

## *Practitioner's Corner*

### Uncertainty – A Fruitful Place to Be

Bonnie J. Straight  
*Lithuania Christian College*

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Are you striving to minimize uncertainty in your organization? If so, you may not be fully utilizing the creativity of your people and may be missing out on significant opportunities. Uncertainty can be a fruitful place to be if you understand how to take advantage of it. This research note reviews some studies of uncertainty, transition, and not knowing and then examines some examples from Lithuania's transition from the Soviet Union to the European Union. These examples are from a case study of the development of organizational trust in a multicultural university in Lithuania (Straight, 2004).

#### **Leadership in a Context of Uncertainty and Transition**

Leaders of organizations often operate within a context of transition and uncertainty; the leaders are influenced by the context and, in turn, influence the context. Proponents of charismatic/transformational approaches to leadership have suggested that this approach is particularly suited to an environment of uncertainty and transition. Waldman, Ramirez, House, and Puranam's (2001) study identified the widely recognized behaviors of a charismatic leader including (a) articulating a vision and sense of purpose, (b) showing persistence and enthusiasm over the long haul, and (c) communicating high performance expectations. This study of financial performance, environmental context, and level of charismatic leadership found that "charisma predicted performance under conditions of uncertainty but not under conditions of certainty" (p. 134). Transformational leadership is composed of similar attributes and behaviors of charismatic leadership: (a) inspirational motivation, (b) idealized influence, (c) individualized consideration, and (d) intellectual stimulation (Arnold, Barling, & Kelloway, 2001; Bass, 1990, 1997). Den Hartog and colleagues (1999) suggested that, while the attributes and behaviors need to be enacted in ways appropriate to culture(s) in question, there is a common preference across cultures for charismatic/transformational leadership.

Hodgson and White (2003) claimed that a leader's role is not to reduce uncertainty but to increase the ability of organization members to work more effectively within it. Based on 10 years of study, they identified the following "broad strands of behavior that seem to help people cope with ambiguity and uncertainty" (Hodgson & White, p. 4). Some of the types of behaviors

were identified from observing children. Who are better mystery seekers than children? The authors suggested the following:

1. *Mystery seekers* are curious people who are attracted to areas that are unknown and to problems that appear to have no obvious solution.
2. *Risk tolerators* can make decisions when necessary despite incomplete information and will tolerate the risk of failure. They are not hampered by insufficient or ambiguous data.
3. *Future scanners* have the ability to question deeply and make links between apparently different pieces of information, while being constantly on the lookout for even the faintest signals of what the future might hold.
4. *Tenacious challengers* resolutely pursue difficult and challenging issues and problems. This skill is most often seen in inventors and start-up artists and is sometimes seen as the entrepreneurial part of entrepreneurs. They are at home with conflict.
5. *Exciters* create excitement and energy at work not just for themselves but enthuse others around them also.
6. *Flexible adjusters* have the ability to make adjustments in the face of problems and to be able to sell those adjustments to others.
7. *Simplifiers* are able to get to the essence of something and be able to communicate it to others in such a way that they not only understand it but become enthused and committed to it.
8. *Focusers* know what are the few most important things to do or keep a watchful eye on, no matter what else may be going on and however many options beckon. (Hodgson & White, p. 4, based on Figure 3)

In a case study that blended academic research and a real world organization, Simpson and Burnard (2000) proposed that effective leaders “must act believing the action to be correct not knowing (for certain) that it is” (p. 235). Such leaders need to be able to stay in the place of not knowing, a place of uncertainty and disagreement, and either enable others to work there as well or lead them to a place of knowing. These researchers made several helpful suggestions for “working in the place of not knowing” (Simpson & Burnard, p. 238): (a) emotions are important data, (b) boundary issues are important, (c) effects may be distant from their cause both in terms of time and space, and (d) learning never ends.

In an article summarizing key thoughts from speeches at The Strategic Leadership Forum in 1999, Grant (1999) described this knowing and not knowing in terms of jazz:

The essence of jazz is the combination of discipline and spontaneity: loose enough to permit innovation and individual variation but organized enough to permit integration and coordination. . . . The jazz band . . . points to the kinds of mechanisms needed to avoid disharmony and chaos. (pp. 32-33)

These include: (a) shared purpose, (b) a common language, (c) consensus of the ground rules that constrain individual initiatives, and (d) familiarity and trust between individuals.

### **Uncertainty in the Post-Soviet World**

A recent example of extreme uncertainty was the environment present in the former USSR-controlled countries in the early 1990s. Independence for Lithuania, one of the Baltic countries, seemed quite possible; but the Russian Bear was far from asleep. “Determined and

effective leadership became a crucially important lever of transformational change” (Tucker, 1995, p. 10) among the former soviet republics; only a few of the successor states had such leadership. Senn (2002) recorded his personal observations in Lithuania from August 1988 to early April 1990 in *Lithuania Awakening*. He described the transformation of the leaders among those advocating independence:

The outstanding feature of the spiritual revolution that took place in Lithuania was the way in which the Lithuanians’ self-consciousness and self-confidence grew. In the past, people had tended to think in terms of what was permitted. . . . After the [August 23, 1989] meeting, the Lithuanians gradually took over the initiative in their relations with Moscow; they thought more about what they wanted to do and physically could do than they did about Moscow’s possible reaction. Using the principles of Gorbachev’s perestroika, they began to take control of their own agenda. (Senn, p. 35)

For example, in an interview with me, L. Kaminskiene reported that, as a staff member of the Ministry, she delivered the annual education report to Moscow in the fall of 1990. Included in the report was an official document stating that the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture and Education would no longer report to Moscow; “We decently finished the fiscal year, and we stopped” (personal communication, November 30, 2000).

During soviet times, Lithuanian leaders often responded with “purely political realism,” choosing to “remain a living nation organism until better times” (Senn, 1995, p. 125). Even the party leaders, though speaking in self-interest, saw their work as a quiet resistance, doing what was possible to help Lithuania. Lithuanians often speak of doing things *step by step*, patiently working toward a long-term goal. Lithuanian politics were and are highly personal, focused on individuals. The transformation from *perestroika* to independence was lead by the intelligentsia, artists, historians, dissidents, the underground, and former prisoners of the gulags who found that they could work together toward a common purpose.

As the map of Central and Eastern Europe was redrawn one more time, Lithuania both influenced and was influenced by the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. One of the gestures of independence, and an attempt to prepare for and build the skills needed for independence, was the establishment of Lithuania Christian College (LCC), the first Christian liberal arts college in the former Soviet Bloc countries. Many key decisions in the LCC story were made based on the vision and purpose, without knowing for certain that the action was correct. The Ministry of Education signed a protocol of intent to establish LCC without knowing exactly what the school would be and before there was a niche in the system for it (Kaminskiene, 2001). Persistence and enthusiasm kept the vision alive. When Ernie Reimer came as interim president in the fall of 1992, there were no long-term faculty, no home base, and only an incomplete curriculum. E. Reimer (2001) continued with a description of the early leaders:

When the troika of DeFehr, J. Reimer, and Balciunas get together, concept becomes reality in a hurry; procrastination is not in their vocabulary. The initial concept, conceived a few months earlier, was quickly put into action. Faculty, students, financing, facilities and academic programs had come together quickly. (p. 81)

“You can’t run a college with volunteers!” (R. Neumann, 2001, p. 153). But, in the early 1990s, serving at LCC provided a way for volunteers with Mennonite backgrounds in this region of the world to “repay evil for good” (p. 155). Others valued the “opportunity to establish relationships with Lithuanians, sharing values and faith on a personal level” (p. 155). Retirees came; professors on sabbatical leaves came. Word of mouth spread the invitation. “Occasionally

volunteers have just arrived on the doorstep at LCC” (R. Neumann, pp. 157-158). Others came after a long conversation. As of 2001,

Five hundred and twenty volunteers [had] filled approximately 790 positions at LCC since that first summer in 1991. Close to 65% of these volunteers have returned to LCC at least once, with a significant number coming three, four and five times. (R. Neumann, p. 158)

People looked at the condition of the newly leased dormitory building and the budget for renovating it and said it could not be done (D. Neumann, 2001, p. 192). Valuable local contacts helped find needed materials. Eleven skilled craftsmen from Canada arrived to spend 3 months renovating the building; others followed. The workers had to learn new construction methods and how to use new materials. The process repeated itself with the completion of the new campus. However, the newest building completed in the fall of 2003 was built primarily with local craftsmen and only a handful of volunteers. The general contractor is recognized in Klaipeda for LCC’s construction. The leaders and many of those who worked on the Michealsen centras participated in the building’s dedication in October 2004.

An early LCC board meeting seemed totally “ad hoc-ish,” a family-type meeting of friends and colleagues of DeFehr together with faculty and administrators (D. Shenk, personal communication, November 22, 2000). The ownership and governance of LCC was restructured in 1999 (Universalia, 2000, p. 14). The CIDA Report concluded that “beyond the triumph of continued existence, the college is exemplary because it keeps renewing its energies to address its problems. LCC has boundless energy – sponsors, volunteers, Lithuanian faculty and staff, students, alumni and community supporters to name a few” (Universalia, p. 28).

### **An Uncertain Environment Can Be a Fruitful Place to Be**

The coping behaviors suggested by Hodgson and White (2003) can be observed in LCC leadership. The founders explored, talked, and thought about what kind of education would be useful for the new Lithuania. They learned about each other’s cultures, values, and dreams. The founders and Ministry officials clearly made important decisions, taking great risks, without knowing all the information they needed. If they had waited until all the information was available, it would have been too late. They risked failure. In an interview, Kaminskiene looked back on the pressure for LCC to leave the city where it began and said “no matter that we failed at that time, we succeeded” (personal communication, November 30, 2000). The founders and Ministry officials kept thinking, talking, working, and not accepting failure as the end. This mindset has continued through volunteers, Lithuanian staff and faculty, Lithuanian boundary spanners, and students.

What about your organization? Can you stay in a place of not knowing and flourish there? Can you relax and learn like a curious child in the midst of uncertainty? Can you shake off the fear of failure and make a strong decision without waiting to get all the details?

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### About the Author

Dr. Bonnie Straight is currently an instructor in the Business Administration Department of Lithuania Christian College (LCC) in Klaipeda, Lithuania. From 2001 to 2005 she was chair of the Business Administration Department. In 1992, after nearly 20 years in the management information systems field, she moved to Klaipeda to teach English at LCC. In 1996, she began her doctoral studies at Regent University in Virginia, USA and completed a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership in 2004. Her dissertation title was "A Case Study of the Development of Organizational Trust in a Multicultural University," of which this paper presents a segment. Email: [bstraight@lcc.lt](mailto:bstraight@lcc.lt)

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