



IT'S TIME TO EVOLVE
LEADING WITH JUST ENOUGH ANXIETY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY ROBERT ROSEN

IT'S TIME TO EVOLVE

IN PREHISTORIC TIMES, saber-toothed tigers and other wild animals tried to make primitive man their meal, before he made a meal out of them. Out of this anxiety-ridden society, a built-in coping mechanism was burned into our genes—the fight or flight response. In today's business world, leaders face a modern-day breed of saber-toothed tigers; burnout, corporate takeovers, diminishing finances, and other anxiety-producing events threaten our well-being and the survival of our companies every day.

Our ancestral response to anxiety is no longer enough, nor is it the most effective way to deal with 21st century anxiety. While fighting and fleeing may still be fitting in some circumstances, they can often make matters worse by limiting our ability to live and lead in an uncertain world. It's not appropriate to attack bosses who threaten our careers. It's not acceptable to abandon debt that is driving us to financial ruin. No matter what the anxiety producer, we're expected to deal with it. But most of us have never been taught how.

When it comes to managing our anxiety, it's time to evolve. Anxiety is as much a fact of life today as it was for our ancestors. How we use it makes all the difference. If we let it overwhelm us, it will turn to panic. If we deny or run from it, we will become complacent. But if we use anxiety in a positive way, we will turn it into a powerful force in our lives. We will uncover the hidden driver of business success.

REFRAMING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ANXIETY

It's time to quit seeing anxiety as the enemy and learn to befriend it. This requires letting go of long-held negative views of anxiety based on faulty thinking that goes something like this: "Change and uncertainty make me anxious. Anxiety is bad, a sign of weakness. Therefore, I have to avoid change and uncertainty. I have to do whatever I can to avoid anxiety."

Such faulty thinking comes from centuries of viewing change as dangerous, even life threatening. It comes from medical models that frame anxiety as a mental health problem, and from years of outmoded leadership practices that ignore the human side of business.

Leaders who successfully befriend their anxiety are able to use its powerful force to take them to the pinnacle of success. But what is the evolutionary step that will enable you to power yourself and your organization to the top?

The answer is *Just Enough Anxiety* (JEA). During my 30-year career as a psychologist, entrepreneur, and CEO advisor, I've interviewed and advised more than 250 leaders at organizations worldwide—from Toyota, Singapore Airlines, and Canon in Asia, to UBS and Cadbury Schweppes in Europe, Procter & Gamble, Motorola, and Boeing in the United States, and Fosters Brewing in Australia. The most successful leaders I've met are those who create just enough anxiety inside themselves and their organizations. They are JEA leaders.

What is just enough anxiety? It is the right level of anxiety that drives you forward without causing you to resist, give up, or try to control what happens. Just enough anxiety produces the optimal state of arousal that enables you to stretch beyond the current image you have of yourself. It helps leaders at all levels and in all types of organizations to manage themselves, mobilize people, maximize performance, and accelerate sustainable growth. It is relevant to individuals in all types of situations.

If you live or lead with *too much anxiety*, you lapse into the outdated fight response, driving yourself and your business into chaos and confusion, lowering productivity, and destroying morale. If you live or lead with *too little anxiety*, you slide into the ancestral flight mode that drives you and your organization into complacency, preventing the innovation needed for maintaining a competitive edge.

Too Much Anxiety

Too much anxiety comes from negative thinking and emotions. It causes you to resist, attack, or avoid change to ease the pain you feel. Too much anxiety creates discomfort, tension, and frustration.

Too Little Anxiety

Too little anxiety is grounded in contentment. It is based on an unrealistic belief that all is well, and an unfounded expectation that good times will continue unabated, with no need for change or improvement. Too little anxiety leads to complacency, boredom, and stagnation.

Just Enough Anxiety

Just enough anxiety is the emotional charge that tells you that you're ready to take action, your signal for learning and growth. At the organizational level, just enough anxiety unleashes human energy and creates hope and momentum.

Only by learning to live and lead with *just enough anxiety* can you soar to new heights of success. In fact, my research shows that the ability to create just enough anxiety, more than any other quality, is what will propel you to the top—but not before throwing you into the “gap.”

NAVIGATING THE GAP

The gap is the space between where you are and where you want to be—for yourself and your organization. Whenever your current reality is out of sync with your desired future, you're in the gap, treading, swimming, or drowning in anxiety.

Living in a world of dynamic change creates one gap after another. You enter the gap every time you stretch yourself or solve problems. You step into the gap whenever you decide to be a better person, strengthen your relationships, reach a new team goal, or start a new job. You're thrown into the gap by unexpected illness, plummeting employee morale, the rising costs of doing business, or poor market economies.

No matter how you get there, you'll find that the gap is a breeding place for anxiety. It is your personal laboratory for change. On a personal level, it sets the course for your development. In business, it defines your strategy for growth.

The size of the gap determines your level of anxiety. If the space between where you are and where you want to be is too large, you feel too much anxiety and have trouble taking action. This prevents you from recognizing your own weaknesses or tolerating weakness in others. Too much anxiety also causes you to lose your focus. You may begin making mistakes and bad decisions, eventually immersing yourself and those around you in chaotic energy.

On the other hand, if the space between where you are and where you want to be is too small, you feel no desire to act. You have too little anxiety. You become complacent, find it too demanding to face difficult problems, and gradually lose out to the competition. Too little anxiety dampens enthusiasm and lowers productivity—your own and others.

Too much anxiety or too little anxiety both shut down learning, growth, and performance. They keep you stuck in the gap, unable to move from where you are to where you want to be.

Only when the distance between “here” and “there” is big enough to make you stretch, yet small enough to be surmounted, can you experience just enough anxiety to live and thrive in the gap.

It's important to note here that just enough anxiety differs from person to person and company to company. One leader's “just enough” may be “too much” for someone else. Mature organizations may have a higher tolerance for anxiety than start-ups, either because they've found ways to protect people from anxiety or developed ways of handling it. Or they may live dangerously close to too little anxiety, because they are mired in bureaucracy or content with their history of success. On the other hand, new companies may find that a high level of anxiety is their “just enough.” There is no one-size-fits-all definition of anxiety that applies to every person or situation. Just enough anxiety is a moving target.

If you want to use your anxiety as productive energy and thrive in the midst of change and uncertainty, then now is the right evolutionary moment for reframing how you see and respond to anxiety. To successfully navigate the gaps in your life with just enough anxiety, you need to:

- develop an open mind
- cultivate an open heart
- learn to live in paradox

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DEVELOP AN OPEN MIND

An open mind is vital for developing a new relationship with the anxiety in your life. It enables you to keep your ancestral urge to avoid, resist, run away from, or control change in check. The three keys to opening your mind are self-awareness, commitment to lifelong learning, and non-attachment.

Becoming Self-aware

Self-awareness forms the foundation for living in uncertainty and broadens your understanding about the dynamics of change. When you are more conscious of how change and uncertainty affect you, you can better manage your anxiety.

Self-awareness helps you play to your strengths and compensate for your weaknesses in the midst of change. It also makes you more aware of what is going on around you—and within you—from moment to moment.

To become self-aware, get comfortable sitting with and talking about the anxiety that change produces, both in yourself and in those around you. Regularly assess where you are and where you want to go in the future, while observing how much anxiety is just enough to get there.

Committing to Lifelong Learning

Learning is the change agent in every thriving organization. It is the life raft that enables you to cross the gaps in your life more successfully. It is the vehicle that helps you champion informed risk-taking and sustainable growth—for yourself, for others and for your organization.

When you make learning a priority in your life, you commit to growing yourself and your organization. You avoid rehashing the past or rehearsing the future. As your knowledge increases, so does your sense of urgency and commitment to achieving results.

To be open to learning, let go of fears and behaviors that don't make sense any more and be courageous enough to change patterns that don't work. Stop assuming you know it all. Seek out new information to solve new problems. Admit your mistakes and begin asking difficult questions of yourself and others, recognizing that success and failure are equally good teachers.

Practicing Non-attachment

Becoming attached to the ways things are can sabotage your efforts to live with uncertainty. Trying to maintain stability by controlling or denying the need for change undermines your ability to manage the inevitable ups and downs of life and business. It is only by avoiding unnecessary attachments to success, objects, fame, people, and money that you can truly embrace change as a part of life.

Non-attachment can be a tough concept to embrace. But to develop a truly open mind, you must detach from any particular truth and willingly accept a new truth, even if it contradicts what you think you know.

To practice non-attachment, use your self-awareness to watch for signs of attachment such as: blowing things out of proportion, being overly-critical of yourself or others, never feeling a sense of accomplishment, or balking at new and different ways of doing things. Monitor repetitive thoughts that intensify or exaggerate your anxiety. Refuse to entertain thoughts that cause you too much anxiety. And when new ideas or innovations are under discussion, listen to them weighing both the positive and negative merits they may hold for you and your organization. Remember: If you cling to nothing, you can handle anything.

CULTIVATE AN OPEN HEART

An open heart is the open door for the kind of energy you need to move successfully through the gap. The energy comes from your emotions—fear, anger, love, and compassion. These emotions can slow you down or speed you up.

Only by fully experiencing and skillfully managing your emotions can you proceed through the gap with just enough anxiety. Doing so requires emotional honesty, empathy and compassion, and emotional resilience—the three keys to opening your heart.

Striving for Emotional Honesty

When you are emotionally honest, you are able to feel your emotions without being hooked into them. You recognize feelings of anger, frustration, and fear, as well as feelings of gratitude, joy, and love, —and you express them in healthy ways. This turns the energy of your emotions into productive energy.

Being emotionally honest helps you stay focused and reach your goals. It enables you to live with uncertainty, face change, and manage your anxiety. It prevents you from exploding in anger, imploding in resentment, or sinking into depression. It may even make you physically healthier as it helps you maintain just enough anxiety to keep moving forward.

Strive for emotional honesty by expressing your feelings freely, flexibly, and in healthy ways. Learn to identify and name your feelings so you know what you're dealing with. Accept your feelings and those of others as valid indicators about what may or may not be working, and as valuable gauges about the level of anxiety within yourself and others.

Nurturing Empathy and Compassion

Empathy is the ability to put your self in another's shoes and understand his or her feelings.

Compassion is a sense of shared experience—the ability to understand the suffering of another, to identify with that suffering inside yourself, and to reach out to help others.

Empathy and compassion build relationships. Using this powerful pair can lead to increased performance, more on-the-job engagement, and a passion for winning in yourself and others. Empathy and compassion can also help you stretch people into their discomfort zones, where they can ignite a spark of creativity into the flame of innovation needed to make your organization noticed in the marketplace.

Nurture empathy and compassion by respecting and seeing the good in others, as well as in yourself. Honor people's feelings as true for them, and try to minimize people's pain and fear and maximize their sense of well-being.

Building Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience is the ability to navigate and recover from the inevitable emotional ups and downs of life. It requires seeing uncertainty and change as part of life, while believing in your ability to manage that change and uncertainty. You need emotional resilience to address unexpected challenges. You need it to solve problems, take on extra work, and bounce back from setbacks. You also need it to learn from your mistakes.

Your resilience in the face of adversity helps you continue experimenting and exploring possibilities. It allows you to face seemingly unending difficult and complex issues in this rapidly changing world with just enough anxiety.

To build your emotional resilience, take time to reflect during challenging times. Get help when you need it—from friends, coworkers, partners, or professionals. Take vacations, meditate, or find other ways to rest and renew yourself.

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LEARN TO LIVE IN PARADOX

Having just enough anxiety is all about balance. It's about balancing between too much and too little anxiety. It's about balancing between being nice and being tough. It's about balancing two opposing views at the same time—living in paradox.

A paradox exists when two opposing ideas contain equal power or truth. Both are real and have merit, and, yet, they contradict each other. Businesses and leaders are constantly moving back and forth between opposing conditions as they strive to cut costs *and* increase revenues, improve quality *and* efficiency, challenge *and* inspire people—all at the same time.

During the past 20 years, I've observed that the best leaders are those who have mastered three key paradoxes: *realistic optimism*, *constructive impatience* and *confident humility*.

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Moving Forward with Realistic Optimism

Living and leading with realistic optimism involves telling the truth about the present while dreaming the future. It is the way to keep moving forward in a world that keeps changing.

If you are realistic, you are neither afraid of the truth nor cynical about it. You're good at assessing the current situation and are problem-oriented, fact-based, and a great short-term thinker. You face problems and opportunities head-on and look at all sides of an issue—seeing things as they are, not what you want them to be. You know that being honest with yourself and others is an act of courage, and the only way to run a business in a world of uncertainty.

If you are optimistic, you are all about dreaming the future. You're imaginative, solution-oriented, and a great long-term thinker. You believe that tomorrow will be better than today, and that people are capable of doing more than they think they can. You see the glass half-full, and you know you can refill it, even if it appears to be leaking.

To be both realistic and optimistic, you need to learn to live in the present *and* the future simultaneously. This will allow you to create just enough anxiety to thrive in uncertainty while closing the gap that exists between your current reality and desired future—in both yourself and your organization. When you find the right balance between realism and optimism, you discover the secret to providing focus. With realistic optimism, your vision is grounded in reality and hopeful about the future. You instill a sense of common purpose and a clear mental image of success.

To move forward with realistic optimism, tell people the truth about where things stand. Give them a clear starting point for their journey across the gap. Articulate a compelling vision and let them know where they're going. Give them something to focus on that inspires, stretches, and unites them—a North Star.

Empowering People with Constructive Impatience

Engaging people and making it safe for them to take risks, while challenging them to higher and higher levels of performance, is the hallmark of *constructive impatience*.

Being constructive is about creating a psychologically safe environment. It involves building trust by demonstrating respect and appreciation. If you're constructive, you are predictable and credible, honest and open. You foster participation and learning by helping people feel good about themselves, their work, and their organization.

Being impatient is about challenging the limits, setting bold personal and organizational goals, and unleashing hidden potential. If you're impatient, you focus on performance and results. You set audacious goals to stretch people beyond their comfort zones.

Leading with constructive impatience is a lot like pulling a rubber band. If you pull too hard, you break people's spirits. If you don't pull hard enough, you fail to maximize their potential. But, if you find the right tension, amazing things happen. You engage people's hearts and minds and create just enough anxiety to stretch them to their limits—and beyond.

To empower people with constructive impatience, learn to balance urgency with patience, and your passion for results with your compassion for people. Foster people's hunger to get ahead while also providing them with the needed support to do so. Stretch their capabilities in a setting that is creative and fun. By doing these things, whether you are trying to raise the bar, do more with less, increase sales, or improve performance, you will get more out of your organization—day by day and year by year.

Tapping into the Power of Confident Humility

Perhaps the most counter-intuitive of the three paradoxes, *confident humility* offers significant promise for our world today. This paradox is about learning to lead with power and generosity at the same time.

Confidence is an attitude. It's about believing in yourself and your ability to master your environment. It is also about believing in the people around you. It's being sure that your organization can meet challenges head on, solve problems, and win in the marketplace. You can't build a winning team without it.

Confidence is about believing in yourself and your ability to master your environment.
It is also about believing in the people around you.

If you are confident, you exude confidence in yourself and express confidence in others. You know and share yourself, talk about your family, and are open about your fears and aspirations. You live your values personally and professionally and you encourage others to do the same. This makes you predictable and trustworthy.

Being humble involves admitting that you don't know everything and not feeling like you have to. Humility is essential in today's complex world. It entails listening deeply to others and being eager to learn something new. It also involves giving of yourself in service to others—being generous with your time and attention.

If you are humble, you are generous in your compassionate and respectful attitude toward others. And you are generous in your gentle and accepting attitudes toward yourself. You realize that nobody can have all the answers and that people need each other to thrive in a world of change. You use humility to build mutually rewarding relationships that are catalysts for success. This can make your life more fulfilling and your organization more competitive.

Confident humility is born from a positive self image and compassionate respect for others. It grows with the development of personal power and generosity of spirit. And it blossoms with lifelong learning, strong values, and a desire to share power and serve others. Leading with confident humility helps you take bold actions without becoming arrogant, and maintain a healthy ego without feeling self-important. You feel at ease with your own power. You also readily share power and are adept at empowering others.

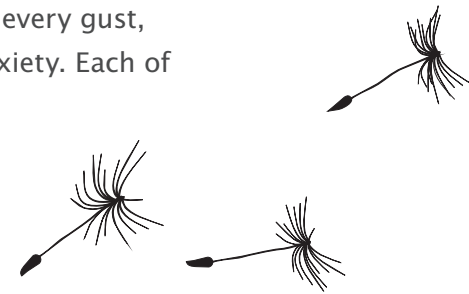
To tap into the power of confident humility, get comfortable with not knowing. Ask for help, rely on and learn from others. Accept who you are by holding onto your self-assurance and accepting your shortcomings at the same time. Know clearly what you can and cannot do.

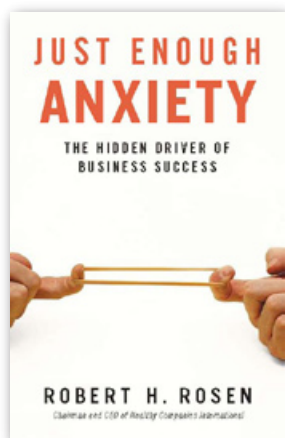
CONCLUSION

Over the past twenty years, I have watched scores of JEA leaders create the right amount of anxiety to move people forward in positive and productive ways. I have coached executives as they have learned to understand and use their anxiety in personal and organization-wide transitions. And I have learned through my own experience growing a small entrepreneurial firm what it takes to create and live with just enough anxiety. And what it takes is an open mind, open heart, and the ability to master three paradoxes: realistic optimism, constructive impatience, and confident humility.

Too much and too little anxiety are both dysfunctional and destructive. They hold you back or send you in the wrong direction. Just enough anxiety gives you the energy you need for optimum performance. The ability to create just enough anxiety, more than any other leadership quality, will propel you to the top.

We stand at a critical juncture in human evolution. As the world continues to increase in complexity, accompanied by stronger and stronger winds of change, we have two choices. We can try to stand still and be blown about at random, fearful and anxious at every gust, or we can lean into the wind. We can learn to live and lead with just enough anxiety. Each of us must make our own decision. What are you going to do?





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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Rosen is CEO of Healthy Companies International and the author of *Just Enough Anxiety: The Hidden Driver of Business Success* (Portfolio; March 2008).

For more information please visit www.justenoughanxiety.com.

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