MODULE
Communication

LESSON
Work is about Managing Chaos: Dealing with Ambiguity
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Overview

Purpose

To teach students the importance of functioning successfully in a continuously dynamic workplace.

National Career Development Standards

Standard 1: Understanding the influence of a positive self-concept.

Standard 2: Skills to interact positively with others.

Standard 5: Understanding the need for positive attitudes toward work and learning.

National Career Development Benchmarks

Students will be able to. . .

Benchmark 1.d. Demonstrate an understanding of environmental influences on one’s behavior.

Benchmark 2.a. Demonstrate effective interpersonal skills.

Benchmark 2.b. Demonstrate interpersonal skills required for working with and for others.

Benchmark 5.c. Demonstrate a positive attitude toward work.

Think and Discuss

1. Describe in detail examples of workplace ambiguity.

2. List some ways we can control workplace ambiguity.
### Module: Communication  
**Lesson: Dealing With Workplace Ambiguity**

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This lesson uses 12 of the 16 EFF Standards:
- Resolve Conflict and Negotiate
- Observe Critically
- Listen Actively
- Cooperate with Others
- Solve Problems and Make Decisions
- Take Responsibility for learning
- Reflect and Evaluate
- Speak so Others Can Understand
- Plan
- Advocate and Influence
- Guide Others
- Learn Through Research
Teacher Preparation

Class Materials

Copy the following exercises for distribution to students

- Exercise 1: Ambiguity Pre-Quiz
- Exercise 4: Ambiguous Scenarios A - E
- Exercise 5: Ambiguity Role-Plays
- Exercise 6: Ambiguity Self-Assessment

Overhead templates for teacher use

- Exercise 1: Ambiguity Pre-Quiz
- Exercise 2: Anecdotes of the Day
- Exercise 4: Ambiguous Scenarios A - E
- Exercise 5: Ambiguity Role-Plays
- Exercise 6: Ambiguity Self-Assessment

Key Words

1. Ambiguity
2. Directionless
3. Chaos
4. Defuse
5. Perspective
6. Complexity
Exercise 1: Pre-Quiz Directions & Answer Key

Teacher Directions

This exercise should take 5 minutes with some discussion after each question. A teacher copy is provided with the answers.

Step 1: Have students take the 6-question “Workplace Ambiguity” quiz to check for understanding.

Step 2: Review the questions with students to correct misconceptions they may have which relate to workplace ambiguity.


Answer Key

1. C
2. True
3. A
4. E
5. E
6. E
Exercise 1: Workplace Ambiguity Pre-Quiz

1. Ambiguity is:
   a. A medical emergency vehicle that transports people to a hospital
   b. An attitude of not caring much about anything
   c. A feeling of not knowing what might happen next
   d. An attitude of having lots of drive and motivation

2. Ambiguity is a certainty you will face in the workplace
   TRUE
   FALSE

3. Which scenario best identifies ambiguity?
   a. You have two supervisors that ask you to do two opposite things that are conflicting
   b. Your boss tells you to punch in at 6 am every morning
   c. Your co-worker instructs you to have a project done in 10 minutes
   d. You make a goal to become company President in 5 years
   e. None of the above

4. How can you avoid ambiguity?
   a. Ask a lot of questions
   b. Communicate clearly
   c. Make sure you establish rules and guidelines
   d. Help others clarify a plan
   e. All of the above

5. Fill in the blank. Workplace ambiguity stems from __________.
   a. A poor diet
   b. A bad leader
   c. A poor plan or no plan
   d. Poor communication
   e. B, C, & D

6. What is so bad about ambiguity?
   a. It can bring down your morale
   b. It can leave you directionless and without goals
   c. It can ruin your company’s work ethic
   d. It is scary for many people
   e. All of the above
Exercise 2: Anecdotes of the Day

Teacher Directions

You may want to write the anecdotes on the board to focus your students’ thoughts on “Dealing with Workplace Ambiguity.” Process the anecdotes with your students to check for understanding. This exercise should take 5 minutes with some discussion.

Step 1: Have selected students read the anecdotes aloud. Ask students the following questions:

What is ambiguity?

What are some of your current ambiguities at school? At work? At home?

How can you control some of your ambiguities?

Step 2: Proceed to Exercise 3: Video Vignette: “Work is about Managing Chaos: Dealing with Ambiguity.”
Anecdote 1

In the world of work, ambiguity is one of only a few constants that an employee can expect to experience. Ambiguity is the knowledge that you don’t know what your next assignment will be, or it might mean that you don’t exactly understand where or how you fit within an organization. For most people, ambiguity or uncertainty brings stress because, as humans, we like to know what is ahead for us. We need to know the “plan;” we need to understand what is in store for us; we like to know how we fit in; and we need to know that we are necessary and important to our supervisors and our co-workers. Unfortunately, most employees don’t feel this way. Sometimes we will go through a workday not knowing what to do next after we complete our current assignment. Sometimes we go through a workweek not knowing if we are really contributing to our group’s project because, perhaps, the co-workers are not demonstrating an appreciation for our help. Sometimes we go through an entire work-year not knowing if our jobs are secure and wondering “Will I be let go because the company is performing so poorly?” In all three of these cases of ambiguity, the best thing to do is COMMUNICATE. Ask questions. Find out what your next assignment will be by asking your boss ahead of time. Better yet, go to him/her with ideas and offer suggestions for your next assignment. Ask your colleagues if you are helping them with the project the way they expect and need you to help. They will give you an answer and, even though it might not be the answer you want to hear, at least you won’t be in the dark – you will be able to do something about the situation. Finally, talk to your boss if you are worried about getting let go from the company. Tell him/her your worries, and the situation should be clarified for you. Taking control of any ambiguous situation is the sure-fire way of fighting it!

- Career Counselor

Anecdote 2

Ambiguity for students rears its ugly head in many ways. It might come in the form of not having plans for college or not having certainty about what to do after high school. Should I join the army? Work at my family’s store? Go to college? Big decisions like these that go unanswered for some time are very scary. When you compare these ambiguous situations to the ones you might face on the job, the job’s ambiguities don’t seem so scary, do they? You have to remember that you face ambiguity every day in your life and you learn to deal with it in your own way. Take to the world of work the ambiguity-fighting skills that you have developed in school, and you should be just fine!!

- Career Counselor
Exercise 3: Video Vignette: “Work is about Managing Chaos: Dealing with Ambiguity”

Teacher Directions

*Play the video titled “Dealing with Ambiguity.” Discussion should follow after the video vignette. This exercise should take 5 minutes to discuss.*

**Step 1:** Review the video vignette before introducing the video to your class.

**Step 2:** Show the video and discuss with your class the message provided in the video.

**Step 3:** Transition to Exercise 4: “Identifying Skills to Manage Ambiguity.”
Exercise 4: Identifying Skills to Manage Ambiguity

**Teacher Directions**

*Please review the exercise before proceeding. This exercise should take 30 minutes to complete.*

**Teacher Notes:** In this exercise, you should help the students identify which skills they have that can help them fight ambiguous situations when they start.

**Step 1:** Ask the students to volunteer to read the scenarios out loud.

**Step 2:** Lead a discussion using the intermission questions to determine understanding.

**Step 3:** Transition to Exercise 5: “Thinking on Your Feet.”
Ambiguous Scenario A:

(Ask for 2 volunteers to read the following scene aloud to the rest of the class.)

**BOSS:** Hey, Don. I need a summary of the cost analysis we discussed.

**DON:** OK. What do you need?

**BOSS:** I told you, a summary.

**DON:** Right, but what should I put into it?

**BOSS:** A summary of the cost analysis.

**INTERMISSION**

Questions for Review:

1. Is Don in an ambiguous situation right now?
2. What makes it ambiguous?
3. Who is making the situation worse, Boss or Don?
4. How can the situation become less ambiguous?

**BACK TO SCENARIO A:**

**DON:** Let me ask you this, should it be one page in length?

**BOSS:** Yes.

**DON:** Would you like it in bullet-point format or paragraph format?

**BOSS:** Paragraph.

**DON:** How about the audience, to whom will this be given?

**BOSS:** Your team members in accounting.

**DON:** OK, this gives me a few ideas. I will have it done for you soon.

**INTERMISSION**

Questions for Review:

1. What did Don do to defuse the ambiguous situation?
2. Did Boss do anything to help clarify the situation or did he just answer questions?
3. What does this tell you about the quality of those questions?
4. In Don’s last statement, was anything he said ambiguous?

PROCESSING SCENARIO A:

Ambiguity fighter #1: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.

Don was able to get clarification from his boss and help make an uncertain situation more clear.

AD LIB the ALTER-ENDING: Ask a student to ad lib (play it out off the top of his/her head) the rest of “SCENARIO A” with the question below as a guideline for his/her acting:

What do you suppose would have happened to Don if he had not asked his boss the questions but rather had simply gone to his desk and tried to live through the ambiguous situation?

Feel free to ask more than one student to ad lib the alter-ending to “SCENARIO A” if they have more ideas.

Ambiguous Scenario B:

(Find 2 more volunteers to read aloud to the class.)

BOSS: Excuse me, Lisa. I need to go over something with you.

LISA: OK. What is it?

BOSS: Some of the customers have been complaining about the quality of your service.

LISA: Oh, I haven’t heard anything from our customers. What’s wrong?

BOSS: Well, the quality of your customer service is unsatisfactory. It says so here on some customer surveys.

LISA: OK, but does it give examples of what I am doing incorrectly?

BOSS: No, but you should know our customer service motto: “Always make them smile.” You are not making them smile. Isn’t it obvious?

INTERMISSION
Questions for Review:

1. Is Lisa in an ambiguous situation right now?
2. What makes it ambiguous?
3. Who is making the situation worse, Boss or Lisa?
4. How can the situation become less ambiguous?
5. Is it the responsibility of Lisa or Boss to settle the ambiguity?

BACK TO SCENARIO B:

LISA: Can I see the surveys? They must have written some examples.

BOSS: Here.

LISA: OK. There is nothing here. I need to find out what I am doing wrong. Why are the customers not happy with my service? What should I do?

BOSS: That’s exactly what I want to know. You better get yourself on track soon.

LISA: Here is what I am going to do: I am going to ask all of the customers I help today if everything is satisfactory for them. If they tell me “NO” then I will be able to fix it on the spot. If they say “YES” then I will thank them for coming to our store. Does that sound like a good start?

INTERMISSION

Questions for Review:

1. What did Lisa do to defuse the ambiguous situation?
2. Did Boss do anything to help the situation?
3. What does this tell you about going to the source of the ambiguous situation?
4. In Lisa’s last statement, was she passive or did she take charge?

PROCESSING SCENARIO B:

Ambiguity fighter #2: GO TO THE SOURCE.

Lisa knew that her boss was not going to be helpful in this situation. He just didn’t have the information she needed to get her out of the ambiguous situation. She decided to go to the source of the ambiguity—her customers. She couldn’t find the people who previously completed the surveys, but she had an opportunity to talk to current and future customers.
AD LIB the ALTER-ENDING: Ask a student to ad lib the rest of “SECENARIO B” with the questions below as a guideline for his/her acting:

What do you suppose would have happened to Lisa if she had not decided to ask the questions of her customers to find out if they were satisfied? What if she had simply gone to work and tried to live through the ambiguous situation?

Feel free to ask more than one student to ad lib the alter-ending to “SECENARIO B” if they have more ideas.

Ambiguous Scenario C:

(Find 2 more volunteers to read aloud to the class.)

CO-WORKER: Felicia, are you OK?

FELICIA: Yes, why?

CO-WORKER: Well, the quality of your work is slipping.

FELICIA: What do you mean?

CO-WORKER: Well, you come to work only 30 minutes early, you leave work around 7 PM and the other day, I saw you taking lunch in the cafeteria and not at your desk.

INTERMISSION

Questions for Review:

1. Is Felicia in an ambiguous situation right now?
2. What makes it ambiguous?
3. Who is making the situation worse, Co-worker or Felicia?
4. How can the situation become less ambiguous?

BACK TO SCENARIO C:

FELICIA: How can you say that the quality of my work is slipping? You said yourself that I come in early, leave late, and rarely take a lunch break!

CO-WORKER: That isn’t high-quality behavior. Look at me. I come in to work 2 hours early every day. I never leave before 8 PM and my productivity on our project is twice your productivity. My work is of a higher quality because I put more time into it.
FELICIA: I arrive early and leave late. I put a lot of time into this project, and I work hard. I have a life outside of work and I need to make sure I balance my family, fun, and work evenly. I guess you and I define “quality” differently. If I am not meeting your expectations, I am sorry. If you would like, I can ask our supervisor if she has a problem with my quality of work. If she does, then I will listen to your suggestions. For now, though, I think we should simply agree that we define “quality” in two very different ways, but that they are both pretty good. Are you in agreement with this plan?

INTERMISSION

Questions for Review:

1. What did Felicia do to defuse the ambiguous situation?
2. Did Felicia do the right thing by defining the word “quality”?
3. What does this tell you about defining an unclear situation?
4. How has a difference in perspective or point-of-view made a situation in your life ambiguous?

PROCESSING SCENARIO C:

Ambiguity fighter #3: DEFINE THE DIFFERENCE IN OPINION.

Felicia was able to give her perspective and compare it to her co-worker’s perspective. She also offered to get their supervisor’s perspective to further clarify the situation and ultimately get her co-worker off her back!

AD LIB the ALTER-ENDING: Ask a student to ad lib the rest of “SCENARIO C” with the question below as a guideline for his/her acting:

What do you suppose would have happened to Felicia if she had not defined her perspective and her meaning of “quality” to her co-worker but rather had simply tried to live through the ambiguous situation?

Feel free to ask more than one student to ad lib the alter-ending to “SCENARIO C” if they have more ideas.

Ambiguous Scenario D:

(Find 2 more volunteers to read aloud to the class.)

CO-WORKER: Hey, James. What are you doing?

JAMES: I’m just thinking about what to do next on this project.
CO-WORKER: Why?! The boss isn't around. Kick back!

JAMES: Right, but the boss gave us some freedom on this project because he trusts us to do a good job.

CO-WORKER: I know, but I have no idea what to do, so I'll just wait for him to come around and give us direction.

JAMES: I can't do that. I hate not knowing what to do. I feel bored.

INTERMISSION

Questions for Review:

1. Is James in an ambiguous situation right now?
2. What makes it ambiguous?
3. Who is making the situation worse, Co-worker or James?
4. How can the situation become less ambiguous?

BACK TO SCENARIO D:

JAMES: OK, here is what we need to do: The boss told us to take care of these sandwich-making stations.

CO-WORKER: That's right, Genius. That means we have to make sandwiches, and when nobody is here, we don't have to make sandwiches.

JAMES: You are partially correct. We have to FIND other things to do that go beyond our initial instructions. Look at this food prep station. Simply by looking around and ANTICIPATING what our boss might expect, we can find our next assignments. For example, there is lettuce everywhere, the mayonnaise isn't cold, we have to get more ice, and we don't have enough tomatoes. So, we need to get into the cooler and restock all that stuff before another rush comes.

INTERMISSION

Questions for Review:

1. What did James do to defuse the ambiguous situation?
2. Did James do the right thing by defining his work assignments himself or do you think the boss would have wanted him to wait?
3. What does this tell you about the way you should take charge of an unclear situation?
4. How did James' take-charge attitude keep ambiguity at bay?
PROCESSING SECNARIO D:

Ambiguity fighter #4: TAKE CHARGE.

James was able to take charge of his situation to avoid an ambiguous situation. He took charge when the boss wasn’t there by thinking about what the boss WOULD have wanted and provided some leadership for his co-worker as well. By anticipating what the boss would want, James kept himself and his co-worker busy and saved them from scrambling for organization when the next rush of customers showed up.

AD LIB the ALTER-ENDING: Ask a student to ad lib the rest of “SECNARIO D” with the question below as a guideline for his/her acting:

What do you suppose would have happened to James if he had not taken charge but rather had simply tried to live through the ambiguous situation?

Feel free to ask more than one student to ad lib the alter-ending to “SECNARIO D” if they have more ideas.

Ambiguous Scenario E:

(Find 2 more volunteers to read aloud to the class.)

CO-WORKER 1: Walter, we need your help in the warehouse. We need you to lift something.

WALTER: I’m really supposed to stay here in Men’s Clothing.

CO-WORKER 2: C’mon! This is a box full of Men’s Clothing items any way! Plus, we don’t have enough help back there.

WALTER: If I leave my station I will get in trouble. We have clear rules.

CO-WORKER 1: Well, we have clear needs. This has to get done or you won’t have anything on your shelves for the customers to purchase.

INTERMISSION

Questions for Review:

1. Is Walter in an ambiguous situation right now?
2. What makes it ambiguous?
3. Who is making the situation worse, Co-workers or Walter?
4. How can the situation become less ambiguous?
BACK TO SCENARIO E:

WALTER: OK. Well, let me ask my manager if I can do it. Wait here. (Minutes later.) He said no, I can’t go back there. He has rules, and I have to follow them. He said the merchandise is the warehouse’s responsibility.

CO-WORKER 2: That’s the way it is then. The items will sit back there until next week when Sam gets back. (He leaves.)

CUSTOMER 1: Excuse me, Sir. I am looking for a pair of gloves and a matching scarf. Do you have any brown ones?

WALTER: I don’t see any on the shelf. I know I ordered some last week. They should be here. Wait! They must be in the warehouse. But they should be ready to purchase next week. I don’t have the authority to do the job of the warehouse.

CUSTOMER 2: I would really like to see those matching scarves and gloves as well.

CUSTOMER 3: Me too! I need 3 sets for the Holidays!

WALTER: Sorry, you will have to come back next week.

CUSTOMERS 1, 2, and 3: Forget it! We’re going to another store!

INTERMISSION

Questions for Review:

1. What did Walter do (if anything) to defuse the ambiguous situation?
2. Did Walter do the right thing by sticking to the rules?
3. What does this tell you about how you should define your own role?
4. How did this situation of having two different roles (warehouse guy and Men’s Clothing guy) create such ambiguity? Should it have been so uncomfortable?

PROCESSING SCENARIO E:

Ambiguity fighter #5: DEFINING YOUR ROLE.

Walter did a decent thing by following rules. We all have to follow rules. But there are times when rules get tested, as in Walter’s situation. If you find yourself in a situation where your job description or your role on the job becomes different or starts to change, you might have to be flexible enough to go with the changes or you might lose customers, money, or even your job! In fact, you should be looking for ways to change and expand your role in the company (without
breaking any rules, of course). For example, Walter could devise a plan where each week he could personally unpack and shelve all of the Men’s Clothing items. That would give him more control over the merchandise and take some of the load off the already strained Warehouse crew! So don’t be like Walter. Fight ambiguous role situations by devising new rules that will help grow and expand your responsibilities at work. It might just turn into a nice big raise for you!!

AD LIB the ALTER-ENDING: Ask a student to ad lib the rest of “SENCENARIO E” with the questions below as a guideline for his/her acting:

What do you suppose would have happened to Walter if he had not followed the rule but rather had gone in the back and got the merchandise for the customers? Would the customers have been happy? Would the store have made more money? Would the boss be furious with Walter for breaking the rule?

Feel free to ask more than one student to ad lib the alter-ending to “SCENARIO E” if they have more ideas.
Exercise 5: Thinking on Your Feet

Teacher Directions

Please review this exercise before presenting the topic to the class. This exercise should take 15 minutes to complete.

Step 1: Assign students in groups of two a role-play topic dealing with ambiguity. Each role-play should be about 30 seconds in length.

Step 2: Provide 5 minutes for students to prepare and practice their role-play.

Step 3: Ask each group to develop two questions related to their ambiguity role-play.

Step 4: Transition to Exercise 6: “Ambiguity Self-Assessment.”

Note: It is important that the students understand that each one of these scenarios is an everyday occurrence in the workplace. How an employee deals with ambiguity reflects future leadership, future job responsibilities, and future physical and mental stress issue.
Ambiguity Role-Plays

1. You don’t know what is being asked of you on the job.

2. There is no clearly correct way to handle a situation.

3. You are not sure what would constitute “success” or “quality” in a given situation.

4. You are not sure who should do a particular task.

5. You hear some “news” but are not sure if it is “good news” or “bad news.”

6. You have questions but are not sure whom to ask.

7. You sense that there might be “political” implications from something you did in a certain situation but are not sure what they are.

8. You hear a rumor but are not sure if it is true and/or if you should speak to anyone about it.

9. You have two different bosses asking you to do two different things but you are not sure which to do first.
Exercise 6: Ambiguity Self-Assessment

Teacher Directions

Please review the exercise before introducing the subject. This exercise should take 15 minutes to complete.

Step 1: Make copies of this Self-Assessment and ask students to rate themselves in each category.

Step 2: Discuss the Self-Assessment in class.

Step 3: Transition to Exercise 7: “Ambiguity Wrap-Up.”
Ambiguity Self-Assessment

• I become bored when I don’t know what I am supposed to do.

HOW CLOSELY DOES THIS DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT SITUATION?

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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<td>Not at all</td>
<td>Just a little</td>
<td>Very close</td>
<td>Right on!</td>
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• I am nervous when I don’t know what the future holds.

HOW CLOSELY DOES THIS DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT SITUATION?

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• I am never comfortable in situations where rules are not clear.

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• I have trouble thinking 2 steps ahead of my boss or teacher.

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• It is difficult for me to see a long-term plan or vision of something.

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</table>
• It is difficult for me to ask questions that produce the answers I need.

HOW CLOSELY DOES THIS DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT SITUATION?

1 2 3 4
Not at all Just a little Very close Right on!

• If a situation is the wrong one for me, I have nervousness about making a change on my own.

HOW CLOSELY DOES THIS DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT SITUATION?

1 2 3 4
Not at all Just a little Very close Right on!

• It bothers me if I don’t have a “next step” (a new career option) planned.

HOW CLOSELY DOES THIS DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT SITUATION?

1 2 3 4
Not at all Just a little Very close Right on!
### Tabulate your Score to the Ambiguity Self-Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOTAL SCORE</th>
<th>WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN</th>
<th>WHAT YOU SHOULD DO FOR FOLLOW-UP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>You have the highest level of AMBIGUITY FEAR! You need to work with your teacher or counselor right away.</td>
<td>Make sure you practice the AMBIGUITY FIGHTERS often!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 to 31</td>
<td>AMBIGUITY is a concern for you and you should start working on taking control of it right away.</td>
<td>Take some time to practice developing your weak areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 23</td>
<td>You are on the right track!</td>
<td>Sharpen your weaker points and you will be even better!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 to 15</td>
<td>You have no problems with AMBIGUITY and you are, for the most part, in control of the unanswered questions in your job.</td>
<td>Spend some time with your teacher so you can develop a strategy on building your strengths even further!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### QUESTIONS FOR THE STUDENTS:

1. Which areas of ambiguity from the Self-Assessment are your strongest? Weakest?

2. How do you explain this?
Exercise 7: Ambiguity Wrap-Up

Teacher Directions

*Please review this exercise before introducing the subject to your class. This exercise should take 5 minutes.*

**Step 1:** Have the students answer the following questions in their journals:

1. Describe in detail examples of workplace ambiguity.
2. List some ways we can control workplace ambiguity.

**Final Thoughts:** Ambiguity will always happen in the workplace. Ambiguity is part of human nature because ambiguity is brought on by human beings! How we deal with ambiguity and how we diminish it contributes to our success or failure in the workplace and in life. Remember, good leadership skills, communication skills, organization and prioritization skills, listening and questioning skills, and the ability to know your workplace limitations are ways that you can control much of the workplace chaos. Employers love calm, cool, collected individuals in stressful situations. An employee who deals with ambiguity in this fashion will be assigned increasingly more complex tasks and responsibilities that will ultimately lead into managerial and leadership positions. The skill of dealing with ambiguity is not just a workplace skill. Ambiguity is in every facet of our lives.