



# NON-PROFITS THRIVING IN A “VUCA” WORLD

*Reflections on Leading in a World of Rapid, Unpredictable Change*

## WHAT IS “VUCA”?

“VUCA” is an acronym used to describe the current state of our society as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. This term describes many aspects of everyday life from the social to the political to the personal, however, it is important for leaders of non-profit organizations to understand how VUCA impacts their community and their organization’s vision, mission and programming.

### *Current Context*

The term VUCA was first used by the US Army to describe the state of warfare and combat. Metaphorically, the use of the term in the non-profit context does not seem to be too far off. Communities are struggling to adapt to the combative political ideologies, focusing on profit margins and market deregulations rather than human rights and standards of living.

An essay by David LaPiana states that non-profit organizations are increasingly unable to plan for VUCA world dilemmas that occur including but not limited to “political polarization, the breakdown of democratic institutions and the rebirth of a new Far Right at home and abroad, the rise of social media as a means of interacting with the world, historic levels of economic inequality, corporate capture of our politics.”

Furthermore, Imagine Canada predicts that our social deficit as a sector will continue to rise, forcing organizations to close, decrease services or adapt and come up with new ways of doing business. **Social Deficit is “the gap between rising demand for services provided by charities and the ability of society to pay for them.”**

### *“VUCA World” Scenario-Local Case Example*

Homelessness is becoming increasingly more severe and overwhelming communities in Ontario. If looking at homelessness strictly from a traditional standpoint, the attitude exists that housing situations are a personal problem rather than looking at the markets, other structures and contributing factors and dealing with the issue as a collective. In Oxford County, youth homelessness is being combated with an innovative approach where agencies come together to coordinate an individualized response on a case by case basis, meeting the youth and their family where they are at to address their needs (name for the Youth Coordinated Response Table currently under consideration). This involves a holistic view not just focusing on one’s housing but on other aspects of their life. What makes this approach responsive is that the partners are testing something new to meet a need and although it is in its infancy they have seen great results with youth participants. They are building trust among partners, using principles to guide their work and recognize that working together is more effective than working alone. Although this is creating an individualized approach for addressing youth homelessness, larger systemic issues are being addressed through dialogues about confidentiality, how agencies work together and current system gaps. Systems thinking is being applied as broader prevention efforts from other communities are being considered.

***Volatile: change is violent, uncontrollable***

***Uncertain: future is unpredictable, making it hard to prepare for***

***Complex: with so much going on, things can often feel chaotic and confused***

***Ambiguous: we lack clarity because it’s hard to know what the root cause of the problem is***



**Imagine Canada estimates that in Canada by 2026 the social deficit will be \$25 billion.**

***“The program quickly fills the gap and creates a localized community of care that youth and their families can lean on to write an alternate storyline.”***

David Knezevic, Housing Support Worker-Youth, Oxford County Community Health Centre



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### Leadership in a VUCA World moves away from planning ahead to strategizing-making active and deliberate change

Tamarack Institute furthers this by discussing the need to incorporate emergence into an organization and collective’s thinking and approach. “We build the road as we travel it, but not without a map” (Paul Born, Tamarack Institute).

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Imagine Canada’s Bruce MacDonald suggests that we adopt the following 5 practices to thrive as non-profits:

1. Seeing possibilities
2. Intense Courage (staff and board are not risk adverse)
3. New Fashioned Allies (find allies that may not be traditional)
4. Old Can Be New
5. Adaptive DNA (building capacity for change )

**Ask yourself:** What is my organization or community’s readiness to adapt in uncertain times? What do we need to do to embrace the current reality and future? What do we need to let go of?

### Complex Problems and Systems Issues Often Require A Collective Impact Approach

Collective Impact is a cross-sector approach to solving complex social issues on a large scale.

#### Recommendations:

- Learn from the past but don’t be afraid to let go of old ways of knowing or doing that are holding the problem in place.
- Be open minded to new strategies.

**Ask yourself:** How is our agency contributing to the problem? And how can we contribute to the solution?

- Be engaged in dialogue to create solutions. Don’t be afraid of process and the time it takes to build a collective to get you to innovative solutions.
- Work towards shared ownership of a process/issue.
- Ensure open lines of communication. Be willing to have the tough conversations.
- Spend time building trust with your partners as it is the foundation to whether or not a partnership or collective will be successful.
- Sell your organization’s values and when working in a collective ensure that your group discusses their principles.
- Encourage diversity in voices being heard and deeply listen to course correct as needed.
- Measure to demonstrate value. Move from just talking about the issue to working towards population level outcomes.

### FUTHER READING/REFERENCES

Collective Impact Forum (2019). What is Collective Impact. [www.collectiveimpactforum.org](http://www.collectiveimpactforum.org)

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Covey, S. (2006). The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything.

Imagine Canada (2018). Canada’s Emerging Social Deficit.

La Piana, D. (2018). Developing Nonprofit Strategies in a VUCA World. The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution.

Quinn Patton, M. (2017). Principles Focused Evaluation: The Guide.

Tamarack Institute. Learning Centre: Collective Impact. [www.tamarackcommunity.ca/collectiveimpact](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/collectiveimpact)

*Social Planning Council Oxford maintains a vision of “every resident in Oxford County experiencing well-being and a sense of belonging.” In order to achieve that in a VUCA world, SPCO needs collaborative efforts of ambassadors and community members to provide solutions to the injustices of poverty and marginalization. The approach to VUCA dilemmas is a collective one. Bringing the vision back to the original use of VUCA language, like in war, there is strength in numbers. Agencies with different scopes and visions can provide to a collective solution for the complexity and uncertainty of life moving forward.*