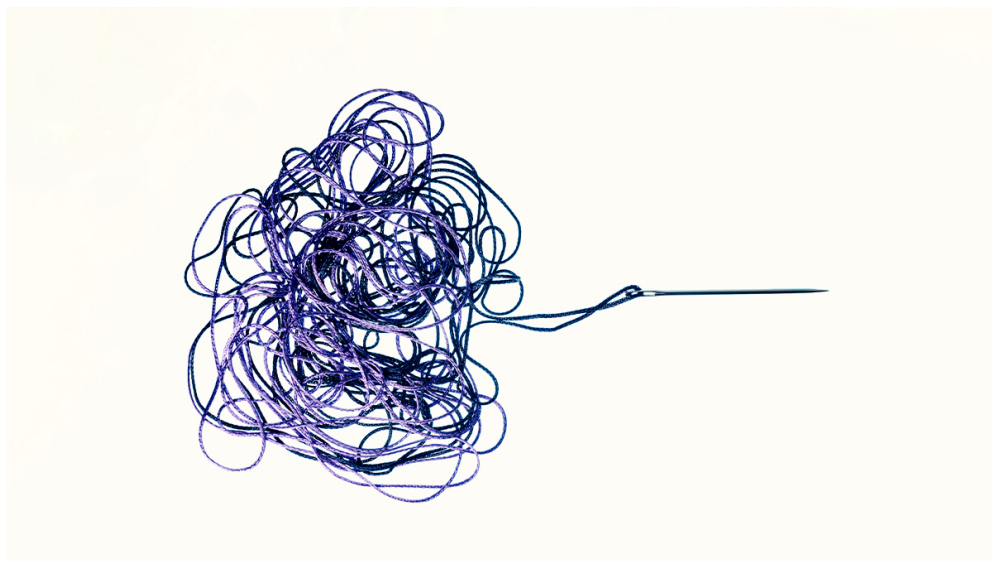




## Managing Uncertainty



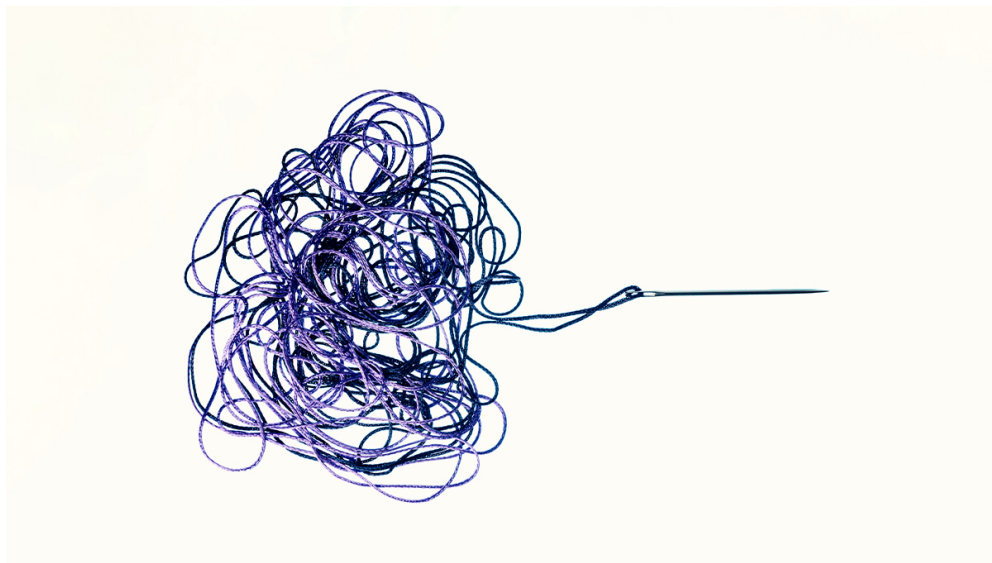
# 6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty

by Rebecca Zucker and Darin Rowell

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**If there was ever any doubt about** the importance of a leader's ability to navigate change, uncertainty, and disruption, the emergence of the global pandemic in 2020 made this necessity abundantly clear. And while we all hope to avoid future pandemics, one thing is certain — we cannot avoid ever-increasing complexity.

The leaders we work with often report feeling stuck, ill-equipped, or overwhelmed as they face the growing challenges of their roles. Understandably, it's easy to feel this way when the complexity of our

world has surpassed our “complexity of mind,” as Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey describe in their book, *Immunity to Change*. To put this in concrete terms, computing power has increased more than a trillion-fold since the mid 1950’s, but our brains remain unchanged.

In order to effectively lead others in increasing complexity, leaders must first learn to lead themselves. Although each leader faces their own unique circumstances, we have observed six strategies that accelerate your ability to continually learn, evolve, and navigate progressively more complex challenges.

### **Embrace the Discomfort of Not Knowing**

Throughout our careers, we are conditioned to come up with the answer — as in a single, definitive, correct answer. Given that our brains are hardwired to see uncertainty as a risk or threat, it’s physiologically normal to feel stress when faced with unfamiliar situations. This is especially true for high achievers who have built their career on knowing or finding the “right” answer. Although avoiding these unpleasant feelings is a natural human tendency, it can become a significant barrier to learning, future growth, and ultimately performance.

Rather than avoid these feelings, we must learn to acknowledge and embrace the discomfort as an expected and normal part of the learning process. As described by Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, leaders must shift from a “know it all” to “learn it all” mindset. This shift in mindset can, itself, help ease the discomfort by taking the pressure off of you to have all the answers.

## Distinguish Between Complicated and Complex

Most of us use the terms complex and complicated interchangeably when, in fact, they represent critically different circumstances. For example, tax law is complicated, meaning it is highly technical in nature and difficult to understand, but you can break the problem down into discreet parts, consult with an expert (or several), and generally find a solution.

Conversely, complex challenges contain many interdependent elements, some of which may be unknown and may change over time in unpredictable ways. In addition, an action or change in one dimension can result in disproportionate and unforeseen outcomes. As an example, foreign policy and climate change are complex challenges. While there may be no shortage of opinions on these topics, there are no clear solutions. As a result, solutions to complex challenges typically emerge through trial and error and require the willingness, humility, and ability to act, learn, and adapt.

## Let Go of Perfectionism

In a complex environment, the context is continually shifting; thus, aiming for perfection is futile. Instead, aim for progress, expect mistakes and recognize that you have the ability to continually course correct as needed. For high-achievers, prone to perfectionism, egos and desired identities (e.g., of being successful or being “the expert”) can get in the way. To let go of perfectionism, identify, and acknowledge your specific core fears that are triggered — such as “I’ll fail,” “I’ll look bad,” or “I’ll make the wrong decision.” Underlying these fears is an often implicit and unexamined assumption that “if any of these fears come to fruition, I wouldn’t be able to recover from it.”

We've worked with several clients over the years to help them actively debunk these assumptions by having them talk with others they respect about the role of mistakes or failure in their careers. They hear a lot about learning, new opportunities, and professional growth that emerged as a result, but never the career-ending catastrophes that they imagine. Loosening the grip of these assumptions over time can allow you to let go of perfectionism and accept that mistakes and failure are to be expected along the way.

### **Resist Oversimplifications and Quick Conclusions**

It's tempting to oversimplify complex challenges, so that they seem less daunting. For example, breaking a challenge into its respective components can help you to feel like you have a greater command of the challenge at hand, but it can also narrow your view and obscure critical interdependencies, leading to a false sense of security. Likewise, drawing analogies from challenges that you've faced in the past, can be useful but it can also lead you to miss the unique nuances of the present challenge.

Many high achievers have a bias for action and become quickly frustrated when facing challenges that don't present an evident solution and clear course of action. Instead of caving to the desire for quick resolution, leaders must learn to balance their need for action with a disciplined approach to understanding both the core problem and their own biases. For example, hiring a DEI leader at an organization, by itself, is insufficient if more systemic issues like outdated recruiting, promotion, development, and compensation practices go unaddressed.

### **Don't Go It Alone**

Many of the leaders we work with report feeling isolated as they face the continuous change and uncertainty in the challenges they face. Part

of their sense of isolation comes from an implicit belief that they need to solve all of the issues themselves. As the complexity and volume of our workload increases, our natural tendency is to double down on our focus and individual efforts. When facing relatively short-term challenges with known solutions, this can be an effective strategy. However, when facing challenges where the full scope of issues and interdependencies, let alone solutions, are unclear, it can be a disaster. Instead, this is when it's most important to cultivate the practice of intentionally reaching out to your network and beyond for insight and perspective.

There is an inherent limit for each of us regarding what we can know and our ability to have an objective perspective on any given situation. Yet, we can exponentially expand our knowledge and perspective by cultivating and connecting with a network of peers and colleagues — each with their own set of experiences and perspectives. As stated by one CEO client, “When I’m trying to make sense of a complex issue, the first thing I do is reach-out to people whose opinion I value and whose experience is in some ways different from mine. I want to know “How are they are looking at the situation? What’s their point of view? Who else should I talk to?” He went on to explain, “It’s not so much that I expect them to have an answer, as I want to plug into their thinking and their sources.”

## Zoom Out

Leaders often get stuck in the challenges they face because they are too immersed in them. “Zooming out,” or moving from “the dance floor to the balcony,” as described by Ron Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow in [\*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership\*](#) provides you with a broader perspective and a systemic view of the issues and can shine a light on unexamined assumptions that would otherwise not be visible. From this “balcony” or elevated vantage point, interdependencies and

larger patterns become observable, potentially revealing unforeseen obstacles and new solutions. This more holistic perspective allows for greater adaptability and course correction, when needed. Making a regular practice of conducting this dance floor-balcony shift, you can build your capacity to see the bigger picture and become more agile.

It seems that any given week provides ample reminders that, as leaders, we cannot control the degree of change, uncertainty, and complexity we face. However, adopting the strategies above can improve our ability to continually learn, grow, and more effectively navigate the increasing complexity of our world.



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