

# Leading in Ambiguous and Unstructured Situations

Taken from *The Performance Papers: Incisive Briefings for Busy Leaders*

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*“In technical climbing, the... thing about leading as opposed to seconding, is that when you are seconding, the moves are as impossible for you as they are for the lead climber, but you are protected. As the lead climber you have to decide how much risk you’re willing to take. When you are seconding, your lead climber is already on a station where he or she is locked in and sitting there so that if you fall you’re going to be caught.*

*When you become a lead climber, suddenly a whole new dimension to the sport occurs.”*  
**John Grinder, Co-founder of NLP and experienced technical climber**

## Reducing ambiguity: a key leadership role

People in junior roles usually start off working to highly fixed procedures. In the case of many professionals – bankers, lawyers, engineers, accountants – those procedures may take years to master. With competence and mastery comes promotion.

And then a rather inconvenient thing happens. The further up the leadership ladder you get promoted, the more you are confronted with unstructured situations for which there is no fixed procedure. Briefs from those you work for become less clear, multiple reporting lines create real or apparent conflicts of priorities, and you come face to face with the inherent (and massive) uncertainty of the wider world: the world of markets, politics, shifting trends and demographics.

A primary part of your role becomes to reduce ambiguity and to create structure for the people following you, after all, those objectives, policies, standards, regulations, strategies and plans have to come from somewhere. Just as for the new lead climber, a whole new dimension of the game opens up.

## What it takes: tolerance for ambiguity

We need to accept that ambiguity and uncertainty are facts of life, the more so as your seniority increases. Some people find the challenge of that uncertainty exciting; for others it is frustrating or even frightening. Almost everyone struggles with ambiguity at times, and psychologists tell us that only a relatively small proportion of the population have a high tolerance for ambiguous situations (and some have such a low tolerance that frankly they are unlikely ever to be effective leaders).

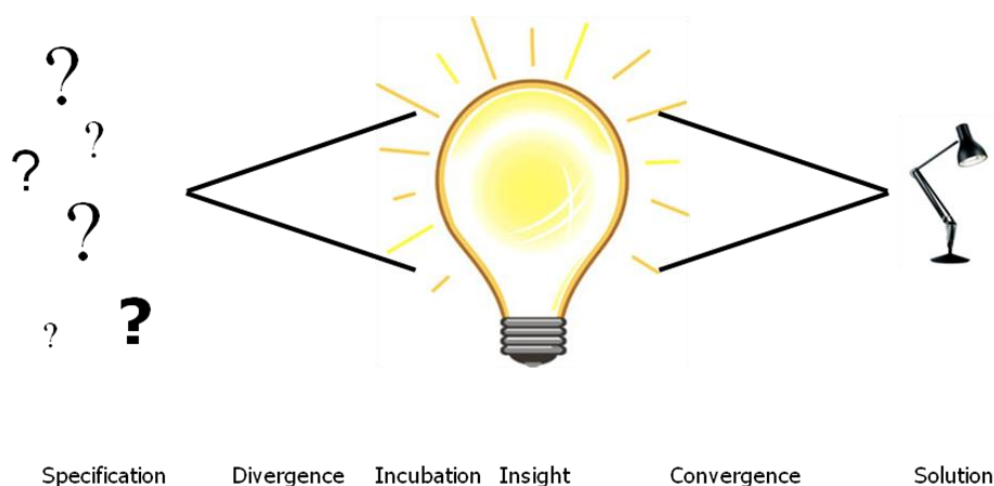
What about the majority, the people in between? Is an ability to function well in ambiguous and unstructured situations actually something you can improve?

I believe the answer to that is yes, but within limits that can only be determined by trying. And if that answer irritates you, it's because you find the uncertainty it contains difficult to cope with – so read on!

## A picture of creative problem solving

Have you ever been given an unclear assignment or project brief, with a time limit for delivery, huge amounts of potentially relevant information, and no clear idea what a solution would look like?

Think about how the following picture applies to this kind of situation:



**Figure 1. The process of creative problem solving.**

The picture was formulated by design expert J C Jones to capture the essentials of a creative design process. You start with a brief – which may be very vague – and you end up with a precise product (or document, or plan, or computer program etc). There are four elements:

- On the right, towards the end of the process, is the "convergent" phase in which the various elements of a solution are assembled. This may be technically demanding, but it is well-defined – the ambiguity is quite low – and an expert will typically apply themselves effectively to execute the technicalities required.
- On the left, at the start of the process (labelled "divergent") is the part that drives many people crazy. What's the source of the craziness? People caught up in the divergent phase often say things such as, "I've gathered loads of information but I don't know if I have enough yet. I can't see a pattern. I am overwhelmed and swimming in data. I am working hard but making no progress. The deadline is looming but I don't know what to do...etc." They are like someone confronted with the pieces of a large jigsaw scattered across the living room floor.
- In the middle of the diagram is a lightbulb. This represents the "Aha!" moment when you see the lid on the jigsaw box. At that point, a pattern emerges out of all the confusing data, and while you still have the work of convergent thinking, you can see where you are going.

- Preceding the light bulb is a period (of unknown length!) called “incubation”. The transition from a sea of unrelated information to the flash of insight often comes only after you have slept on a question for a while, or while you are doing something else (Archimedes had his Eureka moment when he was relaxing in the bath).

I once showed this to a team of corporate graphic designers. They very much recognised the pattern, and then one of them said: “That explains in a nutshell why my job is so stressful – I have to have the Eureka moment show up to a deadline!” This is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges to the disciplined middle-level manager who is promoted to the next level: you can’t accurately plan or allocate time for incubation.

## Understand your need for closure

As a hundred military misadventures, thousands of failed software projects and millions of poorly constructed business presentations confirm, there is a huge problem with rushing from a vague specification to immediate convergence on a solution.

People rush the process because they need psychological closure – divergence creates tension, and many people will do anything to reduce that tension as soon as possible.

The danger is that if you can’t tolerate ambiguity you will adopt a bad course of action just to release the tension. And worse, some people will build an elaborate case for saying that no action is necessary when it manifestly is – again to feel that they have the situation nicely boxed up. British industry has often done this – think about the complacency over the Japanese car and motorcycle industries, or contemporary denial in the face of the Chinese and Indian entrepreneurship and innovation increasingly reported in the business media.

## Seven keys for handling ambiguity and uncertainty

These keys have proven themselves effective as general prescriptions and they are a great place to start. Recognise too that you may find certain aspects of the challenge easier or more difficult to deal with depending on your own individual psychology. Use these as a reliable starting point, and if necessary, engage the help of a mentor, coach or other trusted advisor to deal with any further specific issues.

## Faced with an ambiguous situation, locate your progress on the divergence-convergence map and recognise your need for closure

Earlier I mentioned how the graphic designer got a flash of recognition in response to the divergence-convergence picture. Once you understand the dynamic, you can use it to help you navigate. Just knowing that a lack of closure is normal, or even desirable, at this phase in the process will in itself help to reduce feelings of uncertainty. It will also prevent you from unknowingly rushing too quickly to an ill-thought-out solution.

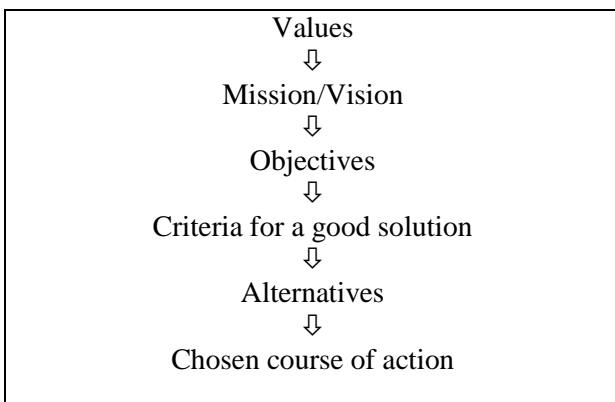
Accept that it may be that you have to define the situation.

This point is not about skills or personality traits; it's about giving yourself permission to lead. If you have spent years learning diligently to deliver to other people's precise specifications, and in accordance with their tightly defined procedures, an active shift of mind is required. As a leader you have to be clear: defining the situation is up to you. This is one of those times where you have to "step up".

## Get clear on your purpose

The best response to the question, "I don't know what to do" is usually, "Well what are you really trying to achieve?" As obvious as this is, it's amazing how often people seem to forget it. NASA spent a fortune on developing a pen that would write in weightless conditions – the Russians gave their cosmonauts pencils. Who was clearer on their purpose?

The purpose hierarchy in Figure 2 is a useful way to make sure you will select actions that achieve your real purposes.



**Figure 2. The Purpose Hierarchy**

Here's how you use it. Say you are given a vague brief such as, "Improve cross-functional collaboration".

If you start by "brainstorming" a load of possible courses of action, you will likely end up either with a poor solution or a huge range from which you are unable to choose.

If, however, you stop and take a little time to focus toward the top of the hierarchy, you will ask better questions, for example:

- What values are we trying to promote by improving cross functional collaboration? What is the fit with our mission/purpose?
- What objectives, if achieved, would represent fulfilment of those intentions?

- What would a good solution look like (in terms of e.g. resources used, risks, cultural fit, ease of implementation)
- What alternatives might meet those criteria?
- And only then, which is the most preferred option?

If this seems almost like a mini strategy process, you are right. A strategist seeks a balance between overall aims, external opportunities or threats, and internal resources. Doing so requires a high tolerance of divergence and ambiguity. It is also the stuff of leadership.

## Actively seek comments and feedback on “draft” plans and assumptions.

In order to lead, you need people to follow. A consultant I know does strategy work with law firms. Law firms are generally partnerships and the process of managing them has been likened to that of herding cats. And of course lawyers are professionally trained to find loopholes and problems with proposals. So this consultant’s challenge is to help define a situation and a solution without being shot down and losing the credibility required to maintain influence. One of his tricks is that “every document is a draft”. People asked for an opinion on a draft are generally far more helpful and charitable than those asked to consider a final version.

If you are seeking verbal input from stakeholders, here is a magic phrase for getting time and comment from people who can help you: “Can I run something by you quickly?” Try it and you will find it creates a constructive dynamic even with people you may find difficult to approach (e.g. very senior busy executives, political rivals).

## Start projects early and build in incubation time.

Any lecturer will tell you that even though they set coursework assignments ten weeks before the deadline, many people still submit late. You may think this is laziness, and sometimes it is. Many times, however, conscientious students start a bit late because they fear the difficulty of the task, and then get caught in a dilemma between endless divergence (hunting for more and more material in the library) and abortive attempts at ill-defined convergence (an essay that just won’t come together). In my lecturing days, I always advised students to at least consider the assignment as early in the term as possible, so that they were mulling it over (incubating it) “on the mental back-burner”.

Most ignored me of course, but those who adopted the advice found it worked, and this was usually reflected in their (blind-marked!) results.

## Realise that there is usually more than one way to skin a cat.

Much professional education reinforces an assumption that there is one best solution for problems, and that the job demands that you must find and implement it. Not to do so is to be “wrong”, which

is “very bad”. This is generally true within technical disciplines, but in business more widely, where we lack perfect information and where time is money, “good enough” now is usually better than “perfect” later. Effective leaders know when they are in a situation where there are multiple ways to get an acceptable result, and they don’t agonise over the choice among those ways.

## Accept that there is no return without some risk

What if you act without perfect knowledge and it doesn’t work out? Well, then you, like all leaders do from time to time, will fall short. Will that matter? Honestly, it depends on the prevalent culture. In the US, one or two failures are almost expected of an entrepreneur in order for them to be taken seriously. In the UK, backers may be less charitable. In some military organisations, where being proactive is vital and standing about can be fatal, there is a stated policy of rewarding even failed attempts at initiative while punishing passivity.

What if you are promoted in a culture which then punishes attempts to take initiative? Well then you have three choices: give up and conform (not really leadership), leave and find something more conducive (perfectly valid), or decide to change the culture (risky, but of course, the stuff of real leaders).

## Final thoughts

The inability to respond effectively to ambiguous situations is probably the most commonly mentioned issue I hear from senior executives about their direct reports.

Someone has to be the lead climber, or else no one will get to make the ascent. Building an organisation, creating wealth, providing jobs and fulfilling work, delivering products and services to make life more comfortable – all these things depend on those who is prepared to enter into uncertain and ambiguous situations and give them shape.

The majority of people are of course not prepared to do this. Therein lies the opportunity for those who are, or who are prepared to develop themselves to overcome their discomfort with ambiguity and pursue the rewards of leadership.

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*If you would like to read more:*

This article is extracted from *The Performance Papers: Incisive Briefings for Busy Leaders*, By Andrew Bass:

"Provides expert guidance for aligning your people with your objectives and turning strategy into action."  
*Jens R. Höhnel, CEO / President Europe, International Automotive Components Group (IAC)*

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