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KEY ATTRIBUTES OF LEADERSHIP

Tony Blair, who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, writes in his book *On Leadership: Lessons for the 21st Century*: “Leaders willingly take responsibility upon their shoulders when passes around, step out when others step back, have the courage not to go with the flow, they speak up when others stay silent, they act when others hesitate, they take risk because they believe a higher purpose means the risk should be taken.”

This is how Tony Blair, who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, describes leaders in his book *On Leadership: Lessons for the 21st Century*.

These leadership attributes remain the same regardless of leadership level or type of organization. They apply across cultures and different eras worldwide, at least for the past three thousand years.

The attributes mentioned above are more nature than nurture. In daily business practice, however, they must be supported by a myriad of skills and behavioral acts that are more nurture than nature. Today, all leadership must be framed within the context of the current VUCA environment and advances in neuroscience.

VUCA WORLD AND LEADERSHIP

A “VUCA world” describes our modern environment as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous, a term originating from the military to explain rapid, unpredictable change that demands new, agile strategies for leadership, business, and life. It means things change fast (Volatility), the future is hard to predict (Uncertainty), many interconnected factors exist (Complexity), and meaning isn't always clear (Ambiguity).

1. VUCA exposes the limits of “traditional” leadership
Control, detailed planning, and expert-driven answers fail.

Reality changes faster than data can be analyzed. Leadership built on certainty creates a false sense of calm and real risk.

2. VUCA reshapes the role of leaders

In this environment, you are not the one with all the answers. You are the one who:

- holds direction even as paths change
- creates psychological safety for fast decision-making
- supports learning in action, not perfection
- works with emotions, not only with KPIs

3. Leadership shifts from “leading people” to “leading meaning”

People do not look for certainty in plans. They look for it in purpose, trust, and a leader's consistent behavior. A VUCA environment amplifies every inconsistency and every act of authenticity.

4. Core capability: the leader's inner stability

You can manage uncertainty outside only if you can hold it within yourself. Self-awareness, stress regulation, and the ability to slow down thinking under pressure are now strategic capabilities, not merely “soft skills.”

WHAT LEADERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT NEUROSCIENCE

Our brains dislike change because they seek predictability and meaning. We are often more

comfortable with certainty about a negative outcome than with uncertainty itself.



You can manage uncertainty outside only if you can hold it within yourself.

OUR SOCIAL BRAIN

The brain is a “social organ.” Social pain is processed in the same neural systems as physical pain. For the brain, social rejection equals pain. As a result, people are highly sensitive to exclusion and rejection.

EMOTIONS

Most people are familiar with happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, disgust, and anger, the six basic emotions. In reality, there are more than 230 emotions.

Try a simple exercise with your team: ask people to write down as many different emotions as possible in 90 seconds. You will be surprised how few most people name, often fewer than ten. Women usually perform better. Unfortunately, the higher

the leadership position, the less awareness leaders often have of the role emotions play during change.

DECISION-MAKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Do you start a new project only after finishing the previous one, or do you begin new projects while others remain unfinished? Do you solve one problem at a time, or several simultaneously? Do you prefer gradual change, or fast and dramatic shifts?

Your answers reveal your problem-solving style. If you identify more with the first options, you are likely an adaptor; if with the latter, an innovator.

Adaptors improve existing approaches. They think and act in standard ways, value structure, complete projects, and focus on systems. They generally prefer safe, stable environments, clear rules, and step-by-step change.

COGNITIVE BIASES

A cognitive bias is a systematic error in thinking that affects judgment and decision-making, leading to deviations from logic or rationality. Biases often stem from the brain's use of mental shortcuts, or heuristics, that help process information quickly but can also lead to flawed conclusions.

There are around 180 cognitive biases. Some key ones leaders should actively manage include:

- **Confirmation bias** – You seek information

that confirms your view and ignore signals that challenge it. The result: blind decisions.

- **Overconfidence bias** – You overestimate your judgment and experience. Risk increases precisely when you feel most certain.
- **Anchoring bias** – The first piece of information sets your mental frame, even when it is wrong.
- **Availability bias** – You decide based on what comes easily to mind, not on data but on recent experience or emotion.
- **Groupthink** – Teams preserve harmony at the expense of critical thinking. Conformity replaces challenge.

Cognitive biases cannot be eliminated but they can be systematically managed.

NO DECISION IS BETTER THAN ACTION

Let me conclude with my favorite quote from Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back.

Yoda, the Jedi Grand Master, guides Luke Skywalker. Yoda says: “You must unlearn what you have learned.” Luke responds: “All right, I'll give it a try.” Yoda replies: “No. Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try.”

Every leader who wants to be successful, effective, and recognized for results must unlearn habits that worked in a stable, predictable world and acquire new ones. It is a tough job.