



Corporate Culture and Complexity Part 2B: The Certainty Trap

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“The way we experience the world is not *the way it really is* but the way that has proved useful to natural selection for us to perceive it.”

— Susan Blackmore, **The Meme Machine** (1999)

Before the 16th Century, living with uncertainty was a way of life, because uncertainty was normal. Very little, if anything, was predictable. The most that people had was hope that the world in which they lived would remain stable. Thus, they lived as if the world were stable by focusing only on the past and the present. In other words, people lived from day to day. According to Peter Bernstein, author of **Against the Gods**: “Up to the time of the Renaissance, people perceived the future as little more than a matter of luck or the result of random variations, and most of their decisions were driven by instinct.

When the conditions of life are so closely linked to nature, not much is left to human control.” To most people, the concept of a future, or of planning for a future, was foreign.

The reason that people lived in the present and the past was that they had no way of thinking about the future. The only way they could deal with what they didn’t understand was to explain it through superstition, mythology, and mysticism. With the arrival of the 16th Century, a number of people wondered if the world *could* be a different place. This thinking gave birth to the Enlightenment, the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution — memeplexes that gave rise to Western Civilization as we know it today. More dramatically, these memeplexes were spread by another invention of the time, the printing press — a *meme-spreading machine*. Blackmore states that “Once books were cheaply available the kinds of memes contained in them could proliferate and change. ... Memes in books provide a good

example of a selection system at work. In this system, the replicators are the memes: the ideas, stories, theories or instructions conveyed in the printed words.”

During this time, and for the next 500 years, people had an overwhelming desire to understand the world —no longer to accept uncertainty, but to harness certainty. This idea of understanding the world (which is itself a meme) was very attractive to a population beset with uncertainty at every turn. At the beginning, it is likely that this meme of certainty struggled to get a foothold in the Western consciousness. However, memes that succeed are those that meet the needs of the people being targeted by the meme. With time and education, the meme of certainty spread to more and more brains. The ultimate result of the Enlightenment, the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution was to banish doubt and uncertainty, and to replace it with the illusion of certainty. Today, Western Civilization is drowning in a sea of certainty. Too often, people believe that an increase in certainty is the best answer to dealing with change, complexity, and uncertainty. In fact, the reverse is true. The more we search for certainty, the less able we are to deal with uncertainty. To deal with uncertainty, we must be willing to embrace it in a way that helps us to move toward a different way of thinking.

Here’s an example that illustrates how much people rely on certainty. We do process consultation work with teams in organizations to help them learn to deal with uncertainty and change. Below are the questions that we are usually asked by most of

the leaders and the teams with whom we work. Notice how each of these questions springs from a desire for certainty:

1. How long will this process take?
2. What results will be produced?
3. What will actually happen to create those results?
4. What guarantee is there that this process will work?
5. How much will this cost?
6. What is the return on investment?

Most leaders and teams want the answers to these questions to provide certainty. For example, an answer to “How long will this process take?” can be given as a set number of days. It is important to remember that, when you seek certainty in situations that are complex and in flux, you get only the *illusion of certainty*. To deal effectively with these situations, you need to tap into the creative processes that are fueled by human imagination and intuition. To give answers based on certainty, when the situation is itself uncertain, is to fall under the cognitive illusion of *overconfidence* and *magical thinking* (see **InfoMine** Vol. 2, No. 2).

The answers below are the ones we give to leaders and teams. These answers reflect uncertainty, because we recognize the complexity of the situation, the necessity of using creative processes to create a desired future, and the fact that this process embraces a large number of variables. As you read these answers, you can imagine the range of responses we get — from extreme discomfort at the lack of certainty to excitement at the prospect of new possibilities!

1. **How long will this process take?** It depends on what the leader and the team want to

examine. It is likely that figuring out what they want to focus on may take a day or two. Then, depending on what they discover, it takes more time to develop actions that will help a team learn what to do.

2. **What results will be produced?** Because this process examines what the leader and the team does, it also examines what results they really want to achieve. The results depend on what they discover through the process. In other words, the leader and the team, as they learn, determine what results this process will produce.
3. **What will actually happen to create those results?** Nobody actually knows, because it depends on how willing the leader and the team are to seeing the process to its end. When will it end? If the leader and the team learn how to use this process, and learn to think and act accordingly, the answer is — never! This new way of working is a continuous process for achieving desired results.
4. **What guarantee is there that this process will work?** None! As consultants, we are responsible for helping the leader and the team learn how to examine how their work is done, and taking people through a process. The leader and the team are responsible for working through the process, learning from the process, and taking action on what they learn. Our assistance works only if the leader and the team develop commitment to the process as they learn from it.
5. **How much will this cost?** It depends. The real question here

is not what it will cost, but what is the cost of not changing and exploring new options?

6. **What is the return on investment?** It depends on whether or not the leader and the team become committed to creating a new way of thinking, acting, and learning.

In our experience over the past ten years, whenever we tried to design processes that focused on answering these questions with certainty, we failed to help the leaders and teams in dealing with their issues. It is only when everyone involved, working in partnership, embraced uncertainty, that the creative process created success. In embracing uncertainty, everyone, including the consultants, embark on a journey into uncertainty, with no guarantees. The purpose of the creative process is to question the memes from which the leader and the team are operating. This creative process helps the leaders and the teams to release the creativity required to build new memes necessary to create the results that they want. When the leaders and the teams build new memes, they create the space required for a new cultural memplex to arise. This memplex is a new way of working that defines the culture.

“Memes ... become the tools with which we think.”

— Susan Blackmore, **The Meme Machine** (1999)

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