FACTOR I: STRATEGIC SKILLS

CLUSTER C: CREATING THE NEW AND DIFFERENT

2 Dealing with Ambiguity

Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity. Gilda Radner – Emmy Award-winning American comedienne and actress

Section 1: Your Development Need(s)

Unskilled

☐ Not comfortable with change or uncertainty
☐ May not do well on fuzzy problems with no clear solution or outcome
☐ May prefer more data than others, and structure over uncertainty
☐ Prefers things tacked down and sure
☐ Less efficient and productive under ambiguity
☐ Too quick to close
☐ May have a strong need to finish everything
☐ May like to do things the same way time after time

Select one to three of the competencies listed below to use as a substitute for this competency if you decide not to work on it directly.

Substitutes: 1,5,12,14,16,28,30,32,36,39,40,46,47,50,51,52,53,58

Skilled

☐ 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

Overused Skill

☐ May move to conclusions without enough data
☐ May fill in gaps by adding things that aren’t there
☐ May frustrate others by not getting specific enough
☐ May undervalue orderly problem solving
☐ May reject precedent and history
☐ May err toward the new and risky at the expense of proven solutions
☐ May over-complicate things
Select one to three of the competencies listed below to work on to compensate for an overuse of this skill.
Compensators: 5,17,24,30,35,39,40,47,50,51,52,59,61,63

Some Causes
☐ Avoid criticism
☐ Avoid risk
☐ Disorganized
☐ Get overwhelmed
☐ Like structure and control
☐ Perfectionist
☐

Leadership Architect® Factors and Clusters
This competency is in the Strategic Skills Factor (I). This competency is in the Creating the New and Different Cluster (C) with: 14, 28, 46, 58. You may want to check other competencies in the same Factor/Cluster for related tips.

The Map
According to studies, 90% of the problems of middle managers and above are ambiguous—it’s neither clear what the problem is nor what the solution is. The higher you go, the more ambiguous things get. Most people with a brain, given unlimited time and 100% of the information, could make accurate and good decisions. Most people, given access to how this specific problem has been solved hundreds of times before, could repeat the right decision. The real rewards go to those who can comfortably make more good decisions than bad with less than all of the information, in less time, with few or no precedents on how it was solved before.

Section 2: Learning on Your Own
These self-development remedies will help you build your skill(s).

Some Remedies
☐ 1. Overwhelmed? Take small, incremental steps. 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? Balance thinking with action. 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? Broaden your horizon. 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? Get organized. 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 TQM, ISO and Six Sigma. Go to one workshop on efficient and effective work design. More help? – See #50 Priority Setting, #52 Process Management, and #63 Total Work Systems (e.g., TQM/ISO/Six Sigma).

☐ 5. Muddled problem definition? Ask the right questions to define the problem. 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 leads 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. Daunted by complexity? 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 fishbone diagram used in Total Quality Management. It is a method of breaking down the causes of a problem into categories. Buy a flow charting and/or project planning software program to help you visualize problems quickly.

7. Afraid to fail? 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?” More help? – See #45 Personal Learning.

8. Stressed out? Manage your 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 a while. 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. More help? – See #11 Composure and #107 Lack of Composure.

9. Nothing to hold on to? Let go. 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. **Want to check it off your list? Redefine progress.** 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.

**Section 3: Learning from Feedback**

*These sources would give you the most accurate and detailed feedback on your skill(s).*

☐ 1. **Natural Mentors**

Natural mentors have a special relationship with you and are interested in your success and your future. Since they are usually not in your direct chain of command, you can have more open, relaxed, and fruitful discussions about yourself and your career prospects. They can be a very important source for candid or critical feedback others may not give you.

☐ 2. **Past Associates/Constituencies**

When confronted with a present performance problem, some claim, “I wasn’t like that before; it must be the current situation.” When feedback is available from former associates, about 50% support that claim. In the other half of the cases, the people were like that before and probably didn’t know it. It sometimes makes sense to access the past to clearly see the present.

☐ 3. **Peers and Colleagues**

Peers and colleagues have a special social and working relationship. They attend staff meetings together, share private views, get feedback from the same boss, travel together, and are knowledgeable about each other’s work. You perhaps let your guard down more around peers and act more like yourself. They can be a valuable source of feedback.

**Section 4: Learning from Develop-in-Place Assignments**

*These part-time develop-in-place assignments will help you build your skill(s).*

☐ Integrate diverse systems, processes, or procedures across decentralized and/or dispersed units.

☐ Go on a business trip to a foreign country you’ve not been to before.

☐ Relaunch an existing product or service that’s not doing well.
☐ Manage a group of resistant people with low morale through an unpopular change or project.
☐ Manage a group of people who are towering experts but you are not.
☐ Assemble a team of diverse people to accomplish a difficult task.
☐ Take on a tough and undoable project, one where others who have tried it have failed.
☐ Take on a task you dislike or hate to do.
☐ Make peace with an enemy or someone you’ve disappointed with a product or service or someone you’ve had some trouble with or don’t get along with very well.
☐ Build a multifunctional project team to tackle a common business issue or problem.

Section 5: Learning from Full-Time Jobs

These full-time jobs offer the opportunity to build your skill(s).

☐ 1. Chair of Projects/Task Forces
The core demands for qualifying as Chair of a Project/Task Force assignment are: (1) Leader of a group with an important and specific goal. (2) Tight deadline. (3) Success or failure will be evident. (4) High-visibility sponsor. (5) Learning something on the fly. (6) Must get others to cooperate. (7) Usually six months or more. Three types of Projects/Task Forces: (1) New ideas, products, services, or systems (e.g., product/service/program research and development, creation/installation/launch of a new system, programs like TQM, ISO and Six Sigma, positive discipline). (2) Formal negotiations and relationships (e.g., acquisitions; divestitures; agreements; joint ventures; licensing arrangements; franchising; dealing with unions, governments, communities, charities, customers, and relocations). (3) Big one-time events (e.g., working on a major presentation for the board; organizing significant meetings or conferences; reorganizations, mergers, acquisitions, or relocations; working on visions, charters, strategies, other time-urgent issues and problems).

☐ 2. Change Manager
The core demands to qualify as a Change Manager are: (1) Leader of a significant effort to change something or implement something of significance. (2) Success and failure will be evident. (3) Always something new and unique to the organization. (4) Must get many others to buy in and cooperate. (5) Involves cross-boundary change. (6) High visibility sponsor. (7) Exposure to significant decision makers and key stakeholders. (8) Resistance is expected and near-universal. (9) Cost of failure is significant. Examples include: (1) Total Work Systems like TQM, ISO, or Six Sigma. (2) Business restructurings like a move away from a core competence and into a new product space or industry, i.e., American carmakers move into smaller, more fuel-efficient products. (3) Installing major systems (like an ERP or HRIS) and procedures for the first time. (4) M&A integrations, responding to major competitor initiatives that threaten the organization. (5) Extensive reorganizations. (6) Long-term post-corporate scandal recovery.
3. Crisis Manager
The core demands to qualify as Crisis Manager are: (1) Leader responsible for an unpredictable, unique crisis of significant proportion. (2) Success and failure will be evident and visible. (3) Takes Herculean effort to solve. (4) Learning something on the fly. (5) Solution requires cross-boundary team. (6) Leader will be a spokesperson and potentially subjected to media scrutiny. (7) Hostile questioning and suspicious atmosphere is common. (8) Time pressure is extreme. (9) Solution involves working with parties outside the organization. (10) Usually short-term (up to three months). (11) Other parts of job would have to be temporarily set aside. Examples of crisis management would be: (1) A product safety recall; product or system failure. (2) Unexpected death of a CEO or senior corporate executive. (3) Unexpected termination or scandal involving a CEO or senior corporate executive. (4) Trouble with a key customer or supplier that decreases revenue or production. (5) Natural disasters. (6) Terrorist attacks. (7) Kidnapping or arrest of employees; violent crime against employees.

4. Fix-It/Turnarounds
The core demands to qualify as a Fix-it or Turnaround assignment are: (1) Clean-ing up a mess. (2) Serious people issues/problems like credibility/performance/morale. (3) Tight deadline. (4) Serious business performance failure. (5) Last chance to fix. Four types of Fix-It/Turnarounds: (1) Fixing a failed business/unit involving taking control, stopping losses, managing damage, planning the turnaround, dealing with people problems, installing new processes and systems, and rebuilding the spirit and performance of the unit. (2) Managing sizable disasters like mishandled labor negotiations and strikes, thefts, history of significant business losses, poor staff, failed leadership, hidden problems, fraud, public relations nightmares, etc. (3) Significant reorganization and restructuring (e.g., stabilizing the business, re-forming unit, introducing new systems, making people changes, resetting strategy and tactics). (4) Significant system/process breakdown (e.g., MIS, financial coordination processes, audits, standards, etc.) across units requiring working from a distant position to change something, providing advice and counsel, and installing or implementing a major process improvement or system change outside your own unit and/or with customers outside the organization.

5. Heavy Strategic Demands
The core demands necessary to qualify as a Heavy Strategic Demands assignment are: (1) Requires significant strategic thinking and planning most couldn’t do. (2) Charts new ground strategically. (3) Plan must be presented, challenged, adopted, and implemented. (4) Exposure to significant decision makers and executives. Examples of jobs with Heavy Strategic Demands: (1) Strategic planning position. (2) Job involving repositioning of a product, service, or organization.
Section 6: Learning from Your Plan

These additional remedies will help make this development plan more effective for you.

Learning to Learn Better

☐ 1. Monitor Yourself More Closely and Get off Your Autopilot
Past habits are a mixed blessing, sometimes helping, sometimes not. To avoid putting yourself on “autopilot,” think afresh about each situation before acting. Consistently monitor yourself with questions. Is this task different? Ask why you would repeat a past action. Are you avoiding anything, like taking a chance? Is there something new you might try?

☐ 2. Be Alert to Learnings When Faced with Transitions
To avoid applying rigid habits, be alert to situations that require a transition to a new set of conditions and reactions; check what’s similar and what’s different; think out which past lessons and rules apply and which need to be changed. Don’t apply old solutions because you have missed subtle differences.

☐ 3. Teach Others Something You Don’t Know Well
Commit to a project like teaching something you don’t know much about to force you to learn quickly to accomplish the task; pick something new, different, or unfamiliar.

☐ 4. Put Yourself in Situations That Call for Your Weaknesses
Put yourself in situations where you must overcome or neutralize a weakness to be successful. Find opportunities to develop countercoping skills: If you’re shy, attend functions where you don’t know many people; if you’re too aggressive, work with children, etc.

☐ 5. Break Up Your Work Routine When You’re Blocked
When blocked on a problem, intersperse your work routine with dissimilar tasks, activities, or rest breaks. Turn to another task for a while. In a sequence of tough work, string dissimilar tasks together so you can vary the types of skills used and the work done.

☐ 6. Examine Why You’re Blocked on a Key Issue
Examine what you are worrying/angry about and list all of your thoughts about it; ask why these feelings are holding you back. Why are the feelings overriding your thinking? How are they getting in the way? Why are they important to you? How can you move beyond them and learn to do something differently?
Learning from Experience, Feedback, and Other People

7. Being a Student of Others
While many of us rely on others for information or advice, we do not really study the behavior of other people. Ask what a person does exceptionally well or poorly. What behaviors are particularly effective and ineffective for them? What works for them and what doesn’t? As a student of others, you can deduce the rules of thumb for effective and ineffective behavior and include those in your own library. In comparing yourself with this person, in what areas could you most improve? What could you specifically do to improve in ways comfortable for you?

8. Learning from Bad Situations
All of us will find ourselves in bad situations from time to time. Good intentions gone bad. Impossible tasks and goals. Hopeless projects. Even though you probably can’t perform well, the key is to at least take away some lessons and insights. How did things get to be this way? What factors led to the impasse? How can you make the best of a bad situation? How can you neutralize the negative elements? How can you get the most out of yourself and your staff under the chilling situation? What can you salvage? How can you use coping strategies to minimize the negatives? How can you avoid these situations going forward? In bad situations: (1) Be resourceful. Get the most you can out of the situation. (2) Try to deduce why things got to be that way. (3) Learn from both the situation you inherited and how you react to it. (4) Integrate what you learn into your future behavior.

Learning from Courses

9. Strategic Courses
There are a number of courses designed to stretch minds to prepare for future challenges. They include topics such as workforce diversity, globalization, the European economic community, competitive competencies and strategies, etc. Quality depends upon the following three factors: (1) The quality of the staff. Are they qualified? Are they respected in their fields? Are they strategic “gurus”? (2) The quality of the participants. Are they the kind of people you could learn from? (3) The quality of the setting. Is it comfortable and free from distractions? Can you learn there?

10. Attitude Toward Learning
In addition to selecting the right course, a learning attitude is required. Be open. Close down your “like/dislike” switch, your “agree/disagree” blinders, and your “like me/not like me” feelings toward the instructors. Learning requires new lessons, change, and new behaviors and perspectives—all scary stuff for most people. Don’t resist. Take in all you can during the course. Ask clarifying questions. Discuss
concerns with the other participants. Jot down what you learn as you go. After the course is over, take some time to reflect. Make practical decisions about what you can and cannot use.

In the future, instead of striving to be right at a high cost, it will be more appropriate to be flexible and plural at a lower cost. If you cannot accurately predict the future, then you must flexibly be prepared to deal with various possible futures. Edward de Bono – British physician, author, inventor, and consultant
Suggested Readings


