

Are our Leaders **VUCA-ready?** (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity)

Our study of 400 executives would suggest NO!

The Article:

Many leadership articles begin by describing the current business world as challenging and unpredictable, due to geopolitical risk, supply chain pressures, funding issues, sustainability and climate concerns, and AI. Two potentially essential questions exist: Are our leaders currently equipped to lead us through this challenging environment? Do our company directors possess the necessary skills to perform their roles? The new environment has been described as volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). Over the last 20 years, new leadership theories and styles have evolved (Transactional, Transformational, Inclusive leadership, etc). Clear communication is key to all these nuanced approaches, regardless of the framework your organisation employs. Now, here lies our dilemma.

A recent study by 3Qetc of 400 executives (CEOs, GMS, and senior Leaders) from nine organisations (61% male, 39% female) found significant gaps and blind spots in communication traits, and, more importantly, a lack of self-awareness among the sampled executives.

This study was conducted by 3Qetc from 2022 to 2025, with data collected from online psychometric self-assessments of strengths administered to participants in 3Qetc leadership programs, coaching assignments, and mentoring programs. We provided executives with the Cappfinity Strengths online self-assessment exercise, which covers 60 strengths. The report categorises the strengths into four categories, focusing on performance, energy, and use. This is a comprehensive test comprising 180 validated questions, researched over a ten-year period and sampled from 30,000 professionals. The four categories are realised strengths, learned behaviours, weaknesses and unrealised strengths. The report also categorises the data into five separate strength families. These families provide a framework to help individuals assess potential blind spots and areas for improvement, while highlighting their strengths profile. The families are being, communicating, motivating, relating, and thinking.

Our dataset focused on the core family of communication as a key contributor to the success of high-performing teams, effective leadership, and directorship. Within the Cappfinity model, there are eight components of communication: **listening**, **feedback**, **counterpoint** (seeking a wider perspective), narrator, writer, spotlight, humour, and explainer.

The underlined strengths above that sit with the communication family of strengths (listening, counterpoint (wider perspective), and feedback) were chosen as they all involve a more comprehensive systems approach, i.e. interaction with other stakeholders. They are not individually focused traits, but are critical to a high-performing team, effective leadership, and directorship. In our analysis, we added "curiosity," which we believe complements counterpoint by taking a broader perspective. A combination of the above: listening, feedback, counterpoint and curiosity would lead to a more effective inclusive leadership style and high-performing teams, which are all critical for our organisational leaders and directors.

The results (sample 400 executives- 9 organisations).

Listening:

- Only **6%** had listening in their top 10 strengths
- Only **14%** had listening in their top 20 strengths

Feedback

- Only **5%** had feedback in their top 10 strengths
- Only **16%** had feedback in their top 20 strengths

Counterpoint

- Only **13%** had counterpoint in their top 10 strengths
- Only **25%** had counterpoint in their top 20 strengths

Curiosity

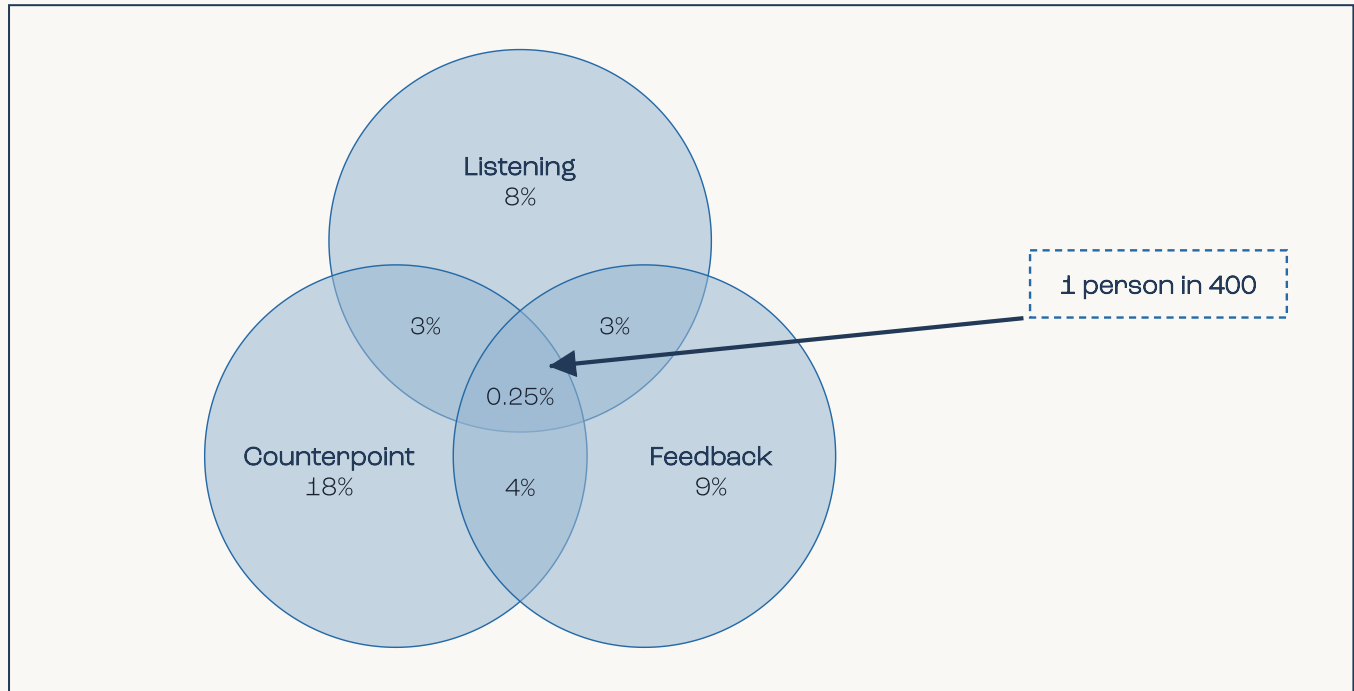
- Only **10%** had curiosity in their top 10 strengths
- Only **25%** had curiosity in their top 20 strengths

Conclusion

- The data shows alarmingly low levels of key competencies in the communication family of strengths for individuals to be effective as a team leader, or part of a high-performing team, or as an effective director.
- We believe this is the unintended consequence of the strength “Resolver” (the fix-it Bias). We note from Cappfinity’s recent research that this strength, as measured in a sample of 50,000 individuals, was higher than any other strength among executives.
- We also note in our research the following:-
 - The lack of self-awareness of these underperforming traits by individuals- i.e. their “blind spots” during individual debriefs.
 - We also observed that females had a significantly higher level of self-awareness than their male counterparts.
 - We also observed from our data, when analysing the male-female demographic, that females had significantly lower ratings of the following traits than their male counterparts: (Self-belief / Courage / Competitive / Resilience).

We took the analysis a step further, examining how many participants possessed more than one of the communication traits as a strength to be an effective team player, leader, and director. Listening, feedback, and counterpoint are key to the strengths of the communication family. Sample size: 400 executives.

% distribution of participants that had these communication strengths in their top 20 Strengths



There is much work to be done here to develop our leaders and directors, who may be technically highly proficient. However, our data suggests there is plenty of scope to improve some key communication traits, which would improve performance, engagement, culture, and well-being.

Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most adaptable to change". According to Darwin's theory, the one that survives is the one that best adapts and adjusts to the changing environment in which it finds itself. In the business world, to thrive as leaders and be effective in our responsibilities as directors, we suggest improving our listening, feedback, counterpoint, and curiosity skills to survive, be genuinely effective, and prosper in this VUCA world.