

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY  
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 8  
MANAGE SELF

*Get Used to  
Uncertainty  
and Conflict*

Buckle up. It's going to be a bumpy ride. The difficult challenges holding back your organization are full of uncertainty, change and conflict. Anyone can lead, anytime and anywhere, but if you can't handle the twists and turns, get outta the car.

Typically, we covet comfort and avoid conflict. We call this "Kansas nice." We've also heard it as "Minnesota nice," "Iowa nice" or "Southern nice." Maybe you can relate.

When a large group meets, everything is wonderful and fine. But afterward, out in the parking lot, people cluster in twos and threes, venting frustrations and saying what they really think.

Adaptive challenges live in people's hearts and stomachs. By their very nature, adaptive challenges lack ready-made solutions. Where you see a need for change, other people fear losing something they now have. Keep in mind,



it isn't change that's scary but the loss that goes with it. People get passionate about issues that affect them. Values come into play. In the midst of this kind of work, no one knows the outcome. As uncertainty rises, so does conflict.

If you care about the future of your organization or community, leadership requires facing uncertainty and conflict for the sake of making progress.

Adaptive challenges are all about learning, and learning isn't easy. When the stakes are high and unknowns outnumber knowns, people get uncomfortable. They do everything possible to settle things quickly and make the discomfort disappear.

*The better you get at holding steady amid uncertainty and conflict, the more prepared you'll be to help people learn and achieve a shared purpose.*

Uncertainty and conflict are often pegged as bad things — if the group doesn't know where it is going something must be wrong. Our experience suggests that uncertainty and conflict are signs that adaptive work is at hand. Leadership means harnessing the discomfort by focusing attention on the underlying causes.

### **How do you handle uncertainty?**

- ▶ **Stay grounded in your purpose.** Remember that the discomfort is worthwhile.
- ▶ **Treat every situation as an opportunity to learn.**
- ▶ **Acknowledge risks, and keep them at a level you can manage.**
- ▶ **Don't put a time stamp on progress.** Adaptive work always takes more time than you think it will.

- ▶ **Be smart about what you ask of others.** Ask enough but not too much.
- ▶ **Don't forget what you do know.** Use it as your compass to navigate uncertainty.

### How do you handle conflict?

- ▶ **See it coming.** Know what sets you off and what might trigger others.
- ▶ **Don't take things personally.** Instead, focus on what's best for the organization.
- ▶ **Keep one hand on the thermostat and keep conflict productive, not inflammatory.**
- ▶ **Value productive conflict.** Learn to manage it instead of eliminating it.
- ▶ **Seek out mediation skills or read "Getting to Yes" by Roger Fisher and William L. Ury.**
- ▶ **Walk in someone else's shoes.** Try to see where others are coming from.
- ▶ **Focus on observations and avoid interpretations.** Observations are pieces of data that are indisputable. For example: "I've noticed the marketing department never attends meetings initiated by the sales department." Interpretations are simply a guess at what the observations mean. For example: "It's clear the marketing department doesn't value the sales people."



## TIPS TO HELP YOU GET USED TO UNCERTAINTY AND CONFLICT

- ▶ When something is on your mind, say it.
- ▶ If you usually try to keep everybody happy, resist that urge to be the peacemaker.
- ▶ Come to people's defense only as a conscious choice. Avoid a knee-jerk response to save them.
- ▶ If you feel yourself taking something personally, get on the balcony. Force yourself to make concrete observations about what is going on.
- ▶ If you say a meeting will last one hour, end the meeting on time whether there is resolution or not.

*GARTH BROOKS sums it up with his chorus from "Standing Outside the Fire."*

*"Life is not tried, it is merely survived if you're standing outside the fire."*

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## WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT GETTING USED TO UNCERTAINTY AND CONFLICT?

Check out Ken Segall's book "Insanely Simple: The Obsession that Drives Apple's Success." Chapter 1, Think Brutal, nails the value of conflict. Chapter 9, Think Skeptic, highlights the value of uncertainty.

What happens if you don't get used to uncertainty and conflict? We all start moving down a path that no one either wants to take or should be taking, all because we don't want to speak up or disappoint someone else. Check out Jerry Harvey's "Abilene Paradox" to explore further.



I've been working on an issue with my church and am finding myself continually triggered by a key player, Samantha, who seems against progress. It causes quite a bit of stress and often derails me. How do I "push through" this conflict without going crazy?

- FAITHFULLY CRAZY CHRISSIE

Dear Chrissie,

Don't "push through." Instead, try to embrace the conflict. Don't add to it, but acknowledge and study it. Why is it there? Most likely, Samantha represents the views of many others. Rather than seeing her as a source of conflict, think of her as a faithful and helpful adversary, someone helping you understand a point of view different from your own.

Invite Samantha to coffee, breakfast or lunch once a month for the next six months. Go into each occasion with a stance of curiosity about her opinions and history. Ready yourself with sincere, appreciative questions (e.g., "What experiences have helped shape your faith the most?"). Avoid snide questions (e.g., "Why are you holding up progress? Why are you dividing us?").

The two of you may not be fast friends six months from now, but you will know a lot more about where she is coming from, and that will help you handle the conflict.

Onward!

P.S. Don't forget that "love thy enemy" stuff your church preaches!