PART THREE

WHAT DON’T I KNOW I DON’T KNOW?

ASK BETTER QUESTIONS TO DRIVE SUCCESS
CHAPTER 9

HOW CAN WE ENSURE SUCCESS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY?

We live and work in chaotic and disruptive times. These are times that require new skills and a deeper appreciation for what it takes to lead and to make effective decisions when there is unpredictable, high-speed change.

Not that long ago, the term disruptive conjured a negative image. Today, owing to the high-tech revolution, the word has a new, positive connotation. It refers to the breakthroughs that unexpectedly emerge when a game-changing innovation in using technology challenges competitors and traditional business methods. Clayton Christensen of Harvard Business School advanced the concept of disruptive technology in The Innovator’s Dilemma and later redefined it as “disruptive innovation” in The Innovator’s Solution. He alerted companies to the importance of adapting technology to meet the future needs of customers by providing lower-priced solutions that evolve to displace established competitors. Examples of disruptive technologies are
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personal computers, e-books, digital photography, mobile telephony, cloud computing, and the Internet—none of which were recognized as disruptive when they first appeared on the market.

New technologies disrupt the workplace and also shake up how people identify with their work. The necessity of responding to these disruptions is just one reason why the nature of leadership is changing. Until recently, leaders were expected to know the answers and for the most part were also expected to tell people what to do. Today, leadership means being able to lead in the midst of uncertainty, regardless of whether you have an immediately definitive answer. It also means being able to inspire others to take the lead—regardless of their role or rank in an organization.

The job of a leader has changed from having knowledge to generating knowledge and inspiring and sustaining the capacity of others to learn. Leaders must demonstrate that they are open to finding answers by publicly asking the right questions. This is the reality we face when we have to choose between sticking with what we know and going beyond our comfort zone. Leaders must have the skills to acknowledge to their employees, and to their customers, what they don’t know that they don’t know—in such an authentic way that it inspires people to work cooperatively to chart new territories.

The more we think we know, the less we truly know.

One successful senior manager candidly describes the dilemma of leading in changing times.

Perhaps I am getting a bit jaded, but I tend to believe that many managers think they are smarter, savvier, and more effective than they truly are. A number of factors feed into that: good staff that make them
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look good; they know a lot about how things work in their field; or their own management doesn’t know how good or bad they really are. I am sure there are managers who thought they were absolutely brilliant as they were driving their companies full speed into a crisis.

Having said that, truly wise managers—who want to be agile and adapt to the changes being thrown at us—know that pausing is imperative, particularly in a maelstrom. People may think you are nuts taking a time out in the midst of a storm. But it is precisely that pause that allows you to sort, process, and then focus on what needs to be done right away and what can wait till later. Most important, you have to ask yourself, What are the dependencies in the situation?

One tricky responsibility managers have today is to understand dependencies—to connect the dots between a decision and its consequences, especially when the old way of doing things is being challenged. It is not enough to identify all the moving parts—you also need to understand who or what depends on each of those parts. You can more effectively prevent chaos when you have the discipline to hit the Pause button. Here’s a simplified example:

Executive: We have deep budget cuts to make; I want you to outsource our Web function for half of what we pay the staff member to do it.

Manager: OK, I can do that. Let me get back to you to make sure we understand how that change would affect our customers.

It didn’t take the manager long to put the picture together for his boss about the ripple effects this decision could have. He explained:
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- The Web site content wouldn’t be updated immediately anymore—something the boss had required nightly.
- Content changes would be triaged by cost and difficulty—and could take days, not hours.
- The budget would cover only maintenance, not site design upgrades—potentially making the site less useful for the customers.

These changes could have backfired—causing problems for the boss, the organization, and its customers—if the manager didn’t examine the web of dependencies of this situation. He also had to have the courage to explain the consequences to his boss rather than just assume that he had no choice. As a result, the boss made a more informed decision and reset his own expectations as well as his staff’s priorities.

Next we’ll survey some of the research that reveals how our ability to handle change and uncertainty is affected by our biochemistry, psychology, technology, and capacity to connect to one another. We’ll also see how to apply the Power of Pause principles to achieve your goals regardless of what is happening around you.

The Paradox of Knowledge and Uncertainty

Knowledge is different from all other kinds of resources. It constantly makes itself obsolete, with the result that today’s advanced knowledge is tomorrow’s ignorance.

—Peter Drucker

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Making Decisions

Leaders can make and implement better decisions, reports Professor David Garvin, if they have a tolerance for uncertainty, constructively explore differences, don’t take things personally, and step back from assumptions to “examine underlying presumptions.” He also urges decision makers to engage in active listening to ensure that others feel understood and will support the decision rather than undercut it later. Demands for certainty and “arguments backed by unassailable data” interfere with the ability to generate adequate options or enable effective evaluation.

Garvin’s research fits with my clients’ experiences. One CEO admitted that he didn’t realize how frustrated his managers were about how long he was taking to make a decision to replace a powerful executive. Three of them asked to meet with him. Realizing that they weren’t in agreement about what needed to be done, the CEO rephrased his sense of their concerns, telling them he was curious about what was troubling them. “Taking the time to listen in this way shows employees that their opinions matter. I also learned a valuable lesson. They didn’t understand my own decision-making process. Now they know that when my decisions aren’t coming as quickly as they would like, it’s not that I’m unable to make the decision; I’m taking the time to look at all of the facts and make the best decision for our company. I also shared the reasons a particular decision was so difficult. The lesson for me was that I can’t assume that people understand what I’m thinking or even saying.”

As we see in the personal, real-time comments posted by leaders on their Web sites and in blogs, videos, and virtual cyberspace meetings—more decision makers are
acknowledging the need to build trust by making their thought process more transparent.

**Power of Pause applied:** Rephrase to assure others that you didn’t just hear what they said; you understood what they meant.

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**New Ways of Thinking**

To succeed in the future, organizations need to cultivate resilience—an ability to balance between independent thinking and interdependence to foster collaboration among people with diverse outlooks. That is the view of Thomas Homer-Dixon, author of *The Ingenuity Gap*, who believes that most of us aren’t well equipped to adapt to a world of constant change. His prescription? He urges us to “develop a prospective mind, a mind not fixed on the status quo, one that instead is comfortable with constant change, radical surprise, even a breakdown . . . and must constantly anticipate a wide variety of futures.”

One of the phrases my clients and audiences often hear me say is, “I’m not here to make you comfortable with change. I’m here to help you be comfortable with your discomfort.” That’s why Homer-Dixon’s advice resonated with me. For example, when one client was recruited to leave his job as a university provost to become chancellor of a large and turbulent state university system, he didn’t realize how much conflict was awaiting him in his new job, which required him to work closely with state legislators. Trained as a political scientist and having played a primary role in
running a large and rapidly expanding urban university, he thought he was prepared for the politics. After a rough first year, he decided to get curious about what he could do differently.

He asked me to interview powerful legislative insiders to find out what he needed to do to be more effective. He wanted them to speak to me as his executive coach and as an objective observer, assuring them that I would relay their unvarnished comments. They were astonished and impressed that he was willing to initiate this personal (and humbling) inquiry into what he needed to improve. As a result, he was able to change the way he collaborated with them. Eventually he accomplished a number of major goals he had thought to be impossible.

**Power of Pause applied:** Being curious and exercising humility build trust that helps you lead, manage change, and inspire risk-taking innovation.

**Continuous Partial Attention**
Around-the-clock access to technology is changing our capacity to provide full attention to people and to tasks. Writing in *Scientific American Mind*, the directors of the UCLA Memory and Aging Research Center offer this insight about the impact of continuous partial attention on people and the choices they make: “They no longer have time to reflect, contemplate or make thoughtful decisions. Instead they exist in a sense of constant crisis—on alert for a new contact or bit
of exciting news or information at any moment. Once people get used to this state, they tend to thrive on the perpetual connectivity.”

Organizations are experimenting with ways to balance the benefits of instant information devices with the need for undivided attention and respect. In one case, after sales meetings had become a battle for attention, the senior manager had the presence of mind to experiment. He decided to collect everyone’s communication devices at the start of the meeting and return them at the end. As a result, sales and lead generation improved. Customer service also improved, because they made sure that other team members were better prepared to take care of the customer in their absence.

**Power of Pause applied:** Temporarily designating a specific amount of time to disconnect from constant information streams gives you and others a chance to focus and get more done.

**Our Effect on Others**
Neuroscientists keep enlightening us about how the biology of emotions drives the brain’s reactions. Italian scientists recently discovered the phenomenon of mirror neurons that help us attune ourselves to the actions of others, which is what happens, for example, when you feel that you and another person on are the same “wavelength.” Some neuroscientists claim to have identified mirror systems for emotion and have argued that activation of these systems may be a basis for empathy. Experts have identified empathy—the
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ability to read and interpret emotional cues—as one of the most important skills that enable business leaders to make intelligent decisions.

Other research shows that if you put someone in a meeting who has a positive outlook, that emotion can be contagious. This research has implications for when you are trying to engage people in collaboration. For example, data revealed that top-performing leaders foster an environment where laughter—the shared experience of not taking things too seriously at times—is more prevalent than in groups managed by midperforming leaders.5

Power of Pause applied: Pausing to tune in to what’s going on for you and for others increases the chance for greater cooperation.

As you will see in the upcoming story, a sense of humor is invaluable, especially when helping your team or colleagues manage the stress of shifting priorities and heavy workloads. For years I’ve taught that it’s important to laugh at oneself and to laugh with (not at) others when we discover a counterproductive habit. As the research confirms, a little levity lowers what I call “de-fences.” When we’re able to see the humor in a situation, we’re less likely to put up the fences to keep people or ideas at arm’s length and less likely to take things personally. When we aren’t putting up barriers, we can move ahead with less effort.

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POWER OF PAUSE PRACTICE #7:
Ask: What’s on Your Plate?

Responding to competition, time pressure, new technology, or budget cuts can leave you and your staff with too much on your plates. That’s what information technology resource executive Ramon Padilla and his colleagues faced as they tried their best to cope with increasingly “impossible” workloads and layoffs.

Ramon’s boss, Chancellor Mark Rosenberg, asked me to develop a Work Smarter Together, Not Harder program for the government agency that supports eleven state universities, approximately three hundred thousand students, and seventy-six thousand faculty and staff. In the aftermath of significant staff cutbacks, managers were concerned about managing conflicting priorities. I told them a brief story about a practice I’d developed early in my management career.

∞ I was a twenty-something manager at the Westinghouse Broadcasting station in Boston and had been promoted to create and run a department of eight, never having directly managed more than an intern. One day after the weekly staff meeting, my talented senior publicist looked overwhelmed. I privately asked her if I could help. She hesitated, not wanting to complain, as she was proud of getting her work done. “My problem,” she blurted, “is that my to-do list keeps getting longer and longer with all that you keep adding to it.”
I told her we could review her priorities. “That’s just the problem,” she explained. “It seems that everything you give us is a top priority, and to our internal customers everything is a top priority too.”

Of course she thought everything was a priority; she had no way of knowing that what had been important on Monday was less important by Wednesday because of a decision made at corporate about something happening next week. It had also never occurred to me that her plate was full, because she hadn’t complained. Trying to keep things simple, I came up with the idea of a quick weekly “plate check” where we could add, drop, and shuffle projects and deadlines depending on current realities. The goal, however, wasn’t to have me always reset the priorities; it was to develop her ability to prioritize and to handle the changes herself.

Today, the greater challenge I see for organizations is this: few people feel that they have a choice or the authority to prioritize, to redistribute, or to take work off their plates. They don’t want to look overburdened or incapable and don’t want to complain to their bosses, even if they complain privately, producing a chorus of discord in the workplace. So they continue to work with too much on their plates. And there are consequences because it is not a sustainable state—people can’t be or do their best. That’s why I challenge clients to routinely pare down and reorder their priorities with staff, which is what Ramon did shortly after the Work Smarter Together, Not Harder program.
How Are We Supposed to Prioritize in a Nonstop Workplace?
How to prevent staff burnout and achieve extraordinary performance

Two years later, Ramon had been promoted to assistant vice chancellor for information resource management. He shared how he had adapted and implemented Power of Pause Practice #7: Ask: What’s on Your Plate?

Your personal story about being a manager made me realize that I had assumed my open-door policy created a safe environment where staff could discuss their workload with me. I also assumed that if no one was complaining, I could add more to their plate. You opened my eyes to see that most employees will not voluntarily step up to say that you (the boss) are “piling it on.” I began to do regular plate checks with my employees to make sure that I wasn’t burning them out.

Using the “How full is your plate?” question—as a device to open the door to efficiently communicating one’s workload—has been extremely successful. The staff is poking their heads in my door to say, “Boss, there is no more room on my plate unless you have someone help me eat these mashed potatoes.” This makes it easier to have a short conversation about prioritization or passing some work to someone else. “Plate check” has become part of our vernacular. However, as I write this I realize that my plate has gotten to be overwhelming, and our plate checks aren’t as regular as I would like them to be.

As the manager of a shrinking IT department, Ramon has found that the plate check helps his staff keep their sense of humor. Everyone knows that the weekly staff meeting begins with these questions:
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1. What’s on your plate?
2. Tell me about it: What state is it in?
3. What’s keeping you from clearing it?

His team takes the plate analogy and runs with it, asking questions that make it easy for them to laugh, focus, and be more effective: What will it take to get it off your plate? Does it taste bad? Do you need a different utensil? Ramon explains:

Someone might say to me, “If I have to eat this one more time, I will throw up.” I’ll say to them, “OK what can I do to make it taste better?” They’ll shoot right back with an answer such as, “Can you get the universities (our customers) to submit their data in this type of format? It would make it so much easier.” Suddenly I have a practical way to help my people get their jobs done. My approach is to build up this person’s belief in themselves so that they can hold their head up and handle what’s on their plate.

By the time Ramon’s staff meeting is finished, his people are managing their workloads and helping one another with little redirection from him. Using this practice has an exponential effect by increasing the effectiveness of an entire group. Ramon points out that plate checks provided other unexpected bonuses. “We became more effective because we could be more flexible and juggle our assignments when things changed without warning. With budget cuts these days, it’s not like I can hand out bonuses, or give my staff a $100 gift certificate when I ‘catch them doing something right.’ What I can offer them is an environment where people really want to come to work. This upbeat approach is one of those little things that do just that.”