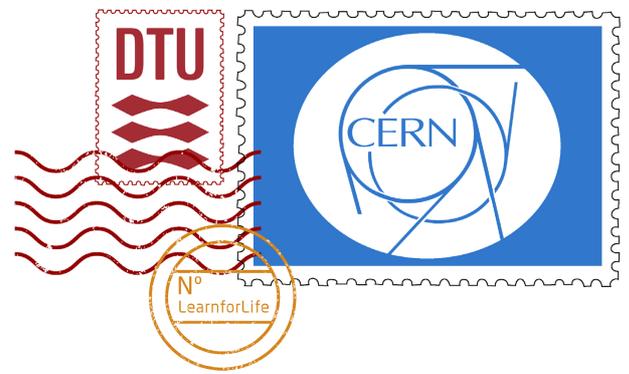


July 2020, Meyrin, Switzerland

Postcard from a virtual trip to the Large Hadron Collider at CERN; 1217 Meyrin, Switzerland

Dr Stephan Schubert, Adjunct Faculty at DTU
Executive Business Education
Postcard (2): Lessons of Leadership
- Greetings from the end of the world as we know it!



Dear Friends,

Greetings from the end of the world as we know it!

In 2019, the World Economic Forum published its 14th Global Risks Report. Assessing impact and likelihood, the report concluded that the main risks for the world and the world economy would be extreme weather events, failure to address climate change, natural disasters, cyber attacks, water crises, biodiversity loss, and critical information infrastructure breakdown. The spread of infectious diseases, exemplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, was considered as less likely and less serious than any of the aforementioned risks.

A world brought to standstill in 2020, by an event that did not even make the Top Ten of global risks in 2019, is called a VUCA world in business- and political circles. The VUCA acronym stands for VOLATILE, UNCERTAIN, COMPLEX and AMBIGUOUS; a colleague of mine recently quipped VUCA as a VERY USELESS CONCEPT ALONE, which needs to be contextualised to have meaning. Here is my attempt at it. The world as we knew it is gone and it is not coming back - period. The new world is VUCA: VIRTUAL, driven by UNASHAMED self-indulgence, with widespread intellectual and moral CORRUPTION, and deep-seated ANGER.

There is no need to list the sheer endless number of ways in which our world is VIRTUAL - we meet and work via Zoom or Teams, pay with smart phones and cryptocurrencies, become victims (or perpetrators) of cyber bullying etc. Platinum status in an airline loyalty programme suddenly looks a bit pointless.

Last week, I read the final draft of a student's project paper. He works for one of the largest tech companies in the world. His project explores using AI, machine learning and artificial neural networks to construct a strategy bot: "Siri, please look at all the data available in our company and on the Internet. Tell me whether we should rather reduce the price of product XYZ or increase our advertising spend." Who needs consultants?

Our world is also UNASHAMEDLY self-indulgent. While millions of people lose their jobs during the pandemic, so-called influencers are making millions by parading their small children or pets in front of the web cam; look at me, listen to me, buy what I recommend, because.... I'm gorgeous. I'm the King...or the Queen.

Smart phone photo albums with 5000 selfies (taken in the past month), sense of entitlement, extensive navel-gazing that blurs the view of anybody else, ostentatious display of wealth, adulation of 'beauty', veneration of material success and a conspicuous consumption of luxury while nearly half the world lives on less than \$5.50 per day. Perhaps I should have used UGLY for the "U".

As for the intellectual and moral CORRUPTION, my evidence file contains Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Brexit, Jeffrey Epstein, the Volkswagen Diesel scandal and many, many more. I am sure you have our own list in mind.

Finally, consider the ANGER expressed in the demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd, the topping of historic statues in the UK during Black Lives Matter protests, the images of white supremacist militias patrolling US streets together with gun-toting Trump supporters to 'protect' the city.

None of this is new, of course; none of it was created by the pandemic. Yet, think of Covid-19 as something like the European particle accelerator at CERN, contained in a tunnel running over 27 km beneath the border between France and Switzerland. Just as the accelerator creates new matter from collisions of the old, the pandemic accelerates, in some cases dramatically, developments that have been underway for quite some time. As they now collide at high speed, a new world takes shape around us.

A new world calls for new maps. Laurence Gonzales is a survival expert; his book *Deep Survival* (2003) is based on a detailed review of hundreds of accident reports - people who lost their way in the wilderness, became shipwrecked on sea, got stuck on a mountain or crashed while attempting to land on an aircraft carrier.

What united all the cases were unforeseen events that turned routine missions into unfolding disasters. Some of the actors realised that their mental maps were suddenly out of date; they proceeded cautiously, with open eyes and an open mind, updating their maps at every step. Most of them survived.

Another group of actors refused to accept that the map could suddenly be wrong. They clung to it, persevering in what the map said was the right direction, ignoring the signals from the environment. Most of this group perished.

For us, too, it's time to update our mental maps. Make VUCA your own concept; fill the acronym with new meanings. Adjust as you go along. Whatever your new map is, it is going to be far more useful than the old one.

Dr. **Stephan Schulbert** is a visiting professor at DTU Management with a deep interest in the field of strategy. Stephan pays particular attention to the role of mental frameworks, biases and hidden agendas in strategy development.

Having worked in 25 countries around the world on client cases first-hand, Stephan has extensive experience in a wide range of industries and cultures.

