

AMBIGUITY



The discomfort that stems from the effort to accommodate apparent dissonance can actually assist group dynamics. Taken as a warning flag that something is amiss in the thinking of individuals or of the group, ambiguity can remind us to support open-minded inquiry that can lead to resolution.

Finance and accounting people are expected to have ready answers to such urgently posed questions as, "Are we going to make the quarter?" "What were our sales yesterday?" or "How much is it costing us to make that product?" And they are expected to answer such questions in an unambiguous manner with concrete numbers. The phrase, "an ambiguous accountant," seems to be a contradiction in terms.

But generally the right answer to questions such as these is, "it depends." It depends on the future, on the assumptions we make, on the interpretation of accounting policies, on the stance taken towards regulatory compliance and so on. Numbers are only a representation of reality - something every accountant knows, but few line managers understand.

For most people the word "ambiguous" suggests uncertainty, equivocation and doubt - a situation that is obscure, an outcome that is indistinct. When things are "muddy," people are apt to feel off-balance or experience an inner turmoil that makes it hard to perform effectively. Haven't we all been there? The phrase, "analysis paralysis," was probably coined under these very circumstances.

But suppose for a moment that ambiguity can serve a useful purpose. What might that be? In many instances, it's a warning flag alerting us that something is amiss.

Sometimes when a significant change is underway, you can sense the feelings of ambiguity. Some people are clinging to the past; others are worrying about the future. They all know the future will be different from what they have known, but they don't know how different. So they let their imaginations invent different possibilities and fill their minds with doubt and fear.

In such circumstances, the good news is that change is happening; the bad news is that people are being distracted by the quality of their own thinking. Either way, it is a signal for leaders to step forward and calm people's thoughts by helping them focus on the present, on what is actually happening right now.

A sense of ambiguity can also warn managers that they are focusing too much on day-to-day details and too little on the fundamentals of the business. Reports are stacked on reports; detailed analysis is followed by analysis of the analysis; yet, despite accuracy to the decimal point, the prized answer remains elusive. At times like this, it's

important to remember that clarity is not gained by a microscopic examination of the surface of things, but by seeking to understand the underlying causes.

Sometimes, ambiguous behavior arises when changes are clearly needed, but not yet acknowledged. Meetings can take on an "Alice in Wonderland" sense of absurdity when people hear statements that reflect profound differences and then simply ignore the contradictions. Two plus two is said to equal five, and no one raises an objection or even makes a joke about it.

The most innocent explanation of such absurdities is that the managers are so caught up by their individual realities that no one is checking to see if the whole equals the sum of the parts. Equivocation like this is usually rooted in poorly formed questions, not incompetence or egotism. Good decisions come from well-formed questions. So, when the room becomes choked with ambiguity, it's time for someone to stand up and start posing the right questions.

Equivocation about decisions is more than looking through muddy water; it's like trying to walk through mud. It is this indecision that generates a feeling of ambiguity, not to mention a boatload of analytic work for the finance staff.

In situations like these, it is important to remember that it's the way we think about external circumstances that creates ambiguity and not the external circumstances, themselves. For example, it is not change that produces feelings of uncertainty, but rather memory and imagination having a party in one's brain. Details are not distracting in themselves; but they become so when they absorb one's thinking, and the forest is hidden by the trees. Seeing that adjustments need to be made is not difficult except when one is too distracted to pay attention to what is happening at that moment. And decisions are not frightening in themselves except when one is too fearful or worried to think clearly.

In fact, when managers are achieving major change, concentrating on the fundamentals, prompting timely adjustments, and taking the right decisions, their minds are clear and their thoughts are calm. Clear thinking leaves no place for ambiguity.

If ambiguity has a useful purpose, it's as a reminder. The feeling warns us to stop hanging onto the past or being absorbed in the future. It reminds us to step back from the problem and look at things more deeply. Or it tells us to quiet our minds so that things can appear as they really are. Finally, it is a quiet voice inside telling us to put our fears aside so that we can make the right decision with assurance and conviction.

For the finance and accounting staff, ambiguity may be the number one driver of unnecessary work. Think about all of the times you have had to endlessly project future outcomes, generate reports with mind-numbing detail, respond after the damage had already been done, or provide the rationalization for an ill-considered decision.

In such circumstances, finance professionals should see ambiguity for what it is ... thought gone awry. They should recognize that these feelings are clues to unresolved situations, clues that can point them to problems before they get out of hand. When things look muddy, it takes only a moment to ask the question, "What's going on?" and get a clear insight that can lead to an effective intervention.

For example, if you are being asked to produce all sorts of analysis on detailed data, the question to ask might be: "What discomfort or anxiety is causing my manager to ask for all this data?" Until you have had a face-to-face conversation with the key players, you will want to assume nothing. By not jumping to conclusions, you are free to probe, inquire, and, most critically, listen with an open mind that is free from preconceived answers.

Such open-minded inquiry enables you to get to the heart of the matter. Toyota is famous for its rule to "Ask Why Five Times" in order to get to the bottom of a fuzzy situation or problem. Try it! You will be shocked at how quickly you can get to the bottom of the murkiest situation.

When you see people reacting to ambiguity by throwing themselves at whatever seems to be causing the problem, that's the time to step back, slow down, and explore the situation quietly. This clears your mind and lets you see things as they really are.

Uncertainty and doubt can overtake any of us from time to time. The finance professional knows this from personal experience. But these thoughts pass, often when you simply acknowledge them with warmth and understanding. So, when you see your line counterpart struggling with feelings of ambiguity, that's the time to be the consummate business partner and offer a helping hand.

Ambiguity is created by our thoughts and not by circumstance or events outside of us. As such, it holds no power over our decisions and actions unless we dwell on it and keep it alive. When we sense it in ourselves or in others, it's a reminder that something may be unresolved and needs attention.

It tells us to look inside ourselves, observe the quality of our thoughts, and then consciously choose to clear our thinking and address the issue at hand. The moment we clear our minds, life becomes more interesting and ambiguity fades to resolution.

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