

Leading through Uncertainty

Specific strategies to make this actionable for other leaders:

Leading through Uncertainty Strategies

1. Lead with the "Instead Of" Framework
2. Give Them Scripts and Questions
3. Provide Meeting Templates
4. Share Failure Stories and Course Corrections
5. Give Them Metrics to Track
6. Create Implementation Timelines
7. Address Common Leader Fears
8. Provide Follow-Up Resources
9. Make It Culturally Relevant
10. End with Permission to Start Small

1. Lead with the "Instead Of" Framework

Structure each recommendation as:

- "Instead of [what leaders typically do]..."
- "Research shows [specific approach] works better because..."
- "Practically, this looks like [concrete example]"

Example:

- Instead of: "We need to cut 30% of our budget - figure out what programs to eliminate"
- Research-based approach: "We need to redesign how we create community impact with different resources" – "how can we do better with less"
- Practically: "Ask your program teams: "What would you design if you were starting fresh with our mission and half the funding?"

2. Give Them Scripts and Questions

Provide exact language they can use immediately:

For Transparent Communication:

- "We're facing significant uncertainty about [specific challenge]. Here's what we know, what we don't know, and how we're finding out..."

Strategic Change Management

Presented by Dr. Shawn Kana'iaupuni and D.A. Dabner (September 26, 2025)

- "This change may affect your role. Let's talk about what that means for your career goals and how we can support your growth..."

For Engaging Staff in Problem-Solving:

- "You know this work better than anyone. If you could redesign this program from scratch, what would you keep, change, or try differently?"
- "What's one thing you've always wanted to try but never had permission to test?"

3. Provide Meeting Templates

Give them structured processes they can implement this week:

15-Minute Team Check-In Template:

1. Acknowledge current reality (2 minutes)
2. Ask: "What's one concern you have about changes ahead?" (5 minutes)
3. Ask: "What's one opportunity you see in this situation?" (5 minutes)
4. Next steps: "What's one small experiment we could try this month?" (3 minutes)

30-Minute Innovation Session:

1. Problem framing: "How do we serve our community with different constraints?"
2. Asset inventory: "What are we really good at that we should protect?"
3. Creative ideation: "What would we try if failure wasn't possible?"
4. Next action: Pick one idea to test for 30 days

4. Share Failure Stories and Course Corrections

Make it real by sharing what doesn't work:

Example: "I tried being overly positive about budget cuts and saying 'this is an opportunity' - staff rolled their eyes and trust dropped. When I switched to 'this is hard and uncertain, AND we're going to figure it out together,' engagement improved immediately."

5. Give Them Metrics to Track

Help them know if it's working:

Weekly pulse questions to ask staff:

- "How confident are you that you understand what's changing?" (1-10)
- "How included do you feel in shaping our response?" (1-10)
- "How connected do you feel to our mission right now?" (1-10)

Signs you're building innovation vs. demoralization:

- Innovation indicators: Staff bringing new ideas, cross-department collaboration increasing, "what if we tried..." conversations
- Demoralization indicators: Cynical comments, decreased initiative, "that won't work here" responses

6. Create Implementation Timelines

Week 1 Actions:

- Schedule individual conversations with each direct report using the transparency script
- Ask each team to identify their top 3 strengths and biggest constraint

Week 2-3 Actions:

- Run one innovation session with each program team
- Start weekly 15-minute pulse check-ins

Month 1 Review:

- Assess staff engagement using the pulse questions
- Identify which ideas generated in innovation sessions are worth testing

7. Address Common Leader Fears

"What if I don't have answers?"

- Research shows staff trust leaders more who admit uncertainty while demonstrating competence in navigating it
- Script: "I don't know exactly how this will unfold, but here's what I'm doing to figure it out..."

"What if they come up with ideas we can't fund?"

- Frame as: "Let's collect all ideas, then figure out what we can test with current resources"
- Some of the best innovations cost nothing but permission to try differently

8. Provide Follow-Up Resources

Give them 2-3 specific next steps:

1. One book/article for deeper learning (but emphasize they have enough to start)
2. One peer organization doing this well they can call
3. One tool or template they can customize for their context

9. Make It Culturally Relevant

Help them adapt to their specific context:

- For grassroots organizations: Emphasize community decision-making processes
- For larger nonprofits: Focus on cross-departmental collaboration approaches
- For advocacy organizations: Connect to campaign strategy and coalition building

10. End with Permission to Start Small

Key message: "You don't need to transform your entire change management approach overnight. Pick ONE thing from today that resonates with your situation and try it this week. Build from there."

The goal is to send them away with something they can literally do tomorrow, not a whole new philosophy they need to study first.