

LEADING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY



Ophthalmic leaders can thrive in disruptive times.

BY ZAIBA MALIK, MD, AND MICHAEL ONUSCHECK

Although the pandemic continues to create disruptions, physicians and industry leaders have always dealt with uncertainty. From the first day of training to the first day on the job, leading members of the ophthalmic community continuously assess decisions with varying information and find a way to level up. Steadiness is a luxury, and although it is easy to keep following the same routine, pivots are inevitable.

As uncertainty pushes the boundaries of one's comfort zone, leading through uncertainty means embracing change and disruption. Doing so requires an understanding of the difference between unintentional and intentional uncertainty and recognition of the importance of habits, mentors, and a passion for lifelong learning.

INTENTIONAL UNCERTAINTY

Uncertainty is often seen as the result of an external change (eg, a corporate restructuring, a job promotion, and recently a global pandemic). This external, unintentional uncertainty can breed stress, feelings of imposter syndrome, and disruption. In contrast, intentional uncertainty is an internally initiated event that typically fosters professional or personal growth. One must purposely assume positions of chaos, doubt, or discomfort in order to grow an idea or create a vision.

Examples of intentional uncertainty include career changes, business

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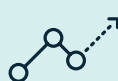
launches, and stretch assignments. Although such shifts can result from external, unintentional causes, how one frames a new circumstance depends on one's mindset. Is it possible to rise to the occasion and reinvent oneself, or will one languish and fail to reach one's full potential? Every leader has their tried-and-true style of leadership, but the most successful leaders incorporate strategies of planning, mentorship, and a growth mindset into navigating these challenges.

Most members of the ophthalmic community are planners. Physicians plan their journeys from undergraduate school to medical school to residency to practice. Industry members plan their activities to strategically advance their positions; they learn various functional areas of the business to develop their careers. Ophthalmology, however, is a dynamic space. A critical skill of strategic leaders is the ability to foresee obstacles and plan for disruptive scenarios. Whether adjusting to a change in rotations, adopting a new procedure, preparing for an economic downturn, or promoting a novel technology, personal scenario planning is essential.

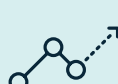
► **Habits.** Although disruptions can cause stress and anxiety, daily habits can improve one's ability to cope with them. For example, several leaders at a recent Ophthalmic World Leaders (OWL) event agreed that building exercise into their day helped them to decompress, manage their thoughts, and accept new challenges. For others, listening to music or a podcast while commuting or sketching or watching a show in the evening helped them to unwind. These daily habits allow time for introspection and reflection, which provide time and space to both plan and deal with contingency scenarios.

► **Mentors.** A shared priority among ophthalmic leaders is maintaining a circle of mentors. This network of meaningful and deep connections allows leaders to share vulnerabilities, successes, ideas, and disappointments. A close community helps individuals to not feel alone or experience imposter syndrome. Simply hearing mentors acknowledge that they have been in certain situations before can help others build confidence in their decisions. Although having a core circle of confidants is important, widening one's circle through intentional networking

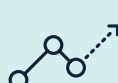
RESOURCES FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

 **American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) Leadership Development Program**
www.aao.org/about/leadership-development

 **Ophthalmic World Leaders (OWL) Leadership Summit**
www.owlsite.org

 **YoungMD Connect Mentoring Sessions**
www.youngmdconnect.com

 **Women in Ophthalmology (WIO)**
www.wioonline.org

 **Leadership Podcasts**
 Growth Edge, Modern Mentor, *Harvard Business Review's* Coaching Real Leaders



allows new thoughts, ideas, and practical advice to enhance and accelerate growth.

► **Lifelong learning.** Lifelong learning is a critical leadership skill. Leaders must be willing to learn in order to innovate. The growth in pharmaceuticals or surgical interventions alone makes it crucial for ophthalmologists to stay informed of the latest technologies and treatment options. Medical school taught physicians the skills to be lifelong learners. Journal clubs honed their skills for digesting and evaluating new research. Leaders are constantly stretched by competitive entrances, new assignments, functional responsibility changes, or regulatory shifts. Although such breakthroughs may seem daunting, it is possible to rely on

the foundational skills of breaking big challenges down into smaller steps and mastering each on a systematic basis.

CONCLUSION

Leaders must be comfortable being uncomfortable in order to grow intellectually, professionally, and personally. Although uncertainty can be stressful, experience confirms that it also enables innovation and growth. From personal innovation in taking on a new role, strategic innovation in capturing a new market during or after the pandemic, institutional innovation in pivoting to virtual or hybrid grand rounds or wet labs, many developments stem from uncertainty. The strongest leaders make plans, develop habits, enlist mentors, focus

on learning, and continue to foster a growth mindset to overcome the challenges they face. Greatness is achieved not overnight but through intentional uncertainty. ■

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