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FROM FEAR TO OPPORTUNITY: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO LEADING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY



INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty has become a defining feature of organizational life, making adaptive leadership more critical than ever.

From technological disruptions to shifts in global politics, leaders are now operating in environments characterized by high levels of volatility, unpredictability, and complexity. While traditional leadership approaches emphasize control and definitive answers, modern leaders must embrace not knowing as an inherent aspect of their roles. This article explores how leaders can adopt a relational approach to navigate uncertainty more effectively. The framework highlighted in *figure 3* underscores the emotional and behavioral dynamics of uncertainty and provides actionable leadership practices to address it.



UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS OF UNCERTAINTY

The way leaders experience and manage the emotional dynamics of uncertainty has a significant impact on themselves, their teams, and organization.

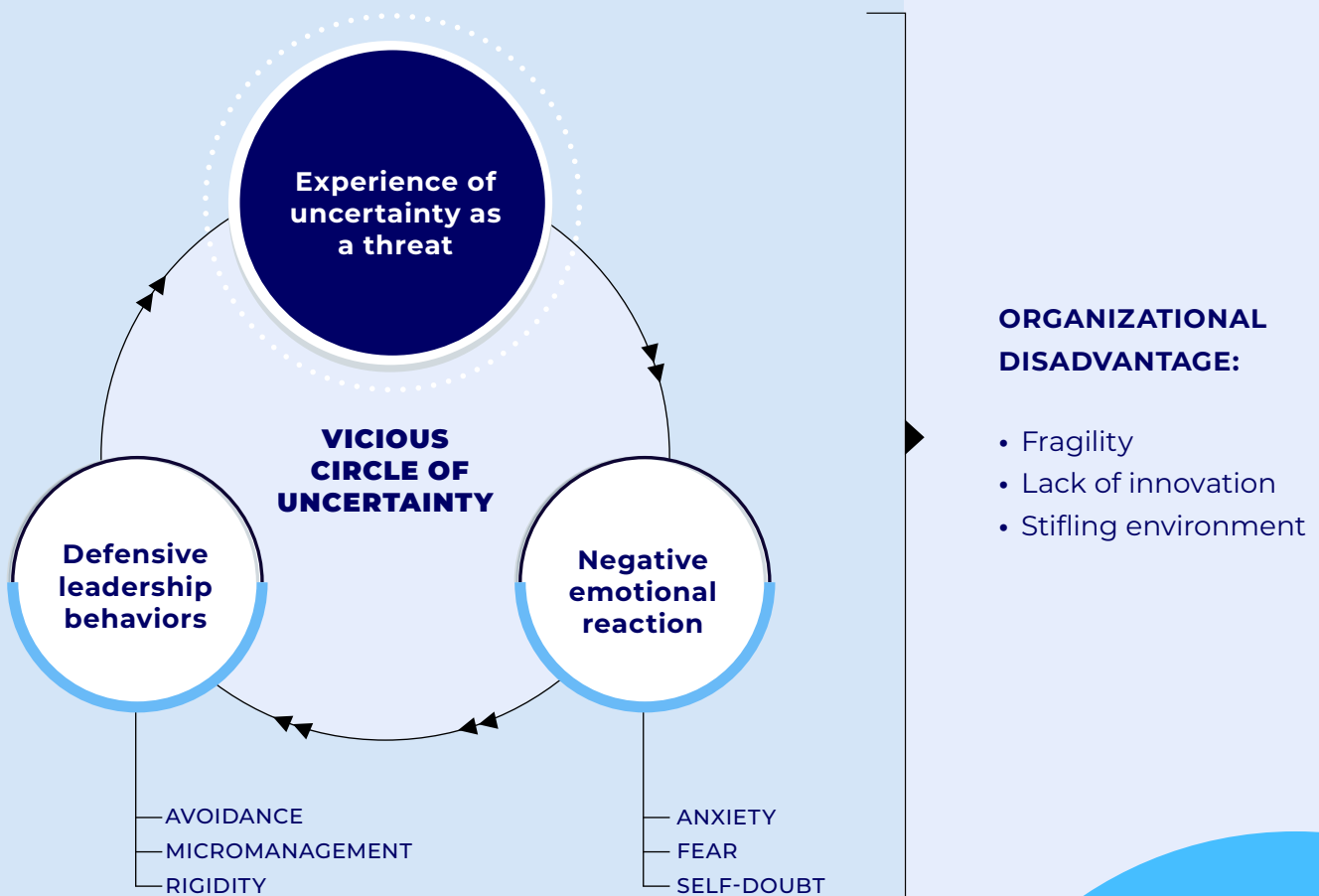
When uncertainty is perceived as a threat, it often triggers a vicious cycle that leads to defensive behaviors in leaders and negative organizational outcomes (*Figure 1*). In other words, the negative experience of uncertainty evokes strong emotional reactions such as feelings of anxiety, fear, and discomfort (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). When these emotions are left unchecked, they lead to dysfunctional leadership behaviors. For example, faced with the anxiety of not knowing and not feeling in control, a leader may default to micromanagement or introduce overly rigid structures to provide the illusion of certainty. The most problematic aspect is not that these defensive behaviors are ineffective (i.e., the uncertainty cannot be reduced) but that they are counterproductive. In fact, rigidity and control destroy the necessary conditions for a leader and their team to effectively manage uncertainty and find adaptive solutions. Moreover, when leaders persistently apply ineffective strategies to reduce uncertainty, they create a weak culture characterized by fragility (Taleb, 2012), lack of innovation and adaptability. Organizations with such cultures are at a higher risk of being disrupted and becoming irrelevant by failing to adapt to the changing environment.

“LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT BEING IN CHARGE. IT IS ABOUT TAKING CARE OF THOSE IN YOUR CHARGE. AND THAT REQUIRES EMPATHY, PATIENCE, AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE—ESPECIALLY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY.”

—SIMON SINEK,
LEADERSHIP AUTHOR & SPEAKER

However, leaders can stop the vicious cycle of uncertainty by effectively managing their feelings, increasing self-awareness and emotional self-regulation. Moreover, acknowledging fear and openly addressing shared concerns allows leaders to build deeper connections with and among team members while increasing the psychological safety of the team.

Figure 1: *Uncertainty as a Threat*



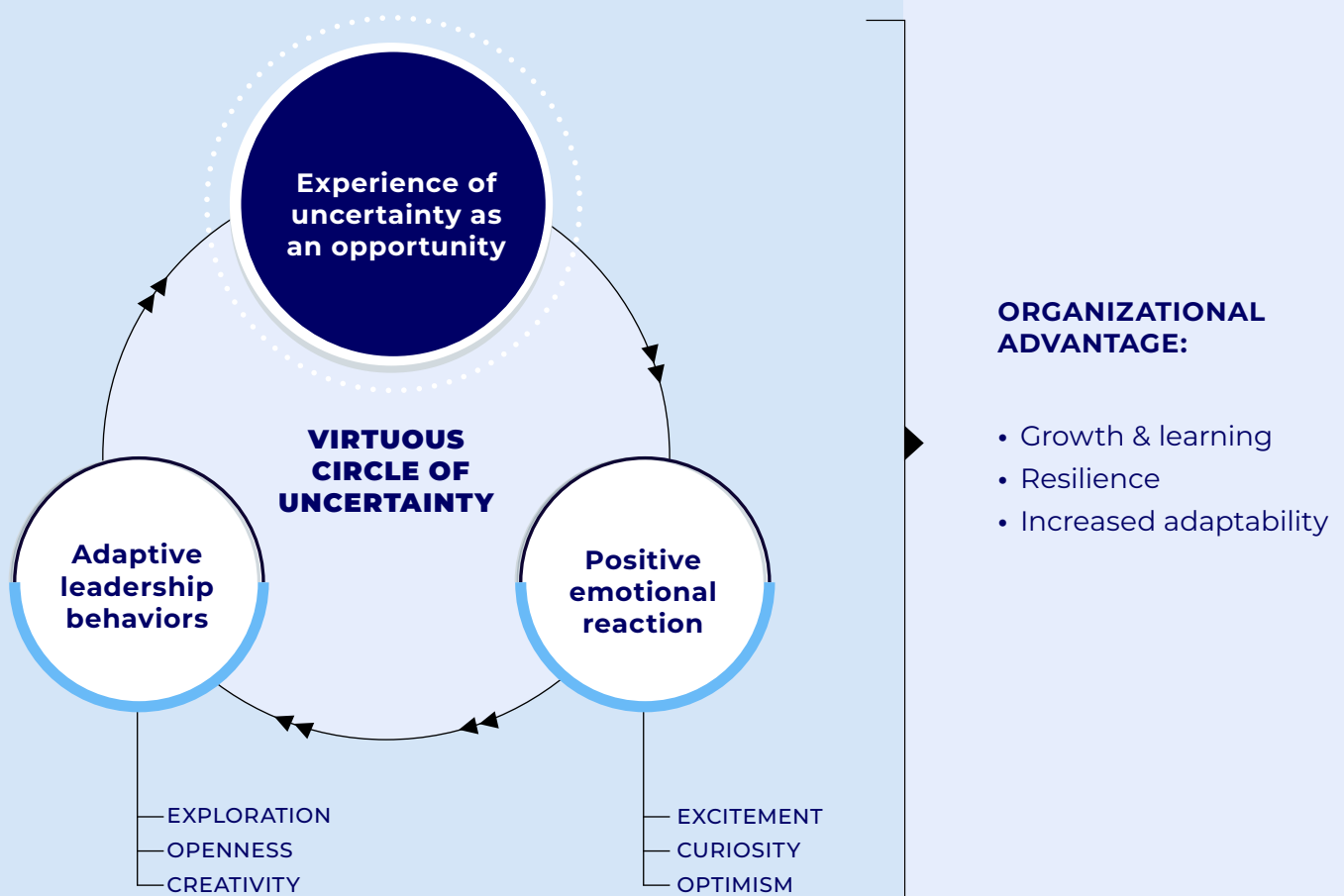
“THE ABILITY TO EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY AS AN OPPORTUNITY IS A DEFINING ABILITY FOR THE MODERN LEADER.”

—NICK VAN DAM AND LUCRECIA GRANDOLINI

On the other hand, when leaders embrace uncertainty as an opportunity, it frequently inspires a virtuous cycle that results in positive emotions such as excitement for new possibilities, curiosity for the unknown, and optimism. In turn, these emotional reactions lead to adaptive behaviors such as exploration, curiosity and openness to diversity of viewpoints and opinions (Grandolini, 2022). This reframing of uncertainty is critical for creative problem-solving when faced with complex and uncertain problems.

Over time, these adaptive leadership behaviors shape the culture to be one of continuous learning and innovation, increasing the organization’s resilience and ability to effectively adapt to the competitive and volatile market.

Figure 2: *Uncertainty as an Opportunity*



LEADERSHIP PRACTICES TO TRANSFORM UNCERTAINTY INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

Leaders play a key role in creating conditions within their teams to leverage uncertainty as an opportunity rather than a threat. There are four key practices they can use to effectively deal with the unknown, as demonstrated by our research (Grandolini, 2022). These strategies are: establishing trust, embracing not knowing, engaging in dialogue, and distributing power (Figure 3). At the center lies a relational approach to leadership, which focuses on creating environments of trust and inclusion. By adopting a relational approach, leadership becomes an emergent, dynamic process as opposed to leading by authority, formal power, or command and control.

Figure 3: Relational Approach to Leading Through Uncertainty





ESTABLISHING TRUST

Establishing trust is the cornerstone of effective leadership in uncertain times. It involves creating an environment where team members feel safe expressing their concerns and can share ideas and take risks without fear of judgment or reprisal (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Leaders can establish trust by:

- Demonstrating consistency and transparency in their actions and decision-making;
- Actively listening to team members, checking for meaning; and acknowledging their emotions with care and compassion;
- Being authentic, approachable, and respectful in every interaction with every person.



EMBRACING NOT KNOWING

Acknowledging that one does not have all the answers is a powerful act of vulnerability and authenticity. It shifts the focus from the leader as the sole problem-solver to the collective wisdom of the team. Strategies to embrace not knowing include:

- Encouraging open-ended questions and inviting diverse perspectives; actively asking for a counterview and seeking challenge;
- Normalizing not knowing by sharing questions and areas of confusion; encouraging exploration and iteration; refraining the urge to jump into solutions too quickly;
- Modeling humility by admitting gaps in knowledge and demonstrating a commitment to continuous learning.
- Allowing space for deeper reflection and discovery.

“NOBODY HAS ALL THE ANSWERS. KNOWING THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW EVERYTHING IS FAR WISER THAN THINKING THAT YOU KNOW A LOT WHEN YOU REALLY DON'T. THE WISE LEADER HAS LEARNED HOW PAINFUL IT IS TO FAKE KNOWLEDGE.”

—JOHN HEIDER, THE TAO OF LEADERSHIP.



“DIALOGUE IS ABOUT A SHARED INQUIRY, A WAY OF THINKING AND REFLECTING TOGETHER. IT IS NOT SOMETHING YOU DO TO ANOTHER PERSON. IT IS SOMETHING YOU DO WITH PEOPLE.”

—WILLIAM ISAACS.



ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE

Open and rich dialogue fosters mutual understanding and collective sense-making, which is essential in times of disorientation and confusion. By entering into dialogue, teams can cocreate solutions and navigate ambiguity together. Effective dialogue involves:

- Facilitating conversations to explore multiple perspectives, and considering both challenges and opportunities (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010);
- Using reflective questioning to deepen insights from an attitude of interest and curiosity (Schein, 2013);
- Avoiding the use of close, rhetorical and leading questions;
- Ensuring all voices are heard and equally valued;
- Accepting and appreciating all ideas without judgment, blame, or shame.

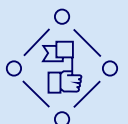


DISTRIBUTING POWER

Distributing power empowers teams to take ownership of decisions and actions. It decentralizes leadership and leverages the diverse strengths within a group. Practices for distributing power include:

- Delegating authority and decision-making responsibilities;
- Encouraging participation and enabling access to the right resources, people, and forums;
- Enabling autonomy and freedom to operate within clear principles and boundaries.

APPLYING A RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP APPROACH



A relational approach to leadership views leadership as a dynamic, co-constructed process that emerges through interactions between individuals rather than being tied solely to a leader’s position or authority (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). It focuses on the interconnectedness of individuals and co-construction of meaning through dialogue. In this sense, relational leadership should happen across the organization beyond those in formal positions of power and authority. Rather than seeking absolute control or certainty, relational leadership thrives in ambiguity by fostering adaptability, curiosity, and co-creation.



IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations play a critical role in supporting leaders in their navigation of uncertainty. Key organizational strategies include:

1.

Developing leadership capabilities:

Offering learning programs that enhance emotional intelligence, adaptability, and relational leadership skills and mindsets (van Dam & Grandolini, 2024).

2.

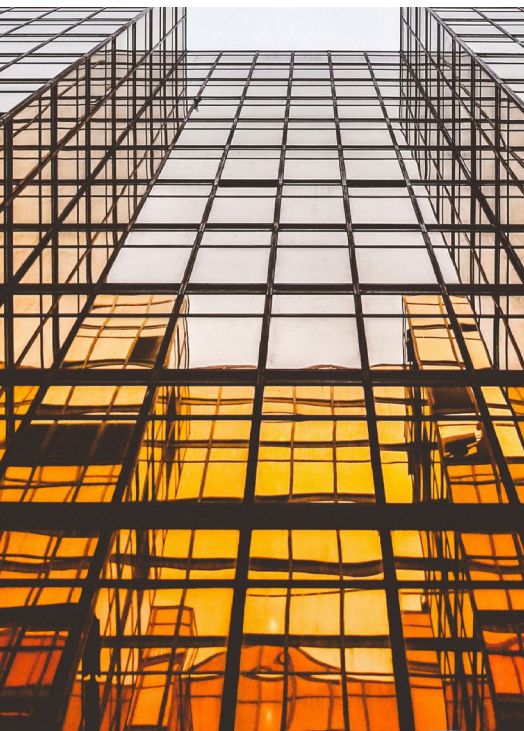
Promoting a learning culture:

Encouraging experimentation, continuous feedback, and curiosity. Encouraging **questioning over certainty**, prompting teams to explore multiple perspectives.

3.

Increasing psychological safety:

Ensuring that leaders and teams feel supported in taking calculated risks, voicing their opinions, and challenging ideas.



IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL LEADERS

Leaders must actively cultivate their ability to embrace and manage uncertainty. Practical steps include:

- **Practicing self-leadership:** Developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience (Goleman et al., 2013);
- **Engaging in life-long learning:** Practicing humble inquiry, acquiring new skills, and deliberately engaging in activities outside their comfort zone;
- **Building strong and diverse networks:** Collaborating with peers, mentors, and stakeholders whose alternative views and diverse perspectives challenge assumptions and engrained behaviors.



CONCLUSION

Leading through uncertainty requires a shift in mindset – from control to collaboration, from certainty to curiosity, from telling to questioning. By adopting a relational approach, leaders can transform uncertainty into an opportunity for growth and innovation. The practices of establishing trust, embracing not knowing, engaging in dialogue, and distributing power provide a road map for navigating the unknown with confidence and agility.

A relational approach fosters an environment where uncertainty is not feared but embraced as a catalyst for creativity and adaptation. Leaders who create spaces for vulnerability, transparency, and open dialogue and co-creation, cultivate a sense of collective ownership, allowing their teams to rise to the challenges of an unpredictable world.

Ultimately, the ability to turn uncertainty from fear into opportunity lies not in having the right answer but in the collaborative journey of exploration and adaptation. Leaders who embrace uncertainty as a shared experience rather than a solitary burden are better positioned to drive sustainable success and build resilient teams and organizations.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1.

How do you currently respond to uncertainty in your role as leader? What do you find most challenging? And what do you find most helpful?

2.

Which of the relational practices discussed resonates with you the most? How can you integrate it into your daily leadership?

3.

What steps can you take to foster a culture of trust, dialogue, and openness to not knowing so your team feels empowered to navigate uncertainty?

4.

How can you more effectively embody humility and curiosity when navigating the unknown?



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



DR. NICK VAN DAM

Dr. van Dam is a dynamic force in the world of leadership and talent development. With a deep passion for helping individuals and organizations reach their full potential, Nick is an internationally recognized speaker and the best-selling author of more than 30 books on leadership, organizational behavior, corporate learning, and talent management.

With more than 25 years of extensive business experience, Nick has held influential roles as a former partner, global chief learning officer, business executive at top organizations such as Siemens, Deloitte, and McKinsey. Through his expertise, Nick has made a tangible impact, having served over 100 clients worldwide.

Nick holds professorial positions at IE Business School and Nyenrode Business University. He also serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard Business Publishing, where he is recognized as a thought leader. Nick is director of the IE Business School Center for Corporate Learning and Talent Management, and is the founder and academic director of the IE and Nyenrode Global HR Leadership Diploma Program and Global L&D Leadership Program. In addition, Nick is an external senior advisor and faculty member at McKinsey & Company and founded the e-Learning for Kids Foundation, which has provided free digital learning to 30 million children globally.

Nick has studied organization sociology (MA, Universiteit van Amsterdam), human capital development (PhD, Nyenrode Business Universiteit), and psychodynamic psychology (EMC, INSEAD).



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Lucrecia Grandolini is an organizational psychologist with a passion for enhancing workplace performance and development. With over 15 years of experience across leadership, learning, management consulting, and clinical psychology, she seamlessly blends academic rigor with practical insight. Most recently, Lucrecia served as the Global Head of Learning and Development at Investec. Previously, she was a management consultant in Deloitte's Human Capital practice in London.

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