



Executive Interview



Developing Leaders Who Act Without Perfect Information

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About VPS Learning



VPS Learning, a subsidiary of V2X, Inc., is a global provider of managed learning solutions that delivers more than eight million hours of customer training across more than 100 countries each year. The company is headquartered in Detroit and maintains primary offices in Barcelona, London and Mexico City.

About Matthias Paretsky



Matthias Paretsky is a Program Manager at VPS Learning. He designs and manages training programs for government and commercial clients, with a focus on logistics, deployment and performance analysis, and he leads cross-functional teams that develop technology-enabled learning tools tailored to customer needs.

Paretsky has more than 25 years of leadership experience, including key roles at Kinko's, Franchise Services Inc., Raytheon and V2X. As a Master Instructor for leadership development, he trains and mentors instructors, and he facilitates communication and soft skills training developed for colleges, universities and Fortune 500 clients. His approach blends emotional intelligence, behavioral insights and practical tools.

About David Wentworth



This Executive Interview is moderated by **David Wentworth**, Managing Director of Learning and Talent at Brandon Hall Group™, a role he returned to after serving as Vice President and Talent Platform Evangelist at Schoox. He previously spent 11 years at Brandon Hall Group™ as Principal Analyst and his insights draw on nearly two decades of research, interviews and data analysis in the learning and talent space, including a prior role as a senior analyst at the Institute for Corporate Productivity.

Recognition



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Learning and Development

Silver

Gold



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Time to Shoot Your Shot

Q David

How do we get leaders to understand that there is a time and a place to shoot their shot, and what is the concept behind it?

A Matt

We want leaders to be able to move forward with some level of confidence, without every answer at their disposal and without waiting for perfection in their concept or execution plan. Blind risk taking is not the goal. There is a cost to delay and a cost to waiting until everything is worked out.

Leaders need enough confidence to shoot their shot and move forward with an informed level of risk, trusting that they can manage what comes up, keep their efforts on track and accomplish their objectives.

Q David

How do we make the cost of not acting real for people who have mostly experienced the risks of taking a chance?

The Cost of Waiting

A Matt

It can be tempting to wait until the calculus is exactly right, because uncertainty is scary and there is always some element of risk to address. That applies to any business decision, though. Waiting carries a cost and taking action carries a cost. We need to help people see the opportunity cost of sitting on a decision for too long.

We don't want people rushing forward without any of the answers, but this is a world that doesn't sit still and wait for anyone. Leaders need to develop confidence and the courage to weigh their options and make an informed decision about when the right time to act is, without waiting until they have every answer.

Q David

What level of information frees a leader to decide, and when does gathering information become a trap?

A Matt

It comes down to a leader's comfort with what is happening, and that is hard to quantify. Most of these decisions are not run through a quantitative matrix. They are qualitative. The leader considers their own comfort with risk and their ability to sit in some discomfort without backing away completely, weighs the rewards and takes stock of what they know and what they still don't know.

Then they decide how to address the unknowns. Some are known unknowns, such as what the market will do next quarter or how business decisions will play out six months, a year or five years down the line. Others are unknown unknowns that arrive by surprise. A leader has to ask whether they can adapt if something comes up that they weren't prepared for. The plan should not be so locked in that there is no room for flexibility or change.

Planning for the Unknown Unknowns

The plan should not be so locked in that there is no room for flexibility or change.

Psychological Safety Starts at the Top

Q David

How does an organization create an environment where emerging leaders are safe to make decisions, try things and collaborate on them?

A Matt

Much of the discussion around psychological safety comes down to giving people the freedom to take a risk without complete success, or to speak up or ask a question when it feels awkward. Creating that environment is one of the major responsibilities of leaders at every level of an organization.

It starts in the C-suite and executive leadership, who need to enable people to feel confident that an idea they bring forward will not be shot down immediately because it doesn't align with leadership's expectations or anticipated plan.

A Culture That Invites New Ideas

We want people to speak up, share ideas and try something different.

Q David

Does the program also teach people how to recover when a risk does not pay off?

Learning as an Active Strategy

A Matt

Yes, and that is key. If we ask people to take risks and try something new or different, or to move ahead without full confidence that they have answered every question, we have to go in understanding that we will need to learn, adapt and continuously improve. Part of that is having the tools and mechanisms to look back, explore and take the lessons learned. It also looks forward.

If I could tell you one thing about human beings, it is that all of us will make mistakes at some point and choose the wrong thing at some point. An organization needs a mindset that accepts this. That tells us two things. Not everything will work out the way we intended, so we need mechanisms and systems in place that let people fail safely, with support structures that help them recover.

Second, we need to adopt learning as an active and conscious strategy. Looking back at a failure and saying that didn't work, so we'll try something different, is not enough. We ask what we learned from it and how we carry it forward. Learning as an active strategy is what lets someone shoot their shot with confidence that they will come away with something positive.

Room to Fail Safely

We need mechanisms and systems in place that let people fail safely, with support structures that help them recover.

Q David

How does your framework treat irreversible decisions versus reversible ones?

A Matt

If a decision is irreversible, we come back to some level of quantitative or qualitative analysis. The leader needs an understanding of the risks and rewards and needs to be able to say that, while they

A Continuity Plan for Big Decisions

may not have all the answers, they have confidence in their plan and a plan for managing the potential interruptions, missteps or shortcomings in it. This is not jumping in blindly. You may not have every answer, but you need some agility in your decision making and a plan for what to do when things go wrong.

Outside of learning and development, I have worked in risk management and business continuity planning, and its lessons apply well to leadership. In business continuity planning you never know what the disaster might be, but you need a plan. What are the crucial things we must maintain and continue? What is important but can be set aside temporarily? What sacrifices are we willing to make long term? And what is our plan for returning to our stable processes when things get interrupted?

Business decision making is no different. If a decision carries a potentially irreversible consequence, I need a business continuity plan for when things go sideways. What must I absolutely maintain? What can I set aside temporarily? And what is my plan for getting back to a normal state or making progress on my plan anyway?

Q David

Many people see risk tolerance and agility as innate traits of a leader. Can they be developed in people who do not see themselves that way?

A Matt

Looking at the leaders I have worked with, particularly the ones I consider real examples of successful leaders and business strategists, there is no single right mindset or type of person who succeeds. I encourage people not to think that they have to change something about themselves.

No Single Leadership Type

There is no single right mindset or type of person who succeeds.

Risk Aversion Isn't a Weakness

Instead, they should recognize where their approach to risk, or how they feel about risk, gets in the way of moving forward, and then leverage other strengths or grow their ability to sit in some level of discomfort. Being risk averse is not necessarily a bad thing.

People who are not risk averse may make decisions blindly and have some success because their decisions so far have played out in their favor, but that doesn't mean they are doing the right thing. We want people with some discomfort around risk to speak up. Part of psychological safety is making sure everyone has a voice and everyone's voice is heard. I want the leaders on my team to tell me they have misgivings about a plan, because that lets me ask what we do if it happens and how we plan for that worst case scenario.

I also want those people to have the skills to answer those questions for themselves and find their own way to address their discomfort. Perfect is the enemy of the good, and someone so tied up in managing every risk that they never move from risk management to execution will sit on a plan until it is too late or never move it forward.

So I challenge people to recognize their risk aversion and ask how they can develop some comfort with risk without moving forward blindly. They can work with the other leaders on their team, or as a leader of others, work with their team to make sure the risk has been addressed and there is a plan. I never want anyone to discard that risk aversion.

Don't Silence the Caution

Risk is there because your brain is telling you something important, and I don't want to shut that voice off.

Risk is there because your brain is telling you something important, and I don't want to shut that voice off. I want an answer for it so I can move forward.

 **David**

Are companies extending this type of development beyond existing leaders to the broader workforce?

Leadership Skills for Everyone

A Matt

I still see a lot of leadership training delivered after people become leaders, whether that is at the frontline level, where someone is promoted into a leadership role and then receives training, or higher up, where we continue to hone their skills.

We don't see much leadership or soft skills training targeted at individual contributors, but I do see a recognition that those skills are valuable, and I see people starting to ask for that training to be offered more broadly.

I am working with one of our clients right now to roll out communication skills training and emotional intelligence training to their leaders and to their line employees. They recognize that whatever your role in the hierarchy, you have to work collaboratively with people.

You need some ability to influence without the direct authority an org chart position gives you, and you need effective ways to collaborate and work as a team. We still do most of our leadership training at the leadership level, but there is growing recognition of the value of improving everybody's ability to collaborate and communicate.

A Clear Vision and Mission

I am a big proponent of articulating your mission and vision so people know why we are here, what we are trying to do and what they can rally around.

Q David

How does communicating a clear mission and vision help create an environment where good decisions can be made?

A Matt

I am a big proponent of articulating your mission and vision so people know why we are here, what we are trying to do and what they can rally around. Blind risk is taking risk without understanding what

The Mission Is Your Guiding Star

you hope to accomplish and without a clear plan for getting there. The mission gives us our endpoint and the reason for what we do. The vision describes what we will be as a team to get there.

The better a leader communicates what they are here to accomplish and the type of team or organization they are building in pursuit of that mission, the easier it is to get people on board and aligned.

A team that doesn't know why it is here or what it is trying to produce will flail around, because every person will do what they think is most important for their own reasons. The mission is our guiding star. It gives everyone a direction and helps them answer whether they are doing the right thing, working toward the right goal and sharing a purpose.

That is key to a leader's success whether or not they have the answer to every question right now. We will come across things we're not sure about that were not in our plan, but because we have the mission and know our end result, we know the direction we need to go to get around those obstacles or overcome those challenges.

Q David

What other aspects of the program make it unique?

A Matt

A few of the things we develop I have already touched on. First, we are not trying to fit everybody into the same cookie cutter mold. No archetype exists that you have to match to be an effective leader. Everyone is most successful when their words and actions are best aligned with who they are. People have strengths and areas where they have limitations or challenges.

No Cookie Cutter Leaders

*No archetype exists
that you have to match
to be an effective leader.*

Turning Caution Into Proactive Planning

Recognizing those limitations is about finding ways to leverage strengths to offset them, or to gain enough comfort and confidence that the limitations stop being absolute stops. It is never about ignoring them or pushing through with sheer mental brute force.

Take the people who are risk averse. I don't want them to throw caution to the wind. In our program we focus on building skills and building the self-awareness to recognize when they may be holding themselves back, and then the skills to take that recognition, make a conscious choice to move forward and move past those challenges.

They can recognize that their concerns may be leading them to be cautious and turn that caution into proactive efforts to look ahead, recognize risk, plan to manage it and still get off the starting blocks.

Some of that is personal recognition and growth. Some of it is developing capabilities around risk management.

If someone is so risk averse that they are very afraid to make a decision, we may talk about how to manage the risk they know is out there and how to develop the mental agility in their decision making to say that if something comes up they don't have a plan for, they know they can adapt and develop one as needed.

Improvement by Design

We don't get better by chance. We improve through a conscious focus on learning and continuous improvement.

Q David

What final takeaway would you like to leave with leaders who are reconfiguring, adding to or building a leadership development program?

A Matt

We don't get better by chance. We improve through a conscious focus on learning and continuous improvement, whether we are

Set Sail, Then Adapt

talking about individual contributors or leaders at any level of an organization. We want to keep moving our skills and performance forward through the leadership skills and communication skills that help all of our teams develop.

My closing thought is that we have a conscious strategy for how we develop leaders within our own organization, and we want to help leaders in any organization develop that same conscious strategy for improvement.

That includes the ability to set sail without knowing every risk that is out there, making a conscious decision to take a risk with the knowledge that they can adapt and address challenges as they come along.



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