JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

How to Overcome Your Fear of the Unknown

By Nathan Furr and Susannah Harmon Furr

Humans are wired to fear the unknown. That's why uncertainty—whether at the macro level of a global economic, health, or geopolitical crisis or at the micro level (Will I get that job? Will this venture be successful? Am I on the right career path?)—can feel nerve-racking, exhausting, and even debilitating. However, that gut reaction leads people to miss a crucial fact: Uncertainty and possibility are two sides of the same coin.

Consider the achievements you're most proud of, the moments that transformed your life, the relationships that make your life worth living. We'll bet that they all happened after a period of uncertainty—one that probably felt stressful but that you nevertheless pushed through to accomplish something great. When we moved abroad, for example, we faced uncertainty about making less money, paying higher taxes, doing more-challenging work, and introducing our children to new schools, a new language, and a new culture. But seven years later we are so grateful for all the possibilities the move opened up.

Our modern-day heroes all have a similar story. Rosa Parks faced great uncertainty when she refused to give up her seat, igniting the Montgomery bus boycott and paving the way for desegregation. Nearly everyone initially thought that Elon Musk and his team would fail when they set out to revolutionize electric vehicles and push the world toward a more environmentally friendly future. They couldn't have achieved their breakthroughs if they had been afraid of uncertainty.

Uncertainty doesn't have to paralyze any of us. Over the past decade we have studied innovators and changemakers who've learned to navigate it well, and we've reviewed the research on topics like resilience and tolerance for ambiguity. The findings are clear: We all can become adept at managing uncertainty and empower ourselves to step confidently into the unknown and seize the opportunity it presents. Applying the following four principles will help you do that.

1. Reframe Your Situation

Most people are loss-averse. Multiple studies demonstrate that the way you frame things affects how you make decisions. The research shows, for instance, that if one treatment for a new disease is described as 95% effective and another as 5% ineffective, people prefer the former even though the two are statistically identical. Every innovation, every change, every transformation—personal or professional—comes with potential upsides and downsides. And though most of us instinctively focus on the latter, it's possible to shift that mindset and decrease our fear.

One of our favorite ways of doing this is the "infinite game" approach, developed by New York University professor James Carse. His advice is to stop seeing the rules, boundaries, and purpose of the "game" you're playing—the job you're after, the project you've been assigned, the career path you're on—as fixed. That puts you in a win-or-lose mentality in which uncertainty heightens your anxiety. In contrast, infinite players recognize uncertainty as an essential part of the game—one that adds an element of surprise and possibility and enables them to challenge their roles and the game's parameters.

Yvon Chouinard, the cofounder of Patagonia, is an infinite player. As a kid he struggled to fit in, running away from one school, almost failing out of a second, and becoming a "dirtbag" climber after he graduated. But rather than seeing himself as a failure, he recounts in his book Let My People Go Surfing, he "learned at an early age that it's better to invent your own game; then you can always be a winner."

Chouinard not only created one of the world's most successful outdoor-apparel brands but also changed production norms by adopting more-sustainable materials, altered the retail model by refitting old buildings for new shops, and challenged traditional HR policies by introducing practices like on-site childcare. Some of those innovations created uncertainty for the business. For example, Patagonia adopted organic cotton before it became popular, when it was expensive and hard to source. When a financial downturn hit, outsiders encouraged the company to buy cheaper materials. But using organic cotton was in keeping with its values, so Patagonia persisted, despite the cost and the supply risks, and in the end grew its sales while its competitors saw their sales fall.

Chouinard has learned to face uncertainty with courage—and in fact to be energized by it—because he views his role as improving the game, not just playing it. "Managers of a business that want to be around for the next 100 years had better love change," he advises in his book. "When there [is] no crisis, the wise leader…will invent one."

Of course, when uncertainty is forced upon us, we often need help reframing. Consider Amy and Michael, a professional couple with four children who moved from the United States to France in 2017 for Michael's job. When the pandemic started, his position was eliminated, and then companies that initially promised him job offers started stalling. In July 2020, Amy and Michael were scheduled to fly home to the United States, but three days before they left they still didn't have jobs or even a place to live. Family and friends were asking for updates, and their teenagers harangued them: "You are the worst parents ever! How can you have no clue where we're going next?"

Two days before their flight, Amy confided to us over lunch that Michael had been offered a job, but neither of them wanted him to accept it. "Should we just take the bird in hand?" she wondered aloud. "I feel like we are such losers." We encouraged her to reframe. She and Michael were showing resilience and bravery by exploring all possible next steps and holding out for the right one. How lucky their kids were to have parents bold enough to know what they really wanted and wait for it! The couple returned to the States with curiosity and courage and, by summer's end, had both found jobs they loved as well as a fixer-upper home in a fun location.

2. Prime Yourself for New Risks

Although innovators often talk about eating uncertainty for breakfast, if you dig deeper, you discover some curious habits. When Paul Smith—a designer known for daring color combinations—travels, he always stays in the same hotel, often in the same room. Others we've studied book the same airplane seat for every flight, follow the same morning routine, or wear the same clothes. Steve Jobs had a lifetime supply of black turtlenecks.

All those habits provide balance. By reducing uncertainty in one part of your life, they prime you to tolerate more of it in other parts. Some people ground themselves with steady, long-term relationships, for instance. As the serial entrepreneur Sam Yagan, one of Time's 100 most influential people and the former CEO of Match.com explains, "My best friends are from junior high and high school. I married my high school sweetheart. Given how much ambiguity I traffic in at work, I do look for less in other areas of my life."

You can also prime yourself for uncertainty by getting to know the kinds of risk you have a natural aversion to or an affinity with. Case in point: Back when Nathan was pursuing a PhD in Silicon Valley and Susannah had started a clothing line that wasn't yet making money, we had four children to support and were still living off student loans in a few hundred square feet of on-campus housing. At lunch one day, Nathan told his mentor, Tina Seelig, "Let's face it, if I really had any courage, I would become an entrepreneur, but I'm just not a risk-taker." Tina disagreed. She explained that there are many types of risks: financial, intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and so on. In Nathan's situation, avoiding financial risk by pursuing a stable career as an academic—while still taking intellectual risks—was a prudent choice. The important lesson is that knowing which risks you tolerate well can help you see where to push more boldly into the frontier, while knowing which you don't will help you prepare so that you can approach them with more confidence.

Just as important, you can increase your risk tolerance by taking smaller risks, even in unrelated fields. Consider Piet Coelewij, a former senior executive at Amazon and Philips. When he was thinking of leaving the corporate track to head the expansion of Sonos—then a start-up—in Europe, he decided to take up kickboxing. Coelewij describes himself as "naturally fearful of physical confrontation," but trying kickboxing helped him build up his muscles for dealing with uncertainty, which made him "more comfortable with higher-risk decisions in other settings with less complete information," he says. "Once you are in a cycle of lowering fear and developing courage, you create a virtuous circle that allows you to continuously improve."

3. Do Something

Taking action is one of the most important parts of facing uncertainty, since you learn with each step you take. Research by Timothy Ott and Kathleen Eisenhardt demonstrates that most successful breakthroughs are produced by a series of small steps, not giant bet-the-farm efforts. Starting modestly can be more effective and less anxiety-provoking than trying to do everything at once.

When Jenn Hyman and Jenny Fleiss, the founders of Rent the Runway, first had the idea of renting out designer dresses online, they were students at Harvard Business School. But they didn't begin by writing a business plan, raising money, and then getting big as fast as possible. Instead they made one small move: They rustled up some dresses, set up a dressing room on Harvard's campus before a big dance, and observed firsthand whether women would rent them. Then, one experiment after another, one step at a time, they built a large, successful public company.

Sometimes you need to quickly ramp up your learning to blow away the fog that obscures the view of what to do next. Entrepreneurs face that challenge all the time. Research on the most-effective start-up accelerators demonstrates that the best way to help founders meet it is to make them talk with as many people, from as many different backgrounds, as quickly as possible (instead of keeping their ideas to themselves for fear that someone might steal them). Leading accelerators often force entrepreneurs to meet more than 200 people, some from seemingly unrelated backgrounds, in just one month.

It's not unusual for invaluable input to come from unexpected corners. The founder of one new platform dedicated to helping charities, including religious organizations, initially balked at the feedback session his accelerator had arranged with the vice president of marketing at Playboy. To his shock, the VP not only was a churchgoer but also gave him some of the most helpful advice he had received so far.

Finally, as you make your way forward, focus on values rather than on goals. David Heinemeier Hansson, the creator of Ruby on Rails and the cofounder of multiple start-ups, including Basecamp and Hey.com, views goals as "oppressive" and argues that setting them doesn't even work. "Whether you meet $10 million or not does not happen because you set that as a goal," he explains. If you instead aim to fulfill your values (which for him include coding great software, treating employees well, and acting ethically in the market), you'll have the confidence to make the moves you need to, no matter how the world responds, because you've redefined what success means to you. Even if a big project fails, he says, "I will still look back on the path—the two years and millions of dollars we spent developing this thing—and feel great about it."

He took that approach when Apple began imposing exorbitant app store fees on his most recent project, Hey.com, threatening to shut the new email service down just after it launched. He admits that even he felt anxiety about the uncertainty, just as anyone else would. But his focus on values, rather than goals—in particular, on fairness in the tech industry—"gave us freedom to go all in" fighting back, he says. His situation became a rallying point for entrepreneurs, and the free press that resulted became "the greatest launch campaign we could have imagined."

4. Sustain Yourself

According to Ben Feringa, who won a Nobel Prize in chemistry for work on molecular machines that could one day power nanobots that repair the pipes in your house or keep diseases out of your blood, scientific discovery happens only after facing uncertainty. That means, he says, you have to "get resilient at handling the frustration that comes with it." His approach includes both emotional hygiene (attending to emotions—much as you would a physical wound—so that they don't turn into paralyzing self-doubt or unproductive rumination) and reality checks (in which you recognize that failure is just part of the process).

Feringa admits that failing hurts and that he allows himself to feel frustrated, even for a few days. But then he stops and asks, What insights can I take away from this? What's the next step I can work on? Whether he realizes it or not, he's adopting one of many lenses that can help people recast setbacks, such as the learning lens (what you can learn from them), the gratitude lens (what you still have, not what you lost), the timing lens (it's just not the right time now, but that doesn't mean it won't ever be), and our favorite: the challenge lens (you become the hero only by facing obstacles).

Another practice that the scientists, creators, and entrepreneurs we've studied use to sustain themselves is to focus on the people and things that have meaning for them. You can get through anything—not just the fear of potential losses but the pain of real ones—by holding tight to what really matters.

Take Jos and Alison Skeates, a British couple who launched a small chain of jewelry shops featuring new designers. They'd opened locations in three London neighborhoods—Clerkenwell, Notting Hill, and Chiswick—all while raising their two young girls. Then a series of disasters struck. First, construction around the Notting Hill store killed foot traffic. Then the financial crisis of 2008 crushed sales and, much worse, Alison was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. They had to close two shops and declare bankruptcy. But they navigated those tragedies by remembering that their love and their family were more important than the business.

Slowly, Alison's health improved and the cancer went into remission. Eventually they relaunched the Clerkenwell shop, repaid all their former creditors, and even won an award for being the UK jewelry boutique of the year. They also discovered a new, more meaningful pursuit: becoming one of the UK's first certified B-corp jewelry workshops, leading the way in sustainable practices.

Ultimately, their switch to sustainable jewelry strengthened them and their business. Recently, Jos went back to school to earn a master's degree in sustainability. More than 30 years out of school, he seriously doubted whether he could meet the rigorous reading and writing demands of the program while still running the store. The upside to this uncertainty? "What I have learned has been so interesting and inspiring, and our sales have increased," he says. Although he and Alison didn't build the chic jewelry empire they had imagined, their lives are happier and richer on this side of many challenges.

Resilience—being able to take a blow and stay standing—is important. But we argue for something more: learning to transform uncertainty into opportunity. The only way for any of us to tap into new possibilities is through the gateway of the unknown. And it doesn't have to be a painful process if you believe in your ability to navigate it. Our hope is that you can use our advice to transform your relationship with change and inspire others to do the same.

https://hbr.org/2022/07/how-to-overcome-your-fear-of-the-unknown