

MOVING BEYOND UNCERTAINTY: OVERCOMING OUR RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

by Debbe Kennedy

Regardless of our type of organization or business, we share a common bond. We have witnessed and experienced firsthand the undeniable truth that long periods of uncertainty have human consequences on many fronts. Among the most debilitating for our organizations, and the people in them, are the human consequences that hold us at a standstill. Simply put, the most common impacts can be summed up this way: a level of cynicism that crushes anything new and different, loss of trust in leadership, and withered confidence in ourselves and in the talented people we are counting on to achieve results.

We feel these effects of uncertainty—perhaps even see evidence of their impact in the latest worrisome data, but it is rare that we either admit or openly talk about these human consequences in any real way as part of our routine practices in the workplace, marketplace, or community. Consequently, they inadvertently get woven into our day-to-day work and contributions. This often happens as patterns of behavior slip into the regular scheme of things. They become acceptable over time and carry an infectious influence on leaders, individuals, and sometimes whole teams. Most important, the human consequences of long periods of uncertainty, left unchecked, block creative thinking, new

ideas, and the innovations we need to solve our most pressing problems—and to bring the promise of a better future to life.

How do we begin to move beyond uncertainty and its influences on our organizations? How do we free ourselves from its grasp and its unintended consequences? Where do we begin? The answers to these questions may surprise you. Discovering the answers begins with an openness to first take a look at ourselves, accepting that leaders at all levels play important roles in the process.

Uncertainty and Its Unintended Impact on the Organization

The influence of uncertainty is insidious. It can be gradual, sometimes subtle, or come on in an instant. The doubting words of just one person can paralyze progress. How this takes place is best illustrated with a story that you may relate to from your own experience:

Some years ago, during another time of economic uncertainty and sweeping needs for change, a global organization had reached a place where the senior leaders agreed to focus on one key issue that they felt certain would help them achieve a new level of business results. So together, they commissioned their own A-Team of senior leaders to look closely at a specialized kind of collaboration and teamwork from the vantage points of each of their individual organizations across the world.

Their mission was to come up with a plan of action.

The A-Team met for one packed day, where they spent the time analyzing each of their businesses, doing some computer modeling, engaging in dialogue to test their assumptions, and finalizing a plan of action. *It was electric!* By late afternoon, they had finished and they were congratulating themselves on the job well done. Unexpectedly, in the last few minutes of the day, in what

seemed an instant, a big dark cloud of doubt swept over the A-Team. One leader stood up and proclaimed his concern about the plan working in the uncertain business climate. He thought it was a big risk to implement and suggested that before they began any of the action plans that they pull together a “sub-task force” to study the issues and senior leaders’ plan of action to make sure it would head them in the right direction. Surprisingly, there was immediate consensus. Action halted.

The sub-task force they pulled together was huge, representing all their organizations worldwide. It took a whole year for the large group to complete analysis of issues and the senior leaders’ plan of action. When it was complete, the sub-task force presented their findings. Their lengthy study validated everything that had been concluded during the senior managers’ session. There wasn’t one change made to it. The forward-thinking ideas were then one year behind in getting implemented.

What is it about uncertainty and doubt, and the risk that accompanies it, that makes us take such a detour, rather than taking the bold actions we know need to take place and which have so many benefits? All indicators point to one answer: Taking action, particularly when the future seems uncertain, requires more of us. It often requires paving a new path. Risking. Doing something we know little about or that maybe has never been done. So we often shelter ourselves with talk and task forces. Because the longer we talk, analyze, work to crystallize the perfect words to describe our unique issues (the bigger sounding and more complex, the better!), the longer we avoid having to act—having to figure out what to do—and then risk doing it. Interestingly, moving into action itself is a paradox. On one hand, it is the hallmark that has preceded every innovation, act of leadership, and accomplishment since the beginning of time. Think about one of your own achievements, great or small. Remember that first important step forward. It was freeing, wasn’t it? It felt good to be in motion. Heading in the right direction. *Doing*, at last!

On the other hand, at times even the most action-oriented find themselves temporarily paralyzed by the

“Uncertainty is insidious.”

thought of taking action. Even very talented leaders sometimes get stuck by the uncertainty that surrounds them. This often happens after they have made a significant personal investment in taking a deep dive into the organization to assess where they are. It takes place even after these skilled leaders miraculously pull off getting full sponsorship to proceed. Something kicks in. A hesitation. A panic over the feeling of vulnerability and risk of actually moving out, knowing you are holding the bag, accountable for results. At this common occurrence, the excuses we come up with are often wild and numerous. It's that moment when your screen goes blank. The courage you bolstered up last week, convincing all your sponsors, disappears. The brilliance of the new strategy you designed pales, and all those great ideas suddenly become suspect. The risk of mobilizing has great power over us and often helps us find a detour. The wisdom of Michelangelo sheds light on the true risk of our decisions: *"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it."*

Uncertainty and Its Unintended Impact on Others

Particularly in times of uncertainty and doubt, people are looking for leadership—and we also look to one another for it. Because the realities of the globally distributed, technologically driven world of work that exists, each of us has opportunities to influence others every day. We are all on display. Consequently, how we think, behave, and operate matters. Every word we speak, every thought we express, every attitude we reveal has the potential to be a powerful influence on achieving results for our organizations and also for helping create a better world by our example. In a time of such great need, these leadership truths have increased the significance of the personal responsibility we each own.

In the past few years, I've had the opportunity to witness how the words, actions, and behavior of leaders can spread uncertainty and doubt—and erode confidence in others. Certainly, no leader wants to have this kind of influence, but the results of an informal

Resistance to change was the top challenge to new ideas.

global study give us all cause to take a look at ourselves to see if we might be contributing to it. Since October 2009, when the economic downturn hit, futurist Joel A. Barker and I have been conducting an informal cross-industry, cross-sector innovation survey including leaders at all levels (such as leaders by title, innovators, aspiring leaders, and professionals of every kind), representing Fortune 100, corporate, nonprofit, government, education, churches, and small and medium-size businesses, as well as entrepreneurs and students. We asked them to pinpoint their top challenges in sharing their new thinking and new ideas within their respective organizations or with their unique customers. As of April 2011, we had received responses from more than 3,000 people representing more than two dozen countries and thousands of businesses. One response was so strikingly consistent as to seem universal: 95 percent of respondents reported that resistance to change in its many forms was the top challenge to new thinking and new ideas. It is notable that the percentage has moved up nearly 10 points in the last year or so. As we continued to inquire and followed with deeper discussions, online dialogues, and direct correspondence with those who responded, resistance to change has consistently been on the top of the list.

This survey result indicates that being able to introduce, share, and engage others in your new thinking and ideas effectively is a badly needed critical skill for twenty-first-century leaders at all levels. That said, the results of 2,850 out of 3,000 people reporting their experience of resistance to change and its influence

What are your TOP CHALLENGES
in sharing new **THINKING** and new **IDEAS** ?

3000 leaders and innovators responded, representing the U.S. and 25+ countries
October 2009 – April 2011

95% said **RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

- CYNICISM about all "new and different"
- unwillingness to LISTEN
- NIH - not invented here
- my own CONFIDENCE to deal with the resistance

Source: Innovating in Hard Times Study by Joel A. Barker and Debbe Kennedy
October 2009 – April 2011 | Global Dialogue Center

EXHIBIT 1. TOP CHALLENGE

on them serve as a heads-up that calls for our attention—an opportunity for us to take a look at ourselves. Just imagine the sobering reality of so many talented people—brimming with new ideas—yet experiencing their current workplace, marketplace, or community environment as one that is not only resistant to change but led by those who are cynical, closed to new thinking, unwilling to even listen to new ideas or hear from new people—and whose behavior appears to be draining them of self-confidence in the process. This at a minimum makes it necessary to ask, *What are the chances that you or other leaders in your organization might be leaving similar impressions with those looking to you for leadership?*

Making a Change—What You Can Do

How do we begin to move beyond uncertainty and the impact of resistance to change on our organizations? The answer doesn't involve grandiose change initiatives, consultants, or piles of money for training. It just requires willingness to take a look at ourselves and make a few refinements in how we think, behave, and operate from day to day. Peter Drucker reminded us of the importance of this self-examination in *Managing in a Time of Great Change*: "The individual has to take more responsibility. . . . You have to take responsibility for knowing yourself." Here are three action-directed ways to help you begin:

1. *Observe your own behavior and actions.* Most of what we do is habit. Over the course of a week, consciously make a commitment to observe your habits. Listen and watch how you react to new thinking, new ideas, and new people. Look for signs of your own resistance

to change. You'll recognize it in seemingly small ways (unconscious cynical remarks or cynical body language and expressions that say more than words; talking too much without ever listening; squelching an idea first without asking a question about its advantages; casting careless words of doubt without even realizing it; choosing those same favorites for a task, perhaps overlooking fresh perspectives from others). At the end of the week, if you're like most of us, you'll have some very valuable information to support refinements of your leadership habits, as well as validation of what you're doing well.

2. *Observe your team and organization.* Take another week to consciously and quietly look and listen to how your team reacts to the realities of day-to-day uncertainty, new thinking, new ideas, and new people. Look for those leading by example in positive ways and how they go about it. Also, take time to look for those operating as cynic, victim, or bystander. They too can have a sweeping influence on others—and on you. Again, most of what you will discover is about habits that can be praised or influenced to change.

3. *Talk with your team.* After you've taken a look at yourself and the organization, you will have everything you need to seed a meaningful conversation with your team. The fact that you take the time, in itself, will have great value. Your actions speak loudly about what is important to you. The dialogue doesn't have to be long or a big event. At best, integrate it into your regular staff or team meeting. If you make it part of your regular practice, it opens the possibility for ongoing meaningful discus-

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can do it.”*

sions that keep momentum alive. You might begin the conversation at one meeting by sharing your experience of observing yourself and the organization, outlining key points from what you observed and learned in the process. This gives you an opportunity to also acknowledge exemplary leaders to illustrate a key point. Then invite your team to spend a week going through the same self-assessment. Agree to talk together at your next meeting about what they observe and learn. The dialogue can follow a simple format:

1. What's going well that supports the realities of uncertain times and the need for new thinking and new ideas?
2. What behavior, actions, and practices could be improved?
3. What can each of us do to make a change happen?

The practice of self-reflection is powerful. Peter Drucker described the first basic competence for a leader as the willingness, ability, and discipline to *listen*. "*Listening is not a skill; it is a discipline. Anybody can do it.*" These three simple actions help us put that competence into practice to help us move beyond uncertainty.

Encouragement to Keep Us Going

As we work from the inside out in our organizations to reduce the realities of uncertainty by listening to ourselves and each other in more effective ways, we don't have to look far to see we are not alone. There is always room for refinement, and the best organizations are in a constant state of renewal. To encourage us, there are many positive stories unfolding during the uncertainty of our times and inspiring trailblazers to emulate, and innovative organizations are opening up new pathways to the future every day. We can affirm from listening to their stories what we have learned here. How we think, behave, interact, and operate from day to day matters. It can be a formidable catalyst to help us move beyond the realities of uncertainty and empower us to take advantage of the opportunity in front of us for innovation.

Great leaders have expressed the importance of this personal self-reflective leadership mission in different ways:

Mother Teresa helped us understand we can start on our own: "*Don't wait for the leaders. Do it alone, person to person.*" Gandhi demonstrated his belief that it is how we live and work that teaches others. "*My life is my message,*" he told us. Thomas J. Watson Sr., founder of IBM Corporation, put our call to action in practical terms: "*Nothing so conclusively proves a man's ability to lead others as what he does from day to day to lead himself.*" It is also essential that we rise up *first*, as soon as we can, to take bold steps forward in a visible way. Why? Eleanor Roosevelt defined the significance of this leadership responsibility, when she told us, "*It is not fair to ask of others what you are unwilling to do yourself.*"



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