waiting children, is another innovation. An electronic sensor in its nose alerts line-standers to the location of rides, shows or exhibits with shorter lines. When it comes to dilemma flipping, the trick is to distinguish a true dilemma from an otherwise solvable problem. Once you identify a bona fide dilemma, “sense, frame and reframe the situation.”

4. **“Immersive learning ability”** – Dr. Scott Dye, an orthopedic surgery professor at the University of California at San Francisco, heads the San Francisco Knee Clinic. To identify “the sources of pain in the knee,” he had both of his knees “cut open and probed for pain sensitivity” without anesthesia. He immersed himself in his patients’ painful experience to understand it better and is now “a leader in...knee pain relief.” You do not have to go to such extreme lengths to learn. You can turn to video or online simulations. Sometimes, immersive learning means acting upon your willingness to try new worlds that you have not experienced. For example, the CEO and senior executives of an industrial cleaning products company traveled by bus to a cheap motel and then used their firm’s products to clean exceptionally dirty rooms. The challenge was to clean one room every 20 minutes, the normal amount of time allotted to the motel’s housekeepers. Through this immersive learning experience, executives got firsthand knowledge of how hard-working people use their products. They gained the insight that their cleaning products needed to have labels with instructions written in the first language of the janitorial staff members.
5. **“Bio-empathy”** – The life sciences and biology will spark a significant portion of future economic development. Important change will stem from “biological and organic ways of thinking.” Bio-empathy means respecting all the natural components of systems. Future leaders must appreciate nature’s primal lifecycles, including their inevitable “cycles of change.” Humans are an integral part of nature and their actions directly affect natural cycles, so future leaders must see the world “from nature’s point of view.” To build bio-empathy, learn the “ecological consequences” of the things that you do. This will have myriad commercial applications. For example, some architects now design buildings in Africa that mimic the “airflow principles of a termite mound,” thus reducing the need for expensive air conditioning.
6. **“Constructive depolarizing”** – Extreme polarization will greatly test leaders in the future. They must find ways to depolarize factions so people can come to understand each other more completely and get along better. For example, “reverse-mentoring,” where young people advise older individuals, can help eliminate tensions that classically exist between young and old. For instance, young Facebook aficionados now counsel their senior boomer managers about networking socially online. Young scientists advise older senior executives about the newest scientific developments. Such role reversals already help routinely in the resolution of sticky conflicts. By posting YouTube videos to explain Islam’s beliefs and traditions, Queen Rania of Jordan uses constructive depolarization to build understanding and to try to diffuse tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. During a BBC interview, she explained, “Violence has overtaken dialogue, and compassion has lost out to anger. I’m hoping this will become a channel of communication between East and West...As Muslims, we need to stand up and speak out about who we are.”

*“Leaders are what they can organize.”*

*“One should...be able to see that things are hopeless yet be determined to make them otherwise.” (F. Scott Fitzgerald)*

*“If you are not confused by current events...you are not paying attention.”*

7. **“Quiet transparency”** – Future leaders must master quiet transparency, the “ability to be open and authentic about what matters to you – without advertising yourself.” As more and more consumers become concerned about the environment, safety standards and other issues, expect the demand for transparency to increase. Technological developments will enable people to monitor firms more closely. “Pervasive computing” will make transparency compulsory in numerous environments and organizations. Grassroots groups will demand it. Along this line, open sourcing will become more prevalent and increasingly drive change. Leaders unwilling to cultivate transparency are in for rude shocks. After all, the “evaluator of transparency,” not the leader or firm under the microscope, determines what transparency actually means.
8. **“Rapid prototyping”** – Think of this as a process that allows you to “fail early, fail often and fail cheaply.” That’s the essence of rapid prototyping, the ultimate trial-and-error methodology. It enables speedy learning about what works and what doesn’t. Certainty emerges only after multiple failed engagements. Thus, rapid prototyping is an ideal leadership method for a future where uncertainty reigns. The measurement of a rapid prototype’s results takes only “hours or days, not months.” Rapid prototyping is designed for developing products. Conventional leaders who prefer to plan their strategies and tactics carefully may find that “learn-as-you-go” rapid prototyping makes them nervous. “Visual prototyping,” which takes place “in your mind and in virtual space,” takes rapid prototyping a step further. Grove Consultants International helps its clients use “visual cartography” to create prototypes of their ideas. Savvy future leaders will learn to “discern patterns across the prototypes” to discover what works. As Winston Churchill put it, “Success is the ability to go from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.”
9. **“Smart mob organizing”** – An online community gathered to achieve a shared goal is a smart mob. It is smart because electronic connections enhance the members’ collective intelligence. It is a mob because no one can safely predict its future behavior. In China, people form online smart mobs called *tuangous* to buy items in volume, making them less expensive for their members. Although moderately priced goods are usually *tuangous*’ targets, one such group even approached a BMW dealer to ask, “What is the price if we buy 30 at once?” Clearly, smart mobs can bring about major changes in conventional retailing and information management. Smart mobs form to fulfill a mutual purpose, from sharing healthy eating plans to carrying out terrorist attacks. In fact, Wikipedia, a social innovation designed to gather all human knowledge, is a very successful smart mob.
10. **“Commons creating”** – A commons is a valuable asset that people share to their mutual benefit. The Svalbard International Seed Vault, a North Pole facility that stores seeds to guarantee “crop diversity for future generations,” is an example of such “shared wealth.” Future leaders must develop novel commons arrangements, that is, “public and private, social and economic, digital and physical” group platforms everyone can use, benefit from and share. Commons creating is a win-win scenario. It depends on robust connections. The “global electronic web” is an ideal setting to establish a commons.

## About the Author

**Bob Johansen** is a Distinguished Fellow and former president of the nonprofit research center Institute for the Future. He has written eight books, including *Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present*.