



helping you stay calm and emotionally steady, exercise your critical thinking, and take pragmatic action even in the most uncertain circumstances. Those we most respect have demonstrated traits we admire. Tap into their strengths to inform your own.

**Engage other managers.**

Managers often believe they need to “be strong” and go it alone to demonstrate managerial confidence and competency. That’s not true. My executive clients reach out to peers and former colleagues regularly for advice, counsel, and emotional support. If someone you know asked for your advice, you’d happily provide support and feel valued as a peer. Your network will feel the same. Start the conversation with “I could really use another point of view” and you’ll be surprised how quickly others engage.

**Embrace the wisdom of thought leaders.** Your network becomes global when you expand beyond those you know personally to those you can access in today’s digital environment. The greater your understanding of how others think about strategic agility and change leadership, the better you’ll be able to navigate ambiguity

in your company. The brightest and most inspiring minds are at your fingertips—read books and articles, listen to podcasts and interviews, and watch instructive videos, webinars, and more to expand your thinking and learn new approaches relevant to your specific situation.

The ability to thrive during periods of strategic uncertainty separates the great managers who go on to become exceptional leaders from the rest. Don’t allow a lack of clarity at your company to cast a shadow over your confidence or performance. Even in the most challenging and ambiguous situations, you can succeed when you commit to taking pragmatic action while demonstrating emotional steadiness and drawing on the expertise of others.

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## 4. Six Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty

→ by REBECCA ZUCKER and DARIN ROWELL

**IF THERE WAS** ever any doubt about the importance of a leader’s ability to navigate change, uncertainty, and disruption, the emergence of the global pandemic

in 2020 made this necessity abundantly clear. And while we all hope to avoid future pandemics, one thing is certain—we cannot avoid ever-increasing complexity.

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## ■ Leaders must shift from a “know it all” attitude to a “learn it all” mindset.

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The leaders we work with often report feeling stuck, ill-equipped, or overwhelmed as they face the growing challenges of their roles. Understandably, it's easy to feel this way when the complexity of our world has surpassed our “complexity of mind,” as Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey describe in their book *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Harvard Business Press, 2009). To put this in concrete terms, computing power has increased more than a trillionfold since the mid 1950s, but our brains remain unchanged.

To effectively lead others in increasing complexity, leaders must first learn to lead themselves. Although each leader faces their own unique circumstances, we have observed six strategies that accelerate your ability to continually learn, evolve, and navigate progressively more-complex challenges.

**1. Embrace the discomfort of not knowing.** Throughout our careers, we are conditioned to come up with the answer—a single, definitive, correct answer. Given that our brains are hardwired to see uncertainty as a risk or threat, it's physiologically

normal to feel stress when faced with unfamiliar situations. This is especially true for high achievers who have built their career on knowing or finding the “right” answer. Although avoiding these unpleasant feelings is a natural human tendency, it can become a significant barrier to learning, future growth, and ultimately performance.

Rather than avoid these feelings, we must learn to acknowledge and embrace the discomfort as an expected and normal part of the learning process. As described by Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, leaders must shift from a “know it all” to a “learn it all” mindset. This shift in mindset can itself help ease the discomfort by taking the pressure off of you to have all the answers.

### **2. Distinguish between complicated and complex.**

Most of us use the words “complex” and “complicated” interchangeably when, in fact, they represent critically different circumstances. For example, tax law is complicated, meaning it is highly technical in nature and difficult to understand, but you can break the problem down into discreet parts, consult with an expert (or several), and generally find a solution.

Conversely, complex challenges contain many interdependent elements, some of which may be unknown and change over time in unpredictable ways. In addition, an action or change in one dimension can result in disproportionate and unforeseen outcomes. As an example, foreign policy and climate change are complex challenges. While there may be no shortage of opinions on these topics, there are no clear solutions. As a result, solutions to complex challenges typically emerge through trial and error and require the willingness, humility, and ability to act, learn, and adapt.

### **3. Let go of perfectionism.**

In a complex environment, the context is continually shifting; thus, aiming for perfection is futile. Instead, aim for progress, expect mistakes, and recognize that you can continually course correct as needed. For high achievers, prone to perfectionism, egos and desired identities (for example, of being successful or “the expert”) can get in the way. To let go of perfectionism, identify and acknowledge your specific core fears that are triggered—such as “I’ll fail,” “I’ll look bad,” or “I’ll make the wrong deci-

sion.” Underlying these fears is an often implicit and unexamined assumption that “if any of these fears come to fruition, I wouldn’t be able to recover from it.”

We’ve worked with several clients over the years to help them actively debunk these assumptions by having them talk with others they respect about the role of mistakes or failure in their careers. They hear a lot about learning, new opportunities, and professional growth that emerged as a result, but never the career-ending catastrophes that they imagine. Loosening the grip of these assumptions over time can allow you to let go of perfectionism and accept that mistakes and failure are to be expected along the way.

### **4. Resist oversimplifications and quick conclusions.**

It's tempting to oversimplify complex challenges so that they seem less daunting. For example, breaking a challenge into its respective components can help you feel like you have a greater command of the challenge at hand, but it can also narrow your view and obscure critical interdependencies, leading to a false sense of security. Likewise, drawing analogies from challenges that you've faced

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in the past can be useful but can also lead you to miss the unique nuances of the present challenge.

Many high achievers have a bias for action and become quickly frustrated when facing challenges that don't present an evident solution and clear course of action. Instead of caving to the desire for quick resolution, leaders must learn to balance their need for action with a disciplined approach to understanding both the core problem and their own biases. For example, hiring a DEI leader at an organization, by itself, is insufficient if more-systemic issues like outdated recruiting, promotion, development, and compensation practices go unaddressed.

**5. Don't go it alone.** Many of the leaders we work with report feeling isolated as they face the continuous change and uncertainty in the challenges they face. Part of their sense of isolation comes from an implicit belief that they need to solve all the issues themselves. As the complexity and volume of our workload increases, our natural tendency is to double down on our focus and individual efforts. When facing relatively short-term challenges with known solu-

tions, this can be an effective strategy. However, when facing challenges where the full scope of issues and interdependencies, let alone solutions, are unclear, it can be a disaster. Instead, this is when it's most important to cultivate the practice of intentionally reaching out to your network and beyond for insight and perspective.

There is an inherent limit for each of us regarding what we can know and our ability to have an objective perspective on any given situation. Yet, we can exponentially expand our knowledge and perspective by cultivating and connecting with a network of peers and colleagues—each with their own set of experiences and perspectives. As stated by one CEO client, “When I’m trying to make sense of a complex issue, the first thing I do is reach out to people whose opinion I value and whose experience is in some ways different from mine. I want to know ‘How are they are looking at the situation? What’s their point of view? Whom else should I talk to?’” He went on to explain, “It’s not so much that I expect them to have an answer as I want to plug into their thinking and their sources.”

**6. Zoom out.** Leaders often get stuck in the challenges they face because they are too immersed in them. “Zooming out,” or moving from “the dance floor to the balcony,” as described by Ron Heifetz, Marty Linksy, and Alexander Grashow in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Harvard Business Press, 2009), provides you with a broader perspective and a systemic view of the issues and can shine a light on unexamined assumptions that would otherwise not be visible. From this “balcony” or elevated vantage point, interdependencies and larger patterns become observable, potentially revealing unforeseen obstacles and new solutions. This more holistic perspective allows for greater adaptability and course correction, when needed. Making a regular practice of conducting this dance floor–balcony shift, you can build your capacity to see the bigger picture and become more agile.

It seems that any given week provides ample reminders that, as leaders, we cannot control the degree of change, uncertainty, and complexity we face. However, adopting the strategies

above can improve our ability to continually learn, grow, and more effectively navigate the increasing complexity of our world.

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