

Driving Execution, Fostering Agility:

How to align your leadership
to the agility demands put on
your team?



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Abstract. A team's knowledge of how to produce desired results can be highly mature versus highly immature, depending on the level of »VUCA« (for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) surrounding its work processes. This paper connects the »3x2« Leadership Framework and the leadership practices it defines (»embrace«, »infuse«, »direct«, »facilitate«, »promote«, and »empower«) to the concepts above in order to specify which leadership style to embrace, if process knowledge is rather mature vs. rather immature. In doing so, the paper features a *comprehensive, yet situational* approach to leading people and teams that involves two leadership modi operandi, namely driving execution and fostering agility. Furthermore, it provides to managers a tool to help them assess the agility demands put on their teams and, with it, to align their leadership practices.

¹ The term has been coined in 1987 at the United States Army War College to describe the unpredictabilities that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The term soon found its way into the management literature

»Situational leadership« theory recommends managers to flexibly adapt their leadership style to the leadership challenges at hand. In our view, the most crucial challenge that managers must align their leadership style and practices to is the level of uncertainty or, more broadly, »VUCA« surrounding the work of their teams.

In this paper, we will feature the »3x2« Leadership Framework (Solga, 2020a) as a guiding model for adapting leadership practices accordingly, showcasing one of its core features: to help managers balance between driving execution and fostering agility. »Driving execution« is focused on promoting goal achievement and – if applicable – a disciplined execution of work routines. »Fostering agility« is focused on nurturing a culture of speaking-up, collaboration, experimentation, and reflection because these aspects are key to dealing with higher levels of uncertainty or »VUCA« in more agile ways. »More agile« is to say: more proactively, more flexibly, and with greater speed.

Reading this article and using the assessment tool presented below will help you align your leadership to the levels of »VUCA« and, with it, the agility demands put on your team (or teams, respectively). On a more general level, it's an opportunity to reflect your leadership style with a view to its »situational fit«. We will lay out the concepts and basic ideas first; if you are less interested in the conceptual stuff, you may jump to page 10 already.

The »VUCA / Process Knowledge Spectrum«

»VUCA«¹ has become a popular buzzword to denote the challenges of dealing with higher levels of **volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity** in business and organizational life. To readers less familiar with these

to indicate the uncertainties that organizations are facing in globalized economies that rely heavily on knowledge, innovation, and digitization.

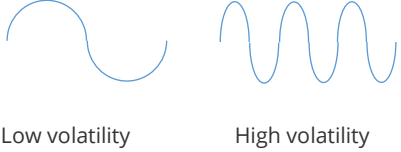
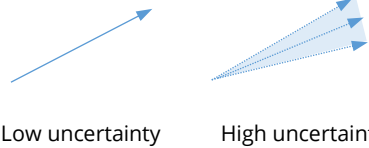
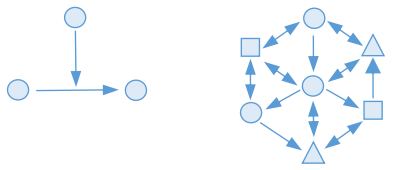

terms, Table 1 provides a concept overview (see also Bennett & Lemoire, 2014).

The more »VUCA« there is, the less mature an organization's or team's so-called process knowledge. **Process knowledge** is what the team or the organization knows about how to produce desired results; it's the knowledge of cause-effect relations or if-then rules transforming goals into results (Edmondson, 2012). **Maturity** of process knowledge is the extent to which tasks are clearly defined and corresponding if-then rules or action steps are clearly prescribed or codified, based on vast experience and ample research.

To the extent that boundary conditions (as for example, customer demands, technology, or competition) are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, process knowledge is in flux and will remain immature, because yesterday's insights on cause-effect relations are tied to boundary conditions that don't exist anymore or because yesterday's »VUCA« conditions didn't allow reliable insights on cause-effect relations.

»VUCA« and process knowledge maturity can be thought of as **varying along a continuum** from »low VUCA / high maturity« to »high VUCA / low maturity« (Edmondson, 2012). Edmondson discusses **three prototypical levels** of »VUCA« and, with it, process knowledge maturity:

1. **Low levels of »VUCA«: routine operations.** In business units where boundary conditions are stable, process knowledge is highly developed and precisely codified (as in manufacturing settings with high-volume repetitive work). Here, work processes are characterized by routine operations. Outcomes can be predicted with certainty. In such settings, learning is focused on improving efficiency – making an existing process more accurate, less time-consuming, or less expensive.

DIMENSION	DEFINITION
Volatility	Refers to the speed of change in an industry, market, or the world in general: the more volatile the world, the more and faster things change. 
Uncertainty	Refers to the predictability of future events : the more uncertain the world, the harder to predict what's going to happen when. 
Complexity	Refers to the number, diversity, and interconnectedness of factors that cause or impact an event: under high complexity, it is impossible to fully analyze an event's boundary conditions and come to rational conclusions about how to generate or control it. 
Ambiguity	Refers to lack of clarity about how to interpret situations and events: something is ambiguous to the extent that corresponding information is incomplete, fuzzy, contradicting, or inaccurate. 

Visualizations adopted from Kraaijenbrink (2018).

Table 1: The four dimensions of »VUCA«

2. **Moderate levels of »VUCA«: complex operations.** In business units where frequent changes in the environment force the organization to adapt, that is to say, refine and differentiate certain processes (as in complex service organizations where services need to be customized to the ever-changing service demands of customers), some process knowledge is mature but other process knowledge is in flux or unknown. Here, work processes are characterized by complex operations where unexpected and problematic results frequently appear and need to be dealt with effectively. Learning in such settings occurs through problem-solving and involves growth in problem-solving capabilities and adaptiveness.

3. **High levels of »VUCA«: innovation operations.** Process knowledge remains immature in business units (research labs and product development teams, for example) where goals are vague and shifting, where there is an initial vision that, to be achieved, requires experimentation, trial and error, and collective brainstorming, and where crucial boundary conditions keep changing in volatile ways. Here, tasks must be defined, specified, assigned, and improvised on-the-go. Learning in such settings is focused on innovation through experimentation; its primary purpose is to generate novel possibilities.

Intraorganizational Diversity of »VUCA« and Process Knowledge Maturity

An organization usually **involves all three types of operations**, routine, complex, and innovation (Edmondson, 2012). Depending on their function within the larger whole, some business units or teams are focused on disciplined execution, others are focused on complex problem-solving, and yet others are focused on organizational learning, innovation, and development. Here is an example from an automotive company: routine operations – assembly plant; complex operations – supply chain management; innovation operations – design and development of future cars.

If single team members are enrolled in multiple functions or project work, their task portfolio might be characterized by **different levels of »VUCA« and thus process knowledge maturity** as well: They might be engaged in routine operations with regard to *one* organizational role or job assignment (e.g., training administration) but engaged in complex operations (e.g., workshop facilitation) or even innovation operations (e.g., »new work« project) with regard to *another* organizational role or job assignment.

That's where the idea of **»situational« leadership** comes into play: Depending on respective levels of »VUCA« and process knowledge maturity, different styles of leadership are needed to drive and facilitate team and individual performance. Starting from here, the »3x2« Leadership Framework helps to specify the idea of aligning leadership styles to different levels of »VUCA« and process knowledge maturity.

Before we move on: What are the levels of »VUCA« and process knowledge maturity that apply to your team or to the different teams in your area of responsibility? Think about it for a second.

The »3x2« Leadership Framework

The »3x2« Leadership Framework (see Solga, 2020a, for a more detailed treatise) defines **three overarching tasks** for managing people and teams: to »navigate«, »engage«, and »develop«. Each of these tasks is specifically linked to a specific domain of leadership outcomes, namely task performance, contextual performance, and adaptive performance.

- **Task performance** involves goal achievement in the first place, but also disciplined execution and meeting efficiency standards. **»Navigate«** entails all leadership practices dedicated to driving and enabling task performance.
- **Contextual performance** is discretionary behavior for the benefit of the company and involves helping

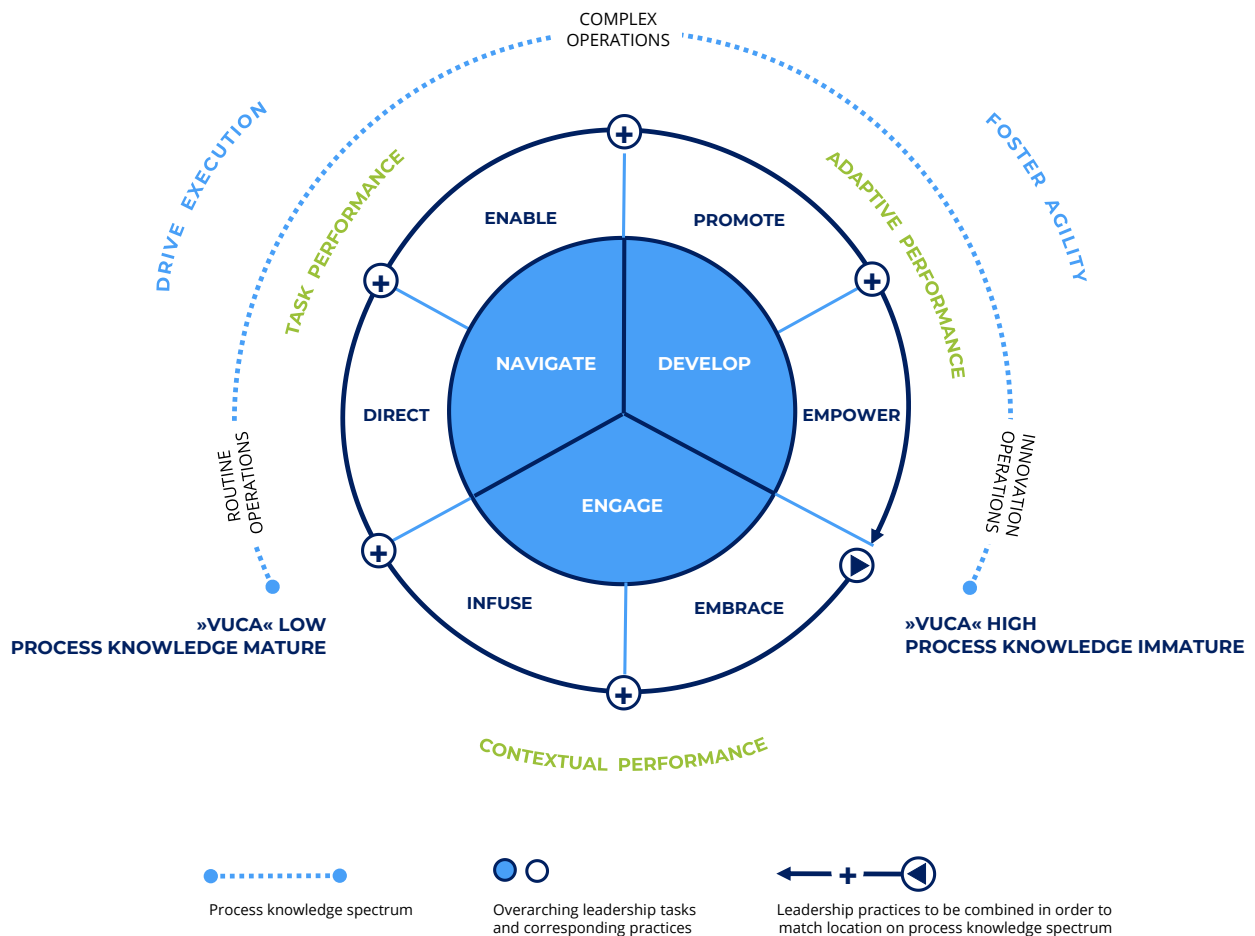


Figure 1: Linking »3x2« to the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum«

others, embracing additional tasks, proactive problem-solving, etc. **»Engage«** refers to all leadership practices focused on encouraging contextual performance through building identification and commitment with the team and the organization.

- **Adaptive performance** involves dealing with change and »VUCA« effectively. **»Develop«** encompasses all leadership practices focused on building capabilities and boundary conditions that facilitate continuous learning and improvement, innovation, and flexibility and speed in dealing with disruptive change.

So, »3x2« prompts managers to »think from the end« – that is to say, to focus on desired leadership outcomes when planning for action: »Navigate« to drive task performance; »engage« to promote emotional commitment

and, with it, contextual performance; »develop« to foster adaptive performance.

Another core idea of »3x2« is to structure leadership activities in terms of **give-and-take behaviors** in cooperative exchange relationships. We are using the terms »promote« and »challenge« for that purpose. In cooperative relationships both parties are not only committed to their own needs and interests, but also to the needs and interests of the other party as well as oriented towards a shared purpose. In this respect, **»challenge«** encompasses all activities that forward organizational standards, needs, and goals, and **»promote«** encompasses all activities directed towards meeting the reciprocal needs and

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES	NAVIGATE	ENGAGE	DEVELOP
CHALLENGE	DIRECT Give direction and create alignment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain vision and strategy • Define processes • Set goals • Provide directive feedback • Give contingent reward 	INFUSE Nurture value orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote corporate values • Demonstrate fairness • Engage in self-reflection • Give ethical guidance • Resolve relationship conflicts 	EMPOWER Build environments conducive to team learning and agility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame for learning • Create psychological safety • Establish learning-from-failure strategies • Engage in boundary spanning
PROMOTE	FACILITATE Give task-related support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources • Remove barriers • Resolve task conflicts • Engage in boundary spanning 	EMBRACE Give inspiration and care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give positive attention • Give recognition • Give inspiration • Give emotional support 	COACH Promote capability and career development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify strengths and talent • Coach for performance • Give developmental feedback • Support career exploration • Give stretch assignments
LEADERSHIP OUTCOMES	TASK PERFORMANCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal achievement • Disciplined execution • Meeting efficiency standards 	CONTEXTUAL PERFORMANCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration • Helping • Conscientiousness • Sportsmanship • Taking charge 	ADAPTIVE PERFORMANCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting to novel job demands • Mastering »VUCA« • Embracing continual change

Table 1: The »3x2« Leadership Framework

expectations of team members and, with it, towards fostering »upward spirals« (that is, processes where both partners thrive on their cooperative exchange).

The foregoing yields **3 x 2 = 6 key areas of action** for leading people and teams, namely »direct«, »facilitate«, »infuse«, »embrace«, »empower«, and »coach«. Table 1 outlines these key areas that we refer to as **»leadership practices«**. Each practice is focused on a specific purpose and involves a specific set of behaviors. See Solga (2020a) for a more detailed look into these practices.

Before moving on: To what extent do you embrace the different leadership practices described in Table 1? Is there a dominant practice? Or something you hardly ever do? Think about this for a second.

Linking »3x2« to the »VUCA / Process Knowledge Spectrum«

Figure 1 connects the »3x2« Leadership Framework to the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum« and indicates

which leadership style to embrace, if – due to the given level of »VUCA« – process knowledge is relatively mature vs. relatively immature.

Keep in mind that **»leadership style«** is here defined as a specific combination of the six leadership practices layed out by »3x2« (these practices, of course, are »embrace«, »infuse«, »direct«, »facilitate«, »coach«, and »empower«). By this, our concept of leadership style is not a descriptive but a normative or *pre*-scriptive one. Put simply: It does not describe what people do but instead tells them what to do.

In Figure 1, the **»VUCA / process knowledge spectrum«** is represented by the dotted semi-circle ranging from »VUCA low / process knowledge highly mature« on the left to »VUCA high / process knowledge highly immature« on the right. The prototypical levels of maturity discussed above – routine, complex, and innovation operations – are marked on the semi-circle as well. As indicated in Figure 1, the different levels of »VUCA« and, with it, process knowledge elaborateness call for **different kinds of performance**, namely task performance (goal achievement, disciplined execution, and efficiency) and adaptive performance (team learning, innovation, and agility).

As Figure 1 also shows, the different leadership practices are put into a specific order or sequence by the dark blue circle. Note that this circle has a starting point (»embrace«) as well as an end point (»empower«) and that the pluses on the circle indicate an **additive combination of practices**. This setup intends to represent the essential idea put forward in this paper:

In order to **match a team's location** on the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum«, managers need to **combine the leadership practices** layed out by »3x2« from »embrace« (starting point of circle) to where the team presumably sits on the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum«.

More specifically: If the work to be done involves routine operations, the leadership style recommended by Figure 1 is »embrace + infuse + direct« (not simply »direct«). If the

work to be done is complex and tending towards innovation and the boundary conditions are fairly high on »VUCA«, the most adequate leadership style is »embrace + infuse + direct + facilitate + coach« (not simply »coach«). In our leadership trainings or coachings, we prompt participants to **determine the level of »VUCA«** and process knowledge elaborateness that applies to a specific team or unit.

At the end of this paper we will provide to you an **assessment tool** for that purpose. You are invited to apply it to your area of responsibility.

With a view to Figure 1, the following is also noteworthy: Two leadership practices, namely »embrace« and »infuse«, are not linked to the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum« and, at the same time, are defined as the most basic ones (given their sequence from start to end along the dark blue circle). The underlying idea is very simple, yet strongly programmatic:

Whatever the mission or challenge of your team – be it disciplined execution of routine operations, complex problem-solving, or team learning, innovation, and agility – your leadership needs to **always start with engaging people**.

More specifically: Giving inspiration and care (»embrace«) and creating value-orientation by modeling the way (»infuse«) are the main ingredients of *any* leadership style and given *any* level of »VUCA« and process knowledge maturity. The outcome of combining these practices are identification with and emotional commitment to the team and organization and, with it, discretionary behavior for the benefit of the company (helping other, embracing additional tasks, taking charge of problems, etc.) – in short: contextual performance.

Arranging the leadership practices in a circle allows to highlight yet another set of **leadership principles** represented in »3x2« (see Figure 2):

- **Setting standards:** By carrying out the leadership practices »infuse« and »direct«, managers are giving

direction in terms of the goals and values that matter to the organization.

- **Giving support:** By carrying out the leadership practices »enable« and »coach«, managers are shaping facilitative boundary conditions for people to achieve goals.
- **Fostering empowerment:** By carrying out the leadership practices »empower« and »embrace«, managers inspire feelings of safety, trust, purpose, meaning, autonomy, competence, and impact, with it, tapping into sources of intrinsic motivation and creating psychological empowerment. The latter is a motivational state that leads people to embrace their job role with a much higher level of vigor and dedication.

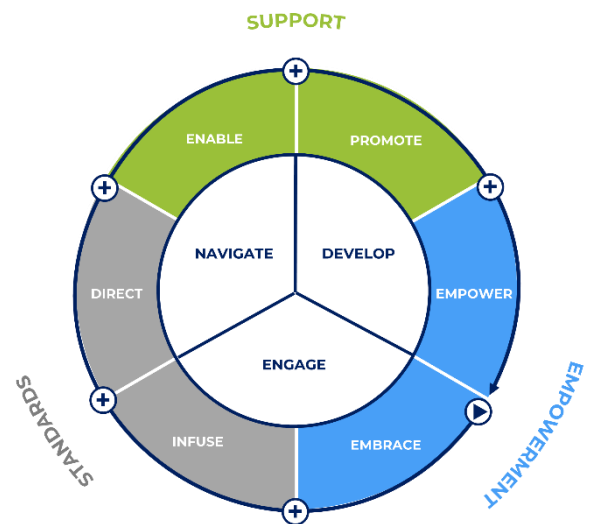


Figure 2: Standards, support, empowerment in »3x2«

Two Leadership Modi Operandi

As can be seen from Figure 1, linking the »3x2« Leadership Framework to the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum« allows to juxtapose two **leadership modi operandi**: »driving execution« and »fostering agility«. These modi operandi pursue different purposes but are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary: Combining them constitutes a **full-scope approach** to leading people and teams in the face of high »VUCA«. ² As we will explain in a forthcoming paper (Solga, 2020b), this full-scope approach indeed represents our understanding of **»agile leadership«**.

»Driving execution« is mainly focused on ensuring and improving goal achievement, disciplined execution, and efficiency, but should strive to inspire discretionary pro-organizational behavior as well. Therefore, its mission is to balance navigation and engagement. »Driving execution« combines the leadership practices »embrace«, »infuse«, »direct«, and »enable«.

»Fostering agility« is focused on promoting team and organizational learning, innovation, and – of course – agility (i.e., proactivity, flexibility, and speed in dealing with disruptive change). Altogether, its focus is to enable and empower people and teams to deal with higher levels of »VUCA«. Therefore, its starting conditions are moderate to high levels of »VUCA« and, based on that, a weakly structured and immature body of process knowledge.

Table 2 provides an overview of the two leadership modi operandi, their purposes, starting conditions, and practices. Furthermore, »driving execution« and »fostering agility« entail different understandings of learning and development and of process-related variance and failure. These are sketched out in Table 2 as well.

Take a few seconds to think about the two leadership modi operandi in connection to your organization. To what extent are »driving execution« and »fostering agility« represented in the day-to-day practices of the leadership team? To what extent does this correspond to the different levels of »VUCA« and process knowledge maturity you see across the organization? And with a view to »driving execution«: To what extent is there a balance between all four leadership practices, »direct«, »enable«, »embrace«,

² This approach is similar to Edmondson's (2012) idea of juxtaposing two approaches to teaming, namely »organizing-to-execute« and »organizing-to-learn«.

	»DRIVING EXECUTION«	»FOSTERING AGILITY«
Leadership purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive goal achievement, disciplined execution, efficiency • Encourage contextual performance, namely social facilitation, dedication, and taking charge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote organizational learning, innovation, and agility (i.e. proactivity, flexibility, and speed)
Starting conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • »VUCA« low to moderate • Process knowledge maturity high to moderate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • »VUCA« moderate to high • Process knowledge maturity moderate to low
Leadership practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek a balance between navigating and engaging people and teams to drive task performance and encourage contextual performance • »Embrace«: give inspiration and care • »Infuse«: create value-orientation • »Direct«: give direction, create alignment • »Enable«: give task-related support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embrace leadership practices that nurture capabilities and shape environments promotive of team/organizational learning, innovation, and agility • »Coach«: promote capability development • »Empower«: shape environments conducive to speak-up, collaboration, experimentation, reflection
Learning and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive: learning <i>before</i> doing in structured learning environments • Goal: improving efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-directive: learning <i>from</i> doing in real-life settings • Goal: solving problems and generating novel possibilities
Variance and failure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid variance to improve efficiency • Avoid mistakes – threats to goal achievement and efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploit variance to create possibilities • Exploit mistakes – tap into their potential for learning and development

Table 2: »Driving execution« and »fostering agility«: two leadership modi operandi

and »infuse« (as opposed to »direct« trumping all other practices)?

Assessing Agility Demands to Challenge Your Leadership

Finally, here is an opportunity to systematically **assess the agility demands** put on your team or area of responsibility. Go to page 10 to start.

It is on you to **set the frame of reference**. You may focus on your whole area of responsibility (which might involve various teams) or on a single team. Given what we discussed earlier about the intraorganizational diversity of »VUCA«, we recommend focussing on a specific team.

You may as well focus on a specific person and the different tasks or job roles of that person. Note that the statements are phrased to apply to a specific team; it will be easy however, to refer the statements to a single person.

The outcome of your assessment will be a score that represents the current level of »VUCA« and process knowledge maturity for a specific unit, team, or team member. If you follow the procedure laid out on page 10 and 11, your score will be connected to the »3x2« Leadership Framework. Based on that, the tool will recommend a specific **combination of leadership practices** to match the location of your unit, team, or team member on the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum«.

Good luck!

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»VUCA« Assessment

INSTRUCTION

Apply the following pairs of statements to **your team** or area of responsibility and give a **total of 3 points** to each pair.

Depending on how strongly you agree with statement A or B, **assign 0, 1, 2 or 3 points** to each statement.

0 = almost never
1 = sometimes
2 = often
3 = almost always

The **total for each pair** of statements must **always equal 3**.

Here is an **Example**:

- 2 A. The task diversity is manageable.
- 1 B. The task diversity is tough and continues to grow.

1	— —	B. We have to adapt our procedures often. A. There is little need to adapt procedures.	12	— —	A. Our goals are very clear and specific. B. Our goals are unclear and need specification.
2	— —	B. Job demands are constantly changing. A. Job demands are quite stable.	13	— —	A. Our procedures are tried and tested. B. Our procedures are immature and need constant optimization.
3	— —	A. Organizational change is happening slowly. B. Organizational change is happening at a fast pace.	14	— —	A. Customer demands are stable. B. Customers keep changing their demands from one day to the next.
4	— —	B. We have to refine our goals very often. A. Our goals hardly ever change.	15	— —	B. We must be prepared for surprises. A. There are very few surprises.
5	— —	A. It's quite easy to predict what's going to happen next. B. It's impossible to predict what's going to happen next.	16	— —	B. It takes a lot of trial and error to get where we want to be. A. There is path-goal-clarity.
6	— —	B. There is so much uncertainty that we have to fly on sight all the time. A. Uncertainty is very low; we can therefore fly on autopilot.	17	— —	A. Competitors have little influence on our actions. B. Competitors put us under constant pressure to act.
7	— —	B. Keeping track of events is important to navigate uncertainties. A. »Navigating uncertainties« doesn't apply to this teams.	18	— —	B. We are working on cutting-edge issues. A. We are working on well-established day-to-day issues.
8	— —	B. Planning projects and tasks can only happen in small and short-term steps. A. Projects and tasks can be planned over long periods of time.	19	— —	A. We can base our decisions on hard facts. B. We have to take decisions based on intuition because we don't have facts to cling to.
9	— —	B. Complexity is very high and keeps growing fast. A. Complexity is manageable and rather stable.	20	— —	A. The information we need is mostly complete and accurate. B. We have to deal with incomplete and fuzzy information.
10	— —	A. The diversity of tasks is manageable. B. The diversity of tasks is tough and continues to grow.	21	— —	A. Ambiguity is not a big issue. B. There is a fairly high level of ambiguity.
11	— —	B. Task complexity is very high – there are so many things to keep track of while moving forward. A. Task complexity is low – you just follow the protocol.	22	— —	B. Moving along is constant improvisation. A. There is are a clear path of actions to follow.

SCORING

When you are done, please calculate the total score for statements B. Note that the order of statements A and B on page 2 is shifting from time to time!

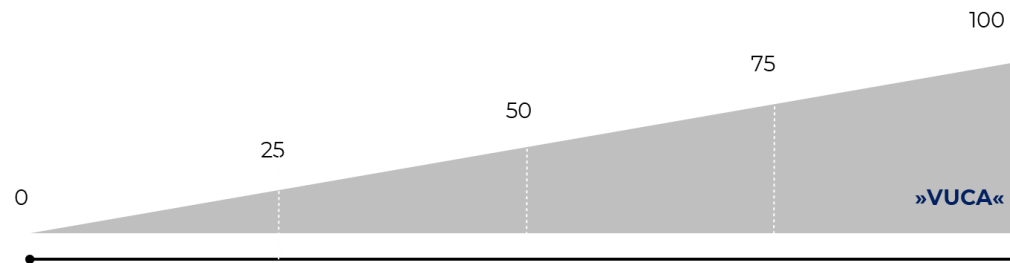
Total score of »B«: _____

Now, divide your total score of B by »66« and multiply it by »100«. This will yield your final score.

Total score of »B« / 66 * 100 = _____

This score represents the location of your team on the »VUCA / process knowledge spectrum«. Make a mark on the continuum (the dark blue line) below.

The figure recommends a **combination of leadership practices to match the agility demands put on your team**. Move from left to right, starting with »embrace«, up to where you made your mark on the continuum.



EMBRACE	+	INFUSE	+	DIRECT	+	ENABLE	+	COACH	+	EMPOWER
Give inspiration and care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give positive attention Give recognition Give inspiration Give emotional support 		Nurture value orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote corporate values Demonstrate fairness Give ethical guidance Resolve relationship conflicts 		Give direction and create alignment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain vision and strategy Define and align processes Set goals Provide directive feedback Give contingent reward 		Give task-related support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide resources Remove barriers Resolve task conflicts Engage in boundary spanning 		Promote capability development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coach for performance Provide developmental feedback Give stretch assignments 		Build environments conducive to team learning and agility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frame for learning Create psychological safety Establish learning-from-failure strategies Engage in boundary spanning
ENGAGE			NAVIGATE				DEVELOP			



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