



Growing Resilience in Uncertain Times



By Nathan Furr , INSEAD

Managing the current crisis is an inside job.

“My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened.” – Michel de Montaigne

When confronted with a situation weighed with anxiety and ambiguity, like a pandemic, a lockdown and frightening news from the economy, it’s impossible for most of us to imagine any upside. We become paralysed; overwhelmed by events, we descend into a state of mind I call *unproductive uncertainty*. But there are some people who manage to see their way through that paralysis and find a positive path forward.

Specifically, some manage to make uncertainty work for them: innovators, entrepreneurs, CEOs, Nobel Prize winners as well as gamblers, paramedics and surfers. Over the past five years, I’ve identified the approaches and tools they use to navigate turbulent times and uncover their own potential.

Although part of our capacity to deal with the unknown is innate, a larger portion is learned. Those who develop this *uncertainty capability* are more creative, more successful and better able to turn uncertainty into possibility. My research has shown a variety of tools for cultivating this capacity, of which I share just a few here.

Reframing the impossible

Perceiving our options in a positive or negative light, or framing, changes how we feel about them. It also has an important impact on our responses, according to behavioural science research. [Daniel Kahneman](#) and Amos Tversky, for example, showed how we are loss-averse and gain seeking. Imagine two potentially life-saving programmes. One would definitely save 200 lives out of 600 and the other has a 33 percent chance of saving 600 lives. When presented with these virtually identical options, the majority of participants in their study chose certainty.

Sometimes described as bias, frames can be used to our advantage:

- **Learning:** The Nobel Prize winning chemist Ben Feringa experienced years of learning through failure in his research. He said, “If you deal with uncertainty you will fail. Allow yourself to feel the frustration for a few hours or a few days. But then ask yourself: What can I learn from it? What is the next step that I can be working on? Get resilient at handling the frustration that comes with uncertainty.”
- **Game:** Rather than beat ourselves up when we lose an account or miss an opportunity, we see that while one day we may lose, we could win another day. Frustration is all part of the game.
- **Gratitude:** You have a lot at this moment in time, so take time to recognise it all. Baseball legend Lou Gehrig is a great example. At the height of his success, he was diagnosed with the debilitating disease of ALS but in his farewell to baseball, he said: “Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth...I might have been given a bad break, but I’ve got an awful lot to live for.”
- **Randomness:** What happens to you isn’t solely down to your actions, but you can control your own response. A survivor of a massive avalanche, entrepreneur Jon Winsor said, “We have this perception in business: We think we control the world. I think what is probably more correct is it’s more about interpreting the world instead of trying to say

we control it.” Failure and success are more random than we may realise, so don’t let frustration prevent you from trying one more time.

- **Hero:** This is the most powerful frame I’ve learned about. A former paramedic, Australian filmmaker Benjamin Gilmour never knew when he went through a door if he would save a life or if his own life would be threatened. To navigate this uncertainty (and later ones), he viewed his experience on the callouts as **the hero’s journey**. “Every story we love, from Luke Skywalker to Harry Potter, is about the hero who goes through obstacles. Everyone loves the hero. But the obstacles are what makes the hero.” Strength can come from overcoming hurdles and from showing up even when it’s uncomfortable.

Habits to develop your uncertainty capability

These suggestions are variations on framing which can help you put things in context.

Open your eyes to all options

When in the midst of unproductive uncertainty, we may become so focused on the situation at hand that we overlook any broader possibilities. This creates disquiet and can thrust us into making rash decisions or forgoing opportunities because we can’t look up from our current problem. Psychologists call this tendency to miss the bigger picture “relative deprivation”. Who do you compare yourself to?

When we can remember that there is a much wider context than we initially believe, we are much more likely to find an optimal outcome. A broader focus allows us to weather the discomfort of unproductive uncertainty with greater optimism and calm. Even when uncertainty relates to relatively small issues, like missing a flight and wondering what to do with the unanticipated extra time, or to larger ones, like losing a job and having to consider different possible paths.

For example, Steve Blank, serial entrepreneur and father of the Lean Startup Movement, visited Silicon Valley on a work assignment early in his career. Awestruck at the **48 pages of job listings** in the *San Jose Mercury News*, he told his colleague: “I’m going to quit, I’m staying here.” Blank’s view was, what could be the worst outcome of quitting his job? Why not try? Friends thought he was insane to give up a good job, but Blank saw the larger context (the emerging computing boom in Silicon Valley). He was willing to

walk into one of the scariest unproductive uncertainties – shedding his previous life and job – and ushered in a totally different life than if he had stayed with what was comfortable and certain.

Think in probabilities, not binary outcomes

When we find ourselves in the middle of a period of unproductive uncertainty, we might get stuck imagining extreme either/or outcomes. Innovators who are adept at managing uncertainty think in terms of probabilities instead, enlarging their potential options.

I saw the power of this particular habit recently while teaching an Executive Education course at INSEAD just as the pandemic was accelerating in Europe. French President Emmanuel Macron was scheduled to address the nation about the crisis and the participants from all over the globe began to worry that the borders would be closed, leaving them stranded. Thinking in binary terms – stranded or not stranded – we all felt a palpable sense of anxiety. But when we turned it around, considering the full range of possible outcomes and assigned probabilities to them, we began to see the situation differently. We imagined there was a good chance the borders wouldn't close for a few days, a modest chance they would close sooner and an extremely slim chance they would close immediately. Considering multiple options brought us immense relief and the participants were able to travel.

Remember that possibilities always exist

This may be difficult to see now, in this time of grief and fear for many, but is it true that possibilities always exist? Or is the ability to push through unproductive uncertainty only for the privileged?

Looking back at the words of renowned psychologist and concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl, his conclusion is a powerful testament to the potential for growth even in unthinkable circumstances. He wrote: “Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in a given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” We are all free to choose, and finding that freedom is key to finding a way forward in uncertain times.

With unprecedented levels of uncertainty about our health, our work and the world, it’s possible to nurture an uncertainty capability and find resilience.

This article was based on [***Don't Let Uncertainty Paralyze You and You're Not Powerless in the Face of Uncertainty***](#) by Nathan Furr in Harvard Business Review.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/growing-resilience-uncertain-times>

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About the series

Covid-19

The consequences of Covid-19 for public health, the global economy and the future of work cannot be overestimated. No one knows where exactly we will go from here, but INSEAD's thought leaders — both faculty and their close collaborators in the practitioner and entrepreneurship communities — possess informed perspectives that will help us not just weather the crisis, but hopefully emerge from it stronger than ever.

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