



Prepare for the unexpected

The challenge

We have a natural aversion to uncertainty, and thus establish subconscious mechanisms to protect ourselves. For example, our brain tends to filter out information incompatible with our current analysis of a situation. Reality then hits with an even bigger shock when we are forced by events to abandon this false sense of control. The paralysis and denial caused by intense stress then delay our response and make it even tougher for us to adapt. It is preferable to try to prepare for the unexpected—for better or worse. We will then be more serene and better prepared to deal with unforeseen events. And, these will inevitably occur.

Four routines to develop your vigilance

Anticipating that there is a strong probability that nothing will go as planned improves your agility.

1 Regularly explore your areas of ignorance

What we know blinds us to information that does not fit into the models we take for granted. This natural mechanism can be mitigated by actively searching for information that could contradict our beliefs.

Ask yourself:

- What facts and recent observation data confirm that what we know still holds true? E.g.: Our market is dominated by three major players. Does current data still confirm this situation? Might a newcomer see things differently?
- About what do we know we're missing information? E.g.: Incomplete data, emerging, still unfamiliar technologies, etc.
- What might escape our knowledge without our being aware of it? E.g.: An improbable alliance of two competitors.

2 Look complexity in the face

We tend to simplify problems in order to facilitate action, but this can create a misleading illusion of control. Periodically observing key problems in all of their complexity helps to anticipate unexpected outcomes more effectively.

Ask yourself:

- Beyond the solutions implemented, what are the ramifications of the problem? E.g.: What side effects may be expected?
- Might the problem be considered completely differently if it were seen from another perspective? E.g.: Focused on the technical issues, Monsanto failed to perceive the possibility of great European hostility toward GMO.
- What is not in our control, but has an impact on the situation? E.g.: Greater gender equality in management depends on internal processes, but also on the orientation of women towards appropriate career paths.

3 Rethink your perception of your strengths and weaknesses

We have too much information to manage and cannot help but use shortcuts ("I'm good at..."). Although very useful, these shortcuts may nonetheless become ineffectual if they are based on assumptions that are no longer valid.

Ask yourself:

- In the current context, are my traditional strengths still as valuable/rare/relevant? E.g.: Mastery of a rare technology that becomes commonplace, expertise that becomes less relevant in the context of a new job, etc.
- Could my self-perceived weaknesses become assets if the situation changed? E.g.: Could an underperforming team become an example of exemplary performance improvement for the rest of the organization? Could my unspecialized background be an advantage in this new multifunctional project?

4 Listen to your intuitions

In unstable environments, risks are generally diffuse and hard to identify. Relying on your logical reasoning, which analyzes the situation based on existing models, is insufficient. Listening to your intuition is just as important.

Ask yourself:

- Take note, without censoring yourself, of signals sent by your body and brain through sensations and fleeting thoughts. E.g.: You are delighted to sign a contract, and yet you have a funny feeling in the pit of your stomach; and an irrational and unjustified thought pops into your mind: "I don't feel good about this project."
- Ask yourself what could have triggered these signals: what elements, including non-habitual ones that seem trivial or irrational, might constitute an alert that should be taken into account? E.g.: You have perceived tension amongst your customers that makes you fear being exploited in this project.