

Seven Steps for “Turning Uncertainty into Transformative Opportunity”: Doing Your Head Work, Heart Work, and Homework

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A good friend recently sent me a clever cartoon. A Buddhist-like character, wearing a loosely hanging white garment, shoulder exposed, is driving a car, seemingly in the dark. His car is filled with message bubbles: “Follow your bliss”, “The obstacle is the path” and “if you aim for it, you are turning away from it”. The pithy caption: “Zen GPS!”

Not surprisingly, my friend is facing a tough decision fraught with uncertainty. In times of indecision and confusion, if not crisis, e.g. our ongoing COVID reality, what we need is clarity and structure along with a learning and sharing path more than certainty, perfection, and absolute truth.

As we have recently witnessed, facing chronic uncertainty, “can lead to acting irrationally and irresponsibly, from boycotting masks to throwing big parties in the face of all precautions - all products of frustration, fear and defiance in an effort to reassert control over the upended circumstances” (Kamila Sip, Jay Dixit, “LEADING THROUGH ADVERSITY: Brain-based leadership in a time of heightened uncertainty”, *Chief Learning Officer*, November 30, 2020).

With my friend, I texted back some pathway steps as she ponders making a life-changing decision. Consider these fleshed out Seven Steps for “Turning Uncertainty into Transformative Opportunity”:

1. **Admitting powerlessness as true strength:** Accepting that you are powerless in a vital decision-making realm is both a sign of honesty and strength. It is not evidence of failure, though our vulnerable ego or wounded pride may interpret a need to ask for help in this self-critical manner.
2. **Being open to and digesting new info:** While you should always consider the source of info, now is the time to get some “outside-your-social bubble” ideas and input. Also, key, take time to listen to and assess your emotions; what is being stirred by such a new perspective and/or approach. And having done your emotional due diligence, now reflect on the new information and your reaction(defensiveness) or response (integration of heart and head) to the same. Pay close attention to any new questions that arise in your head, heart, and gut.
3. **Conferring with trusted others:** This can be challenging, as we often don’t like to reveal our uncertainty and feelings of vulnerability. Will others judge us to be weak or indecisive? So, at this part of the decision-making journey, try sharing your uncertainty, new info, new questions, etc. with trusted others. But even here, consider whether your friend or colleague might have their own bias or subjectivity regarding their feedback to you.

4. **Initial decision-making:** Formulate a new perspective or position, if not a complete strategy. If you have the time and energy, seek another round of feedback. Again, take time for digesting the new problem-solving gestalt through emotional reflection. You might even want to journal about pros and cons, fears, fantasies, excitements, etc.
5. **Making a decision:** Now commit to a decision, however imperfect, incomplete, or unfinished it may seem. Perfection or absolute control is not the goal. As the Buddhists would say, “That’s an illusion”. And most important, act on your commitment. Again, to sustain a challenging new problem-solving step, first, expect some anxiety, a predictable consequence of the early stages of a learning curve. And second, seek feedback and resources to help you sustain your new path, at least long enough to feel you engaged in a real test drive.
6. **Preparing for conflict:** Remember, not all will agree with your decision, even folks who, in general, recognized there was a problem. Such doubters may have legitimate concerns; they also may be protecting themselves from recognizing that they too may need to break out of a self-defeating habit or comfort zone. If you have done your past and present head work, heart work, and homework, you can trust you are on the right path... for now.
7. **Knowing you can change:** Finally, as you travel along this new path, new experiences, conversations, and information will arise. If you feel you have given this new plan of action your best shot, and you are having doubts, wondering if you need to step back and reevaluate, then you can. You can reevaluate – from solo reflection to shared brainstorming – following the above steps. Most important, with this decision-making framework, a change of heart or plans is rarely an impulsive choice or rash decision. You are not avoiding or abandoning the issue but approaching it from a hard-earned wisdom perspective.

Which reminds me of a closing story.

The Secret of Wisdom

Words of wisdom. Most of us seek them. I immediately think of two of my favorite sayings. Jonas Salk, the great scientific pioneer observed: “Evolution is about getting up one more time than we fall down, being courageous one more time than we are fearful...trusting one more time than being anxious”. And along with a sense of persistence, everyday struggle and appreciation for even small triumphs is the need for serenity: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can...and the wisdom to know where to hide the bodies”. No...Just kidding;-) “And the wisdom to know the difference”. And the older I get, the more profound “The Serenity Prayer” seems. Yet, a fundamental question remains: how the heck do you get the wisdom? Okay, folks. Here it is...*The Secret of Wisdom*.

Once there was a young woman who heard that an old wise woman had the secret of wisdom. The young woman was determined to track the old woman down. After traveling many months, the young woman found the old woman in a cave. She entered and addressed the old woman: “Old Wise Woman, I hear you have The Secret of Wisdom. Would you share it with me?” The old woman looked at the youth and said, “Yes, you seem sincere. The Secret of Wisdom is good judgment”. “Good judgment, of course”, said the youth, thanked her mentor, and started to leave. However, as she got to the entrance of the cave she paused, turned back and said, “Old Woman, I feel funny, but, if I may ask, how does one obtain good judgment?” “That’s a good question”, said the sage. “One obtains good judgment through experience”. “Experience, of course”, said the young seeker, and proceeded to leave. But once again she stopped in her tracks, and humbly walked back to her mentor. “Old Woman”, said the young woman, “I feel foolish, but I have to ask: How does one obtain experience?” The old woman paused, nodded her head, then proceeded: “Now you have reached the right question. How does one obtain experience?

... Through bad judgment!”

Errors of judgment rarely mean incompetence; they more likely reveal inexperience or immaturity, perhaps even boldness. Our so-called “failures” can be channeled as guiding streams (sometimes raging rivers) of opportunity and experience that ultimately enrich - widen and deepen - the risk-taking passage...If we can just immerse ourselves in the these unpredictably rejuvenating waters.

And just remember...Practice Safe Stress!

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