



The Age of the
Uncertain
Leader

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Today's era of uncertainty has many leaders uncomfortable.
But to survive and thrive in this age,
a new type of leader that embraces this reality must emerge.

Today's business landscape can be described in many ways: volatile, ambiguous, chaotic. But few leaders would suggest the environment facing them is as predictable as in past eras. In fact, the level of uncertainty leaders face today may be greater than ever.

Across industries, most organizations are grappling with increasingly challenging dynamics. Change is a constant. Evolving economies and emerging technologies offer exciting opportunities but create an environment that is increasingly complex. Morphing demographics confound talent and customer markets. Innovation, disruption and competition emerge from increasingly unexpected sources.

In this environment, there's little that anyone can be sure of, and yet, day-in and day-out, business leaders still continue to expect leaders to act with certainty — and measure them accordingly. They do this because they've come to believe that:

- ◆ **Certainty is efficient.** Busy managers are looking for ways to expand their capacity and get more done with less. Uncertainty is associated with protracted processes, never-ending meetings — and a lot more time.
- ◆ **Certainty mitigates risk.** Threats and dangers permeate the business landscape. It doesn't take much to spook Wall Street. Mistakes go viral and can receive global attention within minutes. Job security depends upon managing and avoiding these possibilities. Many leaders associate increased risk with the need for greater control and certainty.
- ◆ **Certainty exemplifies leadership.** The decisiveness and action associated with certainty is synonymous with leadership in organizations. This creates expectations and pressure to find certainty even where it doesn't — or can't — exist.

Your Brain on Uncertainty

In addition to the complex business conditions and organizational factors that create the desire for it, people are biologically driven to crave certainty. In fact, neuroscience research demonstrates that human beings are profoundly uncomfortable with uncertainty. The brain is wired to steer us away from danger and toward safety. This principle serves us well when the threats we faced were primarily physical — for instance, when we're running away from clear, physical dangers. Survival depends on it. Today, however, the threats we face are primarily social — and uncertainty is chief among them.

A 2016 University College of London Institute of Neurology study demonstrates the impact of uncertainty. In the study, volunteers played a digital game in which, depending on their responses, they might or might not receive mild shocks. Researchers found that stress levels were higher when subjects believed they didn't know if they'd receive a shock than when they anticipated they would.

Multiple other experiments arrived at a similar conclusion: uncertainty creates anxiety and fear. As Richard Burton, neuroscientist and author of the 2008 book, "On Being Certain," said in an interview with Scientific American: "At bottom, we are pattern recognizers who seek escape from ambiguity and indecision." Later in the interview Burton goes even further by suggesting that we are committed to "knowing" — even when we can't possibly know. Most of this operates in the unconscious parts of our brain.

A well-known 1992 experiment conducted at the time of the Challenger space shuttle disaster demonstrated this. The memory researcher, Ulric Neisser, interviewed 106 students within a day of the disaster and had them write down how they heard about it, where they were and what they were doing. Two and a half years later, he asked them the same questions and compared the responses. For 25 percent of them, the responses were radically different than their original written accounts and only 10 percent could be considered highly accurate.

What's also fascinating is that prior to being shown their original journal entries, the students were asked if their memories were correct. The vast majority were certain they were. Even after seeing their original journals, many students still insisted that their new versions were accurate. One student is quoted as saying: "That's my handwriting but that's not what happened." There was no relationship between confidence and accuracy.

As these studies show, our need for certainty is hard-wired into our brains and, as a result, may be making it difficult to recognize and interrupt.

The Downside of Certainty

With biology and workplace pressures converging, it isn't surprising that certainty is a sought-after commodity. And yet, too frequently this unconscious reaction creates challenges for leaders, their teams and their organizations. Whether we like it or not, today there are few easy or right answers. And insisting upon certainty when it isn't possible can have devastating results. Aside from simply being wrong, leaders who do this are in jeopardy of:

- Jumping to conclusions.
- Acting upon incomplete, imperfect information with confidence.
- Killing off creativity.
- Not listening to others. Undermining curiosity. Inhibiting collaboration.
- Robbing themselves and others of learning.

The thing about certainty is that it feeds upon itself, inspiring greater conviction and leading to increased polarization and entrenched positions. This makes it harder to relinquish an idea, even in the face of contradictory evidence.

Finally, leaders frequently believe they should demonstrate certainty to inspire the same in their followers. The problem is that employees are savvy and information is ubiquitous. They know what's happening and appreciate the complexity of situations. And when those leaders demonstrate inappropriate or unwarranted certainty, it backfires, leaving employees even less certain and often confused.

As Meg Wheatley and Debbie Frieze write in the Winter 2011 issue of *Resurgence* magazine, "The only predictable consequence of leaders attempts to wrest control of a complex, even chaotic situation, is that they create more chaos."

Cultivating Uncertainty

Given the limited utility and significant negative consequences of certainty, it's time for organizations to begin identifying and developing a new definition of leadership. Enter the era of the uncertain leader.

To be clear, uncertain leaders aren't unpredictable, capricious or wishy-washy. Instead, uncertain leaders have the distinct capacity to:

- Embrace complexity without feeling compelled to simplify it.
- Interrupt the biological drive for certainty and create space for learning, insights and possibilities.
- Recognize and leverage patterns without forcing them into predictions. Courageously say, "I don't know" or "I'm not sure."
- Acknowledge uncertainty without becoming immobilized by it.

These leaders understand how to cultivate constructive uncertainty — and use it to their team's advantage. They share a mindset and skill set that allows them (and those they lead) to thrive even under the most complex and changeable circumstances. Following are seven strategies that support the development of this new mindset and skill set.

1. Foster Awareness

Cultivating a new relationship with uncertainty begins with self-awareness. When leaders start to feel that familiar — but frequently unhelpful — sensation of certainty, they can stop and remind themselves that this could be biology at work, and there's a good chance that they are — in whole or in part — wrong. It's humbling to stop and recognize this possibility; yet this awareness can spark a shift in one's entire mindset. Taking this step opens the door to new ways of speaking, acting and being able to help others question their own certainty and develop a greater capacity to consider new and different possibilities.

2. Embrace Not Knowing

Uncertain leaders understand that they don't have to (and can't ever) know it all. This awareness is both humbling and liberating. Admitting that one doesn't have all of the answers is transformative — for the leader, the team and organizational results. It changes the conversation

and creates the space for others to contribute their knowledge and experiences. But this is a challenge for many because it changes what we value in leadership. It requires evaluating effectiveness not upon the leader's brilliance but upon their ability to tap the brilliance of others.

3. Talk Differently

One of the most powerful tools to embrace uncertainty and minimize the dangers of certainty is language. By paying attention to how we speak, we can begin to affect the cultural change required to genuinely embrace the possibilities that uncertainty can unleash.

Simply saying "I think" or "I believe" rather than "I know" represents a powerful shift. It reminds leaders that knowledge has limits; that we could possibly be wrong and that someone else might be right. This sends a powerful message to employees and opens the door for them to offer ideas and perspectives.

In his book, "Embracing Uncertainty," Phillip Clampitt suggests that leaders should pay careful attention to their metaphors. Consider the difference between "the plan should go off like clockwork" and "we don't see any storm clouds on the horizon — the forecast is for full production." A machine metaphor that is linear and certain vs. a weather metaphor that includes the possibility of uncertainty communicates a very different message to listeners. Consistently attending to the nature of our metaphors can be a powerful way to shift culture.

4. Collaborate Continuously

As leaders come to terms with the limitations of their own knowledge, information, experience and perspectives in an increasingly volatile environment, they develop a deeper appreciation for those around them. Key to leading through uncertainty is consistently engaging others in meaningful dialogue about business issues. This includes everyone from team members to peers to customers to other stakeholders. Shifting from "knowing all" to "including all" requires trust in the wisdom and creativity of others as well as a genuine interest in what they might have to say.

5. Ask Questions

Whereas answers are the language of certainty, questions and inquiry are the primary tools of the uncertain leader. Insightful, probing questions invite others into the conversation. They signal respect and inspire creativity and engagement. And when asked with a genuine spirit of curiosity and learning, questions create the space for ideas, exchange, relationship building and more. Questions aren't just for brainstorming or problem-solving; they are a vital and everyday tool for uncertain leaders. Whereas a traditional leader might accept a plan or idea at face value, uncertain leaders use these opportunities to challenge mindsets, drive shared understanding and generate better results with questions like:

- What might we be missing?
- What don't we know?
- Are we rushing to a decision? Why?
- What makes you unsure about this idea?

This isn't about asking more questions but about asking the kinds of questions that encourage people to examine their assumptions and default thinking — shining a bright light on the reality of uncertainty, removing some of the fear associated with it and weaving it into the fabric of day-to-day work.

6. Mine for Different Points of View

Uncertain leaders understand that diversity of thought is the foundation for effectiveness in today's environment. As a result, they consciously and consistently invite a wide variety of perspectives into the conversation.

They trust that allowing the time and space to explore different points of view will serve the immediate issue and help others build a new mindset and future capacity relative to uncertainty.

The uncertain leader's language telegraphs an acknowledgment that they possess a piece of the puzzle — but that the picture can only become clear when others share their pieces. Small adjustments in how the issues are framed can have a profound effect on others and their willingness to engage. Consider the difference between "The answer is..." and "One answer might be..." This simple reframing allows leaders to demonstrate receptivity, model inclusivity and inspire comfort with uncertainty.

At first, leaders may need to notice and resist the comfort of consensus and actively solicit challenges from others. This could take the form of working with the team to poke holes in a proposed plan or asking a member to play the role of devil's advocate. Over time, as others

experience the leader's genuine receptivity to contrary points of view — and as they see the results that follow — the team will develop greater comfort volunteering a wide range of perspectives and contribute to constructive uncertainty.

7. Encourage Experimentation

A chaotic, ever-changing environment has a way of immobilizing many leaders. When it's too hard to identify the right action, inaction frequently follows. The uncertain leader appreciates that there may be no "right" response to a given situation, and that doing something may be the most effective way of discovering the best response. As a result, risk-taking and experimentation are friends of the uncertain leader.

Language, once again, plays a key role. "What could we try here?" or "What might we do as an experiment?" are powerful ways to invite people to move forward even when uncertain and to learn from both successes and failures. Teams can test hypotheses, and, if the hypothesis is wrong, they can try again. Or they can even run multiple concurrent experiments. The language of experimentation can make things seem lighter and more playful, creating a platform for greater creativity.

But experimentation comes with the risk of failure — a risk that traditional leaders try to anticipate, mitigate, hedge and avoid altogether. In contrast, the uncertain leader views failure as an opportunity to learn. When one course of action doesn't deliver optimal results, it's simply information that can lead to the generation of another experiment. The key is to help the team wring as much learning as possible from the setback and use that to forge another way forward.

The Next Frontier

Complex and chaotic business conditions show no signs of settling down. In fact, the level of complexity is only likely to intensify. Meantime, the brain is not likely to rewire itself any time soon. As a result, most organizations will need leaders who are comfortable with being uncertain and cultivating uncertainty in the years to come. These leaders will need support as they struggle to:

- Acknowledge complexity and chaos as the new normal. Challenge deeply entrenched and hard-wired habits.
- Work in more flexible and fluid ways.
- Let go of the need to be an expert or have all of the answers. Model an experimental mindset and promote experimentation.

Making uncertain leadership a reality requires organizations to take a hard look at how they operate. For instance:

- How cast-in-stone is strategic planning? With what frequency is it revisited? How inclusive is the process?
- Are interviewing and hiring practices deliberately designed to ensure the level of diversity that today's complex environment requires?
- How are leaders selected, promoted and evaluated? Does domain expertise trump the ability to facilitate broad involvement and tap individual knowledge, skills and talents?
- Are "inclusion" and "risk-taking" values only on paper or in practice?
- How transparent is the organization? How freely is information about financials, competition and failures shared?
- To what extent do all employees have access to the training and learning resources required to be able to contribute optimally?

Organizations that acknowledge the ongoing reality of uncertainty in business have an opportunity to better align their intentions and structures to that reality. When they do, they'll create the conditions that enable others to make the shift and they'll reap the rewards associated with uncertain leadership and be positioned to thrive in the midst of complexity and chaos.

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