



Rising Above the Fog: Navigating Leadership's Gray Areas

A White Paper by Jerry Manas

Winston Churchill once said, “True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, and conflicting information.” Leaders confront uncertainty daily. In the rush to make decisions, it’s tempting to default to ‘black-and-white’ thinking—yet most real-world situations live in the gray.

How we address these gray areas is essential to our success as leaders. By living in the gray and maintaining an open mind, we begin to expand our thinking, and to see the bigger issues from broader perspectives. This enables us to move from tactics to strategies, from either/or to multiple viewpoints, and from quick fixes to long-term solutions.

For example, consider common challenges that test us every day, such as:

- How can I be sympathetic to my people’s needs in the face of organizational pressures?
- How can I communicate with simplicity, yet provide the big-picture context people need?
- How can I implement necessary internal processes without hurting morale, stifling creativity, or alienating clients?
- How can I ensure accountability without resorting to micromanagement?
- Should I centralize my organization to gain economies of scale, or should I decentralize to take advantage of local or regional expertise?

Effective leadership in uncertain times means working with ambiguity—not shrinking from it. Rather than snap to ‘either/or’ answers, successful leaders leverage four core dimensions:

- **Relationships:** Systems thinking and understanding interconnections.
- **Inquiry:** Better questions drive better decisions.
- **Self-Awareness:** Knowing your ideals.
- **Empathy:** Understanding others’ perspectives and norms.

Relationships: Systems Thinking for a Broader View

Instead of viewing decisions as isolated events or simple cause and effect, leaders benefit from a systems thinking approach—the understanding that nothing happens in isolation. As Aristotle put it, “The whole is more than the sum of its parts.”

For example, an employee’s workload isn’t just a matter of hours worked; it’s shaped by departmental priorities, available resources, and collaboration. Problems such as multitasking, resource shortages, and lack of teamwork can compound, leading to higher workloads and

mistakes across the organization.

Quality expert Peter Scholtes once reinterpreted Knute Rockne's famous "Win one for the Gipper" speech, asking not if oratory won the game, but whether years of preparation and coaching—the system—did. Without this broad perspective, we risk making short-sighted decisions based on incomplete information.

Inquiry: Asking better questions

Once we understand the complex relationships at play, it's crucial to ask the right questions before acting. Effective leaders consider three ethical lenses: virtue (what do I stand for?), consequence (who is affected, and how?), and principle (what is right according to the rules or culture?). No single perspective suffices—combining them, or 'holistic ethics,' helps ensure wiser decisions. Echoing management guru Peter Drucker, tomorrow's leaders excel by knowing how to ask, not just tell.

The Socratic method—probing deeply with questions like, "Can you give an example?" or "What else might that affect?"—reminds us not to leap to conclusions or easy fixes. By challenging ourselves and others to reflect—Whose values are at play? Where do obligations conflict?—we foster dialogue and surface the true dimensions of each gray area decision. In many situations, the right questions matter far more than finding a single 'correct' answer.

Self-Awareness: Understanding our Ideals

Understanding who we are begins with examining the ideals that drive us—both as individuals and organizations. As former US Senate Chaplain Peter Marshall said, "Give us clear vision, that we may know where to stand and what to stand for—because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything."

Some companies are renowned for living their ideals. Toyota, for example, balances community focus and long-term thinking, even when it conflicts with short-term gains. Patagonia, Unilever, and Ben & Jerry's similarly emphasize social and environmental responsibility. Yet staying true to ideals is challenging. Toyota struggles to embed its philosophy consistently across global facilities, while Starbucks' rapid growth sparked criticism over perceived loss of core values and cultural sensitivity.

This leads to a fundamental question: Is growth inherently at odds with ideals? The answer varies, but Nelson Mandela's concept of *ubuntu* (humanity to others) offers guidance: "Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to improve?" Effective leaders must not only uphold their own ideals but also respect those of others.

Empathy: Understanding the ideals and norms of others

Empathy—the ability to see through others' eyes—is a cornerstone of effective leadership. It requires understanding that people's actions are shaped by culture, role, and personal background. For example, someone from the U.S., Germany, or England may be more rule-oriented, while those from Latin America or Asia may take a flexible approach to processes or time. Even within organizations, different functions, such as marketing and engineering, can foster distinct cultures. While these patterns offer clues, they are not certainties.

When seeking support, recognize that others' values and motivations may differ sharply from your

own. As George Bernard Shaw observed: “Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.”

Putting RISE to Use

Patagonia’s leadership exemplifies the RISE model in action. The company has built its reputation on a steadfast commitment to environmental stewardship, ethical business practices, and a values-driven culture. Patagonia’s leadership team prioritizes long-term impact over short-term profit, engaging deeply with employees, customers, suppliers, and environmental advocates alike.

By embedding systemic thinking, asking critical questions, maintaining authentic self-awareness, and showing empathy for diverse perspectives, Patagonia tackles complex challenges including sustainable sourcing, climate advocacy, and responsible growth. The company’s culture fosters innovation and accountability without sacrificing its core mission or alienating key stakeholders.

As Patagonia’s example shows, embracing relationships, inquiry, self-awareness, and empathy empowers leaders to navigate uncertainty with ethical clarity. When facing complex decisions, applying the RISE principles can help leaders rise above simplistic choices and find more inclusive, impactful solutions.

Next Steps

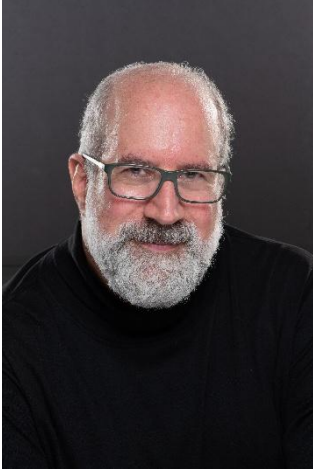
The challenges outlined here—balancing organizational pressures with empathy, simplifying communication without losing context, fostering accountability without micromanagement, and navigating centralization versus decentralization—are complex tests that all leaders face.

If these questions resonate with your experience, consider diving deeper into the full framework and guidance provided in my book, *Managing the Gray Areas*, where these principles are explored in richer detail alongside practical tools for navigating uncertainty and ambiguity effectively.

To translate these leadership insights into organizational transformation, explore our tailored Culture Change offerings. These programs help embed empathy, inquiry, systems thinking, and self-awareness into your team and culture, fostering resilience and agility amid complexity. Contact us via our website to schedule a discovery call and learn more about how we can partner with you to drive positive organizational change.

Together, these resources provide actionable pathways to rise above the fog of uncertainty and lead your organization to lasting success.

About the Author



Jerry Manas is an internationally bestselling author, speaker, and consultant specializing in workforce planning and resource management. He helps organizations maximize the potential of their people to achieve breakthrough results. His books include *The Resource Management and Capacity Planning Handbook* (McGraw-Hill), which Judith E. Glaser, noted author of *Conversational Intelligence*, touted as “the first book dedicated to what is essentially the drivetrain of organizations—the effective use of its people toward its most important activities.”

Jerry is frequently cited by leading voices in the world of business, including Tom Peters (*In Search of Excellence*), who often references Jerry’s bestselling work, *Napoleon on Project Management*, for its insights on simplicity and character, and Pat Williams, Senior VP of the Orlando Magic, who called Jerry’s book, *Managing the Gray Areas*, “a new path for leaders.”

Jerry played a pivotal role on the leadership team for the first editions of the Project Management Institute’s international standards for portfolio and program management. He later served as a U.S. Registered Expert with ANSI/ISO, representing the United States in the creation of global standards for Workforce Allocation, Employee Engagement, and Knowledge Management, and as a voting member of the ISO Global Standards ANSI Technical Advisory Committee on HR Management (TC 260).

Jerry’s work has been highlighted in a variety of publications, including the *Houston Chronicle*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *National Post*, *Globe and Mail*, *Huffington Post*, and others. He has appeared on TV and radio internationally, including a notable appearance on Icelandic National TV, where he applied lessons from his books to the country’s economic recovery.

Visit his website at jerrymanas.com.

JERRY MANAS
JERRYMANAS.COM