

Is uncertainty a friend or an enemy to your organization? Well, everything depends on how you answered that question!

Here's the first truth when thinking about uncertainty. Uncertainty is not a "controllable" factor that leaders or enterprises can wish away—uncertainty is simply a reality of everyday life in organizations. So, the question isn't whether you can eliminate uncertainty...no, you as a leader must deal with it. The irony? One of the very few certainties of life is...uncertainty!

Second, God doesn't give believers a spirit of fear—quite the opposite, God gives us peace. Christians the world over harbor a lot of conflicting ideas about God's sovereignty, but one thing's for sure for the believer: we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose, even though we all will have trials and temptations.

So then, we should not fear even though we constantly live with uncertainty. That requires a rock-solid faith and trust in God—and that's a full-blown, real-life benefit to believers.

Next, uncertainty does mean risks and threats to your enterprise. But uncertainty also can mean risks and opportunities for your enterprise. For you, is that glass half-full or half-empty? Well, if you have not equipped your enterprise to proactively grapple with uncertainty, now that's a real threat to your organization. But, if you have equipped your enterprise leadership to deal effectively with uncertainty, that could well be where your highest opportunities are found.

Most leaders work like crazy to bring certainty to their organization, and rightly so, in many cases. Long-term customers? Great! Stable work force? Wonderful! Satisfied owners? Terrific! But those certainties are many times just illusions, at least in the long-term.

The famous economist Joseph Schumpeter coined the term "creative destruction." That essentially means that, in a free market, other enterprises constantly work very actively to disrupt your organization: that is, to lure away your customers, to hire away your employees, to offer your owners a better investing opportunity. That simply means other enterprises want to be and are preparing to be better stewards of your current relationships than you are!

Now what follows is counterintuitive to many of us, but those uncertainties are what actually can make you better as an enterprise: you're forewarned, you're "on your toes" for competition and disruption from others. In fact, this uncertainty is what makes free markets so powerful in creating broad prosperity in a society: everyone has to work to keep their constituents well-served and pleased. Or, of course, you can fail in your stewardships.

In contrast to free markets...with both socialism and crony capitalism...powerful, central government favors its selected organizations who then cannot fail, staying in place only by virtue of government power. And everyone outside the favored organization pays the price.

Now, the current digital era seems to have especially increased uncertainty...and therefore increased real opportunity for knowledge workers and knowledge-leveraging enterprises that have created a culture of embracing uncertainty...of embracing new learning...and then of adapting well. That's a mindset, an increasingly necessary mindset for any enterprise to thrive—whether it's a business or a nonprofit.

But here's another dimension. Actually, it's not always failing to handle uncertainty that fosters failure for enterprises—instead, failure often happens due to a false certainty about things that aren't actually certain at all. Again...failure often follows a false certainty about things that are aren't actually certain.

How about Blockbuster, the video rental store chain? You see, Blockbuster had established its entire business model around a special approach—movies for VCRs that allowed films to be viewed on-demand at home after store-pickup and checkout. So, when a little company called Netflix proposed doing a deal, Blockbuster declined—because it was apparently quite certain that Netflix was not a threat. And you know the rest of the story: Blockbuster went from over 9,000 stores to just one...while Netflix became a wildly popular alternative for entertainment delivery.

So, here's an enterprise lesson. Blockbuster perceived with false certainty that it had a very strong market position—namely, its thousands of retail locations that it had carefully established over many years. But Netflix was moving towards much more effectively delivering its own ultimate version of Blockbuster's business model: that is, personal on-demand entertainment delivered to many places convenient to individual consumers. So Blockbuster's locations actually became an expensive burden, not a competitive advantage. Here's the key: what Blockbuster was counting on as its advantaged certainty should have been rightly understood as an uncertainty that needed addressing.

Now, how about Sears making a choice in the early 2000s between focus on its retail stores or its rather fledgling online sales catalog? Apparently, Sears became certain that its physical stores were the right choice for its future. At the same time, Amazon had nurtured its own rather fledgling online sales operation. Now Sears is in real trouble and Amazon is currently among the most valuable companies in the U.S. stock market. What seemed the certain choice to Sears should have been seen as uncertain.

In the late 90s, if you had told the top 50 retail experts in the United States that the most powerful force in retail 20 years later was going to be a company that very rarely actually talks to the customers for research or for service, it's highly likely that every expert would have been certain that would not be true. But look at Amazon—it's likely that not one person in a hundred of Amazon's happy customer population has ever talked to an Amazon representative. And like the experts, twenty years ago many top retailers were certain their business model was quite invulnerable to such a wild idea.

And how about the Pharisees? Certain of their position in their Hebrew socio-religious structure, certain of their handling of the Law of Moses, certain in their ability to work fruitfully with Rome, the Pharisees played their strategy hand out to the very end...and their strategies failed. By sticking to their certainties, they lost eternal life through Jesus Christ and they lost the temple in 70 AD at the hands of Rome.

Certainty is not a bad thing, of course. But we had better be certain of the right things. That's especially emblematic in the life of the Apostle Paul: before Christ, Paul was certain and wrong...after getting knocked off his horse, he was certain and right. But others in Paul's era did not need to be knocked off their horse—they embraced the fresh new certainty of Christ and Him crucified. In a rapidly changing macro-environment like our current era, not handling uncertainty properly can be really deadly. But having certainty about the wrong things can be just as deadly. Humility and healthy uncertainty go together. So, always be ready with a mindset for the potentially epic opportunities that uncertainty in the marketplace can bring.

Netflix. Amazon. Jesus. Uncertainty can truly offer epic opportunities for you...and your enterprise too!

R&D: Reflection & Discussion

1. Regarding your workplace enterprise, identify three uncertainties that you believe should be deeply considered in order to better help mitigate the risks ahead.

2. Supposed certainties—that is, certainties that really aren't certain at all—can in fact work to create huge risks for both enterprises and individuals. Can you identify three such “certainties” that might substantially impact your workplace enterprise or you?

3. Consider the uncertainties ahead for your local church. Then consider the “certainties” that your local church has coalesced around with regard to its theologies, its cultural assumptions, and its current strategies. Are the uncertainties or the “certainties” a bigger threat to your church's future Kingdom impact (e.g., Jesus—“go forth and make disciples”)?

Similarly, how about the churches in your nation?