

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO NEXT?

"It's not that I am so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer." -Albert Einstein

All of us constantly have to take decisions. Taking decisions requires us to know what the right next thing to do is. Doing that well is relatively easy when we it comes to deciding what to have for dinner, when to leave the house in the morning, or when to start a meeting. But things get messy and uncertain when we face a situation like the current Covid-19 crisis. A situation in which there is no one right answer as to what to do next, but lots of disagreement about possible solutions and scary uncertainty about their potential outcomes.

The current, admittedly unprecedented, situation has put the question "what do you do when you don't know what to do next?" squarely in the middle of our attention. But this question is not a new question. It has been around since the advent of humanity. However, at least in organizational life we have lived under the illusion that with modern scientific management control methods and tools we no longer face this scary paradox. That is a fateful mistake.

A paradox refers to a situation in which two seemingly contradictory statements are both equally true at the same time. This can be experienced as extremely challenging or confusing. For instance, managers are expected to be in control of their operation. However, in reality they are in charge and *at the same time* they are not in control. There is nothing anybody can do to eliminate this truth; it is a simple fact of life, just like gravity. All you can do is acknowledge the paradox, accept it and try to act in ways that have a chance to help make things better while not knowing if that will actually happen.

The paradox of not knowing while having to take a step or make a decision has two main implications for managers (and for all of us, too). Firstly, since complex situations have no one right answer, an answer can therefore not come from one expert that you can turn to. This requires managers to bring in many diverse voices and opinions in order to enhance the chances of forming the broadest possible understanding of the situation to be able to take the best possible decision. Secondly, even the best possible decision does not guarantee to produce its desired outcomes. Because managers are held responsible while having no ability to predict or control exact outcomes they experience feelings of anxiety and stress which can cause frantic activities or even emotional derailment.

In our experience, to counteract these negative consequences it is important to have compassion with yourself and others in the face of feeling anxious due to dealing with situations that can neither be controlled nor predicted.

“The greater the doubt, the greater the awakening. The smaller the doubt, the smaller the awakening. No doubt, no awakening.” -C.C. Chang

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