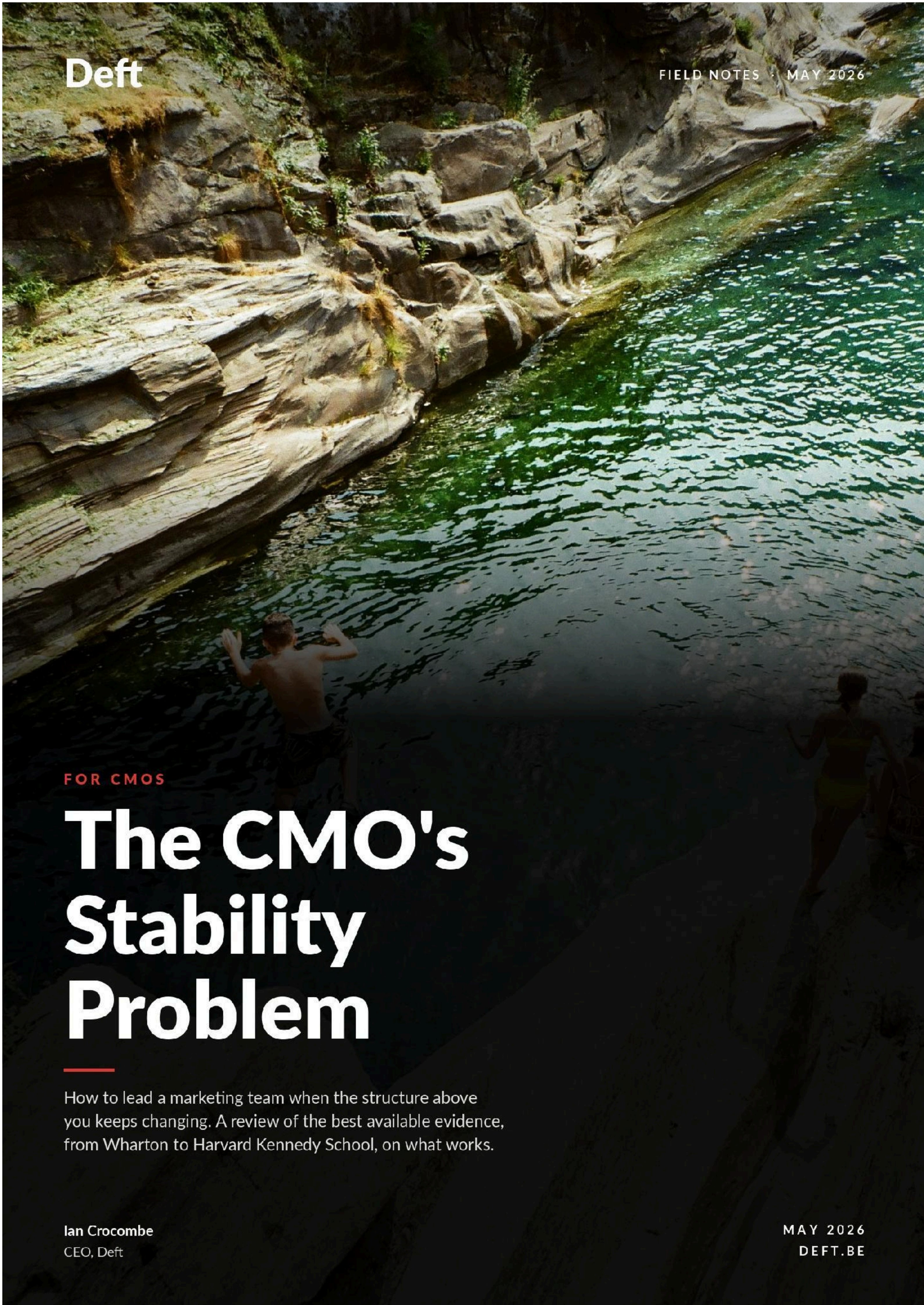

FOR CMOS

The CMO's Stability Problem

How to lead a marketing team when the structure above you keeps changing. A review of the best available evidence, from Wharton to Harvard Kennedy School, on what works.

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WHAT THIS PAPER ARGUES

> In 2026, the org chart above you will keep changing. Waiting for it to settle is not a strategy.
>
> The marketing leaders who run high-performing teams through volatility stop borrowing stability from above and build it inside the team instead.
>
> Seven principles, grounded in research from Wharton, Harvard Kennedy School and field studies in high-reliability organisations, set out how.

FROM THE AUTHOR

A note before you read

I spent four years inside Facebook through five reorganisations. Some of the people I inherited in October 2015 had had eight line managers in twelve months. Nobody was committing to anything. They were watching upward, waiting to see what came next before they moved.

I see that pattern in the marketing organisations I work with now. When the direction above keeps changing, the instinct is to look upwards: to figure out what the senior leader is actually thinking, to position ahead of the next restructure, to manage up. That instinct costs more than most people realise. It burns focus, clarity and team energy. And it rarely produces what it is supposed to produce, because senior leaders who are themselves reacting to volatility are by definition not sending consistent signals worth decoding.

The CMOs and marketing leaders I have seen perform well inside genuinely volatile organisations do something different. They stop trying to borrow stability from above and build it inside their own team instead. A clear direction that does not change when the org chart does. Operating norms the team holds regardless of what is happening two levels up. Shared understanding deep enough that everyone can respond coherently to a significant announcement without needing a meeting to work out what it means first.

This paper reviews the best available evidence for how to do that. The frameworks come from serious research, from Wharton to Harvard Kennedy School. The argument underneath them is mine: in a volatile organisation, the stability your team needs has to come from within. You cannot borrow it from the structure above. You have to build it.

That is a more achievable challenge than it sounds. In 2026, for marketing leaders in complex organisations, it is probably the most important one.

> **Waiting for the organisation to stabilise is not a strategy. Building your team so it does not need stability from above is.**
>
> IAN CROCOMBE · DEFT

THE CONTEXT

The new permanence of instability

In 2026, volatility is not a phase organisations are moving through. It is the operating environment.

Tariffs shift supply chains overnight. Inflation cycles reshape cost structures mid-year. Regulatory changes arrive faster than governance frameworks can absorb them. AI capabilities redraw competitive positions quarterly.

For marketing teams the pressure is doubled. The macro environment is changing fast, the technology stack underneath the team is changing faster, and the org structure above is being adjusted to keep up with both. A CMO appointed in January is on their third strategic brief by July.

CEOs and boards are responding. They have the broadest purview in the organisation and the most pressure, so they move fast and they change direction. For marketing leaders operating one or two layers below, this creates a particular challenge: how do you build momentum, make good decisions and hold a team together when the direction from above keeps shifting?

That volatility lands differently on different people. Some individuals adapt quickly and find change energising. Others need time, context and a reliable signal that the team's direction is holding before they can do their best work. Both responses are reasonable. A good leader in this environment knows their team well enough to see both, and builds a way of working that functions for the full range.

This is not a management failure story. It is the new normal. The question is not how to slow the environment down — it is how to build a leadership operating model that runs well inside it.

What follows is a review of the best available evidence from organisational research, Wharton, Harvard Kennedy School, field studies in complex organisations, and two decades of management literature, on what it takes to lead well when the environment is hostile to doing so.

THE SYNTHESIS

Seven principles for operating in volatile environments

These are grounded in five research frameworks set out in the next chapter. The frameworks are the why; the principles are the what. Each is derived from evidence on what teams that operate well inside volatile organisations actually do.

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01 **Build stability inside, not from above**

Clarity, vision and operating norms come from the team, not from whatever is happening at the leadership level above. A team's operating charter is its own. It does not change because the org structure does.

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02 **Move before the clarity arrives**

In volatile environments, waiting for certainty is a losing strategy. Small, reversible actions build momentum and generate the evidence that makes bigger decisions easier. Fire bullets.

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03 **Separate signal from noise, and agree the filter**

Not every announcement from above requires a response. An effective team has an explicit, agreed way to categorise: "this changes what we do," "this changes how we describe what we do," "this is noise to monitor but not react to." Without this filter, every strategic pivot drains energy from the actual work.

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04 **Your advantage is your capabilities and your relationships, not your position**

Org positions change. New layers get added. Roles get merged or eliminated. The team's actual capability is much harder to displace than its position: the knowledge it holds, the relationships it has built, the speed at which it operates. Invest there.

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05 **Run the 20-mile march**

Agree the three to five metrics that define success for this team, regardless of what changes above. Hold to them. Show consistent progress. This is what makes a team legible and valuable to any structure that sits over it, now or after the next reorganisation.

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06 **Be the buffer**

The leader's job in a turbulent environment is to absorb chaos from above and create clarity below, not to pass the turbulence down. The team should feel less uncertain than the wider organisation, not more. This requires the leader to internalise one principle: I am the boundary between the noise and the work.

07

Build shared consciousness

Everyone on the team should understand the full picture — the external context, the internal dynamics, the direction of travel — not just their own slice. When a significant decision arrives without warning, shared consciousness means everyone can respond in the same direction without needing a meeting to process it first.

> **The teams we work with at Deft that navigate volatile environments best are rarely the most senior or the most resourced. They are the ones with the clearest operating norms, the strongest shared understanding of their purpose, and a leader who has stopped waiting for certainty from above before they move. That combination outperforms hierarchy every time.**
>
> IAN CROCOMBE · DEFT, FROM CLIENT WORK 2024–26

THE EVIDENCE

What the research says

Five frameworks underpin the seven principles. Each comes from a different vantage on the same question: what makes a team operate well when the environment refuses to stabilise?

1. VUCA and its antidote

The US Army War College coined VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) after the Cold War ended and command-and-control stopped working as a model for leadership in a complex world. Bob Johansen at the Institute for the Future extended it into a practical counter-framework: the antidote to each VUCA element is not resilience. It is a positive capability that can be built.

THREAT	ANTIDOTE CAPABILITY
VOLATILITY	**Vision:** a clear sense of direction that does not change even when the path does
UNCERTAINTY	**Understanding:** deeper knowledge of your own team's capabilities than of what is coming next
COMPLEXITY	**Clarity:** simple principles for how decisions get made, so you do not need a stable org chart
AMBIGUITY	**Agility:** the ability to act before you have certainty, and correct as you go

The conditions driving VUCA in 2026 — macroeconomic instability, AI-driven disruption, geopolitical unpredictability — mean that marketing leaders in complex organisations face all four pressures at once. The strategic response is not to wait for the environment to stabilise. It is to build all four antidotes inside your own team, regardless of what is happening above.

2. Karl Weick: sensemaking and high reliability

Weick's research on high-reliability organisations — nuclear carriers, air traffic control, emergency response — is the most rigorous evidence base for teams that operate well in chaos. His five principles from Managing the Unexpected (with Kathleen Sutcliffe, 2001):

Preoccupation with failure

Treat every near-miss as a signal, not a lucky escape. The question after a close call is not “why did it turn out fine?” but “what could have gone wrong and didn't?”

Reluctance to simplify

Resist the urge to explain complex situations with a clean narrative. Premature simplification is how teams stop seeing what is actually happening.

Sensitivity to operations

Leaders stay close to actual work, not just reports about it. In volatile environments, the gap between what leaders believe is happening and what is actually happening is where surprises come from.

Commitment to resilience

Build the capacity to improvise and recover, not just to plan. The plan is not the point; the ability to keep moving when the plan breaks is.

Deference to expertise

In a crisis, authority flows to the person who knows most, not the person with the title. The teams that navigate volatility best are not the most hierarchical. They are the most honest about who knows what.

The insight for a marketing team inside a volatile organisation: become a high-reliability team regardless of whether the wider organisation operates that way. This is achievable within a team even when it is not achievable across an enterprise.

3. Stanley McChrystal: Team of Teams

Team of Teams (2015) is the most compelling real-world case study of this exact problem. McChrystal was leading a large, highly capable organisation that needed to outpace a faster, more networked competitor. His organisation had every structural advantage: training, resources, reach. But it could not keep pace because every significant decision was bottlenecked at the top. The competitor did not need permission to act.

His solution was not to flatten the hierarchy but to build two things: shared consciousness (everyone understands the whole mission and why decisions are being made) and empowered execution (teams act without waiting for permission from above).

> **The temptation to lead as a chess master, controlling each move of the organisation, must give way to an approach as a gardener, enabling rather than directing.**
>
> STANLEY MCCHRYSTAL, TEAM OF TEAMS

The analogue for a marketing organisation is direct. A central brand team that controls every campaign approval cannot keep pace with a market that moves at the speed of social, regulatory shifts or competitor launches. The marketing teams that absorb sudden direction changes well are the ones with shared consciousness deep enough — of brand, of strategy, of commercial reality — to act coherently without waiting for the centre to tell them how.

In organisations where senior leadership makes frequent pivots, whether strategic, structural or commercial, the teams that absorb this best are not the ones that receive better instructions. They are the ones with strong enough shared consciousness that they can figure out the implications themselves and act coherently without waiting to be told.

4. Ronald Heifetz: adaptive leadership

Heifetz (Harvard Kennedy School) makes a distinction that reframes most leadership friction in large organisations. Most teams treat everything as a technical problem: one with a known solution that just needs to be executed. But the problems that cause the most damage are adaptive challenges, where the problem itself is unclear, the solution requires new thinking, and the process of finding it is uncomfortable.

Most leadership volatility from above — sudden structural changes, strategy reversals, impulsive commercial decisions — is a technical response to an adaptive challenge. The decision looks decisive. From below, it creates confusion because the underlying adaptive question has not been answered.

Heifetz's prescription is to get on the balcony: create regular moments of distance from the noise to observe the patterns. What is genuinely changing? What is theatre? What requires a response, and what requires patience?

His concept of the holding environment is the practical mechanism: a structure that gives the team space to tolerate ambiguity and do the hard thinking that crisis mode prevents. The leader's job is to create that environment. This is what distinguishes teams that think clearly under pressure from teams that just react.

What makes this harder in practice: people on the same team have genuinely different tolerances for ambiguity. The holding environment needs to be robust enough to work for the person who finds change most difficult, not just the person who handles it best. That is a design challenge, not a communication one.

Why this dynamic gets reinforced from above

Heifetz's distinction is sharpened by research on how fast-moving senior leaders get appointed in the first place. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (UCL / Columbia) has shown that organisations consistently mistake confidence for competence: leaders who project decisiveness, make bold calls and show visible action are selected by environments that reward the appearance of progress. This is not a pathology. It is a feature of how large organisations filter for leadership in times of external pressure, when boards and shareholders want movement.

Two implications for marketing leaders operating below. First, the style is unlikely to change. It is being reinforced, not discouraged, so waiting for a more deliberate approach from above is not a strategy. Second, it can be worked with. Linda Hill's research at Harvard Business School on mid-level leaders in complex organisations finds that the ones who maintain influence in volatile environments are those who frame problems before the senior leader does. Not reacting to decisions already made, but being the person with a clear, simple case prepared when the question is about to be asked. The leader who has already thought through the implications shapes outcomes. The leader who is still processing the announcement does not.

5. Jim Collins: Great by Choice

Collins' 2011 research (with Wharton backing) studied companies that outperformed their industries by 10x over a decade, specifically in the most volatile sectors: semiconductors, aviation, software. Great by Choice identifies three practices common to what he calls “10x leaders.”

The 20-mile march

Consistent, committed progress regardless of external conditions. Not faster when conditions are good, not slower when they are bad. “The 20-mile march imposes order amid chaos.” In practice: agree the three to five metrics that define team success, and hold to them regardless of what changes above. This makes the team's value legible and consistent to any structure sitting over them.

Fire bullets, then cannonballs

Small, low-cost experiments before large commitments. Empirical creativity over bold vision. In environments where large strategic bets may be reversed without warning, the teams that test fast and build from evidence are more durable than those that wait for certainty before acting.

Productive paranoia

The best leaders in uncertainty prepare more thoroughly than conditions appear to require. They scenario-plan. They hold reserves. They are never caught entirely off-guard because they have already imagined the difficult outcomes. “Preserve the core, stimulate progress.”

FURTHER READING

Sources

The frameworks in this paper draw on the following.

Books

Team of Teams · Stanley McChrystal
Portfolio/Penguin, 2015. How JSOC rebuilt from hierarchy to network. The definitive case study on shared consciousness and empowered execution inside a complex organisation.

Managing the Unexpected · Karl Weick & Kathleen Sutcliffe
Wiley, 3rd ed. 2015. The academic foundation for high-reliability organisation theory and the five principles for teams that perform well under pressure.

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership · Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow & Marty Linsky
Harvard Business Press, 2009. The field guide to leading through adaptive challenges. Technical vs. adaptive problem diagnosis, getting on the balcony, building holding environments.

Great by Choice · Jim Collins & Morten Hansen
HarperBusiness, 2011. Wharton-backed research on what separates 10x companies in the most volatile industries. The 20-mile march, fire bullets then cannonballs, productive paranoia.

The End of Competitive Advantage · Rita McGrath
Harvard Business Review Press, 2013. The case for transient advantage over sustained competitive advantage. Discovery-driven planning as the right strategic tool for volatile environments.

Antifragile · Nassim Nicholas Taleb
Random House, 2012. The framework for systems that gain from disorder. Optionality as the mechanism for antifragility at the team and organisational level.

Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders? · Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic
Harvard Business Review Press, 2019. The research on how charisma is mistaken for competence, and why impulsive leaders keep getting promoted in large organisations.

Articles and background

Transient Advantage · Rita McGrath, Harvard Business Review, 2013. The accessible summary of McGrath's competitive advantage research.

VUCA on Wikipedia · The origin and evolution of the framework from the US Army War College through its adoption in business leadership and strategy.

Adaptive Leadership · Ronald Heifetz, Harvard Kennedy School. The distinction between technical and adaptive challenges, and how to diagnose which type of problem you are dealing with.

Institute for the Future (IFTF) · Bob Johansen's institution and the source of the VUCA antidote framework. Ongoing research on leadership capabilities for complex and uncertain futures.

ABOUT

Working with Deft

Deft helps CMOs and marketing leaders build the operating capability to move at a different speed than the organisations around them. We work across strategy, adoption and operations, and stay until the change sticks. Current clients include Arla Foods, Cisco and TeamViewer.

If your marketing team is navigating structural change, or you can see another reorganisation coming, that is the position we work with leaders through. A first conversation is the easiest place to start.

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