



## **Ambiguity and Decision Making**

by Cub Marion

In many performance management programs, you will encounter the leadership trait “Dealing with Ambiguity”. Typically, the definition you will find states: “Can effectively cope with change; can shift gears comfortably; can decide and act without having the total picture; isn’t upset when things are up in the air; doesn’t have to finish things before moving on; can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty” (FYI, For Your Improvement, Michael M. Lombardo & Robert W. Eichinger).

This is a useful definition, and to take a step further, in an ambiguous environment things simply lack clarity. This can be uncomfortable for some people, which can lead to distress and at times impact one’s ability to function or execute effectively.

Notable leaders have a gift to perform in those dynamic and uncertain environments, which is often referred to as the “fog of war”. Searching for perfect clarity of a situation is wasted motion, as any situation is defined by a person’s interpretation of the relevant facts, or at least what they perceive to be the relevant facts. This can really get foggy. But effective leaders have a knack for navigating through this and dealing with it decisively.

Some things to keep in mind when faced with ambiguity:

1. Frame the situation
2. Take on a manageable piece...do not try to boil the ocean
3. Do not search for the perfect solution (analysis paralysis)
4. Be confident in yourself
5. Make up your mind and have the fortitude to stick with it

When dealing with ambiguity, reckoning typically comes when a decision needs to be made. Individuals who process matters in the order outlined below are extremely effective and efficient decision makers.

1. Determine when the decision has to be made. This allows one to understand how much time is available to explore options and develop a solution
2. Gather the facts – get the relevant information
3. Develop multiple options if possible
4. Evaluate options and assess risk
5. Select option that yields highest probability of success
6. Make decision and communicate
7. Supervise, monitor, and adjust as needed

Tying this decision making process to ambiguous situations is quite helpful. It brings forward something a person knows, is comfortable with, and results in confidence. This familiar ground defuses some of the discomfort experienced when confronted with uncertainty, and generates the momentum needed to move forward decisively and effectively.