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## Culture and Uncertainty: Meanings, Reasons, and Results

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### Abstract

Uncertainty is high in a world hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, medical emergency, and consequent social and economic disruptions. Yet, variations in levels of acceptance of and “comfortableness” with uncertainty by people, organizations and societies varies globally. Such situations require not only leadership, but also effective leaders. What this is and its ingredients are contested but can be seen as composed of leaders’ thoughts and actions influenced and shaped by key factors stemming from the local operational and situational context, an organization’s particular business culture and their individual competences and skills. We deal with uncertainty in terms of terms and meanings, then its levels and degrees, along with variations in comfortableness with it and its acceptance and how all this might be explained. We then detail some points on leadership, what it is and also effectiveness and requisite skills, end with a conclusion section.

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### Introduction

In a world hit by the uncertainties engendered by the Covid-19 pandemic, medical emergency and consequent social and economic disruptions, leaders’ behaviors and actions have come to the fore. One consequence of the sudden changes and shift in working to has been the sudden emergence of what have been labelled “accidental leaders.” Interestingly, variations in levels of “comfortableness” and acceptance of uncertainty by both leaders and “followers,” to use the oft used term covering the gamut of who is being led, have varied globally, as has their dyadic relationship, as explained in Leader-Member Exchange Theory. This theory, also known as “LMX” or the Vertical Dyad Linkage Theory, emerged in the 1970s and focuses on the relationship that develops, which goes through stages.

Such situation of change and uncertainty require not only leadership, but also effective leaders. What this is and its ingredients are contested but can be seen as composed of leaders’ thoughts and actions influenced and shaped by key factors. These stem from the local operational

and situational context, an organization's particular business culture and their individual competences and skills.

The rest of this article has the following 6-part structure. We deal with uncertainty in terms of terms and meanings, then its levels and degrees, along with variations in comfortableness with it and its acceptance and how all this might be explained. We then detail some points on leadership, what it is and also effectiveness and requisite skills, end with a conclusion section.

### **Uncertainty: Terms and Meanings**

The word "uncertainty" has several varied possible alternatives that may seem to imply similar things, such as, *inter alia*, volatile, ambiguous, complex or turbulent, and so on. Turbulent is used, for example, by the famous management guru Peter Drucker who is commonly quoted as saying: "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday's logic." Other examples include the word turbulence in relation to leadership, such as leading in "turbulent times." This is used in the title of books like those from Lorange (2010) and Goodwin (2018). The word "uncertainty" is used, for example, in the book title by Johnsen (2009). This distinguishes a "VUCA" (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) framework and asserts that dealing with the future is hard work as we need to learn to listen through the "noise" of a VUCA world.

This sort of lexiconic fluidity and flexibility is rife. This mixes with the common issue of nominalism. Such issues are exemplified in the writings of people like Thomas Hobbes, as in his *Leviathan* (1651) to Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871), with Humpty Dumpty's famous quote: "When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." Therefore, it is useful to try to "pin down" some of the terms a bit more. Thus, we can see some of them in the following ways. Volatility can be taken as indicating variations in rates of change. Complexity can be viewed as indicating multiple key decision factors. Ambiguity can be seen as showing a lack of clarity about the meanings of decisions and events. Uncertainty is then taken as, being unclear about something that is not certain or known.

Also, the resultant difficulty or ease of decision making itself can vary by type under triple environments. First, Uncertainty, here decision makers do not know the probabilities of the various outcomes. Second, Certainty, here decision makers know with certainty the consequences of every alternative or decision choice Third, a "middle ground," Risk, here decision makers know the probabilities of the various outcomes. We can now put the above on a spectrum of level of difficulty in making decisions ranges from low (under 1) to moderate (under 2) to high (under 3).

### **Levels and Degrees of Uncertainty**

Even with the above conceptualizations, uncertainty can be seen as varying by degree/levels. This can be seen a trio of dimensions, each of them on a spectrum. First, Scale, going from small to large. Second, Speed/Velocity, moving from low to high. Third, Fluctuation, swinging from clear to unclear patterns of evolution.

Of interest and use here is the famous framework extolled by Donald Rumsfeld, former U.S. Secretary of Defence (Rowley, 2020). His classification is actually based on the Johary Window concept (Luft and Ingham, 1955). This is a technique that helps people better understand their relationship with themselves and others, used primarily in self-help groups and corporate settings as a heuristic exercise. It was created by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, who used a combination of their first names to name their model. With this in mind, we can see Rumsfeld divided up what we can “know” as follows. There were “Known Knowns,” these are things that we know, are aware of and understand. There were “Known Unknowns,” these are things that we know we do not know – we are aware of them, but we just do not understand them. Crucially, there were also “Unknown Unknowns,” these are things that we do not know we do not know - things we are neither aware of nor understand. The uncertainty surrounding each of these categories of what is “known” is very different.

The above discussion and analysis show that there can be very different types, degrees, and levels of uncertainty. Not only that, but people, organizations and societies vary in terms of amounts of acceptance and their comfortableness with more or less uncertainty, even of the same type, degree and level.

### **Acceptance of Uncertainty in People, Organizations, and Societies**

We can see this variation in terms of amounts of acceptance and comfortableness with uncertainty by using culture-based perspectives. These views are numerous and popular, not new. For example, Tönnies (1887) categorized social relationships into dichotomous sociological types: “*Gemeinschaft*” (“community”) versus “*Gesellschaft*” (“society”) cultures. Weber also wrote extensively about these relationships and wrote in direct response to Tönnies.

Other early writers on culture besides Weber (1905, 1915) himself, include Parsons (1951) and also Hall (various from the 1950s, see bibliography), who applied anthropology to the understanding of cultures and intercultural communications. He analyzes and interprets how communications and interactions between cultures differ by using three categories: “Context” (high or low), “Space” (close or distant), “Time” (monochronic or polychronic). Of relevance to us here are “Context” as this refers to how a message is communicated. In high-context cultures, such as Latin America, Asia and Africa, the physical context of messages is important. People tend to be more indirect and to expect the person they are communicating with to decode the implicit parts of messages. While the person sending the message takes care in crafting the message, the person receiving the message is expected to read it within context. In high-context cultures, body language is as important and sometimes more important than the actual words spoken. The message may lack the verbal directness of a low-context culture, such as the U.S. and Northern Europe, where people tend to be explicit and direct in their communications. The guiding principle is to minimize the margins of misunderstanding or doubt, listening only to the words spoken; they tend not to be cognizant of body language. As a result, people often miss important clues that could tell them more about the specific issue. Thus, communication between people from high-context and low-context cultures can be confusing.

Hall's "Time" is also of relevance here as in polychronic ("many times") cultures people can do several things at the same time while in monochronic ("one-time") cultures people tend to do one task at a time. Monochronic cultures, such as Northern Europe and North America, tend to schedule one event at a time and keep to times. Time is a means of imposing order. Thus, even if agendas are not finished, meetings end, and agendas completed at another scheduled meeting. In polychronic cultures, by contrast, people and relationships matter more. Finishing a task may also matter more. Those from Latin America, the Mediterranean or the Middle East have more relaxed timetables. People might attend to several things at once or cluster informally, rather than arrange themselves in a queue. It is not considered an insult to arrive late, and people regard work as part of a larger interaction with a community and if an agenda is not complete, are less likely to simply end the meeting and more likely to continue to finish the business at hand. Those who prefer monochronic order may find polychronic order frustrating and hard to manage. Those with a polychronic sensibility, on the other hand, might resent the "tyranny of the clock" and prefer to be focused on completing the tasks at hand. The impact on feelings about uncertainty from Hallian "Context" and "Time" cultural dimensions are clear.

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) identified six dimensions of culture: "Nature of People"; "Relation with Nature"; "Duty towards Others"; "Mode of Activity"; "Privacy of Space"; "Temporal Orientation." Amongst these, again time, as in "Temporal Orientation," has relevance to feelings about uncertainty as it relates to which is more important: past, present or future. Some societies focus on the past, ancestors, and traditionalism. Others are focused on the hedonism of today, whilst still others plan carefully for the future. Thus, variations in "Temporal Orientation" impacts on views about uncertainty.

Cultural perspectives took off with the seminal works of Hofstede (see, *inter alia*, 1980; 1996). There are also cultural alternatives, such as Tropaars and Hampden-Turner (1993; 2004). Their dimensions were: "Universalist versus Particularist"; "Individualist versus Collectivist"; "specific versus Diffuse"; "Achievement-Oriented versus Ascriptive"; "Neutral versus Emotional or Affective."

Culture has also been used to explain variations in the area of leadership. For example, Lewis (1996), after visiting 135 countries and working in more than 20 of them, came to the conclusion that humans can be divided into 3 clear categories, based not on nationality or religion but on behaviors: "Linear-active," "Multi-active," "Reactive." House et al (2004) and the GLOBE project used 9 cultural dimensions, which extended the original work of Hofstede by adding new cultural dimensions to the study and analysis. GLOBE defined the dimensions of individualism and collectivism by segregating it into societal and institutional collectivism.

Culture has continued to be utilized as an explanatory variable. For example, Hampden-Turner, Abelin, and Rowley (2019) look at rationality with values as differences to be reconciled in comparing business cultures in the West to East. Another example is Hampden-Turner, Abelin, and Rowley (2020) who examine how culture hinders or helps innovation with the culture clash between the formality and the informality needed to innovate.

Despite the plethora of diverse armchair critics, we will use Hofstede's famous cultural dimensions, which developed over time into 6: "Power Distance"; "Individualism versus Collectivism"; "Masculinity versus Femininity;" "Long versus Short Term Orientation"; "Indulgence versus Restraint"; "Uncertainty Avoidance" (UA). Although views about time – as orientation that is short or long term - is listed, we will only focus on the most directly relevant one here, the UA measure. This concerns the level of acceptance for uncertainty and ambiguity within a society on a spectrum, giving a "low" to "high" score.

A high UA score indicates low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Worrying about the future and the uncertainty in life is felt as a continuous threat that must be fought. There is a need for clarity and structure. Usually a very rule-oriented society which follows well-defined laws, regulations, and controls. Society maintains rigid codes of belief and behavior and structured organizational activities and less risk taking. Examples of such countries include Germany, France Japan (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

A low UA score indicates being comfortable with ambiguity. The uncertainty inherent in life is accepted and each day is taken as it comes. Society is less rule-orientated, with more tolerance for differences, variety, changes, and experimentation. Societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles. People are more willing to accept the risks related to the unknown, with less structured organizational activities and more risk taking. Examples of such countries include U.K., U.S., China (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

There is work that more directly specifically uses the Hofstedian UA dimension across a range of areas, topics, and issues. These include the following few examples. Atkins (2000) uses Hofstede's UA in terms of consequences to teaching in a cross-cultural context, in particular in a Japanese high school. Similarly, Shuper et al. (2004) investigate whether Canadian and Japanese university students differ in how they deal with uncertainty. In topic contrast, Lee et al (2007) look at how cultural differences in the UA affect product decisions.

Now if we put into the uncertainty picture leaders and "followers" from societies with different UA scores we will have a more complex mix of different approaches to uncertainty. If followers are in teams and workforce that themselves are also internally diverse and from different UA scoring countries, variations in acceptance of uncertainty complexity increases. The UA dimension has been used and researched in cross-cultural settings. For example, Ochieng et al (2013) show the effect of cross-cultural uncertainty and complexity within multicultural construction teams. They examine the challenges faced by construction managers in managing cross-cultural complexity and uncertainty. Samochowiec and Florack (2010) look at the intercultural context under uncertainty in terms of the impact of predictability and anxiety on the willingness to interact with a member from an unknown cultural group. They find the willingness to interact with member of a foreign culture depends on the incidental affective state of an individual and the predictability of the potential interaction partner.

Given this, it seems obvious that uncertainty is not seen, processed, taken or accepted in the same way and fashion by all in practice and empirically. There are some theories that might help explain this UA variation.

## **Explaining People's Uncertainty**

Here we can look at several related theories, for example, Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT). Famous works by Gudykunst (2005a, 2005b) on Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory. According to him, communication is effective to the extent that the person interpreting the message attaches a meaning to the message that is relatively similar to what was intended.

He notes the foundational URT of Berger and Calabrese (1975) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) of Tajfel and Turner (1979). The basic underlying ideas of SIT had emerged in Sumner (1906), whose influential work captured the primary dynamics. Gudykunst (2005a; 2005b) began his groundbreaking study at a time when very little theoretical research on intercultural communication existed.

URT itself stems from Information Theory, originated by Shannon and Weaver (1949). This suggests that when people interact initially, uncertainties exist especially when the probabilities for alternatives in a situation is high and the probability for them occurring is equally high. They assume uncertainty is reduced when the alternative amount is limited and/or those chosen tend to be repetitive.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) provide a theoretical perspective for dealing with the initial stage of interpersonal interaction. According to UCT people find uncertainty in interpersonal relationships unpleasant and are motivated to reduce uncertainty through personal communication. Their UCT (or Initial Interaction Theory) is a communication theory that specifically looks into the initial interaction between people prior to the actual communication process. In gaining this information, people are able to predict the other's behavior and resulting actions, all of which, according to UCT, is critical in the development of any relationship. They explain the connection between their central concept of uncertainty and 7 key variables of relationship development with a series of axioms and deduce 21 theorems. Within UCT, 2 types of uncertainty are identified (Cognitive and Behavioral), 3 types of strategies people may use to seek information about someone else (Passive, Active, Interactive) and 3 individual stages (Entry, Personal, Exit) that the initial interaction of strangers can be broken down into.

## **The Need for Effective Leadership**

Given everything so far about the difficulty of dealing with uncertainty and the variations in terms of its acceptance and comfortableness with it, it is an opportune moment to look at leadership in uncertain times given the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its medical and economic crisis with its impacts on individuals, organizations, business, economies and society. The simplicity, boldness and clarity of some initial leadership strategies and tactics have over time metamorphosed into something more nuanced, hesitant, and opaque. So, how might individuals – from the political, scientific, medical, and economic worlds – lead effectively in such uncertain times?

To help shed light on this, we need to start with some working ideas of what “leadership” is. The area is awash with huge numbers of definitions, many trite, cliched, banal and hagiographic, etc. In contrast, for the famous management guru Warren Bennis, leaders challenge the *status quo*

and have the capacity to translate vision into reality. A useful working view come from the novelist David Foster Wallace (2005) who states that leaders “help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own.” Indeed, despite not being a “leadership expert,” he manages to concisely capture key ingredients and address the counter-factual with the final words, otherwise things may happen anyway, with nothing to do with leader actions.

This sort of leadership is inter-woven with ideas of so-called “Emotional Intelligence” (EI). This can be seen as the ability of leaders to understand and manage their own emotions and those of the people around them and has four components: self-awareness, social awareness self-management and social skills. Leaders with a high degree of EI know what they are feeling, what their emotions mean, and these emotions can affect other people. A case study example of this leadership type is provided by the actions and behaviors of Ernest Shackleton during 1914-16 when he brought back, with no deaths, all his crew members from the failed Endurance Antarctic expedition.

Another aspect is the leadership style to use in uncertain times. Here we can recall the identification of the classic groups of leadership concerns and choices in decision making. First, Lewin’s (1948) single dimension of participation or involvement levels in decisions on a spectrum ranging from “autocratic” through “laissez faire” to “democratic.” Second, the two dimensions on low to high spectrums of the seminal university of Ohio and Michigan 1940s-50s studies, operationalized in the famous Managerial Grid of Blake and Mouton (1964), with its twin axis of “concern for people” versus “concern for production.”

Once we add in the dyadic relationship involved in leading, we can see that a leader needs to be flexible in thought as their leadership style may well need to vary not only according to circumstance, but also type of followers. Furthermore, leadership in uncertain times requires a further pair of ingredients: “effectiveness” and “skills.” First, “effectiveness,” which again, this is not a new area, for example, Drucker (1967). A plethora of definitions exist, often using a descriptive/prescriptive “best” list containing a kaleidoscope of abilities or skills. Such genres have been aptly and comprehensively critiqued by Rosenzweig (2007) and his seminal *The Halo Effect... and the Eight Other Business Delusions That Deceive Managers*. Additionally, these types of approaches fall into the classic Trait Theory and Universal Theory mold, with all their well-known issues and drawbacks. In contrast, Contingency Theory can be used. What makes an effective leader is a mix of factors, the “3Cs,” which influence a leader’s thoughts and actions (Rowley and Ulrich, 2013). These are first, “Context,” the philosophical views that shape norms and patterns in countries. Second, “Culture,” the organization’s unique culture and practices. Third, “Competence,” the leader’s own personal style, traits, and predispositions.

A second component to leadership in uncertain times actually concerns “skills.” Here we can recall the seminal work of Katz (1955), who wrote counter common trends at the time and produced a temporal three-fold distinction of skills. Importantly, not only did he distinguish skill types, but he clearly outlined how their relative balance shifted over careers. First, “Technical skills,” the ability to apply specialized knowledge or expertise. Second, “Human skills,” the ability to work with, understand and motivate other people, both individually and in groups. Third,



“Conceptual skills,” the mental ability to analyze and diagnose complex situations. He then argued that the lower the position in the organization the more technical skills and less conceptual skills were required. On the other hand, the higher someone was in the organization, the less technical skills were required to fill the position and the more conceptual skills were required. However, human skills were always required, no matter the level of position in the organization, and also became more important.

Part of such skills, especially conceptual ones, is “critical thinking,” which is important as all societies require two things. Firstly, to adapt to change, if they cannot shut themselves away from it, such as China and Japan in the past or North Korea more recently. The porosity of borders in the globalized world of the Covid-19 pandemic amply illustrates the problems of trying to do this. Second, a way of sharing common resources – not just material, but including knowledge, if they are to flourish via cooperativeness. Again, the Covid-19 crisis highlights this point with the multitude of varied responses and initial Gadarene rush for medical equipment and supplies and the need for maximum cooperation in the development of live and non-live vaccines.

These twin needs of adaption and cooperation are best met by quiet, reasonable debate and the exchange of ideas as the more people debating ideas with full consideration of the issues, the better will be the end result for everyone. Reasonable debate can be seen as comprising 7 parts, with:

1. All the key facts included.
2. Expertise respected.
3. Acceptance of different judgements about “the facts.”
4. A clear proposition discussed.
5. Respect for the evidence about both the advantages and disadvantages of the proposition.
6. Any side effects of the proposition fully acknowledged.
7. The overall purpose being legitimate and good and bringing widespread benefits.

Such reasonable debate in turn requires reasonable persuasion and reasonable discussion. The art of reasonable persuasion can be seen as also having 7 components, to:

1. State clearly what is proposed - and why.
2. Immediately acknowledge points of opposition.
3. State clearly several main reasons for the proposal.
4. Clarify the logics behind it.
5. Add examples, with data if possible, to show how such a thing has worked elsewhere.
6. Be very specific about dates and places.
7. Re-state the proposal.

Once reasonable debate has occurred, we leaders need to be able to persuade others of their position. The art of reasonable persuasion has 5 aspects, to:

1. Show respect to the other person.
2. Acknowledge there are different perspectives, each based on knowledge and experience - there is no monopoly on “the truth.”

3. Suggest the proposition is different for reasons to do with the kinds of understanding behind it – not the individuals debating it, so avoiding “playing the person not the ball” as the saying goes.
4. Explain the basis of your own understanding, for example, including data, times, examples, etc.
5. State clearly what you propose and its benefits and for whom.

Of course, we need to note - and at least acknowledge - that this endeavor faces at least two forms of bias. First, desirability bias, which is wishful thinking, seeing what we want to see. Second, confirmation bias, the tendency to see what we expect to see, to cling on to beliefs by picking whatever facts support them and dismissing contrary evidence. Remembering this in both our own and other’s work is important.

So, what are the implications of all this analysis for leadership in uncertain times, such as the Covid-19 medical pandemic and economic crisis? They are two-fold. First, leaders can use different styles, critical thinking, and skills: conceptual skills and considered use of human skills. Second, leaders need to be aware of variations in leadership styles of and be ‘sensitive’ to “follower” reactions to each.

## **Conclusion**

Uncertainty is a slippery, elastic, and multi-faceted term and concept. We have tried to pin it down a bit more and to also draw distinctions in terms of levels, types, and degrees of its acceptance by and conformableness with people, organizations, and societies. Such nuances are especially important in heterogeneous and cross-cultural contexts.

Leading in unchanging times is easy. As legendary investor Warren Buffett is famous for saying: “Only when the tide goes out do you discover who’s been swimming naked.” With cultural models we try to understand where people are coming from and then try to respond in alignment with their view of the world. In terms of responses to uncertainty, this is exacerbated when different cultures collide. While some leaders, managers, policy makers, workers and societies may be more or less content with the uncertainty, openness and flexibility of responses to events, such as the Covid-19 medical pandemic and economic results, others will be far less so. When groups are composed of individuals from societies scoring very differently on Hofstedian UA, then we have a recipe for difficult times.

The Covid-19 crisis has put a searching spotlight on leaders from all sorts of areas - political, medical, scientific, and economic. Leadership in such uncertain times is about effective leadership. It is about using appropriate styles and skills with specific people in a particular context and situation that is evolving. This requires leaders of exception talent and skills to help guide businesses and society through the choppy waters of uncertainty to the more certain *terra firma* some may seek.

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