

INTO THE UNKNOWN



To facilitate change, leaders must guide their teams past fear by staying committed to exploration.

Everyone thinks that making good decisions depends upon analyzing every detail, dissecting the variables, and taking all the facts into account. In other words, managers operate on the assumption that decision-making is a rational, quantitative process.

But decisions have an elusive aspect. At the moment leaders make decisions, they are committing themselves, and those who follow them, to a course of action with an uncertain outcome. While they may be convinced that the chosen action is the right one, they cannot prove, in advance, that the outcome they envision will actually happen. They are stepping into the unknown.

As a matter of fact, we are all stepping into the unknown, every minute of every day. To one of our clients, that simple truth came as an epiphany. Dave was the president of a commodity board that helped farmers market their crops. It was funded by mandatory assessments, so many cents on every ton of product grown. While the size of the crop varied from year to year, the organization could always count on a fairly steady amount of money coming in after every harvest.

For more than 20 years, Dave felt insulated from the budget vagaries suffered by companies dependent on sales for income, until a group of disgruntled farmers petitioned the U.S. Department of Agriculture to disband the organization. Suddenly, Dave's stable world was shaken. He came upon a quote about "the unknowable future" and walked around in a daze, repeating the phrase, over and over.

Of course, the future is always unknowable. We live in and with the unknown all the time. To sustain a sense of security, we wrap an illusion of predictability around ourselves, an illusion shaped by memory and projection. We move through time as if our thoughts about the future were not a flimsy veil but heavy armor, keeping us safe.

In truth, we never know what is going to happen from one minute to the next. Yet, sustaining a sense of control is so important to us that we try to anchor ourselves in our thinking, as if we could stop change. All we accomplish is to move into the future looking backwards. Our thoughts about the future cannot protect us. In fact, their weight can exhaust us.

Whenever an organization faces significant change, you can sense the feelings of ambiguity. It's obvious that the bigger the change, the heavier the decisions weigh on people's minds. Some respond by clinging to the past; others, by worrying about the future. Everyone knows that things will be different, but they don't know how different. Imagination fills the void and combines with insecurity to generate doubt and fear.

The leader's job is to guide the team past such fear. We think of fear as a stop sign. You're in your car, driving down the road, and come to a stop sign. Is that sign telling you to stop forever? Hardly. The stop sign says: "Heads up! You've come a place where dangerous things can happen. Pay attention! Look around! Then proceed with great awareness of what's going on around you." You're driving into the unknown. By its very nature, the unknown evokes uneasy feelings. It tempts managers to play the game so as not to lose, rather than to win. This mindset biases decision tools and methodologies towards conservatism. It causes us to use assumptions that give more weight to negatives, "what might go wrong", than to positives, "what needs to go right." Expectations are bounded by past results; people are doubtful that far better outcomes can be generated by bold, fresh or innovative actions.

But bold decisions are the precursors of great outcomes. Precisely because the future is unknowable, we can't really tell if positive or negative outcomes are more or less likely. What a funny choice, to argue for and defend our right to think negatively.

Remember Forrest Gump's saying, "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you are going to get." So why not work from the assumption that things usually turn out for the best. That way positive results are expected. And if outcomes are poor, people can make adjustments from a clear-minded state rather than from negative thinking that clouds their perception and dulls their judgment.

The leader as explorer.

To help the group keep its bearings and achieve success, the leader must stay committed to learning and exploring. The leader's confidence that answers will be forthcoming calms everyone and helps them see things more clearly. The leader's quiet-minded enthusiasm for exploration encourages others to step into the unknown fearlessly.

Since institutions accomplish work through collective energy, leaders need to give direction so that exploration has a purpose. In other words, leaders should begin the journey by articulating a clear goal. One of the best examples of this is John F. Kennedy's challenge to the nation to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. When he made that vow in 1961, most of the requisite technology was mere theory.

The goal's achievement, in 1969, resulted from people creatively taking one step after another towards the realization of this huge challenge. Neil Armstrong could have said, "That's *another* small step for man; one giant leap for mankind"; for that is truly the way we reached the Moon, building on a multitude of small steps.

Kennedy knew that within that singular purpose there had to be room for exploration. "Mucking around" is critical to progress. When a team is looking to do something uncommon, they are inevitably going to take wrong turns and follow false leads. Mistakes teach us where the right path lies. Just as knowing what you don't know is essential to posing the right questions about what needs to be learned.

In essence, we are saying that great achievements are possible only by dropping our dependence on accumulated knowledge, which can be very difficult. It takes the kind of courage that is ready to explore the unknown, guided by nothing more than our faith in our inner intelligence.

Tapping that innate intelligence requires us to release ourselves from the mental prison of egocentric thinking. By encouraging members of the group to step back from their own "right answers" and listen more deeply to one another, leaders foster the spirit of investigation. People see things differently. Suddenly, what they were holding dear looks ridiculous.

Shifts in thinking can be tangible. Instead of arguing in the mode of "two-way thinking", critically assessing right/wrong, yes/no, in/out, people suddenly see a third way with crystal clarity. They are able to integrate seemingly conflicting points of view, taking the best ideas and putting them to work in novel ways. Conflict is viewed as a chance to transcend the past by creating something fresh and new.

What motivates people to keep on exploring is the sense that there are possibilities beyond what they already know. In other words, skillful leaders know that feelings of hope help people let go of negative thoughts and free their minds to explore. Hope generates a palpable sense of enthusiasm, sometimes even more than the actual accomplishment.

Making vital decisions, changing old behaviors, and exploring new territory are capacities all humans possess, for the ability to tap into one's wisdom and common sense is inborn. By considering significant questions with a calm mind, we are open to receiving insights that alter perceptions and stimulate new behaviors.

The only thing leaders need to "do" is give this ability the respect and attention it deserves. Thus, leading is merely a form of taking action, stimulated by our insights about what appears obvious, directed by the process of reflection about the important questions, and guided by the learning that comes from exploration.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
T.S. Eliot
"Little Gidding"

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