

# 6 Thoughts on Leading through Uncertainty



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At a meeting a few days ago, I was asked how long our teams will be working from home. The answer, of course, is I don't know - though I truly wish I did. Coronavirus (COVID-19) has upended just about every aspect of our existence, including the quaint condition formerly known as certainty. And that's about all that is definite. The rest remains to be seen: how long, how much, with what effects still to come?

If there is one catchphrase of our health and economic crises right now, it's "*at this time of uncertainty*." It's the first few words of so much that is written and said. Watch how many times I end up having to include it in this post. So many lives and livelihoods have been knocked off foundations that felt solid just weeks ago. My heart goes out to everyone contending with this loss of confidence and normalcy. My gratitude flows to everyone helping us find our footing in what feels like quicksand, from courageous healthcare professionals to the workers stocking shelves around the clock to teachers trying to educate their students remotely to those of us staying at home. Whoever we are and wherever we are, we're all on the front lines of uncertainty.

It's a hard place to be. Of all the human conditions, uncertainty is among the most rocky to navigate. It sends our minds into a stressful scramble of survivalist thinking. We are wired to put high estimates on the level of threats around us and low estimates on our ability to handle them. This calculation is a kind of cognitive hail Mary intended to save us from harm, but the dread it engenders weighs heavy. According to [Psychology Today](#), we are calmer being told we're going to experience pain than being told we have a 50% chance of such a fate. And job uncertainty has been documented to exact a greater toll on health than job loss, though I would argue both are devastating.

At this time of uncertainty, we find ourselves rendered deeply vulnerable. We want to do anything to rid ourselves of that discomfort. As leaders, there is a double whammy: people are looking to us for certainty where there is none, and we want to do anything to rid *them* of that discomfort. I want more than anything to spare my team, my friends and family, the people I read about in the news, of this pain. The problem is that there is no antidote to uncertainty. So what are we to do? We can't provide definitive answers on the future, but we can find a path to some assurance.

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Here are six things to think about.

1. **Keep leading.** A few years ago, I read Atul Gawande's wonderful book, [The Checklist Manifesto](#). The book focuses on how simple checklists are invaluable tools to avoid or handle disasters. A checklist for pilots handling a crisis starts with one simple command: "Fly the plane." No matter what emergency is unfolding around you, you need to first and foremost remember you're still at the controls, even if they've become uncontrollable. Your role is to keep leading, vocally and visibly, as best you can. Leading is sometimes simply saying there is turbulence, rather than fixing the plunging physics. In the absence of information, people fear the worst. So uncertainty is not an excuse to lay low till you know more. It's a moment to step up and speak the truth of what you know and don't.
2. **Become more certain about uncertainty.** Learn everything you can about uncertainty and its psychological impact (as I've described in brief here). It helps to have this deeper acquaintance with what is overcoming us, even if there is little to do about the overcoming. It prepares you to think about how to take care of yourself so you can care for others for the duration. People are your most important concern, and this grounding in what we're all dealing with is a prerequisite to showing up and communicating in a fully human, deeply empathetic and reassuringly transparent way.
3. **Acknowledge the uncertainty.** The reason everyone keeps declaring that we're *in an uncertain time* is that we sure as heck are. Openly recognizing this fact has value. It acknowledges our collective condition, giving us the ability to see we all have it, get our arms around its shape, and to mourn its effects as a community. This process generates a kind of energy, allowing emotions to move through us instead of remaining stuck inside. It also makes us less lonely. Naming what we're feeling fuels our shared humanity. Uncertainty together is better than uncertainty alone.
4. **Make flexible the new normal.** I lived in Asia early in my career, where there is wisdom in watching how bamboo weathers a storm. The wind doesn't break bamboo because it is incredibly flexible. It can bend and sway, and for that reason, it doesn't snap in two. Uncertain times call for that kind of flexibility. The winds may blow us in any number of directions, and so we must prepare to change course in all those directions, as needed. We don't make one plan; we must make many plans. And each day, we have to revisit which plan seems best, because that, too, may change. Priorities may shift as we change direction. Explaining this new normal is important, so your team can see that what's going on isn't chaotic decision making but rather strength through flexibility.
5. **Balance realism and optimism.** The management guru [Jim Collins](#) coined the term the Stockdale paradox, based on Admiral Jim Stockdale's mentality in surviving years of imprisonment and torture as the highest-ranking military officer in the so-called Hanoi Hilton. It's related to what Viktor Frankl called tragic optimism and what Zadie Smith describes as a [negotiation between optimism and despair](#). Stockdale said you must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose — with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be. He said people who clung to an idea that they would be out of the prison by Christmas or Easter died of a broken heart. "We're not getting out by Christmas," he told himself, but "I never ever wavered in my absolute faith that not only would I prevail—get out of this—but I would also prevail by turning it into the defining event of my life that would make me a stronger and better person."

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6. **Renew a sense of purpose.** As Stockdale's story describes, a sense of purpose is a powerful, grounding force amid the storm of uncertainty. Normalcy may be destroyed, but what is left behind in our lives can remind us of why we are here and what matters most. I see this sense of purpose springing up all around me, as sure as the change in seasons. Maybe it's in a surge of gratitude for having time at all, instead of viewing the day as hours to fill. Maybe it's a generative act at a time of destruction, from saving a life to sending a colleague a note of appreciation. Help those around you connect to themselves, each other and a larger purpose. Our sense of meaning is to be found in those ties and the things that come of these efforts.

These are some ideas for navigating uncertainty. It's okay if you stumble on that difficult journey. I will. We all will. So above all, we have to extend grace to ourselves and everyone around us. Grace for those struggling to stay healthy. Grace for the grumpy person who snaps over the Zoom call. Grace for the nurse sacrificing in profound ways. And grace for our guilt if we feel relatively fortunate. We are in a moment of [collective grief](#), which calls for collective compassion. At this time of uncertainty, the heart of our humanity is the one thing, the most important thing, to count on.