Focus on Leadership
Leading in Uncertain Times

By Connie Whittaker Dunlop, Ed.D., and Steve Gladis, Ph.D.

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Leading in Uncertain Times

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During challenging times, leaders must combat uncertainty with resilience.

The Westhaven Police Department had always been a pillar of the community—trusted, respected, and proactive.[1] Then, in an instant, everything changed.

A viral video of an officer shooting a teenager ignited a firestorm. Stripped of a robbery-in-progress context, a refusal to halt by order of a police officer, and the robber threatening the officer with a pistol, the footage exploded across social media. This triggered mass protests, intense media scrutiny, and withering political pressure. Overnight, calls for resignations and department overhauls dominated the conversation—officers who once walked the streets with confidence now faced anger and distrust. Morale plummeted. Some officers questioned their futures. Whispers of defunding and drastic changes spread like wildfire.

Inside the agency, tensions flared. Some pushed for a strong public defense of the officer; others urged caution and silence. Command staff struggled to maintain order amid external chaos as well as internal uncertainty and disgust at a perceived lack of courage. The chief stood at the center of the storm, facing tough decisions with no clear path forward.

Crisis breeds fear, and uncertainty can paralyze even the strongest teams. Leadership in these moments is not about waiting for clarity but creating it. It is about 1) leading yourself, 2) connecting with others in the department, and 3) taking decisive action when everything feels like it is unraveling.

This is leadership in uncertain times. When the future is murky, leaders do not freeze. They step up.

Leading Self

When faced with uncertainty, the human brain defaults to survival mode. The prefrontal cortex, which governs logical reasoning, problem-solving, and impulse control, can become compromised. In its place, the amygdala—responsible for processing threats—takes over, triggering a fight-flight-freeze response. One expert likens this dynamic to an "elephant and rider" metaphor: the elephant represents the emotional, instinct-driven brain, while the rider symbolizes the rational, decision-making self. When fear is activated, the elephant charges ahead, and the rider's ability to guide it weakens.[2]

Leaders can counteract this tendency by deliberately engaging the prefrontal cortex. One proven tactic is the "10-Second Rule." When confronted with a high-stakes decision, pausing for several slow, deep breaths can recalibrate the nervous system, allowing logical thinking to reengage. Similarly, when time permits, structured reflection—such as taking a short walk or discussing a challenge with a trusted advisor—can provide the necessary cognitive distance to make sound decisions rather than reactive ones.[3]

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Reframing uncertainty as opportunity is another powerful strategy. Neuroscientific research reveals that when challenges are perceived as threats, the brain enters a defensive state, limiting cognitive flexibility and problem-solving capacity. However, when leaders consciously reframe uncertainty as a source of innovation, the brain's reward system is activated, releasing dopamine, which enhances motivation and strategic thinking. Cultivating a growth mindset not only strengthens individual resilience but also sets the tone for connecting with others.[4]

Connecting With Others

Resilient leadership is not a solitary endeavor. Organizations that navigate uncertainty effectively do so because adaptive leaders create psychologically safe spaces and deepen trust on their teams. Additionally, fostering an environment where employees feel empowered to challenge assumptions and offer dissenting perspectives enhances decision-making.

Trust, according to one of the authors, is composed of three elements: character, competence, and caring.[5] Employees must believe that their leaders act with integrity, possess the capability to navigate challenges, and

genuinely care about their well-being. Further, when leaders demonstrate consistency, aligning their words with their actions again and again, followers believe that leaders will fulfill commitments. These collective behaviors reinforce the social contract that underpins effective teamwork.

Also, trust is related to, but different from, psychological safety. One expert defines psychological safety as the shared belief that employees feel secure in expressing ideas, voicing concerns, and taking risks without fear of retribution.[6] Teams with higher psychological safety simply perform better. And, in uncertain times, psychological safety becomes even more critical as fear and stress can lead to burnout and turnover.

Team meetings are an important venue for leaders to foster trust and psychological safety. One of the authors provides a simple roadmap for leaders who want to improve trust and safety on their teams. Be humble at the start of the meeting, acknowledging the novelty of the situation and admitting that leaders do not have all answers. Embody curiosity by asking powerful questions and digging into the answers, one layer at a time. Stay present by inviting dissenting opinions and synthesizing key points from several people. Be intentional in closing the meeting by thanking all participants and clearly stating key takeaways and next steps.[7] Open communication inside and outside of meetings not only mitigates uncertainty but also strengthens trust.

Taking Decisive Action

Once leaders manage their own response to uncertainty and build strong connections, they must take decisive action. Effective decision-making in uncertain environments requires an awareness of cognitive biases, the application of structured decision-making tools, and the right balance between data and intuition.

Cognitive biases can distort judgment, leading to poor decision-making.

- *Hindsight bias* causes leaders to over-rely on past experiences, even when previous solutions may not apply to novel challenges.

- *Confirmation bias* leads them to seek information that reinforces existing beliefs while ignoring dissenting views.

- *Loss aversion* can create risk paralysis, making leaders hesitant to act for fear of making mistakes.

- *Emotional contagion* amplifies stress, impairing collective problem-solving.

Recognizing these biases is the first step in mitigating their impact. "Trust your intuitive instincts in areas where you have deep experience, but go slow in newer, less known situations."[8]

Next, leaders must apply structured decision-making tools to combat uncertainty. And they should resist the urge to limit authority to those in critical roles and postpone significant decisions until more or better information is available. Instead, leaders should gather experts from relevant silos and engage in lively debates. With the right tools, several of which are described below, leaders can navigate complexity with confidence.

1) *Problem-solving:* One of the authors developed and tested a simple 4P problem-solving method—problem, present state, possibilities, and plan. Drawn from action-learning research, this method guides groups and teams to use their collective wisdom to make better decisions.[9]

2) *Authorities:* Using a decision tree framework with root, trunk, branch, and leaf decisions, teams identify key decisions and determine communication pathways to clarify who has what authority when making critical decisions.[10]

3) *Priorities:* Teams make a list of key projects and programs, then prioritize them by urgency and importance using the Eisenhower Matrix.[11] Leaders and their teams walk away with new clarity around what they should do, delegate, decide, and delete.

4) *Scenario planning:* Decision makers identify key uncertainties, develop a set of plausible future scenarios, and craft strategic responses in advance. This approach, widely used in military and corporate strategy, enables organizations, teams, and groups to pivot quickly as new information emerges.

5) *Red team/blue team:* Drawn from the U.S. military and adapted to business, the red team launches a simulated attack, while the blue team tries to detect and stop them. In a facilitated debrief, both teams analyze strengths and opportunities for improvement.

> **Resilient leadership is not a solitary endeavor.**

6) *Polarities:* When leaders learn what a polarity is, they see them everywhere. Examples of polarities include stability vs. change and local vs. global. Using a framework for mapping polarities, groups and teams learn how to shift from either/or to both/and thinking.[12]

Balancing data with intuition is equally important. Research on fast and slow thinking argues for the use of both analytical reasoning and instinct. While data is valuable, excessive reliance on analysis can lead to paralysis. The 80/20 rule offers a pragmatic guideline: leaders should spend 80% of their time gathering insights and 20% making decisions. This ensures that they remain informed without becoming immobilized.[13]

Exhibiting Resilience: The Antidote to Uncertainty

In today's volatile environment, uncertainty is persistent and pervasive. It is persistent in that its presence is constantly felt. Uncertainty is pervasive in that it extends from personal challenges to the world's problems and from the private sector to public servants, like those in the Westhaven Police Department.

Leaders everywhere must combat uncertainty with resilience—managing themselves, connecting with others, and taking decisive action. When they do, they will not only navigate uncertainty effectively but will also position themselves, their teams, and their organizations for long-term success.

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Endnotes

[1] The Westhaven Police Department is a fictional agency used for illustration.

[2] Jonathan Haight, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

[3] Jennifer L. Howell and James A. Shepperd, "Reducing Health-Information Avoidance Through Contemplation," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 9 (2013): 1696-1703, *https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613478616.*

[4] Steve Gladis, *Hacking Brain Science for Leaders* (Belchertown, MA: HRD Press, 2024).

[5] Steve Gladis, *The Trusted Leader* (Belchertown, MA: HRD Press, 2015).

[6] Amy Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

[7] See Connie Whittaker Dunlop, "Safety at Work," *TD Magazine,* June 3, 2024, *https://www.td.org/content/td-magazine/safety-at-work.*

[8] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[9] Steve Gladis, Connie Whittaker Dunlop, and Salpi S. Kevorkian, "Facing the Talent Crisis in Law Enforcement (Part 1)," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin,* November 7, 2023, *https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/facing-the-talent-crisis-in-law-enforcement-part-1;* and Steve Gladis, *Leading Well* (Belchertown, MA: HRD Press, 2017.

[10] See Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations* (New York: Berkley Books, 2004).

[11] See Mark Nevins, "How To Get Stuff Done: The Eisenhower Matrix (a.k.a. The Urgent Vs The Important)," *Forbes,* January 5, 2023, *https://www.forbes.com/sites/hillennevins/2023/01/05/how-to-get-stuff-done-the-eisenhower-matrix-aka-the-urgent-vs-the-important/.*

[12] See Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management* (Belchertown, MA: HRD Press, 2014).

[13] Kahneman.