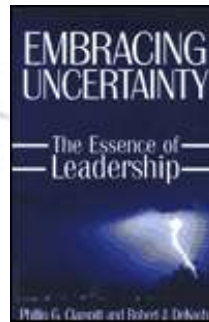




Embracing Uncertainty

The Essence of Leadership



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■ About the Author

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Phillip G. Clampitt, Ph.D, received his Ph.D. in organizational communication from the University of Kansas. He is a full professor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay in the Information Sciences Program. He has published in various journals, including *The Academy of Management Executive*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journal of Business Communication*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Broadcasting*, and *Communication World*. He also is on the editorial board of numerous professional journals. His most recent book, *Communicating for Managerial Effectiveness* (2nd edition), is based on the research from past communication assessments. Professor Clampitt is also the founder of MetaComm, a consulting firm that enables organizations to take their communication practices to a "higher plane" (see www.imetacomm.com). He has worked with numerous organizations over the past twenty years.

Robert J. DeKoch

Robert J. DeKoch received his B.A. from Lawrence University and his M.B.A. from the University of Wisconsin. His career has spanned numerous manufacturing industries where he has held various management positions in manufacturing, engineering, and research. He is currently the Chief Operating Officer with a major U.S. company, the Boldt Company. Throughout his career, Mr. DeKoch has focused on developing work environments for high involvement and continuous learning. He has instituted progressive communication processes in the workplace to promote understanding, focus, and alignment. He strives to build work relationships that foster innovative thinking, recognition of achievement, and genuine teamwork.

■ The Big Idea

In a global business climate that changes faster than any leader can plan, authors Clampitt and DeKoch have outlined the essence of leadership, by first explaining how false certainties are created, and then providing key ideas and insights into how to cultivate a culture that embraces uncertainty. They make the case that organizations which learn to live with a healthy amount of uncertainty perform better and maximize their people's potential.

First of all, as a leader, recognize that you are not expected to have all of the answers all of the time. It is part of the mantra of embracing uncertainty to do away with this shame in saying, "I don't know" and encouraging debate, more thoughtful decision-making, and more self-critique.

■ 1. What are the Benefits of Embracing Uncertainty?

It's a hedge against overconfidence.

How many companies that performed well a decade ago are still flourishing today? In business, you must prosper or perish, and allowing your organization to be complacent about its established positions, markets, and methods is dangerous. There is a line between positive thinking and overconfidence. Humility is always a better teacher than arrogance. Many battles are lost because an arrogant leader refuses to listen to other views or possibilities, to seek other alternatives. Embrace doubt and keep questioning your existing systems and ideas. See where there is room for change.

Embracing uncertainty reduces frustration.

Police investigators are often under great public pressure to present a suspect. Sometimes the public need for certainty sends an innocent person to prison. In business, most decisions have to be made without complete information and ever-evolving regulations or climates.

Embracing uncertainty fosters growth, learning, and flexibility.

One must remain teachable and open to learning. When we stop being teachable, we stop growing. A tolerance for the new and uncertainty enables a group of people to work with focus and flexibility, in an almost ant-like method. Things can change in a day, and your people need to understand this and move like a swarm of ants towards a new direction at the drop of a hat.

Embracing uncertainty properly frames information.

Weather forecasters have the most professional use of uncertainty in their language. They use words like "possibility of rain". This is a totally different paradigm and can be given some consideration when it comes to our business climate.

When the space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986, a part called the O-ring was previously noted to melt in certain temperatures. Under pressure from NASA the manufacturer of the defective O-ring reversed its "no launch" recommendation. Seven astronauts died because NASA did not consider this important piece of information on the O-rings. Officials did not consider the doubts of the engineers in their haste to push through with the launch.

Embracing uncertainty encourages more thoughtful decision-making.

There are two types of thinkers: the tortoise style thinker who is contemplative and deliberate, and the hare that favors a quick fix solution. A tortoise takes time to mull over a decision, balancing it with hare-like quick action once the major decision is made.

Embracing uncertainty encourages innovation.

Explorers who move into an unknown territory thrive on uncertainty. They find the unknown exciting. When one admits one does not know and would like to learn more, that is when one reaches more innovative solutions. The design company IDEO built its reputation on a range of innovative product range that includes what we know as the Palm Pilot. Passion, curiosity, a love of collaboration, and a lack of arrogance are the key ingredients of the design group's mix.

■ 2. Why do People Suppress Uncertainty?

People are programmed to think that "Order is good" and "Chaos is bad". As a result, they expect leaders to provide decisive action and execute thoroughly detailed plans. Go to a press conference where reporters are willing politicians about their platforms for re-election and you'll see the need for certainty. Why do people

suppress uncertainty? Here are some clues:

- People want to feel the impression of having control. Any management technique taken to the extreme can suppress uncertainty. The need to control the spontaneous dampens truly creative thinking.
- In the quest for efficiency, too much time and motion studies and controlling systems will not encourage thinking "outside the box". Sometimes you have to turn your entire system upside down or trash it altogether to find the right solution.
- So as not to rock the boat, people keep their unproductive family members on board, or refrain from firing friends, and the like.
- The notion that one has invested time and money in a single idea causes unrealistic expectations that suppress uncertainty. People want to believe the solution or program will fix things.
- People want information before making a big decision. You simply cannot have all of the information you need. Sometimes you need to go on gut feelings.

■ 3. What is Uncertainty, Anyway?

Uncertainty deals with the unknown, the chaotic, the vague, and those things, which are yet to be proven true. Laws are in the realm of certainty, because they proclaim the absolute.

The realm from certainty to uncertainty spans from the categories of laws and principles, to more flexible rules of thumb, to hunches, intuitions and then the unknowns.

We seek experts, review our past experiences, and use reasoning to find some certainty in our day-to-day business dealings. Stock market analysts make their predictions with a fair amount of certainty based on these elements. Economists use various data and measures to create possible scenarios. Alan Greenspan is a good example of an authority the world listens to when it requires some form of certainty.

Truth is we cannot really predict the future, or how any new situation will unfold. We cannot predict human behavior, or how one system, whether a natural or man-made one, will behave when forced to operate with another.

Most people will choose certainty over uncertainty. What is certain to one person may be uncertain to another. A scientist will be more cautious in making assumptions, while an ordinary individual may not be.

■ 4. How is the Illusion of Certainty Cleared?

Overemphasizing planning processes

An organization can become the victim of its own planning. Some managers

meticulously plan down to the tiniest detail, where every timetable item, and precise outcome needs to be graphed or charted to death! This overemphasis on planning kills the creative process and leaves no room for realities that may crop up. "When Columbus sailed across the Atlantic, he didn't have a business model." True. One cannot plan for every possible scenario. There are subjective judgments or intangible benefits that simply cannot be measured.

Uncritically using research

Consumer research may not be as certain as it seems. Some answers may not be truthful, for instance, how much a family's income really is per year, and how much a mother spends on baby food. Misinformation to the public by offering forecasts and computer models is another way we use research in the wrong manner, if only to present some picture of certainty.

Enforcing inappropriate deadlines

Sometimes an executive can pressure people and use a deadline to seize power, forcing others into choosing an option as if it is the only option and any further delay would be detrimental to the business.

Improper use of experts

Just because the consultant said so doesn't necessarily mean you need to believe it. A consultant has past experience and credentials under his belt, an organization may seek his approval based on that consultant's credibility. His credibility is considered certainty in this case, and this is what the company finds itself buying into. Credibility rules over logic in these decisions.

Submitting to authoritarians

Some CEOs suffer from a sick belief in their own infallibility. Ironically, in one situation, a CEO started an "employee empowerment" crusade, of which he was the only author, and required all managers to follow.

Over-reliance on success recipes

Recipes provide a false sense of certainty. Even scientists say that duplicating an experiment under the same conditions yields the desired result only 50 per cent of the time.

■ 5. What are the Dangers of Creating Artificial Certainty?

The main danger is artificial certainty produces a Cycle of Certainty. First a need for certainty is created, sparking the search for a "certainty provider" (a consultant, expert, guru, or dictator) who has the credibility to provide this perceived certainty. When the undertaking fails, people blame the certainty provider, and the search goes on for another "fireman" or expert, and so on...

You cannot reach the highest level of self-actualization without taking a few risks and embracing uncertainty, that's for certain.

"If someone had evaluated the risk of fire right after it was invented, they may well have decided to eat their food raw." -Julian Morris, The Institute of Economic Affairs in London

Here are some takeaways from an alphabetical list of things that may happen to an organization when it is caught in a certainty cycle:

- Advocate positions based on computer projection data
- Broadcasting the latest office gossip
- Consulting "experts" about the one best way to do things
- Developing detailed planning documents that are never used
- Employing too many people who suppress others' doubts and concerns
- Formalizing procedures that will be quickly outdated
- Managing by intimidating employees into conformity
- An endless search for the perfect plan

■ 6. How Can You Embrace Uncertainty?

Explore, develop an initial, moveable platform, and refine it continuously.

- Follow the spirit of explorers and adventurers, take calculated risks
- Network to make useful connections with other people and ideas
- Dream! Use your imagination, (Einstein valued this over mere knowledge)
- Systematically survey the situation
- Brainstorm for all possible angles and solutions
- Look at the world in terms of relationships of things to each other
- Experiment and test ideas, plans
- Surf the World Wide Web

Some key insights:

- Remember that persistence without any reflection will bring you closer to nowhere.
- Be willing to throw away your first hypothesis and make a new one.
- Wise leaders should develop a keen sense of when there is too much uncertainty. They know when they must abandon a course of action, such as say, when the leader of a mountaineering group decides not to take his team up to the summit, after checking the weather and other conditions.
- A plan isn't cast in stone. It can be changed as needed.
- No platform is perfect. It just needs to address the current problem.
- Before NASA put a man on the moon, there were prior platforms such as the first six Mercury flights, ten Gemini flights, and four Apollo flights. It took a total of twenty launches before they achieved Kennedy's vision.

■ 7. How Can You Cultivate Awareness of Uncertainty?

- Learn to look at failure differently, as a teacher.
- Understanding the uniqueness of experience is more important than consistency.

- It is more important to ask the right questions than to have answers.
- Learn to appreciate chaotic environments like the stock market. See the beauty in complexity and look at it as a challenge.
- Look at different maps of the same territory
- Change your physical environment and deal with new situations. Have flexible workspaces, for example.
- Change your communication style. Allow for uncertainties and use weather metaphors as opposed to machine metaphors.
- From time to time, rock the boat a little. Have a meeting in a strange location to illustrate your point. Don't offer any particular order in a presentation. Do away with the tired old Power Point and use some other medium of communication.
- Create "not so clear" expectations as to timelines and methods, but stay clear on the main objective.
- Challenge the rule of thumb.
- Put an expiration date on information.
- Check the weather.
- Don't get stuck in the past.

■ 8. How Can You Process Uncertainty?

- Try delaying a decision, or like some officers in a battlefield, wait for the right moment to attack.
- Discern what changes are brought about by new information and how policy should change to meet the new climate.
- Do not be misled by a neat, orderly document.
- Think like a sailor and change your plan as the winds shift.
- Explore contingencies.
- Do not commit to one singular great idea.
- Draw more pictures to articulate the unconscious.
- Identify certainty levels associated with critical facts.
- Enjoy brainstorming sessions and savor the process or journey, instead of rushing to a conclusion or destination.
- Encourage dialogue, allow presentations to be interrupted
- Explore the unknown together
- Frame the challenge, not the solution.
- Discuss different models of the situation.
- It's not about what you know. It's about how you think through an issue.

■ 9. How Can You Catalyze Action During Uncertain Times?

- Sometimes you will have to make a decision based on incomplete information.
- If you can't make a decision, don't force it. Sleep on it.
- If you aren't sure what step to take, reassess the situation.
- Dig deeper and look for the patterns in environments

- Experiment with new solutions on a small scale before applying it to a larger scale.
- Play the odds!
- Don't ignore your intuition.
- Hire the right people who have more emotional intelligence to deal with rapidly changing situations.
- Be flexible about deadlines.
- Allow for more changes in timelines and methodology.
- Exercise focused flexibility, just like the way ants work together. They change their work patterns to suit the current problem. They can move quickly and once a plan of action is set in motion the whole population moves in that direction.
- Develop an integrated strategy like satellite offices in strategic locations, and revolving staff.

■ 10. Does Embracing Uncertainty Really Work?

Some "certainties" about Embracing Uncertainty:

- There are more unknown things in the universe than the little we do know.
- You may at first be perceived as indecisive, but through clear communication you can tell people why a decision must be delayed.
- People have different tolerance levels for uncertainty in different situations.
- Start with the small stuff then work up to weightier matters.
- There is more stress in searching for that "one right answer" than discovering there are many possible answers.
- A deadline forces some people into proposing cookie-cutter solutions. Spend more time exploring other ways first, and then once the big picture is clear your plan of action will easily follow.
- Acceptance of the unknown is a natural human thing. Many people base their whole lives on faith or religion.