

## Harnessing Uncertainty How to Prosper in the Unknowable New Normal

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Have you heard any of these questions lately?

- What will the new normal look like?
- How long will the recession last for my country, industry, and company?
- What, where, and how will be the future of work?
- When will a vaccine be available? Will COVID-20 be even worse?
- And countless others

Two extreme options exist to answer these (and other) questions. On the one hand, some leaders suggest *false hope* and try to manage or control the uncertainty by offering solutions, proposing definitive answers, and declaring a new normal. These false hopes often create cynicism. On the other hand, some people *give up or give in* and tolerate uncertainty by accepting the lack of answers and merely reacting to changing conditions, thus abandoning hope leading to despair.

I propose a new option between these two extremes --- *harness uncertainty* to have realistic optimism about what can happen (see Figure 1) --- and review the why, what, and how of harnessing uncertainty.

*Figure 1: Responses to Uncertainty*

### Why Harness Uncertainty?

Leaders in organizations and people, in general, have less control over the context in which they work and live, than their responses to the context: content is king, but context is the kingdom. An enduring lesson of this pandemic will likely be the inevitable and lingering reality of uncertainty. In early 2020, people everywhere were living their normal lives, then the global pandemic upended routines, plans, actions, and lifestyles in ways no one could have predicted. Looking forward no one can definitively answer what's next. Harnessing uncertainty avoids the two extremes of false hope or no hope in Figure 1.

[Psychologists have found](#) individuals with a tolerance for uncertainty (or ambiguity) have more positive cognitions (confidence), emotions (hope), and behaviors (decision making). [Leadership](#) and [organization](#) scholars have found that learning and organization agility (a response to uncertainty) is a key predictor of success. Simply stated, uncertainty is real; harnessing it determines our reality.

### What Does Harnessing Uncertainty Mean?

Uncertainty is not a new concept and many terms have been used to characterize it: unpredictability, variety, inconsistency, [ambiguity](#), incomprehensibility, complexity, disorder, unfamiliarity, and so forth. Harnessing means capturing energy (harness wind and solar energy or harness personal energy), protecting oneself for safety (wearing a harness in dangerous settings), focusing attention (using harnesses to control animals), and driving change (harness racing). *Harnessing uncertainty* means turning the threat of not knowing the future into opportunity by becoming more energized, psychologically safe, focused, and agile. Many disciplines have approached uncertainty as a key challenge, offered insights about uncertainty, and suggest positive outcomes from harnessing it (see summary).

### **How to Harness Uncertainty (Six Principles):**

Drawing from the above disciplines and from [our research on organizations](#), let me propose six principles for harnessing uncertainty.

1. **Tame apprehensions.** Turn the mindset of uncertainty as threat into opportunity by acknowledging and running into the fears and anxiety it creates, naming the uncertainty and exploring its causes, knowing and overcoming one's predispositions, and becoming more mindful by learning skills of being calm, curious, and compassionate.
2. **Envision the future.** Even in the midst of today's uncertainty, anticipate what future success can be. Put specific events (e.g., working at home) into patterns (how I work) and then envision future patterns (how I might work in the future). Identify the specific behaviors of future opportunities and celebrate progress when acquiring those new behaviors.
3. **Regulate expectations.** Uncertainty often leads to disappointment because one can never do enough when enough is undefined which often leads to unrealistic expectations. Regulate expectations by recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses and defining personal and realistic measures of success. Accept minimal acceptable outcomes (called [satisfice](#)) that shape a new identity. Recognize that a new identity emerging from uncertainty will take a gestation period to acquire.
4. **Experiment nimbly.** Uncertain settings can give rise to incredible innovation of ideas and solutions. Experiment by taking small and simple actions that you have not done before. Take risks by exploring new ways to approach old problems. Do scenario planning to see alternatives. Celebrate what works.
5. **Guide choices.** Use uncertainty to bring discipline to making better choices and decisions. Seize control of actions that are within your control by accessing information to make and improve decisions. Create a growth mindset to learn rigorously and adapt quickly. Pay less attention to trying to change factors outside of your control and more attention to guide choices within your control.
6. **Collaborate frequently.** Affiliate with others to share processes and insights for harnessing uncertainty. Identify others who face your uncertainties. Talk with them, learn from them, and invite their advice on your circumstances. Find an accountability partner who will support your new efforts.

Belong to a community of those committed to harnessing uncertainty.

See summary in Figure 2:

*Figure 2: Six Principles of Harnessing Uncertainty*

These are clearly not the only six principles to harness uncertainty, but they offer guidance to individuals, leaders, and organizations as indicated below.

## Conclusion

Uncertainty will likely outlast the current crisis. If business and HR leaders can learn to harness uncertainty, they will help individuals and organizations prosper in the unknowable new normal.

How do you harness the uncertainties in your life?



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