

DIFFICULT TO SEE. ALWAYS IN MOTION.

Written in June 2017. Just after Theresa May's failed election gamble.

There's nothing quite like the unexpected evaporation of a landslide victory to illustrate the power of the unknown. What do we have to learn?

Choose two words that express the opposite of uncertainty. Did you opt for 'strong' and 'stable' by any chance? Didn't work out so well did it?

Strong and stable leadership was an appeal that fell on deaf and angry ears during the election. Despite this endlessly repeated credo, the political landscape now seems as uncertain as any time since World War Two. From Brexit to The Donald to a Glastonbury PM in waiting, strange how quickly the ground no longer feels solid beneath our feet, regardless of our politics.

Uncertainty, we're told is, bad for business, and at the Leadership Trust they know investment in people and team development becomes a tougher choice for clients when the outlook is riskier. (Not surprisingly, they take a different view.) But uncertainty is a bigger problem than that. When it becomes the dominant narrative, anxiety settles in, hearts and minds are distracted, awareness narrows, morale is punctured, the unconfident wagons circle and performance dives.

Filled with dread or a new hope?

So are you feeling the pressure of our uncertain political world? Has the Don't Know gripped you with dread about the implications for your personal or professional future, or are you perhaps energised by the prospect of a near complete break with the old orders? Either way we can safely assume that uncertainty is par for the course. Our responsibility, as leaders throughout our organisations, is about helping our teams cope with that.

But coping—like willpower—is a resource that depletes and requires renewal. How can that be made to happen?

Leading when the pressure is on.

The Leadership Trust was founded on the principle of enabling high performance under pressure. To this day it assume countless obstacles stand between you and your best (and a fair few are self-made). A typical anxiety response to uncertainty is one of the classics. There are two ways teams can learn to cope.

The first is founded on a robust and flexible approach to executing plans and strategies in the face of uncertainty (which puts paid to all semblance of precision). “Man plans and God laughs” as the old Yiddish proverb has it.

Working to a plan that ‘evolves under constantly changing circumstances’ requires a clear purpose and a confident workforce, able to respond on the ground and communicate the revised tactics they’ve adopted. These ideas are over 200 years old yet still seem revolutionary because they demand humility and trust in place of hierarchy and obedience.

The second is about ‘critical distance’. We spend most of our time swept up in the histrionics of our lives. Stepping back to observe what’s happening to us, our colleagues and our groups gives us a chance to address the possible causes for that drama. Mixed with a simple but powerful enquiry—What? So What? What Next?

Critical distance acts like a magic potion and need only take a minute. Literally!

Just stop for a moment

So where does that leave us with uncertainty? “Prediction”, noted the wry Danish genius of quantum physics Niels Bohr, over half a century ago, “is very difficult... especially about the future.” It seems ingrained in human nature to yearn for a shield against the random moments that determine our lives. An emotional handrail, if you like.

Try this. Tim Gallwey talks about his STOP process as ‘the tool of all tools’. It stands for ‘Step back—Think—Organise your thoughts—Proceed’. It’s a simple way of getting the benefits of critical distance. It’ll certainly help you deal with the distractions of uncertainty, but we can’t promise you’ll feel strong and stable. Not even Yoda managed that.