

# Making uncertainty work for you

**Jon Ainger and Jenny McArdle**, directors at iMPOWER, examine the roles chief executives must play and how they can draw clarity from complex, unclear times

Most public service chief executives we meet are remarkably good at handling uncertainty. All accept the truth that uncertainty is as certain as death and taxes. You deploy admirable reserves of personal resilience and optimism. At your best you embrace it, seeing in uncertainty the wriggle-room to create space to get things done.

You live every day in hugely complex systems, riven with uncertainty – devolution and health and social care integration to name but two. Boundaries are blurred, causation is difficult to prove, you cannot ‘solve’ problems definitively and it can be difficult to know whether you are winning or losing.

Can you really lead the transformation of a health and social care system in these circumstances?

## The problem of uncertainty

The problem for the chief executive is that most of the other people around you – politicians, directors, local partners – are addicted to certainty.

Finance directors love certainty. How else will they make decisions and eliminate risk? How else can they promise things to stakeholders and be held to account for their actions?

Faced with these challenges, many people get tunnel vision. They narrow down their perspective to the things they know they can control and have a direct impact on. ‘We might be losing the war, but at least I’m not



Jenny McArdle and Jon Ainger at the IMPOWER segment at this year's MJ Future Forum

overspending my bit of the budget.’

Defining the edge of the problem too broadly may mean never starting, but defining it too narrowly also has huge risks for chiefs. If your people feel exposed and isolated they are unlikely to take the risks needed to make change happen.

## Embracing uncertainty

One cannot afford to either ignore nor be overwhelmed by uncertainty; the art is navigating the space in-between, which so many chiefs are already doing. That is, managing the inherent tension between ‘managerialism’ and ‘social purpose’.

Properly embraced, uncertainty can bring some benefits; it can be liberating. The best are able to:

- Free themselves and colleagues from limiting assumptions
- Throw out the rulebook
- Think the previously unthinkable

History shows organisations which nurture flexibility, awareness and resilience are not just more likely to survive a crisis and uncertainty, they are also more likely to adapt and to prosper.

## Leading through uncertainty

How do you do this in practice? How do you take people on a journey where the destination isn’t clear, where they are still craving certainty?

We have observed three common behaviours of the successful leaders we have been working with, focused especially in the complex interface between health and social care.

## 1) Start by redrawing the boundaries of the problem

Often, the advice in uncertainty is to focus on what you have direct control over. Too narrow a focus can constrain thinking and the solutions. By broadening the issue to what is within a sphere of influence, you bring in a wider group of people to create space and opportunities for different perspectives and new solutions. For example, measuring all the spending in the out-of-hospital space to show a single set of investments measured against outcomes.

## 2) Clarity of purpose

A ruthless sense of purpose is powerful: knowing exactly what you are here for and what you stand for. By talking about the positive difference you want to make, you bring people with you. Survival might bring people together for a period but it doesn’t inspire. For example, being able to say ‘we are going to prevent family breakdown and have 30% fewer children in care’ gives the social workers a positively-framed goal which also drives down spending.

## 3) Consciously engage with risk

When people are under pressure and uncertain, they often become more risk-averse. Consciously – and visibly – engaging with risk helps create the conditions for people to be brave. That might mean:

- Making the first move*: trying something new, different and making a virtue of learning from mistakes; initiating a different conversation to change the dynamic.
- Committing to shared benefits not just shared risk*: pooling budgets will feel like loss of control, but shared savings means everyone has a stake in success.
- Run with imperfect solutions*: searching for perfect solutions creates more uncertainty. Focus on the outcome and the whole picture even if there are winners and losers.

The challenge is, perhaps, helping your team to get comfortable moving between seemingly contrasting states, taking risks and being cautious.

## Navigating through uncertainty

iMPOWER has developed a new tool to help you have a different conversation with your team about ambition and performance. At its heart is the insight that ‘better outcomes should cost you less’ and that often, the measures which are chosen by managers are ones which reduce risk, rather than measures which improve outcomes.

We have combined our insight about what good looks like in terms of outcomes – discarding many of the traditionally-used measures – to develop our own ranking, of all English local authorities, of their ability to find the win-win.

If you would like to know more about where your authority sits on the iMPOWER Index get in touch.

