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# Leadership

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## The Uncertain Leader

*You can't always be sure, but you'd better be clear.*  
Andy Stanley

July 1, 2003

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Uncertainty is a permanent part of the leadership landscape. It never goes away. Uncertainty is not an indication of poor leadership; it underscores the need for leadership. It is the environment in which good leadership is most easily identified.

Where there is no uncertainty, there is no longer the need for leadership. As Jim Kouzes puts it, "Uncertainty creates the necessary condition for leadership."

It took me several years to figure this out. As a young leader I was tormented by the assumption that I should know what to do in every situation. *If I were a good leader, I would reason, I would know exactly what to do. After all, I am the leader!* Leaders are supposed to be able to stand up at any given moment and give direction with absolute certainty. Or so I thought.

Time and experience have taught me differently. There will be very few occasions when you are absolutely certain about anything. You will consistently be called upon to make decisions with limited information. That being the case, your goal should not be to eliminate uncertainty. Instead, you must develop the art of being clear in the face of uncertainty. The art of clarity involves giving explicit and precise direction in spite of limited information and unpredictable outcomes.

Imagine that you are coaching a football team. It is fourth and eight. You are six points behind and five minutes remain on the clock. What do you do? Kick or go for it?

With limited information and facing an unpredictable outcome, you do what every coach in that situation does: you draw upon your knowledge and intuition and you call a play. You don't shrug your shoulders and say, "We don't have enough information." You make a decision and send everybody into formation with specific instructions. And when the ball is snapped you find out whether or not you made the right decision.

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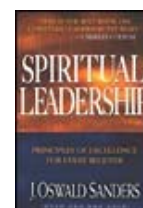
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That kind of clarity requires both confidence and humility. Confidence to move boldly in the direction you have determined. Humility to acknowledge that at best you are making an educated guess.

In the realm of sports we see no conflict between uncertainty and clarity. We are accustomed to coaches, captains, and catchers giving clear signals in the midst of uncertainty. We have seen the chaos that ensues on the playing field when a signal isn't clear. But in the worlds of business, politics, and ministry, uncertainty makes us uneasy. We hesitate. We become less specific and more general in our directives. Our people are unsure of what we expect. We yell "hike" and people run in whatever direction they feel is best.

If you're not careful, uncertainty will sand the edges off your clarity. The result will be chaos.

Leadership is all about taking people on a journey. The challenge is that most of the time, we are asking people to follow us to places we ourselves have never been. There aren't any photographs—we are left with word pictures, metaphors, and illustrations. There are no maps to guide us—we are left to cut a trail. Yet as we move forward into the uncertainty before us, we sense the need to turn occasionally and assure those who follow.

This is the tension every good leader lives with: negotiating uncertain terrain while casting a clear and compelling vision. There is always uncertainty. But uncertainty underscores the need for clarity.

The more responsibility you assume as a leader, the more uncertainty you will have to manage. The cost of success as a leader is greater uncertainty, not less.

This is why it is imperative to learn to thrive in uncertain environments. They don't go away. Your capacity as a leader will be determined by how well you learn to deal with uncertainty.

As a senior pastor, I deal with more uncertainty than anyone else in our organization. I tell our staff, "I'm responsible for the combined uncertainty of every department in the entire organization."

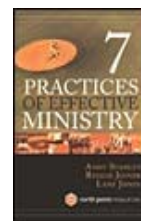
To make matters worse, increased responsibility means dealing with more intangibles and therefore more complex uncertainty. It is the difference between leading a landscaping crew into a yard to do a job and sitting at the helm of a landscaping business that employs twenty-five landscaping crews and trying to determine the best way to market your services.

Overseeing a single yard is mostly about tangibles: shrubs, trees, fertilizer, mowers, arrival, departure.

Determining how to market a landscaping business is almost completely intangible. It introduces a degree of uncertainty that requires a different kind of leadership.

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When we started North Point Community Church, our leadership team suggested that our adult education be built around a network of small groups that met in homes.

This was in contrast to the adult Sunday school model we had all grown up with. We expected some pushback on this issue. Most of the folks helping to plant the new church had grown up going to Sunday school. It was all they knew. But we felt that a campus-based adult Sunday school program was not the best way to accomplish our mission.

Every time our leadership gathered, the issue of our small group strategy would come up. Some key leaders were not convinced that this was the best route. Others assumed we were adopting this strategy only until we had our own facility. People were quick to point out that other churches had tried home-based groups with only limited success.

For a year we listened. It's important to have "unfiltered discussion," to hear everyone's perspective. We did our best to answer questions and build consensus. We studied what other churches were doing. We piloted about a dozen groups to work out the kinks in the system.

But after a while I realized no new insights were being brought up. We were repeating the same arguments to each other. It was time to bring the discussion to a close.

The moment of truth came on a Wednesday evening in a rented facility next door to our property. All of our key adult leadership was present to discuss our plan to move into our soon-to-be completed facility. Toward the end of the meeting a woman raised her hand and shared her concern about our small group strategy. She was genuine, but her question was one I had answered a dozen times before.

In the past I had not taken a firm stand on this issue. I was only about 80 percent certain that our small group strategy would work, but I knew we had to give it 100 percent of our effort if it was going to succeed.

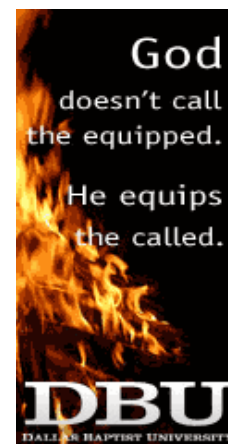
This time I put diplomacy aside and was very direct. Understand, these people are my friends. These folks had supported me through the most difficult transition of my life. They were volunteers. These men and women had sacrificed their time and financial resources to ensure a good start. But in spite of the uncertainties, it was time to be clear.

When the woman finished, I smiled and quickly reviewed the discussions we had been having for the previous year. Then I said, "After tonight we are not going to discuss 'if' anymore. We are moving forward. From now on I need you to focus your energies on 'how.' There are many unanswered questions. None of us has ever been part of a church that was organized around home groups. We have a lot to learn. Feel free to question our implementation, but not our direction. As of tonight, we go forward."

That was seven years ago. Currently, over five thousand adults are involved in small groups. The men and women who were in attendance that evening became the champions of our small-

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group ministry. Once it became clear which play was called, everybody got on board.

Were we certain of the outcome? No.

Were we clear about our direction? Absolutely.

Were we certain that this decision was the right one? No. If we had waited for absolute certainty we would still be talking. But a decision had to be made. A clear decision. And that decision, made in the intangible realm of ideas and projections, was eventually judged in the real world of attendance.

### **Four keys to clarity**

Uncertainty is not your enemy. Uncertainty provides you with job security now and unimaginable opportunities in the future. But all of that hinges on your ability and willingness to press on in spite of your surroundings. Here are four practical suggestions for enhancing clarity in the midst of uncertainty.

**1. Express your uncertainty with confidence.** In leadership we're always tempted to pretend to know more than we really do. We fear that people won't follow us unless we seem all-knowing.

Two things always happen when we pretend. First, we close ourselves off from the input of others. Second, we expose our insecurity to the people we have asked to follow us. The sharp people around you will know when you are bluffing. Pretending erodes respect much quicker than an admission of uncertainty. Uncertainty exposes a lack of knowledge. Pretending exposes a lack of character.

So how does a leader confidently express his uncertainty? My brother-in-law is a successful real estate broker in the Atlanta area. His mother and father started their company 35 years ago. When Rob first got into the business his mom gave him a jewel of a phrase that he has used ever since. It is the perfect example of confidence in the face of uncertainty: "I don't know, but I will certainly find out."

I will follow a leader who doesn't know but is committed to finding out. So will you. I will not follow a leader who pretends to know and does nothing to quell his ignorance.

Here are some phrases for you to file away for future use:

"I don't know right now, but I am confident we can figure it out."

"I don't know right now, but when the time comes to do something about it, I am confident we will have an answer."

"I don't know, but with folks like you around, I am confident we will come up with a solution."

"I don't know. I have never done this before. But I think we are up for the challenge."

Don't pretend. You are not a leader because you know

everything. Omniscience is not a prerequisite. But confidence is. Express your uncertainty with confidence. When you do, you will instill confidence in those who have chosen to follow.

**2. Seek wise counsel.** Leadership is not about making decisions on your own. It is about owning the decisions once you make them. If you don't know, ask. If you aren't certain, find out what others are thinking. Consensus builds confidence in the face of uncertainty. When those we respect give us a nod of approval there is an immediate surge of confidence.

**3. Measure your success by the scoreboard, not the playbook.** Every good coach goes into the game to win. About that he is perfectly clear. And every good coach has a strategy, a plan. But every good coach is willing to scrap his plan in order to win. The goal is to win, not to run specific plays. Coaches measure their success by the number of points on the scoreboard, not the number of plays they successfully execute.

Leaders, like coaches, are forced to abandon their plans at times in order to deliver on the vision. The uncertainty of the landscape will require constant reassessment of your plans. The leader who refuses to scrap or revise his plans rarely reaches his destination.

**4. Be willing to act decisively.** In the World War II thriller *U-571*, Matthew McConaughey plays the role of submarine Lieutenant Andy Tyler, who is denied an opportunity to command his own sub. As it turns out, it was his commanding officer, Captain Dahlgren, who encouraged the Navy not to promote Tyler.

In a stirring exchange, Tyler challenges his superior officer's decision. He assures the captain that he is qualified. Not only is he able to perform every job on the sub, he goes on to insist that he would be willing to lay down his life for any of the men on the crew.

At that point, Captain Dahlgren, played by Bill Paxton, looks up at the young lieutenant and says, "I'm not questioning *your* bravery. Are you willing to lay *their* lives on the line?"

Tyler is stunned by the question. Before he can respond, Captain Dahlgren continues:

"You see, you hesitate. As a captain you can't. You have to act. If you don't you put the entire crew at risk. Now that's the job. It's not a science. You have to be able to make hard decisions based on imperfect information, asking men to carry out orders that may result in their deaths. And if you're wrong, you suffer the consequences. If you are not prepared to make those decisions, without pause, without reflection, then you got no business being a submarine captain."

As Tyler leaves Captain Dahlgren's quarters, the look on his face says it all. Peering at leadership through that lens has caused him to doubt his readiness to lead.

Uncertainty will not be your undoing as a leader. However, your inability to give a clear directive in the midst of uncertainty might very well be the thing that takes you out or causes you to plateau early in your career.



Uncertainty is simply a fact of leadership. Uncertainty calls for clarity. Be *clear* even when you are not *certain*. Lead confidently. Once a decision is made, move forward. If your decision proves to be wrong, own it. You will survive a few bad decisions. You will not survive a lack of clarity.

*Adapted by permission from The Next Generation Leader by Andy Stanley (Multnomah, 2003).*

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