

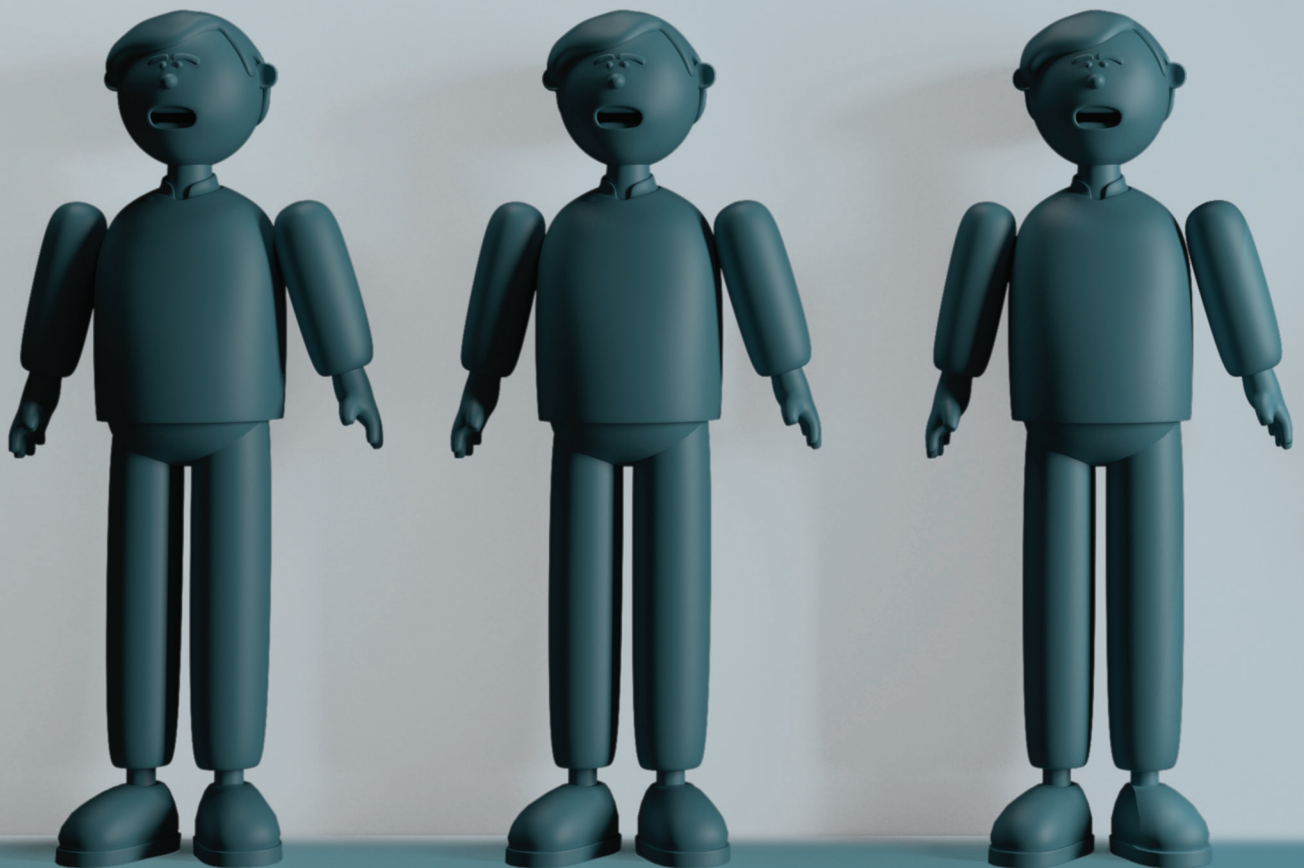
Disruptive leadership in a disruptive world:

Lessons from Abraham Lincoln and George Washington

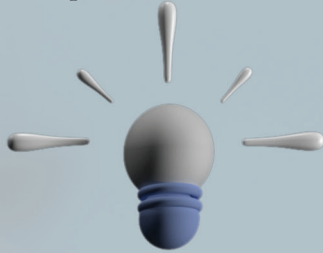
Mostafa Sayyadi and **Michael J Provitera** explore the importance of disruptive leadership in navigating today's rapidly changing and competitive environment, drawing inspiration from historical figures

Disruptive leadership is an important topic for many organisations around the world. Post-pandemic recovery has forsaken the old leadership paradigm and given way to the new autocratic, authentic leader. Organisations that face challenges such as the emergence of new technologies and hypercompetitive competition in today's global environment do not like disruption. Yet they must embrace it or be left behind. Resisting engineering, innovation, and creativity could lead to destruction, and by ignoring external threats and the wide array of growing competitors, organisations find themselves missing the train that has left the station.

Many business leaders worldwide demonstrate distinct characteristics of disruptive leaders. They actively question their own perspectives, which Jim Clawson, Emeritus Professor of the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia, refers to as Level One leadership. These leaders possess cognitive flexibility and an awareness of emerging threats. To minimise resistance to organisational changes, they adopt new approaches to human resource development and recruitment. They prioritise rewards and punishment as their guiding principles. Additionally, they possess strong abstract and conceptual thinking abilities, and they are



willing to discard past experiences when necessary to embrace change. A Level Two leader, while less abrasive than a Level One leader, encourages critical thinking among their team members. They remain open to new changes, using their abstract and conceptual thinking



skills to seek innovative solutions that may initially appear impossible. Unfortunately, only Level Three leaders will be able to survive the new economic shift of hypercompetitive globalism.

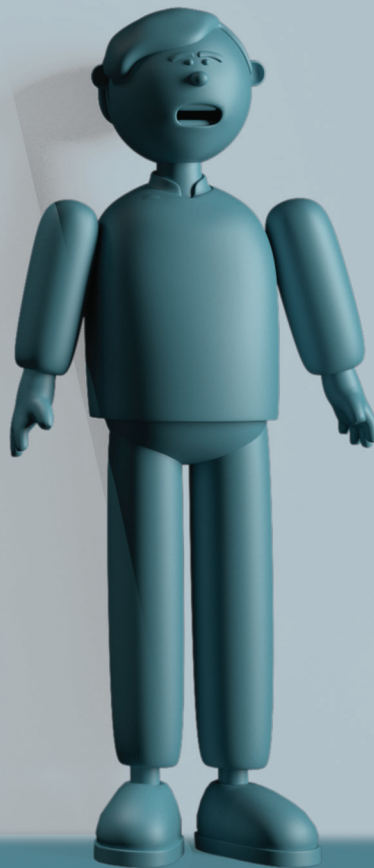
Jim Clawson focuses on the Level Three Leadership model, which emphasises the importance of conscious thought and VABES (values, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations) within the invisible leadership zone. This zone becomes visible when leaders behave and openly discuss their feelings and beliefs. Clawson conducted a study of over 1,500 executives from around the world,

Leadership is about managing energy, first in yourself and then in the people around you

revealing that habituality, or the repetition of beliefs, was observed in 95 per cent of cases on average. Level Three leaders exhibit a strong long-term orientation, prioritising the long-term survival of their company over short-term profits. A notable example of this leadership characteristic is Abraham Lincoln, who exemplified Level Three leadership by refusing to compromise on the abolition of slavery despite harsh criticism. In response to his critics, Lincoln stated: "Let there be no compromise on the question of extending slavery. If there be, all our labour is



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lost, and, ere long, must be done again. You think slavery is right and ought to be extended; while we think it is wrong and ought to be restricted."

This futuristic transformation, now hundreds of years later, demonstrates how a single pivotal decision led to the unity and long-term survival of the United States. It also highlights the inherent connection between authentic and disruptive leadership and the endurance of pain over time. Level Three leaders prioritise innovation, while Level One and Level Two leaders focus on short-term profits and stock prices. Although the significant investments made by Richard Branson and Elon Musk in space exploration may seem extravagant to some business leaders, it is precisely this forward-thinking and long-term vision that sets these disruptive Level Three leaders apart.

On the other hand, it is evident that Level One leaders, who are prevalent in many settings, defy their own human nature, which seeks certainty. They embrace uncertainty in their decision-making and value an outstanding outcome with a higher probability over a relatively good outcome with certainty. An exemplary instance of this Level Three leadership characteristic can be found in Abraham Lincoln's decision to abolish slavery. Despite causing a civil war and facing opposition from the southern states, Lincoln persisted, accepting high levels of uncertainty and demonstrating unparalleled commitment. His ability to navigate disruptive circumstances became a model for leaders worldwide. Conversely, the Southern leaders, acting as Level One and Level Two, initially exerted brutal force against their Northern counterparts. However, they lacked the fortitude of a Level One leader. The pursuit of freedom for all individuals, as enshrined in the Northern VABE, sets them apart. In contrast, the South neglected to address their VABES and solely focused on visible behaviours aimed at winning and spreading conscious thought that served their interests within the Union.

Another notable characteristic of disruptive leaders is their unwavering passion and deep involvement in the organisation, which drives them to engineer its disruption. This passion and interest serve as a powerful engine, enabling them to overcome resistance. Level Three leaders resist the allure of more lucrative job offers and instead pursue organisational transformation they are truly passionate about. A compelling example of this leadership characteristic can be found in leaders like George Washington, who, despite having the opportunity to become a monarch, steadfastly chose a presidential system for a free country. How many business leaders today emulate the thinking of George Washington, embodying the essence of a true Level Three leader? How many prioritise the success of their organisation over personal gain?

Disruptive leaders excel at building robust networks and mobilising human resources to drive disruptive transformation in alignment with their goals. Capable and intellectually compatible individuals gravitate towards the offices of these Level Three leaders, collectively shaping the disruptive journey. Establishing such a powerful network requires Level Three leaders and executives to cultivate buy-in. They must embrace Jim Clawson's 'Goal of Leadership,' recognising that without followers, there is no true leadership. The spectrum of buy-ins encompasses seven levels.

- Level Seven is active resistance: People rebel
- Level Six is passive resistance: People respond slowly or cover their resistance
- Level Five is apathy: People just do not care
- Level Four is compliance: People look for loopholes on how to beat the system
- Level Three is agreement: I will do what you say
- Level Two is engagement: I want to do what you ask me to do
- Level One is passion: What you ask is the number one thing in my life

Level Three leaders are characteristically very long-term-oriented and prefer the long term to the short term. These leaders do not give up ensuring the long-term survival of their company in pursuit of short-term profits

Levels One and Two are the stages where Level Three leaders strive to create positive buy-in. Irrespective of the industry, sector, or organisation, the primary objective is to establish buy-in at these first two levels. Level 1 represents individuals who possess passion and commitment towards the organisation.

Prominent examples of Level Three leaders, including George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk, exemplify how disruptive leaders possess insights that elude Level One and Level Two leaders. Disruptive engineering within any organisation necessitates the presence of Level Three leaders, who embody the aforementioned leadership characteristics. These Level Three attributes are crucial in ensuring the long-term survival of organisations, acting as a reliable parachute amid an era of profound change and turbulence. Emphasising agreement is second only to fostering engagement. Strive to surpass mere compliance on the buy-in scale, reaching a level where positive energy thrives. As Jim aptly describes it: "Leadership entails managing energy, starting with oneself and then extending it to the people around." Let us now radiate this positive energy throughout the remainder of 2022 and beyond.

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