Dealing with Ambiguity--Part 1

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I spent some time last week working with a client who is considering ways to improve his clarity in dealing with those he influences. If his world functioned as he'd prefer, everything would be well organized and predictable, structured and unchanging.

The practical realities of life, of course, are very different from that. Our society is changing faster than ever before in history. Successful leaders in business had better keep innovating, or hungry competitors will overtake them. Fear of what the future might bring is at least occasionally on the mind of every worker.

"Dealing with ambiguity" is a leadership skill. When I invite leaders to assess themselves in the many attributes of leadership, "dealing with ambiguity" is one of the characteristics they evaluate. Here is the description of "dealing with ambiguity" provided by the assessment instrument I use:

- can effectively cope with change
- can shift gears comfortably
- can decide and act without having the total picture
- isn't upset when things are up in the air
- doesn't have to finish things before moving on
- can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty

Many situations faced by leaders are ambiguous. The problems you face are often quite fuzzy, and the solutions are certainly not evident! The higher you go, the more ambiguous the scenarios become. You lack information, time, and precedents. Everyone you consult seems to be working his or her personal agenda.

Opportunities are brought to you for a final decision, yet options you might pursue seem extremely limited. How can you be sure that the most creative (and potentially successful) possibilities have not been overlooked? Even if you knew what all the alternatives were, you have no clear criteria for choosing! What's a leader to do?

Marcus Buckingham, in his 2005 book The One Thing You Need to Know about Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success, says that great leaders "rally people toward a better future." They "discover what is universal and capitalize on it."

He goes on to suggest that we humans have five universal needs that leaders can tap:

- the need for security (to overcome our fear of death and other "scary" things)
- the need for community (to overcome our fear of outsiders and of being an outsider ourselves)
- the need for respect (to overcome our fear of insignificance)
- the need for authority (to overcome our fear of chaos and ignorance)
- the need for clarity (to overcome our fear of the future and the unknown)

The more you understand the interplay of these fears and needs in your people, the more effective leader you will be.

In the absence of being able to discern the unique needs of the people in your organization, is there one of these that seems to be more prominent than the rest? Fortunately, the answer is "Yes!"

Buckingham suggests that "if you can grapple with our fear of the future and somehow neutralize it, even turn it into something positive, you will have positioned yourself to pull off something truly significant as a leader." The need for clarity is paramount. As leader, you must be confident and optimistic in transforming our fear of the unknown into a commonly held vision of "what could be"!

Ah, now we're getting somewhere! In the absence of certainty, leaders need to provide clarity. But how? (Please look for the answer in my column next week!)

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Dennis Hooper is an executive coach, installing leadership enhancement systems in Atlanta organizations. E-mail him at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or phone him at 404-575-3050.