

How to Deal with Ambiguity

"That must be wonderful; I have no idea what it means."

~ Albert Camus

What do you do when asked to take action without a clearly defined goal or desired outcome? Are you able to deliver without having the full picture? Are you comfortable handling the risk or uncertainty? Do you feel a need for more clarity?

Many people find themselves struggling when faced with an ambiguous situation. Yet the amount of ambiguous situations and their level of ambiguity seem to increase with each passing year. Further, as one rises in an organization, ambiguous situations tend to become more and more frequent. Dealing with ambiguity is rapidly becoming one of the most essential leadership competencies, particularly in complex and rapidly changing environments.

Successful leaders deal with ambiguity by remaining calm and focused. They can comfortably shift gears. And they also help others navigate through the fog.

To tackle the challenges presented by ambiguous situations, we can first strive to make things clearer:

- Ask probing questions to seek a better understanding of the problem. Ask until you are satisfied you have a clearer picture of the causes and impacts.
- Get organized by writing what you know as well as your assumptions. Then categorize them into manageable and related segments that can be evaluated and acted upon in small steps.
- Remain flexible and revise your conclusions and solutions as more information becomes available. Ambiguous situations are hard to pin down. Do not be afraid to change direction even if that means losing work that has been done.

In spite of our very best efforts, many complex situations, by their very nature, remain ambiguous. Our next strategy, then, is to learn how to cope with the unavoidable level of uncertainty:

- Free yourself from the notion that you must come up with the perfect solution. Waiting to have all the information at hand before acting can sometimes lead to dire consequences or missed opportunities.
- Let go of the need to control events that fall outside of your control. Acknowledge that other factors influence success and feel confident you have increased your *likelihood* of success by taking appropriate actions and doing your best.
- Recognize that the presence of ambiguity is accompanied by some inherent risks. There will inevitably be times when you make a mistake because you did not have enough information. View those mistakes as learning opportunities that will increase your future chances for success.

Most of us can make good decisions when provided with sufficient information. What makes some more successful than others is the ability to make good decisions with insufficient amounts of information. That ability often comes from experience gained by a willingness to take measured risks.

One of the keys to career progression is learning not only to succeed personally in ambiguous situations, but to also help your team succeed. Use these tips to increase your level of comfort and your ability to deal with these difficult situations. Even more important, help teach others to do the same by sharing what you have learned.