

5 ways to manage through uncertainty

It's an unsettling time and with life changing constantly, the way ahead doesn't always feel clear.

We all respond to uncertainty in different ways but there are some practical things that you can do to limit the uncertainty where you can and keep productive.

By the end of this guide...

You'll have some practical actions you can take to help you feel more in control.

Does this sound familiar?

In times of uncertainty, it's normal to find yourself feeling or doing these things:

You might find it hard to make decisions

You might hold off from making a decision, in the hope that you'll have clarification soon. Or in extreme cases, you might feel completely paralysed. When this happens, work can grind to a halt.

You might be taking risks

On the flip side, you might take risks you wouldn't normally. If you're under pressure to take action, you might make quick, ill-informed decisions to get things moving.

You've got too much to do

When we make decisions without all the information, it could mean generating more work than is really needed.

You're feeling stressed

The pressure to make a decision – and the worry about making the wrong decision – might leave you feeling anxious.

Step one: What's your response?

Take the quiz on the next page to get a true picture of how you deal with ambiguity. You'll quickly spot some areas of focus.

Step two: What can you do now?

You may have spotted some actions you can take from the quiz. **As well as this, here are five things you can try today.**

Be specific

When receiving information or instructions, ask for specific details. Information is easily lost or misinterpreted, so ask people to be as precise as possible.

Strike a balance

Managing through uncertainty means striking a balance between taking enough time to think things through and taking action. **Use the checklist in this pack to help you make better decisions.**

Break it down

Break down decisions or problems into small chunks. As you make decisions on these smaller issues, everything else will become a little clearer.

Think differently

Tried and tested approaches don't always work in unprecedented situations. Don't be afraid to try a different way or suggest an alternative option.

Know yourself

Being aware of how you deal with uncertainty and developing coping strategies will go a long way in diffusing stressful situations. **Complete the quiz on the next page to see where you are.**

Quiz

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Take this quiz to get a true picture of how you deal with ambiguity. Some of the questions ask you to consider real examples, so be as honest as possible.

Step 1: Identify your enablers

If you answer **no** to three or more questions in a section, it is likely that this is an area in which you need to improve.

1. Motivated by mysteries

Would you say that you are attracted to the unknown and the unfamiliar?	Yes	No
If your colleagues were asked to describe you, would they say that you actively seek out new ideas and possibilities?	Yes	No
Have you recently investigated an issue at work just because you were intrigued by it?	Yes	No
Consider past problems that you have faced at work. Did you naturally seek out new information or ways of doing things?	Yes	No

2. Risk tolerance

Think about your attitude when you have made big decisions at work. Do you tend to rely upon your intuition and gut instinct?	Yes	No
Do you tend to view risks as a means of increasing your experience and knowledge?	Yes	No
Consider a current project that you are involved with. Have you visualised the consequences of things not going as planned?	Yes	No
Think about a difficult decision that you have made. Did you make it even when others did not agree with you?	Yes	No

3. Scanning ahead

Think about when you last did a team brainstorming exercise. Did you have any ideas that were considered unconventional or 'outside the box'?	Yes	No
Do you like to get to the heart of an issue and find out what really makes something work?	Yes	No
Think about the planning stages of the last piece of work you were responsible for. Did your plans take account of future possibilities and scenarios that might arise?	Yes	No
Do you spend time exploring the logic of a situation so that you can hone in on the key facts?	Yes	No

4. Tackling tough issues

Consider the last time you faced a major setback or failure at work. Did you reflect upon what you learnt from this experience and identify what you would do differently next time?	Yes	No
Think about a project that involved a lot of resistance and negativity from stakeholders (or employees or managers). Were you able to counter their concerns and work towards a compromise?	Yes	No
Do you find it easy to keep the key objective of a project in sight, in the face of other options and distractions?	Yes	No
Does your desire to succeed increase the more difficult a project becomes?	Yes	No

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5. Creating excitement

Think about your last month at work. Would you say you were mostly enthusiastic and positive?	Yes	No
Would your team say that you are almost always in a positive frame of mind about your work?	Yes	No
Think about the last time a team member told you their work was difficult or uninspiring. Did you help them find a way to make the work more interesting?	Yes	No
Consider the last time you needed to put a project team together. Did people actively volunteer to work on the project with you?	Yes	No

6. Being flexible

Think about the last significant error or mistake you made. Have you changed how you work in light of this?	Yes	No
When people appear to resist change, do you acknowledge their concerns and help them find practical ways to proceed?	Yes	No
Think about a recent problem that your team has faced. Did you encourage them to work together to find a solution?	Yes	No
Do you actively seek out different ways to approach problems rather than relying upon what has worked in the past?	Yes	No

7. Being a simplifier

Are you able to cut through complexity to understand the core of an argument or message?	Yes	No
Consider your most recent presentation. Did you communicate ideas using simple language, slogans and images?	Yes	No
Think about the last time you needed to explain something complicated to your team. Did they find your explanation easy to follow?	Yes	No
When you talk to colleagues and your team, are you known for being clear and precise?	Yes	No

8. Getting focused

Consider a recently completed project you were involved with. With hindsight, did you quickly pinpoint the most critical activities?	Yes	No
With the same project in mind, did you feel you made the wisest investment of your time and resources?	Yes	No
When faced with a myriad of tasks and options, are you good at recognising what you must immediately focus on?	Yes	No
Can you shift your focus quickly when critical activities and priorities change?	Yes	No

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Before you move on

Go back over your answers and identify the sections where you've answered 'no' to three or more questions. These are the areas which may need the most work.

Identify your three weakest areas in the space below. If your results are very close, or you have more than three areas which need attention, think about which are most relevant to achieving success in your role.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Step 2: Identify your blockers

If you answer **yes** to three or more questions in a section, it is likely that this is an area in which you need to improve.

1. Trouble with transitions

Do you always deal with all aspects of a project or task before you feel you can move on?	Yes	No
Do you avoid putting yourself forward for projects which you don't feel are suited to your particular skills?	Yes	No
Do you suspect your team/colleagues sometimes avoid speaking to you about certain issues because of how you might handle them?	Yes	No
Do you find it difficult to switch between being assertive, and being friendly and approachable when situations demand it?	Yes	No

2. Not motivated by work

Do you often find yourself being critical of your organisation, or your team?	Yes	No
Consider the immediate goals of your team. Do you find it hard to drum up enthusiasm for them?	Yes	No
Think about your organisation's key strategic aim. Do you feel that you lack the energy to help achieve it?	Yes	No
Have you recently compared current practices unfavourably with the ways things used to be?	Yes	No

3. Fear of conflict

When there is a dispute between members of your team, do you prefer to leave them to sort it out by themselves?	Yes	No
When allocating your time and resources, do you give more of these to the most demanding members of your team?	Yes	No
If you encounter inappropriate or bullying behaviour by a team member, do you find it hard to nip it in the bud before it escalates?	Yes	No
Consider when employees approach you with their problems. Do these situations tend to make you feel uncomfortable?	Yes	No

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4. Muddy thinking

Do you sometimes have trouble conceptualising concepts in your head?	Yes	No
When you are explaining something you have done at work, do you find it easier to explain 'what' has happened rather than 'why'?	Yes	No
Think about the last time you were asked to explain something at an important meeting. Did your colleagues have trouble understanding what you were talking about?	Yes	No
When it comes to projecting your team's results, do you rely heavily upon your intuition?	Yes	No

5. Complex communication

When communicating, do you sometimes forget to take into account that others might not know as much about the subject as you?	Yes	No
Think about a recent team or client meeting you attended. Did you find it difficult to explain complex concepts in clear simple terms to the other participants?	Yes	No
In your last presentation, did you use in-depth explanations and examples to get your point across?	Yes	No
When presenting your ideas, do people often ask you to explain what you have said?	Yes	No

6. Hooked on detail

Think about a current project you are involved with. If others have responsibility for delivering the details, do you feel you also need to check things yourself?	Yes	No
Do you repeatedly check information and data?	Yes	No
Do you always hold projects back until all the details are just so?	Yes	No
Think about the last time you gave a team member feedback on a report or other piece of written work. Did you overlook the bigger picture and focus on typographical or presentation errors?	Yes	No

7. Narrow thinking

Do you like to focus on just a couple of things at any one time?	Yes	No
Think of recent changes to your team's processes. Were the majority of these based on your own ideas?	Yes	No
Consider the tasks you are engaged with at the moment. Are you focused upon day-to-day activity rather than longer term issues?	Yes	No
Can you make logical connections, but find it more difficult to think creatively about how you do things?	Yes	No

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8. Tethered to the past

Do you prefer to rely on established processes rather than investigating and using new approaches?	Yes	No
Think about the last time you received negative feedback about your work. Looking back, did you find it hard to accept this criticism?	Yes	No
Think about the last work-related social event you attended. Did you spend time reminiscing with colleagues about the way things used to be done?	Yes	No
Do you often question the validity of new procedures that you are not familiar with?	Yes	No

How did you do?

Go back over your answers and identify the sections where you've answered 'yes' to three or more questions. These are the areas which may need the most work.

Identify your three weakest areas in the space below. If your results are very close, or you have more than three areas which need attention, think about which are most relevant to achieving success in your role.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Checklist

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Are you finding it hard to come to a decision?

Dealing with ambiguity effectively means striking a balance between thinking things through and taking appropriate (but not risky!) action. This checklist will...

- help you analyse the root cause of ambiguity
- give you a practical plan to move forwards

You can use it individually or as a team exercise to generate ideas and develop a plan of action.

How to use the checklist

Step one

On separate paper, brainstorm a list of reasons why you can't move forward with the problem or decision.

Possible Reasons Rating	Investigation Needed	Investigation Rating	Rank Order of Investigation	Responsibility
<p>Step two</p> <p>Use this column to rate your list. 1 being the highest possible cause and 5 being the least likely cause.</p>	<p>Step three</p> <p>Use this column to note down what action is needed to investigate each reason. Break large actions down into smaller chunks.</p>	<p>Step four</p> <p>Use this column to rate how much effort (and cost) is needed to explore each issue. Use 1 for the highest amount and 5 for the least.</p>	<p>Step five</p> <p>Think about how you've rated the list of reasons against the amount of effort. Make a note of the final order of investigation in this column.</p>	<p>Step six</p> <p>Use this column to record who will take charge of investigating each issue. You could also agree dates here too.</p>
1.		1.		
2.		2.		
3.		3.		
4.		4.		
5.		5.		