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Effective Leadership in a Turbulent World

Neree Claes

Abstract

In today's world, we are confronted with a great deal of complexity, resulting in numerous business challenges that demand innovative leadership styles. To overcome these challenges, motivate staff members, and accomplish business strategies, leadership should shift from hierarchical to creative mixed forms of shared leadership. The aim of leadership is to encourage team members to reach their full potential and achieve business objectives as a team. This involves fostering an environment where leaders are receptive to personal and professional growth, as well as the development of their colleagues. Effective communication is crucial in achieving this goal. Good communication enables us to understand people and circumstances more effectively. It fosters trust and respect and facilitates the exchange of innovative ideas, problem-solving, and collaboration among team members. This review article explores the connection between leadership that starts with emotional intelligence and self-awareness and the fundamental principles of nonviolent communication, which is a crucial skill for a leader to connect with his team. Psychological and communication constructs will be discussed in this chapter. However, there is still a need for research on the implementation and effect of this form of communication and innovative leadership styles.

Keywords: connecting communication, nonviolent communication, leadership development, authentic leadership, team leadership

1. Introduction

The world we live in is often described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) [1]. *Volatility* refers to the unpredictable nature of both large and small changes that occur constantly, with the recent COVID-19 pandemic being just one example [2].

Uncertainty unfolds due to the difficulty of anticipating events or predicting how they unfold; historical forecasts and past experiences are losing their relevance and are rarely applicable as a basis for predicting the shape of things to come. For instance, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of employee absences due to illness has increased and a high number of job turnover is seen. Recent literature found a positive correlation between leaders' conscientiousness and ethical leadership and a negative correlation with employees' turnover intention [3].

Moreover, there has been a change from pursuing long-term careers in the same job to embracing short-term careers or frequently changing jobs. Our present-day world is more *complex* than it has ever been, featuring numerous interconnected components and variables that are harder to comprehend. Some information is available or can be predicted; however, its volume and nature can be overwhelming. This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when it was a complicated task to filter and summarize scientific information in order to safeguard our nation's health and enable healthcare workers to perform their jobs safely.

Finally, *ambiguity* exists with unclear causal relationships. In this world, it is difficult to determine the relationship between the cause and outcome. Problems and their repercussions are more multilayered, and as a conclusion, this VUCA world brings a lot of turbulence and, consequently, challenging business needs. There is turbulence on the business side, and as a result, it requires a new kind of leadership and leadership skills [4].

In order to effectively address these business challenges, to motivate and maintain staff members, and/or to create value and keep focus on the business strategy, leadership will need to shift from analytical hierarchical toward creative mixed forms of shared leadership, and from transactional toward transformational leadership [5]. Employees believe they play a vital role in the business, and ethical leaders (self-interest, friendship, and personal morality ethical climate) who actively involve their subordinates in the organizational process are more likely to profit from higher engagement [6]. To successfully transform to the later shift, it is necessary to develop new mentalities and leadership skills.

Transactional leadership has a command and control mentality, most often explained as a cost-benefit exchange between leaders and their followers [5]. Transactional leadership involves leaders clarifying goals and objectives and communicating to organize tasks and activities with the cooperation of their employees to ensure that wider organizational goals are met. The success of this type of leader-follower relationship depends on the acceptance of hierarchical differences and the ability to work through this mode of exchange.

Transformational or empowerment-based leadership is an umbrella term that encompasses several theories, including ethical, visionary, moral, servant, authentic, and team leadership. This grouping is derived from several commonalities that are present in the concept of transformational leadership. Specifically, these commonalities include developing the followers, raising the moral standards of leaders, working collaboratively or in teams, and the sharing of power and responsibility [7].

This brings us to our definition of leadership, namely *bringing the best out of our team members to achieve business goals together* [8]. In this definition, power is shared through the development of followers into leaders themselves, empowering followers, and creating responsibility for shared goals within the team and team members. The latter requires authentic leaders who are open to growth and development not only for themselves but also for their team members. They will encourage their members to utilize their talents and unlock the entire potential of their team by concentrating on team leadership. As an authentic leader, they will possess a growth mindset, be self-aware, invest in emotional intelligence, demonstrate bravery, and have the willingness to learn from their failures [9, 10]. It has been found that leaders with higher conscientiousness quality are morally inclined toward their employees' needs and subsequently bring positive change in the work unit conscientious leaders can serve as role models for their subordinates [3]. Employees can replicate the behaviors of conscious leaders who establish a fair workplace, convey standards, and support

ethical conduct, making employees more dedicated and willing to stay with the firm. Besides this, the leader must be warm and build trust and human attachment within the team, while trustworthiness increases information sharing, openness, fluidity, and cooperation within the team and team members [11].

In the first part of this review article, the focus is on personal leadership because the first step in leadership is to know yourself. To become an authentic conscious leader, it is essential to understand your personality, values, talents, skills, and potential for growth [12]. An authentic leader can effectively lead an organization and empower their team members based on mutual understanding [13]. Successful communication helps us better understand people and situations [14]. It builds trust and respect and creates conditions for sharing creative ideas, solving problems, and connection between team members. Different studies show that communication skills and collaboration are crucial and can be learned [15–17].

In the second part of this article, we explore and practice the main principles of connecting communication, originally introduced by Marshall Rosenberg and also known as nonviolent communication [18]. It is a way of thinking, speaking, listening, and acting that contributes to mutual understanding, connection, and cooperation. Effective communication involves openly expressing what is significant to you, embracing radical honesty, and having the courage to voice your needs. Connecting communication also means not to experience feedback as critical or threatening but as an opportunity to learn and invest in lasting relationships and collaborations. Connecting communication stimulates powerful leadership and provides a basis for healthy relationships. However, research is needed to invest the implementation and its effect.

2. Connected leadership: emotional intelligence and self-awareness

Research suggests that *emotional intelligence* could be the determining factor that sets exceptional leaders apart from those who are merely adequate. Daniel Goleman introduced “emotional intelligence” [10]. Emotional intelligence in a professional environment is divided into five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The main topic of this paragraph is the importance of self-awareness for leaders and the ways to achieve it through personality assessments and constructive feedback. Developing a growth mindset, embracing challenges, and being open to learning are essential elements in enhancing self-awareness.

Self-awareness is defined as the ability to recognize and understand your personality, emotions, and values, as well as their effect on others. Highly self-aware leaders are self-confident, have a realistic self-assessment, and have a self-deprecating sense of humor [19]. There are two types of self-awareness. The first is internal self-awareness, which represents how clearly we see our own emotions and values, professional goals, fit with our environment, reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses), and impact on others. We found that internal self-awareness was associated with higher job and relationship satisfaction, personal and social control, and happiness; it was negatively related to anxiety, stress, and depression. The second category, *external self-awareness*, refers to understanding how other people view us in terms of the factors listed above. Our research demonstrates that individuals who are aware of how others perceive them are more proficient at displaying empathy and considering others’ viewpoints.

When we judge others, especially those in leadership roles, we typically examine two key traits: their *warmth*, communion, or trustworthiness (i.e., how lovely they

are), and their *strength*, agency, or competence (i.e., how fearsome they are) [11]. The question arises, which is more important: being liked or being competent? Many leaders today frequently highlight their strengths, competencies, and qualifications in the workplace, but this might be the wrong approach. By emphasizing their power before establishing trust, they run the risk of fostering feelings of fear and encouraging negative behaviors. A growing body of research suggests that the way to lead is to begin with warmth. Warmth facilitates trust, communication, and absorption of ideas. Prioritizing warmth helps you connect immediately with those around you, demonstrating that you hear, understand, and can be trusted by them.

As a conclusion, emotionally intelligent leaders who view their employees as their own tend to develop warmer and stronger relationships with them, experience greater fulfillment from their interactions, and see them as more effective in general. When it comes to internal and external self-awareness, it is tempting to value one over the other. However, leaders must actively work on both seeing themselves clearly and receiving feedback to understand how others perceive them. Highly self-aware people actively focus on balancing both types of awareness.

3. How to improve your self-awareness?

One important way – besides self-assessment and reflection – for development and to increase self-awareness is feedback. The latter is a way to grow and an opportunity to validate the known, and most importantly to uncover the unknown [20]. Feedback is defined as a dynamic partnership between *feedback* givers and receivers based on listening, trust, and awareness of the other person's emotional state and surroundings, to facilitate effective communication between both partners [21].

The Johari model divides feedback into four distinct zones, and each with an optimal strategy for the recipient to follow [8, 21]. First behaviors that are known to both oneself and others — validating the known; second behaviors that are unknown to oneself but are known to others — accepting the blind spot; third behaviors that are known to oneself but unknown to others — disclosure of hidden; and fourth behaviors that are unknown to both oneself and others — uncovering the unknown.

The dynamic interaction between two individuals needs a mindset of growth, normalizing self-disclosure of limitations, encouraging feedback seeking, and training in nonjudgmental feedback with connecting communication. Constructive feedback is a generic skill that can be learned. A systematic review found that feedback is nonspecific, limited in amount, lacking in action plans, and focuses predominantly on the positive aspects of their performance [21]. This leniency bias could occur for many reasons, including faculty fear of negative reactions or a lack of skills in providing constructive feedback.

Feedback can come in various forms, and each with a unique purpose and delivery method. There are different types of feedback: positive and constructive feedback, 360-degree feedback, performance reviews, and informal feedback in spontaneously daily interactions [22].

By hearing critical feedback, you may well experience negative emotions and choose for maladaptive responses (procrastination, prejudice, brooding, jealousy, sabotage, ...) [23]. Adaptive responses that lead to an appropriate plan of action. However, if the feedback is grounded and honest, the receiver must be thankful for the chance to improve and carefully consider the comments. It is expected that self-esteem will affect the way people process information about themselves. However,

literature is ambiguous about this finding. A study has revealed the following findings: Firstly, people recall personally relevant feedback better than other-related feedback. Secondly, when evaluative feedback is ambiguous, people have a greater ability to recall positive information. Thirdly, The effect of self-esteem (the degree to which these self-beliefs reflect value and self-acceptance, that is, it reflects an individual's attitude toward their own person) on feedback processing is relatively small.

It is not fair to deprive your team of information that will enable them to grow [24]. When you reframe conflict as a healthy normative part of leadership, it loosens the anticipatory anxiety that you may feel about broaching difficult topics with others. The next time you have to provide feedback, take a deep breath, and remind yourself that you are not creating a conflict, and you are *guiding your people toward growth*. You are not criticizing, but rather nurturing, and you are certainly not being a villain; you are being the leader they need.

4. Some important virtues for a connected leader?

To be an authentic leader in a VUCA world, it takes *courage*. Courage is a virtue and is defined as taken a conscious decision and act despite fear, often driven by a commitment to morals or values. It means making a choice because your heart says it is right yet feeling the fear of the change because there is still uncertainty [25]. To act courageously, the leader must be powerful and at the same time be vulnerable. This is distinct from being reckless, meaning not taking care about the danger of the effect their behavior will have on other people. Courage is the opposite of weakness and laziness, exhibiting the capacity to make difficult choices or decisions and undertake well-considered risks.

Besides the virtue of courage, the leader also has the *will to make failures* and learn from them. He has to recognize failure as part of the process [26]. Leaders should recognize that failures and mistakes are ubiquitous aspects of the work process. This mindset will encourage employees to be safe to perform their work, to make evaluations, to learn from mistakes, and to see it as an opportunity. The latter could be a challenge for a leader with perfectionistic personal characteristics because perfectionism and intolerance of failure can spoil creativity. The creativity of the team must be stimulated to find correct answers to challenges in the VUCA world.

5. Connected leadership and connecting communication

Leadership has a significant and positive impact on motivation and employee performance at work, so it is crucial to continuously improve good leadership since it is been proven to boost motivation and employee performance [27]. To inspire employees, it is essential to encourage their *intrinsic motivation* by fostering a sense of self-determination [28, 29]. Specifically, the self-determination theory proposes three psychological needs people are born with and are important to fulfill to increase employees' motivation: autonomy, competence, and connection (or relatedness). These three needs are important, and we will first focus on communication to create connections between the leader and his employees. Connecting communication can also be used to discuss the need for autonomy and stimulate competence. Moreover, connecting communication can be seen as the required competence to have meaningful conversations, which is essential for everyone's autonomy, as well as the need to look and invest in talented people.

Supplementary, knowing that communication competences are a prerequisite for effective leadership [30]. A study reported connecting communication and empowerment as an important variable for employment satisfaction and retention among millennial professionals [31]. Effective and appropriate communication were both positively related to satisfaction, motivation, and organizational commitment [32].

Communication in general is defined as a mutual process between at least two people. Connecting communication, however, is a way of communicating between people where the goal is to positively influence others or to positively influence yourself. Connecting communication is not a way to manipulate, and it takes courage to grow into mature and equal relationships. It is a tool for moving from the drama triangle (Figure 1) to the winner's triangle (Figure 2), and it is an excellent competency that can be used when providing feedback [35].

A brief explanation, the *drama triangle* assumes that a human can take one (or more) of three positions during transactions: persecutor, rescuer, or victim (see Figure 1) [33]. How these three roles are related to each other determines the behavior of the players. Each role in the drama triangle is based on *inequality*; everyone believes that they are either better or less than the other. In addition, no one takes responsibility for his or her own behavior, and everyone points the finger at the other. All three roles fixate on the responsibility of the other, and therefore divert attention from themselves. Caught in the drama, there is no emotional intimacy between people. They do not share their deeper and most vulnerable feelings with each other. They would rather stay caught up in the drama than risk

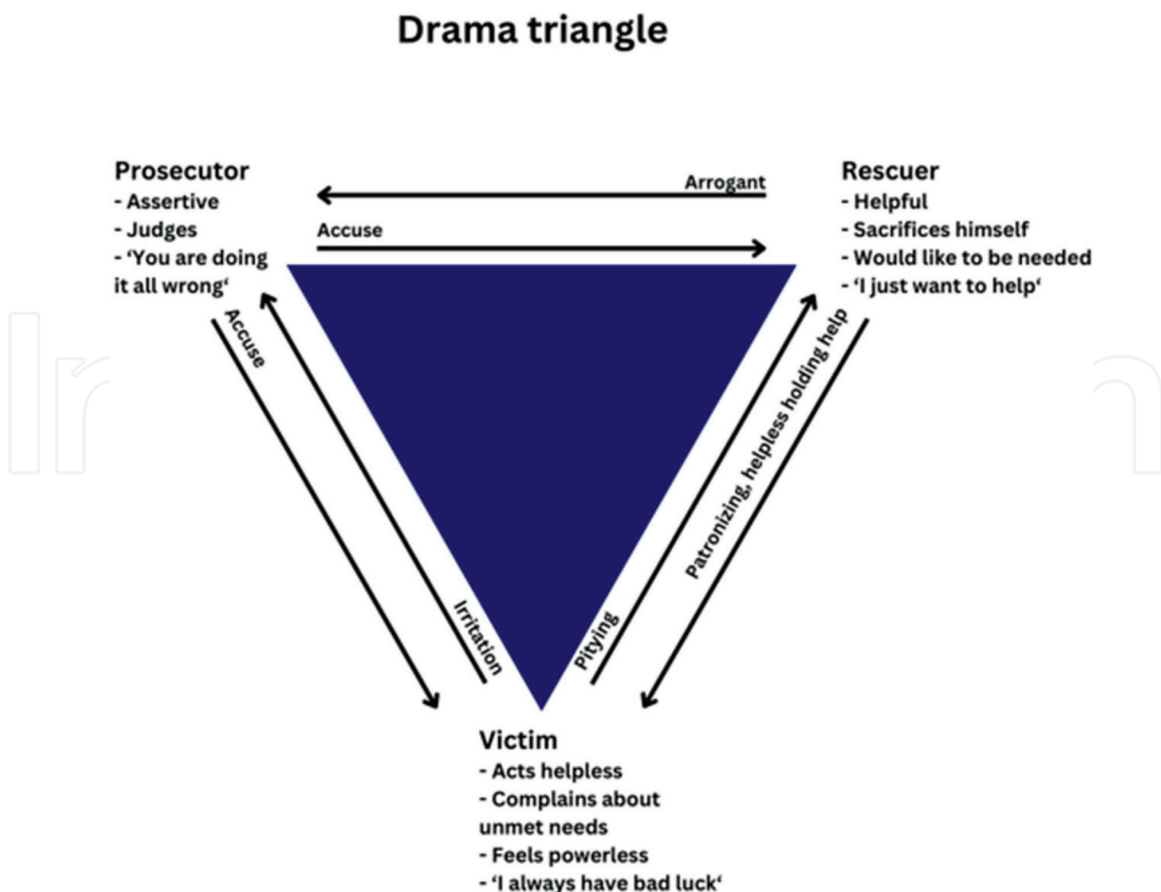


Figure 1.
Drama triangle [33].

Winner's triangle

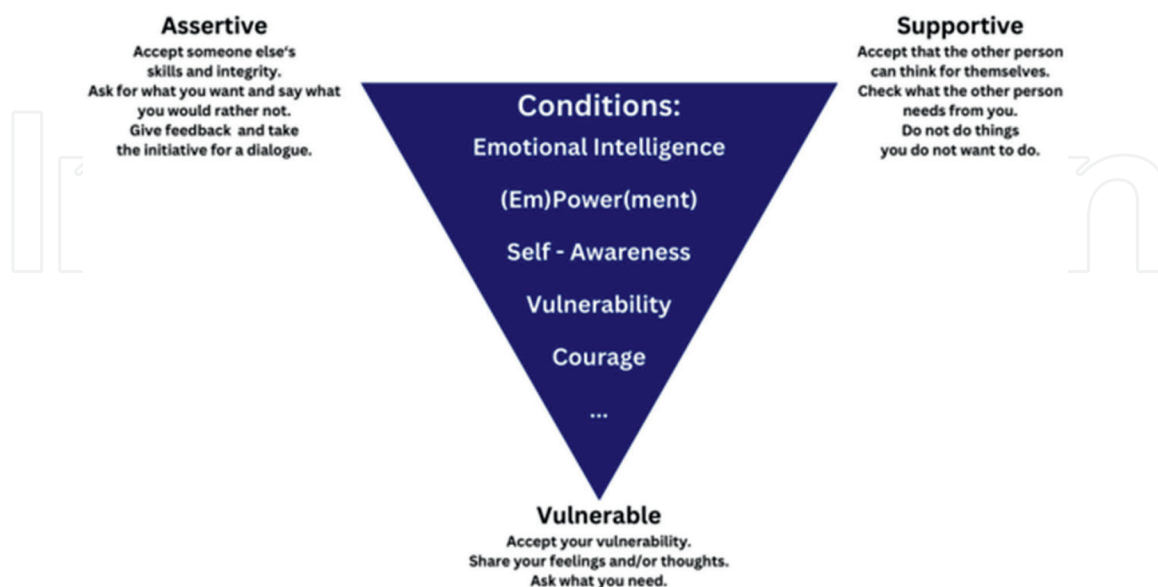


Figure 2.
Winner's triangle [34].

getting hurt by opening up. This is understandable, and it takes much courage to transform this pattern. The winner's triangle helps us to move into adult ego state (see **Figure 2**).

Connecting communication helps — on the condition of trust and safety — to break this drama triangle. Connection means that the needs of the two conversation partners are *equally important*. The condition is that you overcome your fears and make yourself vulnerable. Then you can move on to the *winner's triangle* [34].

We should transition from:

- Victim to vulnerable – asking honestly for what we need instead of hoping someone else will tell us
- Rescuer to supportive – supporting others instead of doing it for them
- Prosecutor to assertive – making it clear what needs to happen, without blame, aggression, or punishment; defining boundaries and believing that everyone's needs are important.

Connecting or nonviolent communication was developed by Marschall Rosenberg and consists of *three processes* and *four steps* [18].

These three processes are self-empathy, empathetic listening, and empathetic expression.

- *Self-empathy*: You learn to look at your own opinions and assessments in an empathetic way. You must, therefore, learn to place feelings of self-judgment and self-criticism here and learn to translate them into clear needs. Gifted leadership involves a combination of feeling and thought [10].

- *Empathetic listening*: It is a similar process, but it is of course applied to communication from the other party. Thus, it is about trying to distinguish the feelings and needs of another person. And ask in-depth questions, such as What do you mean? Who was involved? what did this do to you? Questioning must be conducted in a non-suggestive and nonjudgmental manner. Be curious, paraphrasing what you hear (even if you do not agree!) and ask for clarifications. We should want to truly understand how our communication partners feel.
- *Expressing empathy*: It is putting yourself in someone else's position and feeling what they are feeling. Some sentences will help you to stimulate, "That is interesting. Tell me more.", "I am here for you" or "I'm happy to listen any time" or "What do you need right now?"

The four steps in the communication process are observation, feeling, need, and request (see **Figure 3**).

- *Observation* indicates the facts that need to be stated. This is crucial as a first step because it provides a joint starting point for a conversation or discussion. Any differences in interpretation can therefore become clear immediately. It is important that neutral terms are always used here, and that no judgment is made.
- The *feelings* make it clear what exactly the facts mean to someone, for example, happy, angry, scared, sad, love, disgust, Feelings are important because they guide one's needs.
- Trying to explain the *needs* why you find something important gives rise to the feelings you have expressed. This allows both parties to better assess each other's positions. Examples of needs include love, connection, meaning, honesty, order, autonomy, well-being, creativity,
- The final phase is the *request*. This means that one looks for a solution that meets the formulated feelings and needs. These must always be formulated in a positive manner; otherwise, they are not requests but demands. In other words, there must always be room for counterproposal. The request is the starting point of a possible negotiation rather than an ultimatum.

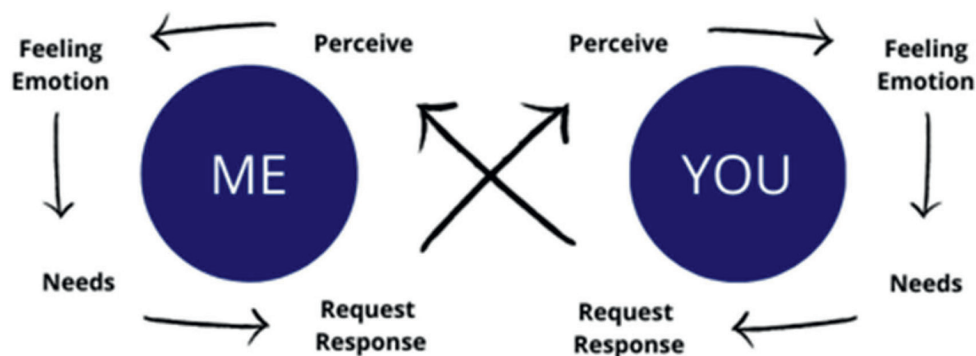


Figure 3.
Communication process [8].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, as the world becomes increasingly complex due to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), it is necessary for leadership approaches to evolve. Instead of relying on traditional hierarchical models, leaders should shift toward innovative forms of shared leadership that emphasize collaboration, empowerment, and authenticity. Successful leadership involves creating environments that promote personal and professional growth and prioritize effective communication.

Leadership that begins with emotional intelligence and self-awareness lays the foundation for authentic connection and collaboration. Self-awareness, comprising both internal and external perspectives, enables leaders to navigate challenges with empathy and understanding. Embracing feedback as a tool for growth and cultivating a growth mindset are essential components of self-aware leadership.

Implementing nonviolent communication principles can offer a framework for building trust, understanding, and cooperation within teams. By prioritizing empathy, active listening, and the clear expression of needs, leaders can facilitate meaningful dialog and foster a culture of openness and collaboration. By embodying these virtues and mastering effective communication techniques, leaders can navigate uncertainty and inspire their teams to achieve collective success during turbulent times.

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