



MANAGING YOURSELF

6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty

Guidance for Deans, Educators, and Academic Leaders

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If there was ever any doubt about the importance of an educator's ability to navigate change, uncertainty, and disruption, a quick look at the news makes this necessity abundantly clear. Whether it's geopolitical tensions, regulatory turbulence, financial pressures, or technological innovations that reshape how we teach and learn, one thing is certain: We cannot avoid ever-increasing change and complexity.

The leaders we work with often report feeling stuck, ill-equipped, or [overwhelmed](#) as they face the growing challenges of their roles and the need to manage multiple stakeholders. These same demands ring true in education, where academic leaders must navigate change in the classroom, across departments, and throughout their institution. Understandably, it's easy to feel overwhelmed when the complexity of our world has surpassed our "complexity of mind," as Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey describe in their book, [Immunity to Change](#). To put this in concrete terms, computing power has increased more than a [trillion-fold](#) since the mid 1950s, but our brains remain unchanged.

To effectively lead others in increasing complexity, academic leaders and educators must first learn to lead themselves. Although each leader faces their own unique circumstances, we have observed six strategies that accelerate your ability to continually learn, evolve, and navigate progressively more complex challenges.

1. Embrace the discomfort of not knowing

Throughout our careers, we are conditioned to come up with the answer—as in a single, definitive, correct answer. This is particularly true for educators. Given that our [brains are hardwired](#) to see uncertainty as a risk or threat, it's physiologically normal to feel stress when faced with unfamiliar situations. This is especially true for high achievers who have built their career on knowing or finding the “right” answer. Although avoiding these unpleasant feelings is a natural human tendency, it can become a significant barrier to learning, future growth, and, ultimately, performance.

Rather than avoid these feelings, we must learn to acknowledge and embrace the discomfort as an expected and normal part of the learning process. As described by Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, leaders must shift from a [“know-it-all” to a “learn-it-all”](#) mindset. This shift helps ease discomfort by relieving the pressure to always have all the answers—and it's the same mindset that helped Microsoft reshape its culture into a learning organization.

2. Distinguish between complicated and complex

Most of us use the terms complex and complicated interchangeably when, in fact, they represent [critically different circumstances](#). For example, preparing grant applications is complicated: They're time-consuming, difficult to understand, and highly technical in nature. But they can be broken down into discrete parts, addressed with expert input, and ultimately resolved.

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Conversely, complex challenges contain many interdependent elements, some of which may be unknown and may change over time in unpredictable ways. In addition, an action or change in one dimension can result in disproportionate and unforeseen outcomes. For example, [developing institution-wide policies around AI](#) or [reworking a course you haven't taught in years](#) are both complex challenges. While there may be no shortage of opinions on or approaches to addressing these challenges, there's rarely a clear solution. Instead, [progress tends to emerge](#) through trial and error and requires the willingness, humility, and ability to act, learn, and adapt.

3. Let go of perfectionism

In a complex environment, the context is continually shifting; thus, [aiming for perfection is futile](#). Instead, aim for progress, expect mistakes, and recognize that you can continually course correct as needed. For high achievers, who are often prone to perfectionism, egos and desired identities (e.g., of being successful or being “the expert”) can get in the way. To let go of perfectionism, identify and acknowledge the specific core fears that are triggering you—such as “I’ll fail,” “I’ll look bad,” or “I’ll make the wrong decision.” Underlying these fears is an often implicit and unexamined assumption that “if any of these fears come to fruition, I wouldn’t be able to recover from it.”

We’ve worked with several clients over the years to help them actively debunk these assumptions by having them talk with others they respect about the role of mistakes or failure in their careers. They hear a lot about learning, new opportunities, and professional growth that emerged as a result, but never the career-ending catastrophes that they imagine. Loosening the grip of these assumptions over time can allow you to let go of perfectionism and accept that mistakes and failure are to be expected along the way.

4. Resist oversimplifications and quick conclusions

It’s tempting to oversimplify complex challenges so that they seem less daunting. For example, breaking a challenge into its respective components can help you feel like you have a greater command of the challenge at hand, but it can also narrow your view and obscure critical interdependencies, leading to a false sense of security. Likewise, drawing analogies from challenges that you’ve faced in the past can be useful, but it can also lead you to miss the unique nuances of the present challenge.

Many high achievers—both educators and students—have a bias for action and become quickly frustrated when facing challenges that don’t present an evident solution and clear course of action. Instead of caving to the desire for quick resolution, educators must learn to balance their need for action with a disciplined approach to understanding both the core problem and [their own biases](#). Educators then have the opportunity to both model and teach this approach to students. For example, an instructor might respond to declining student engagement by overhauling their entire syllabus without first understanding why students are disengaged. Taking a more reflective approach, the instructor might share the challenge with students and invite their feedback before making changes.

5. Don’t go it alone

Many of the leaders we work with report feeling isolated as they face the continuous change and uncertainty in the challenges confronting them. Part of their sense of isolation comes from an implicit belief that they need to solve all the issues themselves. As the complexity and volume of our workload increases, our natural tendency is to double down on our focus and individual efforts. When facing relatively short-term challenges with known solutions, this can be an effective strategy. However, when facing challenges for which the full scope of issues and interdependencies, let alone solutions, are unclear, it can be a disaster. Instead, this is when it’s most important to cultivate the practice of intentionally reaching out to your network and beyond for insight and perspective.

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There is an inherent limit for each of us regarding what we can know and our ability to have an objective perspective on any given situation. Yet, we can exponentially expand our knowledge and perspective by cultivating and connecting with a network of peers and colleagues—each with their own set of experiences and perspectives. Reaching out to other academic leaders and faculty, both inside and outside of your department or institution, can be invaluable. These conversations can help normalize the challenge, offer a fresh perspective, and move you closer to a solution.

As stated by one leader, “When I’m trying to make sense of a complex issue, the first thing I do is reach out to people whose opinion I value and whose experience is in some ways different from mine. I want to know, ‘How are they looking at the situation? What’s their point of view? Who else should I talk to?’” He went on to explain, “It’s not so much that I expect them to have an answer as [that] I want to plug into their thinking and their sources.”

6. Zoom out

Leaders often get stuck in the challenges they face because they are too immersed in them. “Zooming out,” or moving from “the dance floor to the balcony,” as described by Ron Heifetz, Marty Linksy, and Alexander Grashow in [The Practice of Adaptive Leadership](#), provides you with a broader perspective and a systemic view of the issues and can shine a light on unexamined assumptions that would otherwise not be visible. From this “balcony” or elevated vantage point, interdependencies and larger patterns become observable, potentially revealing unforeseen obstacles and new solutions.

This more holistic perspective allows for greater adaptability and course correction when needed. Making a regular practice of conducting this dance floor–balcony shift, you can build your capacity to see the bigger picture and become more agile.

Complexity persists—you can navigate it

It seems that any given week offers a new and unexpected challenge, whether on campus or in the classroom, reminding us that, as academic leaders and educators, we cannot control the degree of change, uncertainty, and complexity we face. However, adopting the strategies above can improve our ability to continually learn, grow, and more effectively navigate the increasing complexity of our world.

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