

UNCERTAINTY CAN LEVERAGE INNOVATION

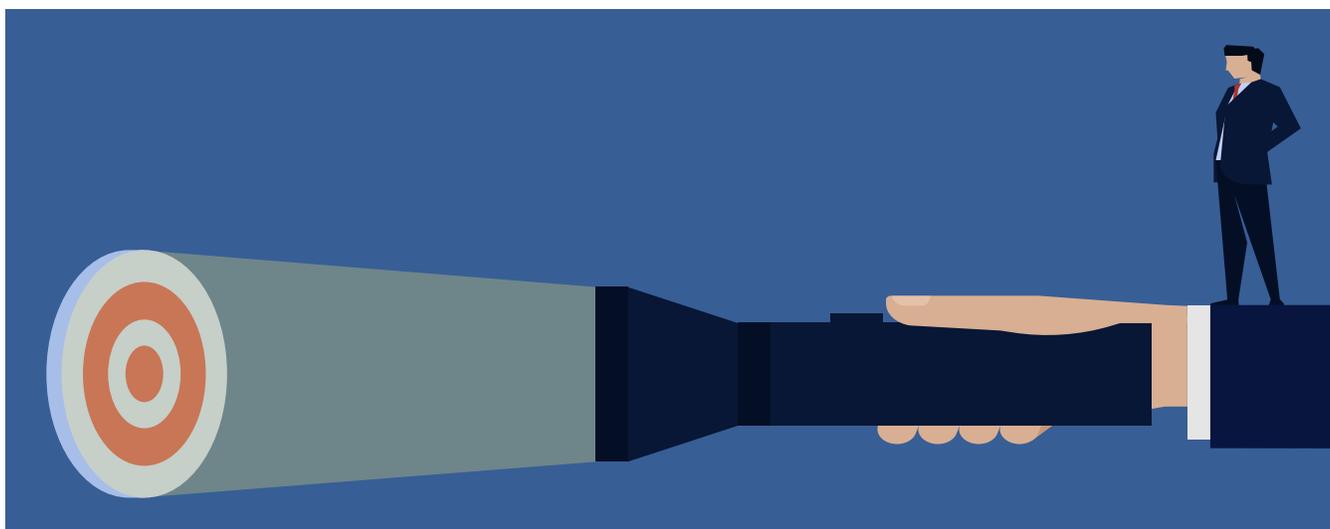
PART II: WINDING THE COIL: INNOVATION IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

- ▲ **Step One – Ensure your team members are out of “Amygdala Hijack”**
- ▲ **Comfort Zone dynamics aid leaders in stimulating Innovation**
- ▲ **Vision clarity anchors the pathway to innovative solutions**



Crises can create paralysis. When negative inputs become too overwhelming, our “Fight or Flight” reactions can also create a third option, “Freeze.” Unfortunately, when people freeze, innovation and performance suffer. Leaders have difficulty moving their organizations forward when their team members are in the throes of an “Amygdala Hijack,” a term coined by Daniel Goleman. In Part I, we discussed comfort zones and their impact on our performance. When we experience major displacements from our comfort zones, such as the threat of Covid and the restrictions imposed, performance can plummet. **What must leaders do to reverse this?**

The first step is to assure your team members and give them an ability to unwind from their defensive postures in which they operate uniquely on emotion and instinct. They must be able to reconnect to language and logic before they are able to listen, think and interact constructively. Leaders need to assuage these feelings by tapping into emotions associated with successful, rather than fearful, actions. They need to help their members connect with their resilience and capability to deal with challenging situations. Often this can take the form of connecting them with something they achieved and/or overcame in the past. Authentic concern for their legitimate safety concerns helps remind them of the leaders' concern for them personally as well as a member of an organization.



As leaders work to help their team members return from the Danger area far beyond their comfort zone, it might be tempting to think that getting them fully back into their “Goldilocks” level would be desirable. **In fact, good leaders can capitalize on the uncertainty created by the crisis to help catalyze innovation and higher performance.** Although it may seem counter-intuitive, allowing team members to cocoon themselves in their most comfortable place would be counterproductive.

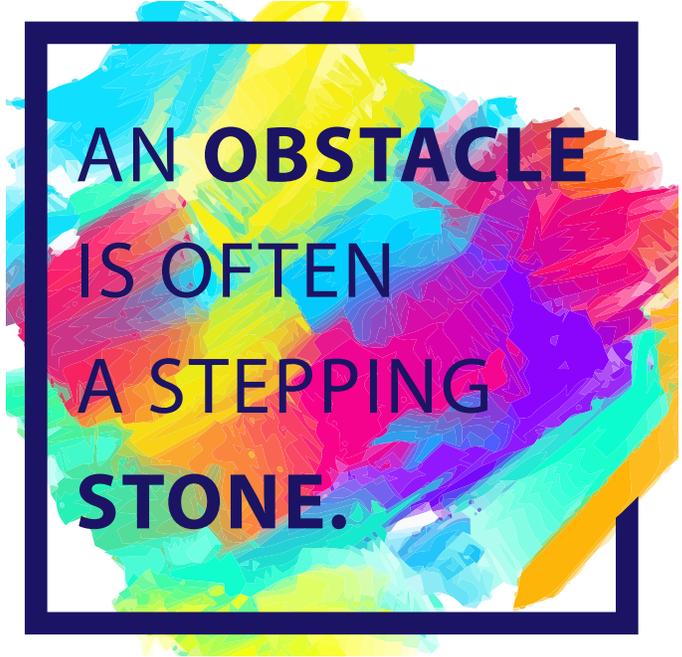
Comfort zones suppress meaningful change. Gestalt psychology holds that humans constantly strive for order in our minds. Consequently, we cannot hold two opposing thoughts simultaneously without creating tension, or dissonance. Think about people who are “compulsive picture straighteners.” When they walk into a room and discover a picture hung improperly, it bothers them. In fact, they will often go immediately and adjust it, even if it is in a public place, or someone’s office or home. If they can’t, they will agitate until they cause someone else to handle the issue. Until the picture is “fixed,” they are unable to focus on anything else. It is that dissonance that leaders can harness. The mind always resolves the tension of two clashing ideas in favor of the dominant image. In the case above, straight pictures clearly dominate. **In the same way, comfort zones are usually extraordinarily strong mental boundary markers. As such, when we move beyond them, we often become uncomfortable and seek quickly to get back where we are at ease, returning our world to “order” as we know it.**

The opportunity created by a crisis is that our “now” has already been disturbed. Leaders leverage this by creating and relentlessly communicating dominant, vivid, compelling future visions, “BHAG’s,” (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals) that create sharp dissonance between the familiar now and the new objective. **By deliberately throwing things “out of order,” enterprising leaders create the dissonance that they can resolve in favor of the newer, more dominant image.** The uncertainty of our current situation itself generates the opportunity to energize a decisive move forward rather than retreating to the former comfort zone or remaining in the unsettling “now”.

Leaders succeed in stimulating innovation in team members when they paint a vibrant, vivid picture of the contemplated outcome and connect to the positive emotion associated with achieving that outcome. This creates a pathway for people to move beyond the crisis thicket, avoid the Amygdala Hijack and break through to innovative solutions designed to achieve the vision they have created.

Leaders succeed in stimulating innovation in team members when they paint a vibrant, vivid picture of the contemplated outcome and connect to the positive emotion associated with achieving that outcome. This creates a pathway for people to move beyond the crisis thicket, avoid the Amygdala Hijack and break through to innovative solutions designed to achieve the vision they have created.

To recap: When team members are thrown out of their comfort zone because of a crisis, it is vital to acknowledge their feelings, recognizing that they may only be operating on emotion and instinct. When the members demonstrate that they have returned from that extreme state, leaders can capitalize on team members’ return to the Growth area, providing graphic, compelling visions for future action, clearly spelling out the “why.” In this fashion, leaders can stimulate healthy creativity and help boost performance in their team at a time when others are simply trying to put the former picture back into place.



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