

AMBIGUITY: LEADING THE WAY WHEN THE WAY KEEPS CHANGING

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If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts, but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.

— Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605)

Welcome to Uncertainty

What shall I do about that new venture? Those sales predictions? That business lunch? How shall I handle that issue concerning my customer, my boss, or even my partner?

Chances are that while reading this you are putting off several decisions that you are facing. Let's ask a rather personal question? How confidently, really, are you facing up to these decisions and the actions that you will need to take? What's more, how certain do you feel about the outcomes? Do you have all the information that you need to make the decisions? How many of these issues are surrounded by uncertainty?

Let us start in a very practical way. When everyone on the planet seems to be facing rising levels of uncertainty in our lives, how can we cope? If you ask people in sports and the performing arts what characterizes the very best performers, the ones who make the really hard seem easy, you will hear that the finest performers seem relaxed with their sport or their art. They have all the time in the world to strike the ball, play the note, hit the cue. On the other hand, the way to reduce performance is to add in too much stress and tension.

So if you are a manager who is facing unprecedented levels of ambiguity and uncertainty and you want to perform really well, then recognize that too much stress and tension is likely to get in the way. What is one of the prime causes of stress and tension? Ambiguity and uncertainty, of course.

Start with the behavior

We have spent the last ten years looking at which behaviors help people cope most effectively with uncertainty. To be an effective leader you need to make decisions, and often those decisions are in the face of a lot of uncertainty. The more uncertainty surrounding a decision, the more the call for leadership. But people in leadership roles are frequently unprepared or unable to admit to the rest of the world the ambiguity they face and the feelings of uncertainty that result. Indeed, it was often believed that for a leader to admit to being uncertain was an outright failure of their leadership.

The real work of leadership is embracing ambiguity

Leadership is what crosses the frontier between what we did yesterday and what we'll do tomorrow. We have argued elsewhere ([Relax, It's Only Uncertainty](#), Hodgson, P., and White R.P., FT Prentice Hall, 2001) that the real mark of a leader is confidence with uncertainty—the ability to admit to it and deal with it. Just to be clear, we think ambiguity is how it is, and uncertainty is how you feel about it. So the effective leader is always coping with his or her own feelings of uncertainty in the face of ambiguity.

Our research identified eight behaviors that seemed to be most effective in helping people cope with Ambiguity. We called them Enablers because although they are largely behavioral – i.e., you can learn to do them – some do require supporting attitudes as well. Arguably, the most significant of these is the first Enabler, being a **Mystery-Seeker**.

Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.

—Sherlock Holmes

Motivated by what?

Imagine that everything was attractive. Imagine that the more you didn't know, the more you wanted to know. Imagine that maybe wanting to know was too weak a description—there was a need to know that drove you from whatever else you were doing and pushed you to continually make further inquiries about the things that you didn't know. Imagine insatiable curiosity. This is a **Mystery-Seeker**.

Mystery-Seekers are curious about everything. They are attracted to areas that are unknown and to problems that appear to have no obvious solution. They question a lot; they want to know who and why and how. They seek to understand and at the same time use that understanding to explore further. Frequently, this exploration is of a playful nature. They experiment, they test things out—they put themselves in the role of both the experimenter and experimental subject. When they see a new building, they will stop and investigate it. They will take a new way home just to see if it is more interesting. They will explore a new road just to see where it goes. When you go for a walk with this person, they will continually be looking over fences, wondering what is over the next hill or around the next bend. They will want to change the walk based on what they've discovered and then to modify it further to go and investigate something. They won't stick to the plan if the plan prevents them from learning something or inquiring about something.

Mystery-Seekers challenge others to be challenged by the unknown. This can make for discomfiting company. You thought you were going to a business meeting to confirm the budget for a particular project, but instead you end up being drawn into a debate about how that product could be modified and used to create a new market somewhere. In times of pressure this can be seen as disconcertingly unfocused. And yet people who are highly motivated by mysteries can be extremely focused. They are almost obsessive in wanting to know more and finding out about the thing they don't yet know about. These people will also question things “for the hell of it” (and have been known to tear things up and start all over because they think it's the right thing to do).

Mystery-Seekers actually seem to get energy from not knowing. Most people get some satisfaction when they discover the solution to a problem, but people who are motivated by mysteries seem to draw their energy when they don't have a solution. Yes, of course, they get satisfaction like everyone else when they have solved a particular problem. But the solving doesn't stop there. Once they have a solution, they will look for a second solution—a better one. And once they have a second solution, they will probably go on and look for a third and a fourth. For people who are strongly motivated by mysteries, it is the absence of the solution, the absence of knowing how something works, that is the really attractive part.

People who have been motivated by mysteries over the centuries have shown this insatiable curiosity and drive to continue to want to understand. And then having understood, they will want to go yet deeper. More than four hundred years ago Galileo Galilei risked torture and imprisonment because the best solution he could find to explaining his astronomical observations was that the earth moved around the sun rather than, as the Bible implied, the other way around. His enormous curiosity kept him asking questions about sunspots, phases of the moon, the phases of Venus, the moons of Jupiter—he never stopped. Even when seriously ill and highly troubled by the pressure of the cardinal's inquisition, he continued to work on a theory about the trajectory of bodies fired from cannons.

Half a millennium later British inventor and entrepreneur James Dyson, in struggling to make a vacuum cleaner that did not require a paper or cloth bag, made more than five thousand prototypes before he finally achieved the level of perfection he sought. Having made his first production model, he carried on developing, and that curiosity to improve on what was already improved upon and to inquire upon yet further ways of developing new ideas could not be stopped. Just two years after its launch, Dyson's first product (an upright model) had become Britain's best-selling vacuum cleaner, overtaking sales of Electrolux, Hoover, and Panasonic. A cylinder model launched two years later achieved similar success. Passionate about design and engineering innovation, Dyson says that success is made of 99 percent failure. His persistent curiosity has taken his business to European brand leader in just five years against multinational competition.

But these people are not necessarily inventors in the normal sense. What is fundamental about them is that they are drawn instinctively to the edge of their knowledge rather than the center of it. It is for this reason that we believe that being motivated by mysteries may well be one of the fundamental enablers underlying the ability to handle uncertainty. Mystery-Seekers leave the comfortable and safe center ground of accepted "truth" and move to the edge of their knowledge and their learning. They ask "why" and "what would happen if," and in general, ask the difficult questions. Later we will return to this theme, as it seems to be a precursor to what we call Difficult Learning.

What happens if no one is very motivated by mysteries?

People who are not motivated by mysteries—who are not Mystery Seekers—use patterns of behavior in approaching the unknown that are narrow and unvarying. They aren't looking for variation in their life; in fact, they prefer things to be the same as they always were. They are not likely to go looking for new discoveries, new ideas, or some other variants in their lives. Sometimes this is a survival mechanism. If you have been living in a state of civil war for the previous several years, for instance, the last thing you want is more change. What you want is to go back to things as they were—to the stability and the certainty that you used to enjoy. However, with traumatic situations put aside, the danger for an individual, an organization or a society that is not motivated by mysteries is that they will be unaware of or unprepared to take up new ideas and changes that occur.

Consider the management of Encyclopedia Britannica. Two hundred and seventy years of publishing tomes convinced the encyclopedia's leadership that there would always be a need for solid, leather-bound volumes that would be updated by an annual volume containing the highlights of knowledge and events of the previous year. Because of this view of the world, they rejected the fledgling Microsoft Corporation's overture to produce a version on CD-ROM. Encarta, a competing product, was born as a result of this rejection, but of course, it didn't belong to Britannica. Britannica was then facing chaos as it tried to retrench and catch up with

the revolution that had taken place in the knowledge marketplace. What if a member of the senior team had been more motivated by mysteries—had been attracted to taking a new way home, for instance—then wouldn't this crisis have been seen as an opportunity?

Motivated by Mysteries is not a “mad-scientist's syndrome”; it is a constant companion to everything else the individual surviving in uncertainty will do. But it should not be overlaid to such an extent that all other matters of everyday life and survival and planning ahead are diminished. It is said that Einstein, brilliant though he was, didn't always recall his own phone number or address. However, Einstein was clearly highly motivated by mysteries. He described himself and his approach in this way, “I have no special talents, I am only passionately curious” and “the important thing is not to stop questioning.” In everyday usage, being motivated by mysteries is about being attracted by the unknown aspects of new sources of data, new ideas, new opportunities. But it is also about integrating that curiosity into the rest of the skills and operations that we need to use. It's about being fluid: the great ideas of tomorrow are the questions of today.

Difficult Learning, or what did you learn today?

It has been our experience that those people and organizations that embrace uncertainty are often drawn to doing things, inventing things, providing services that others find more difficult to do, invent, or provide. These individuals and organizations have learned to do the difficult and to some extent make it routine.

Being first is usually seen as having an advantage, although the so-called first-move advantage has been the downfall of an awful lot of dot-com start-ups. But the level of difficulty of something can be fleeting. On the one hand, The Fosbury Flop, a perfect score of ten in compulsory figure skating, a triple Lutz, or 1000 Mhertz chip speed were once difficult but are now commonplace. So now, even an ordinary competitor is expected to do these things and an ordinary product to have these features.

What is difficult to learn to do may be difficult for only the first learner or may be difficult for all who follow in her footsteps. Things that become easy to learn (or copy), those things that become commonplace, won't differentiate one actor from another, one organization from another. Those that remain elusive and hard to copy will be seen as special or differentiating.

For each of us, difficult learning is taking on something totally new. It is deliberately putting yourself on the steepest part of the learning curve. For both individuals and organizations, true difficult learning is doing what someone else has never done.

It is our belief that any organization that is trying to catch up with its competitors, particularly in the fastest moving sectors like e-business, bio-tech or pharmaceuticals, will need to become good at difficult learning. In these fields, doing what your competitors did six months later than they did it is just not good enough. Your fastest-moving competitors will already have moved on again.

Overcome your fear of failure

How do you learn to handle difficult learning, and how do you teach it to the rest of the organization? First, recognize that most of us were not trained to do it at school. Does that surprise you? Surely, you might argue, many of us worked hard at school, and it certainly didn't

seem easy at the time! This is where we come to the crux of difficult learning and why it is... well, difficult. Difficult Learning is difficult because it asks you to confront your fear of failure, of looking an idiot to yourself or others. Most of us have actually been trained by our school systems to avoid failure, which sounds reasonable enough until we realize that the fear of that failure is what often prevents us from learning what we need to learn.

Let's do some time travel. Take your mind back to when you were at school and the teacher asks the class, "What is the chemical formula for water?" You know what will happen next. You've seen this particular play many times. Those students who know the answer will call attention to themselves, while those who don't know will find something terribly interesting on the surface of the desk in front of them—and will do everything in their power to avoid attention. The practical learning is that when you are faced with something you don't know, you keep your head down and hope someone else deals with it.

Now fast forward to that same person at work and faced with a difficult situation in a public arena like a senior management meeting. The chances are that they will take the same instinct they learned at school into their organization and when faced with something they don't know, their first reaction will be to keep their head down and hope that someone else will handle it. Is this what we want in our organizations? Of course not! But recognize that most of us—and our observations seem to apply around the world—have been through this major conditioning process at least 10,000 times as the result of our schooling.

It is at a fundamental level that we have to tackle fear of failure and the confidence to tackle more and more difficult learning. At schools we really want students who don't know something to jump up and shout, "I don't know, but I want to find out." Only if we fill the organizations of the future with people who are keen to explore their lack of knowledge will our organizations be competent at handling the things they don't know. Once organizations become competent at this, they can start making themselves competitive because they can vastly increase their rate of learning. As one of our teachers of social psychology used to say, "We should hand you PhD's when we admit you. Then you have five years to convince us not to take them away from you." Translation: Show us you are willing to explore, make mistakes, and engage in genuine learning, and then we will let you keep the degree as evidence that you are truly a learner.

A Final Observation

Our expectation is that the trigger for developing your skills in these areas comes from being motivated by mysteries—by your curiosity and by your ability to take on a steeper learning curve—and to embrace Difficult Learning. The future organization will succeed because its employees will have no barriers to any area of learning and development and will be able to handle any situation and any learning opportunity. They will embrace the unknown in their search to provide goods and services that differentiate them from their competitors. And they will not fear the continual search for new and better products that will keep them ahead in their marketplace. The leaders who emerge in these companies will embrace the unknown, and they will relax in the certainty that there is no certainty.

For Financial Times special edition on Mastering People Management, December 2001.