
Teach Your Brain to Handle Crises

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How can you model calm in the midst of organization crisis? Kamila Sip and Jay Dixit of the Neuroleadership Institute explain how the brain processes stress.

The human brain is a meaning-making machine: It evaluates and reevaluates input, detects patterns, and creates meaning in order to adjust and calibrate our behavior, emotions and actions. As a result, having access to information is vital to our sense of security.

Unfortunately, a lack of sufficient data disrupts this process. It requires tremendous cognitive energy to reconcile uncertainty, weigh risks and probabilities, and predict outcomes. When there are gaps in our information, the brain fills those gaps by making up a story.

If the story we create feels straightforward and easy — regardless of whether it's accurate — we feel a sense of ease because the internal conflict has been reconciled. When incomplete patterns are completed, we experience a feeling of reward, triggering a dopaminergic response in the brain that we will then crave again the next time we're in the same situation.

This positive experience motivates us to carry out the same exploratory process the next time we face uncertainty, seeking to turn negative feelings into a positive outcome, to turn uncertain into certain — or, to be more precise, to turn the uncertain into the familiar.

Because of course, the future is never truly certain. We forget that uncertainty is not unique to a crisis, but a permanent fixture of life. What we tend to think of as certainty is often just familiarity, which aids predictability. But that's OK — familiarity and predictability are comforting enough.

How the uncertainty of crisis disrupts work

Crises are usually acute — sudden, dynamic, volatile and riddled with compounded unknowns. They force organizations and individuals to adjust and course-correct on the fly. Lacking sufficient data to predict outcomes, we feel untethered and disoriented and find it difficult to reconcile short- and long-term planning.

In the case of coronavirus, the unknowable length of the pandemic has thrown a wrench in our short- and long-term predictions. The time horizon for living “normally” again depends

on factors we can't control, such as the availability of vaccines and the health of the economy. With no clear and consistent plan and a time horizon that changes continually due to a lack of public compliance, we all feel stuck in a disorienting loop.

The uncertainty of crisis distorts our perception in many ways. The presence of so many unknowns triggers stress responses that color our cognition and, consequently, our behavior. We enter a self-reinforcing circle: The more unknowns there are, the more stress we feel, and the more reactive and instinctive we become. This vicious cycle disrupts our ability to think rationally and deliberately.

The brain's most crucial function is to keep us alive — a task it accomplishes by surveying the environment, evaluating sensory input and assessing whether the stimuli it encounters constitutes a threat to survival. Since it's less costly to overestimate danger than to underestimate it, the brain's threat detection networks err on the side of caution. The brain categorizes the novel or ambiguous as aversive — and views uncertainty as a source of deep discomfort.

The good news is that we evolve, adapt and learn from adversity — and in times of crisis, we can manage our need for certainty by finding clarity where we can.

How leaders can support employees

Organizations must understand that the stress of uncertainty affects not just employees, but leaders as well. No one is immune to the impact a chronic state of uncertainty has on cognition and behavior.

The stress of uncertainty, and the fact that hierarchical power can blind us to the perspectives of others, means that in times of crisis, leaders may have less capacity to empathize and engage in perspective-taking to understand their employees.

That's why the traditional approach to crisis — asking leaders to project strength and courage and to mask any signs of weakness — is misguided, serving only to create distance between them and their workforce.

A hallmark of empathic leadership is an understanding that without compassion, resilient leaders fall short, even inadvertently signaling contempt for employees who are struggling or underperforming due to the stress of crisis. It's crucial that leaders avoid this unintended trap.

Leaders should make a point of displaying vulnerability. No leader has total knowledge of the future. That's why leadership in this era of prolonged uncertainty means being able to say: "I don't have the answer, but we'll figure it out together."

In a recent NeuroLeadership Institute research study, we found that in times of crisis, employees need their managers and leaders to do three things:

- Be transparent about what decisions are being made and why.
- Be clear about how managers can support employees.
- Model behaviors that are productive, not destructive.

Finally, leaders of organizations can help employees stay healthy and productive through times of uncertainty with a few research-based strategies:

1. Be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable.

Leaders can help employees shift their mindset, learning to see crises as opportunities to learn, grow and adapt. When they shift their mindset in this way, employees feel equipped to rise to the occasion and handle whatever challenges arise.

Specifically, employees can reframe the way they view a crisis, coming to view prolonged ambiguity and uncertainty as an opportunity to develop skills they would not otherwise acquire. Research shows that reframing challenging circumstances in this way builds resilience — the ability to withstand, adapt and learn from adversity, developing an ever-evolving shield that prepares us for future adversity.

2. Focus on clarity over certainty

Leaders can help employees manage the threat they feel in response to rapidly unfolding changes by offsetting the decrease in certainty wherever possible by focusing on questions that actually can be answered.

Leaders should be intentional about finding ways to increase employees' sense of certainty. By simplifying options, articulating timelines and anchoring on core principles, they create the structure, order and predictability employees need to restore their sense of control.

3. Be essential, not exhaustive

As stress, anxiety and fatigue rise, creating a risk of burnout, leaders can focus on the essential instead of trying to be exhaustive.

Leaders should let go of the need to have all the answers. When novel situations arise, as they inevitably will, focusing on the essential eliminates distractions, easing the burden on the brain.

Research shows that panic and paralysis aren't inevitable reactions to crisis. By understanding the needs of employees to belong, to know and to have a say, leaders can focus on the strategies that will raise engagement and performance. Together, individuals and organizations can achieve tasks that may have seemed impossible under normal circumstances.

Kamila Sip, Ph.D., is senior director of neuroscience research at the NeuroLeadership Institute. Jay Dixit is senior science writer — North America for the NeuroLeadership Institute.

[Brain-based leadership in a time of heightened uncertainty](#)