

Rules for playing this game of uncertainty **(<https://www.forbesindia.com/article/iim-bangalore/rules-for-playing-this-game-of-uncertainty/58939/1>)**

By Professor Sourav Mukherji | Apr 22, 2020

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As we remain locked inside our houses, tracking the number of corona virus related infections and deaths around us and across the world, doing official meetings and socialization with friends over video, several questions are possibly lurking constantly in our minds – how is this going to pan out, what will happen next and how should one respond to the situation? Uncertainty is bad for all of us because we are used to a world that is largely predictable. Unknowns are relatively known, and changes follow some kind of pattern. Even if something happens that seems new, we search for similar events and experiences that have happened in the past and plan accordingly. We seek out experts to get their advice. We look up to our leaders to give us direction, explain to us things that are unclear. But this time, things are different. This is an unknown-unknown and the so-called super-forecasters and visionaries are struggling to make sense of the world. Management experts who were advising people about how to deal with the VUCA (an acronym for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world have suddenly realized what VUCA really means. Smart analysts who build models using sophisticated technology have understood that their models are limited by the lack of relevant data that can be fed as inputs. In sum, nobody knows what is going to happen in the short term and nobody knows how long this short-term would last! So, what should you and I, the ordinary folks who look for directions and advise, do in these times, apart from avoiding anyone who tries to forecast how things are going to happen?

RSS Given that I have no expertise either in epidemiology, medicine or public health (these are the only people who you should listen to now, but they are too busy doing important work, rather than advising others!). I try to apply an analogy with which I am familiar. Assume this is a team game where we are facing a very powerful team as the opponent. Unfortunately, we do not know much about the opponent team – how they play, what they are good at, who their star players are and how much they can improvise during the game. They however know about many of our weaknesses such as the fact

that not all of us have the immunity to win against them if they can single us out. To make matters worse, the match organizers have told us that the rules of the game are very fuzzy and so are the conditions of the field and weather. The game can drag on for a long time, the rules of the game might change as the game progresses and the rules need not be fair to both the teams. Do we have anything going in favor of us? Certainly, so do not despair. We have played similar games in the past and we have eventually won against similar opponents. While we have a great team, our players take some time to understand the opponent. As a result, we get beaten badly during the start of the game. But if we can endure the beating, we eventually beat the opponent. Think of all other viruses that we have overcome, or we have learnt to deal with and sometimes even eradicate – Ebola, SARS, H1NI and AIDS. However, for each of them, we took a beating, sometimes a lot more than others. In each of them the nature of opponent was different and the time it took for us to understand them and to come to terms with them were different. Naturally, our losses in terms of human life also varied. So, what will our plan for the game this time around be?

First, when we cannot plan, we look within. We are intelligent, we have skills and competencies to play the game, we have practiced hard and therefore we can tolerate fatigue and pain. And we also know how to improvise. Instead of worrying about the fact that we do not know about the opponent or the rules of the game, we derive confidence from the fact that we have in our possession all that is needed to win. "All it takes is all you have" – we really will have to dig deep and give it our best, and our biggest source of strength is our history of winning, our mental toughness, our grit, our resilience. Therefore, come what may, we must stay confident. In a high-stake game, there is very little difference between the loser and the winner in terms of competence or strategy. It usually boils down to who was able to stay positive longer, who was not ready to give up, who was ready to accept the fact that things will improve and was able to derive the last ounce of energy from their muscles to keep fighting. We must keep on asking ourselves are we giving our best in these moments of crisis, to deal with the challenge in our own way, or are we giving up and allowing the opponent to dictate the course of the match? We will lose the match the moment we start taking pity on ourselves. We have no reason to.

Second, when you cannot plan, stay on the moment. Focus on the present rather than looking too far into the future. As the game organizers warned you, there is no fixed time for the game. It can last 90 days or go on for the next few years. We know we can only last physically that much time if we deal with the present smartly and not despair. Follow the process that makes the most of the present situation. Despite the uncertainty, this is not a game of chance. Can I run a little bit harder or am I getting too burdened by my thoughts about the future? Have I taken the electrolyte on time and am I adjusting my water consumption to the weather? Do I need to adjust the length of my studs because the ground has become slushy after a sudden downpour? Since I do not know about the duration, I will not worry about it now. We will cross the bridge when we need to. Now I do not even know whether the first quarter is over. Staying on the moment also means going after small wins and keeping the chin up. We cheer each other when we win possession of the ball or when we make a smart move even if the scoreboard looks ominously against us. We feel inspired when a teammate gets up despite a bad tackle, smiles despite the bruise and blood. It once again takes us back to following the process – run hard, anticipate, take possession and win the small battles as often as possible. Grind your teeth and suck up the pain. You do not know when the war ends, so better to focus on winning the battles.

Third, in such moments of uncertainty, do not depend too much on expertise and specialists. It is time for constant improvisation, which means your defenders might start moving forward and your strikers will probably need to defend. They might change the rules of the game in between and tell you that even the goalkeeper cannot use his hands. In that case, you will probably have to use a striker to manage the goal post and move your goalkeeper upfront. What this means is to be as flexible as a

generalist, possibly being the much-maligned jack-of-all trades most of the time without forgetting what you are good at. But we cannot afford to remain emotionally attached to our favorite domain of expertise, our comfort zones. It also means having a high degree of trust on your teammates so that they can assume totally different roles if they suddenly discover that they are good at that. Revisit the biases and assumptions that you have about your teammates. Biases and assumptions are shortcuts that we use to make decisions. Even in normal times they mislead us. Now they can be lost opportunities for survival. You will have to give almost everyone a chance to express their ideas about what to do, how to deal with the unknown-unknown. This is the ultimate stage of creativity, bordering on the state of chaos – anyone can perform any role so long it advances the cause of the team, so long it wears down the opponent and help us win the game. Yet, the entire team needs to be on the watch that such generalizations do not descend into chaos. It is not that anything goes. But it is about the openness to allow anybody to assume a role that might help the situation. We have talked about distributed leadership, but we rarely practice it. We still prefer to have a coach and a captain to lead us off and on the field. But now is the time to give distributed leadership a chance. Are we listening to all the voices, even the feeble ones and collectively deciding the way forward? Or am I still unable to acknowledge my vulnerabilities and continue to believe that I am the one to design the solution, devise the plan and others need to follow?

Finally, as we play the game, we need to be constantly in a learning mode. Learning is a recurring cycle of insights, interpretation and integration (with existing knowledge) which needs a reflective mindset. When we are in the middle of a crisis, there is little time for reflection. Therefore, we will have to make greater efforts. All great sportspeople develop this ability to learn and improvise even as they play. As we receive more and more information about the opponent, the game, the pitch and the weather, we need to process it and constantly enrich our understanding about what is happening around us. Ability to learn is human beings' greatest strength, it is what has enabled us to progress much faster than most other life forms on earth. Animals learn too, but that is passed from one generation to another through evolution. Therefore, for most life forms including human beings, evolutionary learning or mutation is a slow process. But because viruses have very low lifespan, they can evolve a lot faster resulting in quicker mutation. That is the nature of our opponent in this game. We can only beat it by our ability to learn.

Is this a new normal? Unlikely. Are we going to win? Highly likely and we are already achieving our small wins. Is the worst behind us? Unlikely. So, hope for the best but prepare for the worst. How? By being positive, giving our best and learning every day. This is no doubt a test – probably the toughest that we will face in our individual lives. And it is perfectly normal to lose it sometimes, feel despair. But it also allows us to know ourselves better. I am nervous, unsure and tentative; but I will still bet that we will emerge stronger out of this. The paradox of such epidemics is it strengthens the population at the cost of individuals. It kills the one with low immunity and leaves the rest of us immune and resilient. We need to be sympathetic to those who are suffering and all those who are no longer with us. Almost all of us will survive to see better days. But we need to keep on playing the game, harder, so that when the final whistle blows, we are the winners. And that will be our biggest tribute to all those who have suffered and those who left us while battling this powerful opponent.

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