

## The lost art of saying "I don't know"

**Author :** Steve McKee

**Date :** July 16, 2016



The "Leave" vote prevailing in the UK's Brexit referendum was big news. It was fascinating to watch events unfold from this side of the pond, particularly since what happens here will be affected by what happens there from this point forward.

Most of the people I follow on Twitter know as little about Brexit as I do. But that didn't stop some from anointing themselves "Brexperits" and pontificating on the doom or glory that awaits the UK and, by extension, the rest of us. I have my own thoughts, but honestly, I have no idea what's going to happen.

I also don't know why the Cleveland Cavaliers prevailed over the Golden State Warriors in the NBA finals. Or whether next year will be warmer or cooler than this year. Or if O.J. did it or not. And I don't know whether and to what extent my business will thrive or dive next year. There are some things we just can't know. And yet, there's something inside of us that wants to be so certain of things.

Many times the myth of certainty is harmless. If I'm convinced the Cavs won because of good coaching and you believe the Warriors lost due to bad officiating, well, fine. We can both be as certain as we care to be and neither of us will be the worse off. But other times the stakes are a bit higher.

For example, it's common wisdom that a new CEO should listen, learn and refrain from making sweeping decisions until he or she has ascended the learning curve and gained a clear view of the situation. In some cases this may take days, and in others months, but it's rare to witness a successful CEO who came in in guns-a-blazing on day one. That's a sure way to shoot down the respect of those you're charged with leading.

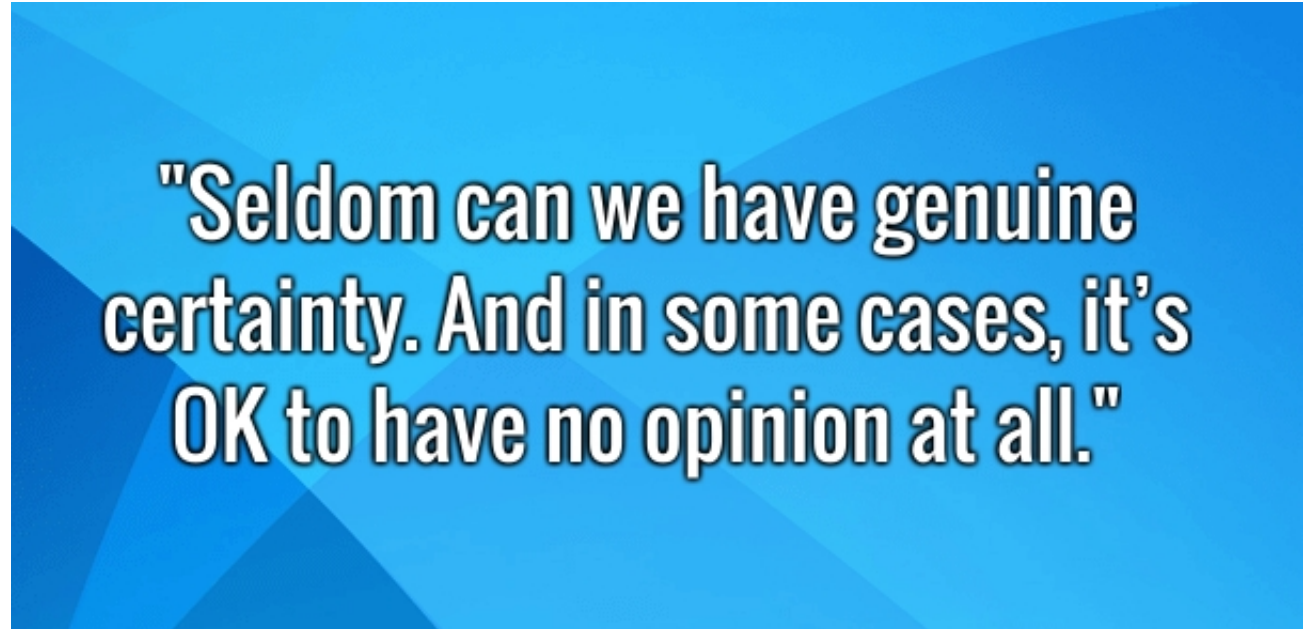
The temptation to certainty is even greater in struggling companies. As the leader of an organization that went through its own two-year trial by fire more than a decade ago, the pressure I felt to have all the answers during that turbulent time was immense -- even if it was somewhat, upon reflection, self-imposed.

After all, a leader is supposed to lead, and not knowing in which direction to head can cause a lot of sleepless nights. In my case it provoked many of my staff to head for the exits, which only

made matters worse.

It was the research we conducted -- not knowing what else to do -- among other former Inc. 500 companies (we had made the list the year prior to stalling) that ultimately corrected my thinking. We found that about one in six of America's fastest-growing companies suffered the same fate as we did after having made the list. In an odd sort of way that took a load off of my shoulders. Maybe I wasn't an idiot. Maybe there were other things going on that I just didn't know at the time.

I have learned since then, both personally and professionally in working with many recovering companies, that saying "I don't know" is not a sign of weakness, or unpreparedness, or a lack of leadership. In fact, knowing when you don't know something -- and being honest about it -- is a mark of a true leader. Unfortunately, in our instant, on-demand, bleat-before-you-think culture it's easy to substitute instinct, opinion and even unfettered bias for certainty. And unfortunately, it infects our personal and political lives as much as it does business.



**"Seldom can we have genuine certainty. And in some cases, it's OK to have no opinion at all."**

There's an issue being discussed of late in my city about which people have become quite polarized. I see good arguments on both sides, and I've even joked that you could give me either podium in a debate about the issue and I'd have a good shot of prevailing. I honestly don't know what the ramifications will be, one way or another. And neither do they, despite their strong protestations.

Most of life is like this. It's about tradeoffs, handicapping the anticipated results of one strategy vs. another and making judgment calls. Seldom can we have genuine certainty. And in some cases, it's OK to have no opinion at all.

Leaders must be decisive, but they can't be omniscient, and a little humility goes a long way. When a decision must be made, make it with the wisest judgment based on the best information

you have. But don't feign certainty when there is none. Nobody likes -- or trusts -- a know-it-all.

*Image Credit: Pixabay*

*This article first appeared in [www.smartbrief.com](http://www.smartbrief.com)*