

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 3
DIAGNOSE SITUATION

*Explore
Tough
Interpretations*

As you work on your challenge, exploring tough interpretations becomes your crystal ball. This skill will help you anticipate the future and plan your leadership moves.

Humans tend to look at a situation and apply one easy or relatively comfortable explanation of what happened. To exercise leadership on adaptive challenges you'll need to train yourself to imagine multiple explanations — we call them “interpretations” — of the same information. And while we normally are glass-half-full kind of people, we realize it is important to recognize glass-half-empty situations to gain the right perspective.



“OOH, A BLINDFOLD – WHAT FUN!
BUT WHERE’S THE PIÑATA?”

HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF WHAT WE MEAN.

First, we give you the “easy” interpretation, then several “tough” ones. Either easy or tough could be right, or partially right. You’ll be better equipped to meet the future if you consider both.

EASY INTERPRETATION: We lost the game because the refs cheated us.

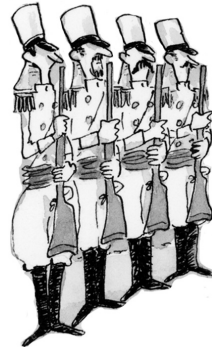
TOUGH INTERPRETATIONS: We lost because we didn’t prepare enough. We lost because teammates don’t trust each other. We lost because key teammates crack under pressure.

EASY INTERPRETATION: To distinguish ourselves from the competition, we need a new strategic plan.

TOUGH INTERPRETATIONS: What good is a new plan if our culture still stinks. We have tried but cannot execute a strategic plan. We don’t like to focus on defined strategies and prefer the flexibility that comes with not really committing to anything.

EASY INTERPRETATION: He is distant from his family because he prefers to do his own thing.

TOUGH INTERPRETATIONS: He is suffering from mental illness. We’ve failed to be there for him in the past. Unacknowledged issues among family members keep him away.



As a species, we humans possess some unique capacities. We can stand apart from what's going on, think about it, question it, imagine it being different. We are also curious. We want to know "why?" We figure out "how?" We think about what's past, we dream forward to the future. We create what we want rather than just accept what is. So far, we're the only species we know that does this.

— MARGARET WHEATLEY

The exercise of leadership looks different based on the interpretation.

More interpretations mean more options. It's the difference between lodging a formal protest with the athletic conference and helping players develop mental strategies for handling stressful game situations. It's the difference between hiring a consultant to guide yet another strategic plan and exerting the will to carry out the current one. It's the difference between rarely seeing your loved one and gathering family members for a frank talk about your part of the mess.

The ability to explore uncomfortable explanations is a necessary leadership skill. If we don't explore tough interpretations, we see what's going on around us in simple, easy and benign ways. Then we apply technical strategies rather than adaptive approaches. Facing those difficult explanations allows us to imagine multiple ways forward and really understand what is required to make progress.

An interpretation is more than just an opinion. It's one explanation for why things are the way they are. Exploring tough interpretations is one aspect of diagnosing the situation. Diagnosing thoroughly helps you lead effectively.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT TOUGH INTERPRETATIONS?

Read the book "Immunity to Change" by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey.

How do you develop the skill?

Practice it. Imagine multiple explanations for a situation at work, at home or in the news. Recognize which interpretation might be easiest to “believe.” Recognize it as just one way of looking at the situation. Practicing this skill is often easiest when you approach it as though you are renting the idea versus owning it. Exploring tough interpretations is about looking at a situation through every possible lens. Renting ideas gives you freedom to make tougher interpretations than you normally would.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- ▶ Base your interpretations on data you can observe, such as what someone said or did.
- ▶ When talking about tough interpretations with others, use language such as, “One interpretation might be ...” and “Another interpretation could be ...” That type of lead-in will help you and others remember those interpretations are just possibilities, not necessarily your opinion.
- ▶ Imagine four people: the rudest person you know; the most negative person you know; the bravest person you know; and the person you know who can most readily grasp a complex situation. Then ask yourself: What would each say about what’s going on?
- ▶ Pretend this is happening to someone else in some other city, country or planet. Come up with interpretations from that vantage point.

If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.

— ALBERT EINSTEIN



I am a parent on the local school board. Lately we've had pretty big debates among teachers, parents and administration about the education our children are receiving. Our test scores keep going down. Parents blame the teachers, teachers blame the parents, and administrators blame lack of state funding. Everyone believes so firmly in his or her own thinking that I'm wondering how we can move forward?

- SAD FOR OUR SCHOOLS SELINA

Dear Selina,

What a frustrating situation! No one is trying to diagnose the situation. Everyone is set in his or her thinking. Leadership here is about getting the factions involved to consider multiple interpretations of what's happening.

You may be tempted to focus on solving the content problem. You might find yourself considering new reading and math programs, for example. Don't. Until you get the factions involved to consider uncomfortable interpretations, the right way forward will be elusive.

Try this. (1) Go first. Publicly acknowledge and "rent" explanations that put more of the blame on the school board. Be vulnerable and show others what it looks like to explore tough interpretations. (2) List different interpretations and share the list after you have five or six interpretations. Simply seeing a list of interpretations will ignite others' thinking.

Leadership here looks like helping the group better diagnose the situation. Good luck!

Onward!

P.S. Make sure the list you share with others always ends with: "Other interpretations?" Add others' ideas to the list.