

The productive power of doubt. What if we lack the leaders we need because of how we think about doubt?

*People tend not to like leaders who are unsure and who take time to make decisions. A key part of Dominic Cummings's role as advisor to the British prime minister was 'overcoming Boris Johnson's floundering procrastination' and forcing him to make a decision. **Nicola Reindorp**, the incoming chief executive of Crisis Action, held herself back from CEO roles fearing her own doubtfulness. Then she decided to investigate the issue and discovered another side to doubt that is productive and powerful, not the destructive doubt of paralysis and pain, but a productive form of questioning and discovery.*

I don't know. I'm not sure. I have doubt. When did you last hear someone in a position of authority utter these words? How did you react?

Research suggests your response was probably negative. For instance, [a Pew 2015 study](#) showed decisiveness was the characteristic Americans most valued in leaders. This holds up internationally too.

And the converse – when people are indecisive, not sure what to do, in doubt? There's a litany of stories of the negative impact of those that dither. In [her autobiography](#), former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard cites her predecessor's prevarication as a prime factor in her decision to contest his leadership of the Labor party and the country. Vogue editor Anna Wintour (cited [here](#)) credits the vacillation of a former boss spurring her signature decisive style (as seen [here](#)). Amid the fallout surrounding the departure of British prime ministerial advisors Dominic Cummings and Lee Cain was the insight into their roles 'overcoming Johnson's floundering procrastination' and forcing their boss to make a decision.

As human beings, we seek certainty. Our brains process millions of pieces of information every second to create order out of our universe. As children, we look for guidance from our parents. As communities and corporations, we seek direction and clarity. No general took his – or her – troops 'over the top' and into battle whilst proclaiming uncertainty about the plan of attack.

That was my personal experience. I held myself back from CEO roles fearing that my doubtfulness – about my competence and my decision-making – disqualified me.

That's the premise I set out to explore. I've been interviewing leaders from different sectors, generations, ethnicities, nationalities and sexualities about their views and experiences of doubt. I've also talked to psychologists, neuroscientists, behavioural economists, teachers of leadership, coaches and counsellors about doubt, certainty and leadership, what we're learning at this moment in history, including what the COVID pandemic may be teaching us.

What's emerged has proved intriguing. It suggests there's work to do to rebrand doubt as part of a collective effort to rethink who and how we hire, promote, and elect to get the leaders and solutions the world needs.

Doubt is experienced as a destructive thing – the cause of emotional pain and stress, the cause of breakdowns, sleeplessness, freezing on stage in front of hundreds. Those I've interviewed give their doubts names of dark places and demonic creatures.

But this is only part of the story. There is another side to doubt that is productive and powerful. This is not the destructive doubt of paralysis and pain but a productive form of questioning and discovery.

This is the doubt that lies at the heart of self-awareness and humility; that asks, ‘How do others experience me or how can I better serve a cause? Doubt spurs curiosity and learning. What is it that I need to know? What is it that I can learn to do? Doubt generates an openness to feedback. Perhaps others can advise me how to improve? Doubt prompts us to interrogate our biases. How is my judgement clouded by stereotypes? Doubt is questioning whether the status quo is good enough that becomes a thirst for innovation or a push for major social change. Is this the best we can do or be? Doubt is a driver for greater inclusion and diversity within teams. How do others see this challenge? What perspectives do I lack?

These are all forms of **productive** doubt, each one connected to better outcomes for our teams, companies, countries, and planet. An absence of doubt leads to missed innovations. Author [Simon Sinek has highlighted](#) the plight of ‘finite’ industries that were obsessed pursuing what they know, not asking what they don’t.

A bedrock of scientific research now shows that an [absence of doubt leads to flawed decision-making](#).

Whether in business or academia, what psychologists call ‘over-signalling confidence’ – stating that you’re surer about something that your knowledge base or competence supports – inhibits the drive for knowledge. See [Daniel Kahneman](#), for example. What’s more, we are starting to learn more about the perils of overconfidence and what happens when we mistake charisma and confidence for competence – with grim results. See, for example, the work of [Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic](#).

I’ve concluded that those that see doubt as superpower share a set of five characteristics or mindsets. These include the recognition that doubt can be powerful, a bias to action in the face of uncertainty, a base level of self-esteem, a grip on what they can change and can’t, and a clear sense of purpose. They are also adept at utilising a set of tools to harness doubt in powerful ways. The Saïd Business School offer [a tool for using doubt in decision-making](#) that also serves for mapping what tools to use when. I like to think of this as a recipe for handling doubt.

Intriguingly, those I’ve talked to who share a sense of the productive power of doubt differ on whether or not to talk openly about their doubt. For some, it can destabilise the team. For others, it can also inspire.

But our leadership myths and narratives are yet to catch up. The result: too many of the doubtful don’t step up to lead, get hired, promoted or elected. Leadership remains disproportionately in the hands of those that fit our leadership norms – of certain men – even as the evidence builds that this is not solely – or even – where leadership talent lies.

What to do? This suggests a collective effort is required to change the narrative. Doubt is not a disqualification for great leadership but core to it. We can share the tools we use to handle doubt productively – and banish destructive doubt. We can hire and promote those that are well-calibrated, testing to establish who is skilled at knowing what they know or don’t. And maybe this will help us change who’s leading and how, to generate better outcomes for teams, companies and our planet at a time when it’s never seemed more urgent.



Notes:

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