

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY

— The Essence of —
— Leadership —



Phillip G. Clampitt and Robert J. DeKoch

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This book is dedicated to
Laurey, who zestfully embraces the certainties
and uncertainties of life, and to
Debbie, my constant inspiration

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DEVELOPED BY M. LEE WILLIAMS

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EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY

I feel a responsibility to proclaim . . .
that doubt is not to be feared, but that it is to be welcomed
as the possibility of a new potential for human beings.

If you know that you are not sure,
you have a chance to improve the situation.

—*Richard Feynman* (Nobel Prize-winning Physicist)

INTRODUCTION

Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.

—*Dorothy*

If Dorothy never heard about the yellow brick road, would she ever have been whisked back to Kansas? Would the tin man have found his heart? The lion his courage? The straw man his brain? The yellow brick road is a powerful metaphor connecting to something deep in the human psyche. It represents hope, direction, and purpose. Yet it also symbolizes a singular promise: follow the yellow brick road, and your dreams will come true.

Transferring these sentiments from a fantasy world to the work-a-day world is as simple as it is troublesome. What if there isn't a yellow brick road, only unexplored territory? What if no one can guarantee that your search will lead to fulfillment? What if you simply don't know if you are headed in the right direction? Most people rarely openly entertain these kinds of questions; privately they experience doubt, confusion, and complexity. The recent graduate publicly professes faith in the career track laid out for her, while privately wondering about the unspoken opportunities. The guru publicly attests to the "seven steps to fulfillment," while privately being haunted by doubts. The manager publicly declares 100 percent support for the latest corporate initiative, while privately harboring unexplored reservations.

The gap between public proclamations and private thoughts is often so great that many people learn to ignore uncertainty altogether. As one employee put it, "Around here, you've got to know all the answers. And even if you don't, you learn to act like you do." In short: certainty prevails, doubt does not.

Our culture tells leaders that they "have got to know." And it tells them in hundreds of ways, both large and small, that uncertainty is bad:

- Interviewers typically expect applicants to adroitly answer queries about career goals for the next five years. If they say, "I am uncertain," what are their chances of getting hired?
- The newspapers are filled with predictions about hot stock tips or the ten best mutual funds for the coming year. How many magazines report on the front page, "Timely Stock Picks Will Not Be Given This Year: We Simply Can't Predict What Will Happen"?
- Citizens often ridicule politicians who don't provide specific plans or promises to deal with every conceivable problem.
- Financial analysts require executives to project next year's earnings down to the last penny. Woe to the company that misses the prediction because of some unknown market force.
- Students frequently insist that their teachers tell them exactly what they will need to know for the next test. Few teachers retort: "I'm not going to tell you because you're going to face many tests in life for which you won't have a clue what the questions will be. You'll just have to hone your intuitive skills."
- Workers often view executives with suspicion when they can't provide the details on market trends, new products, and future investments.

This book takes a decidedly different tactic than the prevailing culture. The core premise is that in many situations, it is in fact better to embrace uncertainty rather than eliminate it. Typically, when people first encounter uncertainty, they try to drive it out with certainty-creating tools (see Chapter 4). Eventually many people learn to tolerate and perhaps cope with uncertainty. Some even learn to accept uncertainty as an inevitable force to overcome. We want to encourage leaders to aspire to something greater—to embrace uncertainty (see Figure I.1). Why? There are two critical reasons:

First, it is important to recognize that there are many things for which leaders don't have answers, they can't make accurate predictions, or they have fuzzy and incomplete notions.

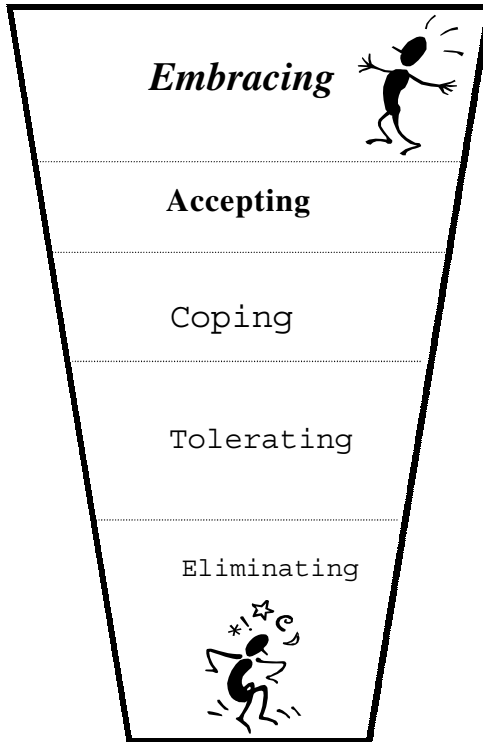
Second, it is important to legitimize “not knowing.” Leaders shouldn't feel compelled to provide a definitive answer when one doesn't exist. Unfortunately, there are powerful forces at work in society and organizations exerting a jackhammer-like pressure, pounding into everybody's heads that they have “got to know.”

We are *not* embracing a kind of whimsical uncertainty that condones inactivity or a “whatever happens” kind of aimlessness. To be sure, there are many things of which people need to be fairly certain:

- that the sun will rise tomorrow;
- that the airplanes in which they travel will be safe;
- that the computer software will work when they use it;
- that employees will show up to work on time;
- that private conversations will be kept confidential.

However, demanding certainty where none exists is foolhardy, debilitating, and often dangerous. There are many benefits to squarely facing up to the uncertainties of life. In

Figure I.1 **Modes of Managing Uncertainty**



fact, the chaos, complexity, and speed of change in modern organizations require that effective leaders become masters of embracing uncertainty.

Organizations, as well as employees, can choose to either ignore or embrace uncertainty. Examining the relationship between the way employees and organizations manage uncertainty proves revealing. The Uncertainty Management Matrix (see Figure I.2) suggests four basic possibilities about the resulting organization climate:

- Status Quo Climate: Employees and the organization both avoid uncertainty. Employees want few surprises, and they rarely get them.

Figure 1.2 **The Uncertainty Management Matrix**

Employee's Approach to Uncertainty	<i>Embrace</i>	Stifling Climate 3	Dynamic Climate 4
	<i>Avoid</i>	Status Quo Climate 1	Unsettling Climate 2
		<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Embrace</i>

Organization's Approach to Uncertainty

- **Unsettling Climate:** Employees desire certainty while they perceive the organization as embracing too much uncertainty. Thus, employees become unsettled and perhaps overwhelmed by the chaotic work environment.
- **Stifling Climate:** Employees embrace uncertainty, but they perceive that the organization avoids it. The result: Employees feel stifled.
- **Dynamic Climate:** Both employees and the organization embrace uncertainty. Consequently, the climate is dynamic, energetic, and ever-changing.

By studying over 1,000 employees working in organizations ranging from Fortune 500 companies to small businesses, we developed a tool that allows us to ascertain which climate best described employee experiences (see Appendices A and B or www.imetacomm.com/eu).

The implications are significant. Our research reveals that employees who work for organizations that embrace uncertainty tend to be:

- more satisfied with their jobs;
- more committed to their organizations;
- less cynical about organizational life; and

- more likely to identify with the organization (see Appendix C).

These trends occurred even when employees themselves did not fully embrace uncertainty. For instance, employees in the Unsettling Climate reported approximately the same degree of job satisfaction and commitment as those in the Dynamic Climate. Even though employees may believe they are ill-equipped to manage uncertainty, they are glad the organization does. In fact, a reasonable hypothesis might be that employees in the Status Quo Climate would be generally satisfied and committed to their organization. But our research indicates otherwise. Apparently, almost all employees recognize the need for *someone* to embrace uncertainty.

Employees look to leaders to provide the necessary inspiration, direction, and tools for their colleagues and organizations to embrace uncertainty. We wrote this book to assist leaders in that quest. In particular, we propose the following ideas:

Proposition 1: Embracing uncertainty enhances the quality of life for employees and organizations (Chapter 1).

Proposition 2: There are some powerful forces that make it difficult or socially unacceptable to embrace uncertainty (Chapter 2).

Proposition 3: There is a lot more uncertainty in the world than ever gets acknowledged (Chapter 3).

Proposition 4: People and organizations spend a lot of time creating the appearance, but not the reality, of certainty. This is problematic (Chapter 4).

Proposition 5: The illusions of certainty are pervasive and often debilitating. The problem is getting worse, not better (Chapter 5).

Proposition 6: There are effective ways to embrace uncertainty in your lives and organizations (Chapters 6 to 9).

In the remaining chapters we develop these ideas in a way that enables you to become a more effective leader and chart a new course. Good-bye yellow brick road.

PART I

**UNDERSTANDING THE
CHALLENGE**

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