

MANAGING THE THREAT OF UNCERTAINTY

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(This post is a summary from our 60-minute webinar, [The Science of Threat and the Brain](#). Please click [here](#) to watch the full-length webinar for more detailed information, including a Q+A on this topic)

Uncertainty is a common word these days. It's typically used alongside other favourites such as unprecedented, challenging, and difficult to describe the situation we find ourselves in. And while these descriptors may be accurate, they are problematic because they bring about certain emotions and reactions that hinder us from operating at our best. To better understand this and how it applies to leaders and employees, we can turn to neuroscience.

Put simply, uncertainty causes feelings of stress and anxiety that put our brain into threat mode. Our brain is designed to protect us from pain and does so by alerting us to threats in our environment and causing certain reactions. When we see a threat, but it doesn't directly impact us, our response can help us by creating a sense of curiosity and attention. However, this becomes an issue when we are facing a persistent and direct threat to ourselves, as our brain reacts by withdrawing, causing impaired cognitive function and physical symptoms. As humans, our brains are wired to seek control and want to know what is going to happen next. So, when faced with a direct threat (in this case, a constant state of uncertainty caused by the pandemic) our minds, and ultimately, our performance suffers. However, the good news is that by applying our knowledge of neuroscience, leaders can manage their threat response and support their teams through these difficult times.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND MANAGE PERSONAL THREAT RESPONSE

To determine your threat response, look for physical symptoms such as sweating, panic attacks and trouble breathing, as well as cognitive signs including confusion, memory loss and procrastination. Once you recognize you are in a state of threat, the first step to managing this response is reflecting on and trying to understand how this experience has affected you. Look for changes or patterns in your emotions and identify what they are. Once you define them, you can move forward with ways to adapt. Here are a few tips to help:

Get organized: Take time to make a plan. This helps provide a sense of control.

Keep a journal: Write down your thoughts on paper so that you can refer to it later.

Use humour: Humour is a powerful tool that can help deflate your fears and bring some much-needed levity to the situation.

Remain optimistic: This goes beyond being positive. Being optimistic means that you recognize the current reality and acknowledge that it is difficult, but you put yourself in the mindset that it is temporary, and things will get better.

Know your triggers: Reflect inward and identify what stimuli make you feel distressed. Once you know what they are you can avoid them or better prepare yourself to handle them.

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR TEAM

Employees aren't likely to be transparent about their fears. Often, their impression is that fear is a weakness that needs to be hidden from leadership. As a leader, you should examine how each person on your team is reacting to the situation and recognize that the level of support will vary depending on the individual. This is a critical time for people, and they need to be treated with kindness. Here are a few tips to help:

Be prepared: Put on your life vest first. Take the time to prepare and get yourself organized before striving to support your team.

Assess the situation: Analyze the situation you are facing, and the different level of threats being experienced by your team members.

Manage expectations: Don't rush to get back to extreme productivity. Keep a slow and steady pace of activity.

Motivate and engage: Good leaders need to rally the troops and provide focus. Connect day-to-day activities to the overall vision of the organization, remain consistent in your actions and maintain high levels of two-way communication.

*As with most things,
there is a **silver** lining.*

During this state of uncertainty, we are building resilience and increasing our capacity to handle change. Humans build confidence and self-esteem by solving problems and experiencing new things. As leaders, we have the opportunity to build resilience with this unusual situation. Let's be effective leaders and lead by example, influence others, and grow our own capacity to care and connect with each other.