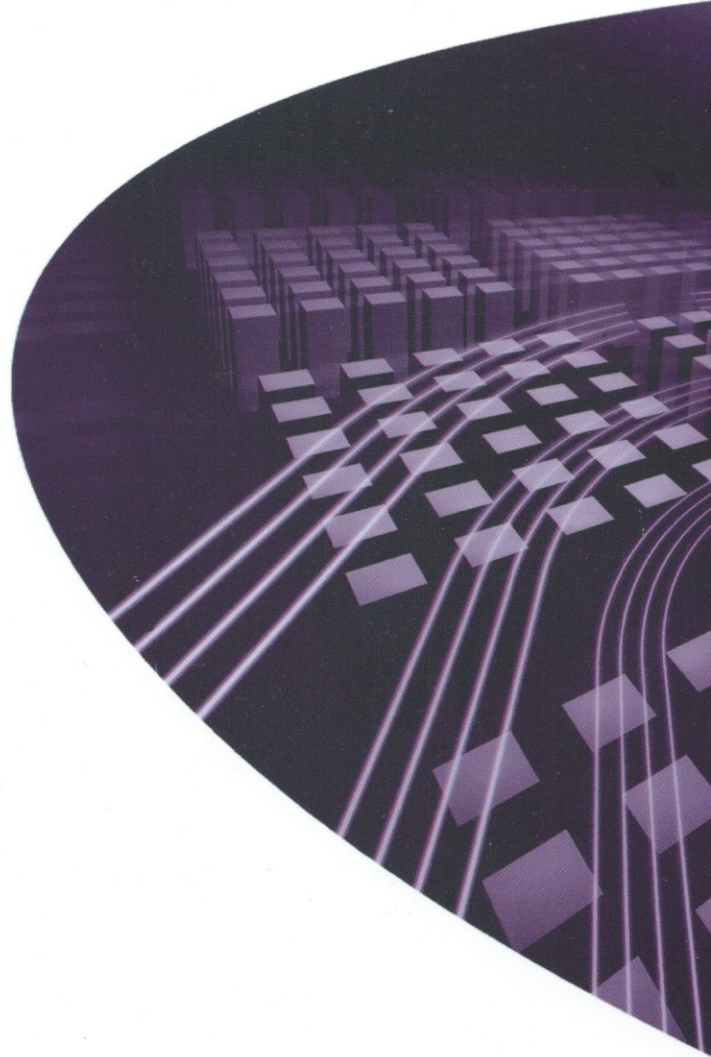


# Development and Learning in Organizations

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# How VUCA is changing the learning landscape – and how curiosity can help

Alison Horstmeyer

**E**ighty per cent of learning and development professionals surveyed by LinkedIn (Thomson *et al.*, 2017) reported that developing employees is top of mind for their organizations' executive teams. At the same time, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) in the business landscape are rapidly eroding learning budgets and resources as worker knowledge and skillsets become outdated at faster rates (Horney *et al.*, 2010). In addition, employees are demanding modern learning content and delivery and are increasingly reluctant to make time for training and development. In short, VUCA has dramatically shifted the learning landscape in organizations, pushing learning professionals to adapt faster than ever before to keep pace.

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In the learning and development realms, VUCA is evident in the following ways:

- Volatility is reflected in the increasing size, nature, and amount of change as well as the accelerating pace of organizational change. The global business landscape is marked by mergers and acquisitions, technology advancements, compressed budgets, and frequent changes in staffing that produce the need for updated knowledge and skillsets across an organization.
- Uncertainty refers to the inability to predict issues and events. For example, it can be difficult to gauge how well training transfers to learners' work. Learning professionals repeatedly face challenges in locating and operationalizing ways to effectively support learners in acquiring – and, more importantly, applying – new work-related knowledge and skills.
- Complexity refers to the general state of interacting forces and chaos at play in the organization. Complexity is evident in the shift from standard training programs being disseminated throughout the organization to use of programs that require customization for individuals, teams, geographic setting, or cultural characteristics. Pressures to customize offerings tax already stressed learning budgets and limit the scalability of offerings.
- Ambiguity concerns difficulty in teasing out issues, the haziness of reality, and the multiple possible interpretations of the conditions affecting companies. For example, ample literature has examined the core characteristics of the millennial workforce. This has led to questions about the efficacy of learning programs that assume workers possess essential professional skills (e.g., relationship building, diplomacy, and communication) and emphasize technical skill building. Such programs may be appropriate for baby boomers but may completely miss the mark for millennials. This ambiguity poses challenges for multigenerational learning programs.

Learning professionals can tackle the challenges posed by VUCA using a curious mind-set.

## Four attributes of curiosity

Curiosity occurs through four attributes, according to Dr. Todd Kashdan, senior scientist at George Mason University (Merck KGaA-EMD Group, 2016). The first mechanism is *inquisitiveness*, which means using inquiry and reframing to move beyond preconceived biases and status quo options to take on other perspectives and investigate new, ambiguous, or complicated situations. Inquisitiveness is demonstrated by asking a range of questions to probe deeply into what is really going on. This helps develop a 360-degree view of a situation to learn everything possible about the challenge at hand, including understanding the current state, defining the ideal state or outcome, and identifying the specific resources needed to attain the outcome. Inquisitiveness is reflected in the recent talent management trend to forgo exhaustive benchmarking studies in favor of scanning the landscape to identify and evaluate such approaches from both within and outside their organization and industry.

The second attribute is *creativity*, which means challenging existing knowledge and approaches through cross-pollination of ideas and entertaining unconventional notions and solutions. Learning professionals could enhance their creativity by using agile design principles (borrowed from software engineering) to draft and pilot course designs, seek critical feedback from partners and participants, and iterate this process to deliver metrics that show that results are trending positively for the purpose of validating the selected approach.

*Openness*, the third attribute, means considering and suspending judgment of new ideas no matter their origins. According to a recent LinkedIn report, learning professionals may demonstrate openness by moving beyond a cost center mentality to adopting a consultative role in their work with leaders and managers (Thomson *et al.*, 2017). Operating from this paradigm, learning professionals would partner with key stakeholders in identifying and addressing root causes, ideally leading to the mutual sharing of insights and production of effective training offerings that drive the long-term organizational health and success. Staying open to and analytically synthesizing both employee learner- and business-focused data can further reinforce the learning professional's value and build credibility within the partnership.

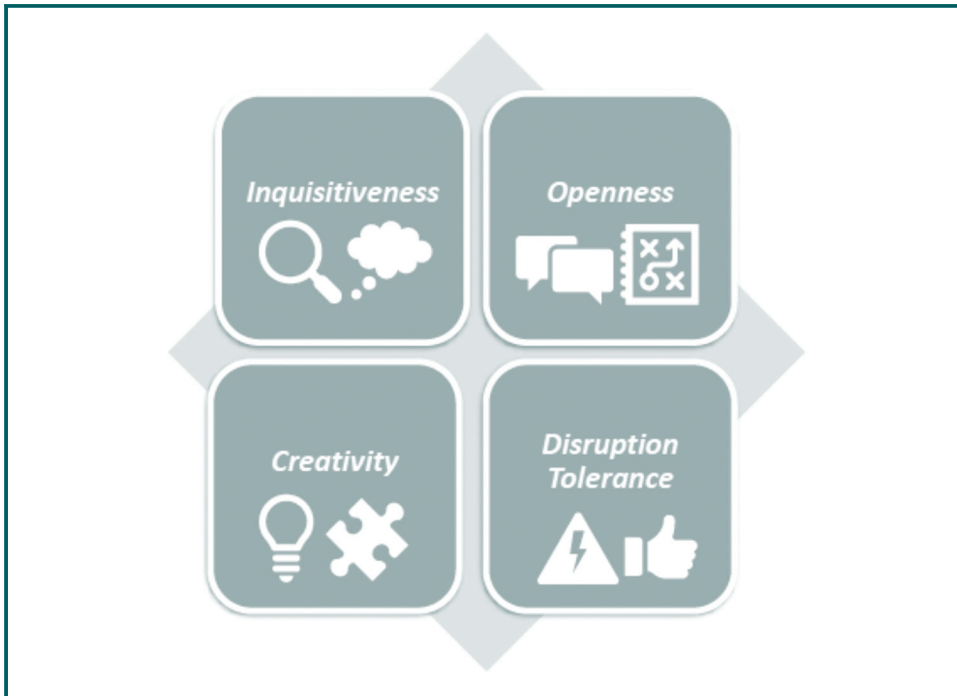
*Disruption tolerance* is the fourth and final attribute, which means embracing risk and the stress associated with risk, enjoying the challenge of trying novel approaches, and allowing enough time to fully vet new solutions. Disruption tolerance is supported by instituting a learning culture within the organization where employee growth, creativity, and engagement are acknowledged and rewarded. Moreover, employees are safe to take risks and make mistakes. When failure occurs, lessons are identified, codified, and applied, promoting stronger aptitudes and adaptability for managing VUCA conditions (Figure 1).

## Applications of curiosity

In January 2017, NY Community Bancorp, Inc. demonstrated curiosity when it redesigned its Teller Fundamentals Training Program. Reflecting openness and creativity, the new design incorporated various delivery methods, including instructor-led facilitation, video demonstrations, simulations, self-study, role-play activities, group discussions, and practical system application. These novel training methods demonstrated the learning designers' willingness to challenge the status quo. As a result, after only 6 months post-implementation, various organization-level outcomes were evident, such as post-training turnover reduction of 13 per cent, increased customer satisfaction, and increased operational efficiency (Weinstein, 2018).

Leading Real Estate Companies of the World (LeadingRE) demonstrated openness, inquisitiveness, and disruption tolerance when it invested more than \$250,000 in a pioneering research study as part of its Consumer Insights program. The study identified seven personas that characterize all real estate consumers in the USA – a first in the residential real estate

**Figure 1** The four attributes of curiosity



industry (Freifeld, 2018b). LeadingRE leveraged creativity in launching the complex project when it garnered interest and early adoption within its network through live training workshops, webinars, online and printed training resources, and coaching. The results of the research generated insights to help leaders and sales associates customize their communications and service techniques that yielded higher net profits.

Sonic Automotive demonstrated inquisitiveness and openness by challenging conventional automotive retail industry training practices. Recognizing the benefits companies in other industries sustained from digitizing training, Sonic completely automated its operational procedures and spent \$150m on iPads and iPhones for all sales staff to have immediate access to an online, on-demand digital format of their standard operating procedures (Freifeld, 2018a). As a result, associates were able to easily access and consult the material, watch a video, view peer comments or tips, or take a quiz related to the task or job they were performing to accelerate and integrate their training.

## Conclusion

Although employee development is a key objective for most organizations, VUCA is exerting pressure on learning and development professionals, diminishing their resources as demands simultaneously increase. A curiosity mind-set offers a potent means for thriving in the current business landscape. Through inquisitiveness, creativity, openness, and disruption tolerance, executives and their organizations may cultivate the agility, learning culture, and operational efficiencies that contribute to a stronger bottom line.

*Keywords:*  
Creativity,  
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VUCA,  
Curiosity,  
Disruption Tolerance,  
Inquisitiveness

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