CRISIS MANAGEMENT

You're Not Powerless in the Face of Uncertainty

by Nathan Furr

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A friend who runs a restaurant group recently endured a month of empty tables due to a transportation strike, only to have his restaurants shut down to slow the spread of Covid-19. Of course, he's not alone as businesses around the world face similar situations. Between

disruption and the ongoing pandemic, we are all trying to cope with unprecedented levels of uncertainty.

For the last few years, I've been studying how we develop the capability to deal with uncertainty — to find the possibilities and opportunities within the unknown, rather than to panic and retreat from risk. In my research, I've interviewed innovators, founders, CEOs, and Nobel Prize winners to understand how they learned to navigate the unknown. I've also studied others who deal with the unknown, including paramedics, gamblers, surfers, and startup investors.

What I've learned is that, 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. I thought about the many coping mechanisms these people use, and I wanted to share one with my friend, the entrepreneur.

The one that resonated most powerfully with him concerns frustration and framing. As the chemist Ben Feringa told me, "If you deal with uncertainty you will fail." Then, with a wry smile that communicated how much failure he'd faced on his way to creating the molecular machines for which he won the 2016 Nobel Prize, he added, "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."

Feringa framed the situation so that he could deal with it. Behavioral science research has underscored the impact of framing — how we perceive our options — on our responses. For example, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky showed how when presented with virtually identical options — such as a treatment with a 5% chance of failure or a 95% chance of success — we are loss-averse and gain-seeking: We all want 95% chance of success. Although this and many other types of frames have sometimes been described as biases, they can be used to our advantage. The people I studied did this well, framing the challenges they faced in a way that made it easier to deal with them.

Below are frames I observed frequently in my research and how they express themselves:

- **Learning** — What can I learn from this challenge? That's what Feringa did.
- **Game** — Frustration is all part of the game. Rather than beat ourselves up when we lose something, we see that while we may lose today, we could win tomorrow.
- **Gratitude** — Recognize all that you already have. For example, when baseball legend Lou Gehrig was struck down by ALS disease in the height of his career, this was his farewell to the sport: "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** — A lot of life is random. What happens to me isn't always my doing. Entrepreneur Jon Winsor compares life in business to his experience surviving a massive avalanche. Although he and his team had done all the preparation and analysis to avoid just such a catastrophe, still they were caught up in a slide that buried many of his teammates in the snow. Reflecting now, he says, "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." Failures and success are less our fault than we may realize, so don't let a frustration keep you from trying again.

The most powerful frame I've observed is the **hero** frame. I learned about it from Benjamin Gilmour, an Australian filmmaker and former paramedic, who never knew when he went through a door if he'd save a life or if his own life would be threatened. He developed the ability to navigate uncertainty by seeing himself on the hero's journey.

To illustrate, several years ago while on a trip to the Khyber Pass, Pakistani authorities impounded his motorcycle. So he continued on foot and along the way he met a Pashtun boy who wanted to become a poet rather than go into the family's weapons business. Inspired by this story, Gilmour made two well-received films: *Son of a Lion*, which premiered at Cannes, and then *Jirga*, a film about a soldier who goes back to Afghanistan to right a past wrong. These films only came to be because he persisted through obstacles: the first time when his motorcycle was impounded; the second time when the funding for *Jirga* got pulled and along with it most of the cast and crew. Rather than give up, he shot a stunning film on almost no budget — and it became Australia's entry into the 2019 Oscars.

When I asked Gilmour what kept him going, he said: "Most people see obstacles and they interpret it as a sign to stop. I've learned to see obstacles as the sign I was heading the right direction." He explained, "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." Gilmour paused and then added, "the only way to become the hero, is to go through the obstacles!"

Nathan Furr is a strategy professor at INSEAD and a coauthor of *Innovation Capital* (HBR Press, 2019), *Leading Transformation* (HBR Press, 2018), and *The Innovator's Method* (HBR Press, 2014)

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