KPMG UNCERTAINTY EXPERTS

the CERTAINTY trap – and why it's ok to say, 'I don't know yet'.

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"Uncertainty. It typically leads to people 'playing small' in their lives and trying to find places of safety. But if you can harness and tap into it, uncertainty can become a force for creativity, new thinking, new ideas; pretty much everything the world needs right now."

Spend half an hour or so in the company of Sam Conniff, social innovation entrepreneur and one of the co-founders of Uncertainty Experts, and you're pretty much ready to embrace the chaos and uncertainty of the modern workplace.

The problem is that you'll still be in the minority. Within their ***Decisiveness Crisis research report*** published earlier this year, Uncertainty Experts (part of the Mediazoo Group) claims that 65% of professionals prefer to be seen as decisive, even if it leads to a negative outcome, rather than indecisive, even if that leads to a positive outcome. That figure rises to 69% among senior leadership team members.

In a world plagued by uncertainty, volatility and change, that's a remarkable statistic. Sound decision-making is inevitably complicated by the uncertainty that swirls around us on a daily basis. Yet despite this, and despite being asked anonymously, more than 2,000 professionals admitted they'd rather look decisive and get it wrong, rather than appear uncertain but eventually get it right.

Sam claims this potentially flawed decision-making comes with an estimated annual £20bn bill (extrapolated from publicly available economic research) in terms of lost productivity, staff turnover and disengagement – and that it all stems from the effect of 'certainty theatre'; the performance of confidence in the absence of genuine knowledge.

It's how it makes you feel

"Ask anybody what they think about uncertainty, especially in a professional environment, and they'll typically give you a balanced, analytical response," says Sam. "But ask them how they feel about uncertainty and it's an overwhelmingly negative emotion that they describe. The problem here is that uncertainty produces cortisol. It feels stressful and narrows our mind. By contrast, certainty produces dopamine which feels far nicer. In times of uncertainty therefore, people want to close a problem and reach certainty as quickly as possible. That feels good. That feels safe. However, it doesn't necessarily produce the best results."

It's perhaps no surprise to learn that uncertainty is the main driver of generalised anxiety disorder. Combating this requires us to increase our uncertainty tolerance which, in turn, can help improve decision-making, performance, empathy and innovation. The problem here is that most of us work in environments that reward decisiveness and certainty, no matter how performative this might be. There's often little tolerance for uncertainty, for wanting to pause, take a breath and come to a more considered conclusion.

That's the crux of the problem right there; the ongoing tension between certainty theatre and finding – or creating – the space for arriving at a more considered judgement.

Few organisations, if any, reward the aspiring leader who regularly says, "I don't know" – and nor should they. However, there should be far more scope, says Sam, for rewarding the leaders who are brave enough to say, "I don't know yet" and who can then take the steps required to figure out what the best answer actually is.

Tenure matters

"The most senior C-suite leaders are best at this," explains Sam. "Our research showed they had less of a negative default response to uncertainty. Tenure and lived experience clearly play a part in this because we also found that 80% of senior leaders who were less than two years into their role opted for the appearance of decisiveness over securing the right outcome."

"That's incredible. They're saying that 'when things get tough, it's more important for me to seem like I know what I'm doing'. These are people who have been invested in and promoted, given financial responsibility and asked to deliver innovation, yet four-fifths are saying that, when push comes to shove, they'll take a negative outcome. That's a cost that the UK economy needs to be aware of."

"Deep down, I'm sure these leaders know that they don't have all the answers. They also know that not having the answer can sometimes lead to a major breakthrough or lightbulb moment. So why are they doubling down on appearing to be decisive? It comes down to the social and reputational cost of appearing otherwise – and that cost only increases in periods of uncertainty. I think



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there's an update to leadership practice that's required to make it ok for leaders to not know something and that allows for a better answer to emerge within a time-bound period."

In search of safety

The Uncertainty Experts' findings certainly resonate with Claire Sweeney, a leadership and capability development expert at KPMG. She explains, "When helping leaders to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity, many struggle because they're hoping to find ways of removing the ambiguity, rather than focusing on how best to navigate it and controlling their reactions to it. Sam's right; it leads people to think small, to find the seemingly safe port in the storm. But it's when you have to take the time to work through something difficult and challenging; that's where the real learning happens and the creativity emerges."

"When I talk to leaders on development courses, what comes out time and time again is the pace of change. Some of the pain of dealing with change and uncertainty comes from feeling that they have to be on top of everything all the time. I also hear about the strain that's created when they step up to the next level because they're pulled in so many different directions that they lose sight of the main thing they were being asked to do. That's when you can understand the apparent value of making a quick decision, regardless of whether it's a good one or not."

"The research is also interesting because it echoes some of what we do in our leadership development programmes around the Dunning-Kruger effect, highlighting the danger of people whose overconfidence is combined with a lack of skill, competence or, as in this case, knowledge.

That becomes even more interesting when you think that what's seen here as confidence (or overconfidence) is actually anything but – and stems from this idea of certainty theatre. It's still just as dangerous though."

Uncertainty Experts' research draws on five years' worth of insights from scientific assessments conducted with more than 3,000 professionals at all levels. Within that research, leaders' preference for decisiveness over outcomes was consistent across almost all sectors. Financial services and technology businesses returned the highest scores, with some reaching as high as the mid-eighties, while healthcare and education sat at the opposite end. In fact, the teachers and
NHS care-givers cohort was the only group in the entire dataset where the majority (55.6%) opted for indecisiveness with a positive outcome.

"These are care professions with long-term, visible, personal accountability for outcomes," comments Sam. "When your decisions affect patients and children, and the consequences follow you home, the incentive structure shifts. The appearance of decisiveness stops being a professional advantage and starts being a professional liability. That tells us something rather inconvenient about the rest of the working economy. Most of it is not set up like that. Most of it rewards the performance of certainty more reliably than it rewards the reality of outcomes."

With a sizable database to interrogate, Sam started digging into the interviews' verbatim responses, at which point clear differences began to emerge between the 65% who favoured decisiveness and the remaining 35%.

When asked about the biggest uncertainty they currently faced, the opportunity it could unlock and what gets in the way of that opportunity being realised, the 65% were laser sharp in their singular, factual, localised and task-orientated responses.

By contrast, the 35% gave far fuller, more descriptive answers. They described multiple connected uncertainties; they talked in terms of systems, not isolated events; and they placed themselves at the heart of the discussion, rather than treating everything as a separate, external consideration. Theirs is a different uncertainty mindset, characterised in terms of altitude (how they see uncertainty), horizon (how they see the opportunity) and agency (how they see obstacles). These are the people who can 'hold the open', as the research describes it; people who can remain comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty for longer. If these are the people better equipped to navigate uncertainty, these are the behaviours and perspectives that you need to be seeking out and rewarding more proactively.

"This isn't about who's smart and who isn't," continues Sam. "And of course any organisation will still want people who – when needed – can be decisive in the moment as well as people who can better hold the open. But it's about understanding how organisations reward the visible performance of judgement more reliably than they reward judgement itself – and how quickly people within those organisations learn what to perform if they want to be successful."

An in-demand capability

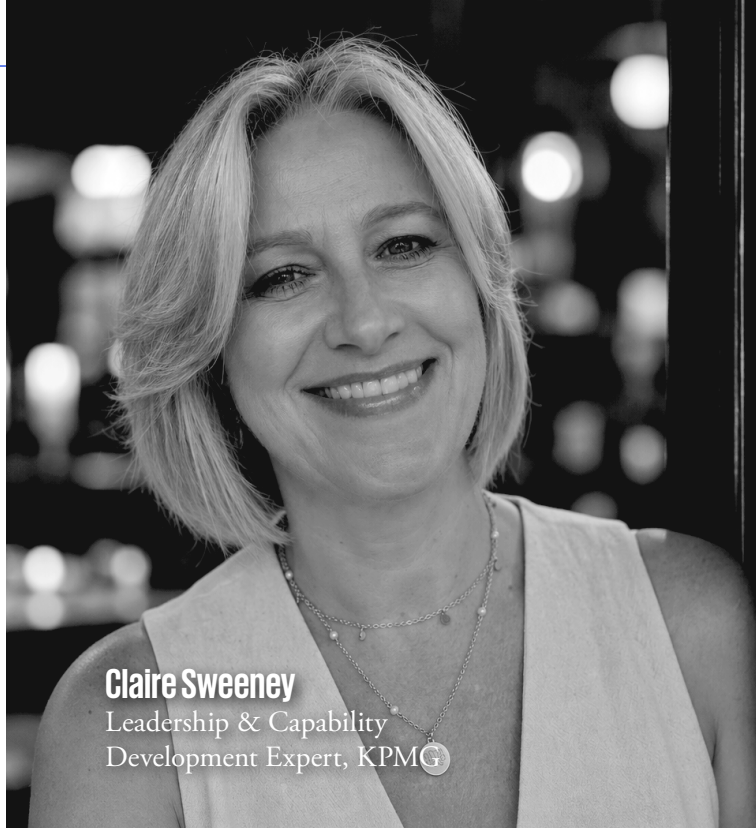
Thankfully, uncertainty tolerance is a learnable skill. As well as advising organisations on how to rethink their approach to recruitment, promotion and how to stop filtering out the 35%, Uncertainty Experts offer training that focuses on helping leaders understand how to tolerate not knowing long enough to get the answer right. Using a blend of psychology, neuroscience, storytelling and self-reflection, developed in conjunction with UCL's Centre for the Study of Decision-Making Uncertainty, they improve learners' uncertainty tolerance, helping improve their decision-making, resilience, judgement, creativity and adaptability.

All of which is music to Claire's ears, as she explains, "The days of generalised training, designed to improve all aspects of your leadership skillset, are gone. We've now moved away from the days of generic leadership development. Today, the best leadership development programmes create specific capabilities which in turn can change behaviours and improve outcomes, such as when improving leaders' uncertainty tolerance."

"Alongside this, I think this is where you also see the value in critical thinking skills; something that we all look for when recruiting but which, if we're honest, we can still struggle to develop in people once they're in the building. It's a vital capability, particularly in risk-averse, process-driven businesses where manuals, handbooks and policy guides are heavily relied on for decision-making. We can create the psychological safety within which critical thinking can be applied but when it comes to developing things like wisdom, discernment and judgement, which are vital in an uncertain environment, those are capabilities that we still need to work on unlocking in the workplace."

Not now, please

Unsurprisingly, broaching the discussion around improving leaders' uncertainty tolerance with senior executives who have plenty of other things on their to-do list is never easy, claims Sam. "I tend to make the point that this cuts across so many issues," he says. "If your leadership group is struggling with innovation, problem-solving, burnout and engagement, for example, then improving your collective uncertainty tolerance can help with all these things. That starts to get people's attention, particularly when applied within the context of major transformational change activities and investments, such as the adoption of AI. That's when you start to see uncertainty as this kind of end-of-level baddie that you simply have to confront at some point."



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Leadership & Capability Development Expert, KPMG

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"We can't ignore the strain this is putting on people though. When presenting these findings and talking about the people recently promoted to senior leadership roles, I've had people in tears because they felt that someone had finally identified the pressure they're under. They talk about being caught in this space where they have to perform with this certainty. They're always doubling down. The more they say they know what they're doing, the more they feel they have to keep on saying that they know what they're doing. The stress that creates isn't something they feel able to put their hands up and talk about – and that benefits nobody."

kpmg.com/uk/learningservices
uncertaintyexperts.com
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