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# MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

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## Doubt

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### From the Editor

When we were on the playground we knew that, “sticks and stones can break our bones but names could never hurt us.” The chant was an inoculation against cruelty. We grew up and learned that the mantra was only half-true. Sure enough, we own how we are going to feel and, as Eleanor Roosevelt once observed, “Nobody can insult me without my permission.” On the other hand, names and labels can minimize, limit, and harm.

Here’s another half-truth about hurt and harm from the playground. What you don’t know can hurt you. It is true that ignorance is expensive. What is also true, however, is this: What you think you know but don’t, can hurt you.

Part of our job as a team of management educators is to distinguish half-truths from whole truths. As well, we help organizations, teams, and individuals determine what they really know. Once that is understood, we work to improve the quality of the leadership-knowledge asset.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

### About the Author and the Article

Leadership used to be a paint-by-numbers type of activity: develop your leadership style within the boundaries of plan, organize, direct, control, and staff. Oh yes, do it with confidence; never let anybody see the moments of uncertainty — because, we believed, if they do they won’t respect our leadership.

In this article, Stephen Baetz challenges that assumption and even goes so far as to suggest that leaders ought to create a modicum of doubt. Doubt, he argues, “allows us to question, challenge, and re-create.” He offers three suggestions to encourage doubt as well as three suggestions to ensure that doubt doesn’t paralyze action.

Stephen is a partner in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



*Stephen Baetz*

# Doubtful Certainty

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Television was a late arrival in the house that I grew up in. Radio, my mother reminded me, stimulated the imagination. “With just a few words from the author, you can be swept away to another time and place that you’ve created,” she pitched. “Television stops you from thinking, dreaming.” It was for those same reasons that I was obliged to read.

The truth was, however, that I did sneak out to friends’ homes who had television and there I was captivated by the flickering black and white. I didn’t realize the medium was the metaphor: this was the 1950s when life and its issues required little or no imagination, thought, or reflection. There was no equivocation, no qualifying “it depends,” no relativity, no shades of grey. The good guys wore the white hats and the bad guys wore the black hats. There was no doubt about what was good and what was bad. There weren’t moral dilemmas that had to be wrestled; one choice was clearly better than another. Security was better than change; work was better than recreation; capitalism was better than socialism; obedience was better than questioning; faith was better than doubt.

I think that’s how doubt got a bad name; for that matter, anything that was associated with doubt — asking questions, challenging previous assumptions, searching for balance — got a bad name. It took a couple of decades at least for many to admit that questioning was a good thing, that challenging previous assumptions was wise, and that doubting was not heresy. Of course, to make doubt a virtue is equally silly in the other direction. Imagine the absurdness of arguing that doubt is good and certainty is bad! An over-abundance of either can be disastrous.

Shakespeare reminds us of the downside of doubt. In *Measure for Measure*, (Act I, scene iv) Lucio asserts:

Our doubts are traitors,  
And make us lose the good we oft might win,  
By fearing to attempt.

A paralyzing fear of action can condemn us to mediocre outcomes. Likewise, an over-abundance of certainty can stop us from

experimenting, searching for better ways, or growing. The unfortunate net result of too much certainty is to live yesterday forever.

What does this mean?

My take is that black and white thinking is too limiting and that we must learn to live and work in the middle of the tension created by the paradox of doubtful certainty. As leaders we have to doubt because that allows us to question, challenge, and re-create and, at the same time, we have to move forward with confidence.

Recognizing that certainty has had its day, I’d like to offer several tips on how to create doubt that can lead to improvements and then an equal number of tips for ensuring that doubt doesn’t paralyze action.

## Tip # 1: Encourage Doubt by Asking Why

A question that begins with why can make others feel uncomfortable; there are times when “Why?” feels like an aggressive challenge. It may be for that reason that the question is avoided. However, *why* creates doubt; it can act to de-stabilize; and therefore, it is useful.

Ask — and encourage others to ask — questions like, “Why are we doing it this way?”, “Why do we have that process, procedure, or policy?”, and “Why is this happening?” These are good Level 1 why-questions.

Then move to Level 2 why-questions by asking, “Why are we holding that belief, attitude, or value?” These are designed to get at fundamental, sometimes emotional, issues.

As leaders, we have the obligation to ask both Level 1 and Level 2 why-questions ourselves and to open doors for others to ask them.

## Tip # 2: Encourage Doubt by Asking What If ...

A question like, “What if we were to do it this way instead of that way?” encourages others to question, to think twice. To kick the question up a notch ask, “What if we were to believe the

exact opposite of what we currently believe?” That question encourages people to challenge existing paradigms and mental models. It starts to create doubt about whether the existing belief system is the only belief system and whether it is adequate.

Imagine the rich discussion that would take place if questions like those which follow were asked within a team or an organization:

- What if we believed that our competitors knew something important about our customers that we don't know?
- What if we believed our current success is short-lived?
- What if we believed our current strengths will soon be liabilities?

The discussion that takes place ought to create doubt, prompt re-evaluation, and develop new thinking and planning.

### **Tip # 3: Encourage Doubt by Searching for Real Evidence**

My experience is that teams and organizations like to tell themselves stories; simple stories that offer plausible explanations about why something has happened. However, the stories are often conveniences that allow people to avoid tough questions and aren't usually connected to reality.

Create doubt by asking, “What do we know for sure?”, “What evidence do we have?”, and “What data or current experience exists to support that explanation?”. Questions like these create doubt about what we think we know and ought to encourage us to determine what we really know.

And now to the other side: how do leaders ensure that any doubt that has been created doesn't stop people from taking action?

### **Tip # 1: Ensure Doubt Doesn't Paralyze by Evaluating Risks**

Risk analysis is the process of determining what could go wrong. And a version of that question — What is the worst that could

happen if we were to proceed with what we know? — is a good starting point for valuable team dialogue. Even go a step further. Ask, “What's the probability that the worst that can happen will happen?” and “What is the cost if it does happen?”. Those questions in combination help you and the team understand which risks must be managed and which can be ignored. With the risks defined and an action plan in place to manage any downsides, action can be taken with reasonable confidence.

### **Tip # 2: Ensure Doubt Doesn't Paralyze by Focusing on What Could be Gained**

Individuals, teams, and yes, organizations are more likely to move forward in the face of uncertainty — in the face of not having all the data and information — if they focus on what can be gained if action is taken: “What do we have to gain if we take action?” The inverse question can be useful too: “What opportunities will we miss if we don't take action?” When these questions are asked and answered, the results often prompt a desire to “get on with it.”

### **Tip # 3: Ensure Doubt Doesn't Paralyze by Trialing and Testing**

If you don't know what is going to work and what is not going to work, run a trial or a test and see what the results are. It's taking a small step — which is often a wise thing to do when the turf and territory are not certain.

Tests and trials are laboratories that generate information about what works and doesn't work. They are learning opportunities that create an appreciation of what is known and what is not known, what should be trusted as certain and what can't be trusted.

Doubt challenges; it encourages fresh thinking; it is a parent of innovation. In a world of accelerated change and complexity, we must create doubt about what we think we know. However, doubt in and of itself should not stop us from acting.

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