



# LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

It's natural to feel anxious or overwhelmed when the world is constantly changing and your environment seems out of control. **RACHEL SETTI** suggests some coping strategies for living with pandemic-induced ambiguity.

If the last two years have brought us anything, it's how to live with volatility and ambiguity. We've pivoted time and again and learnt that certainty is an elusive concept. But how does the human mind make sense of ambiguity? Why do some adapt while others experience analysis paralysis? How can we best cope when under a constant sense of the unknown?

Neuroscientists have long known that humans are hardwired to crave certainty. As ambiguity increases, so does our fear and stress response, which leads us in search of predictability and familiarity. Surprisingly, such is our preference for certainty that we tend to choose predictable outcomes over uncertain ones – even when we know the ambiguous pathway may well be more desirable.

A key insight for working with high levels of uncertainty is recognising that some challenges are unsolvable. This means we need to be managing, not controlling, the

situation. Striving to make the best decision with the information available, and employing effective approaches to managing the ongoing moving parts.

The US Army War College was one of the first organisations to develop a model that represents the challenges faced in uncertain times. It was initially developed in response to the chaos created by the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and later adapted by business to reflect corporate unpredictability. It is referred to as VUCA, an acronym which stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous and represents a set of challenges that individuals, teams, managers, and organisations face. Fortunately, there are strategies and techniques recognised to support us in VUCA environments.

### **From an individual perspective:**

**Understand the situation.** Take a growth mindset to dealing with the

constant changes. This enables us to see change as an opportunity rather than a threat, and helps us move away from a predictive, dogmatic mindset. When working under such conditions, brainstorming with others can support you to challenge your assumptions and view things from a myriad of perspectives, rather than through your own, perhaps inflexible, thinking patterns.

**Avoid knee-jerk reactions** to situations and evaluate whether your response is optimal. In doing so, differentiate between variables you can control and those that you can't, and focus your efforts on issues within your sphere of influence. When we worry about problems we can't control we are more likely to invest in unwieldy behaviours. Consider which course of action is going to help you progress, rather than implementing unhelpful behaviours.

**Communicate and clarify** with



colleagues and teams to broaden out your understanding of the various elements of the situation. In doing so, transparently communicate what you know as well as the gaps in your knowledge. Leaders who withhold or avoid addressing areas of unknown can create a sense of misinformation, or even panic, within their teams.

**Be proactive.** Make the best decision you can with the information that you have. After due consideration of the situation you might decide not take any action at all. This may be a perfectly appropriate response because it is considered and intentional, as opposed to avoidant and reactionary.

#### From an organisational perspective:

**Create a long-term vision.** Firms that have clear strategic and organisational values tend to counter volatility more effectively. The long-term nature of an organisational strategy can help weather the transient nature of ambiguity by maintaining a well-anchored overview of

the firm's goals and purpose.

**Create a culture which values behaviours, not just outcomes.** Humans embrace ambiguity more successfully in environments that reward effective behaviours (commitment, accountability, conscientiousness etc.) rather than just outcomes (such as billable hours). That's because, whatever the situation, we can individually and collectively choose our behaviours, even if the outcome we desire is unattainable or less controllable.

**Consider future scenarios based on best evidence.** Identifying possible future scenarios can help guide firms through uncertain times. A robust approach for doing so is referred to as Scenario Planning. Originally developed for the US military, it is a technique of exploring the future through a series of possible scenarios, thus preparing for a variety of situations. It takes one through a process of: identifying the issue and driving forces, exploring the uncertainty, developing probable scenarios and exploring best practice approaches.

Uncertainty and rapid change are a mainstay of everyday working life. In choosing our response to ambiguity, we have a choice to rigidly resist or flexibility adapt. We can do the latter by recognising the dilemmas presented, accepting that some challenges cannot be immediately disentangled, and seeking out the most effective decisions given the information to hand. **LSJ**

## careercoach

WITH MAUD LINLEY

**Dear Coach, I am feeling quite unmotivated and disengaged at work at the moment. My job used to excite and challenge me, but for a while I have felt like I am spinning my wheels on the same tasks and just "coasting" without progressing my career. Is it the impact of the pandemic or is something wrong with me? How can I get out of this motivation rut?**

There are three signs that lead to disengagement at work and knowing these signs can help you understand the levers to regain motivation and start afresh in 2022. Author Patrick Lencioni describes the triggers of job misery: anonymity, irrelevance and mismeasurement. Your experience of these three factors is unique and you should start by considering how much change is within your control and how much is shaped by your manager's style or your workplace culture. To take action, you can follow these three steps.

**1. Do you feel valued?** Feeling seen and appreciated for who you are, not just as a professional but as an individual is at the core of what drives us. If you are not experiencing this in your workplace at the moment, how can you create the conditions to feel valued? A conversation with your manager to seek their feedback on your contribution this year could help them express what they have not had time to in the last six months. Consider asking them: "Where have I added value this year?", "When have you seen me at my best?" and "What do I need to do to grow and add even more value to the team?"

**2 Do you know what drives you?** Can you express what you love at work and what you want to contribute? Can you express your "why"? Clarity on your personal purpose influences your motivation at work. Take some time away from your desk to reflect on: What typically gets you out of bed in the morning? In the last week, month or year, which activities did you particularly look forward to? What were you doing when the time just flew by, and you felt effective?

These are the activities that give you a hint of your personal strengths. Identify categories or groups of activities and label them with what you love doing when you are in the middle of these tasks. What are your core values? What would you never want to compromise? Is it the love of learning or the courage to close a deal? Is it the responsibility to create a fair outcome for everyone or to protect the organisation against excess? Is it about providing support to others, bringing lightness, humour, and perspective to a team or is it about providing sound advice based on data analysis? If these are difficult to identify, you can take the strengths identifier survey.

**3. Have you aligned what you love and what you do?** Based on your answers to the previous questions, you can start defining what you want to bring to a role that is unique to you and your passion. Too often we progress through our career because the next step seems obvious. But obvious and natural is not always aligned to your personal purpose. Is your current role allowing you to do what you love? Where do you need to go next to experience true alignment and spend more time fulfilling your purpose?



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