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The Comfort of Certainty

Why the most dangerous meetings are often the ones where nothing goes wrong.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Some of the most consequential moments in an organisation's life don't look consequential at all — a meeting where everyone agrees, the reports look sound, and the project simply continues. Certainty, unlike disagreement, is invisible, and that's exactly what makes it worth watching. As success accumulates, questions tend to become confirmations, and experience gradually becomes evidence that today's thinking is probably right because yesterdays was. None of this is unreasonable — it's largely how capable organisations are expected to behave — which is precisely why it is so hard to notice while it's happening. The leaders worth watching aren't the ones with the most certainty. They're the ones who stay curious enough to keep asking whether it still holds.

1. Introduction

There are moments in every career that stay with you, not because something extraordinary happened, but because nothing did. The meeting concluded. Everyone agreed. The reports looked sound. The project continued. On the surface, everything appeared exactly as it should. And yet, every now and then, I've walked away from one of those meetings with an uncomfortable feeling I could not explain — not because I believed anyone was wrong, but because I was not entirely convinced we had challenged ourselves enough to know whether we were right.

> *Disagreement is visible. Certainty is very often invisible.*

I've come to realise those moments interest me far more than the moments when organisations openly disagree. One of the privileges of working across different organisations — government, large infrastructure programmes, technology, private enterprise — is that you start recognising behaviours that have very little to do with industry. Different sectors, different objectives, remarkably similar patterns.

2. How Certainty Changes the Conversation

Certainty has an extraordinary ability to make us comfortable. Not because certainty is dangerous — most of the time it is not — but because it changes the kind of conversations an organisation has. Questions become confirmations. Discussion becomes agreement. Experience gradually becomes evidence that today's thinking is probably correct, mostly because yesterday's thinking proved successful. None of that feels unreasonable. In many respects it's exactly how capable organisations are expected to behave, which is exactly why it is so difficult to recognise while it's happening.

2.1 The Success-to-Certainty Progression

Have you ever wondered why organisations that have enjoyed years of success sometimes struggle to recognise significant change. It's tempting to call it complacency, but I'm not convinced that's fair — most leaders I've worked with care deeply, work hard and genuinely want to improve the organisation. I think something quieter is happening: success creates confidence, confidence reduces hesitation, reduced hesitation increases consistency, and consistency creates stability. Somewhere in that progression, curiosity begins competing with certainty — not because anyone decided curiosity was no longer valuable, but because certainty simply feels more efficient.

> **Key Point:** The environment does not know which conclusions an organisation has become attached to. Technology doesn't pause while an organisation becomes comfortable, and competitors don't ask whether it's ready. The world keeps moving regardless of how confident anyone feels about their current understanding of it.

A few patterns tend to signal that certainty has become the more comfortable habit:

- Far more energy spent testing compliance with expectations than actually testing the expectations themselves.
- "This has always worked" offered as evidence, rather than a question worth asking.
- A room that answers confidently, then goes quiet when asked whether it would design things the same way today.

3. Assumptions Deserve an Expiry Date

The greatest disruptions rarely begin with dramatic change. They mostly begin with small changes that fail to attract much attention, precisely because they don't immediately challenge what we already believe. Those are the changes I find most interesting — not because they're obvious, but because they aren't.

Organisations tend to become very good at testing whether something complies with expectations. Far fewer spend the same energy asking whether the expectations themselves still deserve to exist. It's a subtle difference, but I think it changes everything. Ask a leadership team, "Are we following the right process?" and most organisations will answer confidently. Ask instead, "If we were designing this process today, would it still look like this?" and the room usually goes quiet — not because anyone disagrees, but because the question is fundamentally different. One confirms. The other reimagines.

Assumptions aren't the problem — they're unavoidable. Budgets assume. Strategies assume. Forecasts and risk assessments assume. Leadership itself depends on assumptions about people, markets and the future. The real question isn't whether assumptions exist. It's whether they still receive the attention they deserve. A few prompts worth putting to any assumption that has been sitting on the shelf a while:

1. Are you still true?
2. If we were designing this today, would it still look like this?
3. Has this always worked because it is still the correct pathway — or because the environment has not yet changed enough to expose its limits?

4. A Different Kind of Confidence

One of my favourite conversations with experienced leaders usually begins the same way: “The longer I’ve worked, the less certain I’ve become.” It sounds almost contradictory at first — shouldn’t experience increase certainty? In some ways it does. But the wisest leaders I’ve encountered seem to develop a different kind of confidence: not confidence that they already understand everything, but confidence that they know how quickly understanding can become incomplete. It’s a confidence built on humility rather than certainty.

Perhaps confidence isn’t demonstrated by having immediate answers. Perhaps it’s demonstrated by being willing to place an answer that once seemed beyond question back on the table, and asking whether it still deserves to remain there. That requires a different kind of courage — not the courage to defend a position, but the courage to reopen it.

That becomes harder as organisations grow more successful, not easier. Not because success discourages reflection, but because success provides very few reasons to question itself — until, one day, it does.

Conclusion

There’s a phrase I’ve heard throughout my career that has always fascinated me: “This has always worked.” Most of the time it’s intended as reassurance. I now hear it differently — not as evidence, but as an invitation to ask one more question. Has it always worked because it is still the right approach, or because the world around us hadn’t changed enough to test limitations? Two very different explanations. Only one of them tells us anything about tomorrow.

The older I become, the less interested I am in certainty for its own sake. I’d rather work with leaders who remain curious despite their experience than leaders who become confident because of it — not because confidence lacks value, but because curiosity is what keeps confidence honest.

And perhaps that is the real contribution experienced leaders make: not bringing certainty into the room but bringing enough curiosity that everyone else's certainty is occasionally invited back into the conversation. Organisations that keep doing that, I suspect, will remain interesting places to work for a very long time.

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