The Dangers of Certainty Have Applications in Real World

By Paul F. deLespinasse

Certainty can be dangerous if we seek it before acting, but certainty can also be dangerous if we think we have it.

Imagine that you are piloting a loaded 747, when the plane starts behaving erratically. The pattern doesn't fit situations you have ever encountered, and it is not one for which your training provides a solution.

If you had an hour to think, you could be fairly certain about what to do. But you will crash if you don't fix the problem within about a minute.

Obviously, you cannot afford to wait for certainty about what to do here. You glance at the instruments most likely to indicate what is going on, adjust the controls to do what you think most likely will save the situation, and see what happens.

The plane's reaction may give you additional information, allowing still further actions. Good luck!

Political leaders constantly confront similar situations: unprecedented developments that no one anticipated: depressions and Pearl Harbors (Franklin D. Roosevelt) , 9/11s (George W. Bush), pandemics (Donald Trump). While they don't have to respond within a minute, leaders cannot afford to wait until they are certain what they need to do.

Leadership, thus, is inherently experimental. The leader tries something, sees how it works, and then if necessary tries something else. Franklin D. Roosevelt was a master at this.

There is an even bigger danger than waiting for certainty: leaders and private citizens alike who are so certain about ideas or facts that they don't take into account the possibility that they might be wrong.

Assuming that our ideas are 100% correct makes it difficult for us to find better ideas or change our actions when things don't work like we thought they would. This assumption reinforces our tendency to succumb to "confirmation bias" in which we notice information supporting our current thinking and ignore information undermining it.

Philosophers have long understood this danger. Socrates maintained that "To be uncertain is to be uncomfortable, but to be certain is to be ridiculous."

Millennia later, Voltaire agreed that "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd."

This point is not just theoretical but has an immediate application in today's United States.

To mask, or not to mask? That is the question.

Some people think that wearing a mask is a good idea, since it might do some good for oneself or for others. This belief is either correct or incorrect.

Other people think that wearing a mask will do no one any good. Again, this conclusion is either correct or incorrect.

But people on both sides of this question need to ask themselves a simple question: *What if I am wrong?*

Clearly, someone is wrong here. But which belief, if untrue, has the bigger downside if it is acted upon?

If the people who believe mask wearing is helpful are wrong, there is little harm done when they wear a mask. Although some people exaggerate the physical or emotional damage wearing masks might cause, there is little demonstrated harm in wearing them.

But if people who believe mask wearing does no good are wrong, their failure to wear a mask would be extremely harmful. Contributing to the serious illness or untimely death of other people is not something most of us would want to have on our conscience.

Remember that the main protection from our mask is to the other people around us, and our main protection comes from *their* masks. (Our vaccination, conversely, mainly protects us, but also protects other people.)

Under these circumstances the reasonable thing to do is to wear a mask at appropriate times whether we believe it will do any good or not, and to respect governmental or private requirements to wear masks.

Paul F. deLespinasse is Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Computer Science at Adrian College. Read Professor Paul F. deLespinasse's Reports — More Here.