

Thinkers50: The Upside of Uncertainty



By Rachel Eva Lim , INSEAD Knowledge

In this Thinkers50 webinar, Nathan Furr and Susannah Harmon Furr share practical tools for navigating life’s ambiguities.

Most of us have probably been grappling with uncertainty over the past couple of years. But while Covid-19 may have upped the ante, ambiguity has always been a hallmark of life – and will continue to be long after the pandemic is over.

Is there a way for us to feel less uncomfortable with or afraid of the unknown? And are there tools we can use to help us navigate the great abyss? Such was the topic of discussion at a recent **Thinkers50** webinar moderated by Thinkers50 co-founder Des Dearlove, in which Associate Professor of Strategy at INSEAD Nathan Furr and entrepreneur Susannah Harmon Furr spoke about their book [The Upside of Uncertainty](#).

The book was born out of a salient observation made from interviewing innovators over two decades: to do anything new, they had to endure a period of uncertainty. In their book, the authors expand on specific tools that everyone can employ to **deal with the uncertainty** that pervades our modern world.

“What I’m interested in is [if this book is reaching] the human inside the manager,” Harmon Furr said. “Uncertainty is too wily, it’s too shifty, it’s changing all the time. You’ve got to be surrendering to it.”

Two sides of the same coin

Furr and Harmon Furr began by pointing to the **World Uncertainty Index** – a measure of political and economic uncertainty – which shows a rising trend since the 1990s. “You could view it as all-terrifying, and some of it is. There’s no doubt that some of these political and health-related uncertainties have massive downsides [and] we’re not trying to downplay that,” Furr said.

“It made sense for our [ancestors as] unknown things were potentially life-threatening,” added Harmon Furr when asked why we’re all so unnerved by uncertainty. “[But] we’re living in a world now where the dangers of trying things are so much more reduced. That [evolutionary] wiring that would hold us back is really why we don’t do it.”

Uncertainty, the authors stressed, also has an upside. Rather than falling into the trap of merely seeing it as negative, they invited the audience to look for a silver lining. Although uncertainty presents risks that are often associated with failure, it can also be the gateway to opportunity and possibility.

“Uncertainty is actually the moat that protects entrepreneurs,” Harmon Furr said of its unique value to innovators. “If it was just so obvious, we’d all be racing to the same thing at the same time.”

Tips for dealing with uncertainty

The authors introduced a set of tools to help people develop the ability to cope with uncertainty. These are clustered into four phases: reframing, priming, doing and sustaining.

The first tool, reframing, challenges us to change how we view uncertainty. Among the suggestions was to see life as an infinite game, in which the goal

is to experience life for what it is rather than as something one needs to win at. Relatedly, they brought up fixed vs. growth mindsets, and how the latter lets us approach uncertainty with more playfulness and ease.

Second, “priming” involves establishing routines that enable us to deal with the unknown more effectively. This includes “uncertainty balancers” that offset ambiguity in other areas – such as wearing the same outfit each day or surrounding yourself with people that act as a grounding force. Responding to a question about how uncertainty affects long-term planning, Furr recommended preparing ahead for a variety of possible scenarios – while remaining flexible – as a strategy to mitigate the negative impact of uncertainty.

When it comes to “doing”, the pair advocated a value-based approach rather than a goal-seeking perspective. While goals are external factors that we often have less control over, values are internal principles that can remain steadfast despite periods of upheaval.

Finally, “sustaining” relates to paying attention to ourselves, our teams and our organisations in the face of inevitable setbacks and frustrations. Besides attending to our emotions (emotional hygiene) and taking stock of what’s around us (reality check), another key element of the sustaining phase is making space for magic – moments of serendipity, flashes of insight or instances of pure luck that arise out of uncertainty.

“[It’s about] trusting when we have those flashes and not dumbing them down, trusting those whisperings that are waiting for us,” said Harmon Furr when about how to access this part of the process. “When we are more aware that they exist, [they will] happen more, and they can get us onto a new path.”

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About the research

This article is based on the book [*The Upside of Uncertainty*](#).

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