Dealing with workplace ambiguity

Ambiguity can be an intimidating thing to address in the workplace. Whether your manager isn’t clear about expectations, or the organization’s mission hasn’t been articulated well, you may feel like you’re on uncertain footing. Dealing with ambiguity is a skill you can develop. Here are some tips.

- **Put on your own oxygen mask first.** Taking control of your career path is vital, says Bill Connolly, author and career coach. “If there is ambiguity ongoing, it’s not up to your employer to solve it, it’s up to you. Bring it up to your boss and define a path that will get you where you want to go. If they aren’t helpful or obstruct that process, it’s time to get a new job.”

- **Clarify.** “Don’t be afraid to ask follow-up questions when your boss or someone else gives you an ambiguous assignment,” says Lynne Eisaguirre, of Workplaces That Work. Use a “who, what, where, when” formula to figure out what you need to do. “Ask who needs the information, exactly what they require, where they want it delivered, and when.” You may find that people won’t give this information without being asked. And, if you’re in the middle of the assignment and realize that you don’t have all the information that you need, don’t hesitate to return and ask follow-up questions to clarify.

- **Manage from below.** As an admin, you may deal with several managers who are all ambiguous in their own way. “Learn how best to communicate with them,” Eisaguirre says. “Do they prefer email, voicemail or in-person meetings? Should you deal with their assistant? (This might be a good person to ask this information in order to find out what they like.)”

- **Prioritize self-care.** Ambiguity can be stressful, but general organizational ambiguity is part of life these days, Eisaguirre says. Downsizing, changes in the C-suite, reorganizations and operational changes can make employees feel insecure. “You need to make sure that you have a healthy lifestyle to be able to roll with the punches, including exercise and diet and a supportive community when things get rough.”

- **Build your other skills.** “Constantly improving your skillset is a major component of success,” Connolly says. Take a class, shadow another employee, and volunteer for extracurricular assignments. Even if they are indirectly related to the path you ultimately take, they will keep your mind in a positive space and keep you at the forefront of the leadership’s minds.