



## Lessons from Time of Crisis (VUCA)

A friend of mine recently retired from active duty in the US special forces. As we were talking about the state of education, he used a word/acronym that I had never heard before. The term was VUCA. He used it as though I should know what it was, but after about the third time, I swallowed my pride and said, I'm not familiar with VUCA. His explanation captured my attention and I think it will resonate with educators.

He said, "First, I need you to understand where VUCA started. My unit was at the front of a major effort in Operation Iraqi Freedom. We expected the war to take months or years. We were prepared to be there for a long and difficult process. In actuality, the initial push was much faster than expected. In just a matter of days, the Iraqi soldiers had laid down their weapons and we found ourselves in a city from which we had pushed the enemy soldiers. We were surrounded by people who were in need of help. All the public services of the city had been destroyed. A small handful of US soldiers looked at each other and decided that we had to do something to help the hundreds of thousands of innocent people in that city; thus, the term VUCA."

VUCA stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. We were in a major city with no water, no electricity, no law, no financial system and no leadership. That meant that it was VUCA. The leader of that team, my friend, looked at his men and began assigning duties. "You!" as he pointed at one man. "You used to work an irrigation system on your farm. Get the water running in this city."

"And you." As he pointed at another man, "You were a policeman before you joined the military. "You are now the chief of police. Find the policeman that used to work in this city and get them back on duty." "Medic, get that hospital running...yesterday."

All down the line, he assigned duties. Not one of the soldiers said, "it isn't my job" or "I am not prepared to do that." They had to step up to the task and make it work.

Education, at least in the United States, is VUCA. It is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Teachers wake up in the morning to headlines that schools are failing. Budgets are vastly different from one state to the next and within states, teachers and administrators fear for what they have. These are not simple matters either. Decision makers find themselves between the proverbial rock and hard place. They fight perceptions in media. They fight societal changes. They fight a shortage of qualified teachers. Pre-service educators are having difficulty recruiting potential teachers in an environment that is hostile to educators. The list could go on and on. VUCA.

Dear readers. Let's learn from the group of soldiers that found themselves in a city experiencing VUCA. They didn't point fingers. They didn't lay blame. They didn't wait for budget proposals to make it through the process. They didn't ask if it was their job. They took on the task before them and accepted the challenge. We do need to acknowledge the challenges that we face in education. We need to recognize that the environment for teaching is drastically different than it once was, but that the change is not an excuse to pull back or wait. VUCA? Yes. Impossible? No.

Let's get to it.