

Leading in Uncertainty

Embracing improvisation, agility and resilience

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**What is one thing you are certain about
in the future?**



The Partnership for Public Service is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that is building a better government and a stronger democracy.

01

FEDERAL TALENT

Government recruits, empowers and retains the nation's best talent.



02

PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERSHIP

Federal leaders are equipped to effectively achieve their agencies' missions and contribute to the public good.



03

SOCIETY'S COMMITMENT TO GOVERNMENT

Society trusts and engages with a well-functioning government.



About Me



National Institutes
of Health



Presentation Objectives

Dispel the illusion of certainty
in leadership so we can
embrace improvisation

Learn ways to shift your
mindset to lead with resilience
during upheaval



**Accept uncertainty
and be ready to
improvise.**



Plans vs. Certainty



Questions to ask yourself when facing the unexpected:

1. How might this 'change' change what you're capable of?
2. How might this 'change' change what you value?
3. How might this 'change' change how you define yourself?
(identity)

Improvise on purpose.



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4 min

Improv Game: Fortunately...

- Breakout Group of 3 or 5 (odd number of people preferred).
- Facilitator will start by sharing a prompt.
 - Example: “I’m having a busy day.”
- Person 1 responds to this with “**Fortunately...**”
 - Example: “Fortunately, I have a colleague I can delegate to.”
- Person 2 responds to that with “**Unfortunately...**”
 - Example: “Unfortunately, my colleague is on vacation this week.”
 - And so it goes, alternating around the circle.



**THERE IS NOTHING
EITHER GOOD OR
BAD BUT THINKING
MAKES IT SO.**



**Shift your mindset so
you can be more
resilient.**



What is Resilience?

- An essential capability to persevere through setbacks
- Seeing problems/flaws/difficulties/mistakes as a natural, normal part of being
- Not the same as optimism or being “tough”
- Can be learned and practiced



KEEP
CALM
AND
BOUNCE
BACK



Ingredients of Resilience

- An acknowledgement and acceptance of reality
- Finding meaning in the process
- An ability to improvise



Adapted from: Diane Coutu, Harvard Business Review



Resilience in Times of Change

- Change is a normal, natural part of living.
- **Feel all your feelings.**
- Embrace flexibility and adaptability as strengths.
- **Translate expectations into preferences.**
- Realize that the uncertainty itself causes stress, and reframe how you think about it.





Meet Uncertainty with Understanding

Leaders should:

- Seek multiple perspectives; listen deeply
- Slow down: Not everything is an emergency
- Help others get comfortable improvising
- Build shared context: Get “on the same page” with others, assess the situation, be empathetic
 - And choose the next right action



Mindset Matters

CHOOSE how to think about “leading in difficult times.”



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Effective Mindset (examples)

- Whatever comes my way, I can handle it.
- I've made it through change before. I can do it again.
- I have all the resources within me to lead change and support my team.
- I just need to take the next right step– I don't have to have it all figured out.
- If I fail, I will learn from it.
- There is no failure, only an opportunity to learn and grow.
- This is exactly the experience I should be having right now.



Small Group Discussion

- Share one mindset that would be helpful to you at this time in your life as you cope with uncertainty.
 - For example, think of kind words or sage advice you want to receive. Then say it to yourself.



Summary: Leading in Uncertainty

You never had certainty; you only had plans.

Make plan(s) from which to deviate.

Improvise on purpose.

Meet uncertainty with understanding.

Your mindset matters.



Commitment to Action

What is something you will do or try because of what you learned today?

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