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Rosabeth Moss Kanter is a professor at Harvard Business School and the author of *Confidence* and *SuperCorp*. Connect with her on [Facebook](#) or at [Twitter.com/RosabethKanter](#).

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Five Tips for Coping with Uncertainty — and Finding Opportunity

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Clouds of uncertainty hover over the Western world. The consequences are stalling action. Companies are sitting on piles of cash, several CEOs have told me, as they wait for a resolution to the **U.S. debt crisis** before deciding what and where to invest or whether to hire. **Job creation is slow** and **unemployment high**, leaving millions uncertain about their futures. Europeans wait for a resolution to financial woes from the south affecting the north, and in a safe, sane Nordic country, Norway, fear rises from a seemingly insane **terrorist shooting** that cost nearly a hundred lives. Safe harbors have uncertainty, too.

Companies can make strategic choices once they know what conditions will apply — will laws change, will taxes be raised or lowered, will interest rates go up or down? You could be a CEO weighing factory location decisions in the U.S. or abroad, or a retail entrepreneur deciding where and when to open more stores. Waiting for decisions that provide a direction, any direction, can be paralyzing. Motivating people to try something new, or to get on with innovation, is tough when the rules of the game are up in the air. Uncertainty is one of the primary reasons that people resist change. People are relatively adaptable once they know what the situation is, like it or not.

Perfect clarity is not always possible, and leaders are not always in control of events. But that doesn't mean all the action must stop. Here are five tips for managing under uncertainty.

Provide certainty of process. Even if we can't tell people what the outcome will be, we can provide clarity about when information will be provided. A calendar filled in with communication dates can reduce some of the anxiety of uncertainty. It's good leadership to overcome reluctance to say "I don't know," and instead to engage people in discussion about the situation, letting them

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know when they'll know. Emphasizing meaningful rituals is another tactic. To have some things that the community or family does together regularly, no matter what, increases the ability to get on with the action even if situations aren't yet fully resolved.

Tackle maintenance and repair. Uncertain times, when some things are on hold, provide a good opportunity for fix-ups and clean-ups. Uncertainty makes it tempting to let things deteriorate (maybe we won't keep this office going or live in this place any longer). But fixing things that can be improved represents productive action. For example, for job-seekers, embarking on a fitness regiment can add energy, lift spirits, and potentially make the person more attractive to a potential employer.

Let ideas flow. Opening the brainstorming faucet washes away some uncertainty. Since uncertainty leads to rampant gossip and speculation anyway, it can be a good time to harness imagination toward productive ends. Big companies have equally big planning departments, undoubtedly spewing out data files of alternative scenarios, but average workers and ordinary people can play, too. Brainstorming about possible futures stimulates imagination about what to do under nearly any circumstance. Will they or won't they raise the debt ceiling? Will there be a law favoring green investments, or not — or should there be a push for one? Which newspapers are better weathering the digital revolution? How will retailing look different with or without lower unemployment? Seeds of innovation could sprout.

Mobilize appreciation for key constituencies. Showing appreciation to valued customers is the business equivalent of gathering loved ones to reminisce about wonderful times together. Thanking customers for their loyalty or appreciating suppliers for their contributions doesn't involve making promises, but it does make friends. And sometimes those gestures of appreciation bear fruit in the revenue stream, when those who are appreciated decide to reciprocate by increasing their purchases or sharing their best new ideas. That can pay off regardless of changing directions.

Use purpose and values to "think beyond." Emphasizing who we are and what we stand for reminds people of the long-term, of the march of history beyond today's uncertainty. It provides grounding. It helps focus on the times ahead, not just today's troubles. It helps people remain connected to one another.

Clouds eventually give way to clarity. What separates the best from the rest is whether leaders communicate, improve, engage, invest in relationships, and remain true to principles. This can make the difference in getting stuck or emerging triumphant.

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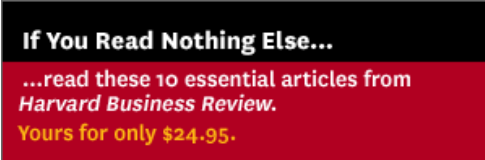


Jai Chakrabarti 37 minutes ago

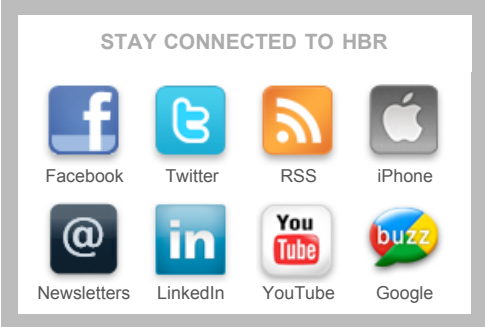
"Clouds eventually give way to clarity"? Is that a hope or a belief? Actually ambiguity and lack of clarity is the very nature of reality. So the quest for certainty is merely a very understandable human desire for consolation in the face of brutal reality.



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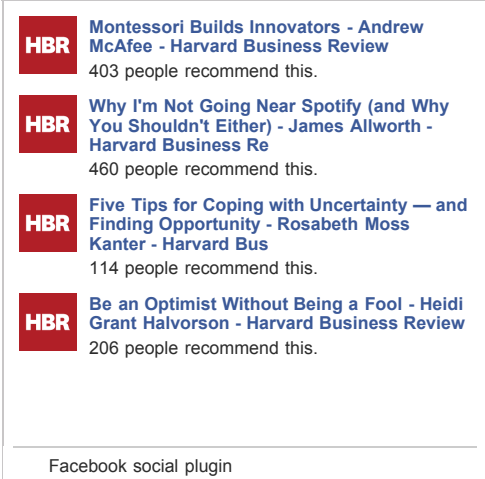
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Andrew W Dix 8 hours ago

What if there is only one certainty--change. If change is the only certainty, then uncertainty could be a given in any organization's plans. This creates a need for systems of vigilance and flexibility that are given priority and resources. It requires observing potential futures as they emerge and accepting and adapting to a fluid situation. C. Otto Scharmer, in "Theory U" calls leading from the emerging future "presencing."

Is it possible that the desire for certainty is a limiting illusion created by the three voices of change resistance: fear, cynicism and judgment? Can presencing leaders who instill faith, trust, hope and encourage a collective sense of wonder, out-shout the resistance trio?

I once heard a speaker say that a manager/leader's job is to clean up meaningful messes and that there is going to be a new mess everyday. It's why we need them around. If we expect nothing less than changing messes and welcome them as the growth and improvement opportunities that they are we have the chance to realize our highest potential future.

Time waits for no man, of that we can be reasonably certain. Is it time to get moving in one direction? Can't we always change if we find the journey is not taking us to where we thought we wanted to go.

Andy Dix
Author/Motivational Speaker/HPT Practitioner

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David Kalman 6 hours ago

This is spot on! All too often employees are paralyzed by fear, uncertainty and doubt. The paralysis leads to disengagement and organizational stagnation. I think all of your tips are great suggestions. I would just add that these ideas can be significantly enhanced or turbo-charged by employees who truly understand the basic fundamentals of how the business operates. Employees can more actively and effectively participate in the "what if" discussions if they understand some basic fundamentals about the business:

What are the marketplace dynamics shaping our industry?

What are our sources of competitive advantage?

What do customers value and how do we deliver/create that value?

What are the financial drivers of our business - where do revenues come from, what are the expense levers and what do profits allow us to do?

When employees can answer these questions for the business and truly understand the fundamentals of the business, it equips them with the knowledge and confidence necessary to get them in the game and taking responsibility for moving the business forward.

Again, great post...I really think this hit the nail on the head.

David Kalman

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Heather Campbell 1 day ago

Uncertainty can be paralyzing for everyone, and too often we forget that the leaders are paralyzed too.

These are great tips on what action to take. Action gets results. Fear that the actions may be in the wrong direction can also lead to paralysis. However, even if results are in a different direction than intended, it is easier to change that direction from a state of action rather than from a static position.

Game jobs and 1 more liked this [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Rosabeth Moss Kanter 23 hours ago in reply to Heather Campbell

You are so right. If you're moving, it's easier to turn.

Game jobs and 1 more liked this [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Karen Janowski 20 hours ago in reply to Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Fear does so often lead to paralysis. What we need in our leaders is courage. I love the quote (attributed to John Wayne): "Courage is being scared to death -- but saddling up anyway." I would love to be inspired by business and political leaders showing some courage!

In business, we need to be willing to act, innovate, ****experiment**** especially when outcomes are uncertain. I agree with the idea that times of uncertainty can be great times for experimentation and innovation - especially by the courageous!

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



SandiM 1 day ago

Thank you! What a refreshing way to start the work week, in the midst of the summer, in this year filled with uncertainty (in nearly every direction).

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Rosabeth Moss Kanter 23 hours ago in reply to SandiM

So many things that people have taken for granted are now uncertain. We need to find ways to renew energy to keep pursuing worthwhile goals. Thanks for finding this perspective refreshing.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Keziafrayjo 1 day ago

Strangely enough these tips also apply to uncertain times for countries undergoing a revolution. I'm currently in Syria and it's become impossible to predict the outcome of the uprising which in turns brings uncertainty to businesses and even homes. These tips are also helpful on a personal level. Thanks for the post.

www.whysosyria.tumblr.com

2 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Rosabeth Moss Kanter 23 hours ago in reply to Keziafrayjo

Thanks for the view from Syria. Yes, I was trying to find ideas that would apply to all of us personally, not just to business. When the outcome is impossible to predict, then the task is to pick some things to do that will matter and produce value no matter what.

1 person liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Barbaratodish 1 hour ago

We all need to be humble like Socrates when he said "I know that I do not know" Perhaps that stement can be made more positive:" I know that the "I"(the ego and the drama especially in the "I" of identity) is arrogance!

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Doug 4 hours ago

Excellent advice. I am sharing your views with my Directors. We have adopted 2 of your ideas already: maintenance and repair and appreciation for our customers. The others are worthy of discussion and inclusion too. Thanks Rosabeth.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Santosh 4 hours ago

Uncertainty is painful. Its very important to stay focussed and not get disoriented. There is so much to do

and opportunities are all around

Like Reply



Christian Crews 5 hours ago

This post represents a great first start. But I'd go a little farther – research by Harvard Business Review and others has shown countless examples of companies who took advantage of past recessions and periods of uncertainty to invest and grow. Here's how to extend Kanter's excellent suggestions:

1)

Provide certainty of process. Good start, but what about creating a process to manage and take advantage of uncertainty? Uncertainty creates risk, risk creates greater returns. Competitive advantage is partly derived from proprietary information about the future that a company acts upon ahead of others because its perception of risk is lower. Companies that put in place processes that allow placing bets on the future ahead of competitors in times of uncertainty will create competitive advantage and greater returns in the long-term. These processes go beyond the traditional scenario planning engagements and push ahead to making declarative statements about the future and creating a portfolio of bets against those statements that are managed as the real future emerges. This calibrates a company's R&D or growth investments to the evolution of the market.

2-3-4) Tackle maintenance/let ideas flow/appreciate constituencies. Unless you put in place mechanisms that take some of the ideas generated in brainstorming activities and get them tested/prototyped and implemented, overall morale will drop, not go up. Why not use the time of uncertainty to build technology platforms that allow open innovation to flourish within the company among employees (and potentially supply chain partners or customers), and appreciate constituencies by involving them in prototyping new products and services targeted to their needs? Ensuring that whatever technology platform is developed includes a way for employees to see the progress of some of the winning ideas through the prototyping phase with customers will greatly improve engagement.

Uncertainty is the time to create competitive advantage and position the company for long-term growth. Doing the hard work around understanding the future can help.

Like Reply



ChiefAlchemist 6 hours ago

Nice list. Thank you.

One of my favorite quotes comes from the classic "The Magic of Thinking Big" by David J. Schwartz. In it Schwartz said: Action cures fear.

I have found that tidbit handy more times than I can remember.

Like Reply



BSMazigh 8 hours ago

Thanks for these insights. As someone said " it is all about uncertainty". Uncertainty creates opportunities. Evaluating these uncertainties make the differences. Creative & innovative minds are the best time to deliver and think outside the bubble and cloud.

Like Reply



Anthony 15 hours ago

The black Swan

Like Reply



Efriedman 16 hours ago

It seems that what is widely missing in times of great uncertainty is effective leadership. Thankfully, leadership is not something that can only be provided by those who are generally perceived as leaders. Each one of us has the capacity to decide to lead the way in a new direction or in a new manner or for a new purpose to accomplish that which we believe needs to be accomplished or done. If value is generated, people will follow; if one fails 9 times but is able to succeed on the 10th try, many may benefit from that perseverance. So let's empower ourselves and each other to find and project the leader within us. It's an uplifting experience.

Like Reply



Andreacdavies 19 hours ago

Thank you for the creating discussion around Finding Opportunity in Uncertainty. I was feeling the pangs of paralysing-uncertainty with my search for a second position and came across your article. I appreciate your honesty and promotion of persons in leadership to be honest. I agree whole heartedly with: "People are relatively adaptable once they know what the situation is, like it or not." I know that nothing will get better without action. Lastly I appreciate your call for discussion and brain storming, even this past weekend on a short trip to Las Vegas to visit some good friends of mine I felt inspired and renewed by hearing stories of how the recession as affected them and what they are doing despite it. Thank you.

Like Reply



Marc Logman 1 day ago

it is also important to have a process-driven step-by-step approach in which (often implicit) uncertain factors are made explicit after some time <http://www.logicalmanagement.b...>

dr. Marc Logman

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