

## Making decisions in uncertain times



**Our human need for inaccurate certainty  
over the reality of uncertainty**



Why do people keep writing books about what's going to happen in the near and far future, asks iconoclast Dan Gardner<sup>1</sup>, when these 'experts' have an appalling track record on the accuracy of their predictions? In his recent book *Future Babble*, he also asks why the rest of us in droves keep buying these books! His explanation is that we cannot tolerate uncertainty, and demand to know what's coming next - that wrong certainty feels better than uncertainty.

Yet uncertainty has characterized most of human history: why does it still feel so uncomfortable? In her book *The Optimism Bias*, neuroscientist Tali Sharot<sup>2</sup> argues that a positive outlook probably helped us survive as a species by enabling us to feel happy in the present despite the uncertainties of the immediate (and even more so the long term) future.

Alas, this can lead us to assume that radical change is unnecessary and that 'normal service' will soon resume, say Andrew Campbell and Stuart Sinclair<sup>3</sup>. They attribute this to the 'human trait of being overly influenced by past experiences and judgments', which decision making experts call 'anchoring'. Everything we do and how we do it tends to be anchored in the past: we keep doing the same things in the same way. This mostly works fine when the present is the same as the past. When everything around us has changed, we meet Einstein's famous definition of insanity; doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Our certainty that the boom of the two decades leading in to 2008 would carry on forever seems sadly deluded now, as Harvard Business Review editorial director Justin Fox<sup>4</sup> observes. I read his comments to indicate that every company will have to explore its entrepreneurial depths simply to stay in business, and had to chuckle at his acerbic comment that it's time we got positive and embraced uncertainty instead of just whining about it.

Knowing all these things doesn't, however, help governments or businesses work out what we should actually do next - especially in light of a growing body of research findings that decisions made when we are tired or anxious are usually bad ones.

One thing's for sure; businesses these days we need to make some kind of decision or join the dinosaurs. And we need a mental jolt to focus our attention on the need to do so.

'What will you do when what you do disappears?' Professional speaker and author Ann Andrews<sup>5</sup> shellshocked her audience at a recent engagement with this question. She left them with three questions to ponder: are you 'headlighting' the road ahead and creating your skills for it? Is the road ahead going to 'work' for you? And what could 'working' actually mean to you?

These are the questions we need to think about – along with those 2am jolts – the worries that wake us up in the night.

Perhaps a picnic in a beautiful spot of nature or a week's team retreat with lots of sleeping and walking will help us relax enough to hatch the ideas we need to come up with to keep our businesses in business.



Clare Feeney is a sustainability strategist who helps organisations of all types grow their sustainability capability. She can help you grow jobs, increase profits and improve the environment – and have fun along the way! You can find out more at [www.clarefeeney.com](http://www.clarefeeney.com) and contact her at [clare@clarefeeney.com](mailto:clare@clarefeeney.com).

This is an excerpt from some of my recent work that examines six profit-draining environmental risks that beset the civil construction and many other business sectors.

There is more thinking like this on my blog at [www.clarefeeney.com](http://www.clarefeeney.com).

## References

1. Gardner, Dan. 2011. *Future Babble*. Virgin Books (UK); Dutton Adult (IU)
2. Sharot, Tali. 2011. *The Optimism Bias*. Pantheon Books.
3. Campbell, Andrew and Sinclair, Stuart. 2009. The crisis: mobilizing boards for change. An article in the February 2009 McKinsey Quarterly viewable at [https://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/the\\_crisis\\_Mobilizing\\_boards\\_for\\_change\\_2300](https://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/the_crisis_Mobilizing_boards_for_change_2300).
4. Fox, Justin. 2010. Embracing Uncertainty Rather than Whining About It. A blog viewable at <http://blogs.hbr.org/fox/2010/08/embracing-uncertainty.html>. Justin Fox is the editorial director of the Harvard Business Review Group.
5. Andrews, Ann. 2010. The yawning gulf between trapezes. An article in *People and Performance*, the magazine of the New Zealand Association of Training and Development, August-September 2010, pages 10-11.



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