

8 Ways to Better Manage Ambiguity and Uncertainty



As a manager, you're supposed to be in charge, but of what? Shifting company strategy, markets changing with the wind, unclear priorities from your manager, even a direct report who may or may not be happy with her role in the long run. Ambiguity is everywhere at work.

Here's the tough truth for managers: You'll never achieve perfect clarity and control of your work. But you can learn to manage the anxiety, frustration, and confusion that typically arise in uncertain situations, and grow more confident in your ability to act despite having limited information. These tactics can help.

1. Prioritize your own self-care.

When you're sleep-deprived, over-caffeinated, and under-exercised, you're much less likely to be able to focus, manage your emotions, and make good decisions — all critical for navigating uncertain situations. Yet all too often, managers sacrifice their own well-being in a heroic effort to make a dent in

their to-do lists, foregoing a morning workout to take an early client call, gobbling a late and unhealthy lunch during a meeting, or finishing up emails before bed.

As the saying goes, you need to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others. Take a personal inventory of your health habits — specifically around how you eat, exercise, and sleep — and devise a plan for improvement. Schedule your health-centric activities (e.g., going to the gym, taking a fresh-air walk mid-afternoon, eating lunch at a deli that serves healthy food) around your other work deadlines. And, when appropriate, enlist buddies to join you in elements of your plan; research suggests that people have more success starting and sticking to new behaviors when they have an accountability partner.

2. Notice and challenge negative thoughts around uncertainty as soon as they come to mind.

“We’ll never survive the merger — all my top people will leave.”

“We have to improve our numbers — we have no clue where to even begin!”

“What if our new strategy doesn’t actually increase revenue?”

“What if the economic downturn ruins us?”

The less information your brain has to go on, the more likely it is to fill in the gaps with what-ifs and worst-case scenarios. And obsessing over potential catastrophes has a momentum all its own and can become a downward spiral that renders you anxious and unable to act.

Instead of telling yourself to “just stop” — which tends to make a person think about something more, not less — the first step is to simply notice these kinds of thoughts. Start by making a list of everything weighing on your mind. Then, instead of letting your mind run wild, the next time the worry arises, try to recognize it in the moment, then challenge your thinking by asking, *“Would that really be the end of the world?”* Will the merger really kill you? Will you really not ever find a way to begin to improve your numbers?

Ideally, over time, this kind of acknowledgement of the negativity sparked by uncertainty should help you begin to calm it so you can move forward.

3. Try to gain some clarity by seeking more information, making a sketch, and/or otherwise analyzing your situation.

While you don't have all the information you'd like, you do have *some*. Make a list of what you do know, then add what you don't know but feel is important. There are a number of ways you can attempt to seek what's missing. Depending on your situation, you could:

- **Ask others who are likely to have additional insight.** For example, if you're unclear how to prioritize your work or don't understand the thinking behind a recent strategic shift at the company, start by seeking input from your manager. Need to shed light on your customers? A peer manager in marketing may be able to help. In some cases, the answer you hear will be, *"I don't know,"* (after all, you're not the only one facing uncertainty). But even knowing that something's unknown can provide a level of clarity.
- **Sketch out your situation in a diagram.** Sometimes drawing can help you visualize a challenge more clearly than words. For example, let's say your team is undertaking a process for the first time. Mapping out the end goal, the stepping stones, and the various stakeholders and risks may help you see how all the pieces could fit together.

- **Use a problem-solving technique like the 5 Whys to get to the root of an issue.** Maybe you know you have a problem, but lack clarity on how to solve it. To ferret out potential causes that could lead you in the right direction, try brainstorming a simple list of “what could be going on.”

4. Don't fall prey to analysis paralysis.

As a manager, there's a lot riding on your decisions: your company's financial success, your own chances of career advancement, your peers' respect, your direct reports' level of engagement, performance, and job satisfaction. No wonder some managers go into perpetual information-seeking mode in the name of learning “enough” to make the right decision.

To avoid letting uncertainty send you on an endless quest for more information, try setting a limit on the information you gather. For example, allow yourself to learn all you can in two weeks, or whatever time frame is right for your business pressures, then commit to moving forward.

Some of your decisions will end up being wrong — it's inevitable. Instead of seeking the perfect way ahead, focus on doing your best and being open to feedback and learning.

5. Communicate ambiguity honestly to your team. And give them as much information as possible to help them do their jobs well.

It can be hard to admit you don't know something, especially when you're supposed to be in charge. But as disorienting and demotivating as “not knowing” can feel to you, it can feel even more so to your direct reports, who have less big-picture context than you.

Great managers fight the urge to clam up (or worse, invent answers when someone has a tough question) and instead narrate the work landscape for

their teams as they see it — including not just what they do know, but also what they *don't* know, and how it all relates to the team's work. For example:

“We’re moving forward with launching a new product this year as part of our growth strategy. We don’t know what it will be, so we’ll need to plan a concepting process. And the logistics team will need to figure out distribution. They won’t be meeting about it until next month, so I should have more to report then.”

Communication about failure is also important for your direct reports, potentially freeing them to be more productive and innovative in their jobs. You could add:

“There’s a chance this product won’t go over well with users — that’s always a possibility. That’s okay. If it doesn’t, at least we’ll know a lot more about our users than we did before and can apply what we learn to the next product.”

Then, on a regular basis, ask yourself: *What information can I share to help my direct reports make better decisions?* Share liberally and often — even if it’s to report that you still don’t know something — and you’ll find your direct reports will be more inclined to share back, potentially giving you information that increases your level of clarity.

6. Start taking action with small steps — and adapt as more information becomes available.

If you don’t know enough to take a big step, no big deal. Start by taking a small one. This gives you the dual benefit of creating some level of clarity for your team — you’ve made a call, rather than spinning your wheels with indecision — and starting the group moving in a direction that can be assessed.

Seek your direct reports' input in determining short-term objectives, defining how you'll measure success, and assigning roles for moving forward. Not only are they bound to have good ideas, but involving them in the process will help them feel like they have some say in their fate and ensure everyone has a shared understanding of the work landscape ahead. Also, explain that agility is key, and they may have to shift their approach as events unfold.

Then, gather lots of feedback from (and give lots of feedback to) your direct reports, your peers, and your manager on how things are going. Watch for signs that your plan won't work as anticipated and you should course-correct.

7. Take the time to celebrate milestones you and the team achieve.

It's easy to get deep into a project, trying to find your way, and forget to lift your head up and notice the progress you and your team have made. But remember, you're managing people, not just projects. Celebrating milestones helps everyone stay motivated, especially when some things are (and may remain) murky.

Design your celebration according to the size of the achievement and how your direct reports prefer to be recognized. Is it a party-worthy big goal met? Or more of a high-five, nice-end-to-the-week accomplishment? Will you recognize the whole team, or just the individual responsible? Does the individual enjoy public praise, or prefer something more subdued?

8. Reflect on what you learn from key experiences and refine your approach.

So, what has worked and what hasn't? If you're not taking the time to assess how well you and your team made decisions in the face of uncertainty, you'll fall prey to the same habits next time. Improvement-minded managers make reflection a part of their regular routine. And they regularly engage their direct reports for their perspectives, whether by seeking general feedback or analyzing the effectiveness of a project or process.

You can also learn a lot from peers facing similar challenges. Maybe they unearthed strategies that helped them fare better than you, which you can use next time. Or maybe they struggled as much or even more than you, helping you see that anyone would have struggled given the circumstances.