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Managing Uncertainty:

Leading Through the Fog



MANAGING UNCERTAINTY: LEADING THROUGH THE FOG

By InnerDrive



WHEN & WHY

Educational leadership rarely stays static for long and with the combination of shifting external pressures and the complexities of large staff and student populations, uncertainty is often the biggest certainty. Traditional decision-making, which rests on clear cause and effect relationships, loses its power when outcomes are unpredictable and information is incomplete. When leaders fail to navigate uncertainty effectively, teams and organisations suffer the following predictable dysfunctions:

- Analysis paralysis and missed decision windows
- Knee-jerk overreactions to short-term disruptions
- Anxious top-down micromanagement
- Initiative overload and strategic drift
- Staff exhaustion and decision fatigue

THE SHIFT TO SENSE-MAKING

The first step that leaders need to make in times of uncertainty is a shift in mindset away from their traditional role of problem-solver or decision-maker and towards one of exploration and sense-making. Defined as the active process through which people interpret, comprehend and give meaning to novel, confusing or ambiguous events, sense-making is an essential skill for educational leaders and requires the following changes in thinking:

Action precedes full understanding

The traditional view of leadership and decision-making often places an emphasis on exploring before acting. However, organisational theorist Karl Weick suggests that you can't just think your way through foggy



situations (1995). In complex, uncertain situations, it is often action that generates the extra information required to gain full understanding and so leaders should be encouraged to run small 'probe and prompt' exercises to gradually gather more evidence.

Mental Models are Malleable

To truly shift into a sense-making mindset, leaders must acknowledge the short shelf life of their mental models and the need to continually see their understanding as a working hypothesis that is open to change. Establishing a culture of psychological safety and surrounding themselves with diversity both demographically and cognitively ensures that leaders maintain an honest and accurate view of reality.

Leave Space for Others

In times of uncertainty and with a shift towards sense-making, leaders must purposefully step back from the front of the stage and leave space for others to contribute. Letting others speak first, amplifying the quiet voices, using tentative language when proposing thoughts and decisions and loosely linking cause and effect, communicates to others that their voice belongs and their contributions matter.

WORKING IN THE GREY

When it's hard to see a clear path forward and leaders are unable to force issues and decisions into neat binary boxes, they may be tempted to rush to resolve internal confusion and external tension. In these situations, there is a danger that leaders act prematurely, pick oversimplified solutions or just simply hide away. Instead, they should learn to work within the grey with the following strategies:

Embracing Incompleteness

The dynamism of schools means that leaders rarely have the full picture before needing to decide and delaying action too much can cause a paralysis that stalls momentum and misses windows of opportunity. Depending on the situation, leaders must find the sweet spot where they have a broad and accurate view of reality but accept that full understanding will only evolve through action. Additional safety can be created through the use of low-stakes pilots, tight iteration cycles and frequent review points to maximise agility.

Transparent Communication

Uncertainty and ambiguity often create an information vacuum which is quickly filled with staff anxieties, rumours and negative assumptions – which leaders must instead fill with clarity and concreteness. Leaders can lessen these voids by maintaining a regular and predictable communication cadence even if updates are minimal. Utilising a three-part message structure where leaders state what is known, what remains unknown and what is being done to find out can help staff manage any anxiety, while setting immediate actions helps maintain a feeling of progression.

Emotional Composure

How leaders behave in uncertain times often amplifies across the organisation and staff naturally look to them to gauge the gravity of situations and levels of preparedness and progress. Protecting the pause and deliberately putting space between disruption and action is a great first step to maintaining emotional composure. Leaders who can maintain a non-anxious presence in reactive climates lower collective stress and create the psychological bandwidth that they and their teams need for focused problem-solving (Friedman, 2007).

Team Empowerment

The complexity that often precedes and follows uncertainty means that no single leader has or should fool themselves to think they have enough insight or capacity to solve problems alone. David Marquet (2013) argues that authority needs to be pushed to those with the information and when frontline staff are empowered, organisations become much more resilient and agile. To avoid administrative bottlenecks and empower teams, leaders need to instil an accountability mindset, define clear guardrails and decentralise problem-solving and decision-making.

Anchoring decisions to values

When urgency or importance dictate a quick decision, but the lack of certainty says otherwise, leaders must look to the school's core values, purpose and mission to provide the moral and strategic bedrock. Anchoring actions to agreed goals and values ensures that leaders and frontline staff can feel confident and empowered to think creatively and find innovative solutions without the fear of compromise.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Uncertainty is sadly not something that will only temporarily disrupt the work of school leaders or that can be waited out, so leaders must learn to shift their mindset and work in the grey. Shifting to a sense-making role may mean acting before the full picture is clear, being open to new ways of thinking and taking a back seat so others can shine. When moving through the fog is the only option, leaders need to make use of low-risk trials and pilots, communicate as transparently as possible, maintain their own emotional composure and push authority and autonomy to the people doing the actual work. When times get really cloudy, leaders must refocus on core values and trust that they will provide a guiding light.

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Marquet, L. D. (2013). Turn the ship around!: A true story of turning followers into leaders. Portfolio/Penguin.

Weick, K. E. (1995). Sensemaking in organizations. SAGE Publications.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

Ganon Shilon, Sherry & Schechter, Chen. (2017). Making sense of school leaders' sense-making. Educational Management Administration & Leadership. 45. 682-698. 10.1177/1741143216628536.

Books

Amy C. Edmondson (2018). The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth. Wiley.

General Stanley McChrystal et al. (2015). Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World. Penguin.



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