

UNCERTAINTY CAN LEVERAGE INNOVATION

PART I: COVID CREATES AMYGDALA HIJACK

- ▲ **Understanding comfort zones provides insight into team member productivity**
- ▲ **The “Amygdala Hijack” blocks performance**
- ▲ **Leaders can help reset to prepare for Innovation**



Covid has turned our lives upside down. It has disrupted our lives in a myriad of ways. Most of us have led out-of-the-house lives, chock full of public appearances, multiple commitments and high expectations. Most of that has come to a screeching halt, except for the expectations. It's easy to see why the pandemic has left us trapped, restless, frustrated and fearful. From an organizational perspective, it puts a premium on enhancing capacity to help keep teams focused and productive. With all the issues swirling around in people's minds these days, that can be a daunting leadership challenge. **Understanding what's going on inside peoples' minds can provide some hints for effective solutions.**

It's no secret that people prefer to operate in an area where they have a positive expectation of success in the actions and tasks they pursue. People are inclined to stay with the known, the familiar. Gestalt psychologists contend that the human mind is constantly seeking order. Habits become a way of establishing patterns of order. We repeat activities until they become familiar to the point of "unconscious competence." We become accustomed to a certain level of performance within this set of habits. As long as we remain in this space, give or take a certain acceptable +/- factor, we operate calmly and comfortably.



This "comfort zone" is easy to spot. For instance, whenever a large new effort is mounted in IT, it shows up immediately. Try telling people they must use new software or a new app on their smartphone and watch the general reactions. Changing schools, doctors, banks; all these disruptions tend to take people beyond their comfort zones. They exhibit discomfort, sometimes becoming irritable and unhappy. People often resist adopting these new approaches. In a corporate setting, performance inevitably suffers, at least temporarily.

There are normally three classifications for comfort zone analysis that change management practitioners recognize. **In the central sector of this zone, Goldilocks, everything is expected, the outcome is known and actions are on "autopilot."** **In the adjacent Stretch area, the person may not know the outcome, but likely has a positive expectation of success, and thus is willing to extend beyond "Goldilocks", perhaps permanently if successfully repeated.** **The final area is beyond the pale of positive expectation and causes discomfort and resistance.** When the mind perceives that the situation is too alien for a sense of comfort, there is an effort to "get back to Goldilocks." If this Danger zone is judged too extreme, the resistance can be visceral and the mind reacts with ancient, instinctive protective behaviors. In this space, reaction can be immediate and without regard to normally accepted behaviors.



The existence of Covid has complicated the comfort zone scenario in a wrenching fashion. The daily bombardment of threatening information about the virus and its devastating effects triggers authentic feelings of fear that reach our minds' safety and protection centers. Deep inside the oldest part of our brain, an area called the Amygdala is constantly scanning for threats. **When something penetrates too deeply into our Danger zone and the Amygdala is activated, the well-known "fight or flight" mechanism takes over.** Unfortunately, the Amygdala is not located in the part of the brain where language operates. When, this "Amygdala Hijack" occurs, the mind operates exclusively on emotion and deeply embedded instincts for preservation. Because this area doesn't contain language, it can be very difficult to use reason to settle someone who is engaged in the fight or flight reaction. Logic and reason are not available when we are in this situation.



When this happens in an organizational context, team members are literally not listening and won't until the hijack is brought under control.

What can leaders do to facilitate this process? Watch any retail commercial today. Advertisers are doing everything they can to inject the concept of "safe and secure" into their product pitches. For leaders, this means not only ensuring the safety within the physical plant the organization occupies, it also means paying extra attention to their members' emotional stability. **It is imperative that your team members have a chance to reset from the Amygdala Hijack before attempting to restore focus on an operational level. This requires substantial legwork on an Emotional Intelligence level before anything else can be approached.** Giving team members the time and space to voice their concerns, helping establish a sense of order in this new, unaccustomed space will yield solid benefits and enable organizations to move forward effectively. In effect, leaders help their team members create new comfort zones within the existing framework.

It may be challenging to get the members all the way to "Goldilocks" in this environment, but once leaders have helped their team members shift their mindset to "Stretch," they can move toward helping their teams thrive in this new environment. We will provide some tips and ideas to navigate this territory in the next blog.

Danger	• Negative Expectancy • Amygdala Hijack
Stretch	• Outcome Unknown • Positive Expectancy
"Goldilocks"	• Automatic • No Learning