



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H04QGH  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
JANUARY 09, 2019

## **ARTICLE** **STRATEGIC THINKING**

# Managing When the Future Is Unclear

*by Lisa Lai*

STRATEGIC THINKING

# Managing When the Future Is Unclear

by Lisa Lai

JANUARY 09, 2019



JAMES O'NEIL/GETTY IMAGES

It's one of the few facts in business everyone agrees on: *Without a clear and compelling strategy, your business will fail.* From MBA programs, to business book jackets, to the last keynote you attended, you've heard it repeated again and again.

Despite this, we frequently find ourselves managing in situations of strategic ambiguity—when it isn't clear where you're going or how you'll get there. Why does this happen? Market conditions shift rapidly. Customers have more choices than ever. Resources are constrained. Executives leave, interims are appointed, and searches drag on. The list continues, and even if your company is nimble

enough to set strategy effectively at the top, keeping the entire organization strategically aligned is an entirely different challenge. Your company might have a clear strategic imperative, but your unit or team might not.

In my consulting practice, I work with leaders all over the world on strategy and execution, and they shift uncomfortably in their chairs every time I broach this topic. Strategic uncertainty can feel like slogging through mud. Leaders avoid investments. Decisions are deferred. Resources are frozen. Fear, uncertainty, and doubt drive bad behavior and personal agendas. Even so, companies often succeed or fail based on their managers' ability to move the organization forward precisely at times when the path ahead is hazy.

The best managers find ways to provide steady, realistic direction and to lead with excellence, even when the strategy isn't clear. Push your leaders for clarity, yes. In the meantime, be productive. There are three things you can do today that will put you in a better position to manage strategic ambiguity: Take pragmatic action, cultivate emotional steadiness, and tap into others' expertise.

### **Take Pragmatic Action**

I'm a proponent of practical approaches to dealing with uncertainty. Doing something, anything, in support of your company's success makes you and your team feel better than doing nothing.

**Get back to basics. Deliver value.** First, focus on what you can control. You owe it to the organization and to your team to deliver value every day. What clientele does your team serve today and what do they expect or need from you? How can you perform better, faster, or smarter to deliver on the promise of excellent service? What matters to the organization's mission or vision? How can your team contribute to that? When uncertainty comes, first and foremost do good work. You'll put the company in the best possible position to navigate new strategic choices.

**Place intelligent bets. What's likely?** When the strategy is uncertain, the best managers acknowledge what's unknown, but also look ahead to what *is* known and what *is likely* to happen. What do you know about the dynamics impacting your company? What options are being discussed? What does your boss think will happen? What can you do today to prepare yourself, your team, and potentially your clients for change? In almost every case, managers can place intelligent bets and start to work toward a future state—even when the complete landscape remains out of focus.

**Operate in sprints: Embrace short-term strategies.** Once you've focused your team on delivering value and started to explore what's possible, you're prepared to move forward with a discrete set of priorities. Take a note from organizations that use agile methods and create your own strategic sprint. What can you do personally to contribute to strategic clarity for your part of the business? What projects can your team execute in 30, 60, or 90 days that will benefit the organization regardless of which direction the strategy takes? Strategy isn't only the work of senior executives—any work you do to further the company's capabilities and position your team for the future is a great

investment. Don't stand still, awaiting the "final" answer on strategy. Move your team and the company forward.

### **Cultivate Emotional Steadiness**

Strategic ambiguity pushes you out of your comfort zone. When there's clear, unwavering direction, you can focus on defined targets and deliver results. When strategies shift, or are hinting toward a shift, it's normal to feel unsettled, and you'll see this in your team too. Here are three steps you can take to help yourself and your team navigate the emotions of strategic ambiguity.

**Be proactive. Learn more.** One of the reasons I suggest pragmatic action is because doing something concrete helps you move beyond your raw emotions. But there's more to emotional steadiness. Questions arise naturally: How will this impact my group? What if everything we're doing today alters? What if this involves job changes, layoffs, or lost resources? Learn as much as you can so you're informed, not just reacting to rumor and innuendo. Use your internal network and ask others in the organization for insight, context, and clarity. When you've done the hard work of sense-making, you'll be able to anticipate the questions your team will ask and prepare the most effective answers you can.

**Acknowledge and navigate emotions.** Emotional steadiness requires that you be intentional about the way you show up in the workplace. Your role is to be calm, transparent, and steady, all while painting a vision for the future. Acknowledge your emotions and talk to a peer or your boss if you need to work through them. Play out the worst-case scenario in your mind and then move on to the more likely outcome. Chances are the reality isn't as bad as what you might conjure up when your emotions are heightened. Commit to avoiding stress responses, frustration, rumors, or other nonproductive behavior. Your team members are watching and taking their cues from you.

**Keep team communication open.** Strategic uncertainty can cause managers to communicate with team members less frequently and less openly. "If I don't have clarity to provide, why not wait?" the thinking goes. But in truth, ambiguous situations require you to communicate even more than normal. To demonstrate emotional steadiness, share your own emotions and acknowledge those of your team in productive ways. Let team members know that what they feel is okay. But talk with them about your commitment to being emotionally steady even during times of uncertainty. Ask them to do the same and come to you if they are frustrated or concerned. Maintaining open dialogue will keep your team engaged and aligned until a clear direction emerges.

### **Tap into Others' Expertise**

Leading through periods of uncertainty and change can be isolating for managers. Remind yourself that you are not alone. You have a network of people who have likely faced similar challenges and you can tap into their experiences. Here are three ways you can tap into the expertise of others for support.

**Imagine your most respected leader's approach.** What would they do in your situation? How would they handle the ambiguity or state of flux? How would they view the way you're handling yourself? This exercise can be incredibly powerful in helping you stay calm and emotionally steady, exercise your critical thinking, and take pragmatic action even in the most uncertain circumstances. Those we most respect have demonstrated traits we admire. Tap into their strengths to inform your own.

**Engage other managers.** Managers often believe they need to “be strong” and go it alone to demonstrate managerial confidence and competency. That's not true. My executive clients reach out to peers and former colleagues regularly for advice, counsel, and emotional support. If someone you know reached out to you to ask for your advice, you'd happily provide support and feel valued as a peer. Your network will feel the same. Start the conversation with “I could really use another point of view” and you'll be surprised how quickly others engage.

**Embrace the wisdom of thought leaders.** Your network becomes global when you expand beyond those you know personally to those you can access in today's digital environment. The greater your understanding of how others think about strategic agility and change leadership, the better you'll be able to navigate ambiguity in your company. The brightest and most inspiring minds are at your fingertips—read books and articles, listen to podcasts and interviews, and watch instructive videos, webinars, and more to expand your thinking and learn new approaches relevant to your specific situation.

The ability to thrive during periods of strategic uncertainty separates the great managers who go on to become exceptional leaders from the rest. Don't allow a lack of clarity at your company to cast a shadow over your confidence or performance. Even in the most challenging and ambiguous of situations, you put yourself in a position to succeed when you commit to taking pragmatic action while demonstrating emotional steadiness and drawing on the expertise of others.

---

**Lisa Lai** serves as an adviser, consultant, and coach for some of the world's most successful leaders and companies. She is also a moderator of global leadership development programs for Harvard Business School Publishing. Follow her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), her [Blog](#), or her website at [www.laiventures.com](http://www.laiventures.com).

---