



## Relax, It's Only Uncertainty

Lead The Way When The Way Is Changing

by Philip Hodgson and Randall P. White  
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### Focus

#### Leadership

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### Take-Aways

- Due to the fast pace of change, every business faces uncertainty and ambiguity.
- Three styles of leadership are command and control, visionary and learning.
- No leadership style is outdated. Each one has an appropriate time and place.
- Modern leaders are not born to their roles; they are made. Leadership is a mindset that is important in more and more situations; it's not just for executives.
- Today's leaders require the ability to learn, and to deal well with change and uncertainty.
- Although certain personality types may be better suited to this task, anyone can learn and practice ambiguity-coping behaviors.
- Behaviors that enhance ambiguity-coping skills are called enablers.
- The eight enablers are: mystery-seeking, risk-tolerance, future-scanning, tenaciously challenging, creating excitement, flexibly adjusting, simplifying and focusing.
- Some behaviors, called restrainers, limit ambiguity-coping skills.
- The eight restrainers are: poor transitioning, being a wet blanket, conflict-avoidance, muddy thinking, complex communicating, bean-counting, narrow thinking and repeating.

### Rating (10 is best)

Overall  
**9**

Applicability  
**9**

Innovation  
**8**

Style  
**9**

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## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) The eight tactics that enable healthy engagement with change; and 2) The eight blocks that restrain such engagement, and how to beware of them.

### Recommendation

Philip Hodgson and Randall P. White provide practical instructions for dealing with change, as all leaders must. Rather than assuming that only certain personality types and traits are suitable for leadership in changing times, they addresses the behavior patterns that mark a successful leader. The authors place their behavioral concepts in a familiar context with case histories. The true value of their book lies in specific exercises that will enhance your ambiguity-coping skills. Some level-headed readers may be slightly put off by the seeming wackiness of some of these notions (they range from “spend some time around children” to “analyze how you spend your time”) and the light-hearted tone (they do refer to *Star Trek*). Lighthearted or not, the advice in this book may just save your job — or your company’s future. *getAbstract.com* recommends this book to senior executives, regardless of industry, as well as to anyone who is concerned about the fast pace of change and wants some help keeping up.

## Abstract

### Leadership and Change

Leaders must cope with change. Formulas that have worked for years are suddenly outdated, and some areas are simply too new to have experts or established market leaders, so any new product or service has a chance to dominate the market. While such rapid change and a near-constant state of ambiguity undoubtedly causes stress, people must remain relaxed in order to lead effectively in such a climate. But how do you stay relaxed if you don’t know what to do next? The answer is surprisingly simple: practice. Leadership is as much an inner state as an outer position, and its state of mind can be practiced and learned like any other skill. You may have been told that your personality type was suited for certain kinds of tasks and not ideal for others, but you can make surprisingly large changes to your skill level. The ABC’s of change management are:

- Attitude — Enthusiasm for a task makes learning any skill easier.
- Behavior — Skills can be learned a bit at a time, reinforcing a positive attitude.
- Capability — Practice, review your progress and always look to the next level.

### Enablers: The Toolkit of Coping Skills

The eight main groups of ambiguity-coping skills and attitudes are called enablers. You may recognize yourself or others in this list, indicating personality matches with one or more of these types, but these behaviors can be practiced and learned regardless of personality type:

1. Mystery-seeking — Born mystery-seekers are insatiably curious, willing to try new things and seemingly energized rather than daunted by uncertainty. They delight in difficult learning, in discovering and mastering something new — not just to them, but to the whole world. Practice these attitudes by consciously questioning. Remember being a child — or talk to children and let their drive to discover inspire you.

“The real mark of a leader is confidence with uncertainty — the ability to admit to it and deal with it.”

“We all have a stake in developing leaders. It’s a societal requirement.”

"Leadership is a problem and an opportunity every-one has to deal with."

"In the end, leadership is not a status, it's a state of mind, and the relaxed leader is likely to be the most effective."

"Imagine a world where most people have developed the skills to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty and thus have real confidence to encourage the new and original."

"Frankly, anyone can have a vision. Drink a bottle of liquor and in 20 minutes you'll have visions (please don't try this too often!), but they may not be of any practical business value to you."

2. Risk-tolerance — Ever notice how some people find it easy to make decisions despite incomplete data? Born risk-tolerators aren't indiscriminately impetuous, but they are willing to risk failure if the upside is compelling enough. Look back at your own failures — were they really that bad? Did you learn from them? Revisit a successful decision, and consider what would have been the least amount of information that would have lead to that same choice. Take on risk one step at a time.
3. Future-scanning — Commonly seen in entrepreneurs, this skill links a vivid vision of the future with the ability to understand the detailed implications of that vision. These people have a knack for asking insightful, penetrating questions that only seem obvious in hindsight. Experiment with asking this type of question (this requires you to face any fear you may have of sounding slightly ridiculous). What will your business look like in five years? Ten years? No one can predict the future, so your guess is as good as anyone else's.
4. Tenaciously challenging — Some people just won't take no for an answer. And in the end, they may accomplish something experts said wasn't possible. They deal easily with conflict, and do not fear complexity. They are experts in making lemonade when life hands them lemons. To enhance these skills, lessen your fear of failure, and figure out what energizes you to tackle a tough problem. Can you give yourself small rewards along the way? Break the problem down into manageable steps.
5. Creating excitement — You may have had a teacher who made even the most tedious subject seem interesting by virtue of his or her own enthusiasm. Executives with the same attitude acquire devoted and ardent employees. They radiate excitement and make it contagious. What excites you about your job? Can you bring that to the less-interesting aspects of your work? Try making your workday fun and spontaneous by scheduling a meeting in the park rather than in a conference room.
6. Flexible adjusting — In today's business environment, perhaps no skill is as useful as thinking on your feet. True flexibility also requires the willingness to abandon an unsuccessful approach — even one that worked in the past — when warranted. Flexible adjusters can identify with all parties in a dispute, which allows them to make changes and to sell the changes to others. Try this in a meeting: Take the other person's point of view and examine your approach from this new perspective. How could you change your tactics to make your position more convincing?
7. Simplifying — In companies where people are overwhelmed with voicemail, e-mail, snail-mail and meetings of all kinds, a complex message is often lost or ignored. Leaders need to learn to speak in "sound bites" when necessary, using language an intelligent child would understand. Advertisers know this, but can you make it work in your organization? Practice rewriting memos and companywide e-mails to get the essence across in 25 words or less. Better still, can you summarize your company and its business in one clear, simple sentence? Can you communicate that slogan to your employees and customers?
8. Focusing — Every leader has multiple responsibilities and a hierarchy of priorities. But some seem uniquely gifted at winnowing these down to a few, focused action items. While too fine a focus can resemble obsession, the ability to focus is crucial to meeting deadlines, budgets and customers' expectations. Analyze a recently completed project to assess how much time you spent on each aspect. Did you spend too much time on any given aspect to the detriment of the overall goal? Can you learn anything from this that you can apply to the way you handle future projects?

"It took the Church until 1992 to officially recognize that Galileo's radical conclusion was correct — 360 years of official ambiguity and uncertainty in the face of one man's big idea."

"It's hard to see how many organizations can be in anything but turn-around or start-up mode in today's organizational world."

"Any organization that is coping with continual change — and show us one that isn't — will need to face up to conflict."

"It is easy to believe we have found the formula, and all that life involves is applying it in larger and larger situations. Adopt that strategy at your own peril."

## Restrainers

Of course, there are also behaviors that keep you from coping well with ambiguity. You may notice that some of these so-called restrainers are the dark sides of some enabling skills (compare narrow thinking to focusing, for example). Look for these behaviors and attitudes in yourself, and use these tips to try to decrease their grip on your ambiguity-coping skills.

1. **Poor transitioning** — Today's executives need to deal with many types of tasks and situations, from companywide meetings to supportive chats with coworkers. People who use the same style of interaction for all their activities inevitably rub others the wrong way, even if they are very good at one particular type of interaction. Look at your to-do list and see where a change in attitude and style between one item and the next would be appropriate. Anticipate this transition and shift consciously. Practice this skill, and evaluate your progress. Ask a trusted colleague how you're doing.
2. **Being a wet blanket** — Everyone is familiar with the manager who dislikes his job and also smothers the enthusiasm of employees and coworkers. These managers may live in the "good old days" or simply take every opportunity to criticize. Imagine that you are like this. Write down the things you would say to diminish your colleagues' and subordinates' motivation. Do you ever catch yourself saying things similar to the ones on your list? Be honest. Try to improve this behavior by consciously looking for reasons to be enthusiastic about your work and the work of others.
3. **Conflict-avoidance** — Disagreements may be inevitable to ensure the free, open exchange of ideas, but some people avoid the slightest perceived conflict. They often have trouble distinguishing between the personalities and emotions involved and the ideas that are being disputed. They may overcompensate by playing peacemaker or trying to accommodate everyone's ideas, an exhausting balancing act. Instead of getting emotionally involved in a dispute, focus on the discussion's content.
4. **Muddy thinking** — Some people never seem to grasp fully the implications of what they say and do. The worst example is the person who appears to convey clear, simple ideas but who is merely repeating phrases heard or read elsewhere. This person sounds good, but the ideas disintegrate under the simplest questioning. If this describes you, simplify. Try to describe your main projects in 25 words or less. Each day pick a single action item to achieve instead of floundering to complete 20 things.
5. **Complex communicating** — Even people who have a clear understanding of complex topics sometimes can't seem to explain them clearly to others. They use jargon, digress from the main idea and are fond of disclaimers and qualifications. If others are often confused by your messages, you may be a complex communicator. Try to take your audience's knowledge level into account before you speak. Restrict yourself to five main points, and ask for feedback to be sure listeners understand.
6. **Bean-counting** — If you need large amounts of data before you can make a decision, often read things more than once, and frequently notice small and unimportant errors, you may be a junkie for detail. While detail is important, a myopic obsession with the small may prevent you from seeing the big picture. Review a completed project, asking yourself how much of the data you accumulated actually proved to be mission-critical. Teach yourself to look at the big picture as well as the details. Think about the long-term implications of your messages, as well as the typos and fonts.
7. **Narrow thinking** — This is the restrainer that is the dark side of the "focusing" enabler. Too much tunnel vision leads to missed opportunities and leaves your com-

“As a child you probably had ambiguity coping skills in at least as good a state as you have them now — probably better in many cases.”

“Most of us have actually been taught by our school system to avoid failure, which sounds reasonable enough until we realize that the fear of that failure is what often prevents us from learning what we need to learn.”

pany vulnerable to being blindsided by the competition. Consciously try new things — even outside of work. Train yourself to stop thinking only in the present tense by asking about the future and the past. Be open to feedback; if you tend to over-focus, you may be unaware of the effect you have on others.

8. **Repeating** — Repeaters think that once they have found the formula for doing something, it will always work the same way. They live in the past and discount anything new or different. This behavior pattern is dangerous in a time of near-constant change. Think about tasks you always approach the same way. Now try an alternate way to do some of them. When you find yourself thinking about the good old days, try casting your thoughts into the future instead. Face your fear of change and strangeness by taking risks — start small and see how it feels.

### A Brief History of Leadership

In the past, leaders were born, not made. Kings inherited their thrones, and government and business officials often were groomed for their destinies beginning at birth. During World War II, the U.S. and Britain faced shortages of officers, and began to assess the qualities of ideal leaders so as to identify potential officers among the military ranks. Postwar, that approach spread to business, leading to the emerging field of leadership theory. There are three main approaches to leadership; each one is ideal for certain contexts but disastrous in others:

- **Command and control** — This is leadership by expertise. The leader supervises and teaches the followers, and promotion is usually achieved by increasing competence at particular tasks. This approach is used in data-heavy areas like law and tax consulting.
- **Visionary leadership** — The leader has a vision, but probably doesn’t know all the details necessary to achieve it. So he or she authorizes the employees to do whatever is necessary, resulting in a more decentralized structure.
- **Learning leadership** — When the future is so ambiguous that no one really has a vision, the leader and the followers work together to create the vision. This entails moving consciously toward ambiguity rather than avoiding it.

As the pace of change increases, the world needs more learning leaders, and not just in executive positions. Society as a whole benefits if we can learn to develop anyone’s leadership potential. Learning to see change not as something uncomfortable but as something necessary is the first step; moving confidently into an uncertain future is the next.

## About The Authors

Philip Hodgson, co-director of both the Action Learning for Chief Executives Program and the Executive Coaching Service, has worked full-time at Ashridge Business School since 1983. Randall P. White is a principal in the Executive Development Group LLP in Greensboro, NC, and an adjunct professor at the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University. Both men have written extensively on executive leadership.

## Buzz-Words

Ambiguity / Command and control / Difficult learning / Empowering leader / Enabler / Restrainer / Visionary leader