**Gracias por invitarme a estar aquí con ustedes en esta hermosa ciudad de Barcelona**

In September of 2012, I went on a spiritual journey along a physical road, probably very familiar to many of you. The Camino de Santiago is an ancient pilgrim road, actually, many roads, that converge in the city of Santiago de Compostela, in western Spain. The traditional Way begins in the French Pyrenees, in the village of Saint John Pied de Port on the border of Spain, and continues westward across northern Spain for 800 kilometers.

I went on the journey because I needed time to reflect on where I was in life both personally and professionally. Along the Way, I met many strangers, several of whom became friends. One man was Michael, a retired priest from Ireland with that Irish gift for telling stories. He wore bicycle kit even though we were walking, silver-haired, a little wall-eyed with eyes going in different directions, wearing these tight, ridiculous clothes. He was memorable-looking! We spent a few days walking together, contemplating how the Camino was a metaphor for life, and it got me thinking about what the Camino could teach us about leadership.

That’s what I am talking with you about today, four specific capacities out of many that I believe are critical to leaders in today’s world: tolerance for ambiguity, discernment, resilience, and self-awareness.

Now, I have been a leadership consultant for 30 years, and executive coach for 15 and I have witnessed an evolution in what we understand about leadership and the complexities of the role. Not that long ago, a good leader was someone who had the ability to inspire others toward a vision; mobilize them toward that vision through collaboration and support; challenge the status quo and find opportunities for innovation; model clear values; and recognize and reward others who did the same. It wasn’t easy, but it was clear-cut and well researched, and leadership training focused on developing these skills.

But what we experience in today’s business environment doesn’t lend itself to simple formulas of leadership. The pace of change in the global landscape has dramatically altered the lay of the land. Organizations now run in a VUCA world— a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

Many traditional leadership competencies that we still use today were developed with pre-VUCA definitions of productivity, based on local economies and a structured organizational life, and were designed for quantitative targets and fewer relationships.

But that is not our world today. The organizations we know now are constantly adapting to environments of increasing complexity—

* Many companies have both global and local economies that need to integrate strategies and tactics in order to compete
* Productivity problems do not have a singular source, and information about them can be highly ambiguous, indecipherable, or downright contradictory
* The interwoven organizational landscape means that a small shift in one area of the business causes a ripple that may have disproportionately large consequences elsewhere.
* “Best practices” do not apply in an era of mass customization and tailored consumer experiences, and overly simplified responses are just that: simple.

Those essential leadership practices of vision, empowerment, innovation, and leading by example are important, to be sure, but they are now the price of entry for organizational leadership. To tackle this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous landscape, this VUCA environment, you need something more than a clear vision, more than spreadsheets and project plans, or even great communication skills.

What we need to help leaders build are higher-level capacities that will allow them to succeed in an evolving world, a synthesis of skills and competencies that can apply to a wide variety of circumstances, including situations they have never directly experienced before. These kinds of capacities are rare and extremely valuable, because they are transferable across many scenarios, much more so than any specific knowledge of a single situation or problem.

Let’s start with the first of these capacities, the **Tolerance for Ambiguity (Tolerancia para la ambigüedad)**

When I was on the Camino, I acquired a habit of rising very early each morning before dawn, quickly packing up my gear, and starting to walk. It was challenging at times to find *la flecha*, or *la venera* that marked the way. One morning, my lamp died, and I ended up walking in the dark for one or two kilometers out in the countryside. After a time, I could see a few lamps flashing ahead of me, other pilgrims who were out early. The lights were confusing, because they first went to one side, and then back again, like they were moving off into the fields. As I came up to the pilgrims with the lamps, I saw that a huge fence blocked the path, it extended far into the darkness in each direction, and the 7 or 8 other pilgrims were anxiously trying to find which way to go. They’d walk a little way in one direction, then the other, but were unsure where to go because there was no arrow, no shell to show the way. Neither their guidebooks nor mine made any mention of this fence.

What was remarkable about this scene was the level of agitation from the pilgrims, bordering on panic, as if a wrong choice would be catastrophic. Simply walking in one direction without knowing if it was the right direction seemed impossible for them to do. I had the sense that they would run around in circles for hours, like squawking chickens in a farmyard.

After observing this bizarre scene for a few minutes, I picked one direction and struck off down the road, figuring that if it turned out to be the wrong way, it would eventually be obvious. To my surprise, the entire group started to follow me, like ducklings. Not long after, the fence ended, the road turned, and there was the arrow.

Simply put, sometimes you need to act without knowing if it will work out.

In our volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous organizations, the VUCA world generates wildly differing options and points of view, and not much clarity. “Tolerance for ambiguity” has become one of the most often cited competencies for senior executives. It is the ability to take action when there is incomplete information, or when your past experience is not a helpful guide for what to do.

For some people, it is the ability to take no action, to be a non-anxious presence and remain in a state of not knowing, long enough for the answers to be revealed though some other means.

This capacity to tolerate ambiguity depends heavily on another one of these sophisticated executive capacities, the capacity for

**Discernment (Discernimiento)**

We’re in a world where we are saturated with information that we are expected to absorb and respond to, often instantly. Discernment is the ability of being able to see or understand, especially that which is hidden or obscure, and to `correctly perceive the right course of action.

In our business worlds, it is the ability to take the right strategic action at the right time; It’s the ability to know when and how to “turn up the heat” and create urgency, or turn it down to let people rest and recover; it’s the ability to be politically savvy; and it’s the ability to see the big picture and the small details, and know which small details are important.

At its essence, it means having keen insight and good judgment.

At the very start of my journey in St. Jean Pied de Port, I went to the *Oficina del peregrino* to register as a pilgrim, and received my *credencial* that would allow me to stay in the pilgrim hostels along the Way. The Portuguese volunteer collected the demographic information about me, and when she was finished, she reached across the table and took my hands, and looked directly into my eyes. She said, with great intensity, “This is your Camino. Do it any way you want to.”

Over the next several weeks, I recalled that message many times, and it was especially helpful when I was in doubt about the right thing to do. At times, I was uncertain whether to stay at a particular place or not, whether to walk with someone or not, whether to keep pressing on, or stop and rest. Even simple decisions like these could have profound implications for my health, or for my spirit. What she said taught me to stay grounded and connected to my purpose and desire. I was able to shut out the distractions of other people’s agendas, the weather, the hardship of the road, in order to remain true to that.

In our business worlds, we are barraged with priorities, ideas, relationships, plans, details… Having an anchor, being clear about what ultimately matters is critical in order to keep a line of sight about what is essential, and what is merely noise. This is the capacity for discernment.

Another one of the VUCA leadership capacities is **Resilience (la capacidad para adaptarse)**

Resilience is the capacity to recover one’s balance and remain optimistic, even in the face of grave disappointment or loss. It’s a determination, a hardiness, and stick-to-it-iveness for the journey.

On the Camino, (at the risk of stretching a metaphor), it took a while for me to develop the stamina to keep walking. The first few days were exciting; I was in a foreign country, experiencing the hospitality of Spain and meeting people from all over the world, all of us on some amazing inner and outer journey. But after a while I became tired. I lost touch with friends I had made. Sometimes I was literally lost. After a time, I hurt physically. I developed pains in my knees that I had never had before. I walked myself into a huge blister on the bottom of my foot that eventually required medical attention.

Yet, amazingly, my body would heal overnight, enough to get started again the next day, and then gradually, this became a habit, and I learned to keep walking.

Resilience is not simply determination, though that is part of it. Resilience has at its heart a sense of hope. This ability to convey genuine faith and conviction that the journey matters, and that it will lead to a better future is what provides the fuel for yourself and those you lead to keep going when they are tired and sore and disappointed.

The last capacity I will talk about here is perhaps the most critical in that it is the catalyst that enables the others to grow.

This is the capacity for **Self-Awareness. (la autoconciencia)**

However much I may learn about business and my profession, and as much as I may know about someone else, the most difficult thing to learn about and the most difficult person to know is myself. Even extraordinary adaptive leaders have buttons that get pushed, biases to overcome, and assumptions to uncover. In the research that talks about how or why leaders fail, the number one reason is because of a lack of self-awareness. I am not talking about the fundamental leadership practice of clarifying and modeling your values. That is the bedrock of good leadership, and allows others to see you as credible and authentic.

I’m talking about being able see my own strengths and flaws, and therefore, being able to manage them.

A common experience that people have on the Camino is to share intimate stories very quickly with others, and become close to them, maybe only for a few hours. I shared details about my life with Michael, and he gave me very startling feedback. “You are too self-sufficient, too fast to take charge to get what you want,” they said. “You don’t allow anyone to help you, you don’t think anyone can do as good a job as you can. If you want a successful partnership, you have to let the other person lead, too.” It was a shock to me, to see myself as too independent, too impatient to share leadership. It was not my image of myself at all.

In our VUCA worlds, it is necessary to convene open and transparent conversations about the challenges that we face. We have to be able to see the value in varying perspectives because we have to rely on one another to solve these complex problems. That means that sometimes we will get information that contradicts our interpretations about how we see the world, and about how we see ourselves.

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It is a remarkable thing to walk day after day with an intention to reflect about things important to yourself, and then every day to fulfill that intention. Walking the Camino, it is easy to sustain deliberation for long hours at a time.

Inevitably, that much reflection results in a shifting of perspective, a broadening and deepening of the lens we are using to look at the challenges we face. This is a critical factor in development, and is what we turn our attention to now for the rest of this talk.

Researchers and faculty at executive education programs, and other institutions are learning about the process of cognitive development, and how that applies to leadership. The terms horizontal and vertical development are gaining popularity to describe qualitatively different kinds of growth and learning that take place:

**Horizontal leadership development programs** build skills - they give people the information and tools to do what they are doing with more efficiency and better outcomes. Learning a process for how to do scenario planning, for instance.

Growing the ability to think strategically, however, is an example of **Vertical leadership development.** It is not about skills and what you do, it is about *how you think*. These types of growth experiences are based in the science of human development that shows how our minds can continue to grow through our lifetime. *Bigger mindsets translate into the agility required to lead effectively in a complex and ever changing world.*

Developmental psychology, behavioral science and neuroscience converge in this space.

So for leaders who need these adaptive capacities - abilities such as building coalitions, viewing issues from a strategic systems perspective, responding to change with agility … *the development programs themselves need to adapt to reflect those development needs.*

In practical terms, this means a shift from content-heavy training on competencies, towards processes and methods that accelerate the development of more complex ways of seeing and interacting with the world. *Our leaders need "bigger, more complex minds” in order to think in bigger, more complex ways.*

These types of development approaches are emerging and experimental, much like the VUCA environments to which they attempt to respond. These approaches include team coaching, learning circles, mindfulness training, high-risk classroom and on-the-job activities, participant-led development, and intensely focused executive coaching; processes and programs that uncover and test assumptions, and demand experimentation. They require a lot of reflection, a lot of dialogue, a lot of coaching… a lot of discomfort in trying something new.

For example, if we want to help our leaders learn to tolerate ambiguity with grace and without anxiety, we need to structure direct ambiguous experiences so they can learn to operate differently.

One hi-potential leader that I coached at Microsoft took the courageous step of leaving the US to build a new product team in India, without direct supervision from his boss. When he left, he was like a healthy potted plant; fed and cultivated, but not much room to grow. In India, he was forced to think creatively about how to find and then assemble the resources to solve the challenge from the ground up. But he was provided a forum and a learning structure, required to check in with his boss every few weeks, not to talk about the technical challenges and solve problems, but to discuss what he was learning about leadership, and about the business world in India. When he returned a few years later, he had transformed into a someone with a bigger, more comprehensive and complex set of leadership skills that affected his family, his community, and his company in inspiring ways. He was like a beautiful, mature oak tree.

Approaches like these also take time. Time not only to participate in the learning activity itself, but time to digest, and time to experiment and learn from real situations. As Henry Mintzberg, from the McGill School of Management said, “Leadership, like swimming, cannot be learned by reading about it.”

There is one image that frequently comes to mind when I think about the Camino, even now, three years later.

It was mid-morning, a beautiful late summer day, and I was walking through a mountainous, agricultural region, a gorgeous part of the journey.

I could see far along the path ahead of me, a long way across a small valley and up the other side of a ridge, pilgrims strung all along the way like beads on a string, moving little by little.

It was hot, the way was very steep, and everyone seemed to move slowly with their heavy packs over the rocky path.

In a breathtaking moment of clarity, I saw all of us joined together in our human struggle, each one of us carrying a burden and a soul, all of us on a journey of enlightenment.

Today, three years after my developmental experience, the Camino continues to teach lessons to me. Even preparing this talk helped me learn more from that experience.

As my Camino friend Michael said, “it takes a lot of experiences to learn how to lead a life.”

*Gracias.*