

3 The Courage to Stay Present

Most leaders, at some point, face a period of sustained uncertainty that does not resolve quickly. Not a single decision to be made, or a crisis to be managed and moved on from, but an extended stretch where the outcome is genuinely unclear and the pressure to keep functioning – to keep leading others – does not pause while it is worked out. A restructuring whose direction shifts week by week. A leadership change that creates ambiguity across the organisation for months. A market environment that offers no reliable signal about where things are heading.

In those conditions, the instinct is to try to see the whole picture – to process the full arc of what is coming, so that you can prepare for it and feel more in control of something that is threatening to take control away. It is an understandable response. But for most people, in most sustained uncertainties, it makes things worse. Attempting to hold the full, unresolved horizon in view continuously divides attention, compounds anxiety, and leaves less available for the people and decisions that are immediately in front of you.

The question in sustained uncertainty is not how to resolve it faster. It is how to remain present and effective – and how to lead others effectively – while it remains unresolved. That is a skill almost no leadership development programme addresses directly, and one that almost every leader eventually needs.

Elite sport has examined this question with unusual rigour, because athletes face extended uncertainty constantly: long injury recoveries with no guaranteed return date, selection pressures that persist for months, careers that can turn on a performance still some way off. What the research on high-performing athletes reveals about navigating this kind of sustained pressure translates directly to anyone sitting inside a professional uncertainty they cannot yet resolve.