LEADING AND OPERATING IN AMBIGUITY

The New Skill Set for an Ever–Changing Work World

by Steven Gaffney

Ambiguity. We have all confronted it at some point in our careers. Matrix organizations, multiple bosses, dotted- and solid-line reporting, internal and external customers, budget cuts, and economic issues are all factors that contribute to an ambiguous work environment. In fact, many of my executive clients cite ambiguity as a top source of frustration, challenges, and wasted time and money. Surprisingly enough, it does not have to be.

Ambiguity can also bring great opportunity – for those who see the possibilities. Our ability to manage, operate, and lead in an ambiguous environment separates the best from the rest on an individual and organizational level.

I am not saying clarity is a bad thing or that we should not strive for it. I am simply acknowledging that it is not always possible to achieve. Get clarity when you can, but when you cannot, choose to embrace the opportunities ambiguity creates for you to shine.

One key to coming out on top is to see the major benefit of ambiguity. Namely, it can serve as a forcing function that engages the mind. If everything is always clear-cut and provided for us, we can become lazy – on both an individual and organizational level. But when things are not clear, there are opportunities to forge new territories, stake one's claim, make suggestions, and seize the moment. While some organizations are constantly in a reactive mode, waiting to see how the world is changing,

what the economic trends specifically dictate, and what customers say they want, others are creating and shaping opportunities.

Look at Apple®. They did not wait until people said they wanted something like an iPad. Apple created it and now others are scrambling to get in on that market – a market Apple defined. In an ever-changing marketplace of technology, Apple continues to create products that generate demand. They are not tossed about by commonly perceived limitations or paralyzed in reactive mode awaiting clear instructions.

After all, even customers (internal customers included) want us to suggest innovative ideas and take initiative. We do that by uncovering hidden needs rather than simply reacting to what customers say they need. If a customer says they want X, we will usually give them X. Yet the value of ambiguity is that it forces us to probe, allowing us to find hidden needs and deliver what our customers truly desire.

This ability to chart your own course and not be dissuaded by common limitations can be the key to even individual success. If I had told you ten years ago that I was going to write a 500-page children's book, you might

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have suggested I have my head examined. After all, children do not normally read that much, right? Yet look at the success J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series had with children. She looked beyond the preconceived limitations of children's literature and saw an opportunity. In doing so, she pioneered the way for juvenile fantasy fiction.

Whether we are leading, managing, idea-generating, servicing customers, or creating new business, we should expect to do it in an often ambiguous and rapidly changing environment. That requires proactive rather than reactive behavior to seize the moment and take action.

One common syndrome we see in the workplace is the "Deer in the Headlights Syndrome," and it is one of the most frequent complaints I hear from leaders. They say that employees are frozen – like a deer caught in the headlights – waiting for clear direction, rather than being proactive with ideas, suggestions, actions, and solutions. Books like Seth Godin's *Linchpin* are now suggesting that people who are just waiting to be told what to do are often the most replaceable. In some industries they are even the ones whose jobs are being outsourced overseas. It has never been more critical to meet ambiguity head-on and create new opportunities. The individuals who can do

so in a quick, effective manner will increasingly become the go-to people, while the organizations that do so will come out on top time and again.

7 Tactics and Skills to Implement in an Ambiguous Environment

Nearly twenty years of surveying the work environment of top governmental agencies and Fortune 500 organizations have shown me that with the right mentality and some key strategies, we can overcome the challenges of ambiguity and capitalize on the opportunities it presents. The following seven strategies can help you and your organization embrace those opportunities.

1. Eliminate Half-Baked Ideas. An ambiguous environment presents incredible opportunities. The way to seize those opportunities is by suggesting quality ideas that are well thought out. Some people mistakenly believe that others do not want to hear their ideas. They complain that they have tried making suggestions and their ideas were rejected. That may be, but ideas are often rejected because they are half-baked and the person hearing them lacks the time to shape and invest in those ideas. So whether or not the idea is inherently good, it is denied.

Interestingly, I have found we are often closer to getting a "yes" than we realize. Test it out. Next time you get a "no" to one of your ideas, ask, "What would you need to see to change your mind?" You may find that with a few adjustments you can get the "yes" you are looking for. Remember, those who create ideas are often the most valuable players, and they can thrive in ambiguous times.

2. Take the Reins. Move from seeking explicit direction from superiors to practicing self-management. As the great management consultant (and friend) Zemira Jones shared with me, the more people can self-manage – evaluate and make corrections — the more motivated and inspired they will be. Being free from the need to wait for constant approval allows quick and timely adjustments to be made, resulting in a tremendous time savings.

To effectively self-manage, it is critical to verify your roles, responsibilities, and goals. If they have not been communicated to you, be proactive in creating them yourself. Look around for information and data; then create your roles, responsibilities, and goals. Confirm all of it with those to whom you report and then move forward on them. Do not wait for goals and direction while opportunities pass you by. Instead, create, verify, and take action.

We cannot necessarily control our environment, but we can control how we respond to that environment. Choose to see the opportunities ambiguity creates rather than getting tied up in the challenges. Often by responding in an effective way, we can shape and affect the environment.

3. Use Influence, Not Authority. As we discussed, we often end up operating in a matrix environment, which means we need to do things more by persuasion than by directing and ordering. Even if we do have the authority, we want to stay away from exercising that authority in a heavy-handed way. Doing so may cause others to give us lip service and then slow roll the initiative, or resist us in other passive-aggressive ways.

The ability to influence others in an honest, non-manipulative, and effective manner is a crucial skill set in today's complex world. One skill for improving your

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influence is building and maintaining rapport with others. Another important skill is addressing and resolving objections and hidden issues. If you can work on improving those two skills, then your ability to influence will continue to grow.

4. Get Clarity on the Non-Negotiables. Even in the most ambiguous, unclear environment, there are certain things that are non-negotiable – off the table. Our ability to gain clarity on those things can save tremendous time and resources. Nothing destroys motivation like spending time working on something that was actually non-negotiable from the start. Leaders who bring clarity about negotiable vs. non-negotiable can get extremely high returns from a workforce that focuses their ideas and actions on the negotiables.

5. Beware of Idea Killers. Watch out for statements like these: "We already know what they want"; "We know better"; "We tried that before"; and "That will never work." Attitudes like these are idea killers, and they can leave your organization stagnant, allowing others to pass you by. The antidote to idea killers is to ask questions and dig for information. Do not assume your customers want what they have wanted in the past. Choose to probe and uncover hidden needs. This is a key to capitalizing on the opportunities in an ambiguous environment.

For more information on avoiding idea killers, please read my article on the "Power of Wrong." If you do not have the article, please call our office.

6. Reset Expectations. I am struck by how many people are waiting for change to stop and responsibilities to become clear. If this is happening, hit the reboot button and reset people's expectations. Remind them that things will always be changing and that much will be unclear. For that reason, it makes sense to always be improving (and therefore tinkering with things). If we are not progressing, we are regressing.

The pace of change in today's business environment demands constant improvement on an individual and organizational level. That means it is crucial to have the mindset that there is no such thing as the perfect solution. Often it is taking action that allows us to see how to make things better. Consider this: when was the last time you saw a plan that was executed the way it was designed? The truth is that no matter how well thought out our plans are, we will most likely need to make adjustments. Encourage everyone to expect change and embrace it.

7. Keep the Floodgates Open. One leader told me he actually likes ambiguity because it forces people to think and communicate. In the absence of being certain, people have to seek out others and talk with them. For that reason, an environment that encourages open, honest communication is a must in order for the other strategies to work. It is the foundation for capitalizing on ambiguity's opportunities.

If staff is not willing to share issues and challenges or is not empowered to freely share ideas, then ambiguity's opportunities cannot be seized. Open those floodgates by rewarding honest communication and encouraging staff to share problems and solutions. This will enhance creativity, make room for outside-the-box thinking, and improve teamwork – exactly what is needed in an ambiguous environment. The end result will be a boost to the bottom line.

For more information on how to achieve open, honest communication, please read my article "The 11 Most Costly Hidden Problems in the Workplace." If you do not have the article, please call us for a copy.

The factors that contribute to ambiguity are here to stay, so do not allow ambiguity's potential challenges to blind you to its prospects. Ambiguity offers great opportunity to flourish – to lead the way in the ever-changing marketplace. Take the initiative and use the seven tactics to operate, excel, and lead in an ambiguous workplace.

Steven Gaffney is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, team performance, leadership, and change management. He has worked with numerous Fortune 500 organizations to increase revenue and drive profit, as well as with many governmental agencies to better allocate resources and taxpayer dollars. Thousands credit Gaffney's seminars, media appearances, books, and products with making immediate and lasting changes in both their organizations and personal lives. He is also the author of two groundbreaking books, *Just Be Honest* and *Honesty Works*, and the co-author of *Honesty Sells*. For more information, please visit www.StevenGaffney.com.