

Creating the Future in Our Complex World



GLS CONSULTING, INC.

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Navigating Uncertainty — by Ann Lindsey

Perhaps more than ever before, leaders and managers in organizations are facing uncertainty, and a rapidly changing world. The impact of globalization is accelerating. Our economy is in a period of turbulence that is unlikely to stabilize for some time. Markets, trends, technology, and the political environment all change rapidly and unexpectedly. Thus managers in today's organizations face new demands as well as new opportunities; they all seem to call for the capacity to "turn on a dime."



Being able to anticipate events and adapt very quickly is only part of the dilemma that organizations and their leaders face in this age of unprecedented uncertainty. Companies must also ensure their internal stability and longevity—even as they're adjusting to the change and complexity that is constantly at play in the environment. In order to do this, their leaders must remain positive as well as consistently truthful when members of their organizations face changing circumstances.

Change, complexity, external pressure, and uncertainty have become—and will remain—a constant part of organizational life. We have identified three leadership skills beyond the usual that will contribute to the organization's capacity to create the resilience and agility required to meet the future. These skills are: relying on one's intuition under uncertainty; distinguishing one's own personal reactions and intuitions from the reactions of others in the environment; and providing an environment that is "containing" or "holding" for the organization, thus ensuring a sense of safety even when things seem uncertain or ominous.

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Leaders who have learned to trust their intuitions while at the same time being able to view what is happening “from the balcony” find these skills critical to successful navigation of their organization’s path through changing times. Maintaining perspective implies that a leader does not allow personal reactions to trigger impulsive decisions or actions that could have detrimental results for the organization. Effective leaders also recognize that while their own intuitions can be of enormous value, the likelihood is high that others in their organizations also have *insights that provide valuable sources of information*. Finding ways to make use of the early warning sensors that exist within the organization can be done by establishing safe processes for the organization’s members to provide their insights.

THE MESSAGE THAT LEADERS SHOULD SEND IS “I’M OPEN TO THE INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE; I MAY OR MAY NOT USE IT, BUT I WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU’RE SENSING.”

Leaders who are successful in leading their organizations through change and complexity publicly acknowledge to their organization’s members that turbulent times surround us all, and that it is okay for people to talk about their reactions to uncertainty and change. People often “catch” the anxiety of others, and are prone to misinterpret it. The difficulties experienced by individuals are often reflective of the larger systemic difficulties that virtually every organization faces. It is important that people don’t misattribute negative feelings that they may be experiencing as having to do with the personal defects of their coworkers or themselves. In addition, when people feel that they can talk without fear of blame, they can often engage in a productive dialogue that encourages problem solving and the creation of new solutions. They can also acknowledge the difficulties over which they have no control, and by so doing, reduce some of the stress that they experience.

The question of course must be asked: what does a leader do with all the information that may come in if he or she successfully invites people to voice their concerns and their intuitions? First, the leader recognizes that the information buried in people’s “hunches” may constitute important sensors about what is at play in the company’s external environment. It is at this point that the leader’s ability to maintain a calm environment that can “hold” people’s uneasiness—his or her ability to be calm, reliable, and predictable—becomes particularly critical.

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An effective leader listens carefully and acknowledges that it is important to know as much as possible about what is occurring within the organization, and what outside influences that may be affecting the organization. We have sometimes heard the opposite reactions from leaders. In one instance, some members of an organization approached their senior executive with concerns about people leaving the organization. The leader's reaction was, "Don't worry about it. The only ones who are going are those we want to get rid of anyway." Not surprisingly, some of the people leaving were, in fact, highly valued. Over time people sensed from the leader's verbal and nonverbal cues that he would not appreciate seemingly negative information. The flow of information slowed to a trickle.

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The message that an effective leader sends is "I'm open to the information you bring; I may or may not use it, but I want to know what you're sensing." This leadership strategy indicates to people that it is okay for them to give voice to their own intuitions, and to say something about the difficulties and challenges they see. When people are anxious and have no channel for expressing their anxiety, they are more likely to attribute their feelings to something that has nothing to do with the situation that stimulated them.

Leaders must also "hold" the uncertainty that members of their organizations feel they are facing; this implies leadership's capability to take in information from others without overreacting, and to acknowledge that the concern expressed has some valid basis. Effective leaders send a consistent message that "we'll get through this together," and that if environmental difficulties become too much to manage, then "you'll be the first to know."

In the hands of an effective leader, members' intuitions can help set the course for successful navigation through uncertainty and change in today's fast changing world. The leader uses his or her intuition as well as others' capacity to sense the environment, and does so while maintaining an environment in which tensions, questions, and doubts can be expressed safely. This allows for greater insight into areas that may affect the organization, and helps the organization to "navigate through change and uncertainty" in our challenging world.

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About the Author



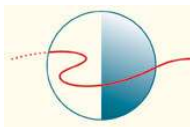
Ann Lindsey is a co-founder and principal of GLS Consulting, Inc. She has more than twenty years of experience working in private and public sector organizations, and has consulted with clients such as General Motors, Quantum Chemical Corporation, The Mitre Corporation, Malden Mills Industries, CBS, Taylor Investments, EMC, and NASA Space Center. She specializes in leadership development, executive coaching, women in management, and team development.

Ann was a Professor of Management at Simmons College Graduate School of Management from 1982 until 2000. In both the MBA and the Executive Development Programs at the GSM, she helped develop and expand the organizational behavior courses that were part of the founding philosophy of the School. Ann has developed comprehensive leadership and management programs for women at Simmons, General Motors Corporation, and Quantum Chemical Corporation.

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About GLS

GLS Consulting, Inc. is a management and organizational effectiveness consulting firm that strengthens its clients' ability to thrive in an environment of complexity and constant change. GLS Consulting helps companies clarify their identity, vision, and strategy, and helps them build strong internal and external partnerships that create lasting success.



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