Dealing with Change

Development Suggestions

1. **Incrementalism.** The essence of dealing comfortably with uncertainty is the tolerance of errors and mistakes, and absorbing the possible heat and criticism that follow. Acting on an ill-defined problem with no precedents to follow means shooting in the dark with as informed a decision as you can make at the time. People who are good at this are incrementalists. They make a series of smaller decisions, get instant feedback, correct the course, get a little more data, move forward a little more, until the bigger problem is under control. They don’t try to get it right the first time. Many problem-solving studies show that the second or third try is when we really understand the underlying dynamics of problems. They also know that the more uncertain the situation is, the more likely it is they will make mistakes in the beginning. So you need to work on two practices. Start small so you can recover more quickly. Do little somethings as soon as you can and get used to heat.

2. **Perfectionist?** Need or prefer or want to be 100% sure? Lots might prefer that. Perfectionism is tough to let go of because most people see it as a positive trait for themselves. Recognize your perfectionism for what it might be – collecting more information than others to improve your confidence in making a fault-free decision and thereby avoiding risk and criticism. Try to decrease your need for data and your need to be right all the time slightly every week until you reach a more reasonable balance between thinking it through and taking action. Try making some small decisions on little or no data. Anyone with a brain and 100% of the data can make good decisions. The real test is who can act the soonest with a reasonable amount, but not all, of the data. Some studies suggest successful general managers are about 65% correct. Trust your intuition. Let your brain do the calculations.

3. **Stuck with what you know?** Do you feel best when you know everything that’s going on around you and are in control? Most do. Few are motivated by uncertainty and chaos. But many are challenged by it. They enjoy solving problems no one has solved before. They enjoy cutting paths where no one has been before. You need to become more comfortable being a pioneer. Explore new ground. Learn new things. Practice in your life. Go to theme restaurants you know nothing about. Vacation at places without doing a lot of research. Go to ethnic festivals for groups you have little knowledge about.

4. **Disorganized?** Under uncertainty, you have to put the keel in the water yourself. You need to set tight priorities. Focus on the mission-critical few. Don’t get diverted by trivia. Get better organized and disciplined. There is a well-established set of best practices for getting work done efficiently and effectively. If you are not disciplined in how you design work for yourself and others and are late taking action because of it, buy books on both Total Quality Management and Process Re-Engineering. Go to one workshop on efficient and effective work design.
5. **Problem definition.** Under uncertainty, it really helps to get as firm a handle as possible on the problem. Figure out what causes it. Keep asking why. See how many causes you can come up with and how many organizing buckets you can put them in. This increases the chance of a better solution because you can see more connections. The evidence from decision-making research makes it clear that thorough problem definition with appropriate questions to answer lead to better decisions. Focusing on solutions or information first often slows things down since we have no conceptual buckets in which to organize our thinking. Learn to ask more questions. In one study of problem solving, 7% of comments were questions and about half were solutions.

6. **Visualize the problem.** Complex processes or problems with a lot of uncertainty are hard to understand. They tend to be a hopeless maze unless they are put in a visual format. One technique is a pictorial chart called a storyboard where a process or vision or strategy is illustrated by its components being depicted as pictures. A variation of this is to do the old pro and con, +’s and -’s of a problem and process, then flow chart those according to what’s working and not working. Another is the wishbone diagram used in Total Quality Management. It is a method of breaking down the causes of a problem into categories. Buy a flow charting software program like ABC FlowCharter® 4.0 to help you visualize problems quickly.

7. **Develop a philosophical stance toward failure/criticism.** After all, most innovations fail, most proposals fail, most change efforts fail, anything worth doing takes repeated effort. To increase learning from your mistakes, design feedback loops to be as immediate as possible. The faster and the more frequent the cycles, the more opportunities to learn – if we do one smaller thing a day for three days instead of one bigger thing in three, we triple our learning opportunities. There will be many mistakes and failures; after all, since you’re not sure, it’s very likely no one else knows what to do either. They just have a right to comment on your errors. The best tack when confronted with a mistake is to say “What can we learn from this?”

8. **Stress.** Some get stressed with increased ambiguity and uncertainty. We lose our anchor. We are not at our best when we are anxious, frustrated, upset or when we lose our cool. What brings out your emotional response? Write down why you get anxious – when you don’t know what to do; don’t want to make a mistake; afraid of the unknown consequences; don’t have the confidence to act. When you get emotional, drop the problem for awhile. Go do something else. Come back to it when you are under better control. Let your brain work on it while you do something safer.

9. **Change is letting go of one trapeze in the air to catch the next one.** For a small amount of time, you have hold of nothing but thin air. The second gets you to a new platform and a new place. If you hang on to the first one, afraid you will fall, you will always return to the same old platform; safe but not new or different. Change is letting go. Stay informed about business/technological change and ask what it means for your work. Visualize a different and better outcome. Talk about it. Invite ideas. Interview those who have successfully pulled off changes. Experiment. The more you do this, the more
comfortable you’ll feel. To better understand dealing with change, read The Future of Leadership by White, Hodgson and Crainer.

**10. Finishing.** Do you prefer to finish what you have started? Do you have a high need to complete tasks? Wrap them up in nice clean packages? Working well with ambiguity and under uncertainty means moving from incomplete task to incomplete task. Some may be abandoned, some may never be finished. They’ll probably only ever get 80% done and you’ll constantly have to edit your actions and decisions. Change your internal reward process toward feeling good about fixing mistakes and moving things forward incrementally, more than finishing any given project.