



## PERSONAL TESTIMONIES TO A VITAL PARADOX

# Uncertainty, a Manager's Natural Habitat

By SANTIAGO ÁLVAREZ DE MON

“Mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. Such a tension is inherent in the human being and therefore is indispensable to mental well-being. What man needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him. Boredom causes more problems today than tension and certainly brings more patients to the psychiatrist's office.” – Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

From cradle to grave, human life is filled with uncertainty. We live looking forward, and the future – which some would like to tie down and know in advance, hence their anxiety – raises more doubts and unknowns than it does certainties. Certainties are found only in the past. The game of life cannot be won by changing the rules, only by understanding them and playing within the framework they provide. Uncertainty, like change, complexity and diversity, is a law that frames and characterizes our life's journey. Exposed to the absence of certainty, to endless perplexity and variability, we resist in every way we can.

Nelson Mandela's sincere testimony in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* is highly instructive in this respect: “I had grown used to Robben Island [prison]. I had lived there for decades

and, while it was never a home, it had become a place where I felt comfortable. I have always found change difficult, and leaving Robben Island, however grim it had been at times, was no exception. I had no idea what to look forward to.” For the great architect of the new South Africa, this uncertain, newfound freedom was a burden. He “missed” the security of prison (he had been there for 27 years!), where there were no shocks or surprises. It was his comfort zone.

In a heterogeneous, fast-moving, constantly changing world, paradox – understood as the ability to hold apparently contradictory ideas in tension – is crucial. The balance and serenity of a seasoned, mature individual lies partly in acknowledging and embracing the imbalance and agitation that accompanies human development. Einstein had a graphic and revealing metaphor for it: “Life



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is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving." If we try to keep still and cling to our own private status quo, the chances of falling off or having an accident are greatly increased. Paradoxically, change – staying on the move – is a surer guarantee of stability. Once we understand and accept this – with an open mind, a humble heart and a robust sense of humor, this latter a hallmark of the wise – life's adventure enters its most interesting stage.

A methodological aside: I intend to discuss the uncertainty that all managers encounter. I propose to explore the secrets of a genuine, productive life through the perspective of a fruitful career, using two sources of information: the research embodied in various cases and field studies; and, as a close and direct complement, my own experience of coaching a variety of professionals from the worlds of sport, the arts and management.

Many people, born into a stable family environment in the geopolitical and social context of the developed world, spend their early years in an atmosphere of security and comfort. Others must do battle with uncertainty from the very start. Muhammad Yunus, founder and chairman of Grameen Bank and 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner, belongs in the latter category. This is how he describes his childhood years in Bangladesh, full of happiness and uncertainty: "My mother gave birth to 14 children. Five of them died in infancy. Unfortunately, for 33 years my mother suffered from a serious illness and no doctor could give an accurate diagnosis. Throughout this terrible time my father adapted to the situation and, amidst the chaos, managed to maintain an atmosphere of normality in the family." This early acquaintance with uncertainty helped Yunus grapple with other uncertainties later in his life. "At that time I had no idea what would come of it. Creating a bank was not what I had in mind. At that point, I did not know what to expect."

Others, imprisoned in a huge jail called communism, were confronted with an artificial, violently imposed uncertainty in their youth, caused

by a totalitarian mentality. Marko Ivan Rupnik is a Slovenian artist (among other major works, he created the mosaics in the *Redemptoris Mater* Chapel in the Vatican), philosopher, theologian, Jesuit and writer. I once asked him about how he managed the conflict between the warm, brotherly, trusting atmosphere of his family and the dogmatic, hostile, constricted atmosphere of his school. He said, "For me, my family was what mattered in life. It was precious to me. It meant friendship, loving care, devotion. That was real; the rest was a fiction, where you had to learn to dissimulate in order to survive. It was a dangerous game, but you had to play it. I was responsible for what I did and for what I said; I tried to keep a balance." Here we see the calm, clarity and tranquility of the family, as opposed to the mendacity and narrow-mindedness of a claustrophobic education. In coping with this contradiction, Rupnik graduated *cum laude* from the school of uncertainty.

From the perspective of a mature professional – Valero Rivera, coach of the F.C. Barcelona handball team – uncertainty is part of the job. "Being a player is simple in comparison. As coach, you spend all your time thinking about what you need to do and how to prepare the game. The players need to be given everything on a plate." Rivera feels responsible for the training plan, the players' diet, discipline, signings, studying and monitoring other teams, planning pre-season activities, managing his team of helpers, planning game strategy, changing tactics as events unfold, coping with the inevitable surprises and setbacks in any sporting event (injuries, referee decisions) and so on. Despite exhaustive and meticulous preparation, so many things are beyond the coach's control that his profession is wedded to uncertainty.

In a different field, the experience of an orchestra conductor leads to similar conclusions. Contrary to the notion of the conductor as being in control of the orchestra, Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, acknowledges his vulnerability and dependency on the musicians, in his book *The Art of Possibility*: "The conductor of an orchestra does not make a sound. It is the specialists – cellists, pianists, violinists, bassists – who make the melody. The conductor depends dramatically on them."

Paradoxically, knowing one's own vulnerability is an unmistakable sign of courage and intelligence. Leading an orchestra, by definition, forces the conductor to accept a universe of unforeseen

### ■ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### Using case studies and his own experience

of coaching a variety of professionals from the worlds of sport, the arts and management, IESE Prof. Santiago Álvarez de Mon explores the keys to embracing uncertainty, helping managers to lead a richer, more productive existence.



## Uncertainty is all around us. We live in a heterogeneous, multicolored, controversial and challenging universe. What will we do?

events and chance occurrences that can only be managed if they are duly acknowledged.

Another conductor, Inma Shara, one of the youngest in her profession, confirms how fragile her leadership is. "Every musician is an artist in his own right. The violinist knows more about the violin than I do, the trombonist knows more about his technique than I do. I depend on them, I feel vulnerable. It's a matter of establishing what I call 'moral leadership' – credibility, communication, trust, commitment. Above all, I need to be patient and tolerant."

Jumping from sport and music to scientific research, I asked Dr. Valentín Fuster, cardiologist and director of Mount Sinai Heart in New York City, what he thought made a good researcher. He replied, "First, you must be willing to take risks. A researcher deals with working hypotheses, which may or may not be true. In other words, you have a hypothesis, you play with it and you take the leap. Later, you find out whether it is correct or not. This is very different from simply describing things, where there is no risk involved. The magic and appeal of research lies in the element of risk. You may be wrong, and often you are." A realistic, down-to-earth professional reports an experience of enigma and risk.

### The Essence of Management

Despite the obvious differences of these personal experiences, you as a manager or team leader know that, regardless of the peculiar nature of your mission, you are likewise required to balance contradictions; to plan for things beyond your control; to depend on the motivation, effort, talent and energy of the men and women under your charge. Take a moment to reflect on your profession and scan the horizon of modern management. What do you see? Among other things:

- A new work ethic, in which discipline, duty, sacrifice and commitment are in retreat, while immediacy, play, quality of life and independent, autonomous purpose have come to the fore.
- The opportune and timely entry of women into the labor force. Diversity is much more than a mere representation or quota.

- Unstoppable immigration. Cultural integration remains little more than an aspiration.
- An aging population. Yet professionals with a wealth of accumulated knowledge and experience are seen as a problem.
- The spread and growth of the Internet. Is it a learning community or a rendezvous for loners?
- The blurring of the boundaries between leisure and business; more freedom, leading to more responsibility and fewer excuses.
- The rise of two hardy and assertive *isms* – nationalism and individualism – and the persistence of a worrying third – fundamentalism.
- The tyranny of the consumer king, seduced by advertising adept at manipulating passions.
- The impatience and greed of Their Majesties the Shareholders and the shortsighted dictatorship of the financial markets.
- The always difficult battle for scarce talent.
- The stubborn reality of an ailing, starving planet. Poverty is still with us; it is not yet an exhibit in the museum of history.
- The debate – honest or partisan, scientific or political – about sustainability, energy sources and the environment.

This rough sociological sketch leads to an indisputable conclusion: uncertainty is all around us. We live in a heterogeneous, multicolored, controversial, challenging universe. What will we do?

### Moral Authority

Everybody with managerial responsibilities realizes what a precarious position they are in so long as their power is no more than a formal mechanism for making decisions. Knowing this, every manager longs for intellectual, emotional and moral leadership, grounded in personal credibility.

In *The Secret Language of Leadership*, Stephen Denning describes the difficulties encountered by Howell Raines, the newly appointed executive editor of *The New York Times*, who took up his post in September 2001 with the full backing of his new boss, the publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr. Less than two years later, he was dismissed. Why? Denning suggests it was because Raines was a "hierarchical leader," and "ordering, assigning office