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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the "Positive Uncertainty" career decision making strategy, which came into being in 1989. The author suggests that Positive Uncertainty is relevant for individuals struggling to make decisions about their careers, relationships, retirement, life, and more. It is also relevant for career coaches, executive coaches, management development trainers and educators who advise and teach about the challenges of making career, organizational and leadership decisions. It helps them accept the inevitability of uncertainty and shows them how to use it to their advantage. Teams, managers and executives also find new ways of making decisions about their work and the organization's future when they don't know what the future will be. (GCP)

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*The Power of Positive Uncertainty: Making
Creative Career Decisions*

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Chapter Thirteen

The Power of Positive Uncertainty Making Creative Career Decisions

H.B. Gelatt & Carol Gelatt

In 1989 a career decision making strategy called “Positive Uncertainty” came into being (*Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 1989, Vol. 36. No. 2, 252-256). Positive Uncertainty presented a new decision-making framework for counselors because we were beginning to see a world that was changing but our decision-making framework wasn’t changing. Both psychologists and physicists began to agree that the order of the universe may be the order of the mind, and the mind is where decision-making occurs. Everything was beginning to be seen as interconnected and the mind was seen as the connector. Although the mind has always been where decision-making occurred, we had been limiting our strategies by using only part of the mind and ignoring the fact that what was going on outside of us was connected to what was going on inside of us.

Since then, change has become more rapid, more complex, and more unpredictable, leading to more uncertainty. Plus, two major, on-going revolutions are changing our world and the way we see it. The Internet Revolution is changing the way we see the world “out there” – the workplace, store, home, family, human relationships, geographic boundaries, etc. This revolution has created a desire and a need for more information and more speed in making decisions. Another revolution is the rapidly increasing focus on looking inside us for understanding what’s happening outside us. Jean Houston named this “The Inner-Net Revolution.” It is changing the way we see the world “in here.” This revolution is creating a growing desire and a need for more reflection and more creative imagination in making decisions.

Then suddenly a one-day event, known as 9-11, occurred. It continues to have a dramatic impact on how people are deciding to live their lives. It is increasing their sense of uncertainty. We point this out because we believe that Positive Uncertainty is even more relevant today than when it was first introduced. And it is now more likely to be accepted as “new conventional wisdom” about decision-making.

Positive Uncertainty is relevant for individuals struggling to make decisions about their careers, relationships, retirement, life and more. It is also relevant for career coaches, executive coaches, management development trainers and educators who advise and teach about the

challenges of making career, organizational and leadership decisions. It helps them accept the inevitability of uncertainty and shows them how to use it to their advantage. Teams, managers and executives also find new ways of making decisions about their work and the organization's future when they don't know what that future will be.

Why Be Positive About Uncertainty?

Decision-making is defined as using what you know and what you believe so you can choose what to do to get what you want. What you want is in the future – it is the intended outcome of your decision. Therefore, decision-making is about the future. Career planning is about the future. Job searching, goal setting, leadership development, strategic planning and organizational change are about the future. It seems that almost everything is about the future – and therefore, about decision-making.

If the future is predictable and you knew what was going to happen next, that would be called certainty. Traditional decision strategies try to eliminate or reduce uncertainty with rational, “scientific” decision rules. When the future is certain all you can do is to prepare for what is sure to happen. You are a reactive decision-maker.

But what you decide to do doesn't always get you what you want. Outcomes are uncertain because the future is unpredictable. Uncertainty increases possibilities and produces opportunity for proactive creativity. You can be part of creating your future rather than just preparing for it. You become a proactive, creative decision-maker.

Positive Uncertainty does not prescribe decision-making rules but offers a point of view, a personal framework for individuals, teams, managers and coaches to use as a guide for making creative decisions about the future.

There are three kinds of futures:

- Possible futures – what could happen
- Probable futures – what is likely to happen
- Preferable futures – what you want to happen

Although it is wise to “know” as many of these futures as you can, most decision-makers focus on the probable and the preferable – which blocks out many possible futures and reduces opportunity for creativity. Positive Uncertainty increases possibilities and creativity in decision-making. As Max Lerner advised, “Don't be a pessimist or an optimist; be a possibilist.”

The Four Paradoxical Principles

The basic decision-making framework of Positive Uncertainty is built

around four paradoxical decision principles about what you want, what you know, what you believe and what you do. The fact that they are ambiguous and paradoxical makes it clear that they are not rigid rules, but are more like personal rules of thumb.

Principle #1: Be focused and flexible about what you want

The conventional wisdom of rational decision strategy is to identify a clear, precise goal and concentrate on it. This strategy is not obsolete; it is incomplete. Although it sounds paradoxical and probably difficult, Positive Uncertainty recommends being focused on your goal and flexible at the same time.

The reason for this principle is that what you want now may not be what you want later. Many people have climbed up the career ladder of success only to find out it is leaning against the wrong wall. The best way to avoid achieving the wrong goal is to be uncertain of what you want. But this doesn't mean not having a goal.

We see many clients who struggle with career decision-making because they are either too focused – will only pursue one job, one industry – or are too flexible – have a laundry list of goals they say they are interested in pursuing. Both of these situations are limiting.

A technique of Positive Uncertainty that stimulates both focused and flexible thinking is to imagine achieving and not achieving the current goal, and then to imagine other possible, maybe even “unrealistic” goals. Positive Uncertainty encourages you to establish your focus and then define the elements of your career direction in which you are open to making tradeoffs and potentially discovering new opportunities.

Advantages of being focused and flexible about what you want include:

- You don't miss life's journey while focusing on the destination.
- You find the courage to challenge your convictions.
- You learn to discover goals as well as achieve them.
- You prevent yourself from pretending to know for sure.
- You use goals to guide you not govern you.

Principle #2: Be aware and wary about what you know

The first thing people do when faced with a decision is to get more information and put the facts in order. Facts are food for thought but they are not the whole meal. This focus on information and facts comes from people's need to know – what we call “info-mania,” the idolizing of information. But we now know that more information can cause more uncertainty. This increases the need for a Positive Uncertainty approach.

The reason for this principle is that what you know may need to become unknown. You both appraise what is known and appreciate what is

unknown. When making decisions, what you don't know is as important as what you do know.

This is an especially important principle when interviewing for a new job. Job seekers cannot know everything there is to know about a company and its people before deciding to accept an offer. At some point, they need to make an intuitive choice.

The Positive Uncertainty technique that helps job seekers to be aware and wary of what they know is to become comfortable in not knowing everything. What they can know more about is what they want from the job. Then they can ask lots of clarifying and confirming questions during the interview process to see how much of a match there may be with what they want. At some point they need to stop asking questions and make a decision, based on intuition as well as information.

Advantages of being aware and wary about what you know include:

- You protect yourself from "info-mania."
- You learn to be comfortable not knowing.
- You expand your thinking about other possibilities.
- You become aware of "the hidden part of the iceberg" – the unknown.
- You realize that knowing can be the opposite of learning.

Principle #3: Be realistic and optimistic about what you believe

In decision-making nothing may be more important than what you believe. However, beliefs are seldom important in traditional decision strategies. Beliefs complicate rational, intellectual, scientific strategies. To be realistic means to accept beliefs as real. To be optimistic means that positive beliefs about yourself and your future can lead to more proactive and creative behavior.

The reason for this principle is that "believing is seeing is doing." Your beliefs determine both your reality and your behavior. To believe something is to accept it as real. Therefore, to believe something else is to accept something else as real. Herein lies the dilemma. Your reality may not be the same if you have different beliefs.

An example of how beliefs get in the way of optimum performance is when a manager believes that the team is not strong enough to take on new responsibilities. We saw this in a manager who wouldn't delegate because she did not want mistakes to be made. As a result, the manager became overworked and stressed. The team was limited in their growth and development. And the results of the department were less than what they could have been.

The Positive Uncertainty technique that helped the manager become realistic and optimistic was to look at the beliefs behind her not wanting to make mistakes. Once she realized that it's realistic to make mistakes

and that her pessimism interfered with hers and her team's functioning, she accepted that the problems started inside of her. She worked to shift her beliefs from fear to trust. This change allowed her to take the risk to delegate and develop her team. The result was that everyone's results and attitude improved. Questioning your beliefs requires openness to feedback. Taking action to change your beliefs takes patience, persistence and courage but the payoffs can be huge.

Advantages of being realistic and optimistic about what you believe include:

- You discover that beliefs are a great decision factor, and in your control.
- You learn to overcome "perception paralysis" – the inability to shift your view.
- You see how changing your view changes you.
- You replace dogmatic believing with heuristic believing.
- You move from dreaming vaguely to dreaming precisely.

Principle #4: Be practical and magical about what you do

The practical and magical principle is about what you do to decide what to do. It is about methods, rules, or procedures you use to make decisions. Rules for deciding are found in every bookstore and in many business and self-development workshops. People love rules that tell them what to do – and they hate them. It's another paradox. We want to be captain of our ship but we also want a pilot's manual. Being practical and magical is like having a pilot's manual *and* being captain of your ship.

The reason for this principle is that you need to use both your head and your heart when deciding. Be business-like and be child-like. Traditional decision strategies are all business-like or adult-like. Although most people preach the practical, rational strategy when deciding, they often practice something else. The something else we are recommending is Positive Uncertainty.

An example of using both your head and heart in decision making comes from a client faced with deciding whether or not to accept a promotion that required relocation. On the surface, the decision was clear – this job was likely to have a positive impact on both his short-term and long-term career. This was his head talking.

However, the Positive Uncertainty technique of the Outcomes Window, a four-quadrant matrix of positive and negative consequences for self *and* others, helped our client expand his thinking about the impact of the decision on his career, wife, children and parents. His decision-making was about his career *and* it was also about all the relationships in his life. Now his heart was talking too. This decision-making technique helped our client take responsibility for making a holistic rather than one-dimensional

decision. It is a technique we use with clients to help them incorporate their head, heart and holistic thinking in their decision-making.

Advantages of being practical and magical about what you do include:

- You become aware of your decision strategies.
- You treat intuition as intelligence.
- You learn to make and break your own decision rules.
- You gain a “both and more” holistic perspective (instead of either-or).
- You learn to plan and plan to learn.

Summary and Conclusions

Today’s world keeps changing right before our eyes. We need to keep changing our decision-making strategies right behind our eyes. Making creative decisions using Positive Uncertainty is a versatile framework for keeping your personal decision-making in alignment with the changing outside world.

Decision-making is using what you know and believe in order to choose what to do to get what you want. Enhance the creativity in your decision-making by following the four paradoxical principles of Positive Uncertainty: 1) Be focused and flexible about what you want; 2) Be aware and wary about what you know; 3) Be realistic and optimistic about what you believe; 4) Be practical and magical about what you do.

We cannot predict the future and it seems likely that it will continue to be unpredictable. Uncertainty will be with us. No one has been to the future you are traveling to. There are no road maps. You don’t have a choice between the road more traveled or less traveled. You must take the road never traveled. The best advice for making decisions when you don’t know what the future will be is to decide with Positive Uncertainty.

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