

ACCEPTANCE OF UNCERTAINTY AS AN INDICATOR OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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Research and experience continue to reveal evolving modes of leadership behavior that challenge the practice of consulting psychology. Leadership development that has taken us beyond the notion of born leaders and stable environments has suggested that flexibility is vital. This may be partly because of the constant evolution of the organization and its leadership challenges, from command-and-control to paradigms that are participatory and recognize the importance of interpersonal skills, to an emerging paradigm concerned with organizational learning. Consulting psychologists have identified a wide variety of leadership modes or ideals to fit these newer paradigms. Common to many of these is the need to be comfortable navigating ambiguous situations. One of the metrics that is indicative of this skill is the capacity to effectively process the uncertainty that often accompanies ambiguity. We present preliminary data for a potential tool for assessing this skill. We suggest that measuring an individual's "aptitude for ambiguity" should be considered when identifying high performers for leadership roles.

Keywords: uncertainty, ambiguity, leadership, assessment, leadership development

The prevailing view of leadership in the behavioral sciences acknowledges, and even emphasizes, complexity and nuance. In this article, we suggest that being an effective leader is contingent on the ability to deal with ambiguity and its resulting cognitive–affective reaction, uncertainty. Those who can keep the experience of uncertainty to a tolerable level can keep more options open and embrace ambiguity as an opportunity to bring people and options together to learn and adapt as they collectively find their way.

Organizations are increasingly complex, and their operating environments are increasingly ambiguous and demand faster solutions. Competitive advantage often comes down to the ability to respond ahead of anyone else to market demands. Just to survive, leaders may have to "outrun their headlights" without crashing. The technology industry responds to this urgency by providing faster tools. As the day-to-day velocity of organizational activity accelerates, ambiguity grows.

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We assume that ambiguity is inherent in leadership. Initial efforts to understand this fact were described nearly a decade ago:

Leadership is what crosses the frontier of what we did yesterday and what we'll do tomorrow . . . the real mark of a leader is confidence with uncertainty—the ability to admit and to deal with it. And just to be clear, we think ambiguity is how it is and uncertainty is how you feel about it. So the effective leader is always coping with his or her own feelings of uncertainty in the face of ambiguity. (Hodgson & White, 2001, p. 3)

Our research began as a quest to understand why so many people were transitioning poorly to senior leadership roles (White, Hodgson, & Crainer, 1996). It became clear that the ability to embrace the unknown as a strategic actor was critically important. This suggested that if a person's ease at confronting the anxiety of uncertainty could be measured, then one could more effectively identify and develop leaders who are able to navigate their teams and organizations through uncharted territory. We have been involved in the development and application of an assessment tool—The Ambiguity Architect—that shows promise in assessing this capability for developmental purposes.

Ambiguity and Leadership in Context

Over the past 100 years, prevailing models of leadership have evolved through three distinct phases: command-and-control, participation and empowerment, and learning organizations. From the beginning of the Industrial era through the mid-20th century, the command-and-control approach to leadership was the prevalent mode of getting people to do things according to owners and shareholders. Thomas Carlyle's (1841) popular book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* described leaders as "light-fountains" of divine inspiration and, simply, "great men." This probably reinforced the belief, held by many, that leaders were born, not made, and preferably, for some, they were males born to the right parents who attended the right schools (Domhoff, 1967; Mills, 1956). The dominant mode of organization was to realize economies of scale through size and routinized procedures designed to achieve efficiency in an operating environment characterized by consistency and relative predictability. This model assumed that leaders knew what to do and how to do it. There was little consideration of the possibility that the leader was not somehow a knowledgeable expert. The leader's influence was given by hierarchy and control, and the follower's role was defined by compliance and obedience to a chain of command.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers became recognized as vital to effective leadership. Prior to this, the idea that leadership is a mutual agreement by leaders and followers was not widely accepted (Kelley, 1992). This phase gave rise to notions of participation and empowered models of leadership where the leader has an idea of where to go—a vision—but lacks either the technical expertise or the ability to get there on his own. In this model, the leader's influence and ability to realize the vision is assumed to come from the active participation of followers and ultimately their commitment, not merely their compliance. This era bore witness to both an expanded and diverse set of leader demographics and new forms of organization, most notably flatter structures with power and decision making pushed down to lower levels. These models seemed to acknowledge ambiguity but granted authority for dealing with it to employees.

In the last decade of the 20th century, a new model emerged that repositioned the emphasis from relationships to adaptation to novel problems. Senge (1990) suggested the concept of a learning organization in which leaders are not expected to have a vision but are expected to know it is needed and to rely on the collective wisdom of the organization to help define one. Ambiguity is a given and is seen as a desirable state in which to incubate innovative and more powerful solutions. In this spirit, Heifetz (1994) distinguished between technical problems that are familiar and can be solved by known solutions and adaptive problems that have not been seen before and require solutions that are not yet defined.

These three primary models of leadership—command-and-control, participative and empowered, and learning—are all useful depending on the circumstances. Moreover, each is designed for increasingly higher degrees of contextual ambiguity. Likewise, the need to be comfortable with the feelings of uncertainty that ambiguity typically produces is progressively important for individual leaders across these models. We have moved from assumptions of the leader knowing what to do and how to do it to an expectation that the leader needs to have a vision sufficiently compelling to draw in followers and to secure their commitment to learning organizations. Within a learning organization, the vision itself is a collaborative construct, defined by a collective effort to cocreate the future by forging ahead into the new, the unknown, and, by definition, the ambiguous.

Others have documented the ambiguous nature of learning organizations. Karakas (2009) wrote about a new “organizational context” in an “age of uncertainty” that is “dynamic and fluid,” “visionary and insightful,” “flexible and adaptive,” “chaotic and nonlinear,” and “holistic and quantum.” McKenna, Rooney, and Boal (2009), in an effort to capture what it is that effective leaders do in these types of organizations, wrote about the concept of wisdom as an acquired leadership skill and suggest that wisdom has a metaphysical quality.

It seems that as we have left behind the world of the divine rights of leaders, we have simultaneously allowed theories of leadership to explore some possibly immeasurable energies. We suggest that this is not unscientific but appropriate for developing explanations of effective leadership. After all, current theory and research account, at best, for only half of the variance in who can be described as a successful leader (Arvey, Rotundo, Johnson, Zhang, & McGue, 2006; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006; Sorcher, 1985; White & DeVries, 1990).

Seeking More Elemental Metrics for Leadership Development

Today, a variety of institutions are recognizing that we need to keep seeking the qualities that contribute to effective leadership. Most companies that focus on talent management understand the need to identify “high potentials,” but most also concede that they need to do a better job of defining exactly what constitutes potential for great leadership. The military now prepares its leaders for a significantly enhanced concept of leadership with the soft skills of interpersonal dynamics as well as ambiguity-tolerant concepts that include “targeting critical vulnerabilities,” “surprise,” “decentralized decision making,” and “combined arms” (Clemons & Santamaria, 2002). Sternberg (1996) pointed out that an ability to get things done in the moment with political savvy—knowing to whom to go, how things really get done, and finding a tenable path forward (what he calls *tacit knowledge* or *practical intelligence*)—is a critical leadership skill for leaders of all stripes.

Historically, psychologists have concentrated on styles of leadership—such as task-oriented versus people-oriented or, more recently, transactional versus transformational—rather than first defining the role of the leader and the leader’s role in the social structure surrounding organizational tasks (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1989). There have been many interesting, helpful, and powerful advances—for instance, competency modeling, assessment center and simulation methodology, transcultural personality characteristics, and enhancement of emotional intelligence concepts. We have come to better understand the role of day-to-day experience in the development of leaders, that different types of experiences teach different leadership lessons, that too much of a good thing (a strength) can become a weakness, and that ultimately the best leaders are those who learn, grow, and change as a product of their experience (Kaiser, 2009; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006; McCall & Lombardo, 1983; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987; White, 1992).

Yet, given that so much of effective leadership remains to be accounted for in research, it appears that the essence of leadership continues to elude us. In contemporary organizations, strategic and tactical decisions intersect, executives must balance present focus with future insight, and short-term profit decisions collide with long-term investment goals. Kaplan and Kaiser (2006) addressed this need to manage such constant dilemmas in their work on the importance of embracing dualities and mastering opposing forces (cf. Kaiser & Overfield, 2010, this issue). Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) proposed that learning agility is critical for leaders to keep up with continual change. Implicit in these ideas of embracing dualities and learning agility is the act of dealing with

ambiguity and its resulting uncertainty. Uncertainty has always been a hurdle in the path of leadership action, but it is now more of an expectation than an exception (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Lloyd, 2009). It is suggested that when assessing individuals for leadership potential, attention should be given to the ability to “suspend certainty” and enable effective decision making amid ambiguity.

The Case for the “Uncertain Leader”

Poise and confidence are regarded as desirable personal qualities in a leader—often referred to as *executive presence*. But might a leader become *too* confident, *too* certain as a way of mitigating risk or showing decisiveness? We have seen in our own work individuals who are too convinced of their own decisions and who may not be open to new ideas, be they cultural, financial, interpersonal, or those specific to work tasks. The overly certain leader tends to be closed off to learning just when learning is most needed.

Being overly certain in ambiguous situations may even lead to derailment because the façade of certainty is often driven by an insecurity that keeps the leader using comfortable and familiar behaviors. A key factor in most derailments is an inability to adapt following a major transition (Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, in press; McCall & Lombardo, 1983)—whether to a larger or qualitatively different job, a cross-cultural assignment, market shifts, and so on. Managing these changes requires humility, the antithesis of certainty. Nonetheless, many leaders remain confident in prior success and keep doing what is most comfortable for them to the point of becoming ineffectual, or “stuck” as the world passes them by (Kaiser, 2009).

It seems both logical and worthwhile to explore the potential of a leader who is able not only to allow the experience of uncertainty but also to embrace the confusing state of uncertainty as a way forward. McKenna et al. (2009) offered the role of wisdom as a key determinant of leadership capability in what they describe as less rational, more metaphysical organizational environments; this suggests that a leader’s expectation of uncertainty may facilitate effective participation of other stakeholders (Lloyd, 2009). A leader better able to embrace the ambiguity in an environment where multiple decisions are possible may be more prone to seek assistance and involve people in the process of discovery. A leader less troubled by the unknown also may be more willing to indulge intellectual curiosity, in oneself as well as others, to seek better solutions. We have observed that these behaviors are more common in organizations in which the culture is less judgmental of new ideas and more tolerant of trial and error, informative mistakes, and learning. The behavior of a leader who is capable and competent but who at the same time acknowledges the inherent ambiguity about the situation is often exactly what clients ask consultants to help leaders develop. This is why it is considered valuable to plumb for the aptitude for addressing ambiguity by understanding a person’s tolerance for uncertainty.

Others have already written about leadership and change (Kotter, 1996), leadership and versatility (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006), and leadership amid ambiguity (Hodgson & White, 2001). Furthermore, the ability to respond effectively to ambiguous situations is probed somewhat in current leadership assessments. One good example is the Lominger-Korn/Ferry instrument called Choices that measures learning agility (see DeMeuse, Dai, & Hallenbeck, 2010, this issue). It appears that comfort with ambiguity is increasingly accepted, but not focused on, in the consulting psychology community as a critical trait of effective leaders (e.g., see Heifetz et al., 2009).

If we come to agree that tolerance for ambiguity is vital in organizational leadership, we need to consider the implications of overplaying such a strength. The “uncertain leader” we describe here may be prone to languish in indecision, avoiding action in the name of consensus or exploring too many options. There is also a resulting opportunity for development when an ambiguity-tolerant leader is surrounded by people who are uncomfortable with the uncertainty of ambiguity. We suggest that accepting our premise calls for coaching and interventions to balance the strength and counsel leaders to instill an aptitude for ambiguity in peers and reports.

Still, there is evidence that the need for too much certainty is problematic. Leadership and failed decision making under conditions of ambiguity are significant in a number of case studies of

business blunders from distant and recent history, such as the oft-told story of *Encyclopedia Britannica* rejecting a Microsoft proposal to migrate encyclopedias to digital media. Having published and annually updated bound editions for nearly three centuries, Britannica lost ground when Encarta developed an online encyclopedia. Then along came Wikipedia, which completely changed the paradigm of reference information and essentially replaced Encarta in usage. Perhaps *Encyclopedia Britannica* was overly certain that their product was bound volumes, rejecting the possibility that what the market really valued was simply authoritative information, regardless of format. The bankruptcy of General Motors provides a more recent example. More than one pundit has indicted GM for its strident confidence that the world would always desire large automobiles with minimal attention to fuel efficiency.

In *The Future of Leadership*, White et al. (1996) explored ambiguity and the emotional reaction it evokes, uncertainty, and how leaders deal with this reaction. Top executives were interviewed in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and the ideas were tested in Asia and Latin America. This research revealed that making choices with incomplete information under confusing conditions was frightening and difficult for many executives, yet it was vital for them to take charge, move forward, and lead their organizations. This uncovered the importance for leaders to be able to say, "We are unsure," while still being willing to make choices and seek possibilities. This work led to defining a style of leadership called the *learning style*, which was defined as the ability "to identify productive areas of uncertainty and confusion and to lead the organization into those areas to gain competitive (and other kinds of) advantage" (White et al., 1996, p. 89).

Given previous work and observations, we propose extending the idea of ambiguity a step further in research. Addressing ambiguity for leaders may be a way for them to increase their "bandwidth" by developing transcendence and wisdom, and making greater use of inclusiveness, delegation, consensus building, and brainstorming when facing the unknown. This is not a strategy for avoiding or eliminating ambiguity. On the contrary, we suggest this approach as a way to accept ambiguity as an opportunity to discover new possibilities and mold new realities.

Although there may be other ways to assess dealing with ambiguity and coping with uncertainty, such as the Tolerance for Ambiguity scale (Budner, 1962), these constructs tend to be conceived as *personality* traits, where there is little one can do about development. We are unaware of any existing measure of dealing with ambiguity in terms of specific leadership *behaviors*. So, we set out to conceive a construct as a set of behaviors for coping with uncertainty. A behavioral approach has the advantages of, one, being quantifiable (assessable) to provide feedback and, two, describing behavioral adjustments one can make to better deal with ambiguity (developable).

We wanted to learn more about the behaviors leaders use to contend with ambiguity and cope with the related feelings of uncertainty. Unlike an intolerant personality, which suggests a trait that is not malleable, managers can learn new behaviors for being more tolerant. Therefore, our interest in understanding and measuring the behaviors associated with dealing with ambiguity was motivated by the practical problem of helping managers develop this elemental capacity.

What We Have Learned From Leaders About Managing Uncertainty

On the basis of our premise that ambiguity is inherent in leadership, and increasingly so, and therefore that the ability to cope with uncertainty is more central to leadership than previously acknowledged, we developed a multirater assessment of this aptitude. In the book, *Relax, It's Only Uncertainty*, Hodgson and White (2001) further explored the embrace of ambiguity by effective leaders, as well as the importance of the learning style of leadership. In interviews, the leaders they studied described the uncertainty they felt as they led and a variety of ways they approached the challenge that seemed to minimize the anxiety of not knowing.

From those interviews, from responses to early ambiguity scale items, and from applied work with leadership development, executive coaching, and learning interventions, Hodgson and White (2001) identified eight clusters of behaviors that individuals use to embrace ambiguity and manage uncertainty. These clusters, referred to as *enablers*, are described in terms of observable and measurable actions:

1. “Mystery seekers” are fascinated by what they do not yet know. We might describe them as taking a road just to see where it goes. Curiosity is high.
2. “Risk tolerators” are not necessarily risk takers, but rather they have a willingness and ability to make choices with incomplete information. Risk tolerators may be intuitive, but more important, they can be described as seeing mistakes as a way to learn.
3. “Future scanners” are those who want to understand how a business operates and constantly consider how it will play out in future states. They are not “futurists,” but instead demonstrate a curiosity for the faintest signals of what the future will be.
4. “Tenacious challengers” are tireless in solving problems. They continue to seek solutions and are slow to relent. They will, in some cases, drive others to do similarly, even though this is not always appreciated.
5. “Exciters” were common in our study. They want everyone—especially themselves—to be energized by what they do. Behaviors indicative of exciters include efforts to make work fun for others in an organization.
6. “Flexible adjusters” exhibit two tendencies: the ability to admit they are wrong and the ability to sell change to people whose self-interest is against the change. This is an especially significant advantage in complex organizations rife with conflicts of interest.
7. “Simplifiers,” using verbal and sometimes written means, or possibly analogues, are able to take complicated ideas and help everyone in an organization understand where the organization is going. They have a knack for breaking things down in simple terms.
8. “Focusers” have the ability to identify and attack a “critical few” actions that need to be done, as well as the ability to shift to a different critical few actions at the right time. They simplify the complex with clear priorities.

Conversely, Hodgson and White (2001) also identified eight *restrainers* (listed below) described essentially as “antiskills” that are often overplayed in the service of minimizing uncertainty. Unfortunately, the restrainers also hinder the ability to cope with ambiguity.

1. “Poor transitioners” have difficulty shifting from one kind of task to another. Indicators of this include being extremely capable at some tasks but extremely challenged by others. These individuals have a limited repertoire and tend to rely too much on a select few areas of strength.
2. “Wet blankets” dampen the energy of an organization. They may lack enthusiasm for their own work and respond negatively to the fervor of coworkers.
3. “Conflict avoiders” tend to be overly accommodating to others, often the result of being highly averse to interpersonally heated situations.
4. “Muddy thinkers” exhibit confusion that is sometimes self-inflicted. They process issues in a way that makes them more complicated than they need to be.
5. “Complex communicators” build up their explanations with unnecessarily complicated language. They use jargon presumptively and tend to be verbose.
6. “Detail junkies” can’t see the forest for the trees. They often obsess over smaller tactical issues to the exclusion of larger strategic trends.
7. “Narrow thinkers” have tunnel vision. They are focused on the moment and sometimes blind to new possibilities.
8. “Repeaters” are tethered to the past and continue to rely on actions that worked in the past but may no longer be relevant.

The implied nature of these restrainers to hobble leaders from making discoveries or to cause trepidation that prevents decisions seems to mirror research by Tellegen and Atkinson (1973), who described the relative advantages of “fluid” leadership over “absorbed” leadership. They suggested that a fluid leader might, for example, break out of the current milieu to seek answers in art or literature or simply the world around them, to see a problem framed through a different purview, or to find analogs for the problem at hand. An absorbed leader might be unable to see analogues and a wider array of choices because she tends to be mired in the here and now or, worse, in a day gone

by. On the other hand, the fluid leader seems to have a greater willingness to enter ambiguity, a greater tolerance for the feelings of uncertainty, and therefore a better chance of cutting a path through *terra nova*.

Some Preliminary Findings

The eight enabler and eight restrainer themes just described form the conceptual basis for a new multirater feedback instrument, The Ambiguity Architect. Details for the development of The Ambiguity Architect and basic psychometric properties can be found in the test's manual (White, Hodgson, Lombardo, and Eichinger, 1999). In using The Ambiguity Architect in a variety of organizations and countries, we have found that managers identified by their organizations as high performers also have high scores on the enabler scales and low scores on the restrainer scales, demonstrate a greater ability to function under uncertainty, and tend to be successful in making decisions and leading groups in ambiguous environments. The implication is that the capacity to maintain composure and function adaptively despite feeling uncertain—to embrace and thrive in an ambiguous situation—is assessable. This capacity lends itself to a range of skills required in the current and evolving leadership environment.

Below we report selected results of an initial validation study that establishes a link between The Ambiguity Architect and three criterion variables—effectiveness at leading change, current level of overall performance, and the potential to advance. In deriving these measures, we asked a well-placed senior executive in each organization to provide separate scores for managers on each of the criterion variables. The executive was instructed to render a judgment as to where on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 being the lowest, 4 the highest) the individual ranked on each measure. Then, using survey data from the managers, their bosses, and their peers and subordinates (treated as a single category called “others”), we ran zero-order correlations between the three criterion variables and the eight enabler scales plus an overall composite representing the average score across the eight restrainer scales (a total of nine predictors).¹ Table 1 presents the results of this analysis for each rater group against each of the three criterion variables.² Smaller numbers of boss ratings than we would have liked were available for this analysis, but the results of boss ratings, although not as uniformly significant (in a statistical sense) as those for other raters and selves, were similar in size to the correlations for the other raters. Across the rater groups—self, boss, others—each of the nine factors produced modest to strong correlation with the three criterion measures.

Additional analyses employing all nine factors regressed on each of the criterion measures produced R^2 results of .39 for ability to deal with change, .34 with current performance, and .28 for potential to advance (all significant beyond $p < .01$). The latter result is a bit disappointing, our conjecture being that these variables would account for more variance in potential. Still, accounting for 28% of the variance in potential to advance is testament to the possible additional predictive power that knowing an individual's approach to uncertainty might shed on his or her ability to lead at higher organizational levels. Furthermore, these results suggest that 34% of the variance in current performance and almost 40% of the variance in the ability to deal with change can be accounted for by knowledge of a person's score on these nine factors. This information may prove useful in situations where a great deal of change will be dealt with and where assessment and coaching are to be used to support development of high potentials.

Taken together, this initial validation study offers preliminary empirical support that the behaviors represented by the eight enabler scales and the eight restrainer scales of The Ambiguity Architect are indeed important to leading change, effectiveness, and potential. Whether these

¹ The nine factors make up each of the eight enabler scales and a single score representing the average across all eight restrainer scales. We chose to combine all restrainers into one factor because some of the scales are as brief as two items, and there was sufficient correlation among the scales to justify aggregation.

² Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations), reliabilities, and correlations among the scale scores are available from the first author upon request. See also White, Hodgson, Lombardo, & Eichinger (1999).

Table 1
Zero-Order Correlation Matrix: Three Criterion Measures by the Ambiguity Architect Scale by Rater Group

Predictor	Self-ratings (n = 156)			Boss ratings (n = 25)			Others' ratings (n = 310)		
	Ability to deal with change	Current performance	Potential to advance	Ability to deal with change	Current performance	Potential to advance	Ability to deal with change	Current performance	Potential to advance
Motivated by mystery	.46*	.26*	.33*	.46***	.20	.40***	.42*	.36*	.30*
Risk tolerant	.37*	.22**	.25**	.40***	.45	.40***	.30*	.23*	.24*
Scans ahead	.50*	.24**	.25**	.58**	.27	.37	.45*	.33*	.29*
Tackles tough issues	.51*	.46*	.46*	.57**	.50**	.67*	.50*	.48*	.40*
Creates excitement	.40*	.27*	.25**	.35	.19	.37	.38*	.40*	.36*
Flexible	.29*	.14	.21*	.08	.00	-.14	.38*	.40*	.33*
Simplifier	.39*	.35*	.30*	.66*	.38	.61*	.47*	.43*	.47*
Focus	.27*	.26*	.24**	.15	.29	.10	.32*	.42*	.33*
Eight restrainers	-.45*	-.46*	-.38*	-.65*	-.25	-.59**	-.53*	-.54*	-.45*

* $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .05$.

behaviors provide unique information that adds incremental validity in accounting for effective leadership above and beyond familiar predictors, such as mental ability, personality, and experience, remains to be explored in future research. Furthermore, additional research is also needed to understand the linkages among dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty and other elemental leadership indicators such as leadership versatility, learning agility, tacit knowledge, optimism, and certain elements of emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

Almost every competitive commercial market or governmental setting today is inherently rife with ambiguity and confusion. For this reason, we suggest that being able to engage despite ambiguity is a prerequisite for many positions within an organization at or above general manager. Globally dispersed engagements can present even greater challenges of uncertainty (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002). In addition, writers such as Mintzberg (1993), who believe strategy is making the most of emergent opportunities, would most likely find embracing ambiguity a requisite skill for a strategic leader. Leaders who are comfortable with uncertainty and competent under ambiguous conditions might very well provide a competitive advantage to organizations seeking continual innovation as part of their business strategy.

We suggest that measures of the ability to handle uncertainty belong in a broadband assessment of senior leadership characteristics. Reviews of the derailment literature indicate that roughly half of all senior leaders will eventually fail (Hogan et al., in press). It behooves consulting psychologists to develop their repertoire of measures for looking at leadership capacity at the general manager level. Aside from luck and timing, we believe that uncertainty, together with five other higher order measures—leadership versatility (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006), certain aspects of emotional intelligence (namely, self-awareness and empathy; Goleman, 1995), tacit knowledge (street smarts and political savvy; Sternberg, 1996), optimism (Seligman, 1998), and learning agility (DeMeuse et al., 2010, this issue; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000)—may help us understand those leaders who are effective, who do continue on, and who do not derail. If this is true, these assessments could be used in a much broader way to identify people much earlier in their careers so we could engineer experiences and create valuable teachable leadership moments.

It is generally accepted that the need to manage multiple realities is more important now, but a capacity to do this has been difficult to predict. There are several traits and behaviors related to being able to handle the inherent ambiguity of participatory leadership and the demands of facing adaptive challenges, and one constant for each may be tolerance of, perhaps even a preference for, uncertainty. Developing the skills to make good decisions amid the unknown—having an aptitude for ambiguity—is a potentially rewarding practice for the organization. Furthermore, the ability to thrive amid ambiguity appears to be measurable by determining an individual's skill at coping with uncertainty and how he or she approaches decisions when feeling uncertain.

Ambiguity is a byproduct of constant change and increasing complexity, and it may be the most challenging attribute of the modern business environment. So it follows that embracing ambiguity—recognizing that it is a fact of life—is one more possible key in the process of developing effective leaders. We suggest that the ability to effectively deal with ambiguity should be assessed and encouraged if a strength or developed if a weakness. The leadership struggles around the world thus far this century have centered on the definitions of what is certain and what is uncertain. History is replete with examples of leaders who, lacking an ability to deal with the unknown, artificially created certainty to maintain power. Unfortunately, the creation of a false sense of certainty and the defensive reaction to compensate for feelings of uncertainty have led to the downfall of corporations (Collins, 2009) and, arguably, even civilizations.

Taken a step further, embracing ambiguity while managing the experience of uncertainty becomes a positive incentive for creative solutions and lessens the severity of judgment and gate-keeping. That is to say, if something has never been done before, how can we judge it against any existing paradigm or preconception?

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