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## Executive Book Summaries®

# The New Leadership Literacies

## Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything

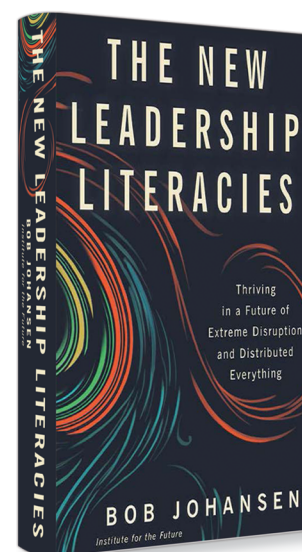
### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Over the next decade, today's connected world will be explosively more connected. Anything that can be distributed will be distributed: workforces, organizations, supply webs and more. The tired practices of centralized organizations will become brittle in a future where authority is radically decentralized. Rigid hierarchies will give way to liquid structures. Most leaders — and most organizations — aren't ready for this future. Are you?

Noted futurist Bob Johansen goes beyond skills and competencies to propose five new leadership literacies — combinations of disciplines, practices and worldviews — that will be needed to thrive in a VUCA world of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. This summary shows how to (1) forecast likely futures so you can “look back” and make sure you're prepared now for the changes to come, (2) use low-risk gaming spaces to work through your concerns about the future and hone your leadership skills, (3) lead shape-shifting organizations where you can't just tell people what to do, (4) be a dynamic presence even when you're not there in person, and (5) keep your personal energy high and transmit that energy throughout your organization.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To succeed despite being faced with waves of disruptions and extreme dilemmas by looking backward from the future.
- To play through fear and develop effective and efficient responses to conflict and change.
- To adapt traditional gaming behavior, such as gameful achievement, grit and gameful engagement, to strengthen your leadership abilities.



by Bob Johansen

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE NEW LEADERSHIP LITERACIES

by Bob Johansen

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## Twisting Toward Distributed Everything

The shift from centralized to distributed organizations has already begun, but the current leadership literacy — inherited from large, centralized organizations — isn't ready for a future when anything that can be distributed will be distributed.

Centralized and decentralized organizations will give way to truly distributed organizations that have no center, grow from the edges and cannot be controlled. Hierarchies will come and go in shape-shifting forms resembling a swirl. Rock-star leaders will be rare; networked leadership with strength and humility will work best. As centralized organizations become increasingly distributed, expect a cloudburst of disruption. In this future, leaders will see things they have never seen before.

In simpler times, perhaps being action oriented was enough to make a great leader. In the past, consultants and business books preached *action* as the defining characteristic of great leaders. But, even thousands of hours of action experience won't be enough for this future. Action without foresight and insight will be dumb, dangerous or both. Leaders will need to combine the practices of foresight, insight and action in an ongoing cycle of learning.

The next decade will be extremely complex, messy and threatening. Future leaders will be facing a VUCA world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.

### Disruptions

In a future loaded with dilemmas, disruption will be rampant, and clarity will be scarce. Leaders will need to

provide enough clarity to make disruption tolerable and even motivational.

Trends are gradual, relatively predictable and almost-comfortable changes. Disruption is extreme and unpredictable change. Disruption is uncomfortable for most people.

Here, we focus on *disruptions*, which are *breaks* in the patterns of change. Disruptions tend to take a long time to play out and are often characterized by waves of innovation.

Disruptions often start as responses to particular problems but almost always spark unexpected changes. Despite its sense of immediacy, disruption is often a process that takes a long time to play out — disruption doesn't just suddenly pop up and then disappear.

When disruption first breaks out, it is hard to tell just what the core disruption will be. Early waves of disruption may look much different from what happens later.

### Dilemmas

Dilemmas are problems you can't solve, problems that won't go away — yet, somehow leaders must learn how to succeed anyway. Future dilemmas will be embedded with both hope and fear — but the fear will be biting and the hope elusive.

If a leader characterizes a dilemma as a problem that can be solved, the failure to solve it is likely to be remembered and probably will be punished. When dealing with extreme dilemmas, leaders will need to learn how to thrive in the space between judging too soon (the classic mistake of the problem solver) and deciding too late (the classic mistake of the academic). ●



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### The *New Literacy* of Looking Backward From the Future

Foresight inevitably links in some way to hindsight. Think of hindsight as our banks of prior knowledge. Hindsight includes experience, which can be both a source of insight and a burden. Hindsight can be a cognitive anchoring in the past, and it can be a stimulus for innovation. Hindsight can keep us from seeing futures we cannot imagine.

Thinking systematically about the future helps us to loosen up, keep an open mind, and question our own assumptions.

Traditionally, innovative companies often miss the biggest potential impacts of a new technology or innovation once it finally occurs. Innovation often involves timing. A failed technology in one period can become a giant success later on. Those early innovators often watch in frustration as later (often less innovative) companies get the benefit of a delayed innovation. Hindsight — even accurate hindsight — can limit foresight. It is dangerous to assume that what didn't work before doesn't work now. Often, what didn't work before does work now. Leaders need to keep their minds open.

Insight is an “Aha!” moment that creates a new pattern of connections in your brain. Creating insight is a lot harder than generating ideas. Ideas bubble out, but insight is rare. Ideas are wonderful, but they are easy compared to insight. Insight is often hard, uncomfortable work.

The goal of futures thinking is to use foresight to induce the kind of head-jerking turn that happens as you read a great story or play a great game: an abrupt shift in your thinking. Once you have had an insight, you can't go back to your old way of thinking. Insight changes you. Ultimately, foresight is about making sense in a future world where sense is in short supply.

Collective moments of insight — when people come to the same realization together at the same time — are often the most powerful. Foresight is a wonderful way to provoke insight even if you don't agree with the forecast. You can argue with any forecast, but it is best to resist the temptation. Some of the best forecasts will be those you don't like. The most useful approach is to assume that foresight is plausible, internally consistent, and provocative.

#### Clarity and Dilemma Flipping

Looking backward from the future will require many skills. Two of these skills — clarity and dilemma flipping

— will be particularly important for looking backward from the future.

Looking backward from the future will help you find your *clarity*. Clarity is the ability to see through messes and contradictions to a future that others cannot yet see.

Looking backward from the future will increase your ability to do the kind of dilemma flipping that will become increasingly necessary in the VUCA world. Dilemma flipping is the ability to turn dilemmas — which, unlike problems, cannot be solved — into advantages and opportunities.

To do dilemma flipping, you must like the space between judging too soon and deciding too late. If you're not sure if it's a problem or a dilemma when you're facing a challenge, it is better to assume it's a dilemma. If it turns out to be a problem you can solve, that's great. But if you think it's a problem, and it turns out to be a dilemma, you're in trouble because you have set expectations as if you're going to solve it, but you won't be able to. ●

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### Moving Toward a Future That Rewards Clarity — but Punishes Certainty

Looking backward from the future will seem unnatural for many leaders today — they are so present focused — but the tools for thinking about the future systematically are improving rapidly, and the need for looking backward from the future is growing.

The more complex the future, the farther ahead leaders will need to look. Given the external, future forces of the next decade, leaders will need to expand their leadership literacy by looking really far. Fortunately, the next generation of leaders will be gamefully prepared for this to happen.

Leaders will face an increasingly uncertain future, even while many of those they lead will crave certainty. Looking long and working backward from the future can help sift out the shards of certainty from which leaders can create clarity.

#### How Far Ahead Should You Look?

We want the forecast to go beyond the planning horizon for current strategy but still close enough in to be believable. The future starts to become clear only at about 10 years out. Sometimes, looking beyond 10 years will provide a view that is even clearer.

# SUMMARY: THE NEW LEADERSHIP LITERACIES

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Sometimes, focusing on the future can help people move beyond the polarities of the present. The best forecasts will begin with a conversation involving foresight to insight to action, so it is very important to go far enough out to begin a great conversation and not get stuck in the polarities of the present.

## Clarity Versus Certainty

In a highly uncertain world, it will be very easy for leaders to confuse clarity with certainty. Many people — including many leaders — just aren't prepared for the speed and scale of disruption they will be facing over the next decade. In this future world, simple will be good, but simplistic will be dangerous.

What is the difference between clarity and certainty? Clarity is usually expressed in stories while certainty is usually expressed in rules. Rigid rules can get leaders in a lot of trouble in the VUCA world while stories encourage people to engage. Clarity is lucid and coherent; certainty is definite and brittle.

What this means for leaders is that if you *feel* certain you are reaching a rational conclusion, your feelings may not be accurately reflecting the reality of the situation at all. What looks and feels to you for all the world like a sure thing may be anything but.

Leaders will have to develop their clarity but moderate their certainty. This will be very difficult in a highly disruptive world where people long for certainty. Seek out clarity in leaders, but beware of certainty. ●

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## The New Literacy of Voluntary Fear Engagement

Gaming, grit and guilds are three very old concepts that will be reimagined over the next decade to help leaders prepare for the VUCA world.

Games can be defined as “obstacles that we volunteer to overcome.” Gameful engagement with the future can safely immerse you in a world of fear so you can practice ways to lead. The best response to fear is to engage with it directly rather than avoid it. Games can give leaders a way to do just that in realistic but low-risk ways.

Guilds allow people to play and learn together. They are all about connection, but it is about connection in the context of the game and the skills that are necessary to succeed in the game. Guild members have always had a shared purpose and a nurtured kinship for mutual benefit.

Like the guilds of old, modern guilds allow craftspeople to share their craft, and learn from each other.

Guilds are about learning, community and power. They are not necessarily focused on winning the game, being the best or being the largest. Some might aspire to those things, but the fundamental purpose of a guild is to make a network that enables players to have a positive experience through social connections. Similarly, in the real world of the future, guilds — or whatever they come to be called — will allow people to learn from each other and learn together.

## Playing Through Fear Positively

If you don't have some fear about the future, you're not paying attention. Fear is not a bad thing. It's what you *do* with your fear that can be bad. Leaders must learn to play through their fear and develop effective and efficient responses by turning fear into something positive. Leaders will need guilds because the world is becoming an increasingly scary place. Being a good guild member in the real world will require leaders to go through voluntary fear exposure in order to be a stronger link in the chain. Guilds build grit.

In a world of disruptive opportunity, leaders will need to learn how to practice voluntary fear exposure. They will need safe zones to practice their leadership skills and develop their capacities, knowledge, discipline, practices, perspective and worldview.

The big insight here is that safe zones allow leaders a chance to practice very difficult circumstances with little risk. The combination of a vividly realistic safe zone, voluntary fear exposure by leaders, and red teaming that challenges you at every stage creates powerful learning.

## Managing Fear

The whole point of gameful engagement is to immerse yourself in a realistic but mock fearful environment and learn how to thrive, or at least push through it. Gameful engagement can be great learning, if you're playing the right games.

Gaming something means trying it out in a low-risk environment before doing it for real. You have to do that with a spirit that allows you to fail early, often and cheaply.

The new leadership literacy of voluntary fear will require two leadership skills in particular: immersive learning ability and rapid prototyping. Voluntary fear exposure will require leaders to develop and exercise their own immersive learning abilities. Immersive learning ability is the ability to immerse yourself in unfamiliar environments, and learn from them in a first-person way.

# SUMMARY: THE NEW LEADERSHIP LITERACIES

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Voluntary fear exposure will allow leaders to create low-risk spaces where they can practice rapid prototyping for innovation. Rapid prototyping is creating quick, early versions of innovations, with the expectation that later success will require early failures. ●

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## ***Moving Toward a Future of Gaming for Grit***

We are moving toward a world where young people will bring their gaming experience to work, and it will be a competitive advantage for them. Learning communities of gamers will emerge as powerful guilds to learn together, share experiences, and amplify their impact.

Leading through gaming and guilds will make much more sense as young people join the workforce because they grew up with often very sophisticated video games and very organized and creative guilds.

Gameful engagement will be basic to the next generation of learning, marketing, advertising, and commercials. In 10 years, most rising star leaders will be gamers, with a gameful mindset. Digital natives are going to expect a much higher level of engagement as they go to work. If companies give them an experience as rich as what they've grown up with in the world of gaming and guilds, they're likely to be very productive.

Resilience will be necessary but insufficient for the leadership demands of the future. Grit will be required to lead with hope in a world of constant disruption. What ultimately ties grittiness and games together is the ability not just to recover from failure but to find value and even enjoyment in it.

### **Game Achievements**

The concept of *game achievements* in the video-gaming world will become more relevant to leadership development. Game achievements recognize players' abilities and long-term exploits. Achievements carry over and can hold value across games. These achievements are part of every player's profile: They unlock bonuses, award new abilities, or simply add to the pride of playing well. The importance of achievements in games cannot be understated since they represent a player's inherited knowledge, a player's worth in virtual worlds.

This notion of game achievements will carry forth into the world of work through guilds or communities of practice. In a VUCA world, leadership development will

be increasingly gameful, and shared learning across games — and into real life — will become part of getting ready for work or battle, just like it is already in video games, in the military, in police work, and in firefighting. ●

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## ***The New Literacy of Leadership for Shape-Shifting Organizations***

The literacy of leading shape-shifting organizations will require many skills, but the two most important ones are constructive depolarization and commons creation.

Leading shape-shifting organizations will amplify the need for constructive depolarization. Constructive depolarization is the ability to calm tense situations in which differences dominate and communication has broken down and bring people from divergent cultures toward constructive engagement.

When conflict arises at the edges of organizations, leadership can become very difficult. Shape-shifting organizations can go tribal. Mutual-benefit partnering can give way to tribal warfare. In the VUCA world, the potential for extreme disruption at the edges of distributed organizations is always possible.

Tribes can bring people together (guilds are also a kind of tribe), but tribes get dangerous when the strength of an in-group comes at the expense of others on the outside.

Over the next decade, as shape-shifting organizations become more popular, the tensions will rise, and the new digital capabilities will create weird twists that will challenge the imaginations of even the best leaders.

The literacy of leading shape-shifting organizations will require commons creating, which allows assets to be shared and provides mutual-benefit partnering models for innovation. Commons creation is the ability to seed, nurture, and grow shared assets that can benefit all players — and allow competition at a higher level.

Commons creation allows leaders to share new assets that benefit more than themselves, which is required for mutual-benefit partnering. Clearly, the long-term direction is shifting from more closed to more open, which is not to say that open sourcing will prevail. Rather, in a world where everything that can be distributed will be distributed, it will be difficult to control intellectual property in traditional ways. Mutual-benefit partnering will allow companies to share risk and rewards. ●

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## ***Moving Toward a Future of Distributed Authority***

In the near future, many traditional, hierarchical structures will bend and break. Lots of diverse partners will come together in new ways to create new kinds of organizational structures that will be more fluid and less rigid.

The job of leaders is to have the perspective necessary to recognize true innovation and when it is ready to take off. The capability to connect distributed organizations was made possible by the invention of packet switching. Over the next decade, these capabilities will finally be able to spread on a global scale.

Over the next decade, shape-shifting organizations will become much more common, and distributed leadership will become mandatory — even though the literacy of distributed leadership is still very much a work in progress. Shape-shifting organizations will disrupt traditional organizations and, in some cases, blend with them.

Economies of structure — organizational structure — will be required to thrive in the world of the increasingly VUCA future. Shape-shifting organizations will be more messy but more productive than traditional organizations.

### **What's Next: The Blockchain Disruption**

Shape-shifting organizations and new economies of organization will be created using blockchain or similar platforms for distributed computing.

Think of blockchain as distributed computing that can track the status of autonomous virtual objects and provide security *without central authority*. It is being used to prototype new infrastructure for organizing ourselves in a global society.

In the future, blockchain will be:

- A way to provide high-trust interactions in low-trust environments.
- A way of documenting and verifying integrity.
- A new kind of coordination being built on top of the internet.
- A distributed, unchangeable ledger or log of information that tells an immutable story of provenance.

Blockchain will provide the advantages of a single platform without the disadvantages of a single provider, such as Google, Facebook or Twitter. It will be to value what today's internet is to information.

It is a big step toward distributed everything. Although it will surely be a confusing process of creation, blockchain

will make it possible for shape-shifting organizations and economies of organizations to thrive. Also, blockchain will challenge traditional organizations in profound ways. ●

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## ***The New Literacy of Being There When You Are Not There***

Leaders will need to find new points of contact in the distributed organizations within which they will be working. Leaders will need a new leadership presence, through a wide mix of media and in-person meetings in varied combinations. Leaders will need to create organizational cultures that are amplified by the increasingly rich mix of media options that will emerge over the next decade.

Even when leaders are not present in person, they will need to have their presence felt. This has always been true, but it will be increasingly important in shape-shifting organizations. The good news is that the tools for culture seeding and nurturing will be so much better than what we have today. Augmented reality, mixed reality and virtual reality are the current buzzwords for a new blended-reality world of work that will take shape over the next decade.

Meeting in person will be crucial but in the context of a blended-reality and increasingly distributed world. We should all be focused on creating great conversations in a multimedia world.

Great leaders will not only be trained in a wide range of media, but they will also have their own signature flair within each medium. At this stage, the media options are improving rapidly, and the styles of use are still taking shape. Media-mix options for leaders will break down into roughly into five categories:

**Same Time/Same Place:** Best for getting to know others, developing trust, and understanding context and cultural background of others.

**Different Time/Different Place:** Best for the coordination of tasks and working fast — all of which work much better if workers have a shared orientation and sense of trust in advance.

**Same Time/Different Place:** Best when coordination and quick feedback are needed and it is important to get a “sense of the meeting” but it is not possible to get together in person for some reason.

**Same Place/Different Time:** Best when a central location or physical space is required for the work tasks, but being at the space simultaneously is either not possible or not required.

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**Any Time/Any Place:** Best for continuous communication and staying in touch.

Each leader needs his or her own personal strategy for each media option as well as a personal skills development plan. ●

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## ***Moving Toward a Future That Is BEYOND Being There***

The great news is that the blended-reality world of leadership in the future will be media rich, with lots of exciting choices for communicating. The challenging news for leaders is that they will have to have experience with how to lead in the expanding array of media-rich worlds, and most importantly — they will have to get very good at deciding which medium is good for what. However, richer media mixes may not be better than simpler forms.

For leaders at a distance, audio will be the primary medium. If your audio channel is weak or scratchy, you will have a weak or scratchy leadership voice — literally and symbolically. Leadership voice will be critical, and audio will be the most important channel for bringing your voice to life.

### **The Uncanny Valley**

Blended-reality media will provide new opportunities to communicate more effectively, productively and persuasively than ever before. These same vivid media will also create new forms of remote presence that will have the potential to be off-putting, alienating and even inhuman. The term *uncanny valley* is used to describe how humans react to humanoid robots.

In climbing toward the goal of leaders being there without being there, our affinity for those leaders will increase until we reach an uncanny valley, where leaders will be perceived as being weirdly present.

The challenge for the future of distributed leadership is we don't yet know what could be on the other side of the uncanny valley for leadership at a distance. Most likely, it is a leadership experience that will not be the same as if the leader were there in person. Rather, it will need to be a hybrid of human presence and machine support. And it will need to be better than if the leader were there in person.

As we move into a world of ambient communications media, many will fall into the uncanny valley of leadership at a distance. In climbing toward the goal of leaders being there without being there, our affinity for those leaders will increase as their virtual connection increases — until

they reach an uncanny valley, where leaders are perceived as being weirdly or inappropriately present. Do we really want our leaders to appear virtually as if they were there in person, or can we do better and at the same time avoid the uncanny valley?

### **Shared Presence**

This will be a world where co-presence is possible, even when people are not present physically together at the same place and same time. Mixed-reality experiences will be able to be shared across distances. The best leaders will have vivid shared work and life experiences with the people they lead. Physically distant leaders will want to feel close — but not too close.

This will be a world where sensors are ubiquitous, many of them are connected, and some of them will be in our bodies. Moreover, leaders (and everyone else) will have the ability to make sense out of all that sensory data. These embodied systems will be able to link workers with leaders through biomarkers.

The best leaders will be able to literally embody and sense the moods of the people they are leading without intruding on their privacy.

This will be a world where we can finally put to rest the old notion that the only productive workers are those who are physically present and able to be seen by their leaders.

Leaders will need to develop their own sophistication in the art and science of being there without being there. There are some general directions of change. For instance, leaders will have to shift from thinking about physical proximity to attentional proximity and come to see scheduling as a much more dynamic and ad hoc process. But, on the whole, communications strategies will have to become much more situational. ●

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## ***The New Literacy of Creating and Sustaining Positive Energy***

Certainly, there are many ways to express positive energy, and each of us has to express our own energy in a way that is authentic for us.

If leaders are going to thrive in a future of extreme disruption, they must not only manage their own energy, they must encourage, model, and reward positive energy in others. Fitness will be a price of entry for top leadership roles. Extreme fitness — physical, mental and even spiritual (though not necessarily religious) — will be required for most leadership roles.

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**Physical Well-being:** While there is much debate on almost every healthy-living practice, everyone seems to agree on the importance of exercise. Former Chief Medical Officer of Google Kelly Traver says, “Exercise physically changes your brain. It helps you learn and remember better. It promotes alertness and enhances creative thinking. It elevates mood and lowers stress. In short, exercise is your biggest ally in achieving and maintaining good health.”

**Mindful Well-being:** The good news is that neuroscience will get very practical over the next decade. Leaders will have a wide range of new resources to help them develop brain-smart ways of leading. Mindful well-being includes the popular interest in mindfulness, but it emphasizes applying the principles of neuroscience to leadership and daily living.

**Interpersonal Well-being:** By interpersonal, we mean family, friends, neighbors and those with whom you have direct communications on a frequent basis. In order to experience interpersonal well-being, you must have a community of individuals with whom you are so close that you could call them at 3 a.m. when you are crying.

**Societal Well-being:** This refers to how well linked are you to the culture, the society and the planet around you.

**Financial Well-being:** For many people, making a living means having a job. In the future, however, there will be fewer traditional jobs and lower job security for those who do have them. On the other hand, the new ways of working will allow much greater flexibility and many more ways to make a living.

**In-Work Well-being:** A career calling is much more than a casual choice of what you want to do with your life. Leaders, particularly in a work-oriented country such as the United States, are at their best if they truly believe in what they are doing at work.

**Spiritual Well-being:** Spiritual does not necessarily mean participation in any organized religion. The key is a sense of grounding, a sense of meaning that allows a leader to maintain a center in spite of being encircled by disruption.

Creating positive energy will require many skills, especially bio-empathy and quiet transparency. The literacy of creating and sustaining positive energy will require nurturing bio-empathy with yourself. Bio-empathy is the ability to see things from nature’s point of view, to understand, respect and learn from nature’s patterns. Nature has its own clarity, if only we humans can understand and learn from it.

Bio-empathy involves learning the principles of nature and applying them to yourself in order to develop your own body and mind as well as your own leadership style.

The literacy of creating and sustaining positive energy will require quiet transparency with strength, humility and empathy. Quiet transparency is the ability to be open and transparent about what matters to you without advertising yourself. ●

## Moving Toward a Future Where Leaders Are Body Hackers

Over the next decade, sensors will be everywhere, and neuroscience will get practical. And if they pay attention with personal rigor and grit, leaders will benefit dramatically. Using body hacking, leaders will be able to monitor and enhance their own energy levels, as well as engage with people who work with them through body sensitivities and metrics.

Hacking means to start with something as it is but make it better. In the future, we will all have a tremendous ability to hack our own bodies, to zoom in and zoom out with high-resolution views in a way that only a few people can today. High-resolution body hacking will allow leaders to make and remake their own bodies, enhance personal energy levels and performance, and help them be more prepared for the leadership challenges they will face.

The people who will succeed in shape-shifting organizations will be full of grit, hope and optimism. It will be up to leaders to keep people hopeful and optimistic; in turn, they will be rewarded with gritty people who will see adversity and change as opportunities rather than challenges. ●

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