

Embracing Uncertainty to Accelerate to a Brighter Future

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In an environment of unprecedented uncertainty, all over the world we are hearing CEOs ask some form of the same question: What is the best way to lead and move forward when we have no idea what's next? Learning how to hold, weigh, and shift priorities for both the near and longer term is shaping the critical mandate of adaptive CEO leadership.

COVID-19 has already been a major accelerator of change and, as one CEO put it recently, “change is only going to speed up.” Historically, the most significant shifts in a sector's competitive rankings have occurred during moments of crisis and uncertainty like the one we are facing today. Leaders are looking for ways to reinvent their companies to create value during recovery and beyond. “We are an industry in transformation . . . and we see an opportunity to advance many elements of our strategy,” one CEO of a multibillion dollar company recently shared. “But it has to be done in a very thoughtful way, balancing all the often conflicting priorities amid so much uncertainty.” This CEO stressed the need for “ambidextrous leaders” capable of “leading the work of today while also looking over the horizon for what is coming.” Moving ahead with “one eye on the microscope, the other on the telescope,” it is essential that leaders learn to embrace uncertainty rather than trying to eliminate it. “Priorities have all changed, personally and professionally,” another S&P 500 CEO explained. “There can be no thought paralysis. What will the new norm look like and how do we adapt? I ask myself that on a daily basis.”

There is little question that the future will belong to those who can adapt quickly and continually, discerning what to keep from the past as they move ahead, and recognizing what they can grow into. Above all, this will require leaders who have the humility to admit and accept what they don't know and build from there to create a productive environment where risk and failure are accepted. The reality is that “most of the time we don't know enough to know what to do next,” the organizational psychologist and MIT professor emeritus, Edgar Schein, stresses in his work on leadership. But we are inclined to not admit that, which needs to change. Dr. Schein emphasizes the pressing need for leaders to cultivate what he and his son Peter have coined as “here-and-now humility,” which, as they explain it, “requires the ability to evaluate current challenges and consider how available resources are able to meet, or not meet, those challenges. The idea being that most of the time you come up short.”

In solving for the future, CEOs will need to allow for the likelihood that evidence critical to their thinking is missing—to stay open to this discovery and allocate the energy to making sense of it. This, of course, is hard on a normal day, much less during the present unsettling circumstances. Our brains seek cognitive ease, and our inclination is to resolve, even in the face of conflicting evidence. We instinctively want to avoid the discomfort of grappling with complex alternatives and instead adhere to simple stories and solutions. We are prone to react from our past experiences, toward the tried and

true. But the present humanitarian and economic crisis demands otherwise. Leaders must have the curiosity to disrupt their previous visions of coherence and seek new information and perspectives—and in so doing, inspire their organizations into action and change.

They cannot do it alone – the days of the all-knowing leader dictating from the top are long gone. No Individual has the capacity to make sense of the vast changes and variables swirling about them today. Critical to a leader's success will be the other people they are able to motivate and engage—their ability to build exceptional leadership teams equipped to take the company through the hard work ahead. “Now what we are looking for is a lot of creativity, which is more important than ever,” one CEO told us. Inner teams of experts capable of developing fresh approaches and envisioning new behaviors will be needed to wade through the possibilities—to spin complex issues 360 degrees, examine them from all angles, entertain conflicting ideas and invite constructive feedback. Complex solutions will likewise be derived by complex, inclusive means. Teams of diverse thinkers and specialists

can bring distinct, complementary understanding to previously confounding issues and help to keep negotiating the delicate balances so needed now. “Each new view of the horizon is a glance through a different turn of the kaleidoscope” as our own founder, Egon Zehnder, once said.

The leadership imperative emerging will depend on this adaptive, inclusive approach. Even during today's daily battles through the crisis, a CEO's mindset must allow for a shift to dreaming about the future, likely with the support of a team, freeing creativity to flourish. Leaders who have learned to be teachable and who recognize and create space for the capabilities of others will pave the way for the innovation needed to meet the long-term goals so critical to survival and growth. These are the curious, humble and agile leaders we need—those who will continually seek new information from our complex, uncertain world and work collaboratively with their teams in accelerating us through and beyond this turbulent period to a brighter future.

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