

## Trying Times – The Director, January 2002

In times of uncertainty, the ability to act without fear of failure can be a huge asset. It's a skill most children possess, but which most adults have forgotten.

In 1995 Corning – the organisation that invented Pyrex – decided to sell its core business divisions and leave behind 145 years of making glass cookware. It had decided to head into an as yet unrealised world of fibre optics and digital transmission. Their stated intention was to become the information revolution's prime contractor. Were they being mad, prescient, or just dealing with business as their leaders saw it?

As CEO John Loose said, "We had the will to do it, our organisation had always been innovative and this was another innovation."

Was Corning exceptional? At the time, possibly. But probably not in the larger span of things. John and his executive colleagues, most of whom were not high tech oriented newcomers but had each been with the organisation more than 20 years, were taking today's toughest leadership test – the ability to face great ambiguity, conquer the inevitable feelings of uncertainty and still make good decisions in a world which is patently less and less predictable .

Is it effective leadership to move your organisation towards a dramatically less certain world? In our view it is. For centuries leaders have been seen as the people who brought certainty to armies, churches, business organisations and nations. Followers wanted to know "what should we do, and how should we do it?" What most followers didn't realise was that leaders themselves experienced huge levels of personal uncertainty. Diaries of the great generals, church leaders and so on reveal the uncertainty they felt as they stood on the lip of a great decision. At the time most of us were unaware of these dilemmas because we didn't have the information. The data was kept in the hands of the leader and perhaps a few immediate advisors.

One of the outcomes of the information revolution is that much of the data that once was available exclusively to leaders is now available to all. Via the net and the media, followers can sit alongside their leaders tackling the same decisions with almost the same data and do it all in real time, too.

Now it becomes clear just how much ambiguity our leaders really face.

These are unsettling thoughts for the people who have grown up with expectations of leadership representing certainty. Most of our images of 'great' leaders are of those who made the uncertain certain and the unclear clear. Where are the role models for people who face ambiguity and handle it competently? We have found an answer from an unusual source: children.

Children appear to be able to handle ambiguity much more effectively than adults. Let us be clear. We are not now talking about reducing ambiguity; we are talking about coping with it, living with it as it surrounds us in everyday life.

Why are children good at handling ambiguity? Because amongst several skills, children are better than most adults at not being paralysed by fear of failure. In fact, when things go wrong, they often quite like it. They greet ambiguity as the way the world is, not an aberration. If they try something and it doesn't work, it's not a problem – they try another way. This skill – and it is a skill, you can learn it, and forget it – lies at the core of handling ambiguity. It is to be able to try something out, learn from it and move on.

Tragically, as children grow up, they experience repeated conditioning that teaches them 'when you don't know, the safest behaviour is to keep your head down.' Think how you reacted every time your teacher asked your class a question and you didn't know the answer.

We teach ourselves to be frightened of what we don't know. The consequence of this response to the unknown is felt decades later in our businesses and organisations when those same children, now executives, realise it is safer not to face the ambiguity. The difficult issues, the dramatic shifts required to remain competitive are put off or ignored.

John Loose and his Corning colleagues broke away from the old norm. They led their

organisation towards ambiguity and away from certainty in order to achieve competitive advantage. For the next few years Corning will have the opportunity to set the pace of events in its industry rather than risk being overtaken by them.

One last thought: maybe the best place we can learn the most useful current leadership lessons is not from the guru's, or even from the likes of John Loose, but at home, from our children.

Phil Hodgson and Dr Randall White work together to research, teach and consult in modern leadership skills. They co-authored Relax, It's Only Uncertainty (2001, Financial Times Prentice Hall).