

Why not knowing what to do isn't always a bad thing for leaders

August 15 2024, by Sarah Bloomfield and Clare Rigg



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In 2002, after a Pentagon news briefing, the then US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld was [widely ridiculed](#) for his thoughts about knowledge. Discussing the issue of whether Iraq was supplying weapons

of mass destruction to terrorists, [he said](#), "As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know."

Rumsfeld was describing a world characterized by uncertainty, insecurity and ambiguity. And he actually made a valid point about how leaders face situations where complete knowledge is not, and cannot, be available.

This awareness of a lack of knowledge is something we call a state of "unknowingness." And [our research suggests](#), perhaps surprisingly, that it can be a good thing for leaders and the organizations they run.

Assuming that leaders—whether that's a [prime minister](#), football manager or head teacher—should be heroically omniscient is not good for anyone. It places impossible expectations on people who cannot be masters of every context or complexity, and it disempowers others in the organization. How can they come up with solutions if they think their leader has (or should have) all the answers?

We also found that if "unknowingness" is recognized and accepted, it can lead to better decision making across an organization—and improved leadership overall.

Our findings came from studying the [leadership structure](#) at [Forestry England](#), an organization with two equally important goals which did not sit together easily. One is commercial—to grow and sell timber. The other is environmental—to look after huge areas of woodland, its wildlife and the visiting public.

There are other complexities too, including legal obligations to protect

habitats and breeding seasons, as well as unusually long planning arrangements (up to 300 years in some cases).

These opposing missions are pursued on a daily basis. Welcoming human visitors to woodland can have a negative impact on wildlife, while protecting wildlife prevents trees being felled for timber. Meanwhile, cutting down trees reduces people's enjoyment of the environment and removes important habitats.

As one Forestry England leader explained to us, "You can't have people [near to] ground-nesting birds without disrupting them, and you can't have forests with trails going through them without disrupting the forestry."

Another member of the leadership team noted the impossibility of adhering to one [government policy](#) which required the restoration of a piece of land to heathland (taking the trees away) and another demanding more woodland (putting the trees back) in the same place.

Someone else described how he was having to organize timber production around the habitats of snakes and sand lizards. But he was aware that in the future the priority might be the timber.

Seeing the wood and the trees

These competing elements within the organization's mission mean there is often no universally agreed right way of doing things. Any decision about what to do in a forest can be right and wrong at the same time, while the very long time frames for planning tree growth or responding to [climate change](#) makes for a perpetual sense of unknowingness.

In response to these institutional complexities, Forestry England uses a leadership system which does not use a top-down approach of senior

executives making firm decisions for others to follow.

Instead, leadership is spread out across the organization, allowing staff without explicit leadership roles to make their own decisions at a local level. So rather than being a deficiency, embracing unknowingness and uncertainty helps the organization to increase its overall leadership capacity, as people across different levels step up to make decisions and enable the organization to get things done.

Although our research reports on an organization with uncommonly long time horizons, leaders and managers in many public and private organizations have to contend with similar contradictions and complexity. They may have to deal with shifting multiple targets, a changing regulatory environment and demanding stakeholders with competing interests.

Many [local authorities](#) for example, face simultaneous pressures both to preserve green open spaces and to relax planning controls to increase availability of housing. But any organization which has to deal with "unknowns" (whether they are known or unknown) would benefit from recognizing and accepting these particular challenges.

There may be little they can do about the things they don't even know they don't know about yet. But when they are aware of the absence of knowledge, and accept an inability to know everything or always make the "right" decision, our research suggests that this can actually be a positive step.

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