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Kristine W. Powers
Jessica B.B. Diaz

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When threats loom, managers must go beyond the tried-and-true techniques for supporting employees to address divergent concerns and build trust.

By Kristine W. Powers and Jessica B.B. Diaz

MANAGERS HAVE ALWAYS NEEDED guidance to lead their employees through times of extreme uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global crisis of our generation, but it is not the first of its kind, nor will it be the last. Uncertainty and volatility continue to rock work environments as the pandemic recedes and global economic and political instability loom, compounding employees' feelings of uncertainty. In this changing environment, traditional management and leadership approaches are insufficient.

Extant research on leadership during crises generally focuses on organizationwide strategies germane to C-suite executives, leaving direct managers with little guidance on how best to support employees. To address this gap, we went straight to the source, asking employees what they want, need, and expect from their managers in times of

uncertainty. (See "The Research.") We asked, "What is one thing your supervisor could do (or do more of) to help alleviate the uncertainty that arose as a result of the pandemic?" In total, 287 participants, from a range of organization sizes and a variety of industries, responded with 398 unique comments.

The data revealed five categories of actions managers can take to help employees reduce or cope with their uncertainty. Above all else, employees most want *information* about their job and the organization. They want psychological and instrumental *support* from their manager and clear, fast, and accurate *communication*. To a lesser extent, they are also



looking for specific *leadership* styles (such as motivational or vulnerable) and desire specific *resources*, both material and intangible. Some employees report that there is *nothing* their manager can do to alleviate uncertainty.

There are many research-backed techniques that managers can use to support employees in each of the five theme areas, some of which we've included in the accompanying table, "Study Results and Aligned Strategies," on p. 32. However, our research reveals that managing uncertainty is far more complicated than implementing such strategies under more stable conditions. We found that during times of uncertainty, different employees want different kinds of support delivered in different ways, and sometimes that includes things that managers cannot actually provide. Consequently, managers must prioritize two behaviors: individualized consideration and building trust. The former helps address divergent concerns, while the latter can mitigate the impact of unaddressed needs.

The Problem: Meeting Divergent and Impossible Needs

Overall, our findings showed that leading through a crisis places managers in nearly impossible positions. First, when employees' needs diverge, they also often conflict. Across the five categories, we identified 27 different sub-needs, many of which are seemingly at odds with one another. For example, some respondents in our sample said they desire a leader who will "communicate their fears," whereas others want a leader who will "stay calm and not panic." Employees also diverge in job structure needs during uncertainty — some want clear expectations and direction, while others want more autonomy and independence. For example, Alex wants their manager to "provide clear guidance about expectations ... and scheduled check-ins," but Susan wants her manager to "continue to work and let me work." Faced with divergent sub-needs, managers must forgo a one-size-fits-all approach that might be effective during times of stability.

Similarly, employees disagree on what constitutes effective communication in times of crisis. Some want frequent and transparent communication, even when this means the message may change. Others want only communication that is consistent and accurate. For instance, Sam wants their manager to "keep us in the loop of decisions ... even if it is just rumors or speculation," while Tony expressed frustration that "the message changes daily" and wants

The Research

BETWEEN MARCH AND OCTOBER 2020, the authors asked employees across a variety of industries and organization sizes, "What is one thing your supervisor could do (or do more of) to help alleviate the uncertainty that arose as a result of the pandemic?"

They collected and coded the data in two phases, using an iterative process and inductive content analysis. Following the initial wave of data collection and coding (N = 201), they collected information from an additional 86 respondents to ensure a sufficient sample size for theoretical saturation. In total, 287 participants responded with 398 unique comments.

managers to "tell me of information only when they are sure of it." Managers face tough decisions regarding whether to share half-baked information fast or wait until there is more certainty.

Most often, respondents indicated that they desire more information from their managers to alleviate feelings of uncertainty. Information allows people to better understand, accept, and handle future events by restoring their sense of control.¹ Past research dictates that communication must be timely, credible, and trustworthy.² However, during times of rapid, unplanned change, the most desired information is not readily available to many front-line managers, such as when it will be safe to return to the office, whether layoffs will be imminent, or how the company is doing financially. Managers are left in the uncomfortable position of being unable to fulfill employees' information needs due to their own limited span of control or their organization's uncertainty about the broader landscape.

Beyond information, employees in our study sought a level of financial security that most managers are unlikely to be able to deliver. Some explicitly asked for financial support in the form of increased pay, advance payments, paid layoffs, bonuses, and hazard pay. However, the pandemic closed doors, decreased demand, and disrupted supply chains, leaving many organizations with no choice but to pass on their financial burdens to employees. In

Study Results and Aligned Strategies

The themes below reflect employees' reported needs and ways managers can provide support in times of uncertainty. Within each theme, we identified multiple sub-themes and evidence-based strategies that managers can use to address the needs the employees expressed.

THEME	ALIGNED MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES
Information: 38% requested more information on a specific topic, such as the likelihood of layoffs, return-to-office plans, and performance expectations.	■ Whenever possible, share organization-level decisions and information with employees at all levels.ⁱ ■ Create structure by clarifying goals, roles, and performance expectations; allocating resources equitably; identifying obstacles; and tracking progress.ⁱⁱ
Support: 35% requested general support, including job assurance, care for health and safety, career support, and empathy.	■ Stop and consider the perspectives of your employees. Ask questions and take cues about how much they want to share.ⁱⁱⁱ ■ Create deliberate opportunities for employees to participate in decision-making. This helps restore a feeling of control eroded by uncertainty.^{iv}
Communication characteristics: 26% cited specific communication characteristics — such as frequent, regular, clear, and consistent — that would help alleviate uncertainty.	■ Identify a consistent source of information so that employees know where to go when situations are unclear.^v ■ Schedule regular information-sharing meetings or emails, even when there is nothing new to convey. Predictability helps reduce uncertainty.
Leadership style: 16% expressed a desire for their manager to emulate a certain leadership style. Some sought transparency and honesty, others optimism, and others calmness and professionalism.	Avoid the tendency to protect employees by withholding negative information. Above all else, be honest and transparent in your approach. ^{vi}
Resources: 13% were looking for specific resources like financial support, job flexibility, or personal protective equipment.	Provide employees with flexibility on where, when, and how they do their work. ^{vii}
Nothing: 11% said there was nothing more their supervisor could do, either because their manager was already doing it or because they saw the uncertainty as unresolvable.	Acknowledge what cannot be done or what remains unknown. For example, saying, "I don't know," is a powerful strategy for building trust and acquiring knowledge more effectively. ^{viii}

addition, news of layoffs and downsizing dominated the media, only exacerbating employees' feelings of uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, many employees in our study said the one thing they desired from their manager was assurance that their jobs would be secure.

As pandemic restrictions eased and business activity accelerated, concerns over job security, reconsiderations of career and life goals, high talent demand, and other factors contributed to the Great Resignation. Tens of millions of employees willingly left their positions or the labor market entirely and, in the process, were able to maintain their sense of control. As a result, reducing job insecurity has become a critical managerial priority for maintaining an effective workforce.

So, what are managers supposed to do about

those conflicting — and seemingly unmettable — needs? How can managers identify and address divergent needs to help reduce uncertainty while helping employees cope with the uncertainty that cannot be remedied?

The Solution: Making the Impossible Possible

Managers can meet divergent needs using individualized consideration, a subdimension of transformational leadership in which managers identify and address each employee's unique needs.³ Varying one's management approach based on the individual is always effective for boosting motivation and performance, but it is critical in times of uncertainty. By prioritizing employees' individual needs

and understanding their fears, managers can target and address the sources of their uncertainty in a volatile environment.

Individualized consideration manifests in various ways. For example, one respondent requested that their manager “reach out and ask how I’m doing with my workload or if there is anything I would like to change about my tasks,” while another asked for “more positive feedback ... and more instruction.” Similarly, it could mean having a manager “acknowledge the fact that the situation could change and we could lose our jobs” with David but “continue to reassure staff that our company is and will be fine, and talk about goals enthusiastically” with Jane. One respondent, whose manager seemed to embody individualized consideration, highlighted, “She recognizes that each of us has unique needs and does her best to meet those needs.” Indeed, a recently published article by Martínez-Córcoles and colleagues and recent work by this article’s second author empirically support individualized consideration as a critical driver of positive employee outcomes amid uncertainty.⁴

Once managers have done what they can to address individuals’ unique needs, a degree of unrelievable uncertainty remains and must be managed with the same degree of individualized consideration. Despite respondent requests for certainty around the future of work, continued pay, and job stability, most employees are well aware that their managers cannot predict the future or make money appear out of thin air. When employees communicate these needs, they provide managers with critical information about what they fear most. Managers should proactively create space for individuals to share what they are most uncertain about, even when it is impossible to deliver what employees want. For example, when employees communicate “buy me food” or “guarantee our store will stay in business,” the managerial instinct may be to take it literally and either turn down the request or dismiss it entirely. Instead, we encourage managers to set aside time — perhaps

during a weekly check-in — to discuss the need and its root cause with their employee in order to generate a collaborative and individualized solution.

However, the effectiveness of individualized consideration is contingent on trust, which grows out of the confidence an employee has in their manager’s integrity, care, and capability.⁵ Researchers agree that trust helps individuals cope with uncertainty, a conclusion echoed by our findings.⁶ Employees’ calls for “honest and transparent” leaders reflect their desire for managerial integrity. Their repeated requests for psychosocial support (such as “asking if we need help and showing genuine care” and “calling me up once a week to see how I am feeling”) demonstrate the importance of caring. Responses focused on the need for “clearer expectations” and a “plan to move forward” highlight capability, the final dimension of trust.

The significance of trust rises when employees express a desire for something managers cannot provide. Managers who act with integrity, care, and capability (representing trustworthiness) instill in employees a much-needed sense of control and acceptance, even when needs remain unmet. As one participant highlighted, “The only uncertainty remaining for me is that one of my two jobs may not exist after the state of emergency ends, but my supervisor for that position is doing everything he can to find out exactly when (or if) that takes effect to give everyone as much notice as possible.”

Our sample highlighted several tactics for building trusting leader-employee relationships that are supported by extant literature, including leading by example, communicating openly and authentically, maintaining clear and consistent expectations, and owning mistakes.⁷ However, there are two evidence-based strategies particularly relevant to managing uncertainty.

First, leaders should prioritize fairness in their processes. This prioritization means allocating resources equitably, designing fair procedures, communicating the rationale for decisions, and treating individuals respectfully. As one respondent lamented in response to a lack of fairness around pay cuts, “They knew for months we would be getting our hours cut but waited until the day before the change went into effect to tell us.”

Second, managers can build trust by creating space to tend to their employees’ feelings and their team’s emotional culture.⁸ As one respondent noted, employees need their managers to “find more time to ask ... how things are going and listen more when

Trust is more important when
employees want something
managers cannot provide.

we talk.” Simply acknowledging the emotional roller coaster employees ride during uncertain times helps build trust by demonstrating care. Furthermore, giving employees the space to freely share emotions aligns with humans’ innate need for optimal distinctiveness — a sense of belonging balanced with an appreciation for what makes us unique.⁹ In addition to trust, this intersection helps build a foundation for inclusion.¹⁰

As a closing note, it is essential to acknowledge that trust can develop over time only when managers repeatedly demonstrate integrity, care, and capability. Much of how employees experience uncertainty rests on the level of trust managers establish long before a crisis comes knocking. In fact, research demonstrates that in times of crisis, individuals revert to pre-crisis orientations and beliefs about their manager’s trustworthiness.¹¹ Though crises are, by definition, unexpected, effective managers can and should prepare for them. Practicing individualized consideration and developing trusting relationships can help employees cope with uncertainty, both now and in the future. ■

Kristine W. Powers is a doctoral student at Claremont Graduate University. **Jessica B.B. Diaz** is an assistant professor in the Division of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences and director of the human resource management program at Claremont Graduate University.

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