



3 C's to reduce negative uncertainty

Description

I have spoken about mystery and the like in the past and you would be forgiven for thinking that uncertainty sits in a similar space. The difference is that mystery or surprise are designed and deliberate.

[TL:TR?](#)

Defining Uncertainty

In this instance I am defining uncertainty as “The lack of certainty. A state of having limited knowledge where it is impossible to exactly describe the existing state, a future outcome, or more than one possible outcome.”¹

Uncertainty can be both negative and positive. As with mystery, sometime not knowing all the details leads to a healthy curiosity and motivates you into “opening the box” (though that didn’t work out so well for Pandora...). There has been research done on how uncertainty can actually boost motivation as well. A paper called “*The Motivating Uncertainty Effect*”² This study showed that if people were given a limited amount of information about the reward they would receive, it could actually boost motivation.

People invest more effort, time, and money to qualify for an uncertain reward (e.g., a 50% chance at \$2 and a 50% chance at \$1) than a certain reward of a higher expected value (e.g., a 100% chance at \$2). This effect arises only when people focus on the process of pursuing a reward, not when they focus on the outcome (the reward itself).

There is a nice caveat there though, that it is only effective when people are focusing on the process not the reward.

Here I am focussing a little more on the negative effects of uncertainty and how you as a system designer can reduce them.

To give this a little context, consider an employee in a large company. There are redundancies happening in the company for various reasons. They are uncertain about how this will affect them. This could be because they have not been communicated with properly (or at all), it could be because they did not understand the communications – it could even be that whilst they have had clear communication, they don't trust the source of the information or the information itself.

Stress

Studies have been done on how this kind of uncertainty can increase stress levels in people ³ and stress can have extremely negative effects on people's motivation ⁴. When people feel that they don't have control of their future they begin to experience an increase in psychological strain – stress. In the above example, the employee does not have enough information to be able to predict the future outcome and has no control over it. This leads to negative uncertainty and thus stress.

For some, knowing if the outcome is negative can help just as much as knowing of the outcome is positive. For others, knowing that the outcome will be negative is just as stressful. Again, this will be because they don't have enough information to predict the future after the negative outcome.

It is useful at this point to get a better understanding of stress. Things that cause stress can be called "Stressors". Stressors are broken down into two main types; Challenge Stressors and Hindrance Stressors. Challenge Stressors are associated with a more positive aspect of stress, providing more focus on the task at hand. Hindrance Stressors are associated with negative stress, reducing productivity in individuals as well as motivation. Both can be broken down into work related and non work related ⁵. The above example demonstrates work related hindrance stressors. The employee is uncertain of their future as a result could become demotivated ⁶.

Put simply, some stress can be good for development, the wrong type or too much can lead to reduced motivation and satisfaction (and other stress related issues).

Reducing Uncertainty

The upshot of all of this; **negative uncertainty -> negative stress -> reduced motivation, productivity, frustration etc.** Whilst the effects can vary from person to person, it makes sense that whatever you are designing, be it a gamified system or an enterprise transformation programme, you should have some tactics to reduce uncertainty!

1. Communication

- Communicating with the target audience is essential. To reduce the chances of uncertainty, you need to give them as much unambiguous information as possible. This may mean not telling them things that are not set in stone. The aim is to give them the right amount of knowledge to understand and predict what the future may hold. In gamification, think about how you would onboard people into a system. You would give them just enough to understand what is happening then and what will happen next, without giving them too much and potentially confusing things. In our example of uncertainty around employment,

keep the employee informed and make access to the information they need simple.

2. Control

- One major issue that causes stress in uncertainty is a feeling that the person affected has no control of the situation. In gamification, this will be about choices as they onboard and as they move through the system. It will also be about knowledge again, if they have a good understanding of what they are doing, they have a level of control. In our employment example, give them a chance to have their voice heard. If they feel they are being listened too, they will feel they have some control. If outcomes are negative, make sure they know there is support for them to help take control of their future.

3. Care

- If someone does not trust you, they will not believe or trust what you are telling them. If you have shown a history of caring and consideration towards them, they are more likely to trust you. With gamification, this is all about looking after them in the early stages and then giving enough support over time that they feel safe. For the employee this boils down to consistency of message and honesty. If they feel you are telling them the truth and that you are at least consistent with what you are saying and how you are saying it, they won't be taken by surprise when things happen. Better still, whatever is happening try to make people feel that you have their best interest at heart beyond the immediate decisions. If there is something negative about to happen, they need to know that you care enough to help them face the future after.

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Category

1. Gamification

Tags

1. ambiguity
2. future
3. information
4. negative
5. outcome
6. stre
7. stress
8. uncertainty
9. Workplace stress

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