

C-SUITE MINDSET

Leesexemplaar



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**C**  
**Suite**  
**mindset**

P E L C K M A N S

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Lessexemplaar

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# CHECK-IN: CHAOS & CHALLENGES

Lecture Exemplaar



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“The only way to make sense out of change is to  
plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.”

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– Alan Watts –

If you think back to those moments in your life when you gained the most valuable insights or learned the biggest lessons, you probably won't be picturing your old school classroom. It is much more likely that these insights and lessons came during your career or in your personal life, at times and places you could not have foreseen. Unexpected, sometimes chaotic, and even unpleasant experiences often leave the biggest impressions. Yet, it is also essential to deliberately put yourself in the driver's seat of both your professional and personal life and to challenge yourself regularly. What do you want to achieve? How can you best shape your career? How can you get the most out of your skills? And what do you need in order to grow and make a difference to both yourself and the world around you? Finding the answers to these questions is a huge challenge, especially today as we face the greatest complexity and fastest changing environment we have ever known. While human history has been marked by crises, interspersed with periods of relative calm, today we seem to find ourselves in a constant state of turbulence. The mix of geopolitical conflicts, unprecedented environmental issues, growing social tensions, and uncertain markets is challenging, to say the least. Furthermore, artificial intelligence (AI) continues to redefine the boundaries of what is possible.

These global shifts are having an enormous impact on both us and our world of work, and the speed at which transformations are heading our way shows no sign of slowing down. The way we live, and indeed work, has changed—for good. Admittedly, even long before Covid-19, the energy crisis, and other challenges hit the world like a tsunami, the bar was already continuously being raised for companies, their leaders, and their employees. The considerable agility demanded by globalization and digitalization is certainly nothing new. For years, the term “VUCA” has been used in management circles to describe our Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous world. In fact, the first use of the VUCA acronym dates back to 1987, when it appeared in U.S. Army War College documents to describe the changed world in the post-Cold War era. In 2014, the *Harvard Business Review* pointed out that the term could also be applied to the world of work. Unpredictable events beyond an organization’s control make it harder for leaders to take decisions and achieve success.

However, the current era reveals new demands. The VUCA concept no longer seems sufficient to describe today’s trends. The specific human skills we need to become and remain successful are not new in themselves, but a number of key evolutions and challenges are now requiring us to reprioritize these skills.

First of all, the events of recent years (some of which are still ongoing) have caused an escalation of our VUCA world. This led American anthropologist and futurist Jamais Cascio to create a new acronym to characterize our world and the way we work: **BANI**, a better fit for the reality of an increasingly chaotic world.

BANI stands for Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible.

**B** These days, brittle doesn’t just mean volatile, but it is also about unexpected and powerful shockwaves that can shake even the most seemingly stable systems, potentially creating a global

domino effect. Brittle systems may appear strong, and even work well, until they suddenly collapse. And in an interconnected world, the failure of just one single link can have far-reaching consequences. A virus escaping on one side of the planet can send shockwaves through all sectors on the other, and also apparently lead to a rush on toilet paper. Houthi rebels disrupting freight traffic in the Suez Canal exposes just how brittle our global economy really is. This means that any structures and ideas implemented are often short-lived.

- A** As the world becomes more brittle, it also becomes more anxious. This brittleness is also being portrayed more than ever before. We're bombarded 24/7 with "breaking news" from all over the world. It's mainly bad news, and our brains love it. This is because we are biologically programmed to pick up on disaster and doomsday scenarios—an ingenious mechanism that keeps us alert to danger. In prehistoric times, this ensured we could activate our fight-or-flight response in order to survive. However, the amount of bad news today far exceeds what we can handle, plus a fight-or-flight response is no longer appropriate. We are also not just being exposed to *real* disasters, but also bombarded with disinformation. So it is no surprise that many people are living in a permanent state of anxiety and stress in a world over which we have no control.
  
- N** The smallest problems can have unimaginable and complex consequences that we may not realize until much later. In a nonlinear world, it is becoming increasingly difficult to detect cause and effect. In *Forbes* magazine, writer Jeroen Kraaijenbrink described this as the "illusion of predictability." Nonlinear processes disrupt what we expect to see as a result of our decisions. Small changes can have a bigger impact than we would like, with bad decisions getting completely out of hand. Take the climate change debate. The problem here is that cause and effect are difficult to iden-

tify because they are separated by time. Our chaotic world is desperately in need of specialists with in-depth knowledge of the smallest aspects of what is going on around us. However, a global, integrated, and holistic vision is equally necessary to understand the complex interactions shaping our world.

- I The human brain is no longer able to grasp the complexity of information and events. Data is everywhere, but as a result fails to give us any better understanding of the world. Many evolutions, such as generative AI, are incomprehensible to us. The more we know, the more we realize how little we know. Holes are constantly appearing in the illusion of the supremacy of our knowledge—something that we, Homo sapiens, are not happy about.

Our brittle, unpredictable world therefore requires a great deal of willingness and flexibility from people to constantly adapt. And if companies want to be and remain relevant, they also need to be alert to market shifts, innovate, and proactively seek out new opportunities. When I met my (now) husband in 2000, he had the latest Nokia phone. I was very impressed. Nokia was the undisputed leader in the cellphone market. Their devices were everywhere, and the brand was synonymous with innovation. However, when the smartphone revolution began, it was Nokia's focus on its existing technology that became its downfall. While Apple and Android took the market by storm with their advanced, software-driven devices, Nokia stuck to its hardware-driven approach.

Today, AI is creating an additional, urgent need for us to constantly reinvent ourselves. When ChatGPT was launched in November 2022, the entire world woke up to a new, AI landscape. Less than two years later, in June 2024, the market value of the American AI chip company Nvidia exceeded 3.4 trillion dollars, dethroning Microsoft in the process. Even though we're already experiencing the benefits of this innovation—also known as the fourth techno-

logical revolution and where the distinction between the physical, digital, and biological worlds is starting to blur—it is generating fear. How will it impact our future and our jobs? This fear is summed up by the term “**FOBO**” (Fear of Being Obsolete), a new trend that has emerged in recent years. This concept reflects the growing fear among employees that all this technology, especially AI, could make their skills, jobs, or entire professions obsolete. According to Gallup, 22% of employees in 2023 were worried their jobs would disappear because of technology, up from 15% in 2021.

FOBO is not entirely unfounded. The enormous technological revolution is bringing inevitable changes to the labor market. Just as the job of blacksmith was once an essential profession that got pushed into obscurity with the invention of the car, certain roles will now disappear or undergo a major transformation. This time, however, it is not just the blue-collar jobs that are at risk; the impact of AI and automation is also affecting white-collar workers. Among the *Fortune* 500 companies, 72% of HR leaders expect AI to replace several jobs within their organizations. Many of the tasks that humans currently perform, such as data analysis, administrative tasks, and even some forms of management, can be automated by AI systems.

However, according to approximately 65% of the same HR leaders, many of whom believe AI is a threat to some jobs, there is also a huge opportunity. They are confident that AI can be used to improve the performance of most roles within their organizations. Previous technological revolutions led to a dramatic reduction in physically demanding and dangerous jobs. This freed up employees to focus on, for example, maintenance, monitoring, and refinement of production processes.

Similarly, we can now outsource the repetitive, time-consuming parts of jobs to technology, allowing workers to focus on more creative aspects, strategic planning, and decision-making. Furthermore,

AI can help avoid human biases, as well as reserve our attention for complex scenarios that require intense focus, critical thinking, and human intervention. For example, AI is currently revolutionizing healthcare. One London hospital has developed a machine learning algorithm that can predict acute kidney failure 48 hours before it occurs in a patient, allowing doctors to intervene in time and save lives. The algorithm is based on the analysis of 620,000 unique data points. It would be impossible for the human brain to identify lifesaving patterns in such a sheer amount of data.

Thanks to these advances in technology, entirely new roles and sectors are also emerging. Occupations such as data scientists, AI specialists, and cybersecurity experts are already in high demand, and this will only increase. However, there is an undeniable need for a framework that allows employees to continuously update their skills, adapt their roles, and remain relevant in their field of expertise. Or rather: their area of interest. This is a shared responsibility between governments, educational institutions, organizations, and the individuals themselves.

While nobody today can claim to know where AI will end, the only way to reduce uncertainty about it is to increase our knowledge and identify synergies with our unique human brain. More than ever before, we need to proactively use our curious, innovative, and critical skills to meet these demands. Innovation should not be a reaction, let alone one of those activities that, when faced with uncertainty on the horizon, we cut back on while we wait for “better times ahead.” On the contrary, it demands a clear mind shift to accept that tomorrow we may find ourselves in a new reality that requires a different approach.

In addition to the BANI world in which our (still quite primitive) brain resides, there is another remarkable, challenging trend strongly influencing the way we perform. The bottom line is cru-

cial to assessing the success of an organization, with profitability a fundamental indicator of a healthy business. Without profit, companies cannot survive, let alone flourish. It is the driving force behind investments, innovation, and sustainable growth. But while figures and financial results have traditionally been considered the leading indicators of success, and employee competencies had to be directly linked to this, today we are noticing a significant shift in company culture. This change is characterized by a **transition from a business-oriented to a people-oriented approach**. This evolution has a huge impact on the mindset with which we approach this environment, and requires a specific skill set.

The shift to this human-centric approach had been underway for some time, but experienced unprecedented acceleration during the Covid-19 pandemic. Organizations suddenly faced a new reality where the **distinction between work and private life** became blurred. Working from home and the digital connection to the workplace suddenly brought living rooms into the picture—as well as family members and pets at seemingly every opportunity. It immediately became abundantly clear that employees were people with a life, responsibilities, and challenges beyond their professional roles. Working from home brought a new level of humanity to the world of work. Organizations were forced to be more flexible and empathetic. A lot of managers tried to support their employees' commitment to keeping the company afloat by also focusing on their well-being in the form of increased flexibility, virtual drinks, and other initiatives. Some organizations even saw the pandemic as an opportunity to flatten their hierarchy.

In addition, the **war for talent**, which continues to rage in various sectors, has prompted organizations to seek new ammunition and look beyond what they can offer in their paycheck. Employees today are no longer swayed by an attractive salary alone. They are increasingly looking for organizations that put their well-being

and development first, but that are also doing something about the major challenges facing society. Another new trend, **conscious quitting**, sees employees deliberately stop working because their organization isn't contributing to the values they consider important or having a positive impact on society. These are employees who are looking for flexibility and purpose in their work. They want a clear role within the organization and need to know how they can contribute to the bigger picture.

Paul Polman, former CEO of Unilever, had research carried out into the conscious quitting phenomenon among 4,000 employees in the United States and the United Kingdom. Even across industries, the conclusive results were the same. Of the respondents, 30% indicated they had quit their job because their company had failed in this regard, and half had thought about resigning for the same reason. The figures are even higher among millennials and especially among the youngest generation of respondents, Gen Z. Even more than previous generations, they want to feel valued and place great importance on their personal development and ethical business operations. Polman calls the dissatisfaction of employees, in combination with a shrinking labor market, a ticking time bomb for companies and their leaders.

Conscious quitting is forcing organizations to transform into honest, purpose-driven workplaces where employees can thrive and flourish. They are also expected to bring in top performers who, even in a BANI world, are capable of bringing out the best not only in themselves but also in the human capital of the organization. The employees themselves also have a responsibility to make a difference by showing purpose and courage.

The fact that today's workplace is more dynamic and diverse than ever before doesn't make this any easier. **Gen Z**, who now account for almost a third of the world's working population, are making



their mark. However, they are also working alongside employees from other generations, resulting in a unique mix. An increasing retirement age means that never before have so many different generations been in the workforce at the same time. Globalization, which has led to more different *cultures* than ever before within organizations, has also given diversity a boost. This melting pot of different generations and cultures poses a challenge for managers and employees at every level. It requires leadership and the ability to work together to bridge the gap between different perspectives and ways of working. Top performers within these challenging workforces cannot focus solely on their own success. They must take responsibility for the issues facing society at large and adopt a holistic, inclusive mindset.

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Those with a C-suite mindset have the ability, despite challenging circumstances, to make an impact on themselves and the world around them.

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So if you want to excel in these volatile times, you need a range of competencies. Having the right set of skills seems almost impossible, and yet, as a coach and speaker for many companies, I regularly come across these top performers—individuals who shine against a backdrop of chaos, and seem to navigate the complex world with ease, delivering remarkable professional and human achievements in spite of the challenges. Based on my experience, from small family businesses to multinationals, I have identified seven essential competencies that we can refer to as **C-skills**. It is clear that high achievers often share specific skills that set them apart and give them a “**C-suite mindset**.” Although “C-suite” traditionally refers to managerial positions with titles beginning with the letter C for