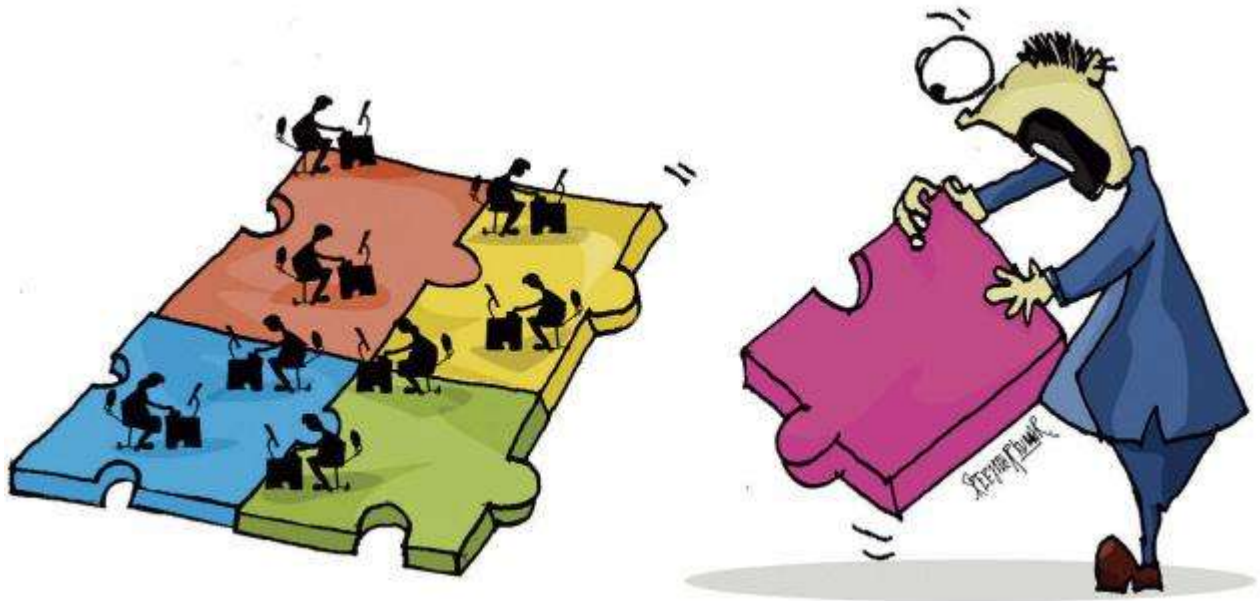


The importance of being uncertain

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As an organisation consultant, largely working in the people space, for over 16 years, I am often invited, with the brief that there is no team work; alignment is lacking; ownership is not being demonstrated; there is poor accountability; reliability is inconsistent; and the list goes on.

If the sub-text of these postulates are examined, it is clear that the overarching anxiety is 'lack of sureness or certainty'; this, indeed, is what cripples organisations, particularly leaders who want to be assured that all will be well.

Yet, the relative truth is that we live in a world that is largely unstructured, unpredictable, whimsical and quixotic. Given this belief and assumption, leaders may help themselves and those they oversee and guide by factoring in the ability to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity. By building into their armoury resilience and tolerance for ambiguity, they will become less restless.

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

Another conundrum that confronts leadership and, therefore, impacts the organisation, is the difficulty faced by leaders in grasping the polarities in organisations. Functional and dysfunctional live together and are two ends of a

continuum that exists in an organisation. Sometimes there is harmony, bonding and togetherness and sometimes there is complete lack of cohesion. Recognising that togetherness and separation co-exist and that this is the reality of all existence helps leadership cope with uncertainty better. If leadership is willing to allow polarities to exist without the overwhelming need for resolution, they will feel less stressed or paralysed. Believing that they control the destiny of the organisation and, therefore, lulling themselves into the belief that they can determine outcomes, robs leaders of the truth that many variables and forces come together to fashion outcomes.

Organisations are like a poem! While the language employed by everyone within the organisation may be similar, the meaning differs from individual to individual.

While leaders profess to celebrate diversity, in reality, they only want clones. This makes their actions, responses and thinking predictable. Their bandwidth of patience is often small and, thus, haste becomes predominant. This, again, results in sub-optimal choices. While urgency is important, it is inadvisable to be hasty.

ALL FOR ONE

It is an interesting, yet unexamined, fact that the army, as an organisation, has lasted unaltered for centuries. If we delve into what has kept armies across the globe effective and functional in spite of the vagaries of monarchs and leaders, it is the singular ability to tolerate and live with the uncertain. This is not saying it all. What really has helped them function and deliver time and again is a uniformly shared 'belief system, values and intent'. Every soldier knows that protection of his country is paramount; every soldier knows that his country's sovereignty must not be compromised and every soldier knows that he has to act in the best interest of his country. Thus, a soldier's brief is simply 'take it in your stride'. Factors, such as when he will be ambushed and from where, are unknown to him. The only thing he can do is be prepared.

In many ways, thus, organisations need leaders to learn to live with uncertainty, celebrate it and embrace it and, thereby, encourage them to keep their temper on ice.

(The writer is an organisational and behavioural consultant.)

(This article was published in the Business Line print edition dated October 18, 2013)

Keywords: [Organisation](#), [people](#), [leaders](#), [cope](#), [uncertainty](#), [ambiguity](#), [leadership](#)