



Two Types of Leaders: Ambiguity Absorber and Ambiguity Amplifier

By Norm Smallwood

A recent article I wrote titled, *Leadership in Uncertain Times: Become an Ambiguity Absorber*, prompted some valuable conversations including one with my longtime friend, Paul McKinnon, recently retired Harvard Business School professor, and former executive at Dell and Citigroup and before that my partner at The Novations Group. Paul added a compelling contrast to the notion of ambiguity absorbers: ambiguity amplifiers.

The distinction between ambiguity absorbers and ambiguity amplifiers are readily apparent:

- **Ambiguity absorbers** are leaders and senior professionals who reduce ambiguity for others by following or setting a clear and positive direction no matter their level in the organization.
- **Ambiguity amplifiers** are leaders who make the situation worse because they increase stress and anxiety by micro managing and/or over analyzing. This approach is a surefire way to stir up controversy or freeze people to wait for direction.

If you are emphasizing the fact that even if you get the virus and recover you will still have permanent lung damage, you are an ambiguity amplifier. If you are communicating to your team that your business is at great risk of not surviving the current crisis and not offering up practical options, you are an ambiguity amplifier. Stop it. Ambiguity amplifiers make the situation worse. Ambiguity absorbers focus on the positive of providing clear direction.

The best conversations have been with leaders who are in the middle of the crisis

and have found ways to absorb ambiguity. They offer important perspectives for us all as we continue to navigate unknown territory. So, let's celebrate some ambiguity absorbers.

My business partner, **Dave Ulrich** is a visible spokesperson during this epidemic. In the last week, he has posted a number of video clips in a series called, *10 Tips in 10 Days: Discover Opportunities in the COVID-19 Crisis*. He is deeply concerned about the crisis and looking for ways to steer people in positive directions. As he provided feedback to me about this article, he commented: "People want certainty in the face of uncertainty...to reduce and get rid of ambiguity. I think it is helpful to accept that there is general uncertainty—When will we return to work? When will the virus end? Will I have a job? Often, I think, we just don't know. Learning to live with and tolerate

uncertainty is a critical skill set. Focus on what I can control, not what I can't. Envision a future aspiration more than lamenting a past failure. Celebrate success and progress and avoid blame and bemoaning the past."

Alexion SVP of Human Experience, **Anne Marie Law** exemplifies how leaders can respond positively in crisis. The senior leadership team at Alexion is in the process of reprioritizing and then communicating to employees so that everyone knows exactly what's important to the business now. While there is uncertainty, there is no intention of playing defense only. For the past couple of years, Anne Marie and the Alexion team have focused on deliberate strategic initiatives and are now playing offense by continuing to invest in their patient-centric ambitions.

Susan Schmitt, CHRO at Applied Materials gave this example of absorbing ambiguity: *"Applied Materials HR leadership team, after working in partnership with the company's executive team, plus a leader from the Environment, Health and Safety team offered US based people managers the opportunity to join calls for Q&A. Over 1,200 people managers joined and learned about HR policy decisions that had been made to date and to hear about key issues that are under review and evaluation as they went forward. The team took many questions and committed to let managers know that they would communicate future decisions as they were made. Feedback was positive. While the team did not have all of the answers, they were forthright about it and committed they would share answers as they were clarified."* Susan's team took the initiative in the midst of the uncertainty, and was transparent and willing to learn as they took action. Like this team, we all need to be willing to learn as we go.

Kathleen Wilson Thompson, CHRO at Walgreens Boots Alliance is taking steps to protect employees and customers during the pandemic. WBA's senior leaders and their teams are working diligently to provide safe environments at their stores and throughout their supply chain. Some examples include face covers, plexiglass shields, social-distancing signage, frequent store sanitizing, health screenings for employees, and adjusted store schedules to allow enough space for after-hours restocking and cleaning. This diligence is a

testament to the balance that healthcare professionals everywhere can relate to—helping patients while protecting employees. When employees know their health is top priority, it clears the way for them to focus on meeting customer needs.

Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York. Regardless of your political persuasion, Mr. Cuomo has emerged recently as one of the foremost ambiguity absorbers during the pandemic as he has articulated what New York and other US states need (ventilators for patients and personal protective equipment for healthcare workers) and what citizens should do (stay at home and social distance) during the crisis. He is an advocate of taking care of people's health first and the economy will follow.

Leaders must take care of employee health and they must ensure long term health of their business. Be an ambiguity absorber leader not an ambiguity amplifier. As you take care of your business, consider the following 5 ideas which you can click on for more details:

[Ensure costs are aligned to the new realities →](#)

[Build a customer-centric culture →](#)

[Refine competitive positioning →](#)

[Ensure team alignment →](#)

[Maintain development cadences—virtually →](#)

We cannot overemphasize the importance of strong leadership right now and throughout the coming months. The RBL Group is prepared to help you identify the best ways to respond to ambiguity. If you are dealing with an issue that doesn't fit into these five categories, reach out and we'll be happy to share our perspective.

About the author:

Norm Smallwood is a partner and co-founder of The RBL Group. His research and consulting focuses on helping organizations increase business value by building organization, leadership, and people capabilities that measurably impact market value. He has written extensively about leadership and organization effectiveness in eight books and over a hundred articles.

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