

# Leadership development in a VUCA world

By Anne Ribbers & Margot de Volder

In a fast-moving world, companies and institutions are faced with challenges that follow each other faster. Not only companies and institutions are faced with dynamic changes, also executives and managers are struggling with the impact of this era in their daily jobs. They have to guide and manage their teams in this challenging time.

To respond to today's dynamic environment, organizations and businesses invest a huge amount of money in the professional development of their employees (Technavio, 2016). At the same time, we notice that organizations are becoming more critical as to how they spend their L& D budgets (Ribbers & Coenen, 2017). The 'one size fits all' approach often doesn't suffice, as each individual has unique development needs. Therefore, integrating an internet-based blended coaching approach in current programs has the potential to be a flexible and agile development method that may be highly effective (Hamlin, Ellinger & Beattie, 2008; Jarvis, 2004).

## Collaboration by Design in a real VUCA case

The biggest governmental employer in the Netherlands went through an enormous and impactful organizational change. It was looking for a way to support their executives and managers to fulfill their crucial role in the new organization; to make the connection between strategy and execution of their work in a complex, ambiguous environment. They noticed that not only the world around them changes; the role of their leaders also changed. In addition, they discovered that not all their managers could respond adequately to these changes and lacked certain skills, competencies and mindset. The question was: 'how can we continue to respond to all these changes and effectively and productively lead the organisation?'

A development program was designed with a focus on how to lead in times of change with a focus on professionalizing collaboration across units by Groupmapping (A Dutch consulting firm) and eCoachPro.

VUCA stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. The world around us is characterized by changes that are bigger, faster, more complex and have more impact than in the past. So, we need to learn to adapt faster and in a more continuous way. That requires new skills and a new mindset.



The specific program we talk about consists of two different elements, namely onsite training sessions with continuous individual online coaching from the beginning to the end.

### Measurement

During the program the individual developmental objectives were measured using the Coaching Monitor developed by the NOBCO (Dutch Association of Professional Coaches). This monitor is distributed four times during the process – and consists of self and peer evaluations. The monitor also measures a number of personal variables, such as personality, attitude towards change, satisfaction with life and psychological basic needs.

### Four onsite training sessions

During four onsite training sessions managers became confident and capable to create breakthroughs in their transformation cases based on proven theories, models and methodologies.

After the program managers were better equipped to:

- deal with complexity and dilemma thinking
- mobilize and activate the right people around key challenges and they can accelerate real behavioral change.
- design and lead cross-functional collaboration.
- execute facilitative leadership skills combined with group dynamics.

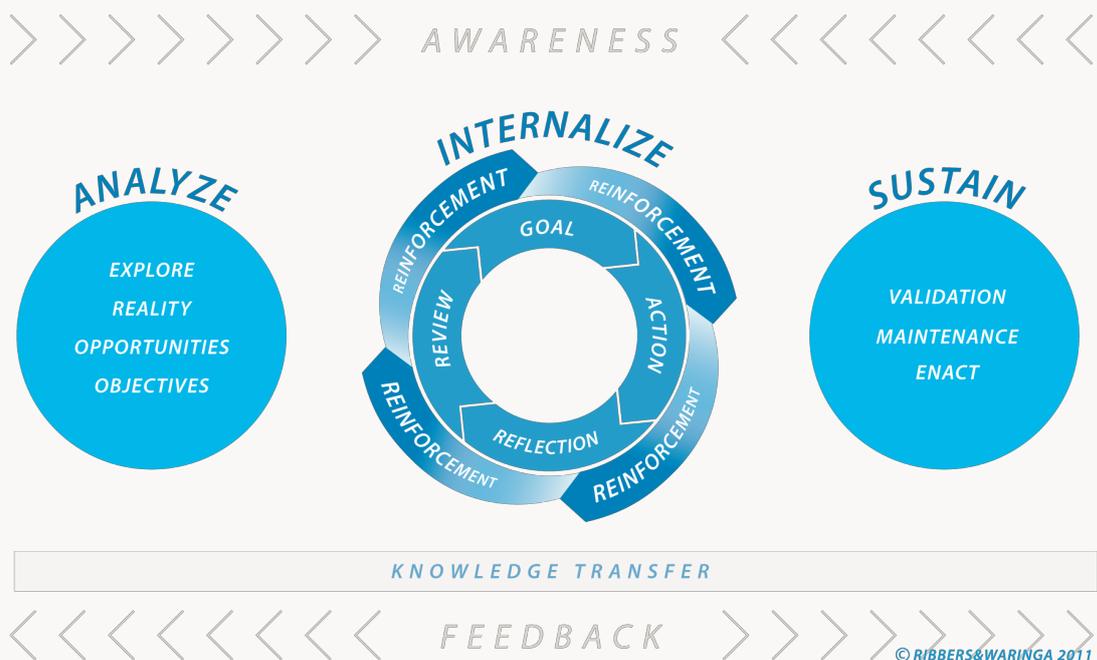
The participants were trained a practical and pragmatic intervention repertoire, in order to be able to operate more energetically in our complex and ever-changing society. In addition, participants were coached to professionalize their leadership roles in this respect.

## The online coaching approach

In addition to the onsite sessions the managers had virtual meetings and a personal, one to one, continuous coaching engagement by coaches of eCoachPro. Crucial in the contact is the continuity, the frequency of contact and the good relationship that has been built in the collaboration between coach and coachee. The starting point of each coaching program is the identification of individual development goals.

The online coaching approach of eCoachPro is defined in line with Smither's definition of internet- based coaching (2011): It is a one-to-one learning and development intervention which is delivered through virtual channels where the relationship is collaborative, reflective and goal-focused.

The main focus of this approach is achieving professional results that are valuable to client and organization. The blended coaching approach of eCoachPro facilitates the natural way people learn and develop new skills and behaviors. This approach is based on the ABC-model of Waringa & Ribbers (2012) and consists of three main stages: Analyze, Internalize and Sustain. The first stage involves investigation and introspection. The second stage consists of implementing the new behavior in your everyday life. The third and final stage relates to maintenance and preservation of your new skills and behavior in your day-to-day setting. Within each stage, the client takes small and specific steps in his or her own daily setting.



Model 1. Het ABC-model (Analyse Internalize Sustain e-coaching Model)

In this way, the development process takes place in a relevant, daily (working) context. Online coaching is highly personalized and supportive at any time and any place (Waringa & Ribbers, 2012). Main focus during the coaching program are the individual development goals. The coaching is offered in a continuous form and is tailor-made. Coach and client can have a structured conversation through this continuous form. During the program, a coaching platform, video calls and texting are used.

Between online and offline coaching there are huge differences. An online dialogue is created and is cut into small pieces and gets an asynchronous and continuous character. While during offline coaching a face-to-face dialogue takes place at regular intervals. One of the most powerful tools in the blended coaching program is the combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication. The asynchronous aspect in the blended coaching program is possible because coach and client write each other.

*"By writing, the client is concerned with himself and his environment in an intensive and consistent manner, giving more meaning due to relevant situations and experiences. When writing down an emotionally charged event into a linguistic structure, a cognitive change takes place. The process of writing and reformulating structures and organizes the event in the mind, making it less emotionally charged. In this way, writing mobilizes the power of the self-reliance of the client. Writing is associated with improvements in insight, self-reflection, optimism, a sense of control and self-esteem" (Ribbers, 2015).*

### The results

The result of this program is unanimous growth on formulated development goals. Coachees worked hard on their own goals, were involved and paid a lot of attention to their exercises, reflection questions and behavioral experiments. Coachees are strengthened in their self-confidence, self-reliance and competencies. These results are based on self-report and peer-report. Their growth is visible and tangible for the people around them.

## Conclusion

The program is valued as a big success by its participants and internal sponsors. Due to the combination of onsite sessions and continuous online coaching. The participants altered their mindset, learned new skills and visibly changed their behaviors on the work floor.

## References

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S.C. (1987). Polite- ness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamlin, R.G., Ellinger, A.D., & Beattie, R.S. (2008). The emergent c´ oaching industry´: A wake-up call for HRD professionals. Human Resource Development International, Vol.11, No. 3, 287-305.
- Grice, H.P. (1975). Logic and conversation, in: Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts, eds. P. Cole & J. Morgan: 41-58. New York: Acade- mic Press. Haan, E. de, Culpin, V., & Curd, J.
- <https://www.technavio.com/report/global-k12-and-higher-education-global-soft-skills-training-market-2016-2020>
- Ribbers, A., & Coenen, M., (2017). De toekomst van duurzame ontwikkeling. Tijdschrift Positieve Psychologie, thema: Online, nr 13.
- Ribbers, A.P.C. (2015). ABC model voor online begeleiden. Counselling Magazine, nr 1.
- Smither, J.W. (2011). Can psychotherapy research serve as a guide for research about executive coaching? An agenda for the next decade. Journal of Business Psychology, 26, 135–145. doi:10.1007/s10869-011-9216-7
- Ribbers, A.P.C., & Waringa, R. A. (2012). E-coaching: Direct aan de slag met het nieuwe coachen. Amsterdam: Boom/Nelissen.