



MANAGING

Uncertainty has an upside - possibility. How to reframe it with an uncertainty manifesto

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The Pandemic Age has been the Age of Uncertainty. The word pivot – a favourite word at one point – has faded from prominence in our conversations as we have patience and resilience. But complaints about uncertainty remain pervasive.

Uncertainty didn't start, of course, with the pandemic but it feels more pressing these days. And it can prevent us from stepping out to meet, and take advantage of, opportunity, warn Nathan Furr, a professor of strategy at INSEAD, and his wife Susannah Harmon Furr, a designer and entrepreneur. They met as college freshmen 30 years ago and their romance has included a shared curiosity with the uncertainty-possibility dialectic.

“Uncertainty is an unavoidable part of being human,” they remind us in their book *The Upside of Uncertainty*. “But because uncertainty’s downsides can be so intense, they often disguise or temporarily obstruct our view of what’s possible.” The couple say we are wired to fear the downsides of uncertainty, but urge you instead to find that upside, embracing the opportunity that accompanies every unknown.

They suggest changing your mindset from “uncertainty is inherently bad” to “possibility always brings uncertainty.”

Focusing on possibility doesn't mean foolishly grabbing every risky opportunity. But it does mean moving past the fear of the unknown, which some psychologists consider the fundamental fear underpinning all other anxieties. “When you reframe uncertainty as possibility, your ability to navigate it increases because your experience shifts from the fear of loss to the anticipation of gain,” they write.

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RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT WE ARE MOTIVATED BY THE FEAR OF LOSS MORE THAN BY THE POTENTIAL of gain. That is accentuated when we face time pressure. However, we do gravitate toward potential gain when it is clearly outlined for us. Presented with two medical treatments, one with a 5 per cent chance of failure and another with a 95 per cent chance of success, people strongly choose the latter, even though the odds of success are identical.

Try defining yourself as someone who has the courage to stand at the edge of opportunity. That may seem silly, but the couple contend it can be like a light switch, changing your approach. Review some of your finest achievements, most important experiences and most meaningful relationships. Some will immediately come to mind and you will almost certainly recognize that you experienced uncertainty on the way to those life gains. They urge you to try to remember what it felt like, and how you pressed on.

Now address a current uncertainty. Jot down the worries you have and the possibilities that could be awaiting you. At the very least, consider that struggle is the gateway to growth and change. Ask whether your negative beliefs about the situation are true? Can you be absolutely sure? Is there any silver lining? Be alert to advantages, not just risks.

They ask you to think of uncertainty as an essential ingredient for new things to happen. “Clearly, too much uncertainty is overwhelming but often in our quest to avoid uncertainty we forget that we need it to feel alive, happy, and challenged,” they write. Organizations need it to innovate. They point to a recent study that found quality control systems by increasing certainty in production eliminated the innovation that arises from mistakes, changes and uncertainty. Some top restaurants force themselves to use unknown ingredients and new cooking techniques in their test kitchen.

You don’t need to consistently embrace uncertainty. Indeed, they found that many people who claim to love uncertainty have gone to surprising lengths to create a great deal of certainty in other parts of their lives. The couple calls those more certain rituals, routines and relationships “uncertainty balancers,” countering the unknowns they face.

All that can come together for you in an uncertainty manifesto – a statement or motto, perhaps shared publicly, that makes clear your intentions when faced with uncertainty. As Jeff Bezos was considering the uncertainty associated with starting Amazon, a decisive factor was knowing when he was 80 he would not regret having tried. He also tries to

...actor was knowing when he was so he would not regret having tried. He also tries to divide decisions between those that are one-way doors, requiring more care because you can't come back, and those that are two-way doors, from which you can retreat and recover. Those approaches are effectively his uncertainty manifesto.

They urge you to write the manifesto on a human scale, not as if you are a superhero. Acknowledge your emotions. But focus on possibility. If you can't come up with a manifesto yet, they ask you to try this: "Uncertainty brings both chaos and possibility, but I am a chaos pilot! I will find the possibility." Maybe you don't feel like a chaos pilot now – the exclamation mark does seem awfully bold – but they believe you can become one and that manifesto can infuse energy and courage.

Certainly it beats joining the managerial chorus moaning about how much uncertainty there is today. Yes, there is. But as a leader, you can't be frozen. You need to figure out the possibilities, determine if there is an upside, and move ahead.

Cannonballs

- Change consultant Greg Satell warns the most dangerous moment in the effort is the victory phase. As you relax, opponents of the idea, now that they see the change is possible, can redouble their efforts to undermine what you're trying to achieve.
- *Good to Great* author Jim Collins urged managers to get the right people on the bus that is their team and then decide where to go. Consultant Wally Bock counters that most managers don't get that luxury: They have to achieve the goals they're given with the people they've got. More fundamentally, he argues you can't know the characteristics of "the right people" until you know where you're going.
- Consultant Mike Shipulski says if when you write a monthly report no one responds with a question of clarification or constructive comment, that may indicate nobody pays attention. Stop writing it, and see if anybody complains.

Harvey Schachter is a Kingston, Ont.-based writer specializing in management issues. He, along with Sheelagh Whittaker, former CEO of both EDS Canada and Cancom, are the authors of When Harvey Didn't Meet Sheelagh: Emails on Leadership.

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