



Cadmus Compass Series: Leading your organization in times of change

Leading through disruption: strategies for success

*By Beth McDonald, Senior Vice President, and
Sonia Checchia, Senior Specialist, Cadmus*

Leading during this very disruptive time in the federal workspace is challenging the best and brightest leaders we know. It's hard to focus and hard to prioritize; it's hard to terminate people and hard to keep things moving with limited resources. We have been talking with the grittiest, most tenacious leaders in government and industry to learn what's working, and we offer a few strategies to increase efficiency as you adjust to the new "normal" with your team.

CADMUS

Prioritize the priorities

Most of our clients are currently facing the reality of significant resource cuts, and they are wondering how to keep doing all the things. Asking a team to do less—especially a team that's strapped for resources—is typically met with resistance. Over the years we have conducted countless Stop/Start/Continue exercises, and the 'stop' list is always the shortest. It's easy to identify programs and initiatives to 'continue.' The ideas for what the group could 'start' also flow; you often get a good brainstorm going. At the same time, it's seemingly impossible to identify anything substantive to 'stop.' Typically, people go on guard and begin defending their work. The result? Creativity and flexibility are shut down.

One group we worked with years ago during an economic downturn was forced to make tough decisions about stopping program offerings that were widely popular with their clients. The group determined clear criteria for what would continue and what would be cut. They selected the term **'purposeful abandonment'** to describe the 'stop' decisions.

Purposeful Abandonment

Acknowledge the attachment, value, and pride of programs being shut down to help the group move past the tough decisions.

Here are some tips for helping a group do less with less.

- **Strategic pause** – While your team may not immediately align on activities that can be stopped abruptly and permanently, you may identify activities to put on a strategic pause. A proposal to put an initiative on hold tends to be faced with less resistance. On an emotional level, it's less scary, because it's not permanent, and you will have the opportunity to revisit the decision in the future.
- **Rescope** – If your work has expanded in scope in recent years, you could consider reverting back to a narrower focus. Another option is to pare back existing workstreams or deliverables. That report that covers 100 items could be limited to 20. The event series that's once a month could happen quarterly. Either way, rescoping or descoping can free up resources, and allow you to prioritize the most important programs.
- **Trade off** – Trading brings to the forefront the notion of 'opportunity cost,' the cost or value of one thing over another. Ask the team to identify activities, initiatives, or deliverables to be prioritized, and assess whether these are higher value or higher impact than what is remaining. This exercise can help surface assumptions and value judgements that may previously have not been communicated.

Leidy Klotz, author of the book *Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less*, shares the observation that humans are hardwired to add, not take away. When email was introduced to US workplaces in the late 1990s, the speed of communication increased, along with the pace. Instead of cutting the workweek from 40 hours to 20, we packed in more tasks. This is just one example of how we tend to add not subtract. In the book, Klotz stresses that an important first step is to acknowledge and consider seriously that **choosing to subtract is an option**—and it can create space and opportunity in a way that adding cannot.

Create certainty where you can

Creating our own certainty starts with acknowledging that, while a lot is changing, we do have constants. In times like these, you need to take a look around and determine what you know to still be true. Work to anchor your thoughts on things like what mission am I serving, what my customers expect from us, and what skills my team has.





Here are a number of resources to help you create certainty for yourself and your team:

- In his article “**Seeking Certainty in an Uncertain World**,” Dave Ulrich warns that “obsessing and managing uncertainties may lead to endless loops of scenario planning that lead to feeling out of control, decreased mental health, and reduced effectiveness.”
- As Stephen Covey advises, define your Circle of Influence®. Separate out the things you can directly control vs. the things that may concern you, but that you cannot influence. Covey represents this with concentric circles, with the smaller circle representing the set of things you can control. This is also an effective group exercise with your teams. Ask the group to respond to foundational questions such as who do we serve, what needs do we meet, and what skills/expertise do I contribute? Then build on that foundation, focusing on what the group can control.

Another strategy is to curate a routine, as Loretta Cooper advised in her Cadmus Campus article “**Leading by example: cultivating wellness during times of change**.” Commit to and emphasize the daily rituals that ground you, and create structure and meaning, in an otherwise tumultuous time.

Harness ambiguity

Once you have created whatever certainty you can, shift your focus to the uncertainties by harnessing the ambiguity. In his article “**Certainty is Overrated: Why Ambiguity Leads to Better Solutions**,” Andy Budd advises that there are some simple ways to push through hazy times. His guidance is to:

	Be curious, and ask open-ended questions		Appreciate the long journey to the answer and don't rely on the shortcuts
	Be okay with not having all the answers		Allow abductive reasoning to teach us what works and what doesn't and why

Without ambiguity, we could not explore what “could be,” which is an exercise in imagining and creating the future.

Grieve (but not for too long)

Many of us who have been through the recent rounds of reductions, terminations, and early retirements have experienced a lot of emotions not typically associated with work: anger, sadness, frustration, confusion, and exhaustion.

As a leader, you may be putting on a positive face for your staff and colleagues and then falling apart when you have a moment to yourself. You may also be minimizing the negative emotions. It's common to dismiss painful emotions by playing the comparison game. "It could always be worse, right?" "There are worse things than losing a job." "I am fine, really."

Author Jeff Chu puts a different spin on our rationalization. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Chu, edited slightly:

Another thing that I often see happening is a ranking of grief, a hierarchy of loss, such that we say, Well, someone else is going through something much worse. While that might be true, I don't actually see the ultimate benefit in ranking or minimizing grief. Just because someone else seems to be going through something incredibly hard, that doesn't make your burden, however petty it might seem in comparison, any lighter.

To grieve isn't just a reality; it's a necessity of being human. We experience little deaths every single day. It might be the extinguishing of a longtime dream or the puncture of a cherished illusion, a beloved pet who dies (we're still mourning our Fozzie, who died last June) or a project that doesn't come to fruition, a relationship that frays or a cherished sweater that you left on an airplane. Do they all matter in exactly the same way? Of course not. But I wish for everyone the space to grieve losses big and small, because not doing so has its own costs.

The key takeaway is that leaders must create space for themselves and their teams to grieve losses. It is a healthy space to spend time in...just don't stay in that space too long or it can become a downward spiral.

Grow and learn

Personal growth is within our control, and times of uncertainty are a great opportunity to brush up on old skills or learn new skills. For starters, on a personal level, ask yourself, "What do I want to learn from this challenging time?" and then set some goals and build a plan to get there. Consider a combination of methods, including reading, finding a mentor, engaging with a group of people with similar goals, etc.

In the workplace, encourage your team members to invest in themselves and double down on their development efforts as well. For yourself, lead by example and take time to pick up that industry certification or prepare a brown bag on a key topic for your team, both of which can help shift thinking into a space of creativity and openness. Work with your teams to conduct a needs analysis. Determine what your customers or constituents will need in the future and build a plan to strengthen your team's expertise in those areas.

Engaging in learning can build forward momentum, which is especially important in times of high anxiety.

Celebrate success

Celebration, even in times of stress, is an important part of leading a group. Such an important part that it's a separate article! Be on the look-out for our final article in the Cadmus Compass series, "Celebrating success: building a culture of recognition," by Kelly Stuck.

So yes, it's hard! We never said it's easy. But you can do hard things. And modeling the strategies above is a way to increase your new team's efficiency as well as support your own.

Beth McDonald is a senior vice president at Cadmus with 35 years of experience in strategy development, change management, organizational effectiveness, and leadership development. She is a master facilitator, communicator, and advisor for our clients, leading high-performing teams to deliver on critical missions in complex environments.

Beth is the co-author of **The Method and The Magic: Every Leader's Guide to Making Transformational Change Happen**.

Sonia Checchia is a senior specialist at Cadmus where she consults on internal, executive, and change communications. Her two decades of experience spans government, management consulting, and nonprofits, providing her with a comprehensive understanding of organizational culture, stakeholder engagement, and employee experience. She is passionate about bringing people together to have conversations that move an organization forward.

References:

Budd, Andy, "**Certainty is Overrated: Why Ambiguity Leads to Better Solutions**" (December 2024)
Klotz, Leidy, **Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less** (April 2021)
Ulrich, Dave, "**Seeking Certainty in an Uncertain World**" (January 2022)

We're here to help you succeed. Cadmus provides government, commercial, and other private organizations worldwide with technology-empowered advisory and implementation services. We help our clients achieve their goals and drive lasting, impactful change by leveraging transformative digital solutions and unparalleled expertise across domains. Together, we are strengthening society and the natural world.

For more information, visit cadmusgroup.com.

CADMUS