



Stanford eCorner

Negative Capability

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Magic experience designer Ferdinando Buscema believes entrepreneurs and leaders must possess 'negative capability' to successfully thrive in this uncertain world full of disruption.



Transcript

Did you know that some point around the 16th century, some of my European ancestors thought that California was as a matter of fact an island? I found this piece of information quite interesting and by the way, this has been a long held misconception that went viral, well, whatever viral meant at that time, and people stick to it. Now I find maps pretty fascinating tools. Maps are fascinating tools to make sense out of external reality and to navigate into reality. Well, nowadays all the maps that we have to chart external reality are quite accurate. As a matter of fact, very few reality - very few maps to make sense of our evolving social and cultural background are meaningful. So it's always more and more difficult to draw maps to make sense out of a very complex evolving landscape. Now as some would say, we live in a VUCA world. Have you heard the word VUCA? Taken from the military jargon and now drawn in to the corporate world, VUCA means a world which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. So basically all our certainties are kind of evaporated. And in order to survive and to thrive in such an environment, we don't need a more complex model.

We don't need a more refined, a more sophisticated map. What is useful to survive in this kind of environment is a concept called negative capability. Now the idea of negative capability is a creation of the English poet John Keats. According to John Keats, negative capability is the ability to live into uncertainties, to live into mystery, to process and to conceive opposite ideas and nonetheless be able to function. So negative capabilities, the ability that can be trained to stand in a moment of uncertainty where you don't know - you don't have any much certain reference points and nonetheless being able to stand into it and be able to function. Now this is another interesting study. Well, in the literary - in the field of management literary, there are multiplicities of studies addressing the fact that nowadays a good manager and a good leader is someone who is able just to stand into a situation without much certainties and be open and being able to navigate into this waters in a comfortable way. So the idea of being - standing open to what's happening, to what's going to happen like being - like listening to subtle signals, to weak signals that are emerging, and basically the role of a manager and a leader is to facilitate the emergence of things that want to emerge, but again the idea of standing in the midst of chaos, standing in the midst of complexity and nonetheless being able to function. And also being able to go with the flow, as they say, and being open to serendipitous events, because good things can happen so it's a kind of postmodern kind of faith, just stay there, just be quiet, don't hurry up and don't speed up decisions, just let's wait and see what happens.