

Stop Waiting for Certainty. Leadership Happens Before the Answer Is Clear.

A conversation for making responsible decisions when information is incomplete.

**What do we know well enough to act on, what remains uncertain,
and how will we know when it is time to adjust?**

1 WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY KNOW?

Separate evidence from interpretation. What is well supported, current, and relevant to this decision?

2 WHAT REMAINS UNCERTAIN?

Name the unknowns explicitly. Which gaps are important enough to influence what we decide?

3 WHICH UNKNOWNNS CAN WE REDUCE?

What could we reasonably learn through more evidence, consultation, modelling, or research before acting?

4 WHAT CANNOT BE KNOWN YET?

Which conditions will only become visible after action - or may never be fully predictable?

5 HOW REVERSIBLE IS THIS DECISION?

If we are wrong, can we change course? What options should we preserve while uncertainty remains high?

6 WHAT WOULD CHANGE OUR MIND?

Which signals, evidence, or conditions should cause us to reconsider, adapt, pause, or stop?

BEFORE YOU LEAVE

The decision we are ready to make now

The signal or evidence we will monitor

When we will return and review the decision

Certainty is not the standard. Good decision-making is.

Build an Uncertainty Decision Map.

A 20-minute practice for making the uncertainty visible before choosing the next move.

The goal is not to eliminate uncertainty. It is to decide intelligently within it.

1 NAME THE DECISION

What exactly needs to be decided? What does not need to be decided yet?

2 MAP WHAT YOU KNOW

What evidence, constraints, responsibilities, and priorities are sufficiently clear?

3 MAP WHAT YOU DO NOT KNOW

Which assumptions, probabilities, reactions, or future conditions remain uncertain?

4 SORT THE UNCERTAINTY

Can we know more? Can we test first? Is this uncertainty deep or inherent?

5 DESIGN THE NEXT MOVE

What is the smallest responsible, robust, or reversible action that moves us forward?

6 BUILD IN ADAPTATION

What signals will we monitor? What would cause us to change course? When will we review?

A USEFUL LEADERSHIP SENTENCE

Here is what we know today. Based on that evidence, this is the decision. Here are the assumptions underneath it - and here is what would cause us to reconsider.

Committed enough to act. Humble enough to update.

— FROM THE BLOG —

CERTAINTY IS NOT THE STANDARD. GOOD DECISION-MAKING IS.



*Leadership happens **before** the answer is clear.*



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WHAT KIND OF DECISION IS THIS?



CAN WE KNOW MORE?

Is the uncertainty reducible with more evidence?



Gather information.
Do the research.



CAN WE TEST FIRST?

Can we learn by trying on a smaller scale?



Experiment.
Pilot. Prototype.



CAN WE REVERSE IT?

If we act, can we change course later?



Preserve optionality.
Keep doors open.



CAN'T WE KNOW YET?

Is this deep or inherent uncertainty?



Build an adaptive pathway.



MUST WE ACT NOW?

Is there a window for action or a cost of delay?



Choose a robust next move.



Not every uncertainty should
be managed the same way.
Lead with judgement. Learn as you go.



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Lead with clarity.
Decide with courage.
Adapt with humility.

How Do Leaders Work With Uncertainty?

Current findings on uncertainty, sensemaking, adaptive leadership, and decision design

Recent research does not support a heroic model in which good leaders simply know more or predict better. Strong decision-making under uncertainty depends on naming what is and is not known, communicating uncertainty precisely, making sense of changing conditions, preserving options, and creating pathways that allow learning to influence what happens next.

1 How uncertainty is communicated matters.

Research on leader uncertainty suggests that people distinguish between a leader being personally unsure and a situation being inherently uncertain. Precise external uncertainty can preserve credibility while remaining transparent.

Source: Lohre & Teigen (2024)

2 Sensemaking is a core response to unfamiliar conditions.

A 35-year review shows how sensemaking helps people interpret unfamiliar, dynamic environments by noticing cues, constructing plausible accounts, acting, and revising understanding as new information appears.

Source: Eckstein et al. (2025)

3 Deep uncertainty calls for robust and adaptive pathways.

Decision-making under deep uncertainty emphasizes options that perform reasonably across plausible futures, preserve flexibility, and include monitoring and adaptation rather than optimizing for one forecast.

Source: Lempert et al. (2024)

4 Leadership mode should shift with the situation.

Adaptive leadership research distinguishes familiar situations needing efficient coordination from genuinely novel conditions that require broader collective sensemaking and shifts in team and leader behaviour.

Source: Thommes et al. (2024)

5 Systems and future thinking strengthen adaptive leadership.

Recent adaptive-leadership research connects systems thinking, future thinking, mental models, and adaptive change management as important capabilities in volatile and uncertain environments.

Source: Abukalusa & Oosthuizen (2025)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS

Separate evidence from assumption.

Confidence should follow the quality of the evidence, not the pressure to look certain.

Name the uncertainty.

Make clear what is unknown, why it is unknown, and whether it can be reduced.

Preserve options.

When uncertainty is high, reversibility and staged commitment become valuable.

Build feedback into the decision.

Decide in advance what signals will trigger review, adaptation, or a different path.

Open the room when the problem is novel.

If the answer is not known, narrowing who is allowed to think may make the organization less intelligent.

Leadership happens before the answer is clear.

Decision Quality Is Not the Same as Outcome Quality.

A thoughtful decision can encounter a poor outcome. A poor decision can get lucky.

LOOK FOR DECISION QUALITY

- What evidence was available at the time?
- What alternatives were considered?
- Which assumptions mattered most?
- What uncertainties and risks were recognized?
- Was the level of commitment appropriate to the uncertainty?
- What feedback and review points were built in?

WATCH FOR THE HAZARDS

- Certainty theatre - sounding more sure than the evidence justifies.
- Analysis paralysis - assuming another report will eventually remove every unknown.
- Irreversible commitment too early.
- Treating adaptation as failure rather than learning.
- Using one predicted future as though it were the only plausible one.
- Becoming more controlling when the situation actually requires more intelligence.

A PRACTICAL PROJECT PRINCIPLE

Skornyakov argues that project leaders can reduce unpredictability by working in smaller meaningful slices. Each slice creates information that can improve what happens next - a useful principle whenever a large commitment can be broken into responsible learning moves.

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Know enough to act. Learn enough to adapt.