

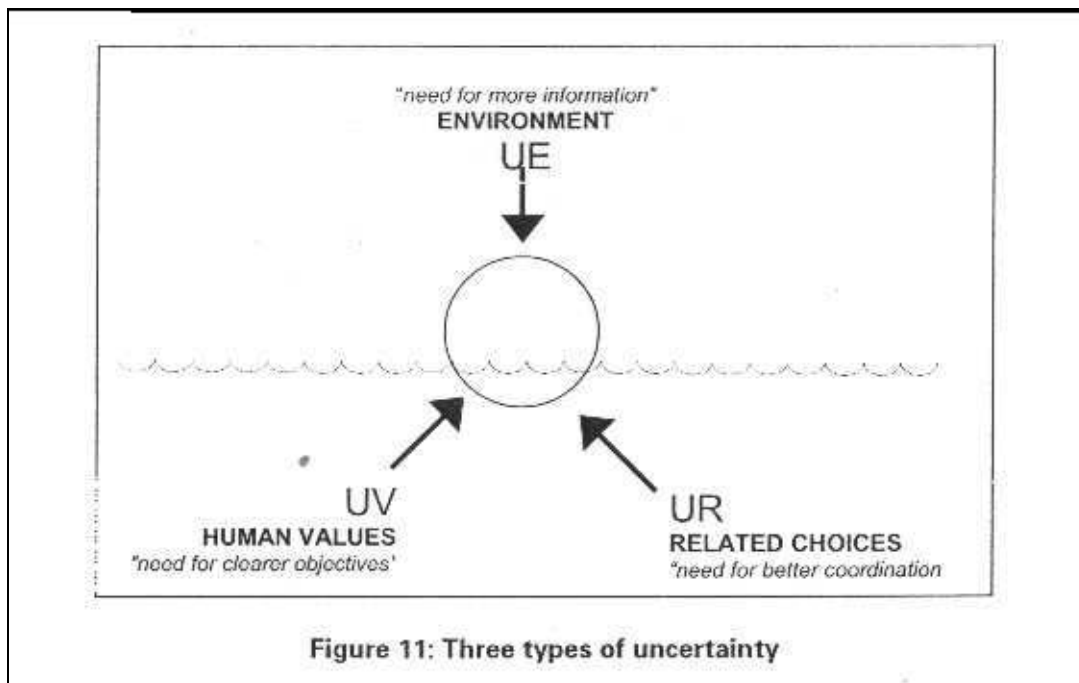
# Working With Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a key element in any complex situation, and the shared management and ultimate resolution of uncertainty is a key step towards building consensus.

## Working with uncertainty

If everything were clear and certain; if there were no assumptions to be made and no risks to be run; if people could weigh up every factor in the knowledge that they knew all there was to know, and therefore it was obvious what decisions were open to them - then really there would be much less room for conflict.

But life is not like that, and situations for which Stakeholder Dialogue is used are definitely not. In such cases there is much uncertainty, which can be seen to be of three types:



First, there is uncertainty about the environment within which the results of the decision will take effect: people experience this by feeling the need for more information, and demanding more research, surveys and analysis.

This is the sort of uncertainty that people first think about. However, in the field of facilitation and Stakeholder Dialogue, there are two other important types that lie just below the surface.

One is about what values are involved for whom. People experience this by feeling the need for clearer objectives. They respond to it by seeking policy guidance and engaging in participation exercises.

The other is about related decisions, often decisions to be made later - mostly by others - which would affect the situation. People experience this by feeling the need for better coordination. It can be handled by consultation with others and joint working in task groups.

It is worth noting that these two 'below the surface' uncertainties can only be reduced by working with

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others. Desk studies and scientific analysis will not help.

One of the ways of establishing some degree of common ground early in the process, even in a polarized situation, is to explore the shared uncertainties and how they may be reduced. Very often the hostility in a situation is generated by these uncertainties, since hostility is often the product of fear, and fear is often the product of uncertainty. Working together to reduce the uncertainties is a potent means of reducing the fears and hostilities spawned by them.

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# Uncertainty, Fear And Hostility

**Uncertainty is a fact of life. It has always been with us, so it is strange that we have still only a very rudimentary understanding of how to work with it.**

Wherever there are difficult choices to be made the cause is always uncertainty of one sort or another. If there were no uncertainty, i.e. if we knew everything about all the effects of all the options; all about the different values and how they should be balanced; and all about how others with a stake in the outcome are going to act in the future; the decision would be easy.

Personal uncertainty causes fear (of getting it wrong) - often leading to the feeling of being pulled in different directions. This, even with only one value system in operation, results in stress.

Interpersonal uncertainty - where a number of people are involved - causes fear in a similar way, but the combined result is much more serious. We now have a number of stressed individuals, each operating with a different system of values. If and when they can deal with their own uncertainty, they commonly find themselves pulling in different directions. When these directions oppose each other, the result is hostility.

In practice, especially when time is at a premium, it is impossible to eliminate uncertainty. Therefore the different stakeholders have to make assumptions which, because of their different value systems, frequently turn out to contradict each other. This, combined with their personal stress, often leads to conflict.

To make matters worse, all the invisible negative effects of conflict tend to exacerbate the situation. Individuals' behaviour instigated by this chain reaction is such that it creates yet more uncertainty, and the cycle begins again.

As with any system of interrelated parts, if you can change one then the other parts have to change in response. The best way to start is with the least threatening part of the system - in this case the uncertainty.

If the stakeholders, even in a polarised situation, can be helped to explore their common uncertainties and how they might be managed they will be automatically extending the common ground.

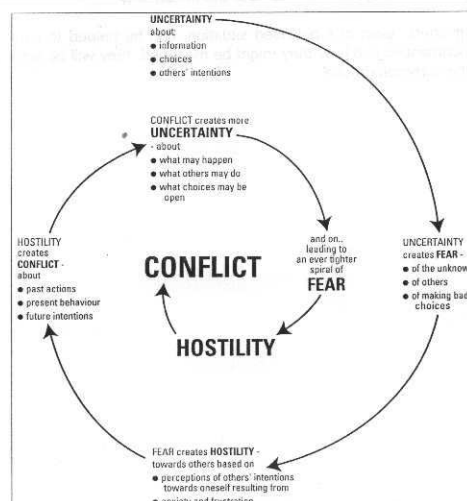


Figure 10: The cycle of uncertainty

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