



For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants  
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### **Issue No 13: Dealing with Uncertainty**

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#### **Dealing with uncertainty**

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So many things are changing, and at such a rapid pace, that it's not surprising managers today feel pressured and can sometimes doubt their own ability to perform. They grapple day to day with the paradoxes and uncertainties of doing business and making decisions in an environment that is tougher, with odds that are greater, and more pressure to 'get it right'.

Managers wrestle with the need to perform today, this week, this month versus the discipline and time it takes to develop new markets, new services and their team. There is pressure to deliver earlier returns on investments as the outlay and overheads are larger now than in the past.

The knee-jerk reaction to this uncertainty and the resulting pressure is usually to move quickly into 'fix and solve-mode' to relieve the anxiety, rather than 'sitting' with the problems and asking questions. Many of you might ask, how can we sit back, think and ask questions when the paradox of the modern workplace is that everyone is usually running so fast that there is no time or space for thinking and reflection?

I actively encourage my clients to set aside 'think time', take a helicopter view of their business and see this as very valuable and creative time. When I run Visioning days for my clients, I always insist that we do so away from the office. I must say, I have never regretted sometimes pushing clients quite hard to do this to make sure that they get true 'think time'. It always pays off.

Even writing this article has been a case in point: I would love to offer 'the solution,' find ways to help my clients and readers 'fix the problem of uncertainty'. As someone once said to me, though, "...the answer is that there is no answer". All you can do is notice uncertainty, the stresses that stem from it, and understand that you do have options and choices aside from just band-aid solutions or 'quick fixes'.

## **What you can do**

While we can't change the world we live in, we can change how we act and react. We can learn new ways of working in the world that give us a much better chance of success. If we fight or resist uncertainty, our ability to be creative and pro-active disappears and is replaced with fear and trepidation that hinders our judgment or, even worse, stops us from moving forward at all. Here are some ideas for what can you do to deal with the increasing uncertainty of the world we live in:

### **1. Look outwards**

Take time to be an observer. Listen to your peers, your team members, notice what your competitors are doing, look to other industries. There are clues everywhere. For example, most of my clients - and I dare say yours - have a multitude of choices when making buying decisions. More and more customised solutions are being offered in a variety of marketplaces. Are you offering options to your clients? Are you asking your clients what they want? Are you watching closely how your clients work and seeing what they actually need? Can you see a niche for yourself? Or are you still stuck in old ways of delivery with falling sales or falling margins?

### **2. Be part of a MasterMind group**

500 years ago we had guilds for the master craftsmen - the businessmen of that time.

Early in the last century Napoleon Hill, in his seminal work, *'Think and grow rich'*, wrote about building mastermind groups. Hill talked about "...the power of people coming together in the spirit of harmony for a definite purpose."

Today we have organisations like the CEO Institute (<http://www.ceo.com.au/>) that runs monthly syndicate meetings for its members. The purpose of these meetings is for CEOs of similar sized businesses to come together in small groups to assist one another with their current issues or to test business ideas. Eminent business people chair the meetings. I have two clients who have attended for several years and have no hesitation in saying that the syndicates have helped them enormously in building very successful businesses.

### **3. Test strategies**

I have seen many organisations make crucial decisions with great haste and without considering more than one option. It's not for me to say that this approach is always wrong, however, it does make great sense to build in tests to stretch your thinking.

Some options might be to have outsiders on your board; form an advisory board; or join a "Mastermind group".

Another option is to develop a set of alternative strategies and, in this process, test the veracity of the scenarios and improve or at least strengthen the decision making process.

One of my most successful clients will talk to outsiders, those in his CEO group and naturally, also to those in his team, before he makes decisions. He 'hastens slowly' on the important decisions.

#### **4. Focusing on what is important**

Often, with the need to quell anxiety, people embrace solutions that don't actually work or add even more problems. For example, I often see businesses buy a piece of software thinking that this software will solve issues, serve customers better, increase productivity or build new business opportunities. Software ought always be a tool for a well thought out strategy – not a solution in itself. In many of the circumstances I've described, the software ends up just sitting on the server gathering cyberdust and the challenges faced by the business remain unsolved.

#### **5. Living with Uncertainty**

Managers are not the only ones vulnerable in this time of change – team members often bare the brunt of changes. Remember that your team members go home to the news of uncertainty in the world; perhaps their own family situation is experiencing some crisis and of course stories abound about the stress it causes when people's workplaces are in flux.

We cannot rush to give certainties, as this would be unrealistic. As managers, however, we can ensure that we communicate well, often and effectively. To get a positive footing it's important to at least let people know the vision or direction you are leading the business in. Involve your people as much as you can and when you can't, let them know that too. List the steps you are going to take and what success will look like. Being involved in the process and knowing what's next goes a long way to alleviating stress levels within teams and, importantly, in keeping motivation up and work moving.

We need to raise the capability for people to accept and live with uncertainty. In particular, we need managers as leaders to role model appropriate behaviour. There are a range of tools and methods that can be used like coaching, mastermind groups, learning to use decision making tools, outside mentoring, job rotations and further study. Understanding yourself and your strong and weaker aspects of your personal style, as well as being a better listener are also powerful ways of 'being there' for your team, particularly in times of change.

#### **In Summary**

My father used to say to me,

"... business is about doing the things others find difficult. If it was that easy, everyone would be doing it."

We all know that very little is 'certain' in business. Being able to sit with uncertainty is a skill that, when done properly, smoothes the path for more effective decision making while modeling an open and adaptive leadership style – that in turn supports a more successful business. The need to 'think' rather than just 'do' has never been more important.

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