

# KNOWING WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO

Stuart Mackenzie explores  
Creativity in Leadership



What do you do when you don't know what to do? That's the burning leadership question of our age. It's the challenge all leaders and managers face in a world that is spinning and changing beyond all previous experience. It was the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard who said:

**“The tragedy of life is that we understand it backwards, but have to live it forwards.”**

The dilemma of the leader is that the job of leading appears to rely on being in control; knowing what to do and convincing others that you have some level of omniscience. However in a world increasingly defined by its volatility and ambiguity it is impossible to be prepared for everything that gets thrown at the leader.

At Maynard Leigh we advocate that 'Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do' demands the creative part of a leader's tool-kit. Make no mistake, creativity is tough - it will sort the leaders from the managers. You can't learn creativity from a book, but you can develop it in yourself. It would be foolish to claim you can do it if you can't: you'd be found out. It is the hardest part of leadership and demands authenticity, vulnerability and, most of all, risk. You have to embrace uncertainty with the

creativity of master improvisers.

In a stable world solutions are replicable. A leader can claim 'I've done it before; it worked previously; I've got a map'. In a leadership workshop I ran many years ago a slightly defensive manager claimed he had 22 years of experience in management. A brave colleague pointed out that the manager had one year's experience, repeated 22 times. In a stable environment that practice of replicating what went before might be acceptable. However the old 'tried and tested' solutions just don't work in the dynamic, complex and chaotic environment in which we now live. A leader (even a good one) in this kind of environment is less likely to feel powerful, and more likely to feel isolated, out of their depth, and without a clue.

Whether we are leaders or not, we have all gone to bed one night with that dread feeling of 'being lost' in the pit of our stomach. We have all at one point said to ourselves, "I have no idea what I am going to do. I feel adrift and off-course, helpless and in the dark.

**“We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them.”**

Albert Einstein

Nowadays leaders face what Ron Heifitz of Harvard terms 'adaptive challenges'. Situations which are alien, extraordinary or incomprehensible. Whether it is a life problem, a strategic predicament at work, or an impenetrable difficulty in your team, it is probably not expertise or authority that is going to fix the issue. It is no use reaching for your MBA notes, or searching your memory banks for what you, or someone else, did last time. Not even reading the latest case study from the Harvard Business Review will sort it out. When you are up against 'adaptive challenges', experience is a devalued currency.

**Intelligence is what you use when you don't know what to do.”**

Jean Piaget, Developmental Psychologist

Creative Intelligence is the most valuable attribute in dealing with adaptive challenges. It is only with creative intelligence that you can face the unknown, fashion a solution to an unfamiliar challenge, and innovate your way out of trouble. Fortunately we all have this intelligence. We were all children once and I have never seen an uncreative child. As Picasso said 'All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once one grows up'. It is the ability to reconnect with that creative spark, that artistic viewpoint, that will bring into play the resources we need to be adaptable, to be innovative, to be successful.

**“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.”**

Charles Darwin

To apply Darwin's reasoning to today - it is not the most authoritative leader that survives, nor the one most versed in leadership theory, but the one most able to use their creative faculty.

Of course as leaders we have to operate in different environments on a spectrum between stable/familiar all the way to dynamic/unfamiliar. When dealing with the more recognisable everyday problems we will be able to use the skills and processes that decades of learning have developed in the leadership role. However the increase in complexity puts at a premium our ability to lead creatively.

**HOW DO YOU ACCESS CREATIVITY IN LEADERSHIP?**

We at Maynard Leigh have **The Six Imperatives**. Coming from our background in the Performing Arts we draw on our experience of being creative practitioners. We know, in our bones, the pressure to deliver results under-pressure, in the most uncertain of situations, where solutions have to have flair and inspiration, as well as practical application.

So we draw on hundreds of years of collective wisdom and experience from the Performing Arts, mixed with the psychological insight of the last century and the observation of business leaders across the globe. These imperatives underpin our approach in all of our work in developing leaders.

The first three imperatives can be achieved in a moment or a week and are focused on the personal, internal life of a leader - they are about character.

The second three imperatives are about the external impact of the leader - this is about action.

## 1. Stand Still

It might seem odd that, when under pressure to come up with a solution in the high velocity of the business world, our initial imperative is to stand still. 'Why?' is the question that comes to mind, 'I don't have time to stand still.'

There is a teaching story from the Native American tradition. It would be told by an elder to a young girl or boy who asked the question, "What do I do when I am lost in the forest?" The Elder says:

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.

The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.

If you leave it, you may come back again,  
saying Here.

No two trees are the same to Raven.

No two branches are the same to Wren.

If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,

You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows

Where you are. You must let it find you.

This poem encourages us to stop and be present; to really experience where we are and to get to know the intricacies, feelings and patterns of the environment in which we have suddenly found ourselves. It advocates that we don't keep running around trying to find 'the way', jumping to a solution, trying not to be 'here'. To me it invites a sort of intense and intimate curiosity. To see the wood for the trees.

### Action Tips – Stand Still

I. Stop and be present; notice the detail of your environment and the specific characteristics of your situation.

II. Don't keep running around, jumping to conclusions or forcing a solution, they will stop you being 'here'.

III. Observe your own and others' feelings, what information does this give you?

This first imperative is a call to pay attention; it is an instruction to be mindful, self-aware and curious.

## 2. Look up

The second imperative is a physiological key. There is a correlation between the physical and the psychological.

When we don't know what to do, the negative emotions can affect our attitude; we sink down, feeling victim to circumstance, sensing the drop in status that is likely to follow. This affects our physical stature. We physically slump, our shoulders droop, we hang our head. What if by looking up, by raising our head we could also raise our spirit? Can this simple physical action really have an effect?

The research done by Amy Cuddy at Harvard shows us that simply by inhabiting powerful stances, as opposed to low status postures, the balance of certain chemicals in our bodies begin to alter and affect our psychology positively – cortisol decreases, testosterone increases. We feel better and the research shows we increase our impact on others.

Not only do we alter our attitude from one of 'poor me' toward more of a pioneering spirit but crucially looking up also allows us to see things from a different point of view. Focusing upwards, raising your eyes toward the horizon often provides the bigger picture and can reveal unseen opportunities.

This second imperative 'look up' is a call to the physical and psychological.

### Action Tips – Look Up

I. Notice if you're caught in feeling victim to circumstance.

II. Change your attitude; realise you have choice.

III. Embody a powerful stance, focus upwards, raise your head; it gives you a different point of view, raises your spirits, and can reveal unseen opportunities.

## 3. Breathe in

It is no coincidence that another word for 'breathe in' is 'inspire'. As sure as you will need air to breathe you will need inspiration to face the challenges. Reconnecting with what inspires you, and your sense of purpose, will raise you from the current stuckness, and propel you forward.

If you are leading a team they will be looking to you for signs of whether the current chaos is an opportunity to learn and adapt, or time to assume crash positions. Reminding yourself and others as to what is important will breed resilience. Committing yourself and everyone else to the values you hold dear will give you a star to sail by.

The breath of life is the source of our energy. Feeling lost and helpless can be a huge drain on our vitality and we need to breathe deeply in order to fuel our endeavours. Breathing in aspects of our life that inspire us is a re-energising process.

### Action Tips – Breathe In

I. Breathe deeply in order to re-energising yourself and fuel your endeavours.

II. Remind yourself of your purpose, and what is important.

III. List the values you hold dear; it will give you a star to sail by.

## 4. Reach out

The loneliness of leadership is only heightened by the reluctance of 'the leadership class' to ask for help. The mistake is to think that self-sufficiency is a value; to equate asking for help with an admission of failure, rather than the calling card of advanced leaders who have moved from an 'independent' to an 'interdependent' ethic.

Often when theatre directors are stuck, and don't know how to move a production forward, or have hit an insurmountable staging problem they are likely to call together their team of actors, in a workshop situation, and they create solutions together.

Collaboration is a source of collective creativity. If you have followed the first three imperatives you are now ready to collaborate with others – get new ideas, fresh thinking, and diverse perspectives. If you don't know, others might. Two brains are better than one when they work together. The wise leader builds on other people's input and includes everything that happens as part of the whole process.

Others can also support you with energy and encouragement at a time when you feel most depleted.

This imperative to 'reach out' is a call to engage others.

### Action Tips – Reach Out

- I. Move from an 'independent' to an 'interdependent' ethic; asking for help is not an admission of failure.
- II. Surround yourself with talent, get new ideas, fresh thinking, and diverse perspectives.
- III. Seek out people who will give you energy and encouragement.

## 5. Step forward

There will come a time when you have to take a risk and break through the inertia. If you have employed the first four imperatives, then you will have detailed knowledge of the situation, galvanised your attitude, inspired yourself and involved others and know it is time to take action. We can all get caught by indecision, waiting until we have more information or data points, or hoping for the perfect solution to emerge. There may never be such a thing. So, it is better to make a decision and take some action rather than none at all. Often the best way to get unstuck is to get moving. Besides, in the long term, anything you do is an experiment. It's best to try things out. Start testing your ideas – take a first step even if you don't know what the second and third step might be; run a pilot; set up a working party; start a process; have a go. Movement begets movement. Stuckness begets stuckness. The 5th imperative is a call to courage and action.

### Action Tips – Step Forward

- I. Notice if you are caught in indecision or waiting for the perfect solution to emerge.
- II. Take a risk – experiment in a new direction.
- III. It is often better to take some action rather than none at all.

## 6. Look again

By now you will inevitably be in a different place than you were when you started. It's time to look around and discover the new territory. More importantly, to learn from what's happened, in preparation for moving forward again.

Peter Drucker encouraged his students to follow effective action with quiet reflection. His belief was that from the quiet reflection will come even more effective action. The bedrock of leadership is insight. Seeing clearly what is and what is not needed. So, you need to question: What's going on right now? Where are you at? How have things changed since you started this process?

What now exists probably didn't exist before. There are bound to have been challenges and mistakes on route – nothing ever goes exactly to plan. These are opportunities to learn so that you don't repeat them as you go along.

Furthermore you are engaged in an iterative process. A leader, like the captain of a ship, watches the currents and the turn of the tide, and is readying to move forward again.

This last imperative is a call to learning and insight.

### Action Tips – Look Again

- I. Pay attention to what has changed. You will inevitably now be in a different place than you were when you started.
- II. Take time to reflect.
- III. Explore the new territory to gain insight from what's happened and where you are now.

Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do is the result of purposeful self-awareness and an ability to engage with a volatile, uncertain or constantly changing world. It means embracing a different level of complexity, agility and adaptation. It requires embodying a creative approach to leadership.

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