



**'Need for Closure' scale**  
**Score yourself between 1**  
**(strongly disagree) and 5**  
**(completely agree)**

1. I don't like uncertain or unpredictable situations.
2. I dislike questions that could be answered in many different ways.
3. I feel uncomfortable when I don't understand why something happened.
4. I feel irritated when one person disagrees with what everyone else in the team says.
5. I don't like going into a situation without knowing what I can expect.
6. When I'm confronted with a problem, I prefer to reach a solution quickly.
7. I become impatient and irritated, if I can't find a solution quickly.
8. I dislike it when someone's statement could mean many different things.
9. I prefer structure and consistent routines.
10. I don't usually consult different views before forming my own.

## DO YOU NEED TO DECIDE?

### *What happens when you feel uncertain?*

Of course, most of our daily challenges don't provoke uncertainty! When it's raining, we pack an umbrella. When the traffic light turns red, we stop. But, these days, all professionals regularly face complex and ambiguous situations where the best decision isn't obvious. The information we need might seem contradictory, or even missing. Each way we look feels confusing and there's no simple solution to hand.

Research shows that ambiguity causes most of us to feel uncertain and that this is an emotion amplifier: it makes anxiety more painful and pleasure more enjoyable.

For example, the pleasure of crossword puzzles is about resolving deliberately ambiguous clues. Detective stories and thrillers, both universally successful literary genres, engage us because of the suspense. Things are by no means clear! The clues and the culprit are uncertain. Our imaginations are captured and we're on the edge of our seats.

However, researchers highlight that most of us prefer our ambiguity to be unthreatening. *Real life* uncertainty and ambiguity tend not to be so enjoyable! Inconclusive medical news or unclear financial situations can provoke extreme discomfort. When the stakes are high, many of us don't react well to ambiguity. We strive for closure.

### *Ambiguous problems the norm today*

Yet today, whatever your sector, you're likely to face non routine problems with multiple, interdependent variables. This is neither comfortable nor easy. Some contexts such as emergencies and crises absolutely require us to take decisive action, often at once. But in other contexts, our ability to tolerate ambiguity and manage uncertainty without jumping to a conclusion too fast, are a decision-making asset, especially at executive level.

### *How we make sense of the world*

It turns out human beings have a meaning-making drive that responds poorly to uncertainty. When a situation disturbs our sense of order, an alarm system goes off. We enter a state of anxious vigilance. We are galvanised to extract clues from our context. We decide on an explanation and we figure out what we'll do.

This happens even when it would have been far more useful if we had been able to stay longer in that state of uncertainty. While mental conflict and feelings such as "I don't know what's going on here" are inherently uncomfortable for many people, research shows us that there is often a power in not knowing. That is, if we can handle it long enough to learn more and to experiment with possible solutions.

### *The Need for Closure Scale*

But the level of discomfort we experience isn't consistent. For example, it rises when we feel fatigued or stressed and falls when we feel calm. As well, each of us has a typical (for us) baseline need for clarity. Psychologists Donna Webster and Arie Kruglanski developed a scale measuring this tendency. Since the publication of their initial research twenty years ago, their findings have been validated and refined by other teams.

Five dimensions are reflected in the scale: desire for order, desire for predictability, discomfort with ambiguity, decisiveness, and close mindedness. In the box at the left, you'll see a few items from this 'Need for Closure' scale, so you can form a general idea of how you think you'd rate (lower score more useful). Having a sense of your baseline is helpful but it isn't enough. The culture of your organisation, the pressure you feel and the skills you have will all affect how you perform in a given context.

### *Uncertainty and good decision-making*

If your job involves decision-making, it's worth thinking about your own and your team's need for closure. A higher need for closure has been shown to lead to over-simplification, especially in the early stages of the problem-solving process. People are less able to resist first impulses, less aware of biases and errors and more likely not to challenge a strong opinion expressed at the start. When the stakes are low, maybe you can accept these risks. But in a high stakes context, it could be disastrous.

### *Collecting more data might not help*

None of this is easy to manage. The urge to resolve ambiguity and commit to action is a deep seated tendency that evolved to support our ancestors' survival. In times of stress, with deadline pressures, low self-awareness and poor skills, all teams risk seizing on a new solution in panic or sticking too rigidly to an old one.

Often, the answer is not simply to get more data. This may not resolve your uncertainty. No simple solutions may present themselves and the information available may always be incomplete.

Tackling our human need for closure requires us to develop robust team processes that make it less likely that we'll jump to a decision in haste. For instance, a speak-up culture where colleagues routinely challenge and disagree will enable team members to embrace the discomfort of ambiguity in a more productive way.

With insight and skills, accepting uncertainty can lead to innovation and far better decisions. So, the next time you feel uncertain, take a deep breath, relax and embrace the power of not knowing!