

FEATURE ARTICLES

Human in the Loop: Leadership in a Disrupted Environment

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Leaders find themselves disrupted constantly in the digitally enabled world. At the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), researchers discovered that technology and other forces only disrupt an organization if the leaders allow them to impact performance and productivity (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020a). Extrapolating these lessons from the business world into the military environment unlocks opportunities to ensure America's national defense remains ready and resolute for future challenges. Regardless of the pace of implementing cutting-edge technologies in national defense, the human leader remains in control of how disruption impacts their organization and mission.

In December of 2015, Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work said in a symposium held by the Center for New American Studies (CNAS), "...we believe, strongly, that humans should be the only ones to decide when to use lethal force. But when you're under attack, especially at machine speeds, we want to have a machine that can protect us" (2015). Following his remarks, the presentation euphemistically became known as the "human in the loop" speech. The Deputy Secretary firmly established in future decisions that although emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence (AI), could identify, assess, and act faster than humans, the defense department

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would not allow it. Human leaders— applying ethics, judgment, and national values—would ultimately make decisions regarding the use of force. The business world experiences these same challenges without the ‘use of force’ element every day. Lessons from these strategic decisions are helpful to explore as leaders embark on critical decisions in a disrupted world.

In 2020, the CCL conducted a groundbreaking study during the global pandemic to determine how leaders were coping with and leveraging disruptions in their organizations. The results of the survey yielded five major disruptions that were common across the hundreds of respondents:

- big data and analytics,
- crafting an innovative culture,
- artificial intelligence,
- equity, diversity, and inclusion, and
- communications overload.

They share a common element: the pace of the disruptive force is increasing exponentially in organizations globally. CCL developed strategies recommended to solve and leverage these disruptions, which can also be universally applied to both the public and private sector—keeping the “human in the loop” as a central theme to them all.

Big Data and Analytics to Create New Opportunities

The world of business is still exploring how analytics of big data will create opportunities in the coming decades. The challenge from analytics points to how leaders and employees are adapting to this trend. Most report a slow adoption of big data and analytics (CCL, 2020a). The global conglomerates identified the trend earlier than most and could pivot to establish new organizations and procedures to harness the potential of big data with customers, clients, and product development. Even the global firms are being disrupted by the power of big data, and CCL sees evidence of that tension in medium- and smaller-sized businesses to be even greater. Leaders shared their concerns over this emerging trend and how business leaders perceived challenges from big data can serve to inform military leaders. The trends indicated that while data creates a competitive advantage for an organization, most of the strategic and upper-level leaders did not recognize how to leverage big data for business opportunities (CCL, 2020a). Most respondents felt that the culture of their organization was not capable of transforming to “unlock data’s power” (CCL, 2020a). Solutions must be available for these types of challenges.

CCL offered several strategies to solving for big data that are built from years of research into leadership

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development. The first is targeted assessments of skill gaps that inhibit a greater adoption of big data into the business (CCL, 2020a). By communicating with leaders about their concerns and blind spots, organizations can work toward precisely developing an agile culture that embraces big data. Another strategy is identifying how leaders think, act, and influence strategically to integrate the emergence of big data and analytics into the organization's strategy. In many cases, leaders are challenged to see big data as a resource and analytics as a means to achieve new business goals. Addressing how strategic leaders think, act, and influence the inclusion of big data and analytics into their organization's overall business and leadership strategies can reverse the disruption and create opportunities. Finally, organizational cultures develop ways of working spontaneously through the social interactions of its employees. The organizations require a culture shift to adopt and integrate the capabilities of big data and analytics or it will lead to a less effective disruption. CCL's research into transforming cultures (McGuire, 2009) reveals that leading culture change is a leadership imperative that involves planning and commitment. Adopting big data and ways to make it readily accessible to all elements of an organization can trigger culture change. The benefits and rewards of bringing big data and analytics into an organization far outweigh the risks and leaders find themselves seeking to leverage this disruptive force for the benefit of their business and customers (CCL, 2020a).

Creating an Innovative Culture Involves New Mindsets

Agile innovation is a somewhat older concept, dating back to the 1950's in the economic boom after World War II. Why then did 53% of respondents identify "agile innovation" as a top disruptive trend in CCL's 2020 survey (CCL, 2020a)? It would seem surprising that businesses are still adapting their cultures to be

more innovative to meet customer needs. Leaders acknowledged innovation as a key driver for business success and further identified how it disrupts internal processes, teams, and existing relationships due to its pace and urgency. Businesses disrupt themselves as they keep pace with customer needs and the market's competition. CCL research informs several solution strategies to this type of disruption.

Innovation within a business is vital to growth and product refinement while being an internal force that generates challenges to the organization and leadership culture. A known strategy that allows businesses to pivot and accept innovative disruption is to build trust and psychological safety across boundaries internally. People are normally cautious and intentional about relationships outside their teams and siloes. Leaders who deliberately develop their people to forge common ground and find ways to weave interdependence into their way of innovating new ideas thrive in the face of market disruption (CCL, 2020a). Another strategy to consider is creating tolerance for risk that fosters learning agility. Innovating, as a business process, creates risk by diverting talent and resources away from the main efforts of the core business. The outcomes are not always certain. When leaders open the aperture for risk tolerance in the leadership culture, innovation is accepted as an opportunity and not rejected as a risk. One key method for encouraging acceptable risk is to empower high-potential talent with the authority to experiment and share results. Finally, enabling the organization to have better conversations internally across stakeholder boundaries fosters innovation as an element of the culture. Better conversations are characterized by the following four actions: 1) listening to understand, 2) asking powerful questions, 3) challenging with feedback, and 4) extending support (CCL, 2020b) in order to ensure that innovation is part of the solution to business challenges. Fostering

an innovation culture takes leadership attention and effort to yield amazing results.

Artificial Intelligence Disrupts the Humans in the Business

Watching an assembly line in a huge automobile manufacturer triggers an interesting observation: there are human workers watching and observing the robotic machines assembling the cars. Humans are incapable of working as fast and efficiently as the artificial intelligence (AI) guiding the machines and yet, the AI has no history or emotional investment in the values and brand of that automobile company. As military leaders consider the disruptive impact of AI as the “Third Offset” (Work, 2015) in military technology, the similarities with business leaders begin to emerge.

Leaders told CCL that AI would fundamentally cause businesses to rethink how they approach their way of working. The impacts have been measured and incremental and are now exponentially creating a reverberating disruption globally. AI is affecting nearly every sector of the global economy. As this wave affects the world of business, repurposing AI to eliminate costs and increase efficiency, the stakes with humans in the workplace have never been higher. The AI disruption can be leveraged with effective strategies to keep the focus on how humans and machines create opportunities together (CCL, 2020a).

The first strategy that CCL recommends is to invest deeply in the people skills around exceptional customer and employee experiences. CCL authored groundbreaking research on the “Four Fundamental Leadership Skills” for all levels of leaders: self-awareness, communications, influence, and learning agility. As AI disrupts a business or an organization,

these skills become vital links to the workforce to create empathy and drive decisions to ensure human interaction is not overlooked. Secondly, establishing a new vision with the purpose of integrating AI fosters the ability for an organization to begin changing and adopting to mitigate the disruption. The three “C’s” of change—communicating the why; collaborating across boundaries; and committing to the purpose—reduce the impacts of new AI processes in the organization and create new possibilities. As AI becomes prevalent within an organization, leaders should be reminded to refresh the talent pipeline with a strategy aimed at adopting a new way of working. Often, talent development addresses the pressing current needs of an organization. AI is disruptive to talent development by creating unmet future demands for employees, so CCL suggests focusing on the diversity of the talented

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workforce and refreshing the approach to filling the talent gaps created by AI. AI will continue to grow in importance to the public and private sectors and disrupt established business cultures unless leaders proactively adapt the human workforce to seek new opportunities (CCL, 2020a).

Tomorrow’s Workforce Excels with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion as a Centerpiece

Leaders consistently cited equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as highly valued in their workplace. They also identified the disruption around EDI to

be moving past awareness to actual practice of EDI values resulting in a culture of belonging. EDI is a fundamental standard by which to guide leadership in all organizations and requires constant attention to the norms and practices that support it. These norms matter to the entire workforce and reveal a leadership imperative to pay constant attention and engage in countermeasures to eliminate beliefs and practices not aligned with the organization's EDI values (CCL, 2020a).

CCL's REAL™ framework provides leaders a way forward—revealing relevant issues through facilitated discovery; selecting strategically relevant actions to elevate equity; activating diversity; and leading more inclusively (CCL, 2020a). Leading EDI in a culture is every leader's responsibility; however, it is often segmented into the human resources function. CCL's first strategy to reduce disruption and build trust around EDI is to start with an internal look at the organizations processes, practices, and behaviors to spot the EDI blind spots that it might have and address them with the above principles in mind. Next, leaders can conduct a network analysis exercise within the organization to find EDI champions to activate and authorize to support an inclusive culture. Connections and belonging are foundational to EDI as a positive culture in the workforce and often champions help make those connections. Finally, managers are not always equipped to coach and provide feedback with EDI informing their interactions. If feedback becomes part of an organization's culture and managers are attuned to the positive forces that involve social identity, they create incredible momentum that reduces EDI as a disruption (CCL, 2020a).

Countering the Chaos of Communication Overload

Over a third of the leaders who shared disruptions

with CCL defined communications management as a disruptor in their businesses (CCL, 2020a). There are many challenges that public and private sector leaders share with communications—from a lack of credible communications to incoherency among message streams, to the challenge of being overwhelmed by the staggering volume of communications—both internal and external. The complexity of communication management leads many leaders to describe how this creates disruption at all levels.

CCL has identified strategies for investing in leaders to reduce communications challenges beginning with promoting a resilient workforce. Surprisingly, the tidal wave of communications effects workforces both emotionally and professionally. Boosting resilience to avoid burning out is a practice developed by CCL that counters the strains of being overwhelmed by the multiple modalities of email, text, video, etc., that plague many leaders. Creating authentic, coherent, and powerful messages within communications management plans are another vital way to reduce disruption in the workplace. Leaders rarely pause to focus on how, when, and to whom a message is designed. Marketing groups are equipped to create precision in customer messaging and yet, the internal workforce is oftentimes forgotten in the maelstrom of messaging. CCL has found that a focus on message coherency reduces the disruptive nature of communications. Finally, when leaders gauge or measure their communications challenges by whether they create direction, alignment, and commitment within the organization, it helps them re-calibrate their messages to achieve collective results. CCL's research into effective leadership was published in 2008 (Drath et al., 2008). This research identified that when direction, alignment, and commitment are measurable and present in an organization, the team and business will see lasting outcomes from their efforts.

Communicating, internally and externally, is firmly a responsibility of every leader and when harmonized, reduces disruption (CCL, 2020a).

Navigating Disruptions to Create Opportunities Requires the Human Factor of Leadership

CCL's 2020 research into identifying current disruptive trends and providing ways to solve for these challenges is re-shaping approaches for developing leaders. Leaders in the military, private sector, and government can reduce the multi-layered complexity of disruption by focusing on what makes us uniquely human and how humans, and thus organizations, react to disruption. The five trends—big data analytics; crafting an innovative culture; artificial intelligence; equity, diversity and inclusion; and communications overload—as identified by hundreds of leaders, are creating a chaotic and uncertain path towards being prosperous and healthy organizations. Lessons from business can apply directly to military and government counterparts finding similar disruptions encountered in the pursuit of their national missions. Keeping the focus on the 'human in the loop' is a research-supported strategy of creating opportunities.

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