

**Book extract
for educational purposes only**

www.notknowingbook.com

NOT KNOWING

THE ART OF TURNING
UNCERTAINTY
INTO OPPORTUNITY

Steven D'Souza | Diana Renner



LONDON
MADRID
MEXICO CITY

NEW YORK
BARCELONA
MONTERREY

SHANGHAI
BOGOTA
BUENOS AIRES

“beware
the shadow that
our knowledge
casts.”

Process-Oriented Psychologist & Consultant Julie Diamond

1.

THE LEADER WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

Anna Simioni, the former Chief Learning Officer of a European financial institution, didn't care for studying and hated homework in primary school. She was an attentive student and did well, but would often trade homework with her classmates. She did not suffer from the view that she needed to “know”; she was happy with being “good enough.”

At high school Anna started her own philosophical movement with a small group of friends, who called themselves “*Uncertaintists: The people who are not certain.*” Their motto was “*never be absolute,*” because they believed that you could never really know for sure whether you were going or not going to do something that at a certain moment you believe or do not believe. When she went to university Anna was surprised to find that there was little room there for uncertainty. Her professors believed that there was a right and a wrong answer to questions and nothing in between. When she was tested with multiple-choice questions, she always thought that there were at least two possible correct answers, not just one, at least in some cases. Yet, her professors seemed to have no interest in engaging with her thinking. They would say “*this is the right answer; the other is wrong.*”

Everything changed when Anna began a career in consultancy. As she says: “*I think that experience ruined me. I felt I needed to know the right answer for my clients. What drove me to know and increase my expertise was that I was a young woman, attractive and in a predominately male industry. I had a desperate desire to be valued for my competence. I did not want people to say ‘she is here because she is pretty or nice’.*” So with her family background, her university and her own expectations of her role,

Anna became embedded in a “right or wrong” way of thinking and competence became her key focus.

Anna quickly became considered a “top talent” in her organization. When she was 24, after a psychological assessment, an occupational psychologist told her that she had never seen a profile like hers: she had CEO potential. Anna was flattered and this reinforced her attachment to competence – her drive for competence and her increasing expertise had now been rewarded. She was promoted and won many “best performer” awards. However, her colleagues found her to be rigid in her approach and would call her “the protector of the method.” While they were looking for ways to adapt the methodology to suit their clients’ needs, Anna fought to preserve the approach rather than deviating from it.

By her 30s Anna had built a career on her own expertise and felt more self-confident and entitled to do what she wanted. *“At that time I was a difficult friend. My self-confidence and my attachment to my own point of view got in the way of my relationships. I had a very select group of friends and an incredibly close relationship with my core team. They loved my passion and stubbornness, but everybody else outside my core-team suffered. I was too smart, too competent and perceived to be distant.”*

Anna got a wake-up call when she did a 360-degree feedback exercise on her role. Her staff rated her 100% competent, but they reported that they did not enjoy working with her. They felt that they had no room to grow, make mistakes or contribute. They believed that their opinion did not matter, since she was always so competent and was always in control, excelling at everything she did. The impact on Anna’s team was clear – they were not motivated to work for her. *“My team was, in some way, suffering from my ‘know it all approach’.”* When she first read the feedback report, Anna was very upset. *“I had great pride in being competent. In fact, I thought it was one of the best things that a manager could be. I would have loved to have a boss like me*

who was competent and fair!’, I thought. In my view, I was doing the right thing. I was imparting confidence in the staff by telling them that ‘this is the way we need to do things’.”

Anna can now see that her way of relating to her staff caused them to experience anxiety.

“If your manager knows everything and you don’t, it is understandable that you might feel that you will never make it. If you have a manager like that and you feel ‘ah this is difficult’, or ‘this is new and strange in our organization’, then the knowledge of the manager can be disempowering. I wanted to introduce major change because it was needed, but I was hindering the change with my own behaviours.”

Anna’s knowledge and expertise were too distant from the reality of her staff’s experience; she was telling them what they needed to do in a way that made them feel less, rather than more, capable. She has since learned that talking with people when they are anxious distorts the flow of communication. *“When there is something complex and difficult to be dealt with we tend to treat people like children: ‘you know what, don’t bother, I’ll tell you how to do it’. We think this is helpful to them. I was really doing this in good faith, thinking that it was useful.”*

However, all this time Anna was feeling awkward herself. The only way for her to deal with the anxiety of Not Knowing was to take an “I need to tell you” approach. Her assumption was that this would make people feel secure and help them to be more productive. She explains the pressure she felt in her role to know: *“I felt that I was the only one responsible for the results. I wanted to achieve good results; I wanted to do our best. There was a big challenge and the stakes were high. My belief that I was the one carrying the whole thing led me to think that I had to clearly tell my colleagues what to do. I knew what was needed and so it was a matter of ‘follow me’. When this did not yield good outcomes in terms of negative tension, I became disappointed and*

could not understand why my staff were not motivated to operate the way I thought was the best.”

There are situations when we can know “too much” and this hinders progress. The expectation that the person in charge knows “everything,” as in Anna’s case, can have a debilitating impact on the people around us; it can be anxiety-provoking and disempowering. We limit our learning and growth through a tendency to over-rely on our knowledge and expertise. If we also manage staff, this can be to the detriment of the team since knowledge can end up having a perverse effect, a corrupting influence.

The pressures and demands placed on us by our workplaces contribute to the *illusion of knowledge*. They increase the propensity for us to become immune to doubts, contributing to many of us having to master the art of sounding as though we know what we are talking about, even if we have no idea. Surrounded by people who seek our approval and depend on us for our expertise, we fall prey to the illusion that we know what we are doing.

UNKNOWN INCREASES

KNOWLEDGE INCREASES

4. MISHANDLING COMPLEXITY

*“For every complex problem
there is an answer that is clear, simple
and wrong.”*

American journalist HL Mencken

Adaptive leadership faculty at Harvard University Kennedy School of Government Marty Linsky and Ronald Heifetz argue that misdiagnosing the complex (what they call “adaptive”) elements of a challenge as complicated (“technical”) is a key failure in leadership. We are trained to think technically and miss the adaptive. We are tempted to look for a silver bullet; an easy answer that will solve the problem in one go.

We see these “quick fixes” in many aspects of daily organizational life, like the current trend to dramatically restructure when we are not getting the results we want, or removing the person at the top of an organization. Also, under fear and stress of uncertainty, our brain will default to the old way of doing things because we are wired for habits, as neuroscientist Srin Pillay points out.⁴⁷

A good example of this is the rapid replacement of CEOs or leaders within an organization after any sign of failure, often for

things that are not even in their control or sphere of knowledge. In Fortune 500 companies the average tenure of a CEO is only 4.6 years; fragile and transient, this certainly is not long enough to establish long-term organizational or cultural change.

Quick fixes applied to complex problems are temporary solutions that don't engage with the issues deeply enough. They perpetuate the problem or aggravate it, and problems will keep coming round again and again.

Steven: When I was working at an American investment bank in the role of VP, Diversity and Inclusion, I worked as part of a team on one of the bank's main challenges – to increase the number of women in senior management roles. This is a common challenge across many industries. Some companies respond to this by seeing it purely from a technical perspective. They provide communication skills or personal branding training, or change the recruitment process. The underlying issues that point to the adaptive nature of this challenge, such as the wider societal barriers to women rising to senior roles, or identifying the values and hidden assumptions held by different groups on this issue, are often not addressed.

We began treating the issue as a complex adaptive challenge. Technical approaches made in conjunction with more sophisticated strategies, such as partnering with schools to raise awareness of the diversity of roles available, encouraging girls choosing exam subjects towards science, technology, mathematics and engineering, or organizing work placements and providing on-ramping solutions such as coaching for those returning to work from maternity leave. Many of these strategies don't provide an immediate solution but take on a more long-term approach by tackling the systemic issues at play at earlier or critical stages.

In complex contexts the effects of our actions are unpredictable and the consequences cannot be fully understood in advance.

In the 1920s the American government enacted The National Prohibition Act, a nationwide ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages, in an attempt to eradicate the perceived negative effects of alcohol abuse on public life. The intent of the prohibition was to lower the consumption of alcohol and to make it seem unacceptable. While the consumption of alcohol halved during the prohibition, it had the unintended consequences of fuelling the growth of organized crime groups and creating an illegal alcohol industry. The organized crime groups took advantage of the fact that the consumption of alcohol was still popular, and produced unregulated, bootleg supply, which sometimes caused health problems. The growth in the illegal alcohol industry also increased the organized crime groups' business in other areas, leading to corruption and disregard of the law.

While the illegal alcohol industry flourished under the prohibition, the ban drove many small-time alcohol suppliers out of business and decimated the fledgling wine industry. Heavy drinkers and alcoholics found that support groups had withered away, and only found adequate support after the ban was lifted in 1933. Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935. Also, before the prohibition era it was seen as socially unacceptable for women to drink in public, but with the newfound freedom after the prohibition ended, it became more common and bars opened catering for both men and women.

The prohibition is an example of how a law was passed to solve a complex social problem, and how there were many less-than-positive unintended consequences. This concept was popularized by American sociologist Robert K Merton, who argued that small, insignificant changes can have unintended, far-reaching and potentially devastating effects.

Not only do we not expect the unexpected, but we also tend to overestimate the control we will have in much more immediate or everyday actions. According to Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer, we suffer from an "illusion of control."⁴⁸

Langer's research showed that we often think we have personal control in situations where there is none. For example, we may feel more confident that a car accident will not happen to us if we are the driver rather than the passenger. Also, where there is a "cue" of skill involved, we tend to behave as if we have control. For example, the gambler might feel his or her winning a game was influenced by his or her dexterity, where in fact the winning odds were no different, regardless of skill. Langer's research showed that traders who believed that they had more control over the markets actually performed worse.

So what happens when we can no longer rely on what we know, when we are forced to come face to face with the unknown?



1. ARRIVING AT FINISTERRE

Cape Finisterre is often the final destination of *Il Camino*, the famous pilgrimage to the shrine of the apostle St James the Great in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Pilgrims walk a further 90km to reach the Cape, framed by steep cliffs dropping down to the Atlantic, also known in the Middle Ages as “*Mare Tenebrosum*,” or the dark sea. The beautiful, spectacular peninsula is aptly named “*finis terrae*,” Latin for “*the end of the world*.”

Finisterre is the edge of the known – the familiar – and the edge is a mysterious place. It separates our current reality, what we are comfortable with, from what is strange, unexplained, undiscovered and perhaps even undiscoverable. Behind us we have solid ground, the knowledge that got us so far. Ahead of us we have the unknown, the mysterious sea, unpredictable and uncontrollable. The fog is starting to settle and it is hard to see around us; the landscape is no longer familiar and there are no road signs or maps to show us the way.

In Roman times, when the map of the world was still being drawn, blank areas represented the unexplored vastness and contained the words “here be dragons,” to warn explorers of the potential risks and dangers. Greek philosopher Plutarch described this space eloquently in *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* in the first century:

“As geographers ... crowd into the edges of their maps parts of the world which they do not know about, adding notes in the margin to the effect, that beyond this lies nothing but sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea, so, in this work of mine, ... I might very well say of those that are

farther off, beyond this there is nothing but prodigies and fictions, the only inhabitants are the poets and inventors of fables.”

Just like those areas, what lies beyond the edge is waiting to be discovered. For some, this may be a sandy desert, for others muddy bogs or a frozen sea. The metaphor, the mental image that is conjured for each one of us will depend on our own story and experience at the edge. It may be a stark and wild place, an unfamiliar territory evoking strong sensations and reactions, or it may be a place for which we have a certain amount of excitement.

Finisterre is not just a one-time experience. We move through many edges, in a dynamic process that brings us face to face with both our limits and our possibilities. There are many situations that bring us to the edge: a loved one being diagnosed with a terminal illness, falling in love, starting a new job, tackling a complex challenge, or leading an organization into a new market. It could be present in the form of a disruption, a crisis, a sudden change, making a mistake or failing at something important.

In spite of being in this situation many times before, we are never fully prepared for the moment when we arrive. Every edge is a new experience. Outside of our comfort zone, we experience a range of complex and conflicting emotions: from hesitation to avoidance and flight, excitement to terror, fear to boldness, and shame to vulnerability. We often fail to react well to standing at the edge. Our crafty brains play every trick in the book to keep us on dry land. We spend all our time trying to clamber back up the path, and we miss out on the learning that can only happen at Finisterre.

How we react at the edge – whether we choose to stay there or turn our backs and run – will determine whether our relationship with the unknown might be full of dread or full of potential. The edge is the crucial point where the future of our relationship with the unknown hangs in the balance.

Elitsa Dermendzhiskya, a young Bulgarian economist and social entrepreneur, travelled the Camino from France to Spain in the summer of 2012, walking for nearly a month with little more than a backpack.

“What brought me to the path that day in early June was a sin I needed to atone for – the sin of knowledge. As a mathematician and economist by training, I readily subscribed to the notion of a universe that could be measured, predicted and controlled. Not only was it so neatly elegant, that notion, but it also perpetuated the false sense of security that by applying the right theory one could aspire to possess the Truth.

“Trouble was, I had taken the scientific credo to heart so much that I tried to apply it in my personal life, substituting cost-benefit analysis for intuition and crushing pleasure and spontaneity with utility theory. My life turned into a sterile, mechanistic, perfectly planned routine, the naivete of which didn’t quite register until after my college graduation. Over time, my scientific facade was stripped away, and I realized there was no absolute Truth to be found; there was only my personal truth to be lived.

“To make the Camino experience as authentic as possible, I embraced a minimalist travelling style: no guidebook, no fancy GPS mobile apps, no emergency equipment of any sort. Morning frost or blistering sun, in the frequent drizzle and the occasional storm, I’d be plodding along clad in shorts and a T-shirt. Some days I’d trudge on for 50km of barren land, my feet blistered inside my woollen socks.

“Besides the very literal uncertainty of walking the Camino, there was another more personal level to it. People talked of visions and divine revelations, of finding themselves – all claims that would have me wincing before. I still had trouble imagining the skies opening up to speak to me, but the power of intense silence and walking to focus the mind’s eye and to heighten one’s self-awareness hadn’t eluded me. I found myself both curious and scared of

what would transpire. My fear was that deep down I was, in fact, a bad person.

“Halfway on the Camino I arrived in the village of Molinaseca one sweltering hot day in July. At its far end, two small tourist inns stood close by, and as I approached with the dozen or so other pilgrims, it was clear where everybody would set up camp for the night. New and shiny, made from smooth polished wood, the first inn was a far cry from the other – a dingy building whose owner might as well have come out of a horror movie set. Dishevelled hair, wild eyes, one missing leg, the unmistakable smell of spirits about him, the ominous screeching noises his cat made – those could only portend trouble. And yet I was drawn to that second inn on a gut level even though I ‘knew’ the danger.

“My feeling overriding my reason, I stayed – the only guest and scared beyond description but not wavering for a second. The inn keeper, perhaps out of gratefulness, went into his room and fished out a bottle of olive oil, which he handed to me with the words “only for special guests.” Then we sat outside at the flimsy table and he told me his life story – a story of love and a happy marriage, a crippling accident in his mid-twenties, the ensuing treachery of the wife, the heartbreak, the denial, the anger at God and finally, the pilgrimage and the finding of God again. The man’s name was Elisande. I had barely uttered a word the whole time, but when he finished his story, he told me, “You are a good person, Ellie.”

“When people ask me what I found on the Camino, I always feel tempted to say, ‘That I’m a good person’. I never say it, of course. I went out searching for my truth and I think this scary man brought me closer to it.”

2. AVOIDING THE UNKNOWN

“There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching toward him and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange.”

Author Elias Canetti

Diana: “Where should we begin?”, I ask the leadership team of a large not-for-profit. Twenty pairs of eyes stare back at me. The question is not rhetorical. This is often the first question I ask at the start of a leadership development program. It is meant to uncover the expectations that are placed on people like me, in an authority position, in situations high in uncertainty and complexity. Expectations that are normal, but that often get in the way of learning and growth. Although deceptively simple, this question always takes the group right to the edge.

“You are asking us this question? Surely you know the answer, you are running this program.” I say nothing and look around the room. “Start at the beginning,” quips a woman right in front of me. I keep silent, and sit down.

“Start with the end in mind,” says another.

The suggestions are starting to come thick and fast now.

“Where it makes sense.”

“With the agenda. How can we start without knowing what we are

going to be working on over the next few days?”

“Are we clear on the purpose?”

“What about going round the room and hearing from everyone what they think?”

“Does it matter?”

“How will we decide?” asks a man to my right.

I continue to be silent.

I can sense the group starting to get impatient. Some people are shifting in their chairs, others are looking at me, waiting to see what I do.

I do nothing. “What do you want from us?” says a young woman in an exasperated voice.

“I’m more interested in what you want from me,” I answer.

I am not fulfilling the traditional, expected role of the person at the front of the room, and without a task and clear direction, the disequilibrium in the group is quickly increasing.

“I’m feeling frustrated, I don’t know what the goal is.”

“Why don’t you just take us on the journey?”

“There is no leadership here, no direction!” complains someone.

In the absence of a clear structure, the conversation starts feeling circular and confusing.

After a while, silence descends on the group. All eyes are on me, waiting for me to do something. Although I’ve been in this situation before, the silence feels heavy and uncomfortable. I feel tempted to say something, but I hold steady. The void gets filled quickly.

“This won’t work in a large group like this. We’ll never agree to one answer. Let’s break into small groups and brainstorm,” suggests one of the more senior men in the group. There is an almost audible sigh of relief. Finally, something to do. The more structure-oriented people are immediately attracted to this proposal. They are starting to move their chairs, but there are some people in the group who are holding back, waiting for what will happen next. As there is no consensus in the group, nothing happens.

“If we don’t have a framework, we’re lost.”

“I feel like we’re poking around in the dark.”

Someone cracks a joke and the whole group laughs uproariously.

The tension dissipates for a few moments, but is short lived.

“It feels like we’re on the wrong track, but we don’t know what the right track is.”

I sense some people’s frustration now is going to a new level. Some people are leaning back in their chairs, looking absent or lost. A few people start talking amongst themselves, and I notice a couple are checking their phones.

“There’s nothing worse than this happening in a meeting... take the lead!” shouts a man to my left.

Time seems to slow down. I can hear the ticking of the clock on the wall. I don’t think I have much time now. I stand up, take the whiteboard marker, and start debriefing the session.

When we step into a new space, where we are faced with an uncertain and complex task, we inevitably come to the edge of our competence. We can recognize we are at the edge if there are changes in the energy of the situation - embarrassed laughter, fidgeting or boredom; if information is missing or keeps being repeated; or if there is nervousness, feelings of getting lost or not knowing what to do next⁴⁹. When the disequilibrium increases, we naturally fall back on what we know. To avoid the uncomfortable feelings that arise outside of our comfort zone, we resort to tried and tested ways of organizing a group, design an agenda or create some structure. We look to those in decision-making roles to restore the equilibrium and provide us with clarity and safety, or we blame them for not ‘showing leadership’, or we disengage altogether from the current situation, finding other things to occupy us.

What is behind this avoidance of the unknown?