

Podcast Episode #031

## ENCORE: Why Ambiguity Can Be Good for You

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**Announcer:** Welcome to the LiftOff Project with Coach Pamela.

**Pamela:** Welcome to the LiftOff Project. I am Pamela Mitchell, your host and your coach, and this is the podcast devoted to helping you meld your professional self and your personal self into an enhanced version of your best self. My goal is to help you take control of your work and your life, feel more relaxed and confident, and experience the satisfaction and fulfillment of a sustainable, successful life. Today we are talking about why ambiguity can be good for you. That space of not knowing can oftentimes feel so incredibly painful and our mind wants to go to all the negative outcomes that can happen, but do not do it. There is a space of positivity and possibility even in the most uncertain of times, so we are going to talk about that.

In Ask Coach Pamela, I answered a question that two separate clients asked me and that is how to deal with regrets. Lots of great stuff on tap for you today, so let us get this show started.

**Announcer:** Now it is Tales from the Coaching Front.

**Pamela:** When we embark on a career reinvention, there are a number of internal roadblocks that we will encounter and that is guaranteed. Now, some of them are known. Like fear, for example. We can expect that fear is going to be a companion with us on that journey, but some of them are unknown. They are unexpected, like having to tolerate ambiguity. What is ambiguity? It is that space of uncertainty, unclearness, indefinite. It is that not knowing and we know that not knowing can be very, very painful. Just think about that. When you were standing there faced with a choice and you do not know. You just have no clue; just imagine that sense inside of you that just feels all stressed out because you just do not know what is going to happen. In fact, there has been lots of research done on this. Our brains actually hate this space. It is called ambiguity aversion. We so much hate not knowing that, in fact, what we will do is we will take a known choice that is risky over an unknown choice. How does this show up in career reinvention? Well, you might choose to look for a job in an industry



that is dying or in a failing company because hey, at least I know what I am getting into. Maybe you have heard yourself say that. However, there are two kinds of uncertainty that you need to know about. One is an “ambiguity space” that we have been talking about and the other is risk.

Now, risk is rolling the dice like you are at a casino and you know what those odds are. They might be stuck against you, but hey, maybe you will hit the jackpot. You can quantify those odds, whereas uncertainty is that not knowing space as I said before. Because it's that not knowing space, we assumed that it is probably going to be horrible, but the thing is that not knowing does not mean poor odds. You just do not have enough information to make that assessment. When you are in this whole career reinvention and you are choosing to look for a job in that failing industry because, hey, you know what you are getting into, that is actually inherently a risky move.

You know that the odds are not in your favor because the industry is dying, the company is failing, and so you know that things might not work out for you, that are actually likely not to work out for you, but somehow that feels safer than that space of ambiguity. I talked in my book about this thing: The 10 Laws of Career Reinvention. Law 4 is “what you seek is on the road less traveled.” On that road less traveled, even though it brings ambiguity, it also brings a space of opportunity and possibility. You have to explore that unknown. You have to be able to tell the difference between a situation where you can assess your odds, which is risk, and when you will have to deal with ambiguity.

Now here is the thing. What you have to also understand about ambiguity is that it is risk neutral. Even though you might assume that it is going to be a catastrophic path because you just do not know, so it is probably going to be horrible, that is where our minds go. In fact, that is not true. You just have no data. It could just as likely be good or not good, you just do not know. Here is how to tell the two apart, how you tell risk versus how you tell ambiguity.

Some examples of risk where you know the odds. My company is laying off 20% of its workforce. You can tell what your odds are in that. Or there are two finalists for that position and I am one of them. Again, you can quantify your odds.

Now, examples of ambiguity. My company might lay people off. A space that you do not really know what is going to happen. There might be conversation, but it is not certain. Or, I have interviewed for the job, but they are still talking to other candidates. Again, a space that is indefinite. You do not really know which way it is going to go. As I said before, if you can quantify your odds, you are dealing with risk. If you cannot get a handle on your odds, you are dealing with ambiguity. Why ambiguity is good for you is because as I said earlier, you open yourself up to possibility and those odds could be better. It might turn out that your company does not lay people off or they are talking to other candidates, but they really love you, you do not know. You have to explore to find out.



Here are a few questions that you can ask yourself to help you navigate ambiguity, that uncomfortable space of not knowing. First question: when have I faced ambiguity in the past and things turned out better than I expected? Just file back and see when you just did not know how things are going to turn out, but it really brought something wonderful to your life. Second question to ask yourself: what are the risks I am taking by continuing on the same path in my career? Do the odds look good for this industry or company or not? I once had someone talk to me and their strategy was to hold on. They were 9 years away from retirement and they just said, "Well, I'm just going to work as hard as possible and I just have to do everything I can not to get laid off, so that I can hit my 9 years and retire."

I said, "Actually, that's a very risky strategy because you don't control whether or not you get laid off. You do not control what is going on with this job. A better strategy would be to do a good job, obviously, but also to think about what you might do if this does not work out. That would actually enhance the odds in your favor." You have to look at the odds and really assess what is going on there.

Third question to ask yourself: when I consider pursuing a more ambiguous path, what positive outcomes can I imagine that will help me stay open to the options?" As I said, oftentimes when we are faced with ambiguous space, our minds start to bring up everything, the entire catastrophe that could happen. "Oh, it is going to be horrible. This thing could fall apart." But what you want to do is imagine those positive outcomes as well just so that you remain open to the possibilities. Although it is difficult, tolerate not knowing the outcome of your reinvention. The process of reinvention forces you to get comfortable in this space. It forces you to get used to ambiguity and as I said, that is a good thing.

Stay focused on how ambiguity is risk neutral. It does not automatically mean those poor odds. Though it may feel like a gamble, you actually cannot call this spread if you do not know how many horses are on the field, to pull up this track metaphor. By exploring the road less traveled in your reinvention, you open yourself up to multiple races instead of just one. You increased your opportunity, and you place a bet on the winning horse.

That's it for Tales from the Coaching Front. Now onto our next segment.

**Announcer:** Got a question? She has your answer. It's time for Ask Coach Pamela.

**Pamela:** Today's Ask Coach Pamela came from a question that was asked to me by two different clients who happened to wonder about the same thing. Their question was how to deal with regrets. Each of them had made some decisions in the past that they just felt perhaps they should have done differently. In looking back, they were thinking, "How do I deal with this, because I think maybe I should have gone down a different path."

I understood that because I myself have faced regrets. Because they are clients, I obviously cannot share with you, my lovely liftoff listener, the details of their situation. But I can tell you my own regrets. I can also talk to you about the solution that we came up with that I explained to them and that we worked out to handle those regrets.



Here is my particular situation. In the past, when I was younger, I was very close to my grandparents, and my grandmother in particular. My grandmother was a person who loved to call all her grandchildren and have long conversations with them. I wanted to speak to my grandmother, of course, but she would often call me at work. I would be like, "Granny I'm busy," and I would hang up with the phone on her. She died when I was about 32, so right when I was in the midst of all my working years. I always regretted the fact that I had not carved out more time for her. In this issue of regrets, here is the plan that I came up with to help me handle this and to help my clients handle this.

The first thing is to understand something that we actually talked about in an earlier episode with Tom Sterner of the Practicing Mind: that analogy of skiing that he brought up where we create different grooves in the snow and then it's just a natural pathway that happens. Well, that also happens with regret. We have a groove in our mind, it is just this automatic groove of regrets, and if we notice, many times we are having the same regret. It is not a bunch of different things. It is just one or two things, but it is a path that you are used to going down instinctively. Here is the thing though. Just because you are going down this path, does it make it right or does it make it true? You have to ask yourself how you know that that was a bad decision in the past.

Many times when we look back, we cannot be 100% certain that it was a bad decision. We might think that on its surface. If we really break it down and look at it, we do not truly know because we do not know the alternative scenarios and how they would have played out or unfolded. You have to think about that because you are assuming that if you had followed the other path, that it would have been a great thing. This is the flip of the ambiguity thing that we were talking about earlier in this episode. In this case, when we are regretting, we assumed that if we had taken the other path, it would have been better. But that is not necessarily the case. These regrets that are grooved in your mind can act as a signal that you want to have a different path now and that was the case with my grandmother.

I couldn't go back and do anything, but I could do something now. Whatever you feel you could not do back then, you can do now, and that is the first piece of turning this around. Then the second thing is to look at the underlying reason. You made the decision you did back then. I was young; I was in my late 20s. I just thought I was so busy in life. It was only as I got older that I realized, "Hey, people are not around forever." We do not know that when we are young. I just have to understand that I was a different person back then. That's what you've got to do. You have to know that the person that you are now is in a different position. You can actually make a different decision now. Do not ignore the extenuating circumstances for why you made that decision in the past.

The truth is that I really was busy. She was calling me on the free 800 line at work and I did not know whether I would get in trouble for that. There were some extenuating circumstances there, but the truth is that you do not want to ignore those because you did make a decision with some data then, so do not, now in retrospect, take that data off the table. As I said, we are different people now so if you are having these regrets, turn it



around. Start small in taking a different path now because remembering that the opportunity lies in front of you is the real catalyst for change. There is nothing you can do with your past, but you can make a change in your future, and that in fact is what I did. I could not go back and change things with my grandmother.

My mother-in-law had her final illness and my mother-in-law reminded me of my grandmother in so many ways, both just really strong, wonderful, powerful women. In that situation when she was ill, I made time. I spoke to her. I went. I visited her. When she passed, I had absolutely no regrets. That's what I say to you: take the opportunity that's in front of you today. Take all that you've learned and make your future different. Do not try to change the past.

That's it for this segment of the LiftOff Project. Be sure to visit our website [theliftoffproject.com/podcast](http://theliftoffproject.com/podcast) where you can download a transcript of today's episode. If you have a question for an upcoming segment of ask Coach Pamela, go to [theliftoffproject.com/question](http://theliftoffproject.com/question) and leave me a voicemail. If I answer your question in a future episode, I will send you a free deck of reinvention cards as a gift, so skedaddle on over there and leave me a question. You can also connect with me on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @thecoachpamela. And if you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review for us on iTunes. Your feedback truly does make a difference.

Today's liftoff inspiration comes from Joseph Campbell who says, "Fear, uncertainty, and discomfort are your compasses toward growth, so take that space of uncertainty, ambiguity and use it as a catalyst to move forward towards your dreams." Thank you for listening and remember: why settle for good when great is waiting? Take one small step this week to lift your life. Bye for now.

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