

COVID

“When Uncertainty Becomes the Classroom”



By **Mau Espinosa**

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In *LET It Happen*, Chapter 3 begins in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the world was suddenly forced into a reality that very few leaders had ever experienced. Businesses closed almost overnight, travel stopped, and uncertainty spread faster than information.

For many leaders—including myself—those first weeks were filled with questions that had no clear answers. Customers disappeared. Employees were frightened. Entire industries paused. Decisions that once required careful planning suddenly had to be made within hours

In the book, I describe how quickly the rhythm of leadership changed during those days. Plans that had been developed carefully over months became obsolete almost instantly. Conversations that once revolved around strategy shifted toward survival. And leaders everywhere were forced to confront a reality they had rarely faced before: acting decisively in an environment where certainty simply did not exist.

Looking back, those early days of the pandemic were not just a health crisis or an economic disruption. They were a profound leadership experiment. Leaders around the world were suddenly operating in conditions that management theory had long described but few had truly experienced at scale.

In other words, the world had become **VUCA**—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. And that is where the deeper story of this chapter begins. Because once the immediate shock of crisis passes, something more interesting happens. Leaders begin to discover that the real challenge of sustained uncertainty is not external. It is internal.

When people ask me about the early days of COVID, they usually expect a story about crisis management—about decisions, strategies, and how businesses reacted.

But when I look back, that is not what stays with me.

What stays with me is the feeling that the world had suddenly become a classroom. Not a comfortable one, not a planned one, but a place where every leader was forced to confront something much more personal than strategy. They were forced to confront themselves.

Let me explain what I mean.

Before COVID, most leaders believed they were operating in a fast-moving world. Markets shifted quickly. Technology evolved. Competition intensified. We talked often about agility and adaptation.

But underneath those conversations there was still a quiet assumption: that the environment, while fast, remained predictable enough to manage.

Then the pandemic arrived

In a matter of days, airports emptied, offices closed, supply chains stalled, and customers disappeared. Businesses that had taken decades to build suddenly looked fragile. Leaders who were used to planning quarterly strategies found themselves making decisions every few hours.

Plans that had been carefully designed were obsolete before they were implemented.

I remember thinking:

This is not just a crisis. This is something else.

And that “something else” has a name many leaders had heard before but rarely felt so intensely: **VUCA**.

VUCA—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.

is a term that has been used in leadership and military strategy for years. It often appears on slides in executive presentations, usually accompanied by discussions about agility and adaptability.

But until the pandemic, many leaders experienced VUCA as an abstract idea.

COVID turned it into a lived reality.



Volatility meant that circumstances changed daily. Policies shifted overnight. Markets opened and closed unpredictably.

Uncertainty meant there were no timelines. Leaders could not answer the simplest questions: How long will this last? When will things return to normal?

Complexity meant that every decision had ripple effects. A health decision became an economic decision, which became a cultural decision, which became a leadership decision.

Ambiguity meant that even the data could not always be trusted. Information changed. Experts disagreed. The narrative itself seemed unstable.

When all four conditions combine, something interesting happens. The environment stops behaving in ways leaders are used to. And when the environment stops behaving predictably, leaders begin to notice something deeper. They begin to notice themselves.

In the early weeks of the pandemic, the emotional landscape of business changed almost overnight. Imagine a business owner—we'll call him Daniel. He runs a mid-sized company that took fifteen years to build. It isn't a global corporation, but it is large enough to employ dozens of people and support many families. For years the business had grown steadily. Daniel understood his market, his customers, and his numbers. He had lived through difficult economic cycles before. He believed he understood risk.

Then one morning he woke up to headlines announcing that cities around the world were shutting down.

At first it felt temporary, like the beginning of a storm that would pass in a few days. But as the week progressed, the signals became harder to ignore. In that quiet moment something unfamiliar entered the room.

Fear.

“Crises do not destroy organizations; they expose the leadership that sustains them.”

Not panic. Not hysteria. Just the quiet realization that the world had changed faster than his ability to understand it.

Daniel's experience was not unique. Across industries and countries, millions of leaders were living their own version of that moment. Business owners feared losing everything they had built. Employees worried about their health and their livelihoods. Families wondered what the future might bring. Leaders often feel uncomfortable admitting fear, but fear itself is not the problem. Fear is information. It is the nervous system recognizing that the environment has changed faster than the mind can process.

The real challenge begins after fear appears. Because once fear enters the system, leaders must decide what to do with it.

Under sustained uncertainty, leaders often move through an internal progression that is both psychological and practical. The **first stage is fear** itself—the moment when the mind begins to imagine worst-case scenarios. Revenue disappears. Customers vanish. Employees grow anxious. The future feels narrow and threatening. Yet **fear alone does not determine outcomes**. What matters is what happens next.

The **next stage is acknowledgment**. Acknowledgment is not optimism and it is not denial. It is the moment when leaders stop pretending that the situation is temporary and begin to say, quietly but clearly, this is real. Many leaders become trapped between these two stages. They feel fear, and intellectually they acknowledge reality, but emotionally they continue to resist it. The result is a subtle loop: fear feeds hesitation, hesitation feeds more fear, and the cycle repeats itself.

Breaking that loop requires something deceptively simple—action.

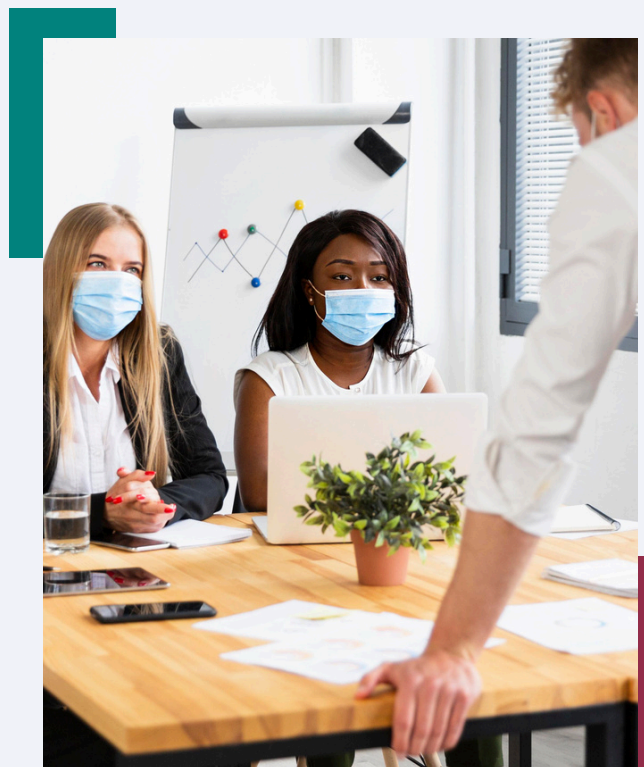
Not perfect action. Not fully informed action. **Just movement**. During the pandemic I watched leaders make decisions in hours that once took weeks.

Meetings that had previously stretched across multiple departments became short conversations focused on immediate priorities. Organizations experimented with solutions they had previously considered too risky. Something interesting happened when leaders began to act. The system itself began to change. Action produced new information. Information created perspective. Perspective opened the door to possibility.

From that possibility emerged **the final stage of the cycle: growth**.

Growth did not come from optimism or confidence. It came from the discipline of moving forward while uncertainty remained. **Fear, acknowledgment, action, growth—this rhythm repeated itself continuously throughout the pandemic**. Leaders who understood it were able to move through the cycle faster. Leaders who resisted it often remained trapped in fear and hesitation.

Another phenomenon also became visible during those months: the extraordinary power of narrative. Human beings do not respond to events directly. We respond to the meaning we assign to those events. In other words, we respond to the story.



During COVID, some organizations unconsciously adopted narratives of collapse. The language used in meetings reflected despair: *We cannot survive this. Everything is shutting down. There is no path forward.* In those environments fear intensified. Uncertainty became paralyzing.

Other leaders chose a different narrative. Not an unrealistic one, but a constructive one. Their language sounded different: *This is serious. It will be difficult. But we will learn our way through it.* **The external reality was the same, but the internal experience of the organization changed dramatically.**

Positive psychology and neurolinguistic research both point to something important here. The words leaders use shape how people perceive events. Perception influences emotional response. Emotion influences behavior. Language, therefore, becomes more than communication—it becomes regulation.

***Narrative is not decoration.
It is leadership.***

Over time something even deeper begins to emerge in environments of prolonged uncertainty. Leaders start to realize that external answers are limited. Data is incomplete. Experts disagree. Predictions fail. In that moment leadership becomes intensely personal. The question is no longer *what does the market require?* The question becomes *what do I believe is the right thing to do?*

This is where the self enters the conversation.

Listening to that internal voice—the one shaped by experience, values, and judgment—becomes critical. Not because it guarantees perfect decisions, but because it provides orientation when external certainty disappears. Many leaders discovered during the pandemic that their greatest challenge was not information. It was trust.

This realization leads to another important insight about leadership under uncertainty: **adaptability is not a personality trait.** Many people assume some leaders are naturally flexible while others are rigid. The pandemic revealed something different. **Adaptability is a decision.**

Adaptability requires leaders to release forms of mastery that once defined them. It demands shorter planning cycles, tolerance for incomplete information, and the willingness to adjust direction quickly without losing purpose. This is what agility truly means.

Agility is not speed. It is the ability to change direction while remaining aligned with what matters.

When leaders embrace that posture, organizations begin to move differently. Communication becomes more frequent. Experimentation becomes acceptable. Mistakes become sources of learning rather than evidence of failure. But when leaders resist that posture, rigidity appears—and rigidity in a VUCA environment is expensive.

Looking back now, the pandemic feels less like a management challenge and more like an examination. Not an examination about finance or operations, but about leadership itself. Every morning leaders faced the same quiet question. Not from their teams, not from their boards, but from themselves.

Who will I be today in the face of uncertainty?

Will I respond with fear, denial, and hesitation? Or will I acknowledge reality, act despite incomplete information, and grow into the leader this moment requires?

VUCA did not create that question. It simply made it impossible to avoid.



Conclusion

Leadership When Certainty Disappears.

When we look back at the pandemic now, it is tempting to frame it as a historic disruption—an extraordinary moment that the world eventually survived. But for many leaders, the deeper lesson was not about the crisis itself. It was about what the crisis revealed.

Under sustained uncertainty, leadership becomes less about having the right answers and more about sustaining the right posture. Fear appears, sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly. Acknowledgment follows, if we are willing to face reality honestly. Action interrupts the paralysis that uncertainty creates. And through that action, something new begins to grow—not only in our organizations, but in ourselves.

What COVID exposed was not simply the fragility of systems or the volatility of markets. It exposed the relationship leaders have with uncertainty. Some leaders responded by tightening control, trying to defend the identity that had once brought them success. Others allowed the experience to reshape them. They listened more carefully, moved more deliberately, and learned to act without waiting for perfect clarity.

In the end, the most important variable was not the environment. It was the leader in the room.

The pandemic did not invent volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. It simply removed our ability to ignore them. And once that illusion disappeared, every leader faced the same quiet question each morning:

Who will I be today in the face of uncertainty?

That question does not disappear with the pandemic. It follows us into every volatile market, every strategic pivot, every difficult decision where the path forward is not obvious.

In the article you've just read, we explored the internal cycle leaders often experience under pressure—fear, acknowledgment, action, and growth—and the powerful role narrative plays in shaping how individuals and organizations move through uncertainty. But these ideas are easier to describe than they are to live.

That is why conversations about leadership matter.

In the next episode of **LET It Happen: The Leadership Conversation**, we will explore these themes more personally looking at how leaders actually experience this cycle in real time, how rigidity appears when fear goes unrecognized, and how the stories we tell ourselves shape the decisions we make.

Because leadership does not develop in isolation. It develops through reflection, dialogue, and the willingness to examine ourselves honestly.

And sometimes the most important insights begin not with answers, but with a conversation.



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LET
IT HAPPEN



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Ejerce un liderazgo estratégico, fundador de G20, Inc., y autor de *LET It Happen*. Trabaja con líderes senior en Estados Unidos, México y Europa, ayudándolos a navegar el cambio mediante la integración de lógica, emoción y tácticas.