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MAKING SENSE OF AND DEVELOPING
EXECUTIVE LEADERS’ CAPABILITY FOR UNCERTAINTY

by

Kathryn Bennett

THESIS

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Philosophiae Doctor

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in the

FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT

at the

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

Supervisor: Doctor Anton Verwey
Co-supervisor: Doctor Letitia van der Merwe

2015
DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis submitted by me for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (Personal and Professional Leadership) at the University of Johannesburg is my independent work and has not been submitted by me for a degree at another university.

_____________________
KATHRYN ENID BENNETT
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ABSTRACT

In the current times of increasing turbulence and uncertainty defining organisational life, executive leaders need to develop their ‘capability for uncertainty’, that is, their ability to engage with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty. However, what constitutes a holistic capability for uncertainty is not clear. The purpose of the study was to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, including recommendations for future research. This purpose was achieved through an integration of insights derived from making sense of (1) executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty and what capability for uncertainty they develop through their experience; and (2) executive coaches’ lived experience of assisting executives with uncertainty and their views on what constitutes a capability for uncertainty.

A qualitative research approach was adopted, using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The research design was cross-sectional, multi-perspectival and retrospective, utilising a three-phased strategy, with data collected through semi-structured interviews. In Phase 1, six executive leaders were interviewed from two companies with different time periods of organisational uncertainty, resulting in an integrated sample of twelve executives. Six executive coaches, with different training or educational backgrounds, and not in a coaching relationship with the executives in Phase 1, were interviewed in Phase 2. An integrative analysis in Phase 3 of the findings across Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches) informed a proposed coaching framework towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty.

The executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty in both companies was found to be one of flux. Their felt uncertainty was a complex and dynamic phenomenon that comprised overlapping and inter-related types of personal uncertainty and challenges experienced in their leader role. The net effect was that the executive leaders’ felt uncertainty seemed to manifest primarily as issues of identity and decreased personal agency. A core aspect of the executives’ approach to managing their uncertainty was through sensemaking and identity construction. The valence and intensity of the executives’ felt uncertainty appeared to affect the quality of and approach to their sensemaking. The findings clarify the sensemaking and identity construction processes adopted, and the inter-relationship between them, thereby adding to the body of knowledge on executive uncertainty and how it is approached.
The executive coaches were found to use their general eclectic coaching approaches for working with their executive clients’ uncertainty, emphasising the importance of trust for clients to share their experienced uncertainty. While common strategies were identified in working with their clients’ uncertainty, developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty did not seem to be an explicit focus or intention of their coaching.

Potential components constituting a holistic capability for uncertainty in executive leaders were clarified as being: a sense of positive identity, an acceptance of uncertainty, effective sensemaking, learning agility and adopting a relevant leadership approach during organisational uncertainty. A key finding was that a sense of positive identity is crucial. Rooted in social and contextual factors, the implication is that a more explicit socio-psychological construct in executive coaching is required for facilitating positive identity construction. A coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty was proposed, informed primarily by the theoretical lenses of uncertainty management, sensemaking and identity construction.

These findings have implications for executive coaching and leader development. The clarification of a holistic capability for uncertainty may assist organisations in determining purposes of coaching and leader development. For executive coaches, who have the intention of developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty, they may adapt aspects of the coaching framework into their repertoires. With experienced uncertainty being a personal force for change, it is recommended that the constructs of uncertainty management, sensemaking and identity construction, with emphasis on the links between these, be included in the education of coaches. The proposed coaching framework for developing capability for uncertainty also creates several possibilities for future research.
KEY WORDS: capability for uncertainty; executive coaching; executive development; executive leaders; experienced uncertainty; identity; identity construction; sensemaking; uncertainty management.
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### ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>EXCO</td>
<td>Executive Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFC</td>
<td>Global Financial Crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
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<td>IPA</td>
<td>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
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<td>OD</td>
<td>Organisation Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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CHAPTER 1
ORIENTATION

1.1 Introduction to the study

“We suggest that being an effective leader is contingent on the ability to deal with ambiguity and its cognitive-affective reaction, uncertainty. Those who can keep the experience of uncertainty to a tolerable level can keep their options open and embrace ambiguity as an opportunity to bring people together….to learn and adapt as they collectively find their way.” (White & Shullman, 2010, p. 94)

Although turbulence is not a new phenomenon, there is agreement that the scale of turbulence being experienced globally is unprecedented compared to previous generations (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Lane & Down, 2010). The significance of this for leaders is that uncertainty can be expected to define organisational life (Lane & Down, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010). In these times of increasing turbulence and ambiguity, leaders need to be able to engage with uncertainty in their organisational context, while managing their own experienced uncertainty, as suggested by White and Shullman (2010) above. The implication therefore is to develop executive leaders’ ability for engaging with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty, referred to as a ‘capability for uncertainty’ in this study. However, what constitutes such a capability for uncertainty is not clear (Lane & Klenke, 2004).

Given that the operational definition of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ for this study is executive leaders’ ability for engaging with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty, the overall aim of this study was to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty - based on leveraging an integration of insights gained from making sense of executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty, and exploring executive coaches’ experience of working with executive leaders’ uncertainty.

This chapter provides an orientation to the study, by explaining the background to the research problem and clarifying the research purpose and objectives. The current level
of knowledge and proposed value of the study are then outlined. The research design and the positioning of the researcher are discussed, followed by the thesis structure.

1.2 Background to the research problem

The discussion of the background to the research problem commences with the context in which executive leaders are operating. Given the context of increasing turbulence and pressure, the implications are that executive leaders need to develop their capability for uncertainty, which is explored thereafter. Finally, executive coaching as an option for developing such capability for uncertainty is considered.

1.2.1 The context of executive leadership

It is evident that the world of business has not returned to its position prior to the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008 to 2009, with the business environment increasingly being characterised by rapid, constant change, complexity and ambiguity (Smith & Campbell, 2010). Key drivers of this turbulence are generally attributed to inter-connectedness through globalisation, intensified competition, technological innovation, increased diversity, increased regulation and the changing nature of work (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Lane & Down, 2010; Maltbia, Marsick & Ghosh, 2014). The significance of this for leaders in the private and public sectors is that they are living with constant uncertainty in their organisations (Lane & Down, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010).

Executive leaders (or executives) are situated at the apex of an organisation, with responsibility for strategic leadership in these turbulent times (Storey, 2005). In addition, the executive context has changed over the past decade, with increasing pressures to perform and higher turnover at these levels, resulting in experienced uncertainty (Kets de Vries, Ramo & Korotov, 2009; Manderscheid & Freeman, 2012; Smith & Campbell, 2010). Despite some research on leaders' uncertainty as a result of the GFC (Buckle, 2009; Day & Power, 2009), there is a paucity of in-depth research on executive uncertainty in the executive and leadership development field (Preece & Iles, 2009).

1.2.2 The need for a capability for uncertainty

Leadership of organisations has traditionally been rooted in control and certainty (Lane & Down, 2010). The environmental challenges and pressures sketched above are
creating new demands for leadership capabilities, such as flexibility, versatility and the ability to cope with experienced uncertainty (White & Shullman, 2010). However, in a recent global survey by Development Dimensions International (2014) many leaders indicated that they were not very confident in their ability to deal with the challenges of an increasingly complex and uncertain world. As executive leaders are responsible for strategic leadership of their organisations (Hambrick, 2007; Storey, 2005) they need to be catalysts (Akrivou & Bradbury-Haung, 2011), building adaptive cultures which encourage individuals to accept and engage with uncertainty (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007). Executives are influential in setting the tone for how uncertainty is approached in their organisations. They therefore must accept uncertainty themselves and contain their own personal anxieties (Day & Power, 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010), implying the need for developing their capability for uncertainty. Such a capability, in this study, means the executives’ ability to engage with uncertainty in their organisational context, while managing their experienced uncertainty.

When considering leader development, Stephenson (1999) argued for a distinction between ‘capability’ and ‘competency’, as these terms are often used interchangeably with different meanings, and is further discussed in the literature review (chapter 3). In this study, the meaning of ‘capability’ is informed by Stephenson (1999), Hase (2002), and Phelps, Hase and Ellis (2005), as a holistic capability to manage the unfamiliar and the uncertainty in one’s context. The definition of ‘capability’, by Gardner, Hase, Gardner, Dunn and Carryer (2007, p. 252) as a “holistic attribute” or “all-round capacity” enabling people to “deal with the turbulent environment in which they live (or work)”, is aligned with the notion of a holistic ‘capability for uncertainty’ in the current study.

Developing individual capability therefore requires different learning experiences to those for developing competencies, with an emphasis on learning through and from experience (Hase, 2002, p. 3). However, research is required to understand what capability is, how it is enacted and developed in different contexts (Woods et al., 2013). What constitutes a holistic capability for uncertainty therefore requires clarity. Lane and Klenke (2004) recommended that research be conducted on the leadership capabilities required for coping with and managing uncertainty. A key purpose of the present study
was to explore and clarify the notion of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ as enacted by executive leaders during a period of organisational uncertainty, and what capability for uncertainty they develop through their lived experience of uncertainty.

1.2.3 Executive coaching as an option for developing capability for uncertainty

A key challenge is how to develop capability for uncertainty in executive leaders, with literature suggesting that many current leadership development programmes are not designed to equip leaders for the future (DeRue & Myers, 2013; Development Dimensions International, 2014; Hays & Kim, 2009; McCall, 2010). There is consensus however between leaders and academics that leadership is primarily learned through experience (DeRue & Myers, 2013; McCall, 2010), requiring leadership development approaches that are more integrated with leaders’ real-time experiences. Executive coaching is a development intervention which has therefore been suggested for developing leaders’ capability for uncertainty (Day & Power, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010). Coaching is unique as a leader development intervention by virtue of being a one-to-one confidential development process in which an executive coach facilitates a series of coaching conversations, over a specified time, towards achieving the executive leader’s desired outcomes (de Haan & Sills, 2012; Hill, 2010; Kilburg, 2006).

A survey in the United Kingdom (UK) identified the top priority for coaches as being responsive to the economic challenges of client organisations, with a key focus on “coaching clients through change and on coping with uncertainty” (Coaching-at-Work Survey, 2012, p. 12). Although a few authors have explored certain aspects of working with and approaching uncertainty within executive coaching (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Hindmarch, 2008), there does not appear to be an integrated coaching framework or guidelines for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. Thus, for executive coaching to add value to leader development in these times, there is a need to understand the lived experience of executive leaders’ uncertainty - and what a capability for uncertainty is - in order to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing such capability in executive leaders.
1.3 Research problem, purpose and objectives

From the background sketched above, the problem is that executive leaders are experiencing more uncertainty in their organisational contexts, requiring them to develop their capability for uncertainty, defined in this study “as the ability to engage with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty”. However the components of such a holistic capability are not clear. Executive coaching has been suggested as an option for developing capability for uncertainty, but no integrated coaching framework and guidelines currently exist for this.

The purpose of the current study, therefore, is to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, with recommendations for future research, informed by an integration of insights gained through making sense of:

- Executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty - and what capability for uncertainty they develop through their experience; and
- Executive coaches’ lived experience of assisting executive leaders with uncertainty and their views on what a capability for uncertainty is.

The research objectives to address the purpose of this study are outlined in Table 1, showing alignment of the three phases of the study with these research objectives.

Table 1
Research Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of study</th>
<th>Research objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1:</strong> Executive leaders</td>
<td>1. To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty - at a personal level and in their leader role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. To understand what capability for uncertainty executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong> Executive coaches</td>
<td>3. To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 3:</strong> Coaching framework</td>
<td>5. To propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The executive leaders and executive coaches in Phases 1 and 2 above are separate entities and not in a coaching relationship (or dyads) to intentionally explore different contexts and different perspectives, crucial for the purpose of this study. The use of
executive-coach dyads might have pre-empted congruence of perspectives between the executives and coaches.

The rationale for and integration of the research objectives is depicted in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Integration of research objectives in the study](image)

The purpose of the study was to propose a coaching framework and guidelines for developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, which is the deliverable in Phase 3 of the study. For this deliverable, integration in Phase 3 was required across the research objectives in Phases 1 and 2 as illustrated above. Thus, an integrative analysis of the findings for research objectives 2 and 4 would provide insights as to what components constitute a capability for uncertainty, and therefore what the outcomes of the proposed coaching framework could be. Similarly, integration of findings across research objectives 1 and 3 would yield implications for executive coaching and possible leverage points which could be harnessed in the coaching framework to develop the components of a capability for uncertainty.

1.4 Current level of knowledge

A capability for uncertainty was defined for the purpose of this study as the executives’ ability to engage with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty. In this section a brief overview of the literature is outlined to indicate the current level of knowledge on relevant key concepts, emphasising where this study will
make a contribution. The current level of knowledge is considered pertaining to (1) the meaning and nature of uncertainty, (2) executive uncertainty, (3) crucial components for developing a capability for uncertainty, and (4) executive coaching in relation to working with executives’ uncertainty.

1.4.1 The meaning and nature of uncertainty

Uncertainty is pervasive and therefore a multi-disciplinary subject, of interest to a range of disciplines (Bammer & Smithson, 2008; Smithson, 2008a). While qualitative research on the lived experience of uncertainty was lacking in the psychological disciplines (Brashers, 2001; Van den Bos, 2009), phenomenological research in the healthcare field (Brashers, 2001; Penrod, 2001, 2007) has contributed to an understanding of the nature and dynamics of experienced uncertainty, the focus of the present study. In particular, Penrod’s (2001) research on caregivers’ lived experience of uncertainty lent credence to pursuing a phenomenological approach as a basis for informing professional practice. For the purpose of this study, ‘experienced uncertainty’ is defined as personal or subjective uncertainty, manifesting as ‘feeling uncertain’ about the self, one’s context and the inter-relationship between these (Arkin, Oleson & Carroll, 2010).

There is agreement in the literature that experienced personal uncertainty is a cognitive-affective (thinking-feeling) subjective state of being in doubt (Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009; Penrod, 2001, 2007). Uncertainty reduction theorists argue that the discomforting feelings of uncertainty motivate one to reduce the felt uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). In contrast, other theorists view individuals as having a range of responses to uncertainty which are adapted over time, integrated under the theory of uncertainty management (Brashers, 2001; Smithson, 2008a). Thus, experienced uncertainty, triggered by different and multiple sources, has a temporal aspect to it, with shifting appraisals and responses over time (Brashers, 2001; Penrod, 2007; Smithson 2008b). Qualitative research is therefore required to understand the dynamics of experienced uncertainty in different contexts (Van den Bos, 2009), particularly in organisational contexts that are complex and multi-layered (Brashers, 2001). This study will make a contribution to understanding the dynamics of executives’ experienced uncertainty in an organisational context, over a period of time.
As this study explores how executives make sense of their experienced uncertainty, the concept of sensemaking is relevant (Weick, 1995) because more effortful and conscious sensemaking by individuals occurs when there is a disruption in their context (Kuntz & Gomes, 2012; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). While the role of emotion in sensemaking has been acknowledged (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick et al., 2005), it is not understood (Maitlis, Vogus, & Sonenshein, 2013; Weick et al., 2005). A theory about the role of emotion in sensemaking has therefore been developed by Maitlis et al. (2013). With uncertainty being an emotional or cognitive-affective state, the present study will contribute to their theory through understanding the role of uncertainty, as an emotion, in sensemaking. Furthermore, sensemaking is viewed as being filtered through issues of identity (a form of personal uncertainty) and identity construction (Marsico, 2012; Weick et al., 2005), yet the inter-relationship between sensemaking and identity construction is not clear in the literature (Brown, 2014). My study, through exploring how executives make sense of their experienced uncertainty, will contribute to understanding the manifestation of and inter-relationship between the processes of managing experienced uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction.

1.4.2 Executive uncertainty

The literature revealed that executive leaders are experiencing increased uncertainty at a personal level and in their leader role during organisational uncertainty (Kets de Vries et al., 2009; Lawrence, Ruppel & Tworoger, 2014; Manderscheid & Freeman, 2012; Preece & Iles, 2009). Limited research has been conducted on leaders’ experienced uncertainty since the GFC (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Day & Power, 2009), however, it has not focussed on the lived experience over time, which my study has, using executive leaders’ retrospective views through a period of organisational uncertainty. There has also been research on the experience of executive transitions, suggesting that these are times of experienced uncertainty, particularly for newcomers to organisations (Day, 2009; Smerek, 2011). Taken together, there is a scarcity of research on executive uncertainty in the executive and leader development literature, as noted by Preece and Iles (2009), which this study will therefore attempt to redress.
1.4.3 Crucial components for developing a capability for uncertainty

While the overall meaning of a holistic capability for uncertainty has been clarified in the literature (Gardner et al., 2007), what constitutes such a capability is not clear, therefore requiring research (Buckle, 2009; Lane & Klenke, 2004; Woods et al., 2013). Hence, the literature review identified concepts and components that seemed to align with and might be crucial for developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty. These concepts and components are:

- A tolerance or acceptance of uncertainty (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Day & Powers, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010).
- Adaptive capacity (Bennis & Thomas, 2002).
- Learning agility (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Kolb, 1984; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002; McCall, 2010; Woods et al., 2013).
- Effective sensemaking (Ancona, 2011; Maitlis et al., 2013; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Schwandt, 2005).

The findings of this study will contribute to the clarification of what constitutes a holistic capability for uncertainty, thereby clarifying what components need to be developed by executive leaders in the proposed coaching framework.

1.4.4 Executive coaching - in relation to working with executives’ uncertainty

Executive coaching has been suggested as an option, within the spectrum of executive and leader development interventions, for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (Day & Power, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010). My review revealed a paucity of literature in the coaching field on working with clients’ uncertainty, only finding three studies (Buckle, 2009; Hindmarch, 2008; Reynolds, 2011) of relevance to the construct of experienced uncertainty.

Despite certain authors calling for coaches to develop their approaches to better service clients in these times of increasing turbulence (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Clutterbuck &
Megginson, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-Travis; 2011), there was a scarcity in the executive coaching literature on the proactive development of a capability for uncertainty through coaching. The one exception was exploratory research conducted by Buckle (2009) to identify organisational purposes for coaching in relation to uncertainty. Her findings implied that organisational purposes were more implicit than explicit, as the Human Resources (HR) sponsors of coaching had difficulty in articulating coaching purposes for developing a capability for uncertainty. The current study will therefore make a contribution to executive coaching practice by (1) clarifying the components crucial for developing a capability for uncertainty, and (2) by proposing an integrated coaching framework and guidelines for developing such capability.

1.5 Proposed value of the study

Meaningful contributions to theory and practice were identified when outlining the current level of knowledge on relevant concepts above. Here these potential contributions are aligned to the five research objectives of the study. After stating each potential contribution, relevant authors who highlighted gaps in knowledge, recommended specific research and/or implications for executive coaching practice in relation to the stated contribution are noted in parentheses.

An in-depth understanding of executive leaders' lived experience (research objective 1) will extend knowledge on the complexity and dynamics of executives' experienced uncertainty over time in the organisational context (Brashers, 2001; Lane & Klenke, 2004; Preece & Iles, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). The use of two different companies for research objective 1 may highlight contextual factors that are relevant to executives' experienced uncertainty (Brashers, 2001). Understanding the nature of executives' experienced uncertainty and how they make sense of it, will contribute to understanding the role of emotion in sensemaking, particularly to the theory proposed by Maitlis et al. (2013). Increased understanding of the inter-relationship between the processes of managing experienced uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction will be gleaned (Brown, 2014). Implications for executive coaching towards developing executives' capability for uncertainty will be drawn from the in-depth understanding of executives' experienced uncertainty (Day & Power, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010).
Understanding what capability for uncertainty was developed by the executives through their lived experience of uncertainty (research objective 2), together with the executive coaches’ views on what a capability for uncertainty is (research objective 4), will help to clarify what components constitute a holistic capability for uncertainty (Lane & Klenke, 2004; Woods et al., 2013). This clarification will also have implications for executive coaching practice (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011) and for organisational sponsors of coaching, by enabling articulation of coaching purposes for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (Buckle, 2009).

Understanding executive coaches’ experience in working with their executive clients’ uncertainty (research objective 3) will highlight implications for executive coaching practice for developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Day & Power, 2009; Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011; White & Shullman, 2010). The integration of the findings from the executive leaders’ experience of uncertainty (research objective 1) and the executive coaches’ experience of working with executives’ uncertainty (research objective 3), will contribute to executive coaching practice through proposing a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (research objective 5). This proposed coaching framework and guidelines will contribute to executive coaching practice and recommendations for future research for adding value to organisational clients in these turbulent times (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011).

1.6 Research design

The research study adopted a qualitative approach informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as developed by Smith (1996), which falls within an interpretivist research paradigm. IPA embodies the principles of being inductive, interpretive and idiographic, to be elaborated on in chapter 4. The role of the researcher is interpretive, with IPA recognising the value of the researcher’s perspectives in interpretation of the data. As this study adopted an interpretive approach, with the researcher being the main research instrument, this thesis is written in the first person, with a balance of active and passive voice.
IPA was aligned with my research objectives, as it is considered a suitable approach for research focused on exploring individuals’ experience of a specific phenomenon and how they make sense or meaning of it – and for informing professional practice (Hindmarch, 2008; Penrod, 2007). The research strategy was cross-sectional and multi-perspectival, comprising three samples (of six individuals) in South Africa, which explored a different perspective of the phenomenon being investigated, as follows:

1. The lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders in a private sector company, which had been going through prolonged uncertainty for five years.
2. The lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders in a state-owned company in the public sector, which had been going through 18 months of uncertainty.
3. The lived experience of executive coaches in working with executives’ uncertainty.

Data collection from the first two samples of executive leaders occurred in Phase 1, followed by data collection from the sample of executive coaches in Phase 2. Of note, these were separate, distinct samples, and not executive-coach dyads. The primary unit of analysis was the individual in each of these three samples, consistent with the idiographic nature of IPA (Willig, 2008). Thereafter, the analysis identified the patterns of similarity and instances of variance across the individuals within each sample (Smith et al., 2009). As IPA focuses on small, homogeneous samples based on the lived experience of the phenomenon being investigated, purposive and convenience sampling were used for the three samples (Smith et al., 2009).

In Phase 1, the study explored the executive leaders’ retrospective view of their lived experience of uncertainty during a period of organisational uncertainty, prior to and up to the time of the present study. This retrospective view would therefore give an understanding of the dynamics of the executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty over a period of time. Thus, the main sampling criterion for executive leaders was that they were members of an executive committee in a company which had experienced a period of organisational change and uncertainty, prior to and up to the time of data collection. The first company selected had a five-year period of organisational uncertainty. I was concerned about the ability of participants to recall their lived experience of uncertainty, so chose a second company with a shorter period of organisational uncertainty, that is, 18 months. My rationale was that these different time
periods taken together would yield a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the executives’ experienced uncertainty over time. The intention was ultimately to integrate the findings across these samples from the two companies.

**In Phase 2**, the study explored executive coaches’ experience of and approach to working with executive leaders’ uncertainty. The key sampling criteria for the executive coaches were level of coaching experience and having coaches with different training or educational backgrounds, to gain diverse perspectives of their experience in working with executives’ uncertainty.

The individuals in all three samples participated voluntarily, signing informed consent forms prior to data collection. A key ethical consideration was ensuring anonymity for the participants and for the two companies. I collected the data from the three samples through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded then transcribed verbatim. After the contents were verified by the participants, the interview transcripts were analysed inductively, first for Phase 1 (executive leaders), then for Phase 2 (executive coaches), using the IPA guidelines (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). A peer researcher, who was a leadership coach with IPA experience, carried out independent analyses to promote dialogue, as a form of triangulation aligned with an interpretivist research paradigm (Hammersley, 2009). While a preliminary literature review was carried out for the purpose of developing my research proposal for this study, an in-depth literature review was conducted iteratively after data collection for Phase 1, then after data collection for Phase 2, to facilitate interpretation of the data.

**In Phase 3**, an integrative analysis of the findings from the executive leaders’ experience of uncertainty (Phase 1) and the findings from the executive coaches’ experience of working with executives’ uncertainty (Phase 2) was conducted, as depicted in Figure 1 (see page 6). The insights from this integrative analysis were then leveraged in the proposed coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty.

**1.7 Positioning the researcher**

In adopting an interpretivist research approach, such as IPA, researcher biases are not viewed as necessary to eliminate, rather they are seen as crucial for assisting the
researcher with interpreting the data (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008). I therefore present my own background, experience, perspectives and personal motivation in relation to the research subject, when the research commenced, as suggested in the qualitative research literature (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Ortlipp, 2008; Shaw, 2010).

My organisational career and background were in all facets of Human Resource (HR) management. I then chose to pursue a freelance career as an Organisation Development (OD) consultant. By making this choice I could focus on the areas of HR that I enjoyed and found meaningful. I worked mostly in the areas of change leadership, culture change, team development and leadership development. As part of leadership development interventions, there was a shift towards developing a coaching leadership style, which stimulated my interest in becoming a leadership coach, alongside my OD consulting work. I then embarked on a path of coach training and coach education.

Over the previous six years I also became involved in the development and education of coaches, as a part-time faculty member with a South African university. I therefore have a keen interest in the development of coaching practice and education of coaches. Based on my OD experience I believe that we (the coaching profession and coaches) need to develop our approaches to add value to organisations by contributing to the development of leaders (our clients) in relation to their changing needs. As coaches, we need to think about coaching approaches which equip leaders with abilities that help them to adapt to their changing contexts in the longer term, that is, after the coaching has ended. Thus, my view is that as coaches we need to have intentions in our coaching work, while honouring our clients’ agendas.

In recent years I noticed how clients’ experience of uncertainty, in relation to increasing turbulence and more pressure in their roles, was becoming more prominent in my coaching. I observed how unsettling my clients’ uncertainty could be, yet I realised that in many instances their uncertainty was also a force for personal change and growth. Discovering that the concept of uncertainty was scarce in the coaching and leader development literature, I decided that ‘experienced uncertainty’ was the area of focus for my research. My own coaching approach, similar to other coaching approaches, is informed by working with subjective realities of my clients, appreciating that their mental frames are key leverage points in their learning and change. Thus, I believed that an in-
depth understanding of leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty, as a basis for informing coaching practice and meaningful development of our clients, was required, which went to the heart of my study.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is outlined in Table 2, aligned with other IPA doctoral theses identified, while customised to the different phases of my study.

Table 2
Structure of the thesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Focus of chapter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Orientation</td>
<td>Sets the context for the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Executive uncertainty</td>
<td>Literature review of the key theoretical concepts and research relevant to executive uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Developing executives’ capability for uncertainty</td>
<td>Literature review of the key theoretical concepts and research related to the development of executives’ capability for uncertainty with a primary focus on executive coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Research methodology</td>
<td>Description of the research approach adopted, explaining the research context, the sampling, data collection and data analysis, while emphasising the role of the researcher and ethical considerations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Findings for Phase 1 - Executive leaders</td>
<td>Presentation of the findings of Phase 1 of the study, pertaining to the executive leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Findings for Phase 2 - Executive coaches</td>
<td>Presentation of the findings of Phase 2 of the study pertaining to the executive coaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Discussion of findings</td>
<td>Discussion of findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches), interpreted in relation to the literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Coaching framework and guidelines</td>
<td>Outline of the coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, based on an integrative analysis across the findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Conclusions and recommendations</td>
<td>Summary of key findings to address the research objectives. Conclusions are drawn, with implications for practice and future research. The researcher's reflections on the study are included.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The literature review is covered in two chapters, to address concepts relevant to the research objectives of the study, as shown in Figure 2 on the next page.
Figure 2. Conceptual framework for the literature review

The above conceptual framework depicts how chapter 2 first focuses on key concepts related to experienced executive uncertainty in the context of increasingly turbulent times. Chapter 3 explores the meaning of a capability for uncertainty, culminating in the case for executive coaching being one viable option, within the spectrum of executive development, as a means of developing executives’ capability for uncertainty.

1.9 Conclusion

The background, focus of the research, the current level of knowledge and potential contribution of the study to theory and practice were outlined in this chapter. The qualitative research design adopted for the study was also briefly explained. The study is informed by an interpretivist paradigm. For this reason, the researcher’s background, perspectives and motivation, in relation to the study, were highlighted. The thesis structure was outlined, with further clarification of the conceptual framework underpinning the literature review across chapters 2 and 3.

The next chapter reviews the key theoretical concepts and research in the literature relevant to executive uncertainty.
CHAPTER 2
EXECUTIVE UNCERTAINTY

2.1 Introduction

This chapter forms the first part of the literature review, related to research objective 1, which was to understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty at a personal level and in their role of leader. The first section focuses on the meaning and role of executive leadership in turbulent times. The construct of uncertainty adopted in the study is clarified in the second section. Thereafter, the third section examines how uncertainty is engaged with and managed by individuals. These first three sections lay the foundation for the final section in which executive uncertainty is explored, the primary phenomenon of interest of the study.

2.2 Executive leadership in turbulent times

This section sets the backdrop for the context in which the study was conducted. The meaning of executive leadership and then the role of executive leadership in the current times of increasing turbulence are examined.

2.2.1 The meaning of executive leadership

Before turning to the literature it is important to position my study, focused as it is on executive leaders. While I do refer to ‘leadership’ at times, the intent of the research was to make sense of the lived experience of uncertainty by ‘individual’ executive leaders (or executives). The term ‘leadership’ relates to the social structures and processes of relational and collective leadership (Day, 2000; Day et al., 2009; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004). However, the inter-dependence between leader and leadership is noted (Day et al., 2009), as leaders also need to be effective in collective leadership processes, particularly executive leaders.

Executive leaders are those situated at the uppermost levels of an organisation, traditional studies of whom have formed part of upper echelon theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) and top management theory (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996). These theories espoused that those in the upper echelon and top management team are pivotal in shaping organisational outcomes. The focus of these theories was more on the
characteristics of executives and their influence on organisational outcomes. This focus on executive leadership in the literature then shifted to strategic leadership, which placed emphasis on the organisational and environmental context, due to more complexity being experienced (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Such complexity relates to “the inter-relationship, inter-action and inter-connectivity of elements” (Mitleton-Kelly, 1998, p. 3) within the organisation and between it and its environment, and the emergent patterns from these (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). Thus, ‘strategic leadership’ refers to leadership of organisations rather than leadership in organisations (Storey, 2005, p. 5), that is, overall leadership of and responsibility for the whole organisation and its strategic direction (Storey, 2005). Strategic leadership has been defined as “a person’s ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organisation” (Ireland & Hitt, 2005, p. 63).

While being responsible for leadership of their functional portfolios, for the purpose of this study, I define executive leaders (or executives) as members of the top management team or executive committee who provide strategic leadership of the organisation as a whole. This definition includes the chief executive officer (CEO) or managing director (MD). The role of executive leadership in times of increasing turbulence, and therefore increased uncertainty, is considered next.

2.2.2 The role of executive leadership in turbulent times

As White and Shullman observed (2010, p. 102), “Almost every competitive commercial market or governmental setting today is inherently rife with ambiguity and confusion”, with organisations facing turbulent times in both the private and public sectors (Lane & Down, 2010). This is relevant to the present study as the executives from a private company and a state-owned company in South Africa comprised the sample for exploring their lived experience of uncertainty. The state-owned company in the study is defined as one owned by a municipality (Municipal Systems Act No. 32, 2000).

In defining the term ‘turbulent’ as understood in this context, Lane and Down (2010) point out that while it is not a new phenomenon, the scale is unprecedented due to globalisation, innovation in information technology, market volatility, increased
complexity and the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 (Hays & Kim, 2009; Lane & Down, 2010). The status of business organisations is not returning to that before the financial crisis (Day & Power, 2009; Smith & Campbell, 2010). Turbulence is also being experienced in the public sector (White & Shullman, 2010); for example, Head (2010, p. 9) described public management as being “characterised by complexity, uncertainty, information overload, multiple and conflicting goals, and diverse expectations by political superiors, the media and external stakeholders”.

If the key role of executive leaders is to provide strategic leadership of the organisation, a new type of strategic leadership is now required as old models and practices, which focused primarily on control, efficiency and fostering predictability (or certainty), are no longer relevant (Day & Schoemaker, 2008; Hays & Kim, 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; Simpson, 2012; White & Shullman, 2010). Strategic leadership needs to be based on viewing the organisation as a social enterprise and a complex adaptive system (Boal & Schultz, 2007), which means acknowledging that complexity is not going to be controllable or knowable (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Obolensky, 2010; Stacey, 1996).

The key feature of complex adaptive systems is emergence from interaction of its multiple, diverse, changing and independent agents, resulting in new and unexpected patterns, processes or structures (Kimball & van Rhyn, 2014). When organisations are acknowledged as being complex adaptive systems, executives need to adopt an enabling leadership approach to foster adaptive capacity within their organisations (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In other words, executive leaders need to be catalysts (Akrivou & Bradbury-Haung, 2011). They must facilitate the conditions for allowing the emergence of conversation, diversity of perspectives, collaboration and self-organising potential within the organisation, which then translates into adaptive capacity of the organisation and emergent strategy, both essential for adjusting to the environment (Akrivou & Bradbury-Haung, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Stacey, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Complex adaptive systems have been described by complexity scientists as comprising of and shifting between three different zones, namely, zones of certainty, zones of chaos and those in between, referred to as the edge of chaos (Kimball & van Rhyn, 2014; Lane & Down, 2010). However, Kurtz and Snowden (2003, p. 466) point out that in reality
these zones of “order and un-order intertwine and interact”. An enabling leadership approach, relevant to the edge of chaos, needs to be balanced with continuing achievement of the organisation’s short-term goals, which lies in the zone of more certainty (Lane & Down, 2010). When there are chaotic zones within an organisation, leadership must focus on sensegiving and providing boundaries in a top-down approach to contain the anxiety, so that people can work with the context (Lane & Down, 2010). The implication is that executive leaders need to be flexible in adapting or blending their leadership approach to shifting degrees of turbulence and complexity within their organisations and environments (Obolensky, 2010; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

In sum, it is important for executive leaders to build adaptive cultures which encourage individuals to accept, engage with and even embrace uncertainty (Buckle, 2009; Day & Powers, 2009). As catalysts, executives must accept and embrace uncertainty themselves, because “how leaders contend with uncertainty in the external world is partly a function of how they deal with uncertainty themselves” (Lane & Down, 2010, p. 525). Leaders therefore need to be comfortable with uncertainty in their context and able to contain their own experienced personal uncertainty (White & Shullman, 2010).

2.3 The meaning and nature of uncertainty

Given that a primary objective of the present study is to understand executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty and how they make sense of uncertainty, at a personal level and in their role of leader, it is essential that the meaning and nature of uncertainty be examined, as applied in the study. Thereafter how individuals engage with and manage their uncertainty is explored, including two key concepts relevant to making sense of uncertainty in the organisational context, namely, sensemaking and identity construction.

Uncertainty is pervasive in many contexts of life and therefore a trans-disciplinary subject of interest to many disciplines (Bammer & Smithson, 2008; Brashers, 2001; Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009), such as, inter alia, healthcare, psychology, decision-making, economics, organisational theory, communication and existentialism. Smithson (2008a) concluded that there is “no cogent, readily identifiable body of literature on uncertainty” (p. 13).
2.3.1 The construct of uncertainty

There are different types of uncertainty (Arkin et al., 2010; De Cremer & Sedikides, 2005; Van den Bos & Lind, 2009) and varying definitions of uncertainty in the literature across different disciplines, making it difficult to define the construct of uncertainty (Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008b). Uncertainty includes concepts of complexity and ambiguity, and the use of these terms in different ways adds to the confusion. The following definition usefully includes and differentiates the meaning of these different concepts within uncertainty:

“Uncertainty is composed of four aspects: (a) complexity, referring to a great number of parts that have a large variety of relations; (b) ambiguity, referring to a suspension of clarity, as the meaning of one part is determined by the flux and variation in other parts; (c) deficit knowledge, referring to the absence of a superordinate knowledge structure that can resolve the contradiction between parts; and (d) unpredictability, implying lack of control of future developments.” (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007, p. 34)

The above definition highlights the multi-faceted nature and complexity of the meaning of uncertainty. Brashers (2001, p. 481), a communications theorist, cautioned one to be cognisant of uncertainty as being multi-layered and inter-connected, particularly within an organisational context. In other words, people may experience multiple sources of uncertainty at once, or people may need to develop responses which take into account different goals, tasks and relationships in their contexts.

Thus, the meaning of uncertainty in the current study needs to fit with the organisational context and focus of my study, which is explained next utilising Figure 3 below as a frame of reference. The multi-layered and inter-connected nature of uncertainty in organisations is captured in this figure through examining uncertainty at three levels - the external environment, the organisation (internal environment) and the individual in the organisation – and the inter-relationship between these, as illustrated by the bi-directional arrows between these levels.
As shown above, given the increased turbulence in the environment, leaders are “facing unprecedented levels of environmental uncertainty” (Chalwa, Mangaliso, Knipes & Gauthier, 2012, p. 200). Environmental uncertainty relates to the complexity of the environment in which the organisation is situated (Duncan, 1972; Gailbraith, 1973), that is, the factors in the external environment beyond the boundaries of the organisation. These factors pertain to globalisation, customers, suppliers, competitors, socio-political trends, the industry, regulatory changes and technological developments (Chalwa et al., 2012). Due to the complexity in the number of factors (or variables) and the increasing pace of change (Duncan, 1972), environmental uncertainty develops from the organisation’s inability to predict or control trends in its environment (Milliken, 1987).

The interdependent nature of organisations and their external environment was emphasised by Emery and Trist (1965), suggesting that organisational performance is contingent on its ability to read and respond to its uncertain environment. Thus, organisations adapt their strategy, structure and processes to their external environment (Miles & Snow, 1978). They also enact their environment through strategic choices and strategic positioning (Porter, 1980). This strategic positioning and adaptation of the organisation, a key role of executive leaders in fostering adaptive capacity (Akrivou & Bradbury-Haung, 2011), leads to organisational changes, re-structuring and innovation.
initiatives, resulting in an organisational context of uncertainty (see Figure 3). Being a social enterprise, other factors in the organisation contribute to uncertainty, such as power relationships and influence, interpersonal relations of members and their interactions with each other due to inter-dependence of organisational units in meeting their objectives (Chalwa et al., 2012; Hogg, 2009; Karp & Helgo, 2008).

Individual organisation members, including executive leaders in their personal capacity and in their role as leaders, therefore respond to the organisational context of uncertainty they are situated in, as illustrated in Figure 3. While there is objective uncertainty in one’s environment or context, such as a lack of information, the subjective uncertainty experienced by people within their context is considered more important for understanding human behaviour in the fields of psychology (Hogg, 2009; Smithson, 2008b; Van den Bos, 2009). Uncertainty is really a subjective perception, even if one has relevant knowledge or information about a topic or event, an individual’s assessment of his or her own state may be one of feeling uncertain (Brashers, 2001).

Feeling uncertain is defined by Van den Bos (2009) as ‘personal uncertainty’, that is, “a subjective sense of doubt” – and it is generally “an aversive or at least an uncomfortable feeling” (p. 198). It is this experienced uncertainty of individuals, due to personal or subjective uncertainty, which forms the primary focus of the present study. The definition of experienced uncertainty used in this study (see Figure 3) is informed by that of Arkin et al. (2010), that it is a personal, subjective sense of uncertainty “regarding the self, the world and the inter-relation between the two”. Of relevance, this definition views experienced uncertainty as operating at the interface of the individual and their context.

Experienced uncertainty may be triggered by situations or events in one’s context which challenge an individual’s perceptions, beliefs and sense of self or identity (Hogg, 2009). Examples of personal uncertainty are the feelings induced from receiving negative feedback from significant or important people (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) and uncertainty about one’s standing in an organisation (De Cremer & Sedikides, 2008), referring to the negative perceptions or regard that other organisational members have of one. Furthermore, it is argued that the aversive feeling of personal uncertainty tends to motivate one to take action or behave in ways to reduce it (Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). Hence, the feeling of personal uncertainty is seen to be a motivational force.
The doubt experienced when feeling personal uncertainty may be related to either the meaning or outcome of the individual's situation (or context), relating to two modes of uncertainty, existential or situational (Penrod, 2007). In existential terms, personal uncertainty and its associated state of anxiety are seen to be essential to the nature of existence because life is inherently uncertain (Segal, 2011; van Deurzen, 2012). These feelings of anxiety may be crucial to questioning one's values, choices, possibilities and meaning of life (Gordon, 2003; Segal, 2011; Van den Bos, 2009, van Deurzen, 2012). Hence, although personal uncertainty is often viewed negatively, some theorists suggest that uncertainty is also essential for spurring people on to self-improvement and in search of meaning (Brashers, 2001; Smithson, 2008a; Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010), implying a potential positive aspect to personal uncertainty.

In sum, there is a degree of consensus on the meaning of experienced personal uncertainty as a state of being in doubt, based on an individual's subjective perceptions within their context, resulting in an aversive or discomforting feeling. However, there are different views as to the negative or positive motivational force of personal uncertainty.

2.3.2 Individual responses to contextual uncertainty

Having an idea of the overall complexity of uncertainty in the organisational setting, I now consider how individuals respond to contextual uncertainty, leading to experienced uncertainty. There is agreement that people vary in the way they respond to uncertainty, that is, uncertainty is individualised and subjective (Brashers, 2001; Smithson, 2008a). While many are uncomfortable with uncertainty, it is acknowledged that some individuals accept and even embrace or initiate it (Brashers, 2001; Buckle, 2009; Clampitt & DeKoch, 2001; De Cremer & Sedikides, 2009; Smithson, 2008a). It is commonly pointed out that an individuals' appraisal of uncertainty will be influenced by their own predispositions and contextual factors (Brashers, 2001; De Cremer & Sedikides, 2009; Hogg, 2001; Smithson, 2008b; Van den Bos, 2009).

2.3.2.1 Individual predispositions to uncertainty

In considering individuals' predispositions in personality trait research, one's uncertainty response is seen to be related to an individual's predisposition to tolerate ambiguity (Budner, 1962) or one's personal orientation to uncertainty (Greco & Roger, 2001;
Sorrentino & Roney, 2000; Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010). Accordingly, people who have an intolerance for uncertainty tend to adopt more rigid black-white (or either-or) thinking, often ignoring reality and demonstrating premature closure, rather than openness to exploring (Clampitt & DeKoch, 2001; Greco & Roger, 2001; Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010).

2.3.2.2 The appraisal of uncertainty and emotional responses

There is consensus that individuals’ responses to contextual uncertainty are shaped by their appraisals and re-appraisals of the situation or context of uncertainty (Brashers, 2001; Liu & Perrewe, 2005; Van den Bos, 2009). These appraisals result in different emotional responses, which can shift over time (Brashers, 2001; Penrod, 2007), giving rise to the question of how individual appraisals account for different emotional responses. In social neuroscience, which studies the brain for understanding the “biological foundations of the way human beings relate to each other and themselves” (Rock, 2008, p. 1), findings have emerged in relation to the appraisal of uncertainty. The primary motivation of human behaviour, in several domains of social experience, appears to be driven by wanting to minimise threat and maximise reward (Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2008), similar to the ‘fight-flight’ stress response. Hence, five key social needs, one of which is the need for certainty, may activate the brain’s alarm system of perceived reward or threat (Rock, 2008), as illustrated in Figure 4.

![Figure 4. The appraisal of uncertainty and emotional responses](image)

As depicted above, individual appraisals of uncertainty relate to the source of uncertainty being viewed as a threat or a reward. The threat response is aligned with theorists who view the distressing feelings of uncertainty as motivating one to reduce the uncertainty (Greco & Roger, 2001; Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). Positive emotional
responses to uncertainty, such as excitement or hope, tend to occur when the uncertainty is appraised as beneficial or as an opportunity, motivating one to engage with the uncertainty. Thus, different emotional responses of varying intensity are possible when experiencing uncertainty (Brashers, 2001; Clampitt & DeKoch, 2001; De Cremer & Sedikides, 2009; Smithson, 2008b).

Moreover, future-orientated emotions, experienced when appraising or anticipating a future event, are associated with a higher level of uncertainty (Liu & Perrewe, 2005, p. 266). Individuals tend to experience more intense emotions when anticipating events than retrospection of past events (Van Boven & Ashworth, 2007). This type of emotion, termed ‘anticipatory’ (Liu & Perrewe, 2005; Smithson, 2008b), is often associated with earlier periods of organisational change, when there is more uncertainty about the future. Evaluative emotions, on the other hand, are related to appraising events when they are known or become known over time (Liu & Perrewe, 2005).

In sum, individuals experience a range of emotions during periods of organisational change as events unfold, ranging from strong negative emotions, to mixed emotions (both positive and negative) and to primarily positive emotions (Brashers, 2001; Liu & Perrewe, 2005, Smithson, 2008b). The shifts in emotional responses over time, including the intensity of these emotions, are due to individuals’ appraisals and reappraisals of uncertainty over time (Brashers, 2001; Liu & Perrewe, 2005; Penrod, 2007), which may be influenced by their predispositions and/or contexts.

2.3.3 The phenomenon of experienced uncertainty

Much of the research on uncertainty in the psychological disciplines has been based on experimental simulations using manipulations of uncertainty, with a focus on correlation of uncertainty with different variables. Thus, qualitative research has been suggested to gain more in-depth understanding of the lived experience of uncertainty, and how people actually respond to and manage uncertainty across different contexts (Brashers, 2001; Van den Bos, 2009). Attention therefore shifts to the healthcare literature where more extensive, in-depth qualitative research has been conducted on the phenomenon of experienced uncertainty (McGonigal-Kenney, 2011; Penrod, 2001, 2007). Of relevance to the present study was discovering that Penrod (2007) had deliberately chosen to
adopt a phenomenological inquiry into caregivers’ lived experience of uncertainty. She did this to advance her initial theoretical definition of uncertainty based on multidisciplinary literature, which “simply did not fit with what was known of caregivers’ experience of uncertainty” (Penrod, 2007, p. 660).

The phenomenological study by Penrod (2001, 2007) illuminated the actual experience of lived uncertainty in more depth. Due to the paucity of research on the lived experience of uncertainty, Penrod’s key findings are used (2007, p. 662-664) in Table 3, as a foundation to integrate knowledge and research from other theorists on the subject of uncertainty, to depict the attributes of experienced uncertainty.

Table 3
The Attributes of Experienced Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Description of attribute</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence and control undergird uncertainty</strong></td>
<td>Van den Bos (2009) advocated that both confidence and control are related as they promote a sense of agency when uncertain. While confidence relates to a sense of being able to handle the situation (invoking feelings of certainty), control refers to the ability to influence or affect the flow of events or outcome (Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009). However, Penrod (2007) concluded that one’s confidence and control do not simply mediate the sense of uncertainty, but are the primary essences that influence the type of and intensity of uncertainty. When both control and confidence are low, the felt uncertainty may be overwhelming to one (Penrod, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertainty is a dynamic state</strong></td>
<td>There are fluctuations, or a waxing and waning, in the intensity of uncertainty experienced over time (McGonigal-Kenney, 2011; Penrod, 2007), which are based on changes in one’s perceived sense of confidence and control - through tallying of evidence within the context through cognitive and pre-cognitive (emotional and intuitive) ways of knowing (Penrod, 2007). The appraisals and emotional responses to uncertainty shift over time, based on individual predispositions and the context (Brashers, 2001).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>There is a range in the feelings of uncertainty</strong></td>
<td>The level of discomfort when feeling uncertain ranges from fear and anxiety, to frustration, and to acceptable or manageable levels of doubt (Hogg, 2009; Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009). The shifts in intensity of feelings are due to the on-going tallying of evidence in one’s context (Brashers, 2001; Penrod, 2007). However, some have argued for the need to move beyond seeing uncertainty as being inherently negative - and to recognise that some individuals may intentionally increase uncertainty, or be able to accept and tolerate living with chronic uncertainty (Brashers, 2001, Smithson, 2008b; Szeto &amp; Sorrentino, 2010).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shifting temporality</strong></td>
<td>Uncertainty is a present-orientated state, yet influenced by past experience and anticipation of future events (McGonigal-Kenney, 2011; Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008b). Research suggests that individuals do anticipate and respond to future uncertainty (Caroll, 2010). Uncertainty can be short-lived or continuing (Brashers, 2001). Delays in uncertain contexts may heighten the experience of uncertainty as they extend the uncertainty (Smithson, 2008b). On the other hand, the passage of time allows people to tally evidence in their context and try out different strategies to manage their uncertainty, so altering their states of uncertainty (Brashers, 2001; Penrod, 2007).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taken together, it emerges from the above table that experienced uncertainty is an individualised, subjective and dynamic process affected by one’s predispositions and context, thus making it a complex cognitive-affective phenomenon. The emotional intensity of uncertainty fluctuates over time, based on one’s sense of confidence and control (or agency) in relation to the continuing tallying of evidence and trying out of different strategies in one’s unfolding context. There is a temporal dynamic to uncertainty as it fluctuates over time, while being a present state, rooted in past experience, yet anticipating the future. The current study will therefore contribute to an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of executives’ experienced uncertainty.

2.4 How individuals engage with and manage their uncertainty

In this study, exploring how executives make sense of their uncertainty will indicate how they enacted their capability for uncertainty in their context of uncertainty. The question thus arises as to how individuals manage their uncertainty, as depicted in Figure 5, which provides the structure for examining relevant constructs in this section.

![Figure 5. How individuals engage with and manage their uncertainty](image)

2.4.1 Strategies for managing uncertainty

Uncertainty has traditionally been perceived as a discomforting and aversive state, which motivates people to find ways to reduce the uncertainty (Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009) because it is a stressful psychological state (Greco & Roger, 2001). This approach is informed by uncertainty reduction theory in the communication literature,
developed by Berger and Calabrese (1975), and further adapted by Kramer (1999), who proposed that individuals are driven to seek information to reduce their aversive state of uncertainty. Since then, several authors have agreed that uncertainty would not always produce anxiety or doubt that people would want to reduce, and that there are instances when individuals want to rather maintain or increase uncertainty because it fosters hope, optimism or new opportunities (Brashers, 2001; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997; Smithson, 2008a; Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010). It was for this reason that Brashers (2001) proposed that uncertainty reduction be considered one strategy, among others, within a broader theory of uncertainty management. The range of strategies in the literature, which may therefore be adopted to manage uncertainty (Brashers, 2001), have been integrated into four overall strategies, namely, denial of uncertainty, reduction of uncertainty, acceptance or tolerance of uncertainty, and engaging with or embracing uncertainty.

2.4.1.1 Denial of uncertainty
When in denial, people tend to act as if the world is certain and predictable, and therefore may find it difficult to admit when they do not know something. They tend to plan and be organised as though the world is certain (Buckle, 2009; Smithson, 2008a).

2.4.1.2 Reduction of uncertainty
People adopt a range of approaches to reduce uncertainty (Brashers, 2001; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997; Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008a), as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4
Approaches Adopted to Reduce Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Description of approaches</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking additional information</td>
<td>Collecting additional information or reading the situation to better understand the situation, or before making a decision (Lipshitz &amp; Strauss, 1997; Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008a), seeking trusted sources of information (Brashers, 2001).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making decisions or delaying them</td>
<td>Using assumption-based reasoning, or heuristics (rules of thumb) – to enable one to make quick decisions or choices, when there is missing information or gaps (Brashers, 2001; Lipshitz &amp; Strauss, 1997; Smithson, 2008a). Weighing up pros and cons of alternatives to assist in making a decision and/or deferring or delaying a decision, until more information becomes available (Lipshitz &amp; Strauss, 1997; Smithson, 2008a).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for future uncertainty</td>
<td>Scenario planning (Schoemaker, 1995) to imagine possible future scenarios, which helps one to be prepared for different options. This approach is often linked to anticipation of future uncertain events, helping one to be prepared for different scenarios and making contingency plans (Carroll, 2010; Schwarzer &amp; Taubert, 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribute</td>
<td>Description of attribute</td>
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<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing focus and structure</td>
<td>Focusing on areas one can control, sticking to identified priorities or finding solutions to resolve the uncertainty (Brashers, 2001). Sticking to rules and developing routines to provide structure also may help to buffer the effect of uncertainty (Brashers, 2001).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing social identity</td>
<td>Identifying with a group (that is; social identity) to reduce personal uncertainty (Hogg, 2009), or when experiencing belongingness uncertainty (De Cremer &amp; Sedikides, 2009; Stillman &amp; Baumeister, 2009).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken together, the range of approaches adopted in the above table for reducing uncertainty appear to foster a sense of being or feeling more in control, confident and/or belonging. Penrod (2007) concluded from her research that individuals adopted strategies to build their confidence and/or control as a means of reducing their uncertainty, depending on whether the personal uncertainty was related to a diminished sense of confidence and/or control. Similarly, Van den Bos (2009) perceived one’s lack of confidence and the need for control as factors in felt uncertainty and being motivated to reduce such uncertainty. On the other hand, Hogg (2009) proposed that personal uncertainty reduction is a core motive for social identity processes to belong to a group.

**2.4.1.3 Acceptance or tolerance of uncertainty**

This strategy tends to be adopted when an individual comes to acknowledge that the uncertainty is not going to be reduced, and one therefore needs to accept or tolerate the uncertainty (Hogg, 2009; Penrod, 2007). Hence, such a strategy means making flexible decisions and finding ways to live with or cope with the existing uncertainty, based on accepting it and maintaining it at a tolerable level (Brashers, 2001; Buckle, 2009; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997; Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008a). Finding meaning in one’s situation may enable one to accept, tolerate or even endure uncertainty (Penrod, 2007: Van den Bos, 2009). Longitudinal research by Van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Bakker and Schaufeli (2013) established that meaning-making fostered individual acceptance of and adaptation to organisational change and uncertainty. Essentially, values and personal goals are able to provide a sense of purpose and meaning to one’s behaviour and choices when experiencing uncertainty (Steptoe-Warren, Howat & Hume, 2011; Van den Heuvel et al., 2013), because values “transcend situations and are used as normative standards to judge and choose” (Schwartz, 1992, p. 2).
2.4.1.4 Engaging with or embracing uncertainty

Engaging with uncertainty means exploring it, rather than rushing to reduce or eliminate it (Brashers, 2001; Clampitt & DeKoch, 2001). Such engagement is referred to by Buckle (2009) as “sitting with the discomfort, …exploring the paradoxes and yet still taking purposeful action” (p. 42). Engagement is thus giving time to exploring the experienced uncertainty, before making decisions or taking action.

Some individuals embrace uncertainty as they perceive and focus on opportunities and challenges being opened up in the uncertainty, which may be harnessed or exploited (Clampitt & DeKoch, 2001). De Cremer and Sedikides (2009) suggested that the self-improvement motive is a factor which needs to be considered in uncertainty management, as some people choose an uncertain path in the interest of personal growth and developing themselves, for example, making lifestyle or career changes. This self-improvement motive may be aligned with an existential search for meaning (Segal, 2011; Van den Bos, 2009). Moreover, self-improvement may be considered to be proactive coping, a form of goal management when initiating uncertainty through action towards personal goals (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

In sum, when the source of uncertainty is personally threatening, resulting in aversive feelings of uncertainty, individuals are motivated to adopt strategies to reduce it. If the uncertainty, however, cannot be reduced in one’s context, the focus will shift to finding ways to accept the uncertainty or make it more tolerable. On the other hand, there are also individuals who engage with or initiate uncertainty related to positive appraisals of uncertainty, their personal goals and/or quest for meaning. Hence, with experienced uncertainty being a dynamic phenomenon, with reappraisals and shifts in emotions over time, an individual will probably use different strategies over time.

2.4.2 Coping mechanisms

The terms ‘managing uncertainty’ or ‘coping with uncertainty’ often appear to be used interchangeably in the literature. Much of the literature on coping theory has been based on Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) cognitive model of coping with stress. Accordingly, coping is regarded as a stabilising factor that helps people to adapt psychologically during “situations that are appraised as stressful” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 147),
with coping being an unfolding process within one’s context. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two types of coping, that is, problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves actions to solve the problem causing the stress and is more appropriate for environments that can be controlled. Emotion-focused coping is aimed at changing the intensity of one’s emotional state, and is more relevant when one cannot control the environment. Thus, emotion-focused coping may be particularly relevant to uncertain contexts, when feeling uncertain.

In coping with stress, reference has been made to personal resources and social resources which may be tapped into (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002). Personal resources are individuals’ internal coping options related to being healthy, affluent, optimistic, and having perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Social resources relate to social support available in one’s context (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002), considered important when coping with uncertainty (Brashers, 2001). Three types of social support (Malecki & Demaray, 2003) may influence the experience of uncertainty for others, as follows:

- Instrumental support, which involves giving needed resources.
- Informational support, which involves giving relevant information or advice.
- Emotional support, which involves giving reassurance.

While Brashers (2001) acknowledged the importance of social support in coping with uncertainty, he pointed out that there are “dilemmas of social support” (p. 485), which complicate the use of available social support. For instance, different goals of support seekers relative to support givers, that is, one might want to reduce uncertainty, while the other wants to maintain it, or an individual may feel that the cost of vulnerability, through disclosure to someone, is too high. These dilemmas tend to influence the choices individuals make when seeking social support within the organisational context.

In sum, the literature reveals some overlap in using the terms ‘managing uncertainty’ and ‘coping with uncertainty’. An implied difference is that ‘coping with uncertainty’ focuses more on changing the intensity of one’s emotional state and the utilisation of emotional support, aligned with emotion-focused coping within more uncertain contexts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which is the view I have adopted in the present study.
2.4.3 Making sense of uncertainty

As the present study focused on making sense of how executives make sense of experienced uncertainty, it was essential to include literature on sensemaking. The concept is discussed first, followed by meaning-making in relation to sensemaking and finally, the role of emotion in sensemaking.

2.4.3.1 The concept of sensemaking

Sensemaking, or “making something sensible” (Weick, 1995, p. 16), became a topic of study in the late 1960s, since when different approaches to and definitions have arisen, resulting in “no single theory” of it (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 62). Cognitive psychologists have defined sensemaking as a more cognitive process involving development of individuals’ schemata or mental models (Klein, Moon & Hoffman, 2006; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), with an emphasis on cognition preceding action (Gioia, 2006; Smerek, 2011). In contrast, sensemaking in organisations has been defined by communication theorists and social psychologists as a social process (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995), in which understanding is mutually constructed and negotiated between people, with action and cognition being intertwined (Gioia, 2006; Smerek, 2011). Despite these differences, it appears that sensemaking is generally viewed as being social (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), because individually it occurs in a social context, meaning that it is influenced by real or imagined thoughts and actions of other people in their context (Weick, 1995).

I focused on the concept of sensemaking developed by Karl E. Weick (1995), whose perspective has been influential in the organisational context (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). My rationale is that Weick’s approach is aligned with examining the lived experience of uncertainty by individuals in an organisational context of uncertainty, the focus of the current study. While Weick emphasises the social process, he also acknowledges individuals within the social context of organisations and takes cognisance of the flux and becoming of individuals and organisations. In times of organisational change and uncertainty, sensemaking is most relevant (Kuntz & Gomes, 2012) because it becomes more explicit and effortful “when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). The implication is that
sensemaking is crucial to one’s experience of and approach to uncertainty. Weick’s (1995) original concept of sensemaking, based primarily on secondary research of past disasters or crises (Parry, 2003), incorporated seven key properties. Weick’s properties received some criticism based on an increase in primary research (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), which he responded to by updating the concept (Weick, 2012; Weick et al., 2005). His seven key properties, with updating, are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5
**Key Properties of Sensemaking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Description of property</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A social process</strong></td>
<td>Sensemaking is both an individual psychological and social process, within the social, fluid organisational context. Weick (1995) emphasised its social process and the importance of conversation and interaction. Even alone, in the form of reflection (Parry, 2003), an individual’s sensemaking is contingent upon real or imagined others’ thoughts and actions (Weick, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Continuing</strong></td>
<td>Sensemaking is an on-going process, as it has no clear beginning and end (Weick, 1995). More recently, it has been suggested that there are episodes of sensemaking, with temporary resting points or stability (Maclean, Harvey &amp; Chia, 2011; Weick, 2012). Yet in an environment with constant flux, the sensemaking may appear to be continuous, due to the frequency of episodes experienced (Weick, 2012). Sensemaking is now viewed as being more effortful (Maitlis, Vogus &amp; Lawrence, 2013; Weick et al., 2005), when there is a disruption in one’s context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focuses on extracted cues</strong></td>
<td>Weick (1995) suggested that to understand sensemaking is to be sensitive to how people extract cues. People notice certain things by paying attention to and extracting cues from the environment. These noticed cues therefore form the core seeds of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005), as interpretation involves the connecting of cues to one’s mental frames (Weick, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Driven by plausibility, rather than accuracy</strong></td>
<td>Sensemaking is about individuals finding a plausible, coherent and credible account as to what is happening, which energises one to act (Weick, 1995). It is not about being accurate, which could be protracted, resulting in de-energising one. Rather, it is about continually redrafting an emerging account, which sustains motivation to keep things moving (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retrospective</strong></td>
<td>Sensemaking is retrospective as people are only able to really make sense of something they have experienced; that is, after they have done it (Weick, 1995). “Action is always just a tiny bit ahead of cognition” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 419). Some have questioned this, suggesting more credence needs to be given to cognition taking place before action (Smerek, 2011). Gioia (2006, p. 1714) sees cognition and action as being “inextricably and recursively intertwined”. Weick et al. (2005) restated sensemaking as being retrospective and prospective. It is temporal, combines retrospect, the present and the future (Maitlis &amp; Christianson, 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enactive of sensible environments</strong></td>
<td>People produce the environment they are part of by enacting it (Weick, 1995). Enactment means actions are taken based on a specific understanding of a situation (Smerek, 2011). Actions or experimentation also may initiate sense-making (Maitlis &amp; Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Actions provide feedback about sensemaking and input for further, new sensemaking - in order to adapt to new information or events in one’s context (Maitlis &amp; Christianson, 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
<td>Description of property</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grounded in identity construction</td>
<td>One’s identity is a key aspect of sensemaking, as “individuals make sense of whatever happens to them by asking what implications these events have for who I will be?” (Weick, 1995, p. 23). Identity construction therefore influences what individuals interpret and enact during sensemaking (Mills, 2003). Hence, sensemaking is filtered through issues of identity (Cunliffe &amp; Coupland, 2012; Marsico, 2012; Weick et al., 2005) and one’s identity is constantly redefined through sensemaking (Parry, 2003).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above table, and for the purpose of my study, sensemaking is seen to be an iterative process in which the above properties do not occur in a step-wise sequence, but interact (Currie & Brown, 2003; Weick, 2001), as individuals interpret their experience and/or context in finding a plausible account of what is happening, to enable them to take actions to move forward (Maitis & Christianson, 2014). Interpretation of noticed cues is seen as being at the core of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005), which occurs through the connection of the cues to one’s frames, for example, reference to one’s past experience (Parry, 2003; Weick et al., 2005). Further, issues of identity and identity construction seem to play a key role in sensemaking.

### 2.4.3.2 Meaning-making in relation to sensemaking

An area of ambiguity in the literature was that ‘sensemaking’ and terms such as ‘search for meaning’ and ‘meaning-making’ were often used interchangeably. After identifying ‘meaning-making’ as a key theme in the executives’ approach to making sense of uncertainty in the present study, I explored the literature further to shed light on meaning-making in relation to sensemaking, on which there appears to be a paucity.

Of relevance, Van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Schreurs, Bakker and Schaufeli (2009) have differentiated between sensemaking and meaning-making. They view meaning-making as being less immediate than sensemaking, with the former occurring after the “primary interpretation processes” (p. 522), which they equate with sensemaking. Meaning-making refers to finding meaning in “how events relate to what an individual finds important and meaningful” (Van den Heuvel et al., 2009, p. 522), often linked with personal values and/or goals. Values and/or goals are able to provide a sense of purpose and meaning to one’s behaviour and decision-making, particularly when experiencing uncertainty (Schwartz, 1992; Steptoe-Warren, Howat & Hume, 2011). Research by Van den Heuvel et al. (2013) also established that meaning-making may
be a personal resource which helps an employee to be resilient and willing to adapt to organisational change, particularly when uncertainty is prevalent. Thus, an individual’s meaning-making, which happens after interpreting one’s experienced and/or context of uncertainty (that is, sensemaking), may help to build resilience to persevere.

2.4.3.3 The role of emotion in sensemaking

Literature has acknowledged that different emotional responses of varying intensity are possible when experiencing uncertainty and that these are a motivational force to deny, reduce, accept or embrace the uncertainty (Brashers, 2001; Clampitt & DeKoch, 2001; De Cremer & Sedikides, 2009; Smithson, 2008b). With experienced uncertainty being an emotional state, I was therefore interested in understanding the role of emotion in sensemaking for the purpose of my study. Although Weick (1995) referred to the importance of emotion in the arousal of sensemaking, its role within the process of sensemaking was not fully developed, which he subsequently acknowledged (Weick et al., 2005). In spite of increasing evidence of the importance of emotion in sensemaking in organisations (for example, Walsh & Bartunek, 2011), little theory has been developed on the explicit role and impact of emotion within the sensemaking process (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis et al., 2013).

Emotions are considered crucial for energising individuals to engage in sensemaking as it is an effortful process, particularly during disruptions. However, studies have found that intense negative emotions, even though they might stimulate actions or reactions, generally impeded the cognitive process (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). As a result, felt emotions may block sensemaking or provide useful information and energy for it. Maitlis et al. (2013) have therefore proposed a theory on the role of emotion and its impact on the process of individual sensemaking, based on an integration of relevant research findings and theories, as outlined in Table 6.

Table 6

Proposed Theory on the Role of Emotion in Sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Proposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valence of emotion</td>
<td>The triggering events which are appraised and produce negative emotions, like anxiety, are more likely to fuel effortful sensemaking, than positive emotions. One’s appraisal of a triggering event is influenced by the positive or negative impact on important goals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The negative emotions need to be moderately intense to energise the effort required for sensemaking, as extremely intense emotions tend to interrupt thought processes and may therefore impede the sensemaking process. The intensity of emotions is also mediated by an individual’s self-regulation focus to either approach pleasure or reward (promotion-focus) or avoid pain or threat (prevention-focus).

Integrative sensemaking, based on negative emotion, will tend to be information processing of evidence associated with attention to new information or cues. On the other hand, positive emotion fosters a more generative type of sensemaking, in which emergent cues are assimilated in a flexible or creative manner. Hence, it is suggested that as negative emotions stimulate integrative sensemaking (resulting in plausible accounts and actions), the emotions tend to become more positive as the sense-maker gains a sense of being in control, which may then stimulate more generative sensemaking.

Emotions which are connected to an individual’s sense of self (identity), or self-conscious emotions (related to some form of self-evaluation, such as shame), affect one’s social behaviour – and sensemaking will therefore tend to be more solitary. However, settings where psychological safety is fostered will engender more social sensemaking processes.

The iterative process of sensemaking concludes when there is resonance between the sense-maker’s account (or interpretation) and the sense-maker’s felt emotion and actions. At this stage, the initial felt emotion about the trigger event may have shifted.

The above proposed theory offers an explanation of the role of emotion in sensemaking, specifically the role of moderately intense negative emotions in energising the effortful sensemaking process required. This theory also accounts for the role of valence (positive or negative emotion) and the level of intensity of the emotion. Importantly, a rationale for more solitary sensemaking is suggested as occurring when individuals feel a threat to the self, implying a link with issues of identity as argued by authors (Marsico, 2012; Mills, 2003; Parry, 2003; Weick et al.; 2005).

Some uncertainty theorists (for example, Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009) emphasise the negative emotional state of personal uncertainty as being a motivational force to reduce one’s uncertainty. Maitlis et al. (2013) suggest that positive emotions also motivate sensemaking, albeit of a different nature, where the emphasis is on generative sensemaking to harness the opportunities in the uncertain context. Brashers (2001) noted that information-seeking may be used to manipulate uncertainty in a desired direction, meaning that it could assist in decreasing, maintaining or exploiting the uncertainty. Hence, ‘information seeking’ in the uncertainty management literature might equate with sensemaking triggered by negative or positive emotions.
Maitlis et al. (2013) have also suggested the need for research to focus on more in-depth analyses of the role of emotion in understanding how sensemaking processes vary across individuals and contexts. Reference to their proposed theory (Maitlis et al., 2013) would be valuable for further interpretation of the present study’s findings, that is, to understand the role of the emotional state of uncertainty in the executive leaders’ approaches to making sense of their experienced uncertainty.

In conclusion, there is consensus in the literature that sensemaking is a complex and dynamic process. In the context of organisational uncertainty, an individual’s emotions appear to be triggered, the intensity of which then either energises or impedes the effortful process of sensemaking. Based on noticing and interpreting cues, sensemaking is a reiterative process of forming a plausible account of what is happening, resulting in promulgation of actions to keep moving forward, with a positive shift in emotions over time. Sensemaking therefore appears to align to some extent with the continuing ‘tallying of evidence’ and the notion of continuous appraisal and reappraisal in the uncertainty literature. The strategy of seeking information to understand, decrease or exploit uncertainty also aligns with sensemaking, which is integrative in relation to moderate negative emotion, or generative in relation to positive emotion. Meaning-making, linked to one’s goals and/or values to foster acceptance of uncertainty and the will to persevere, is closely related to sensemaking.

2.4.4 Identity construction

Although sensemaking is viewed as being grounded in issues of identity construction (Marsico, 2012; Mills, 2003; Parry, 2003; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), the inter-relationship between sensemaking and identity construction, and how they interface in relation to uncertainty, is not clear in the literature. Notably, Brown (2014), in his recent review on identity work in organisations, argued that more in-depth understanding of how sensemaking and identity construction connect with each other is required. Having noticed that issues of identity were a key feature of the executive leaders’ experienced uncertainty in the present study, I extended my literature review to include the concept of identity and that of identity construction, exploring how these are relevant to experienced uncertainty and making sense of such uncertainty.
2.4.4.1 The concept of identity

Identity is concerned with “the question of who I am and who I am striving to become?” (Alvesson & Wenglen, 2010, p. 3). One’s identity is seen to have a profound effect on one’s feelings, thoughts, actions and goals (Day et al., 2009). In the psychological literature, the terms ‘self’, ‘self-concept’ and ‘identity’ are used interchangeably, and refer to a person’s view of self (Hall, 2004).

Traditionally, from a psychological perspective, identity has been viewed as a relatively stable and coherent concept which endures as the core self (Giddens, 1991), seen as an ‘individual’ accomplishment (Sinclair, 2011). More recently, the concept of an enduring identity has been rejected and replaced with the idea that identity is more fluid, fragmented (comprising multiple identities) and in the process of becoming (Alvesson & Wenglen, 2010). For example, work-related identities may relate to personal identity, role identity, professional identity, leader identity, social identity and/or or organisational identity (Dutton et al., 2010).

The literature suggests that individuals experience tensions in seeking a stable sense of identity versus the contradictory forces and insecurities inherent in identity construction, which appear to be mostly influenced by one’s social relations (Alvesson & Wenglen, 2010; Beech, 2011; Clarke, Brown & Hailey, 2009; Collinson, 2003). One approach that may resolve these tensions is the idea of having an enduring core self, with variation or flexibility in peripheral identities around the core (Layder, 2004). This approach is also referred to by Petriglieri (2011, p. 642) as balancing the need to preserve ‘identity stability’ with the need to sustain ‘identity dynamism’.

2.4.4.2 Understanding identity construction

Identity construction refers to “processes whereby individuals take on and/or modify some aspect of their identity” (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 268). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) refer to identity construction as ‘identity work’, which they defined as the struggles that one engages in when “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (p. 626). The notion of ‘identity work’ therefore emphasises personal agency of the individual (Brown, 2014; DeRue, Ashford & Cotton, 2009). However, social psychologists have
emphasised the importance of social forces and dynamics in identity-making (Sinclair, 2011, p. 509). Thus, in identity construction the self is “situated in a dialogue that always incorporates the inner-self and the outer social identity” (Beech, 2011, p. 289).

Leader identity is particularly ambiguous (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b). The rationale is that a leader’s identity cannot be objectively measured, being associated with multiple traits and behaviours, with disagreement about the relative importance of these and how they should be enacted within a context. Leader identity construction is therefore a complex and dynamic process (Day & Sin, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010b; Sinclair, 2011), whereby leaders are constantly crafting and refining their leader identities (Karp & Helgo, 2009; Klenke, 2007; Klenke, 2013). Although research has been conducted on identity construction in different contexts (Dutton et al., 2010), relatively little is known empirically about the process of leader identity construction (Klenke, 2013).

Leader identity develops through self-development of the leader role (Klenke, 2013) involving a “fundamental identity shift” (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013, p. 4). Because leadership is a social process (DeRue et al., 2009) the construction of a leader identity depends on reciprocity, negotiation and mutual influence (Sinclair, 2011). Leader identity construction is not a one-time process (Day & Sin, 2011; Sinclair, 2011). It is an iterative and dynamic process (Ibarra et al., 2013), occurring through the interaction of giving recognition and being recognised or affirmed (Ibarra et al., 2013; Karp & Helgo, 2009) and/or negotiation through making claims of leadership from others and being granted leadership by others (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b; Swann, Johnson & Bosson, 2009). Consequently, if one’s leadership is affirmed positively, this builds a positive leader identity encouraging the leader to seek further development opportunities (Day & Sin, 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013). However, because leader identity construction depends on reciprocity and recognition, the preferred leader identity may not be achieved (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b; Ibarra et al., 2013), resulting in a “partial or incomplete” identity (Beech, 2011, p. 287), a form of identity diffusion “marked with an unstable and threatened self, self-doubt, and extreme self-consciousness” (Day et al., 2009, p. 58).

Nonetheless, although identity construction is a complex process, individuals in organisations appear to want to construct positive work-related identities, which are associated with favourable outcomes (Day et al., 2009; Dutton et al., 2010). Examples of
such outcomes are: enhanced capacity to deal with stress, creativity, adaptability, motivation, increased job satisfaction and a sense of meaning at work (Alvesson & Wenglen, 2010; Dutton et al., 2010). In terms of a positive leader identity, outcomes are leader reputation, which fosters credibility and trust in others, and leader self-efficacy, which relates to a self-perceived competence and confidence in the leader role (Day et al., 2009; Ibarra et al., 2013; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Klenke, 2007).

Positive and healthy identity construction needs to be balanced between the processes of assimilation and accommodation by the individual (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Whereas assimilation refers to interpreting one’s context to fit with one’s current frames, accommodation is adapting one’s personal frames and/or identity to the context. Hence, leader identity construction involves personal struggles of conforming to and/or resisting “societal and organisational scripts” of who one should be as a leader (Sinclair, 2011, p. 509), of which courageous acts may be one form of such identity work (Koerner, 2014). Conversely, Sinclair (2011) argues against perpetuating the notion of “a single perfectible leadership identity” (p. 512). There is potentially a disadvantage in over-identifying with an idealised image; for example, being the heroic leader as an executive, which may lead to self-destructive behaviours such as becoming addicted to work and over-achieving (Casserley & Megginson, 2009; Cavvichia, 2012).

2.4.4.3 Identity construction in relation to personal uncertainty

The question arises as to how identity construction relates to personal uncertainty experienced in the organisational context. Corely and Gioia (2004) found that organisational members, as a collective, experienced ‘identity ambiguity’ associated with organisational identity change. Such identity ambiguity meant they lacked a sense of who they were as an organisation and who they were becoming. While their research did not focus on individual identity ambiguity it implies that in certain contexts of organisational change and uncertainty, individual members are likely to experience identity ambiguity (Day et al., 2009; Karp & Helgo, 2008; Marsico, 2012). The concept of liminality relates to a form of identity ambiguity, particularly the experience of “being betwixt and between” (Beech, 2011, p. 287), which often occurs during organisational change and transitions (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra, 2004; Marsico, 2012). The literature also refers to the notion of ‘identity threat’ (Collinson, 2003; Petriglieri,
by which individuals experience identity devaluation, and use various approaches to restore or repair a devalued identity (Beech, 2011; Dutton et al., 2010). Individual identity ambiguity or threat, during organisational change or transitions, therefore seems to manifest as subjective, personal uncertainty.

Research into understanding how individuals convert identity threat into positive identity growth is required (Petriglieri, 2011). A typology of four different perspectives to positive identity construction in the organisational context, outlined in Table 7, was developed by Dutton et al. (2010, p. 269), which may be pertinent to how individuals construct, maintain or repair their identities when experiencing identity ambiguity or threat.

Table 7
Four Perspectives to Positive Identity Construction (Dutton et al., 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>The basis for the perspective to positive identity construction</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Virtue</td>
<td>A work-related identity becomes more positive when it is has virtuous attributes such as being courageous, having integrity, being compassionate or being ethical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Evaluative</td>
<td>A work-related identity becomes more positive when individuals have a positive regard for their own identity (personal identity) or are regarded positively by others in their groups (social identity). A positive identity would be a favourable evaluation of their personal characteristics, for example, seeing themselves as competent or valued by others. Individuals will therefore adopt strategies and tactics to restore or repair a devalued identity, using on-going evaluation (by self and from others) as part of identity construction. (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 270-271).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3. Developmental | In the developmental perspective, individuals will grow and develop through experiences and over time. They develop by experimenting with and adapting current identities to achieve more meaning and coherence (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 271-273). There are two approaches within this perspective:  
  • **Progressive**: An identity becomes more positive when it changes towards a more developed or ideal identity, as part of one’s natural career development over time.  
  • **Adaptive**: An identity becomes more positive when it changes towards a better fit with internal or external standards, through adaptation to a change in context or situation; for example, being a newcomer or making a role transition. |
| 4. Structural | In the structural perspective, individuals attempt to structure their multi-faceted identities to reduce identity conflict. (Refer to Dutton et al., 2010, p. 273-275). There are two approaches within this perspective:  
  • **Balanced**: An identity becomes more positive when a balance is achieved between personal and social identity; for example, by identifying with groups which enhance one’s optimal distinctiveness (as an individual).  
  • **Complementary**: An identity becomes more positive when multiple identities are viewed as complementary and compatible with one another; for example, meeting both work and family demands. |
Based on the above perspectives, there appear to be definite links between personal uncertainty, sensemaking and positive identity construction. In an organisational context of change, personal uncertainty (related to identity threat or ambiguity) may be triggered, resulting in emotions which energise the sensemaking process and identity construction. Perceived devaluation of one’s identity, possibly in relation to criticism from peers, would foster the evaluative perspective towards positive identity construction in the above table. Similarly, identity ambiguity due to transitions into a new role or organisation may result in the adaptive perspective towards positive identity construction. Further, recent research by Koerner (2014) found that courageous acts constitute identity work related to identity tensions, which may lead to a virtuous positive identity, thereby supporting the above perspective towards virtuous identity construction (Dutton et al., 2010).

With transitions being cited by several authors as triggers for identity construction (for example, Beech, 2011; Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra, 2004), I also explored literature on identity and transitions. The concept of ‘transition’ is viewed by Bridges (2002) as the psychological transition which individuals make within a broader organisational context of change. Bridges (2002) identified three phases of transition, an ending, a neutral zone (when one is in between two roles or states) and a beginning, with the neutral zone considered the most difficult. Of interest in the present study were newcomers’ transitions into organisations and role transitions of executives within organisations, including being appointed to an acting (or interim) role.

In relation to newcomers, a model for organisational entry and sensemaking by newcomers was developed by Louis (1980), based on three possible cues which are noticed by the newcomer, namely, change, contrast and surprise. Change (knowable in advance) and contrast (unknowable in advance) occur when differences are noticed in relation to the newcomer’s previous organisation and the new one. Surprise, on the other hand, is experienced when there are differences between the newcomers’ expectations and their actual experience in the new organisation. Hence, ‘contrasts’ and particularly ‘surprise’ will tend to trigger issues of identity, thereby energising newcomers’ sensemaking to understand the culture and dynamics of the new organisation and/or the team of which the newcomer is a member (Smerek, 2011).
In considering transitions into a new role, the role transitions between six different levels of leadership, with increasing complexity, have been captured as a leadership pipeline by Charan, Drotter and Noel (2011). The emphasis of this leadership pipeline is on the requirements of each role transition in terms of challenges and competencies. While Charan et al. (2011) acknowledged the possibility of identity crises, such issues of transitioning identities were not focused on. Yet the dynamics of the process of role transition were stressed by Ibarra (2004), particularly the ‘in between’ or neutral transition phase, after exiting from one role and moving to a new role, when people are between identities. This phase may therefore be experienced as one of limbo, or an experience of liminality (Beech, 2011, p. 286), implying identity ambiguity or personal uncertainty. Furthermore, when individuals are moved into an acting role as caretakers, while being considered as a candidate for the permanent role, they are clearly situated in a neutral zone (Scheu, 2007), which fosters liminality and identity ambiguity.

It has been argued that the emotions during transitions, which may be experienced uncertainty, foster the need for identity sensemaking and identity construction (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Transitions as newcomers into organisations and/or into new or acting roles therefore trigger issues of identity and subsequent identity construction (Dutton et al., 2010), which tends to involve the trying on and testing of new identities (or provisional selves), and/or future possible selves towards an ideal self, including aspects of the previous role (Ibarra, 2004). A key challenge during transitions is thus unlearning or letting go certain aspects of what made a person successful in the past role (Bridges, 2002; Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra, 2004; Ibarra et al., 2013). This unlearning has been referred to as ‘identity undoing’ (Nicholson & Carroll, 2013).

In conclusion, the notion of identity is complex, particularly leader identity, because it is an ambiguous concept. One’s identity is fluid, multi-faceted and involves continuous refining, repairing and developing, through identity construction, to achieve positive identity outcomes, especially when experiencing identity ambiguity during organisational change and/or transitions. These positive identity outcomes appear to relate to increased competence, self-confidence and efficacy, which align with uncertainty theorists’ views (Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009) that a diminished sense of confidence and/or control is the essence of personal uncertainty.
2.4.5 Integrative summary

At this stage, an integration of the concepts in the literature on uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction, is illustrated in Figure 6.

![Figure 6](image)

**Figure 6.** The nature of and response to experienced personal uncertainty

The above figure depicts an individual’s appraisal of a triggering event as being the result of one’s predispositions and one’s context of uncertainty, such as organisational change or transition. This appraisal results in experienced personal uncertainty or identity ambiguity, the emotions of which may be extremely negative, moderately negative, or positive. The intensity of these emotions is influenced by the importance of one’s goals in the context and one’s self-regulatory focus. Each of these emotional states will influence the ensuing sensemaking, as follows:

- When the emotions are extremely negative and intense, they may influence an individual to react or withdraw (as in the fight or flight response). However, the cognitive process of sensemaking is generally impeded. With time, as events unfold, and the emotional intensity subsides, the individual may progress to more constructive sensemaking, depicted above (as per the next point).
- Moderately intense negative emotion, on the other hand, tends to motivate one to reduce the uncertainty by energising the effortful process of integrative sensemaking, which is a reiterative process of developing plausible accounts of what is happening,
based on cues or a tallying of evidence. The plausible accounts generate actions or strategies to reduce the uncertainty. As the personal uncertainty is often doubt about oneself or one’s identity (identity ambiguity or threat), these actions tend to include those that will restore or enhance one’s identity (identity construction). Over time, the emotions tend to shift positively and the sensemaking may become more generative in nature. Otherwise, the sensemaking will reach a resting-point or be concluded when the individual achieves coherence between one’s emotions, the plausibility of the account and the impact of one’s actions. At this stage, one will probably be feeling more competent and confident, as a result of positive identity construction. If not, then one’s sensemaking will possibly focus on other alternatives.

- Positive emotion tends to motivate an individual to engage with or embrace uncertainty, by adopting a more generative approach to sensemaking, which focuses on creativity and ways to harness opportunities.

In conclusion, the processes of responding to, engaging with and managing uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction appear to be closely inter-related, being influenced by the individual’s predispositions and the context of uncertainty. The strategies for engaging with and managing uncertainty, as outlined in the uncertainty literature, seem to incorporate and/or overlap with sensemaking and identity construction for moving forward. Furthermore, while sensemaking and identity construction both appear to be triggered by experienced personal uncertainty, the way these processes unfold and relate to each other is not clear in the literature. The present study of the lived experience of executive uncertainty will therefore contribute to understanding the manifestation of and inter-relationship between these processes, thus indicating how a capability for uncertainty is enacted by executives (Woods et al., 2013).

2.5 The phenomenon of executive uncertainty

While the previous sections focused on the context and key constructs for the study, this section relates directly to the first research objective of the study, which was to understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty, at a personal level and in their role of leader. To begin with, I consider factors which may contribute to executives experiencing personal uncertainty, followed by identifying key challenges which executive leaders face in their role of leader during organisational
uncertainty. Finally, what is known about executives’ lived experience of uncertainty in terms of relevant research is explored.

2.5.1 Personal uncertainty of executive leaders

In past years, change management research suggested that executive leaders were more comfortable with organisational changes as they tended to initiate the changes, while employees resisted the changes due to experienced uncertainty (Armstrong-Strassen, 2005). Recent research, however, shows that executives do experience emotions as part of their role in leading change ranging from doubts and fears to feeling enthusiastic and proud (Lawrence et al., 2014), thereby implying personal uncertainty. Moreover, the context of executives has also changed. A Booz Allen Hamilton survey (Favaro, Karlsson, Katzenbach & Neilson, 2011, p. 2) reported that CEO rates of turnover were still substantially higher than they were during the 1990s and that “the pressure on performance remains as great as ever”. The high turnover is generally attributed to the spotlight placed on CEO performance and accountability, as a precautionary measure after the well-publicised unethical conduct of other CEOs. This pressure to perform by CEOs therefore spills over to other executives, resulting in higher turnover, transitions, career unpredictability and personal uncertainty (Manderscheid & Freeman, 2012; Preece & Iles, 2009).

The pressure to perform by executives is borne out in the literature. Smith and Campbell (2010) found that many executive leaders were “consumed with strategy creation, strategy execution and ‘pushing’ results” (p. 30). Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski and Senge (2007) argue that leaders have developed a facade of being in control, because of the “attendant fear of appearing incompetent”, and therefore end up “exhausting themselves and damaging their organisations in the process” (p. 110). Many executives, to varying degrees, feel they need to live up to idealised images of being achievers and being successful (Cavvichaia, 2012). However, if executives over-identify with these images of success they may drive themselves too hard, potentially leading to burnout (Casserley & Megginson, 2009).

Consequently, an increase in psychological pressures for executive leaders has been identified by Kets de Vries et al. (2009, p. 4-8). Factors contributing to these pressures
are loneliness, being watched by others, concerns about high performance expectations in one’s role, a steep learning curve given the turbulent environment, time constraints, and work-life balance pressures. Kets de Vries et al. (2009) also found that many executives do not know how to manage their stress or anxiety levels. Taken together, the executive’s context has therefore become increasingly pressurised, suggesting that personal uncertainty is being experienced by executive leaders, the extent of which will be determined by their individual predispositions and their organisational context. Thus, it is critical for them to be able to tolerate uncertainty and contain their own anxiety in their leader role (Day & Power, 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010).

2.5.2 Challenges in executives’ role of leader during organisational uncertainty

For the purpose of this study, the challenges which executives face in their role of leader during organisational uncertainty were explored in the literature. These clustered around three themes: (1) dealing with complexity, (2) influencing stakeholders, and (3) leading others during organisational uncertainty.

2.5.2.1 Dealing with complexity

In research by the Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) on future trends in leadership development, Petrie (2011) identified the “increased level of complexity and interconnectedness” (p. 8) as a key challenge for leaders. Beautement and Broenner (2011) distinguish between two types of complexity for leaders. While contextual complexity is the objective complexity in one’s context, experienced complexity is subjectively experienced by people, implying it to be a thinking-feeling state.

According to stratified systems theory, task complexity at different levels of work in an organisation is “the number of variables that have to be dealt with in a given time in a situation, the clarity and precision with which they have to be identified, and the rate of change” (Jacques, 1989, p. 64). For effective functioning of the organisation, increasing task complexity is required at each successive level of work, based on the exercise of discretion within prescribed time spans. Olivier (2003) defined the level of work by executives as the innovative domain, which focuses on the strategic intent and strategic development of the organisation. Executives at the upper levels, responsible for strategic intent and development, therefore require high levels of cognitive complexity.
Such cognitive complexity refers to the mental processing ability of ambiguous and complex information to make strategic decisions and plans for the long term (Jacques, 1989; Petrie, 2011; Wang & Chang, 1995). Thus Charan et al. (2011), in their leadership pipeline development model, caution individuals transitioning to an executive level about the daunting level of complexity, in terms of the “sheer volume of unfamiliarity” (p. 101).

These turbulent times are viewed as similar to being in a permanent crisis, in which executives are facing two competing demands (Heifetz et al., 2009). They must execute effectively to meet current challenges and adapt and develop new practices to meet future challenges. They therefore need to do both (Lane & Down, 2010), meaning that leaders need to be able to hold contradictory tensions or paradoxes in balance (Bunker, 2010; Goffee & Jones, 2009; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006), referred to as ‘both/and’ polarity thinking (Manderscheid & Freeman, 2012). Being able to come to terms with both being in control and not in control (or needing to let go) is a key challenge for executives, because the traditional leadership paradigm has been rooted in control and predictability (Karp & Helgo, 2008; Lane & Down, 2010; Simpson, 2012; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Another key challenge identified as adding to complexity is 'boundary-spanning' (Smith & Campbell, 2010). This concept refers to leading across multiple stakeholder boundaries outside of the organisation; such as customers, communities, investors and government. Geographic boundary challenges and diversity in the demographics of stakeholders (including employees), also increase the contextual complexity (Head, 2010; Petrie, 2011; Smith & Campbell, 2010).

Taken together, executive leaders are being required to deal with increasing contextual complexity in these turbulent times. By implication, one can expect that there will be a corresponding increase in their subjective, experienced complexity (Beautement & Broenner, 2011). For example, Connor and Mackenzie-Smith (2003, p. 64-65) refer to the psychological weight leaders feel in exercising discretion and judgement required for making strategic decisions in dealing with increased complexity.

**2.5.2.2 Influencing stakeholders**

With multiple stakeholders to interface with, a key challenge for executives is being able to influence stakeholders (Buckle, 2009), through networking, negotiating and resolving
conflicts effectively, all of which requires political skill or intelligence (Ashraf & Iqbal, 2011). Political skill relates to one’s ability to understand others, for example, by picking up social cues, and using these insights to influence others to act towards certain objectives (Gardner, Fischer & Hunt, 2009). Yet politics clearly has a negative connotation and a perceived dysfunctional side to it, often adversely affecting the level of trust between members (Ashraf & Iqbal, 2011; Buchanan, 2008). Some authors argue that political intelligence generates positive consequences for individuals and organisations, and is necessary in the context of organisational change (Buchanan & Badham, 2011; Cook, Macaulay & Coldicott, 2004), implying a positive side to politics. Leaders therefore need to understand political dynamics and exercise appropriate political skill (Goffee & Jones, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009).

2.5.2.3 Leading others during organisational uncertainty

Change leadership has been identified as a key challenge for executives in research (Development Dimensions International, 2011; Smith & Campbell, 2010). During organisational change and uncertainty people tend to look to their leaders for direction to reduce their uncertainty. They also gauge leaders’ emotional reactions by paying attention to leaders’ non-verbal cues (Day & Power, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009). As a result, leaders must be able to regulate their emotions to convey a calm demeanour to people, in order to contain their anxiety (Day & Power, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010). This type of emotional regulation has been referred to as ‘emotional labour’, with its importance being recognised in leadership roles, as research has established that leaders’ emotions do affect followers’ emotions (Gardner et al., 2009).

There is a strong argument, however, for leaders to be authentic and genuine in these times (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Klenke, 2007). A paradox therefore arises for many leaders when experiencing personal uncertainty, yet believing they need to communicate calm and optimism to people (Bunker, 2010; Heifetz et al., 2009). Finding the balance between being empathetic, genuine (showing appropriate emotion) and engaging people in their anxiety, while leading the change positively, is therefore required (Bunker, 2010; Day & Power, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009). In addition, there is some evidence that “leaders who are not necessarily fully authentic”, but have emotional intelligence, political skill and self-monitoring ability, are highly effective (Gardner et al.,
Authenticity does not mean being the same all the time, with Goffee and Jones (2009) viewing authentic leaders as playing “different roles in different contexts” (p. 1), while being true to their core values.

During turbulence and organisational uncertainty, executives need to be able to make sense of the context - and to articulate sensegiving for others (Akrivou & Bradbury-Haung, 2011; Goffee & Jones, 2009; Tichy & Bennis, 2007). Whereas sensemaking relates to how individuals develop a plausible account of the context of uncertainty, “sensegiving is intentionally influencing how other people attribute meaning” (Smerek, 2011, p. 81). Sensegiving was originally conceptualised as a framing process, by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), which means providing a frame or viable interpretation of what is going on in the organisational context. Research has also established that sensemaking and sensegiving are key inter-related and reciprocal processes in the executive leadership role during organisational change (Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994).

Aligned with executive sensegiving, is providing a vision, giving sufficient direction, clarifying boundaries and what to focus on during increased complexity and uncertainty (Goffee & Jones, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009; Tichy & Bennis, 2007; Snowden & Boone, 2007). Importantly, while leaders cannot give certainty, they can instil confidence and hope (Day & Power, 2009; Smerek, 2011). Leaders’ sensegiving also needs to be coupled with processes of experimentation, emergent strategy and adaptive course-correction by engaging their people and key stakeholders in these (Heifetz et al., 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Hence, their sensegiving needs to be balanced with creating space for people to carry out their own sensemaking, thereby enabling them to find adaptive solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Stacey, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Stated differently, a key challenge for executives is to be catalysts for fostering an adaptive culture in these increasingly turbulent times (Akrivou & Bradbury-Haung, 2011).

In sum, there are many challenges in executives’ role of leader during organisational uncertainty. Importantly, executive leaders need to be able contain their own personal uncertainty while addressing these challenges, implying that executives require a capability for uncertainty, the meaning of which is explored in the present study.
2.5.3 The lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders

A key question is to determine what is known about the lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders, at a personal level and in their role of leader during organisational uncertainty, a primary focus of the current study. Early research on the subject of executive uncertainty was conducted by White, Hodgson and Crainer (1996), who explored subjective uncertainty of top executives in several countries. Their research found that under uncertain conditions decision-making with incomplete information was anxiety-inducing for many executives.

Since then, there appears to have been a scarcity of research on the subject of executive uncertainty. While conducting research on an executive development programme over 2002 to 2004, Preece and Iles (2008) discovered that uncertainty was a key aspect of the executive participants' experience, in relation to their roles and work contexts (such as uncertainty due to career unpredictability), and was a key factor in their joining the executive development programme. This finding was not what the researchers were looking for, but it emerged. Preece and Iles (2008, 2009) also observed that executive uncertainties were absent in the leader and executive literature at that stage, emphasising that this type of uncertainty did not seem to be recognised.

With the onset of the GFC in 2008, there has been renewed interest in the subject of uncertainty, yielding some research on executive uncertainty as outlined in Table 8.

Table 8
Research Studies on Executive Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researchers, study focus and methodology</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Explored executives’ and senior managers’ (in the United Kingdom) experience of the impact of the global financial crisis on their organisations.</td>
<td>- They also experienced pressure from multiple stakeholders to account for what was happening, including their employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Using interviews from 50 participants.</td>
<td>- While executives in some organisations retreated into habitual ways of doing, executives in other organisations were more proactive, playing a key role in supporting and bringing people together to formulate business responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Hence, Day and Powers (2009) suggested that executives need the ability to help regulate their people’s anxiety levels; therefore, implying the need for regulation of their own emotions or anxiety.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Researchers, study focus and methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buckle and Slyce (2010):</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Explored United Kingdom leaders’ and businesses’ experiences of uncertainty after the onset of the economic crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Using interviews which included senior Human Resource executives.</td>
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</table>

### Key findings

- There was a range of feelings expressed in relation to uncertainty – from anxiety, frustration and feeling stuck, to being curious, enthusiastic and energised.
- A range of responses for dealing with uncertainty was identified. Hence, a typology of responses was developed, based on one’s sense of agency and one’s tolerance for uncertainty, as follows:
  - Denial – both low agency and low tolerance for uncertainty
  - Coping – low agency and a higher tolerance for uncertainty
  - Resolution – high agency and a low tolerance for uncertainty
  - Engaging – both high agency and high tolerance for uncertainty

The above findings from two studies point to executives experiencing a range of feelings from anxiety and frustration, to feeling energised and proactive. Similarly, a range of responses in how they approached uncertainty is evident, ranging from denial to engagement. The importance of being able to tolerate uncertainty in order to cope with or engage with the uncertainty is also emphasised.

The research of Day and Powers (2009) concluded that leaders need to regulate their own emotions, thereby enabling them to facilitate the containment of anxiety in others. In the case of Buckle and Slyce (2010), they differentiated leaders’ felt uncertainty from the uncertainty and complexity in their environment. They also noted the significance of the leader’s sense of agency in approaching uncertainty, which appears to align with one’s sense of control and/or confidence (Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009), or with one’s sense of positive identity (Day et al; 2009; Dutton et al., 2010). However, the typology of uncertainty responses developed by Buckle and Slyce (2010) does not seem to align with the dynamic unfolding nature of uncertainty responses depicted in the uncertainty management literature. Their typology was based on experiences of uncertainty at a point in time, rather than understanding the lived experience of uncertainty over time, an objective of the current study.

In the field of change management, while there is significant research on the experiences of managers and change-agents responsible for implementing changes, there is a scarcity on the emotional experiences of executive leaders during organisational change. For this reason, Lawrence et al. (2014) conducted research to explore the emotions and cognitions experienced by executives in a health care...
organisation after designing and leading a long-term organisational change process. The findings indicated that these executives had doubts and fears throughout, suggesting experienced uncertainty. Their fears mostly related to the fear of failure in their roles, while coping with steep learning curves in their context of organisational change. What seemed to sustain them was a strong alignment with their vision and the organisational values. They also felt pride and a sense of accomplishment in seeing the change process through successfully. However, this research analysed the findings according to a staged organisational change process model, rather than an in-depth understanding of how the executives made sense of their experienced uncertainty.

Given the limited research on the subject of executive uncertainty, I explored research on the experience of executive transitions to provide further insight on the experience of uncertainty. Table 9 depicts the findings of two studies on executive transitions.

**Table 9**

*Research Studies on Executive Transitions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researchers and study focus</th>
<th>Key findings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Day (2009):</strong></td>
<td>Key findings (refer to Day, 2009, p. 2-4) on the experience of transitions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Explored the experience of transitions, either in the same organisation, or in a new organisation.</td>
<td>- Many found it to be an intense experience with a range of emotions, such as, doubt, fear, frustration and anger. It was also a lonely time for many of them in the early stages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A series of interviews with ten executives over the period of their transitions into new leadership roles.</td>
<td>- For all of them, the transition required them to adjust their identity, by giving up beliefs and practices – and adding new dimensions to their identities. Many found that those above and below them had unrealistic or conflicting expectations about their role, requiring negotiation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The challenges of transition appeared to be greater for those joining a new organisation, than for those moving within the same organisation.</td>
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| **Smerek (2011):** | Key findings (refer to Smerek, 2011, p. 84-89) on the executives’ approach to the uncertain period of transitioning into a new organisation: |
| - Explored how new executives handle being in charge while being an organisational novice. | - Providing broad sensegiving to the organisation, sufficient for giving future direction - yet allowing the executives not to commit to initiatives too early. |
| - Interviewed eighteen new college or university presidents. Used grounded theory for the analysis. | - Displaying wisdom, which meant ‘knowing what they did not know’ and thus not forming quick judgements while new to the context. |
| | - Reducing uncertainty through social interactions, which meant they found trusted peers or mentors to bounce their ideas off and for reassurance. |
| | - Reducing ambiguity through priority-setting, which involved strategic planning sessions and defining priorities to focus peoples’ efforts. |
Day’s study (2009) in the above table focused more on the executives’ experience of and approach to uncertainty in relation to transitions within current organisations and into new organisations. Smerek’s study (2011) emphasised the retrospective view of how executives approached uncertainty in their leader role when they joined a new organisation. Day (2009) concluded that executive transitions were lonely periods of personal uncertainty for many executives, and more so for those who joined new organisations. The transitions clearly included issues of identity, resulting in aspects of identity construction being inter-related with making sense of the new context (the culture and political dynamics), supporting authors’ views that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction (Marsico; 2012; Weick et al., 2005). On the other hand, Smerek’s findings (2011) highlighted the simultaneity of sensemaking and sensegiving when transitioning into a executive leadership role in a new organisation. More specifically, the executives adopted approaches which enabled them to lead in a broad sense, without making decisions or committing to initiatives, while they were learning about the new context. In addition, the executives sought reassurance and guidance from trusted mentors, so reducing their personal uncertainty.

In sum, there is a paucity of literature and research on executive’s lived experience of uncertainty. The research findings from a few studies provide general evidence of executive uncertainty as a phenomenon, some of the sources of personal uncertainty (for example, transitions), and how executives respond to uncertainty. However, more in-depth knowledge is required to inform the fields of executive coaching and leader development in these increasingly turbulent times. The present study therefore focuses on an in-depth retrospective understanding of how executive leaders experience uncertainty and make sense of it.

2.5.4 Integrative summary

The executives’ context has changed, resulting in them experiencing more personal uncertainty. They also face many challenges in in their role of leader during these turbulent times, from increased complexity, to having to influence multiple stakeholders, and meeting current business challenges while fostering adaptive cultures and adaptive capacity essential for the future growth of the organisation. Thus, executives have an important role to play in facilitating sensegiving for people during organisational
uncertainty, including being able to contain people’s anxiety levels, while not providing certainty to them. Executives therefore need to exercise emotional regulation and contain their own anxiety. There also appears to be an inter-relationship a leader’s personal uncertainty and their leader role during uncertainty. Thus, in the context of increasing turbulence, when executives’ personal uncertainty will increase, I argue that it makes sense to focus on developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the key concepts and research relevant to experienced executive uncertainty to address research objective 1. The literature revealed that experienced uncertainty of individuals is a complex and dynamic cognitive-affective phenomenon, which comprises different sources and layers of uncertainty in an organisational context. Yet literature on the phenomenon of experienced executive uncertainty, and how it is made sense of, is scarce, requiring more in-depth research to understand how executives’ capability for uncertainty is enacted. Such research may have limitations when applied at the level of individual, subjective uncertainty because uncertainty is a multi-faceted and complex construct, particularly in an organisational setting. A possible limitation is that it might not yield explanations of the construct at a more macroscopic level, while over-attributing aspects of individual experience to the construct of uncertainty (Penrod, 2007). I argue that this limitation is minimised in the present study because the focus is on executives’ experienced uncertainty. Executives are individuals who occupy strategic leadership positions at the interface of the organisation and the external environment, and therefore formulate strategy, lead change and foster adaptive capacity within the organisation, while experiencing uncertainty themselves at a personal level and in their role as leader. This study therefore focuses on experienced executive uncertainty as a holistic, multi-layered phenomenon within organisational life, with the construct of experienced uncertainty viewed as feeling uncertain about the self (or identity), one’s context and/or the inter-relationship between the self and one’s context.

The next chapter forms the second part of the literature review, which explores the development of a capability for uncertainty and why executive coaching is a viable option for developing such capability in executives, crucial for the purpose of this study.
CHAPTER 3
DEVELOPING EXECUTIVES’ CAPABILITY FOR UNCERTAINTY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the second part of the literature review. Research objective 2 of the study was to understand what capability for uncertainty the executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty. In addition, research objective 4 explored executive coaches' views on what a capability for uncertainty might be. In this chapter, the meaning of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ and the relevant components for developing it are therefore considered. Thereafter the landscape of executive development is briefly examined, to set the scene for exploring the feasibility of executive coaching as one option for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. Finally, the executive coaching literature is reviewed, with the main intent of establishing what coaching approaches have been adopted in working with clients’ experienced uncertainty, to address research objective 3, which focused on understanding executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty.

3.2 The meaning of a ‘capability for uncertainty’

This section begins with clarifying the meaning of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ by differentiating between competency and capability, followed by examining crucial concepts and components for developing such capability for uncertainty.

3.2.1 Differentiating between competency and capability

“Understanding the concept ‘capability’ and what it means to be capable is not a straightforward task” as argued by Woods et al. (2013, p. 3). The terms ‘capability’ and ‘competency’ tend to be used interchangeably and have different meanings for different authors (Woods et al., 2013). Table 10 (below) contains selected authors’ definitions of these two terms, and how they view them as being different. In the current study, the meaning of ‘capability’ is aligned with that of the authors Stephenson (1999), Hase (2002), and Phelps et al. (2005), because their meaning relates directly to the notion of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ in this study, defined as the executives’ ability for engaging with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty.
Table 10

**Competency and Capability – and the difference between these**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>The meaning of competency</th>
<th>The meaning of capability</th>
<th>Difference between competency and capability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown &amp; McCartney (2003)</td>
<td>Competencies are the specific knowledge, characteristics or skills which link directly to effective job performance or competence.</td>
<td>Capability is broadly focused on non-defined tasks and is more fluid. <strong>Two meanings:</strong> Capability-as-potential is related to a person’s potential in the future. Capability-as-content is the existing ability to do one’s job well holistically.</td>
<td>Competencies are concerned with the ability to demonstrate now what has been acquired (a past orientation). Capability-as-potential sees development as realising this innate potential, which has a ceiling, beyond which one cannot develop. Capability–as-content sees development as a process whereby one’s capability can be enhanced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephenson (1999); Hase (2002); and Phelps, Hase &amp; Ellis (2005)</td>
<td>Competencies are individual and measurable skills demonstrated against agreed standards of competence.</td>
<td>Capability is a holistic capacity and relates to confidence in one’s ability (or self-efficacy) to take appropriate and effective action in unknown situations. Self-directed learning is key to capability.</td>
<td>While competency and capability share a common foundation in basic skills and knowledge, competency development leads to more narrowly defined outcomes. As it engenders self-directed learning, capability development fosters more holistic adaptability to changing contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacques (1989)</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td><strong>Potential capability</strong> is the highest level at which a person could work now, based on the person’s cognitive complexity. <strong>Applied capability</strong> refers to the current level of cognitive complexity at which the person is working.</td>
<td>Capability is based largely on the mental processing ability of an individual – both to determine competence in one’s current role (applied capability) - and one’s potential level of cognitive complexity at which one will be able to perform (potential capability).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the above, competencies are the specific skills and knowledge required for performance of an individual’s job to a required standard. Turning to capability, some authors named in the above table (Brown & McCartney, 2003; Jacques, 1989) emphasise capability as being related to an individual’s innate potential in the future, with cognitive complexity being stressed as a key indicator of such potential by Jacques (1989). However, the meaning of individual capability which informs the current study is different. This notion of capability, rooted in an education and training perspective,
emerged in the United Kingdom during the mid-1980s as a response to the increasing degree of change and uncertainty in the world and the workplace. Thus authors informed by this perspective (Hase, 2002; Phelps et al., 2005; Stephenson, 1999) suggest that ‘capable’ people are those who know how to learn in a self-directed way, have a high degree of self-efficacy, work well with others - and can apply competencies in unfamiliar situations.

A critique of the concept of competence is that it does not explicitly include the “emerging and sometimes surprising nature of changing context” (Woods et al., 2013, p. 7), while the concept of capability focuses specifically on this. Hence capability has been defined as a “holistic attribute” or “all-round capacity” enabling people to “deal with the turbulent environment in which they live (or work)” (Gardner et al., 2007, p. 252), thus aligning with the notion of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ in this study. Capability depends more on having the confidence to both apply and further develop one’s skills or competencies in changing, uncertain and complex situations (Stephenson, 1999). Some research has established that adaptability and learning are central to the concept of individual capability (Phelps et al., 2005; Woods et al., 2013).

While competence involves the acquisition of competencies, a pre-requisite for capability, individual capability is a holistic ability to manage unfamiliar and uncertain contexts over time (Woods et al., 2013). Developing individual capability therefore requires different learning experiences, with an emphasis on learning through and from experience (Hase, 2002, p. 3). Capability thus seems to develop through the interaction of individuals with their context and is more about ‘becoming’ through experience over time (Phelps et al., 2005, p. 69). Research is essential to understand what individual capability is, how it is enacted and developed in different contexts over time to provide empirical support for the construct of capability, as argued by Woods et al., (2013). A key purpose of the present study was to explore the notion of executives’ capability for uncertainty - that is, their ability for engaging with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty - developed by executives through their lived experience of uncertainty, during a period of organisational uncertainty. According to Day et al. (2009) the development of different competencies and knowledge “combine into more holistic multifaceted, and multifunctional composites” (p. 257), similar to the
notion of a capability being explored in this study. The question thus arises as to what components (competencies, experiences and/or mindset) in the literature are considered crucial for developing a holistic capability for uncertainty.

3.2.2 Components for developing a capability for uncertainty

Key components and concepts identified in the literature as being relevant and crucial to developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, to be outlined in this section, are: (1) a tolerance for uncertainty, (2) adaptive capacity, (3) learning agility, (4) critical reflection, (5) effective sensemaking, and (6) a sense of positive identity.

3.2.2.1 A tolerance or acceptance of uncertainty

The limited research on executives’ experience of uncertainty established the importance of being able to tolerate uncertainty in order to cope with or engage the uncertainty (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Day & Powers, 2009). In considering individuals’ predispositions in personality trait research, one’s uncertainty response is seen to be related to an individual’s predisposition to tolerate ambiguity (Budner, 1962) or one’s personal orientation to uncertainty (Greco & Roger, 2001; Sorrentino & Roney, 2000; Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010). However, this personality trait approach has been criticised (Smithson, 2008b) on the following grounds:

- An individual’s uncertainty orientation might vary for situational events within a context and across different contexts.
- The notion of a one-dimensional continuum has been questioned in terms of relevance to the cognitive-affective complexity of a predisposition such as uncertainty orientation.

In addition to the above criticism, Penrod (2001) queried the utility of a one-point-in-time measurement of a dynamic and complex cognitive-affective state such as uncertainty. White and Shullman (2010) have argued that an orientation for uncertainty can be developed through experience and over time, in support of which, phenomenological research in the healthcare field by Penrod (2007) found that all participants “learned to live with uncertainty” over time (p. 663). One’s orientation to uncertainty, a key mental frame for capability for uncertainty, can thus develop with experience and over time.
3.2.2.2 Adaptive capacity

The concept of adaptive capacity, developed by Bennis and Thomas (2002, p. 68), was found in their research to be most critical for effective leaders. It is defined as “an ability to transcend adversity, with all its attendant stresses, and to emerge stronger than before” – and comprises of two key qualities, namely, the ability to grasp context and hardiness (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p. 68). Whereas the ability to grasp context implies the ability to read and interpret the context or situation, hardiness encapsulates resilience, perseverance and optimism to persist and emerge stronger from adversity.

Adaptive capacity develops through being able to learn and grow from ‘crucibles of experience’, which are unplanned, transformative experiences whereby individuals gain “a new or altered sense of identity” (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p. 63). With crucibles being ‘unplanned’ experiences, uncertainty would be an element of these crucibles. While these crucibles tend to range from organisational crises to episodes of self-doubt, even the experience of prejudice; they may also be positive, yet challenging, experiences. Taken together, leaders’ adaptive capacity, comprising the ability to grasp context and hardiness, develops through crucibles of experiences. These crucibles are similar to the negative or positive trigger experiences (Avolio & Luthans, 2006) that foster leader development, by creating disequilibrium which may result in the examination of one’s fundamental assumptions and beliefs.

3.2.2.3 Learning agility

The literature revealed consensus on experience being the basis of adult learning (Knowles, 1980; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2001). Research by McCall, Lombardo and Morrison (1988) concluded that successful executives perceived on-the-job development through experience as being the most significant form of leadership development. The lessons learned from their experiences were what contributed to their development, rather than the actual experiences. The ability to learn from experience is therefore essential (McCall et al., 1998) and is supported by DeRue and Ashford (2010a), Kolb (1984) and McCauley (2006).

However people differ in their ability to learn from experience, as found in research by McCall et al. (1998). Essentially, those leaders who adopt a self-directed approach to
their learning and development, by taking responsibility for identifying their own learning needs, goals and plans, tend to learn from their experience (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; McCall, 2010; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002). An attitude of openness and willingness to learn from experience facilitates such learning (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Kolb, 1984; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002), termed ‘development readiness’ (Avolio & Hannah, 2008), a function of one’s motivation and ability for self-development (Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

The concept of ‘learning agility’ (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000) is one which builds on and integrates the above factors essential for learning from experience, by application of these factors in novel, different or uncertain situations. Learning agility is thus the ability and willingness to learn from experience, and to subsequently apply or adapt that learning to perform effectively in novel contexts. The concept of learning agility, which has been expanded to include other attributes such as eagerness to learn (about self, others and ideas) and resilience (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002), is therefore crucial to a capability for uncertainty.

3.2.2.4 Critical reflection

The role of reflection is emphasised as being essential in learning from experience (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2001), because reflection is thinking about and digesting what happened, in order to extract lessons learned and implications thereof (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a). A specific step for reflection on experience was included by Kolb (1984) in his experiential learning cycle. However, Mezirow (2001) suggested that for transformative learning to occur from experience, for example, gaining a new perspective and/or an altered sense of identity, the extent of the learning would depend largely on the leader’s capacity for reflection.

While there are different levels and types of reflection, leaders need to apply more critical reflection, or ‘double loop learning’ (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Critical reflection refers to critical thinking about unquestioned assumptions or perspectives that sustain behavioural patterns, for meaningful insight to occur (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Mezirow, 2001; Schwandt, 2005). Consequently, Schwandt (2005) argued that critical reflection is what differentiates learning from sensemaking, although the two are inter-related. While sensemaking tends to rely on an individual’s current frames, critical reflection is required
to examine one’s current frames, particularly in uncertain contexts, for meaningful learning to occur (such as gaining a new perspective). Leaders therefore need to integrate more critical reflection with their sensemaking (Schwandt, 2005), which would be crucial for their capability for uncertainty.

Critical reflective learning is therefore essential for leaders (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Petrie, 2011; Schwandt, 2005), yet there is agreement in the literature that most leaders do not have time or make time for reflection, as their work is pressurised, fragmented and involves multiple activities (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Parry, 2003). In times of uncertainty or adversity, leaders may also resort to ruminating on the negative aspects, being a form of maladaptive reflection (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Critical reflection is also an effortful process requiring emotional regulation (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a), and as Brockbank and McGill (2006) argue, dialogue with another person is essential for effective reflection. Many leaders thus need to develop their capacity for more critical reflective learning, coupled with emotional regulation, to evolve their own capability for uncertainty.

3.2.2.5 Effective sensemaking

More explicit and effortful sensemaking tends to be energised when a disruption or uncertainty is experienced in one’s context, to bring coherence, which then promulgates actions for moving forward (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking therefore appears to be a core aspect of a capability for uncertainty, and is aligned with the ability to grasp context, as suggested by Bennis and Thomas (2002). However, because uncertainty or disruption usually trigger emotions, and sensemaking occurs by relating cues to one’s current mental frames (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), constructive or effective sensemaking does not always occur (Maitlis et al., 2013). Instead, intense emotions induced by fear or perceived threat, when effective sensemaking is most required, often leads to counter-productive behaviour (Ancona, 2011). For example, individuals may revert to habitual ways of doing things, seek direction from others, or search for one solution after the next to control the situation (Ancona, 2011). Effective sensemaking is therefore considered to be a requirement of leadership capability (Ancona, 2011) and for key organisational processes of strategic change, learning and innovation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 89-94).
The question therefore arises as to what entails effective sensemaking for leaders in relation to experienced uncertainty and/or uncertainty in their context. Sensemaking involves the generating of a plausible and coherent account of what is going on through iterative processes of information gathering, conversations, thinking and actions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). For effective sensemaking to occur, leaders require “emotional intelligence and self-awareness” (Ancona, 2011, p. 5). Leaders also need to challenge their own assumptions through critical reflection (Schwandt, 2005), or ‘sensebreaking’ which means reconsidering the sense one has made, through questioning one’s assumptions or beliefs (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2014; Pratt, 2000). Moreover, leaders must engage others in their sensemaking to broaden the range of sensemaking frames, or perspectives, that are being applied to their context, which also requires time (Ancona, 2011; Snowden & Boone, 2007). Thus effective sensemaking, integrated with critical reflection, is essential for a capability for uncertainty.

3.2.2.6 A sense of positive identity
Identity construction is increasingly being considered as important in leader development (Day & Sin, 2011; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Sinclair, 2011). The construction of a positive identity fosters a form of individual ‘strengthening’ (Dutton et al., 2010), defined as “a process of increasing an individual’s capacity to endure stress and hardship and/or increasing their capacity to take on new demands and challenges” (p. 275). This strengthening results from a positive identity, because a positive identity builds more social resources or relationships that one has access to, which leads to other resources such as trust and information (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 266). Similarly, a positive leader identity, reflected in confidence, credibility and reputation, facilitates leader effectiveness (Day et al., 2009; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Klenke, 2007), particularly in uncertain contexts, by virtue of building trust in others and by being more confident in one’s leadership approach, purpose and values. Day et al. (2009) argue that the highest stages of leader identity development are related to an interdependent view of self.

A sense of positive identity prepares leaders for future experiences of uncertainty, or crucibles of experience. Bennis and Thomas (2002, p. 63) associated a “new or altered sense of identity” with adaptive capacity, implying it is developed through leaders’ crucibles of experience, and it also equips them for future crucibles. Klenke (2007) also
argued that as a leader develops capacity to deal with complexity and uncertainty in the organisational context, the leader’s identity grows in its capacity to deal with increasing complexity. A leader with more expertise (and experience) therefore has a wider repertoire of knowledge, skills and mind-set for dealing with new and different leadership challenges, than a novice (Day et al., 2009). Thus, Day et al. (2009) proposed that leader identity construction and the navigation of developmental experiences occur as a mutually-reinforcing spiral. However, positive or negative spirals can result. A positive spiral depends on the achievement of a positive leader identity, which then promotes the seeking of further development through experience, or crucibles (Day & Sin, 2011).

The three key factors, according to Bosma and Kunnen (2001), which influence positive identity construction, are an individual’s openness and willingness to experience and learning (similar to learning agility outlined earlier), a supportive environment, and the experience of previous positive developmental outcomes. Taken together, positive leader identity construction is therefore essential for executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, and in turn will most likely assist and encourage them in approaching continuous experiences of uncertainty in current turbulent times.

### 3.2.3 Integrative summary

Figure 7 depicts how capability for uncertainty develops through experience over time.

![Figure 7. Developing capability for uncertainty through experience over time](image)
As illustrated in Figure 7, a capability for uncertainty seems to develop through lived experiences of uncertainty, which require such capability to be enacted. After each experience, the enhanced capability for uncertainty then informs the approach to the next experience of uncertainty within the leader’s context. The literature revealed certain components crucial for developing a holistic capability for uncertainty, that is, it appears to be built on the foundation of effective sensemaking, integrated with learning agility and critical reflective ability on the one hand, and with positive identity construction on the other. These components appear to be influenced by the leader’s orientation to uncertainty, and intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities. Whereas intrapersonal abilities are emotional self-regulation and resilience, interpersonal abilities are those relevant to the leader role during organisational uncertainty, as discussed under section 2.5.2.

Having explored the meaning of a capability for uncertainty and key components which constitute it, the next section focuses on the landscape of executive development, to set the scene for arguing that executive coaching is one viable approach for developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.

3.3 Executive development

In this section, I first explain the focus of and approach to executive development, and then the trends in leader development, followed by a consideration of specific barriers related to executive development. Finally, the implications for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty are discussed.

3.3.1 The focus of and approach to executive development

Authors agree that leadership development occurs at all levels of the hierarchy, with different emphases on different competencies, knowledge and skills at different levels (Charan et al., 2011; Guillen & Ibarra, 2010; Lord & hall, 2005; Mumford, Campion & Morgeson, 2007). Executive development specifically refers to the development of executives’ knowledge, competencies, skills, attributes and mind-set to enhance their effectiveness or performance in their role at an executive level, which focuses on strategic leadership (Mumford et al., 2007; Preece & Iles, 2009; Suutari & Viitala, 2008).
Most of the literature and research appears to be on leadership development, with executive development interventions for senior leaders and executive levels included within the spectrum of leadership development. In general, leadership development, including executive development, comprises a range of formal and informal interventions or experiences (DeRue & Myers, 2013; Guillen & Ibarra, 2010). Formal interventions are learning programmes designed for leadership development, and often occur outside or away from the workplace (that is, out-of-context). Informal development experiences occur in the workplace, as part of everyday experience on-the-job (that is, in-context), involving on-the-job assignments or action learning.

This formal-informal continuum allows for a range of leadership development interventions (DeRue & Myers, 2013), catering for different levels in the organisation, with executive development being one (Guillen & Ibarra, 2010). Executive educational programmes and executive coaching are such interventions aimed at the executive level. Executive programmes are primarily out-of-context, formal interventions. Executive coaching, on the other hand, may be a considered a combination of in-context and out-of-context learning, both formal and informal, as it requires individual leaders to step back from and reflect on their work context and experience with an executive coach (Guillen & Ibarra, 2010). Executive coaching could therefore be provided to executives after attending an executive programme, to assist with consolidation and application of the executives’ learning to their work contexts (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007).

### 3.3.2 Trends in leader development

The literature draws a distinction between leader development and leadership development. Whereas leader development is the development of individual leaders, leadership development relates to the development of the social structures and processes of relational and collective leadership (Day, 2000; Day et al., 2009; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004). However, the inter-dependence between leader and leadership development has been emphasised (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Myers, 2013), as leaders also need to be effective in leader-follower relationships and collective leadership processes. While this study focuses on individual leader development of executives, my view is that a key aspect of the role of executive leaders is both influencing and developing relational and collective leadership processes.
Although many organisations have increased their commitment to and investment in leader development, there is agreement that the supply of leader talent will not meet organisations’ leadership requirements (DeRue & Myers, 2013). This has been verified by recent global research across more than 2000 organisations (Development Dimensions International, 2014). The survey results also indicated that most leaders did not feel confident to deal with the challenges of uncertainty and complexity in these increasingly turbulent times. Furthermore, the overall quality of leader development programmes in their organisations was not rated highly by most of the leaders. These results suggest an emerging leadership talent crisis, in support of DeRue and Myers (2013), implying the need to find different approaches for effective leader development which reflect the ever-increasing complexity of work and performance requirements (Day, 2011; Hays & Kim, 2009; Petrie, 2011).

As a process, leader development often happens in fits and starts and may be incremental, evolutionary and/or transformational at different times (McCall, 2010, p. 5). It is a long-term dynamic, complex and non-linear process (DeRue & Myers, 2013), suggesting that leader development should not be simplistically thought of as a ladder of development through a hierarchy of competencies (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Myers, 2013; McCall, 2010). For this reason, Day et al. (2009, p. 38-39) conceptualise leader development as a ‘web of development’, in which various components (knowledge and skills) interact with and influence each other. They therefore perceive the leader development process as a continuous system of differentiation of lower-order competencies, which then interact in developing more higher-order or holistic competencies. While new skills and abilities are acquired over time, others are dropped, implying a gain-loss dynamic (Day & Sin, 2011).

While there is substantially more research on different approaches to leadership and effectiveness thereof, there has been an increase in leader development research over the past two decades (Day, 2011; DeRue & Myers, 2013). Based on this research, several factors have been identified as essential in the design of more effective leader development interventions or experiences. A key factor, on which there is consensus in the literature, is that experience is the key source of leader development (Day et al., 2009; McCall, 1988, 2010), underpinned by adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Kolb,
which emphasises the importance of learners linking prior experience to learning new knowledge and skills. Of note, reference has been made to the need for development experiences to be made up of 70% on-the-job assignments, 20% to be working with and learning from other people, and 10% to be formal programmes. However, this formula does not seem to be based on empirical evidence (DeRue & Myers, 2013; McCall, 2010). One critique of this formula is that these types of development or experiences may occur in parallel, with McCall (2010, p. 4) even suggesting that they should occur in parallel, in real-time, to support on-the-job development as it unfolds. Hence, a constellation of development processes or practices is suggested in the literature for effective leader development (Guillen & Ibarra, 2010).

What has also been established is that not all people learn from their experiences, because they are influenced by their willingness and ability to do so (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; McCall, 2010; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004). Three factors are suggested by DeRue and Ashford (2010a, p. 24-25) as important in facilitating individual learning from experience to occur. The first is how an individual approaches and frames the experience. Importantly, the experience needs to be framed as a learning opportunity to foster a learning orientation. The second factor requires individuals to actively experiment, to seek feedback on progress, and to regulate their emotions during their challenging experience/s to be able to focus on their learning. The third factor relates to the need for individuals to reflect on their experience in order to extract their learning to progress their development.

Challenging development experiences are those which make them “a potentially powerful learning experience” (McCall, 2010, p. 4), such as novel and unexpected experiences, or experiences involving increased complexity and pressure. However, research by DeRue and Wellman (2009) showed diminishing returns in development when leaders were given challenging work assignments to stretch them, overwhelming some. What makes an experience challenging therefore seems to be different for different individuals, but it is important that challenging learning experiences be coupled with support and meaningful feedback on learning progress (Day et al., 2009; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004). Hence, McCall (2010) suggests that coaching be added as an intervention to enable such support and feedback. In addition, the timing and
sequence of development experiences is an important consideration for reinforcement and transfer of learning to occur (DeRue & Myers, 2013). Interestingly, several authors also argue for the need to time interventions in relation to role or career transitions (Charan et al., 2011; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007; Guillen & Ibarra, 2010; McCall, 2010), which are often times of heightened personal uncertainty for leaders (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra, 2004). Taken together, leader development is a long-term complex and dynamic process which needs to take heed of the above factors in designing development interventions, with an appreciation of individual differences, individual needs and the demands of the role in the organisation’s context (Day et al., 2009; Guillen & Ibarra, 2010).

3.3.3 Barriers to executive development

Executives face specific barriers to their development due to being at the executive level in their organisations (Atwood & Bacon, 2011; Preece & Iles, 2009). Research by Preece and Iles (2009, p. 288) found that executives had uncertainties relating to executive development; for example, what development they need and how best to achieve it, who to network with and who to use as a role model. Atwood and Bacon (2011, p. 6) emphasise the nature of the executive territory as being one of living ‘life in a fishbowl’, with executives’ every move being observed by others. Executives therefore have no one or very few people they can confide in at work. They are cautious about revealing weaknesses or any development needs to others. In addition, they have time constraints in their roles, translating into less time available for development interventions. These barriers must therefore be factored into the choice and design of development interventions for executives. Given the nature of these barriers, one key element of executive development must be the provision of a safe holding environment to foster trust (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007; Preece & Iles, 2009).

3.3.4 Implications for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty

Since the global financial crisis, there has been a growing interest in developing leaders’ capability for uncertainty. The research by Day and Power (2009), on how 50 executives and senior leaders in the UK experienced the impact of the global financial crisis of 2008-09 on their organisations, found a key implication of the findings was:
“Leaders of the future will need to have the capability to help people to manage and redirect acute anxiety states....To do this, leaders will need to be able to regulate their own emotions and tolerate high levels of anxiety. This is not a skill that can be learned from traditional classroom teaching. It is more likely to develop through experiential learning which evolves from life experience and processes such as action learning, executive coaching and business simulation.” (Day & Power, 2009, p. 25)

Notably, Day and Power (2009) suggested executive coaching as one option for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. Similarly, White and Shullman (2010) argued that because there was evidence of leaders requiring too much certainty in organisations, they need to develop an acceptance of uncertainty through interventions such as executive coaching. The purpose of the current study is therefore to focus on executive coaching as one option for developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, to be addressed in the next section. Thus, it is important to motivate why executive coaching is a viable option, based on the factors considered crucial for effective leader development, while addressing the barriers to executive development – and enhancing the components that are crucial for a capability for uncertainty.

3.4 Executive coaching as a means of developing capability for uncertainty

Some authors have recommended that executive coaching be considered as one approach for developing leaders’ capability for uncertainty (Day & Power, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010). Moreover, research by Buckle (2009) established that Human Resource (HR) sponsors of coaching in the UK identified a purpose of coaching as being “developing leaders’ capacity for engaging with uncertainty” (p. 3), but this purpose was “more often implicit than explicit” (p. 21). However, although a few authors have explored certain aspects of approaching uncertainty within executive coaching (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Cavanagh & Lane; 2012; Hindmarch, 2008), there does not appear to be an integrated coaching framework and guidelines for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. The present study aims to make a contribution towards this gap, through addressing the third, fourth and fifth research objectives, as follows:
• To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty.
• To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’.
• To produce a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.

To address these research objectives, this section of the literature review first considers the meaning of executive coaching, followed by executive coaching approaches and the effectiveness of executive coaching. Thereafter the rationale for executive coaching being one viable option for developing capability for uncertainty is considered. Finally, literature and research in the executive coaching field in relation to the concepts of uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction are each explored to align with the key inter-related theoretical concepts covered on executive uncertainty in chapter 2, and are essential for producing an integrated coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty.

3.4.1 The meaning of executive coaching

Executive coaching, while considered an executive and leader development intervention, is distinct from other development interventions. It is unique by being a one-to-one confidential relationship between an executive and a qualified coach (external to the organisation), comprising a series of coaching conversations over a specified period of time (de Haan & Sills, 2012; Hill, 2010; Peterson, 2011). There are a variety of definitions of executive coaching in the literature, yet taken together they refer to coaching as a process which facilitates performance improvement, personal growth, and change of executives (de Haan, Culpin & Curd, 2011; Flaherty, 2006; Grant, 2006).

Some authors argue for a second purpose, or long-term view of coaching, suggesting that coaches need to equip their clients with abilities that they can use after the coaching has ended, such as self-guided learning (Peterson, 2006) and self-generation (Flaherty, 2006). These long-term purposes therefore promote sustainability and adaptability of clients. My sense is that this long-term view is not focused on in the literature or in practice and that developing executives’ capability for uncertainty would require executive coaches to adopt a longer-term perspective of the purpose of their coaching.
3.4.2 Executive coaching approaches and effectiveness

The demand for executive coaching has increased markedly over recent years and is regarded as a major development practice in many organisations around the world (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009; Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Maltbia et al., 2014; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007). Executive coaching has therefore evolved rapidly, resulting in an interdisciplinary profession with a range of qualifications (Hill, 2010). Executive coaching therefore incorporates a variety of methodologies, leading to perceptions of coaching being a blended approach (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2014). Consequently, there has been criticism of coaching as being atheoretical (Cox et al., 2014; Peltier, 2009) and debate about the optimal qualifications for executive coaches (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009; Feldman & Lankau, 2005). While some authors see qualifications or training in psychology or psychological-mindedness (Bluckert, 2005) as essential, others deem psychology less important than understanding business and leadership principles, as found by Hill (2010). Thus, the agenda for teaching coaching psychology has been the subject of debate (Grant, 2011).

Cox et al. (2014) have identified 13 theory-based approaches to coaching; for example, cognitive-behavioural, solution-focused, gestalt and existential, most of which are rooted in the field of psychotherapy, but have been adapted to coaching. They argue that the diversity gives coaches a repertoire of models and techniques from which to flexibly draw to meet the specific needs of their clients, both organisations and executives. The development of an eclectic approach is seen to form part of the development and maturation of coaches (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011), based on experimentation, coupled with reflective learning, on how to apply new techniques, models and/or processes into one’s coaching philosophy and approach.

A key aspect of expanding one’s repertoire needs to be based on how these different tools or approaches would better serve one’s clients and their changing requirements (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011), particularly in an increasingly complex and uncertain world (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012). In their critical review of executive coaching research, Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) also argue that the coaching research agenda must contribute to the sustainability of executive coaching practice, which requires the development of coaching practice to be aligned with the needs of executive coaching.
clients in an increasingly turbulent environment. The current study will therefore contribute to executive coaching practice towards the development of executives’ capability for uncertainty in these turbulent times.

Similar to psychotherapy research, coaching research suggests that different coaching approaches using different methodologies (theories, models, tools and techniques) do not yield more effective results (de Haan & Sills, 2012). For example, research by de Haan et al. (2011) explored what determined helpfulness for 71 clients in executive coaching. The key conclusion from their research was that helpfulness was not predicted by specific interventions, models or techniques. Instead, the helpfulness (or perceived effectiveness of coaching) was influenced by common factors across all coaching interventions, such as, the quality of the coaching relationship and qualities of the coach. Their findings did, however, suggest that a broad range of techniques used by the coach were found to be helpful. In particular, the coach’s ability to use the techniques effectively and at the right time, which supports the need for coaches to have a repertoire of techniques to draw from, as suggested above by Cox et al. (2014).

While executive coaching has grown rapidly, the evaluation of its effectiveness has not kept pace (De Meuse, Dai & Lee, 2009). Taking account of research over the years, there does appear to be agreement that executive coaching is effective in yielding a positive impact on a wide range of outcomes, resulting in executives and organisations being favourably disposed toward coaching (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009; De Meuse et al., 2009; Maltbia et al., 2014; Peterson, 2011). Based on the more rigorous research findings in psychotherapy, the trends of which coaching seems to parallel, de Haan and Duckworth (2013) therefore argue for coaching research to focus on the common factors or active ingredients in coaching which influence effectiveness (McKenna & Davis, 2009), rather than on the outcomes of coaching per se. Most evident in the literature is the importance of the coaching relationship as a common factor in developing trust and a safe environment (Carey, Philippon & Cummings, 2011; de Haan et al., 2011; Hill, 2010; Kombarakan, Yang, Baker & Fernandes, 2008). In my study, the lived experience of executive coaches (with different coach training and qualifications) in assisting executive clients with issues of uncertainty was explored, to identify the common factors across their coaching approaches in working with their clients’ uncertainty.
3.4.3 The viability of executive coaching for developing capability for uncertainty

Given the background sketched above on executive coaching, I now consider why executive coaching is one viable intervention for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. In an increasingly turbulent environment, with demanding expectations of executives, it most likely will not be easy for executives to be vulnerable and share their issues of uncertainty (Cavicchia, 2012). Hence, Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007) and Preece and Iles (2009) argue that trust, which is crucial for learning, is of critical importance in executive development interventions. Research has indicated that executives are favourably disposed to coaching (De Meuse et al., 2009), because it is a one-to-one intervention with an external executive coach, which potentially affords them a safe and confidential place for exploration and reflection (Kress, 2008). Executives have also emphasised the importance of the coaching relationship in fostering trust and a safe, confidential environment (Hill, 2010; Mackenzie, 2007; Wales, 2003).

Capability for uncertainty cannot be developed through traditional methods (Hase, 2002), but rather through experiential learning processes such as executive coaching (Day & Power, 2009). Executive coaching is an experiential real-time learning process, harnessing learning from a leader’s experience and taking that learning forward into the work setting through experimentation and reflection (Day & Power, 2009; Griffiths, 2009). Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (1984), often seen to be guiding the coaching process in different coaching models (Cox, 2006), facilitates learning from experience, through a process of reflection, to generate awareness and action. Thus, executive coaching facilitates experiential learning applied to the leader’s real experiences. Experiential learning interventions are being advocated as more effective approaches to leader development (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Myers, 2013; McCall, 2010).

A key aspect of experiential learning is reflection (DeRue & Ashford 2010a; McCall, 2010). In dealing with organisational uncertainty, Grant (2013) argues that executives need to be able to step back from their day-to-day organisational context and engage in reflection before deciding on strategies or making key decisions. He points out that reflection and awareness-raising form a core part of the coaching process (Grant, 2006). Leaders also require personal awareness or insight in their roles when dealing with organisational uncertainty (Grant, 2013). Due to the reflection which occurs in coaching,
increased self-awareness or insight has been established as a key outcome of executive coaching (De Meuse et al., 2009). In support of awareness-raising, du Toit (2007, 2014) argues for coaching to be seen as a sensemaking process, and to appreciate how coaching can enhance clients’ sensemaking. Of note, effective sensemaking and reflection were identified earlier as being crucial for a capability for uncertainty, thus adding another reason for coaching being a suitable intervention for developing such capability.

Time constraints were identified above as a key barrier to executive development (Atwood & Bacon, 2011). Based on my own experience as a coach, executive coaching sessions can also be accommodated more flexibly into an executive’s busy schedule, and in a real-time manner related to the executives’ development needs unfolding in the work context, suggested as being important for effective learning (McCall, 2010). In addition, executive coaching can be integrated with other development interventions (Hill, 2010), such as executive education programs (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007), to facilitate application of executives’ learning to their work context.

Taken together, executive coaching, as a development intervention, is a viable option for assisting executive leaders in developing their capability for uncertainty. In the first place, executive coaching can provide a safe and trusting learning environment, essential for executives to be able to share their experiences of uncertainty. Executive coaching is also well-placed to facilitate executive leaders’ real-time experiential learning from their lived experiences of uncertainty, which fosters capability for uncertainty going forward. Further, executive coaching is a process which facilitates experiential learning, reflection, increased awareness and sensemaking, which have been identified as key components of a capability for uncertainty. Executive coaching therefore also has the potential for developing capability for uncertainty, by possibly focusing more explicitly on the development of the components identified as being crucial for such capability.

In the following three sections, literature and research in the executive coaching field on uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction are reviewed. These specific foci were selected to align with inter-related theoretical concepts covered in relation to executive uncertainty in chapter 2. Covering these concepts facilitates the development
of an integrated coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability uncertainty, a key objective of the current study.

3.4.4 Executive coaching and uncertainty

Given the increasing turbulence in the world and business environments, with implications for leadership, some authors have posed the question as to what significance it has for the field of executive coaching (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Cavanagh & Palmer, 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; Stelter, 2009). It is argued that coaching is ideally placed to assist leaders in responding to these challenges, but requires more flexible and responsive coaches who have expanded their perspectives and repertoires (Cavanagh & Palmer, 2009, p. 4). Further, findings from a UK survey identified the top priority for coaches as assisting clients with change and coping with uncertainty (Coaching-at-Work Survey, 2012, p.12).

In conducting this literature review, I discovered that uncertainty, particularly executive uncertainty, did not feature strongly in the executive coaching literature. This was also observed by Hindmarch (2008) when she explored the phenomenon of self-doubt (or personal uncertainty) experienced by coachees (or coaching clients) in the organisational context. Preece and Iles (2008, 2009) noted that the subject of executive uncertainty was scarce in the leader and executive development literature, within which executive coaching is situated as one development intervention.

However, research after the global financial crisis was conducted by Buckle (2009) to understand how HR sponsors of coaching framed executive coaching purposes pertaining to uncertainty for senior leaders in their organisations. The findings of Buckle’s research are relevant for the development of executives’ capability for uncertainty through executive coaching, and are outlined first to set the scene. Thereafter, key factors for working with executive clients’ uncertainty in executive coaching are explored. Finally, the existential coaching approach is discussed briefly in relation to working with executives’ uncertainty, because it is rooted in existential philosophy, which considers uncertainty to be one of the givens of life (Jopling, 2012).
3.4.4.1 Executive coaching purposes in relation to uncertainty

The findings of the study conducted by Buckle (2009) are shared to set the stage in terms of what a capability for uncertainty might be, as perceived, or expected, by HR sponsors’ of executive coaching in organisations based in the UK. A key finding was that the HR sponsors of coaching had difficulty in articulating coaching development purposes pertaining to uncertainty for senior leaders. The HR sponsors’ rationale was that coaching at senior levels was more nuanced and personal than at other levels, implying that senior leaders tend to identify their own purposes for coaching.

One key purpose of executive coaching in relation to uncertainty, emphasised by the HR sponsors, was supporting leaders with the challenges they faced when transitioning into new roles. Other purposes identified were the need for developing leaders’ confidence, increased flexibility, their personal influence in a political environment and their ability to engage effectively with different stakeholders. It emerged that most of the HR sponsors perceived executive coaching as playing a positive role in developing leaders’ confidence. Yet, although the HR sponsors acknowledged the need for executive coaches to support leaders in engaging with uncertainty, they found it difficult to articulate what they required in executive coaches to be able to provide such support.

In short, Buckle’s (2009) findings suggest that while HR sponsors of coaching appeared to acknowledge the need for developing capability for uncertainty, they were grappling with what capability for uncertainty meant, and how this translated into purposes for executive coaching. Consequently, the HR sponsors also showed difficulty in knowing what they required from executive coaches to support the development of capability for uncertainty. Against this backdrop, I turn to an exploration of the key factors that are relevant for working with clients’ uncertainty in executive coaching.

3.4.4.2 Key factors for working with clients’ uncertainty in executive coaching

As mentioned above, there is a paucity of literature and research on working with uncertainty in the executive coaching field. However, three research studies of relevance to this topic were found, as outlined in Table 11.
Table 11
Research Studies on Executive Coaching and Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher/s</th>
<th>Study focus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buckle (2009);</td>
<td>Buckle’s (2009) research into perceptions of HR sponsors of coaching about purposes of executive coaching pertaining to uncertainty, was combined with Slyce’s research of senior leaders’ experiences of uncertainty. They identified a typology of responses to uncertainty and the implications for coaching (2010).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckle &amp; Slyce (2010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindmarch (2008)</td>
<td>Explored the experience of self-doubt in coaching by coachees (coaching clients in managerial roles) and coaches in the organisational context. They also identified strategies adopted by coaches in dealing with their clients’ self-doubt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reynolds (2011)</td>
<td>Explored how newly-appointed senior leaders in the private and public sectors perceived coaching during their transition period (in their first 12 to 18 months in the new role).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above research studies all included aspects of uncertainty and executive coaching. The major findings of these studies for working with uncertainty in executive coaching are discussed below, under these themes: transitions as a major source of uncertainty; the importance of the coaching relationship; coaching focus and approaches adopted; and outcomes of coaching when working with executive uncertainty.

**Transitions as a major source of uncertainty**

All three studies identified transitions as a major source of uncertainty for executives. Hindmarch (2008) found that self-doubt was triggered by a range of transitions, such as a move into a new role, having a new boss appointed or a change in the organisational structure. Reynolds (2011) emphasised the sense of vulnerability experienced by newly-appointed senior leaders, manifesting as feeling overwhelmed in their new roles, not being in control and feeling the pressure to deliver, while not being sure of what was expected of them. Buckle (2009) noted that HR sponsors of coaching viewed a key purpose of executive coaching, pertaining to uncertainty, as assisting senior leaders with the challenges of transitions. These findings suggest that executive coaches need to be aware that, when engaged in transition coaching, or coaching executives who are experiencing different forms of transition or change, experienced uncertainty, vulnerability or self-doubt may be a key issue that needs to be addressed.

**The importance of the coaching relationship**

The three studies all emphasised the importance of the coaching relationship when working with uncertainty, which supports the consensus in the literature that this is an...
essential common factor in executive coaching which fosters helpfulness or effectiveness of executive coaching (Carey et al., 2011; de Haan et al., 2011; Hill, 2010; Kombarakan et al., 2008). It was found by Hindmarch (2008) that self-doubt was not expressly presented when the coaching commenced, surfacing as a result of it being teased out by the coach within a trusting and safe relationship, as some clients found it difficult to admit to it. The clients valued most the coaching relationship and the safe environment created by the coach, whose positive affirmation and support they appreciated. Similarly, Reynolds' (2011) findings highlighted the safe environment, the trust and the rapport in coaching which supported the newly-appointed senior leaders to be open, enabling them to explore their feelings and thoughts. Buckle and Slyce (2010) also suggested that the executive coaching relationship should provide containment for the client so that uncertainty could be explored.

Trust in the coaching relationship builds over time, as established in research by Alvey and Barclay (2007). The coach’s behaviour is important in building trust, specifically the ability to be impartial (Reynolds, 2011) and non-judgemental (Alvey & Barclay, 2007), which helps executives to share their vulnerabilities. The use of external coaches, rather than internal coaches, is therefore recommended by Hindmarch (2008) for working with leaders in transition because they are perceived as being more impartial or neutral.

Taken together, it appears that when working with clients' experienced uncertainty, the criticality of the coaching relationship is stressed more. Creation of a safe, trusting relationship is crucial for leaders to be able to share their vulnerability and anxieties as “organisations often implicitly and explicitly work to deny vulnerability in favour of outward manifestations of bullish confidence” (Cavvichia, 2010, p. 881). Coaches therefore need to be aware of and able to manage the tensions between the organisational purposes for coaching and the more private realities of clients which emerge in the coaching relationship (Fillery-Travis & Cavvichia, 2013).

**Coaching focus and approaches adopted**

Coaches were found to use their general coaching approach when addressing their clients' self-doubt (Hindmarch, 2008). The general coaching techniques used included questioning, challenging their clients' beliefs and helping them to identify their own options and resources. Based on the findings of her research, Reynolds (2011)
suggested that executive coaches working with senior leaders in transition require a wide repertoire of skills and experience. While Cavvichia (2010) argued that the use of different techniques were valuable (such as imagery, visualisation and positive affirmations), he emphasised that the quality of the coaching relationship would influence the ultimate value of these techniques when working with vulnerability of clients.

A typology of four responses to uncertainty developed by Buckle and Slyce (2010) is relevant for informing specific foci and approaches to be used in executive coaching when working with clients' uncertainty. This typology was based on how HR sponsors of coaching and leaders framed and experienced uncertainty at the time they were interviewed. Buckle and Slyce (2010) proposed that this typology could be used to stimulate dialogue and shifts in perspective when working with clients’ experienced uncertainty, thus suggesting a coaching focus for each of the responses to uncertainty, as depicted in Table 12.

Table 12
Coaching Focus for Different Responses to Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to uncertainty</th>
<th>Focus of coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low agency and low tolerance for uncertainty</td>
<td>Assisting the client to face up to reality or as the world as it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low agency and high tolerance for uncertainty</td>
<td>Assisting the client to survive in a situation where the uncertainty is not being resolved. For example, focusing on what can be delivered and maintaining staff morale, while waiting and hoping for the uncertainty to be resolved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High agency and low tolerance for uncertainty</td>
<td>Assisting the client to generate new solutions and action plans to create a new certainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High agency and high tolerance for uncertainty</td>
<td>Exploring and building the client’s inner confidence and sense of grounding (through his or her own moral compass), thereby increasing their capacity to engage with uncertainty in a purposeful way. An additional coaching focus suggested is to support clients in engaging with paradoxes experienced in their context.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Buckle and Slyce (2010), any or all of the above responses to uncertainty, based on a particular combination of agency and tolerance of uncertainty, may be present at a time for individuals, and may be influenced by their organisational context, culture and approach to uncertainty. They argued that engagement with uncertainty is
the most helpful approach, although acknowledging that it is not simple to master. Their notion of engagement with uncertainty seems to align more with the concept of a capability for uncertainty.

The coaching approach for fostering engagement, as in Table 12 (above), focuses on sitting with and exploring the client’s uncertainty. Stelter (2009) suggested that coaching should, rather than being preoccupied with goals or solutions, provide a reflective space in these more complex and turbulent times for “thoughtful pause” (p. 211), which might lead to the client discovering new ways to act. In fostering engagement with uncertainty, Buckle and Slyce (2010) also proposed that coaching focus on developing clients’ moral compass (or personal values) and inner confidence (based on who the leader is and their sense of purpose) to engage purposefully with the uncertainty. Hudson (2008) and Stelter (2009) also advocated that coaches support their clients to anchor themselves in their values, thus enabling them to use their values to guide their choices and actions.

While the typology in Table 12 appears to offer a useful framework for working with clients’ uncertainty in executive coaching, my concern remains that this typology does not reflect the temporal or dynamic nature of experienced uncertainty emphasised in the uncertainty management literature (Brashers, 2001; Penrod, 2007). This typology was based on experiences of uncertainty at a certain time, rather than understanding executives’ lived experience of uncertainty over time, which is a key objective of the present study. Cavvichia (2012), on the other hand, proposed that executive coaches support clients in learning to accept the state of uncertainty as a real phenomenon, to be expected in the continuing flux of change and uncertainty in life. He also suggested that coaches normalise clients’ felt uncertainty, even the more intensely felt aspects of uncertainty such as shame.

In working with clients’ uncertainty related to transitions, the role of executive coaching is about recognising the “emotional upheaval” of clients and supporting them in shifting their perspective to facilitate their acting differently (Reynolds, 2011, p. 44). Likewise, Hindmarch (2008) emphasised the emotional component of self-doubt, recommending that coaches need to listen to the language and metaphors of their clients to gain more insight into their emotional experience of self-doubt. She had noticed how several participants used metaphors to explain their experience, as it was not easy to
acknowledge their self-doubt openly. Hindmarch (2008) and Reynolds (2011) found that the clients valued in the coaching process the way their coach helped them to step back, slow down and reflect on their uncertainty, so fostering a shift in their perspective, thinking patterns and feelings.

In terms of implications for executive coaches in working with clients’ uncertainty, it was proposed that coaches also help their clients to assess their situation or context realistically (Hindmarch, 2008; Reynolds, 2011). Similarly, Buckle and Slyce (2010) mentioned supporting clients to face up to the reality of their situation, when they are in denial (see Table 12, above). This would help clients to accept their context, to develop new perspectives on their context and to find ways to move forward. Reynolds (2011, p. 46) observed that the newly-appointed leaders in her study found that “exploring ways to see themselves, others and corporate issues differently” was a key enabling aspect of the coaching process for them. Based on finding that clients’ experienced a lack of control in her study, Hindmarch (2008) suggested that coaching focus on areas that clients’ can control and find ways to increase their control - to strengthen clients’ sense of agency. Buckle and Slyce (2010) also advocated that coaching focus on supporting clients’ to cope or survive when the uncertainty cannot be resolved (see Table 12), by focusing on what can be done in their clients’ context of uncertainty.

In times of increasing complexity and experienced uncertainty, executive coaches also need to assist clients in engaging with paradox. As a result, Buckle and Slyce (2010) developed a tool, listing a range of typical leadership paradoxes, for facilitating conversations with clients to stimulate ‘both/and’ paradoxical thinking. Subsequently, Glunk and Follini (2011, p. 226-227) developed a polarity coaching model with guidelines for coaches, focusing on how to explore the opposite poles of clients’ experienced paradoxes, in order to soften the boundary between these opposites, thereby encouraging clients to become more comfortable with the inter-dependency of the opposites. They propose that the polarity model be used as a tool or technique, within the coaching approach and repertoire used by executive coaches.

In sum, the above review of the coaching focus and approaches adopted in working with clients’ uncertainty found the following:
• While it seems that executive coaches’ general coaching approach is used with a wide repertoire of techniques to draw from, some authors suggest that additional tools be included which focus on working specifically with client’s experienced complexity and uncertainty, for example, working with paradox.

• A key focus of the coaching is on understanding the emotional aspect of uncertainty, by exploring the client’s experience of uncertainty, and supporting the client in stepping back and reflecting.

• Developing and/or reinforcing the client’s moral compass or personal values and purpose for grounding or anchoring the client, as a means for engaging with uncertainty.

• Helping clients to confront the reality of their uncertain context or situation, to change their clients’ perspective and support them in focusing on what they can do to move forward with purposeful actions.

• Helping to normalise uncertainty for clients, with emphasis on accepting the continuous flux of uncertainty as a given in life.

In addition to the above, executive coaches are being urged to expand their perspectives and think more systemically to be able to “…stand beside their clients as they struggle to develop larger, more encompassing perspectives of the systems in which they find themselves” (Cavanagh & Palmer, 2009, p. 4). Subsequently, Cavanagh and Lane (2012) have argued that executive coaches need to integrate cross-disciplinary perspectives such as Stacey’s (1996, 2007) complex adaptive systems theory into their coaching approaches, to work more effectively with clients’ organisational realities of complexity and uncertainty. Cavanagh (2013) also stressed that coaches need to have a model of leadership which is aligned with viewing organisations as complex adaptive systems. The enabling leadership approach was discussed in the previous chapter when exploring leadership challenges in these turbulent times (Heifetz et al., 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Of relevance, Stout-Rostron (2014) has suggested that coaches be guided by the Cynefin sensemaking framework, developed by Snowden and Boone (2007), to assist clients in adopting the appropriate leadership approach relative to the degree of complexity in their context. Taken together, coaches need to expand their...
perspectives and coaching repertoires to align with clients’ changing needs in these turbulent times.

**Outcomes of coaching when working with executive uncertainty**

The development of confidence was evidently a key outcome of working with executive clients’ uncertainty in executive coaching, which makes sense in that personal uncertainty or self-doubt often implies a lack of or decreased confidence. Buckle (2009) observed how HR sponsors of coaching perceived the development of confidence as an outcome. While Reynolds (2011) referred to how the executive coaching assisted in overcoming the newly-appointed leaders’ anxiety, Hindmarch (2008) wrote about clients’ self-doubt shifting to feeling more positive about their abilities.

Reynold’s (2011) research was more explicit about the outcomes and value that the newly-appointed senior leaders derived from executive coaching during their transitions. These leaders perceived that they developed more ownership of their new roles, creating a “new identity for themselves within the role” (p. 45). The leaders’ confidence in their ability to be effective in their roles also shifted. Another key finding was that the leaders perceived the coaching contributed positively in supporting them to change thinking and behavioural patterns in their working relationships with their peers, with those more senior to them and with their own teams. These leaders emphasised that this “recalibrating” of their working relationships was one of the most challenging and crucial aspects of their transitions (Reynolds, 2011, p. 44).

In sum, the predominant coaching outcome in working with uncertainty in executive coaching was the increased confidence and sense of agency of the clients. What also emerged for those clients who transitioned into new roles was a stronger sense of identity, ownership and recalibrated working relationships. Hence, executive coaching, which works with clients’ uncertainty, seems to generate positive outcomes for the clients, in particular a positive sense of identity. However, there appears to be a scarcity in the executive coaching literature on the proactive development of capability for uncertainty, through coaching. The one exception is the exploratory research conducted by Buckle (2009) to identify organisational purposes for coaching in relation to uncertainty, although the findings were that these purposes were more implicit than explicit and were not clearly articulated.
3.4.4.3 Existential coaching approach in working with executives’ uncertainty

Before moving to the next section, it is important to briefly consider the approach of existential coaching in relation to working with executives’ uncertainty, which aligns with key aspects of the findings from the three studies I reviewed. Although there was limited research on existential coaching, there are existential coaching approaches being espoused in the literature, mostly using case stories to describe these (Krum, 2012, p. 59). Similar to Cavicchia’s (2012) views, existential coaching approaches, based on existential philosophy, regard uncertainty as a given of existence (Jopling, 2012). Hence certain existential coaching principles may be helpful in working with clients’ uncertainty, which was acknowledged by Buckle and Slyce (2010) when describing their suggested coaching focus in fostering engagement with uncertainty, that is, sitting with and exploring the client’s uncertainty.

Existential approaches therefore focus on helping clients to live with uncertainty, to accept the flux of uncertainty and certainty, and to be alert to possibilities, even opportunities, that their uncertainty or anxiety might foster (Jopling, 2012). A core feature of existential coaching is exploring the client’s worldview, with the initial emphasis on stillness and being with the client to explore their current lived experience, rather than focusing on change (Spinelli & Horner, 2008). In addition, van Deurzen (2012) stresses the role of the coach in encouraging clients to face up to reality and to become aware of the illusions by which they are living. Thus, existential philosophy and principles may be valuable in informing an executive coach’s stance and approach in working with executives’ uncertainty.

3.4.5 Executive coaching and sensemaking

In the previous chapter, the crucial role of sensemaking in approaching and managing uncertainty was emphasised (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). However, it was also established that constructive sensemaking may be impeded or hindered due to the emotional intensity of the uncertainty experienced by an individual (Ancona, 2011; Maitlis et al., 2013). It was therefore suggested that ‘effective sensemaking’ would be an essential requirement for a capability for uncertainty (Ancona, 2011; Schwandt, 2005). Having argued that executive coaching is a viable option for developing capability for
uncertainty, it is important to review how and to what extent sensemaking has been addressed within the executive coaching field.

It became apparent that there is a noticeable lack of literature on sensemaking within the executive coaching field. Only one source referred explicitly to sensemaking, namely a conceptual paper by du Toit (2007), which considered the value of coaching in facilitating clients' sensemaking. While du Toit (2007) suggested that the coaching process in itself could be viewed as a sensemaking process, she argued that the approaches and techniques used in coaching could also be powerful in enhancing the sensemaking of clients. One of the key limitations of sensemaking is that individuals interpret cues in relation to their current mental models or frames of reference (Ancona, 2011; du Toit, 2007). To facilitate effective sensemaking of clients, coaches therefore need to challenge the interpretations made by their clients, and the assumptions and beliefs on which these are based.

Du Toit reinforced the value of sensemaking, as a perspective in coaching, in her book published in 2014. Specific ways in which sensemaking may be enhanced for clients, irrespective of the specific coaching approach or methodology being adhered to, according to du Toit (2007, 2014), are as follows:

- Containing and facilitating a reflective space for the client’s sensemaking so they can hear and understand their own thinking and stories.
- Acknowledging and exploring the emotions associated with the client’s sensemaking, because sensemaking is infused with feelings.
- Using techniques such as storytelling and metaphors to help the client to make sense of what’s going on in their context and to create the reality they want to experience.
- Questioning the cues that clients focus on or notice in their sensemaking.
- Helping the client to explore and challenge their thinking patterns and frames of reference (or mental frames) about their reality, particularly those based on past experience or illusions.
- Supporting clients to become aware of their limiting assumptions and beliefs in relation to themselves, others and their current reality.
• Challenging clients’ interpretations of their context or reality and the possibility of other realities and options.
• Encouraging clients to make conscious choices to update their mental frames.
• Helping clients to experiment with new actions as these can enable new behaviours and hence new or updated mental frames.

Coaching can therefore potentially enhance clients’ sensemaking. However, executive coaches may be adopting some or many of the above approaches implicitly to do so, because the concept of sensemaking is lacking in the coaching literature. It therefore appears that sensemaking is not a theoretical lens adopted explicitly in the practice of executive coaching, particularly for working with clients’ experienced uncertainty.

Effective sensemaking is considered a core capability of leadership effectiveness which needs to be developed in leaders (Ancona, 2011). This begs the question as to whether executive coaching could assist in developing client’s sensemaking capability in itself, for the benefit of the client. In support of this perspective, Rutledge (2009, p. 20) advocated that organisational development (OD) practitioners “call attention to sensemaking as it emerges” when working with groups to foster awareness of sensemaking, because it mostly occurs outside of one’s awareness. Yet when individuals experience uncertainty, more effortful sensemaking is initiated (Weick et al., 2005). Thus the client’s more effortful sensemaking, in relation to uncertainty which emerges during coaching, could potentially be explored in a more explicit and transparent manner to support development of more effective sensemaking, thereby enhancing the client’s capability for uncertainty. The current study aims to contribute to how coaching could facilitate executives’ sensemaking in relation to their experienced uncertainty and be a means for developing their capability for uncertainty.

3.4.6 Executive coaching and identity construction

In the previous chapter, the first part of the literature review, issues of identity emerged as being key sources of uncertainty. Identity construction was also established as being inter-related with the sensemaking initiated by such uncertainty (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Marsico, 2012; Parry, 2003; Weick et al., 2005). Moreover, the development of a sense of positive identity was identified as a key component of a capability for
uncertainty. Again, having advocated that executive coaching is a viable option for developing capability for uncertainty, I now explore how identity construction has been addressed within the executive coaching literature.

There is a paucity of literature on identity construction in the coaching literature (Butcher, 2012). The research conducted by Butcher (2012) was the only research I located on the subject of identity development within the executive coaching field. However, I need to point out that narrative coaching, developed from narrative psychology, is a particular coaching approach which works with clients’ narratives or stories, at the level of identity (Drake, 2007, p. 284). While my literature review did not focus on this specialist area of coaching I acknowledge that executive coaches trained in this approach would have specific techniques and tools that are relevant to facilitating clients’ sensemaking, as suggested by du Toit (2007, 2014), and clients’ identity construction (Drake, 2007; du Toit, 2014; Stelter, 2009). It is also evident that coaches, trained in different coaching methodologies, use some narrative techniques and tools within their repertoire; for example, exploring a client’s life narrative (Butcher, 2012).

The purpose of Butcher’s study (2012) was to understand how the concepts of identity, identity dynamics and identity construction manifested in executive coaching. The research explored how six executive coaches worked with these aspects of identity in their coaching practice. The major finding was that the executive coaches acknowledged that a range of issues of identity manifested in their coaching practice. In describing how they worked with issues of identity that surfaced, most of the coaches said they used a facilitative approach to assist their clients in exploring and gaining perspective on their situation or context. However, the coaches “did not feel they framed their coaching work in relation to notions of identity construction or competing and transitioning identities” (Butcher, 2012, p. 123). She also found that the coaches focused more on psychological constructs of identity (self-concept, beliefs and values) in working with their clients than on socio-psychological factors, which are the social and cultural processes that mediate personal identity. She therefore concluded that issues of identity and identity dynamics were recognised by the executive coaches as being implicit or a “subtext” to their coaching work. In addition, she voiced her concern about the lack of identity construction literature within the executive coaching field, recommending the need for
research to explore whether and how an appreciation of the concepts of identity, identity dynamics and identity construction could add value to the field of executive coaching.

While identity and identity construction is scare in the executive coaching literature, they are increasingly being focused on in leadership and executive development (Day et al., 2009; Nicholson & Carroll, 2013; Sinclair, 2011). With executive coaching being an executive development intervention, there is a need for more explicit integration of the concepts of identity and identity construction into the practice of executive coaching, with emphasis on the socio-psychological aspects (Butcher, 2012; Stelter, 2009). Accordingly, Stelter (2009) argued for executive coaching to “move from an egocentric to a socio-centric model of self and identity” (p. 212). With experienced uncertainty often being grounded in issues of identity, the present study will contribute to the strengthening of the links between identity construction and executive coaching.

3.4.7 Integrative summary

Although certain authors argue that executive coaches need to adopt new perspectives in their coaching approaches to assist their clients in these increasingly turbulent times, the concept of executive uncertainty did not feature strongly in the executive coaching literature. While HR sponsors of coaching acknowledge the need for developing leaders' capability for uncertainty, this has been difficult to translate into executive coaching purposes and into requirements from executive coaches to support such development (Buckle, 2009). Further, there appeared to be a scarcity in the literature on proactive development of capability for uncertainty through coaching, which requires a longer-term view of coaching purposes by executive coaches.

Key factors for working with uncertainty in executive coaching were identified across three relevant research studies. Transitions were identified as a major source of uncertainty for executives, hence alerting coaches that uncertainty could potentially be a key issue when working with clients in transition. The criticality of the coaching relationship was emphasised even more in working with uncertainty, as trust and safety in the relationship support executives in sharing their vulnerability. Although most coaches use their general coaching approach and techniques in working with clients' uncertainty, certain factors were highlighted as being crucial, for instance, exploring the
emotional aspect of clients’ experienced uncertainty and helping clients to face up to the reality of their context of uncertainty. In addition, executive coaching that involved working with clients' uncertainty generated positive outcomes for the clients, particularly confidence and personal agency, implying a sense of positive identity.

The literature review revealed a paucity of literature on sensemaking and identity construction (both important inter-related processes pertaining to experienced uncertainty) within the executive coaching field. A rationale was thus provided as to why sensemaking and identity construction, particularly the socio-psychological aspects, need to be focused on more explicitly within executive coaching, and for the purpose of developing executive clients’ capability for uncertainty. Consideration needs to be given to the integration of the concepts of sensemaking and identity construction into executive coaching practice, which are increasingly being featured in leader development. The current study will contribute towards strengthening the links between executive coaching, sensemaking and identity construction in working with executives’ experienced uncertainty, towards developing their capability for uncertainty.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed key concepts relevant to developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty through executive coaching to address research objectives 2 to 5. The literature clarified the meaning of individual capability, aligned with the notion of a capability for uncertainty in this study. What constitutes such capability clearly requires research in different contexts, with this study exploring executives’ capability for uncertainty. Certain components were identified in the literature as being crucial for a capability for uncertainty, with executive coaching being argued as one viable option for developing such capability. Executive coaching is able to address factors required for effective executive development and has the potential to develop key components crucial for a capability for uncertainty. However, the notion of proactively developing capability for uncertainty, possibly as a long-term purpose of coaching is lacking in the literature. Sensemaking and identity construction, concepts related to experienced uncertainty, were found to be largely absent in the executive coaching literature.

The next chapter describes the research design and methodology adopted for the study.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters focused on the theoretical concepts and current level of knowledge relevant to the scope of the research study. This chapter first explains the research design and then the methodology followed in the study to address the research objectives. The study comprised of three phases, as shown in Table 13, to address the five research objectives.

Table 13
Phases of the Study and Research Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of research study</th>
<th>Research objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Phase 1: Executive leaders from two companies | 1. To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty - at a personal level and in their leader role.  
2. To understand what capability for uncertainty executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty. |
| Phase 2: Executive coaches                   | 3. To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty  
4. To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’ |
| Phase 3: Coaching framework and guidelines   | 5. To propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty |

4.2 Research design

In this section, I explain my choice of a qualitative research approach, the research paradigm and the rationale for the selection of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the particular qualitative research methodology used for the current study. Finally, I describe my research strategy adopted for the study.

4.2.1 Qualitative research and its key features

A qualitative approach was adopted for this research study. Qualitative research is viewed as studying phenomena in their natural settings or contexts, by understanding or interpreting these phenomena from the perspectives and meanings that people bring to them (Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Willig, 2008). The research questions are therefore open-ended in order to explore or investigate a phenomenon holistically in its context (Shurinck, 2003), and the research design and
methods are emergent to permit such exploration (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Willig, 2008). Qualitative research focuses on collecting in-depth, rich data derived from the participants’ (or insiders’) perspectives, aiming for “depth of understanding” rather than “quantity of understanding” (Henning et al., 2004, p. 3). Small, purposively selected samples are therefore used in which the participants have the required experience of the phenomenon being studied (Klenke, 2008; Patton, 2002). The researcher is the main instrument of research in collecting and making meaning from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Henning et al., 2004). A qualitative research approach lent itself to my study because of its ability to generate thick, detailed descriptions of a phenomenon within its context, namely, the meaning of the lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders in their organisational context and of executive coaches in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty.

4.2.2 Research paradigm

There are different approaches that can be adopted within qualitative research, informed by different research paradigms. A research paradigm is the worldview used by a community of researchers (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). The literature tends to refer to three paradigms - positivism, interpretivism and post-modern/constructivism (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Klenke, 2008), each of which is characterised by its own specific ontology, epistemology and methodology. My paradigm aligns with the interpretivist paradigm (Klenke, 2008), as depicted in Table 14 (below), primarily because I believe that there is no objective reality but rather there are multiple realities as perceived by each individual, meaning that reality is subjective. This paradigm also underpins my work as a leadership coach, in understanding individuals’ subjective experience of reality and the mental frames that influence their subjective reality.

Table 14
The Interpretivist Research Paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research paradigm</th>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Although the different methodologies within the interpretivist paradigm above share common principles, each has its own specific assumptions and considerations pertinent to a research study. It is for this reason that Klenke (2008) advised interpretivist researchers to identify and describe the type of interpretivism being subscribed to and how this relates to the purpose of the research.

### 4.2.3 Rationale for selection of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to research which turns away from scientific knowledge and focuses instead on studying the essence of the phenomenon itself, *experience* (Ehrich, 2005). Research over the last few decades has revealed a picture of leadership and management being more messy and complex in reality than the theories suggest, with Ehrich (2005) advocating that the phenomenological approach be used to explore a range of human experiences within management. Investigating particular human experiences has the potential to yield “startling new insights into the uniquely complex processes of … managing and leading” (Van der Mescht, 2004, p. 1).

This study was based on an interpretative variant of the phenomenological approach, because it sought to understand both the lived experience and meaning of uncertainty by executive leaders in their business context. The interpretative variants of phenomenology, which have emerged from the work of hermeneutic philosophers such as Heidegger (1962) and Ricoeur (1981), view people as being embedded in contexts of language and social relationships (Finlay, 2009). Accordingly, people are seen to not give accounts of an objective reality, but instead give accounts based on interpreting and making sense of their experience in their context (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was developed by Jonathan Smith in 1996. IPA is “concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the
meaning of the experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” in their context (Smith, 2011, p. 9). Its aim is to understand the participants’ accounts of their subjective experience, their views and their cognitions as a means to gaining an ‘insider’s perspective’ of the phenomenon (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Willig, 2008). The key interest in cognition is exploring how people make sense of their experience. For this reason, IPA assumes people have some inclination for reflection in relation to more significant experiences and those of existential concern (Smith, 2011).

Although it was initially developed for research in the field of psychology, IPA is not restricted to this field. It is increasingly being used by researchers in other disciplines who are interested in psychological questions related to wanting to learn about the participant’s cognitive-affective (or thinking-feeling) reactions and existential concerns pertaining to a particular phenomenon (Smith, 2011). Moreover, IPA is considered to be a particularly suitable approach for research focused on exploring individuals' subjective experience of a specific phenomenon, and how they make sense or meaning of it (Hindmarch 2008; Willig, 2008), which was the primary purpose of my research.

Exploring the lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders (Phase 1 of the study) is therefore relevant for IPA, as personal uncertainty is considered to be a cognitive-affective phenomenon and of existential concern (Van den Bos, 2009). In addition, Penrod (2007) was able to significantly advance her conceptual understanding of uncertainty, which informed intervention guidelines for healthcare practitioners, by conducting an interpretative phenomenological study of the lived experience of uncertainty within the healthcare sector. Hence, this study lent considerable weight to pursuing a similar phenomenological approach for Phase 1 of the current study to understand executive leaders’ experience of lived uncertainty and the implications thereof for executive coaching practice, a key objective of my study. In addition, I gained some experience in using IPA for a research project towards a master’s qualification, which gave me the confidence to work with this methodology for my current study. IPA studies are also emerging in the executive coaching field (Hindmarch, 2008; Machin, 2010; Plaister-Ten, 2009; Reynolds, 2011), which is a multidisciplinary profession with strong roots in psychology (Bluckert, 2006) and the cognitive sciences (Griffiths, 2009). In Phase 2 of my study, the experience and views of executive coaches, in working with
executive leaders’ uncertainty, were explored. Thus, using IPA for this second phase of the study was deemed suitable.

4.2.4 The key assumptions and limitations of IPA

The key assumptions of IPA, sourced from Smith et al. (2009), and how these related to the study and the researcher’s stance are detailed in Table 15.

Table 15
Assumptions of IPA and Alignment with the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key assumptions of IPA</th>
<th>Alignment with the research study</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IPA is phenomenological and inductive</td>
<td>I generated the findings inductively from the interview data collected, from the executive leaders’ and the executive coaches’ lived experience and perspectives, to address the research objectives. Thus, the literature reviews were conducted after data collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It focuses on deriving meanings from individual accounts of the participants’ lived experience of a phenomenon – and these meanings are expressed in their own terms, rather than according to predefined categories.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA is underpinned by a double hermeneutic enquiry</td>
<td>When analysing the data collected, I needed to make sense of how the participants made sense of their lived experience. This required a double hermeneutic approach (or two-fold sensemaking process); that is, ensuring that the interpretation was rooted in the participants’ experience, while moving beyond this to offer a more in-depth or abstract perspective, one that the participants possibly might not have been aware of, and including psychological terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher attempts to make sense of the participant’s attempts to make sense of their own experiences. The researcher actively extracts meanings which are not directly accessible to the participant. This requires an ‘empathetic hermeneutic’ (being able to empathise with the participant) and a ‘questioning hermeneutic’ (being able to make sense of participants’ making sense).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA is based on idiography</td>
<td>Each individual’s experience and perspectives were analysed first. Thereafter, commonalities and differences across cases were identified. My findings highlighted themes across each sample, while emphasising individual variation within the themes, supported widely by participants’ quotes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA gives primacy to the insider perspective on reality. Hence, IPA involves the detailed analysis of each individual case, within a small sample, which has the lived experience of the phenomenon being investigated.</td>
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</table>

Essentially, it can be seen from Table 15, that IPA is both phenomenological and inductive, by rooting the findings in participants’ lived experience of the phenomenon. It is interpretative, in using a double hermeneutic, or “two-stage interpretation process whereby the researcher attempts to interpret how the participants make sense of their experience” (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, 2011, p. 20). Of importance, IPA also places emphasis on the idiographic, meaning that it highlights the nuance of variation experienced by different participants within the broader findings or themes.
Given the above features of IPA, there are certain limitations in its use. Firstly, the findings are not generalisable, but they may be transferable to similar contexts and, by making links with wider literature, contribute to theory (Pringle et al., 2011). Smith et al. (2009) have advised IPA researchers to refer to “theoretical transferability, rather than empirical generalisability” (p. 51). Moreover, Willig (2008) argued that phenomenological research could inform recommendations for improved professional practice, a key purpose of the present study. Providing transparent analysis, grounded in participants’ extracts, will enable the reader to evaluate transferability to another context (Smith et al., 2009). I have also made links with the literature in my discussion of the findings, highlighting contributions to theory.

Secondly, the researcher’s access to the participant’s personal experience cannot be achieved directly and completely, because it is dependent on the researcher’s own perspectives and frames of reference which are required to interpret that other personal experience (Smith et al., 2009). While IPA recognises the value of the researcher’s perspectives for interpretation, these may both “hinder and enhance the interpretation of another’s lived experience” (Shaw, 2010, p. 239). In this respect, IPA requires reflexivity from the researcher to explicitly present his or her own perspectives (Finlay, 2009; Shaw, 2010; Willig, 2008). I therefore included reflexivity in my study, which is defined and expanded upon in section 4.3.4.1.

Thirdly, IPA is a relatively new methodology and is still evolving. While Smith et al. (2009) have given guidelines for conducting IPA, they stressed that these were not prescriptive and should be adapted by the researcher. Pringle et al. (2011) suggest that this flexibility may be criticised by more positivistic researchers, hence it is important to justify the decisions and choices made when adapting IPA in one’s research context. I therefore justify my methodology decisions and choices in this chapter, after which I justify my approach for presenting my findings in chapters 5 (Phase 1) and 6 (Phase 2).

Having explained the rationale for selecting IPA and the key assumptions and limitations of IPA, the next step is to outline the research strategy adopted to achieve the research objectives. When using IPA, a variety of research designs may be adopted to produce a meaningful account of the particular phenomenon being studied (Smith et al., 2009).
4.2.5 Research strategy

The study adopted a three-phased research strategy, as depicted in Figure 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Objectives per Phase</th>
<th>Key Research Activities per Phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1:</td>
<td>Private Sector Company R – five years of uncertainty: Interviews with six executive leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty - at a personal level and in their leader role</td>
<td>State-Owned Company P – 18 months of uncertainty: Interviews with six executive leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To understand what capability for uncertainty executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty</td>
<td>Analysis &amp; findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2:</td>
<td>Executive coaches experience of working with leaders’ uncertainty: Interviews with six executive coaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty</td>
<td>Analysis &amp; findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’</td>
<td>Integration of findings from Samples R and P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3:</td>
<td>Integration across Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty</td>
<td>Develop coaching framework and guidelines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8. Research strategy aligned with the research objectives*

The research strategy incorporated a cross-sectional, multi-perspectival approach, comprising three sub-studies, each made up of a sample of six individuals, which explored a different perspective of the phenomenon, being investigated, as follows:

1. The lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders (sample R) in a private sector company (Company R), which had being going through prolonged uncertainty for several years at the time of the interviews.
2. The lived experience of uncertainty by executive leaders (sample P) in a state-owned company in the public sector (Company P), which had been going through an 18-month period of uncertainty at the time of the interviews.
3. The lived experience of executive coaches (sample C) in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty (not in companies R and P).

The cross-sectional design (Bryman & Bell, 2003) means that the data was collected at a single time from each sample to identify patterns within each sample. Smith et al. (2009) suggested using a multi-perspectival design to help develop a more multi-faceted and nuanced account of the phenomenon being studied. Such a design also aligns with the concept of triangulation, when different sources are used to seek integrative and complementary information (based on assuming that multiple realities exist as per the interpretivist paradigm of this study), rather than corroborating these different sources for validity, which assumes one reality exists, as per the positivist paradigm, an important distinction made by Hammersley (2009).

Data collection from the first two samples, by interviews with the executive leaders in two different companies, occurred in the first phase, followed by data collection from the sample of executive coaches in the second phase, also via interviews. The primary unit of analysis in the study was the individual in each of these three samples, which aligns with the idiographic nature of IPA (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Willig, 2008). Thereafter, the analysis identified the patterns of similarity and instances of variance across the individuals within each sample (Smith et al., 2009). An integrative analysis of the findings and implications across Phases 1 and 2 was used to inform a proposed coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty in Phase 3 of the study (see Figure 8 above). The use of two samples in Phase 1 of the study was not for comparative purposes, which would have required a different sampling approach. Rather, the findings from these two samples were integrated to give a richer account of individual executive leader’s experience of uncertainty across two different organisational contexts and different time periods of uncertainty; whilst highlighting any key differences identified between the two samples in relation to their specific contexts. This is a form of complementary triangulation advocated by Hammersley (2009) and Yardley (2008).

As there are different views on the role of a literature review in qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Punch, 2006), I explain the approach adopted in this study. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that the purpose of a literature
review is for researchers to widen their own knowledge and to introduce readers to the field. As IPA is inductive, the research questions are usually open-ended and not theory-driven, which requires the researcher to suspend preconceptions when collecting the data (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Pringle et al., 2011). Although a preliminary literature review was completed for the research proposal I chose to suspend the literature review during the data collection process. Two literature reviews were conducted later in the present study (see Figure 6, above). The first review was conducted after data collection in Phase 1, with the second review occurring after data collection in Phase 2, on those concepts relevant to the research objectives of each phase. These literature reviews extended into the analysis stage of each phase, as relevant literature needed to be sourced iteratively to further interpret the findings that were generated inductively from the interview data (Smith et al., 2009).

4.3 Research methodology

The methodology was primarily informed by the IPA guidelines developed by Smith et al. (2009), but adapted to suit the context, objectives and ethical considerations of this study. The IPA guidelines are not prescriptive and researchers are encouraged to adapt them within the IPA paradigm (Willig, 2008). This section explains the sampling procedure, the research setting, the participant profiles, the role of the researcher, ethical issues, data gathering methods, the treatment of the data and the strategies adopted to ensure quality.

4.3.1 Sampling procedure

A small sample of five to six is recommended for IPA projects (Smith & Osborn, 2008), with an upper limit of ten. Small samples are relevant for the in-depth, idiographic mode of inquiry of IPA. Smith et al., (2009) view “a PhD as being made up of three self-contained but related studies” (p. 52), depending on the research objectives. My research study comprised three sub-studies, using three different samples.

As IPA focuses on small, fairly homogeneous samples which have the lived experience of the phenomenon being investigated, purposive sampling was used for the three samples. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling (Babbie & Mouton, 2011) in which the researcher selects a sample which will be able to give the thick, rich
description required on the phenomenon being studied. In IPA, homogeneity of the participants in a sample is mainly in relation to sharing the experience of the phenomenon being studied (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Willig, 2009). Smith and Osborn (2008) emphasise that IPA researchers need to be pragmatic in choosing participants, in order to find participants with the experience of the phenomenon under investigation and where there are issues of accessibility. Convenience sampling therefore tends to be linked to purposeful sampling (Smith et al., 2009), as in this study. In my study, the sampling approach focused on executives and coaches as separate entities, and not in a coaching relationship (or dyads), to foster different perspectives and rich data. The use of dyadic research might have led to congruent perspectives between the executives and coaches. The sampling approach used in each phase is explained.

4.3.1.1 Phase 1: executive leaders in two companies

Two samples from two different companies were selected purposively to give rich data on executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty. For this reason, the key sampling criterion would be executive leaders in companies (that is, they should be members of the executive committee) which had been experiencing change and uncertainty in their organisational contexts prior to and up to the time of data collection.

At the time of preparing my research proposal, I selected a company with which I had worked as an external organisational development consultant and leadership coach. This company had been undergoing organisational change and prolonged uncertainty for about five years. The one possible limitation with this company, therefore, was that the executive leaders would need to rely on their memory, to elicit their lived experience of uncertainty, particularly of the earlier stages of the organisational change. A potential limitation of retrospective interviews is that people tend to remember past experiences as more rationally structured than present or future experiences (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Hence, a decision was made to include a second company, experiencing a shorter period of change and uncertainty relative to the first company identified. These different temporal perspectives, influenced by varying recall by different participants, of the phenomenon of experienced uncertainty, would enable me to better understand its dynamics over time, an aspect in which I was interested and which was identified as a research need by Brashers (2001).
At that stage, a potential second company was identified through my professional network. When contact was made with the company, however, it was established that it had been acquired by a larger organisation, with the sentiment being that the change had resulted in more certainty, rather than uncertainty. This company would not yield the lived experience of the phenomenon being investigated so I returned to planning how to find a suitable second sample. After a few unsuccessful attempts through my professional network, I realised that it would be difficult to gain access to companies with which I did not have a professional relationship, as the research topic was personal and would touch on vulnerable aspects of executive leaders. I therefore decided to approach another company in the public sector with which I had worked and which had been going through organisational uncertainty for a shorter period than the first, that is, about 18 months. I had not considered this company initially, because I had conducted executive coaching in this company, as part of a panel of external executive coaches, prior to and during part of this period of uncertainty. The executive coaching was initiated prior to the period of uncertainty as a leadership development initiative for members of the executive committee and senior managers.

Having had a previous working relationship with key individuals in both companies helped me to obtain permission to conduct my research with them. I will share the details of my professional relationship with both companies and the study participants in section 4.3.4, when I reflect on the role of the researcher. Both companies stipulated two provisos in terms of their involvement, that the executive leaders would be invited to participate voluntarily and that the identity of the companies and participants would not be revealed, due to the personal nature of the data to be collected. Six executive leaders, that is, members of the executive committee, in each company agreed to participate. The companies were referred to as ‘Company R’ and ‘Company P’ in this study to ensure anonymity.

4.3.1.2 Phase 2: executive coaches

The sample of executive coaches needed to meet the following criteria:

- Have at least five years of executive coaching experience of coaching clients at the executive level across a variety of organisations. The assumption was that this level
of experience would mean the coaches had experience of working with executive leaders on issues of uncertainty.

- Have professional membership with a recognised coaching association, such as COMENSA (Coaches and Mentors of South Africa) or other bodies such as the ICF (International Coach Federation).
- Have some diversity in terms of gender and race.
- Have different academic and/or coaching training qualifications, because executive coaching is a multi-disciplinary profession, so that different perspectives would be engaged to generate richer data.

Based on meeting the above criteria, I invited six executive coaches, through my professional networks, to participate voluntarily in the study. These six coaches all agreed to participate.

4.3.2 The research setting

The research setting for Phases 1 and 2 was the organisational context. In Phase 2, sample C comprised executive coaches who had experience of coaching executive leaders in an organisational context. The organisational contexts of the two companies in Phase 1, from which the two samples of executive leaders were sourced, will now be described to give a sense of the research setting.

**Company R** - was a private South African company in the manufacturing sector, and had undergone a change of ownership since 2007 which resulted in a prolonged period of uncertainty for five years as at the time of the research. The company was previously owned by an international organisation, which entered into a black empowerment deal in South Africa, resulting in the change of ownership and a large financial debt to be paid off by the local South African company. This commenced a period of long-term uncertainty due to turnover and changes in the executive team, individuals in extended acting roles, changes in the Board, business challenges in their market and extreme financial pressures due to debt incurred by the change-in-ownership deal, coupled with the impact of the global financial crisis of 2008. While the financial debt was successfully re-structured to the advantage of the company at the time of the research interviews, the company was still facing much uncertainty related to its future growth.
**Company P** - was a state-owned company and a utility service provider for a major city in South Africa, with the company's shareholder being that city. The 18-month period of uncertainty, as at the time of the research, was triggered by the secondment of their managing director (MD) to The City (as it will be referred to in this study). The secondment became a permanent appointment, resulting in a period of acting MDs and acting executives in Company P, as an interim measure, until a new MD would be appointed. Over this time there were other changes in the management of The City and the company's Board, coupled with political pressures and financial constraints that added to the uncertainty within Company P. At the time of the research interviews, the participants were aware that a new MD would take up the role in a few months’ time.

The two companies selected had similarities, as follows:

- They both had experienced a period of change and uncertainty preceding the time at which they were interviewed.
- They were similar in size in terms of the number of employees (that is, in the range of 2200 to 2500 employees).
- Both had a significant operations function.
- Both had a functional organisation structure with functional executive leaders at a similar level.

Both companies had individuals transitioning into and out of their executive committees during their respective periods of uncertainty, which formed the subject of the study. They also had different leadership development initiatives during these periods. Hence, these were examples of variables that could not be controlled for as they formed part of their organisational contexts, which added to the reality and dynamics of the uncertainty being experienced. Henning et al. (2004) argued that in qualitative enquiry, “the variables are usually not controlled because it is exactly this freedom and natural development of action and representation we wish to capture” (p. 3). My view was that the participants would share what was relevant to them in terms of their own lived experience of uncertainty and how they made sense of it. They would make reference to sources of uncertainty and to any relevant resources, initiatives and factors in their organisational contexts that were pertinent to making sense of their experience of uncertainty.
4.3.3 The participant profiles

After describing the sampling procedure and research setting above, this section briefly outlines the profiles of the samples used in the two phases of the study. Table 16 (below) contains the profile of samples R and P, which formed part of Phase 1. In addition to biographical information, the executive role which the participants occupied at the time of the interviews is indicated and their years of experience at executive level, which includes experience at other companies.

Table 16
Profile of Executive Leaders in Sample R and Sample P (Phase1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample R</th>
<th>Executive Role</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Executive Experience (years)</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>B. Comm; MSc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BSc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>BSc; MSc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>BSc; PhD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample P</th>
<th>Executive Role</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Executive Experience (years)</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Acting MD</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>BA (Hons); PG Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Operations (COO)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>BSc; MBL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Acting Human Resources</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BA ; MBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Operations (GM)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>BSc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Acting Internal Auditor</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>CFE; Internal Auditor Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dip (Banking)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When examining both sample profiles in Table 16 (above), one can see that the executive leaders in sample R (from the private company) were generally older (with an average age of 50, compared to 45 in sample P) and had more executive experience (averaging eight years, compared with 5 years in sample P). Although half the participants across both samples were white males, there was diversity in terms of race and gender. Across both samples, there were three females and five blacks, in general a fair reflection of the demographic profiles found at executive level in South African companies. I reiterate that the homogeneity sought in each of the above samples was in relation to the criterion of lived experience of uncertainty within a context of organisational change and uncertainty, that being a longer period in sample R (five years) and a shorter period in sample P (18 months). I was not looking for homogeneity...
in relation to race, gender, age or years of executive experience, however, some diversity in these respects would reflect the reality of the organisational context.

The sample of executive coaches in Phase 2 is depicted in Table 17 (below), indicating their biographical information, executive coaching experience and coaching qualifications. The sample of executive coaches exhibits some diversity and, more importantly, a range of different types of coach training and/or qualifications. Most participants had at least seven years of executive coaching experience, which exceeded the minimum criterion of five years required for this study. Only one coach had five years of experience.

Table 17
Profile of Executive Coaches in Sample C (Phase 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Experience (yrs)</th>
<th>Coaching training and/or academic qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BA; MA (Guidance &amp; Counselling); NLP, Gestalt &amp; Mindfulness accreditations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>BA (Theology); Completing MA (Professional Coaching)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Actuarial Science; Co-Active Coach training; Currently completing M Phil (Leadership)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>B. Comm; MBL; PCC Certificate (Integral Coaching)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>MA (Counselling Psychology); MBA; Integral Coaching &amp; Co-Active coach training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Meta-coaching accreditation; Certificate in Coaching; Completing M Phil (Management Coaching)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To sum up, all three samples met the key requirements for this study. However, I had to consider my professional relationship with some of the participants in the samples and the implications thereof, as addressed in the next section.

4.3.4 The role of the researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument for collecting and analysing the data (Creswell, 2009; Henning et al., 2004). The implications of this in interpretative qualitative research may potentially be positive and negative (Shaw, 2010). One of the negative aspects may be the researcher’s bias being imposed on the processes of data collection and analysis (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010), yet as Willig (2008) pointed out, in IPA, these ‘biases’ are not seen as necessary to eliminate, rather they are seen as necessary to assist the researcher to interpret. That is why IPA requires reflexivity from the researcher to present his or her own perspectives (Smith et
al., 2009; Willig, 2008), in order to engender transparency and trustworthiness (Shaw, 2010). The concept of reflexivity is therefore explained briefly and how it was incorporated into this study.

4.3.4.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is considered important in qualitative research, “because it encourages us to foreground, and reflect upon, the ways in which the person of the researcher is implicated in the research and its findings” (Willig, 2008, p. 18). The need for reflexivity in qualitative research, particularly for research within the interpretivist paradigm, has been recognised (Finlay, 2009). While the importance of reflexivity is emphasised in IPA, there appears to be no clear guidelines on how to approach this from a practical perspective. Some qualitative researchers have suggested one form of reflexivity, whereby the researcher includes a section in the first chapter to position the researcher in terms of the background, experience and perspectives that the researcher has in relation to the research subject, when the research commenced (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Ortlipp, 2008; Shaw, 2010). I have included such a section in chapter 1 of this thesis to assist the researcher to consciously suspend these personal perspectives or biases when collecting the data, but also to be aware of how these come into play when interpreting it. In addition, such a section allows the reader to be aware of the researcher’s perspectives and to consider alternative interpretations of the analysis (Willig, 2008).

In addition to the above form of reflexivity, Shaw (2010) and Willig (2008) recommended that some of the researcher’s reflections be raised in context across the various sections of the research report, which I have done, with particular emphasis on reflexivity in relation to the methodology, in this chapter. Willig (2008) also suggested that a section be included in the final chapter on how the research has affected or changed the researcher, also taken up.

4.3.4.2 The researcher in relation to the participants

Having outlined the sampling procedure and the profiles of the three samples, an important subject for my own reflexivity was my professional relationship with some of the participants, and the potential impact of these. I agree with Corbin Dwyer and Buckle
(2009) that being an insider or outsider as the researcher is not a simple either/or dichotomy, but rather it is about being both, as in this study, in different degrees with each sample. My position in relation to each sample in the study is considered.

**Executive leaders in sample R (phase 1)**

Although I had worked with Company R as an independent OD consultant and leadership coach I had not coached any of the executive leaders in sample R. However, I had interacted with three executive leaders in sample R due to coaching senior managers, reporting to them, and carrying out organisational consulting work for each. I had a closer working relationship with one of them, and for this reason chose to have my first interview with this participant to help me with building confidence before interviewing the others. I had not met the other three executive leaders in sample R prior to this study, except when I presented my proposal to them at one of their executive committee (EXCO) meetings to invite them to participate. Nonetheless, I did have prior knowledge of the company, its context, and culture, which gave me some insider perspective.

**Executive leaders in sample P (phase 1)**

As mentioned under the sampling procedure above, I decided to approach Company P because I had a working relationship with them. Having been part of an executive coaching panel that had coached the executives and senior managers, I initially wished to source participants whom I had not coached, but this proved to be unsuccessful, despite the gatekeeper for my study trying on my behalf. Company P had been inundated with research requests, and there was some suspicion based on previous negative experience of research conducted in the organisation. I finally obtained a sample which included three participants whom I had coached, because these individuals knew me and were willing to participate. However, the coaching relationship had ended a few months before I interviewed them and I had not met the other three participants prior to the study. Having worked in the company, and with three of the participants, I therefore had an insider perspective.

When reflecting on the three participants whom I had coached in Company P, I was aware that one of them did not bring any issues of uncertainty into the coaching that related to the organisational uncertainty that was triggered a few months after the coaching programme started. The other two did raise issues of uncertainty, one sharing
and reflecting on an intense experience of uncertainty he had been through prior to the commencement of the coaching, which had a bearing on him in relation to the organisational uncertainty which transpired. The other brought aspects of personal and leadership uncertainty into the coaching which did relate to the organisational uncertainty being experienced.

I decided to proceed with Company P, based on the following rationale. I would interview all participants strictly for what I was looking for, namely their lived experience of uncertainty. I would make no reference to our prior executive coaching relationship when I explained the purpose of the research and set up my interviews with the three participants I had coached. If any participants were to raise executive coaching, or aspects related to it, during the interviews, it would need to arise spontaneously from them and would form part of the data. I was also aware that the EXCO in Company R had, as a team, been through a leadership intervention, facilitated by another leadership consultant, similar to team coaching. As with Company R, I would have an understanding of the context and culture of Company P, which was to my advantage in having to assimilate the content of participants’ interviews.

Having had a previous professional relationship with several participants prior to the study, three in each sample of executive leaders in Phase 1, I was aware that this might impact on the quality of the interviews, adversely and/or positively, as cautioned by Greene (2014). Whereas some might have been reluctant or have felt uncomfortable in sharing their personal experiences with me, others might have felt more able and willing to share with me because they knew me, or wanted to impress me with their expertise or competence. Similarly, those executives that I did not know prior to my research may have been reluctant to share with me, or the converse. While these were aspects of which I was conscious as the researcher, I also had a strong sense that my understanding of the contexts of the two companies would be valuable in helping me to understand their experiences of uncertainty when interviewing them. This was an important factor, given that I only had one interview with each of the executives.

**Executive coaches in sample C (phase 2)**

Turning to the sample of executive coaches in Phase 2 of the research, I was clearly an insider researcher by virtue of being an executive coach. An insider researcher is a
researcher who shares the role and/or experience being studied with the research participants in the study (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Although I knew all the executive coaches in my sample, as I personally invited them to participate, my association with them was not as a close working or professional relationship as colleagues. There was one exception, a coach who was an academic colleague but who did not work with me as an executive coach. I realised there would potentially be disadvantages and advantages to being an insider researcher, by being an executive coach and having worked with executive clients’ uncertainty. I therefore needed to position myself clearly as an interested researcher and not as a coach when conducting interviews with the executive coaches. I also needed to be sensitive to my impact on the executive coaches, who might be reluctant to share aspects of their professional practice with me or wanted to impress me. However, I also believed that my experience as a coach was an advantage in understanding the executive coaches’ context, which would facilitate my interpretation of the findings, while needing to be aware of the influence of my biases (Green, 2014).

In summary, given the above considerations regarding my role as researcher, my intention was to adopt a curious, respectful and collaborative approach with the research participants. This approach would help to establish rapport and encourage them to be open with me, while consciously suspending my views and perspectives during interviews (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Acknowledging some of the disadvantages of insider research (Green, 2014), I adopted several strategies to ensure quality of data, aligned with an interpretivist research paradigm to be outlined later in this chapter.

4.3.5 Ethical issues

In terms of key ethical considerations, it was important not to harm the participants, whether the executive leaders or the executive coaches (Henning et al., 2004; Willig, 2008). I was therefore transparent about the purpose and process of my study to all participants and needed to ensure their anonymity, while making it clear they understood that the interviews would be recorded with selected verbatim extracts to be included in the final report, or any publications. They were also reminded of the right to withdraw at any time without recrimination. These ethical considerations were included in an informed consent form (Appendix 1), which was sent to the participants before I
interviewed them. When I met for the interviews I asked them to sign the form before proceeding. I was also aware of the possibility of the executive leaders feeling vulnerable and having discomfort in sharing their lived experience of uncertainty with me, which I took cognisance of in my interview approach. All data was stored in a password-protected computer and all documents pertaining to the participants locked away in my home office.

Anonymity, usually through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of personal identifiers, is characteristic of qualitative research (Smith et al., 2011). I therefore allocated codes to each of the participants and their interview transcripts. However, ‘confidentiality’ implies that no one else will see the data, which was not the case in this study due to the interview transcription, peer review processes and inclusion of participant quotes in the final report and other future publications relating to my research. I therefore did not ensure confidentiality on the informed consent form.

A key ethical dilemma for me was how to preserve anonymity in the two samples of executive leaders, as these participants worked together in their respective executive teams, and I was aware that they could possibly identify their colleagues in my thesis. I was therefore particularly concerned about how to present and report my findings to ensure anonymity because the research subject (experienced uncertainty) was of a personal and vulnerable nature. How I decided to approach this ethical issue is explained in the next chapter, when I set the context for reviewing the findings of the executive leaders’ experience from both companies (Phase 1).

4.3.6 Data gathering methods

My outline of the sampling procedure, the sample profiles, and the consideration of the role of the researcher and ethical issues up to this point, set the stage for commencing with the fieldwork. Hence, the gathering of the data is explained in this section. The primary method of data collection in both phases of my study was through semi-structured interviews with the participants. The design of the interview guides, the interview process, followed by transcription and verification of the interviews, are described, with supporting rationale and my reflections.
4.3.6.1 Design of the interview guides

The favoured data collection method for IPA is semi-structured interviewing (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). IPA sees the interviewer as working in flexible collaboration with the participants to allow them to share their experience, while exploring their meaning, to produce the rich data needed for this approach. There is consensus (Babbie & Mouton, 2011; Henning et al., 2004; Willig, 2008) that semi-structured interviews enable the collection of rich data because the use of an interview guide, which only has a few open-ended questions, helps the researcher to facilitate rapport, probe the participant’s responses and explore novel areas raised by the participant in a flexible manner. Three interview guides were designed to focus on each sample in the study to collect the data required to address the research objectives pertaining to the phase of the study, as depicted in Figure 8 (above).

Executive leaders (phase 1)

The interview guides for sample R (Appendix 2) and sample P (Appendix 3) were designed to elicit the executive leaders’ lived experience of personal uncertainty and the challenges they experienced as leaders during the relevant period of organisational uncertainty, as follows:

- For sample R, it was the five-year period that was the result of the change in ownership deal and a large financial debt to be paid off.
- For sample P, it was the 18-month period which commenced when the MD was seconded to The City, temporarily, after which it became permanent.

Other than the different time periods of organisational uncertainty, the interview guides for these two samples were identical. Table 18 (below) illustrates how the key themes in the interview guide aligned with the research objectives in Phase 1.
Table 18
Executive Leaders: Alignment of Interview with Research Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Objective</th>
<th>Key Interview Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty</td>
<td>• What personal uncertainty was experienced during the time of organisational uncertainty - and how did you approach this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- at a personal level and in their leader role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To understand what capability for uncertainty executive leaders develop</td>
<td>• What did you learn and how did you develop from your experience of uncertainty – personally and as a leader?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>through their lived experience of uncertainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two ‘beginning points’ of the respective periods of organisational uncertainty were used to ‘peg’ the periods of uncertainty in the two different companies, and the point at which the interviews started for these two samples. Henning et al. (2004) argued that the use of a structural ‘peg’ in the interview gives a participant something on which to ‘hang up ideas’ while getting used to the interview (p. 73). Stated differently, the ‘peg’ gives the participant a clear reference point.

Referring to Table 18 (above), each interview guide was customised to start at the beginning of the uncertain period in each company (Companies R and P), then the questioning moved through time up to the present (being the time of the interview), to elicit the participants’ lived experience. The starting point when interviewing participants, who had joined the company or joined the executive committee, was their experience of joining the company or the executive committee in a new role during the uncertain period, then moving through time up to the present. Using this approach helped in gaining data in relation to the temporal dynamic of experienced uncertainty over time, in which I was interested.

**Executive coaches (phase 2)**

The interview guide for sample C (Appendix 4) was designed to elicit the executive coaches’ lived experience of assisting executive leaders with issues of uncertainty, and how the coaches approached working with such issues. Table 19 indicates how the key interview themes aligned with the research objectives of Phase 2.
Table 19
Executive Coaches: Alignment of Interview with the Research Objective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Objective</th>
<th>Key Interview Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 3. To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty | • What kind of issues, relating to personal uncertainty and leadership uncertainty, are emerging in your coaching of executive leaders (or executive clients)?  
• What is your approach in working with uncertainty being experienced by executive clients? |
| 4. To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’. | • How would you describe a ‘capability for uncertainty’ and what might indicators of such a capability be? |

The interview themes in Tables 18 and 19 (above) were broken down into a few specific questions on the interview guides (Appendices 2, 3 and 4), including open-ended questions to use as possible prompts. At the end of the interview, all participants in the three samples were asked a final question, which was to reflect on the interview content pertaining to their lived experience and whether they had derived any value from the interview. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that the interviews be facilitated as a sensemaking process, that is, enabling the participants to make sense of their experience. I was interested to see their responses to this final reflective question, as it encouraged the participants to ‘step back’ from the interview, or conversation, and reflect at a meta-level or ‘so what’?’. This type of reflection is advocated as a means of extracting awareness or additional insights in Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, used to positive effect as a coach in my coaching approach.

Each of the three interview guides were pre-tested with the first participant interviewed in each of the three samples, by asking for feedback on the interview process and the questions asked, with a view to improving these. One area, on which I picked up in my first pre-test interview with the first participant in sample R, was that it was not clear-cut for this person to differentiate between personal uncertainty and leadership challenges during the uncertainty. Although I continued to ask these questions in all three samples I did not force this differentiation between experienced personal uncertainty and leadership challenges during uncertainty. Instead, I followed the participants’ lines of response, while acknowledging that I would need to analyse the data carefully in regard to this differentiation in all three samples. Otherwise, I experienced all three interview
guides as being fit for their purpose, using them for the remainder of the interviews, yet applying them flexibly.

4.3.6.2 Interview process

The interview process commenced with Phase 1 participants (executive leaders), starting with sample R, followed by sample P. Thereafter, the participants in sample C (executive coaches) for Phase 2 were interviewed. The research design was cross-sectional, so each participant was interviewed once. I therefore requested participants to set aside two hours for the interview to provide sufficient time for gaining in-depth data, which proved to be adequate. Each interview was recorded, using a digital recorder, thus allowing me to focus on facilitating an effective interview. I then made notes after each interview. These notes captured my impressions of the participant, what had stood out for me in the interview, any feelings that I had in relation to the participant, the quality of the interview and my reflections on what I could improve in my interviewing skills (Henning et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008).

All of the interviews for both samples R and P in Phase 1 were completed before the data analysis commenced, with the same strategy applied to sample C in Phase 2. My reason for this strategy was that I did not want to start forming a picture, or to pre-empt a line of questioning, in subsequent interviews in the sample. This approach is aligned with the idiographic focus of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). My intention during each interview was to capture each participant’s lived experience and how they made sense of it. I therefore mainly used prompts to probe for more details and specific examples to gain richer data. I also asked clarifying questions and summarised at intervals to check my understanding with each participant (Henning et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008).

In my field notes after the initial interviews, an area of concern was whether I might have been leading the participants, or interpreting, when I was checking my understanding with them. I realise this was due to me being conscious of optimising my time with them, knowing I would not be interviewing them again. I therefore wanted to ensure that I understood their experiences and meaning shared with me. I also improved my interviewing style as the study progressed by reminding myself of the IPA principles, my research purpose and approach, thereby helping me to conduct the interview as a
'sensemaking process’. I did this by clarifying my role as the interviewer, which was to ask questions and probe in ways to help the participants make sense of their experience and views, while trying not to interpret (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008). When reflecting on the effectiveness of the interview process in relation to the executive leaders (Phase 1), I found that all the participants were willing to share their experiences with me and all the interviews generated rich data. I even had a sense that it was cathartic for many of them to discuss their lived experience with me. One participant was quite emotional during the interview, but was comfortable to continue when I checked with him. Again, my previous professional relationship with this participant seemed to make him comfortable in sharing his experience with me, openly revealing his emotional state at the time. However, I was concerned about my interview with one of the executive leaders, who I did know prior to my research study, who told me at the outset of the interview that he had a previous negative experience of being interviewed, and who seemed hesitant about being interviewed. We discussed his concerns further and I reassured him as to my intentions as a researcher and my ethical principles. He then agreed to proceed with the interview. I remember wondering, at the time, how his previous interview experience would affect his honesty in sharing his experienced uncertainty with me. I observed how he was initially more comfortable in talking about the events that occurred in his company rather than his personal experience. I followed his lead, and when observing him to be more relaxed I probed gently and he started to share more of his personal experience as the interview progressed. I attribute this to having had a prior professional relationship with him, and felt that he trusted me and so opened up. When reflecting on my interviews with the three participants in Company P, whom I had coached prior to my study and had concluded the coaching a few months before the research interviews, I believe my strategy of making no reference to the coaching was effective. These executive leaders focused on sharing their lived experience of personal uncertainty within the context of the company and in their leadership role during the period of organisational uncertainty. The one participant, who had raised issues of uncertainty during our coaching partnership, did make a reference to the coaching conversations having helped him to make sense of his uncertainty. He only raised this in passing after
discussing how he preferred to make sense of uncertainty in conversations with others, referring to his team in particular. I therefore do not think my prior coaching with these participants affected their interview data adversely.

On the other hand, I discovered during the analysis of the transcripts that there were areas that I could have probed more, or returned to, during some of the interviews. I also noticed that three participants in Company R, for which the period of uncertainty was for five years, mentioned at least once that they could not remember certain details. However, these forgotten details were mainly in relation to specific organisational events, and the specific timing of these, rather than their experience of uncertainty. Of importance was that all executive leaders were able to remember and share their experiences of uncertainty, which concurs with Smerek (2011), who suggested that people have more difficulty recalling common events than recalling unusual experiences with “high saliency” (p. 83). Their experience of uncertainty therefore seemed to be one of high saliency, being prominent in their memory.

When reflecting on the effectiveness of the interview process in relation to the executive coaches (Phase 2), my sense was that they all shared their experience, coaching approach and views willingly and openly with me, resulting in rich data. In retrospect, I believe that sourcing these coaches personally and inviting them to participate improved the interview process. Only one participant was concerned about being able to add value to my study, as she was not sure about uncertainty being an issue for her executive clients, but when I asked her to share an example of one of her clients she soon realised that issues of uncertainty were evident, leading to her relaxing and participating fully in the interview. My sense was that she initially thought the research focus was on external uncertainty, rather than subjective uncertainty of executive clients.

Taken together, my assessment of the interview process was that it was effective in generating rich data from both the executive leaders and the executive coaches. Personally, the interviews were a highlight of my study, and my genuine interest in the subject helped facilitate the open sharing of the participants, particularly those I had not met prior to the research. On reflection, I feel that my coaching skills, based on a non-directive approach and active listening, assisted me with my interviewing skills. In addition, my knowledge of the two companies’ contexts and understanding of coaching
helped me to be fully present to the participants during their interviews. This contextual understanding reduced my personal anxiety about being able to assimilate what was being shared with me.

4.3.6.3 Transcription and verification of interviews

The interviews were then transcribed verbatim as recommended by Smith and Osborn (2008), using the services of a recommended professional transcriber. On completion of each transcript I checked and edited it, while listening to the audio recording to develop familiarity with the data (Fade & Swift, 2011). When editing, I paid particular attention to improving punctuation and changing any identifiers with participants and/or the companies to ensure anonymity. Participants were allocated codes instead of using their names, for example, in sample R they were R1 to R6. Similar coding was applied to sample P and sample C. The transcripts were then sent to each participant for verification of the contents, an important step towards establishing credibility of the data (Smith et al. 2009; Yardley, 2008). I also asked them for any additional reflections since the interview, hoping that the act of reading their transcripts might act as triggers. Only two people sent further brief reflections to me, which were added to the end of their interview transcripts. In retrospect, I believe that asking them for additional input via e-mail was not effective as a means of ensuring completeness of their data. Possibly, a brief telephonic follow-up interview with each participant, after they had read their transcripts, might have proved more productive.

4.3.7 Treatment of the data

There is no one right way to conduct qualitative analysis as it is a creative process and essentially forms “the heartbeat” of the research (Henning et al., 2004, p. 103). The analysis of the data in the present study followed the IPA guidelines (Gee, 2011; Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008;; Smith et al., 2009), with some adaptations. According to Smith and Osborn (2008), in using IPA the researcher is learning something about the participants’ cognition as suggested by their talk (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008). Meaning is central and the aim is to understand the participant’s meaning and sensemaking. The essence of analysis, when using IPA, is “moving from the descriptive to the interpretative” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 97), which involves a double hermeneutic or two-staged sensemaking process whereby the researcher makes sense
of how the participants make sense of their experience (Pringle et al., 2011). The analysis takes an idiographic approach, based on textual analysis of the interview transcripts conducted through in-depth engagement with each case, before moving on to the next (Gee, 2011; Willig, 2008). The purpose of the initial analysis is to identify and cluster the themes per case. Later in the process, the analysis is integrated across the individuals in the sample to develop group-level master themes. Each level of analysis results in themes at a higher level of abstraction, including the use of psychological terms, which incorporate the convergence and divergence across individuals within the sample. The resulting master themes may be presented as a table or a diagram. The findings are then written up as a narrative account of the master themes, with examples of participants' verbatim quotes to 'ground' the findings in (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009), so providing evidence of the inductive process which informed the interpretative analysis.

The data analysis for the present study only commenced after all the interviews had been completed and transcribed for both the executive leaders (Phase 1) and the executive coaches (Phase 2). This helped avoid me recalling the findings of Phase 1, or fixed preconceptions of these, while conducting the interviews with the executive coaches in Phase 2. As per the research strategy depicted in Figure 8 (above), the data analysis was first carried out on the Phase 1 samples of executive leaders (samples R and P), followed by data analysis of the Phase 2 sample of executive coaches (sample C) and finally, an integrative analysis in Phase 3, across the key findings from Phases 1 and 2.

A peer researcher, who is a leadership coach with prior experience of the IPA approach to analysis, agreed to analyse the transcripts in each sample independently as a form of peer review (Smith, 2011). The peer researcher was also involved in the integrative analysis across the findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2, which formed part of Phase 3 of the study. I did not use this form of peer review to establish inter-rater reliability, as per the positivist research paradigm but rather this form of peer review served as a form of triangulation to promote dialogue about the data to enrich the emerging analysis (Hammersley, 2009). This form of triangulation is aligned with my interpretivist paradigm, based on subjective and multiple realities. Yardley (2008) also acknowledged the value...
of working with another researcher when analysing qualitative data, which I found constructive due to the dialogue which resulted from our independent analyses. The data analysis for Phase 1 is described next, followed by Phase 2 and finally Phase 3.

4.3.7.1 Data analysis: executive leaders (phase 1)

The analysis in Phase 1 comprised of three stages: the analysis of sample R; followed by the analysis of sample P; and finally, an integration of these analyses across both samples R and P. Examples of key stages of the analyses and progression of themes identified, are included in Appendices 5, 6 and 7, which together with evidence of verbatim quotes in the findings chapter, provide a form of an audit trail (Yardley, 2008).

Stage 1: Analysis of sample R

The key steps followed in the analysis are explained in Table 20, with examples in Appendix 5. Within each of these steps, the analysis involved an iterative process of revisiting the interview transcripts.

Table 20
The Process of Analysis applied to Sample R (Executive Leaders)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps of analysis</th>
<th>Description of the analytical process applied to sample R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Looking for themes within the first three cases</td>
<td>The peer researcher and I each followed the IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009) for conducting an independent free textual analysis on a case-by-case basis of the same three transcripts of three participants, to identify themes relevant to research objectives 1 and 2 of Phase 1. The textual analysis meant reading each of the first three transcripts from beginning to end, then returning and making notes in the left-hand margin, followed by allocating descriptive codes which were written in the right-hand margin. In this textual analysis, we focused on what was of concern or importance to each of these three participants in terms of feelings, relationships, views, events, processes and values or principles, and what the experience was like for them (Gee, 2011, p. 12; Smith et al., 2009). We also paid attention to aspects of language, like the use of metaphors (Smith et al., 2009). Thereafter, similar codes were clustered into emergent themes for each transcript for research objectives 1 and 2 - at a higher level of abstraction or interpretation, while ensuring that such interpretation was tied to participants’ experiences, and therefore evidenced in their words (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the above, I completed a summary and rough chart to depict shifts in the level of uncertainty experienced over time by each participant, which assisted in giving a sense of the dynamic of experienced uncertainty over time.
Steps of analysis | Description of the analytical process applied to sample R
--- | ---
2. Generating themes across the first three cases | In our first peer review meeting we compared and discussed our analyses of the emerging intra-case themes for each of the three participants. After this dialogue, I clustered the emergent themes into a set of super-ordinate themes across the three participants, thereby introducing a higher level of abstraction or interpretation about what it may mean for the participants (therefore involving a more questioning stance), including the use of relevant psychological terms. This process of analysis represents the double hermeneutic of the IPA approach (Smith et al., 2009).
3. Using the identified themes to analyse the remaining three cases | We used the super-ordinate themes from step 2 to analyse the remaining three participants’ interview transcripts independently. We were careful to analyse each one on a case-by-case basis, consciously being open to any new emerging themes, in the spirit of idiographic analysis (Smith et al., 2009). As in step 1 above, I developed a summary and rough chart to represent each participant’s experience of uncertainty over time in their context of uncertainty.
4. Integration across the sample | I then conducted an integrative analysis across all six participants in the sample, which resulted in a consolidation of categories, sub-categories and key themes for research objectives 1 and 2.

When reflecting on the above process of analysis, there were times when I felt overwhelmed by the amount of data and number of emerging codes and themes. I found it challenging to cluster themes within one transcript into emerging themes. The analytical and interpretative process was helped by dialogue with my peer researcher in comparing the themes across the three transcripts, clustering them at a higher level of abstraction, while encompassing the individual variation across the three participants, which is essential for emphasising the idiographic nature of IPA.

**Stage 2: Analysis of sample P**

I suggested that the peer researcher and I use the list of categories, master themes and lower-level themes developed from the analysis of sample R (step 4 in Table 20 above), to analyse one participant of sample P (an executive leader from Company P), to see if it would be applicable for analysing sample P. As mentioned above, Smith et al. (2009) suggest this as an alternative, as long as the analyst keeps an open mind to new and different emerging themes arising. Again, we were careful to be open to different themes emerging given the different organisational context of Company P. On review of our respective analyses of the first transcript, we agreed that this approach worked with some minor adjustments to take into account the contextual differences. Consequently, the analysis of sample P followed the same steps applied to sample R (Table 20, above), looking at the first three participants, then the remaining three, and finally, across the whole sample of six. Appendix 6 contains examples of the analysis.
**Stage 3: Integration of sample R and sample P**

When integrating the findings across the two samples of executive leaders from the two companies, I was then dealing with a larger sample of 12. I therefore required a criterion for deciding on which themes to include as the basis for integration into the key findings to address the research objectives. Smith et al. (2009) and Smith (2011) recommend focusing on the recurring or most prevalent themes in larger samples. Based on Smith’s guidelines (2011), the criterion I used to establish prevalence was that the theme needed to be evident in at least eight of the participants. Thus, to ensure that both samples R and P were represented in the integration I required a minimum of eight to be made up of either four from each sample, or three from one sample and five from the other (see Appendix 7 for examples). Any differences in emphasis between samples R and P were also noted, to highlight any contextual implications for the findings.

The criterion was then applied to the findings across samples R and P, resulting in the final table of categories and master themes (also indicated in Appendix 7), forming the basis of the overall key findings to address research objectives 1 and 2, in relation to the executive leaders’ experience of uncertainty. I also synthesised the key findings in a diagram, so highlighting the relationships between the themes. This diagram was used to guide the discussion of the findings in chapter 6 and informed the construction of the coaching framework (Fade & Swift, 2011) for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (research objective 5 in Phase 3).

**4.3.7.2 Data analysis: executive coaches (phase 2)**

In analysing the interview transcripts from the sample of executive coaches (sample C), the same four steps and process were followed in Table 20 (above), as for samples R and P in Phase 1. Examples of this process are in Appendix 8. When integrating the findings across the sample of six executive coaches I followed the IPA guidelines proposed for the analysis of a sample size (n) of four to eight (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Based on these guidelines, the criterion used to establish prevalence of a theme was that it needed to be evident in at least four of the participants across the sample. However, in certain instances, because this was a small sample, themes of less prevalence were also highlighted in the findings, to illustrate breadth and depth within the sample. In such instances, this was specifically noted within the findings section.
The criterion of at least four of the participants was applied to the findings across the sample, resulting in the final table of key themes representing the main findings to address research objective 3, related to the executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty, and research objective 4, related to the executive coaches’ views on a capability for uncertainty. I represented the findings in a diagram to synthesise and illustrate the relationships between the themes. This diagram guided the discussion of the findings in chapter 7 and also informed the construction of the proposed coaching framework (Fade & Swift, 2011) towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (research objective 5 in Phase 3).

4.3.7.3 Integrative analysis (phase 3)

As a precursor to the construction of a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, to address research objective 5, integration of key findings across Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches) was required. Table 21 shows the two foci of this integrative analysis.

Table 21
Focus of the Integrative Analysis across Phase 1 and Phase 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of integrative analysis</th>
<th>Research objectives for Phase 1: Executive leaders</th>
<th>Research objectives for Phase 2: Executive coaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Across the findings from research objectives 1 and 3</td>
<td>1: To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty - at a personal level and in their leader role</td>
<td>3: To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Across the findings from research objectives 2 and 4</td>
<td>2: To understand what capability of uncertainty executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty</td>
<td>4: To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 21, firstly, an integrative analysis of key findings was conducted across Phases 1 and 2 findings from research objectives 1 and 3. The key categories or themes from the Phase 1 findings, relating to the executive leaders’ experience of uncertainty, were used as the basis for determining implications for executive coaching. The rationale was that a key purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of executive leaders’ lived experience as a basis for informing executive coaching towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. Thereafter the executive coaches’ findings (Phase 2) were examined to ascertain how these aligned with or differed from
the implications drawn from the executive leaders’ findings. Table 22 depicts the template used for this analysis.

Table 22
Template used to identify Implications for Executive Coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category or Theme from Phase 1: Executive leaders’ findings in relation to research objective 1.</th>
<th>Implications for executive coaching towards developing capability for uncertainty – based on key findings from Phase 1</th>
<th>Alignment with Phase 2: Executive coaches’ findings in relation to research objective 3.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

The above analysis is available in Appendix 9. This integrative analysis directly informed the coaching framework and guidelines generated, explained in chapter 8.

Secondly, an integrative analysis of the key findings, from Phase 1 (executive leaders), Phase 2 (executive coaches) and the literature review in relation to what a ‘capability for uncertainty’ is, was conducted. In Phase 1, the findings established what capability for uncertainty the executive leaders developed through their lived experience of uncertainty (research objective 2). In Phase 2, executive coaches’ views on a capability for uncertainty were explored (research objective 4). The literature review identified the components or factors that seemed to be crucial for a capability for uncertainty. Table 23 illustrates the template used for this analysis.

Table 23
Template used to determine a capability for uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature review: Components of a capability for uncertainty</th>
<th>Executive leaders: What capability for uncertainty they developed from their experience (Research objective 2)</th>
<th>Executive coaches: Their views on indicators of a capability for uncertainty (Research objective 4)</th>
<th>Alignment &amp; implications for executive coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above analysis used the components of a capability for uncertainty identified in the literature review as the basis for the integrative analysis. The key findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches) were then used to populate the second and third columns. In the final column, comments were made in relation to alignment across the first three columns, that is, about agreement and differences
identified, and any implications for executive coaching towards developing executives' capability for uncertainty. The above analysis is available in Appendix 10. The results of this integrative analysis were used to inform the proposed coaching framework and guidelines developed as a deliverable of this study, explained in chapter 8.

In addition to the above foci of the integrative analysis in Phase 3, I focused on how to integrate key aspects of the two diagrams (Appendix 11) which synthesised the key findings, in Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches), to inform the diagrammatic representation of the coaching process proposed towards developing executives' capability for uncertainty (research objective 5).

4.3.8 Strategies used to ensure quality of research

The final section of research methodology focuses on the strategies adopted to ensure quality in this study. Strategies to ensure validity and reliability are based on positivist assumptions that underlie quantitative research, and the relevance of these to qualitative research has been the subject of much debate in the literature (Creswell, 2009; Klenke, 2008; Willig, 2008). Qualitative researchers have developed criteria that align with the positivist criteria of reliability and validity to demonstrate rigour in their studies. Klenke (2008) highlighted the qualitative criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are: credibility (aligned with internal validity), transferability (aligned with external validity or generalisability), dependability (aligned with reliability) and confirmability (aligned with objectivity, or confirmation of the results by other methods or sources). While the credibility in quantitative research depends on instrument construction, in qualitative research the researcher is seen to be the main instrument (Henning et al., 2004). The credibility of this study's findings therefore depends on my ability as the researcher to demonstrate such to the reader.

Some scholars believe that the quality of a study needs to be judged by criteria that align with the paradigm of the study (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008; Yardley, 2008), as certain criteria are being applied mistakenly to qualitative research; namely, objectivity, reliability and generalisability (Yardley, 2008). If the researcher is working within an interpretivist paradigm, then specific quality criteria aligned with this paradigm must be used. Within an interpretivist paradigm, it is accepted that there will be different
interpretations of a set of data, so the focus is not on ensuring confirmability (or objectivity). Instead, the key focus of ensuring quality in IPA is credibility, that is, “to ensure that the current account is a credible one, not the only credible one” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 183). I therefore adopted a combination of strategies, to ensure quality of the current study, with the key focus on fostering credibility of my findings.

I gained verification from all participants of the content of their interview transcripts. However, I elected not to return to the participants to verify the findings after the analysis, as these were based on my interpretation, which they might not have been aware of, as with the double hermeneutic sensemaking in IPA. My view was that it would not be constructive and did not align with the interpretivist research paradigm (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2008).

I had peer reviews in the form of dialogue with a peer researcher throughout the data analysis, which helped to foster plausibility and coherence of my analysis and interpretations. I therefore also asked this peer researcher, being a leadership coach, to critique my coaching framework and guidelines that I produced. In addition, I had peer reviews with my study supervisors who challenged and discussed certain findings and interpretations with me, thereby further promoting overall coherence.

I kept an idiographic focus by ensuring that the divergence attributed to individual variation was captured within the themes and in my narrative account of the findings. My findings were grounded in examples of verbatim extracts that reflected the participants’ voices, which is critical in an inductive and interpretative study. It was essential that my interpretations, as the researcher, could be linked with the participants’ lived experience of the phenomenon. In addition, I exercised reflexivity in terms of my own perspectives at the beginning of the study and was explicit in places where my perspectives or views influenced my interpretations of the data.

I used a form of triangulation to foster completeness and so enrich the data, which aligns with an interpretivist paradigm based on multiple, subjective realities (Hammersley, 2009; Yardley, 2008). Two forms of triangulation were used, firstly, a multi-perspectival design, which incorporated three different sources of data on the phenomenon of uncertainty; and secondly, a peer researcher carried out an
independent analysis of data from the three samples which was compared with my analysis in peer reviews as a basis for dialogue, but not for establishing inter-rater reliability, which is positivistic.

I have been transparent about the research methods and sampling procedures used, including highlighting the limitations and challenges I experienced. I also established an overall audit trail (Smith et al., 2009) in the current chapter, the findings chapters and in Appendices 5 to 11 to provide examples which linked the analytical stages from the raw data to the final report.

While acknowledging certain limitations in the research design and methodology in this chapter, the adoption of the above combination of strategies aligned with an interpretivist research paradigm, has contributed to ensuring quality of my study.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has described the qualitative research approach, strategy and methodology used in this study. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), within the interpretivist paradigm, was selected as it suited the objectives of this study. The research design adopted a three-phased, multi-perspectival, cross-sectional and retrospective research strategy. Six executive leaders from two different companies formed the samples in Phase 1, which were combined into a sample of 12 in the final integrative analysis. Six executive coaches made up the sample in Phase 2. Data was collected from these samples through semi-structured interviews. The analysis was informed by IPA guidelines, with a peer researcher involved in independent analyses and dialogue. An integrative analysis across the findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches) formed the basis of Phase 3, which was the production of a proposed coaching framework and guidelines for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. Finally, I outlined the strategies adopted to ensure quality of the research which were aligned with an interpretivist paradigm.

The next chapter will present the key findings of the study on the executive leaders’ experience of and approach to uncertainty (Phase 1).
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS FOR PHASE 1: EXECUTIVE LEADERS

5.1 Introduction

The research design and methodology adopted for the study were explained in the previous chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of the findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders) of the study to address research objectives 1 and 2, using the structure depicted in Table 24.

Table 24
Framework for Structure of the Findings for Phase 1: Executive Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research objectives</th>
<th>Structure of findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty</td>
<td>• Setting the context for Phase 1 findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- at a personal level and in their leader role</td>
<td>• Findings for research objective 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To understand what capability for uncertainty executive leaders developed through their lived experience of uncertainty</td>
<td>• Findings for research objective 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings from Phase 2 (executive coaches) will be presented in chapter 6, to address research objectives 3 and 4. Thereafter, the findings from both Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches) will be further discussed and interpreted in relation to the relevant literature in chapter 7.

Research objective 5 will be addressed by Phase 3 of the study in chapter 8, after the discussion of the findings from Phases 1 and 2 in chapter 7. My rationale for this sequence of chapters is that Phase 3 is informed by an integrative analysis of the key findings across Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches). Research objective 5 was to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.
5.2 Setting the context for the findings

The context of the two companies and the profile of the samples from each company were described earlier in chapter 4. Here a brief outline of the companies will be revisited in Table 25 for the reader to have the context in mind before reviewing the findings of the study.

Table 25
The Context of the Companies in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Company R</th>
<th>Company P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of company</td>
<td>Private company in the manufacturing sector</td>
<td>State-owned company, being a utility service provider for a major city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period of organisational uncertainty for study</td>
<td>Five years</td>
<td>Eighteen months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of organisational change and uncertainty</td>
<td>• A change of ownership since 2007 triggered period of prolonged uncertainty.</td>
<td>• The period of uncertainty was triggered by the secondment of MD to The City.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Previously owned by an international organisation, which entered into a black empowerment deal in South Africa, resulting in the change of ownership and a large financial debt to be paid off by the local South African company.</td>
<td>• The secondment became a permanent appointment, resulting in an eighteen-month period of various acting MDs and executives, as an interim measure until a new MD would be appointed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Over this period, there were changes in the executive team (including new people in acting roles), changes in the Board, increased competition in their market and extreme financial pressures due to debt incurred by the change-of-ownership deal – and the global financial crisis of 2008, with a downturn in the market.</td>
<td>• Over this period, there were changes in the executive team, changes in the management of The City (as a result of municipal elections) and the company’s Board. In addition, political pressures (due to politicians’ agendas in The City structure) and financial constraints added to the uncertainty within the company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• While the financial debt was successfully re-structured at the time of the research interviews, the company was still facing much uncertainty in terms of its markets and future business growth.</td>
<td>• At the time of the research interviews, the participants were aware that a new MD had been appointed – and that he would be taking up the role in a few months’ time, but still uncertain about The City’s approach.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two voluntary samples of six executive leaders from the executive committees of each company in the above table participated in the study (see section 4.3.1 in chapter 4 for the sample profiles). The participants were referred to as R1 to R6 and P1 to P6 respectively for the data analysis.
As mentioned previously, I grappled with the ethical issue of how to present the findings to ensure anonymity so that the executive leaders, who worked together in their respective executive teams, would not be able to identify their colleagues. After the integrative analysis across both samples (from Company R and Company P), which resulted in combining them into one larger sample of 12, I resolved the ethical dilemma by not using the identifier codes (P1 to P6 and R1 to R6 respectively) for the individual participants. Instead, I allocated pseudonyms randomly to the 12 participants across the two samples, using English male names for all participants, as the focus of my study was not on gender or race. I believed this measure would further assist in concealing the identity of individuals and would not distort the findings in relation to the purpose of the study, as suggested by Wiles, Crow, Heath and Charles (2006). The pseudonyms used for the twelve participants are: Luke, Frank, Gavin, Allan, Kevin, Evan, Peter, Bruce, John, Dave, Ian and Colin. In addition, the use of the term MD was used for both companies, even though Company R used the title of CEO.

With the combined larger sample, I adhered to the IPA guidelines proposed for the analysis and writing up of findings for large samples (that is, \(n>8\)), with appropriate customisation (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). My findings therefore focus only on the key recurring themes across both samples, based on being prevalent in at least eight out of the twelve participants (that is, being present for four participants of each sample, or present for three and five participants in the respective samples). In my narrative account of each of the key (or recurring) themes, I therefore focus initially on a group level analysis or generic text (representing ‘most’ of the participants).

I then move to more idiographic detail of individual variation and nuance within the group level theme, so adhering to the essence of IPA (Smith, 2011, Willig, 2008). The findings of each theme therefore include extracts from participants’ interviews (thereby also providing evidence for each theme), supplemented with my interpretation to add more depth, while such interpretation needs to be “a close reading of what the participants have said” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 112). This approach supports both the phenomenological and interpretative aspects of IPA.
I selected participants’ extracts to illustrate examples of the essence of the theme and to provide examples of individual variation within the theme. Extracts were also chosen to represent at least four participants across the integrated sample for each theme (Smith, 2011). I found this selection process quite daunting and perplexing, as there was an abundance of rich data, and making the decisions as to what to include and exclude was challenging. Furthermore, I needed to choose extracts to ensure that the overall integrated sample was represented proportionately across the different themes (Smith et al, 2009). Of note, all the participant extracts in these findings are labelled with their pseudonyms, with one exception. This exception is when I emphasise any noteworthy differences found between the two companies related to their contexts, and in these instances, participants’ extracts are referred to without any pseudonyms to facilitate anonymity (a key ethical consideration).

5.3 Findings for research objective 1: the over-arching theme

The findings in this section are addressing the following research objective:

| Research objective 1: To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty - at a personal level and in their leader role |

The over-arching theme found from the analysis relates to the overall dynamic of experienced uncertainty over time, as illustrated in Figure 9.

![Figure 9. The flux of experienced uncertainty over time](image-url)
After informally charting the lived experience of uncertainty over time for each executive leader in both samples (see Appendices 5 and 6 for examples), it became evident that, although each chart was unique, the overall trend of the experience of uncertainty over time may be depicted as in Figure 8. The above figure therefore is a representation of the overarching finding that the executive leaders’ experience of uncertainty was one of flux, of shifting between periods of feeling more uncertain and then periods of feeling less uncertain (or more certain). The flux of uncertainty was clearly experienced by participants, as depicted in these extracts:

“That has come and gone. It’s tough, but tough times don’t last forever, they do come and go.” (Luke)

“There was definitely a big down and now there’s a big up again.” (Evan)

“…when everything's in such a state of flux…” (Allan)

“There is still up and down going on…” (Bruce)

The periods of uncertainty may be longer or shorter, and more intense or less intense - depending on the individual’s specific context, different triggers for the uncertainty and unfolding events within the organisational context. In Figure 8 above, for participants in Company R, where the period of uncertainty was much longer than Company P (five years), there were more peaks of uncertainty. In Company P, while the flux was also evident, there were fewer peaks over their shorter period of organisational uncertainty (18 months).

Furthermore, most of the participants acknowledged that there were still uncertainties going forward, suggesting continuous flux. Company R had major business challenges and uncertainties going forward, described by one participant as: “The piece worrying me at the moment is the market out there…I am not sure how we are going to survive that one”. Similarly, Company P had uncertainty about the new MD coming on board and the changes in leadership approach of The City (their shareholder), as a participant said: “…still there is an element of uncertainty regarding the new MD…what his direction will be… and working with The City?”

Next, one of the ‘peaks’ of uncertainty in Figure 9 above is deconstructed in Figure 10.
The above figure represents the relationship between the five main categories of the findings as part of the unfolding dynamic of the experience of uncertainty over time. Overall the findings suggest that the experience of uncertainty was initiated by certain triggers within the executive leader’s context, resulting in felt uncertainty that led to making sense of the uncertainty, which then generated strategies and actions for moving forward in the context of uncertainty. These strategies were adapted iteratively, through further sensemaking, in relation to unfolding events, or new information. Ultimately the level of uncertainty decreased, until it was triggered by other changes, new events or circumstances in the organisational context, and then the same process set in. For each participant, the lived experience over time was unique depending on the type of and numbers of triggers for their uncertainty, the type of uncertainty and the intensity of uncertainty that was experienced.

The over-arching theme, the flux of experienced uncertainty over time, therefore sets the organising logic (Sandelowski, 1998) for the narrative account of the categories and themes in this section. These five categories (as per Figure 9), the various sub-categories and prevalent themes, are outlined in Table 26, which forms the structure of how the findings will be presented.
**Table 26**
*Findings to address Research Objective 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Key themes and density (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Triggers for uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Organisational change (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Transitions (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Delay (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Felt uncertainty</td>
<td>Personal uncertainty</td>
<td>• Identity uncertainty (n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Anticipatory uncertainty (n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges in the leader role</td>
<td>• Experienced complexity (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Managing other peoples’ uncertainty (n=9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Corporate politics (n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Making sense of uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mental frames as filters (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Seeking understanding (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interpreting (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Meaning-making (n=9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Emotion-focused coping (n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Implementing strategies and</td>
<td>Personal uncertainty</td>
<td>• Strategies for developing identity (n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Strategies for managing anticipatory uncertainty (n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges in the leader role</td>
<td>• Leadership focus (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Communication (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Adopting more political skill (n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Adapting</td>
<td></td>
<td>• (n=12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sub-categories in the above table relate to where a distinction is made between personal uncertainty and the challenges experienced in the leader role during uncertainty, to align with research objective 1. This objective sought understanding of the executive leaders’ uncertainty, both at a personal level and in their leader role during organisational uncertainty. The key themes for each category are indicated, including their densities, represented as the number of participants (n) that the theme was evidenced in for the overall sample of 12. The indication of density is suggested by Smith (2011) for larger samples (where \( n > 8 \)).

**5.3.1 Category 1: Triggers for uncertainty**

Overall three prevalent triggers for uncertainty emerged for all of the participants. These triggers were organisational change, transitions and delay. Each of these will be discussed generically as they set the scene for the uncertainty experienced by participants. Moreover, the contexts of the two companies will be highlighted where there are particular differences.
Organisational change

All the participants who were members of the executive committee in both companies, at the start of their uncertain periods, were generally positive and saw opportunities in the changes. In Company R, participants were positive about the change-of-ownership (or black empowerment deal), anticipating business benefits and growth in transforming the company. As one participant said, he felt no personal uncertainty then, instead he “felt excited that something was being done…I was more interested in how this thing [the deal] was going to work out. So the change came as a pleasant change”.

All participants in Company P were positive about their MD being seconded to The City as they believed changes that the MD would make at the City would have a beneficial impact on the company. As one participant stated “we were all excited as we believed the MD would be able to resolve some of the key problems in the City, which were also impacting on the Company”. In addition, there were a few participants who viewed the secondment of the MD to the City as an opportunity for Company P to do things differently under a new leadership approach by the acting MD. This sentiment was clearly expressed as follows: “It was a sense of relief that the previous MD was gone, with all the negativity that was associated with his leadership style”.

After these initial organisational changes in both companies, events developed which served as triggers for uncertainty. In Company R, the initial change-of-ownership deal changed due to the withdrawal of a key shareholder, which resulted in re-structuring of the deal involving some new players. Once the reality of the changed deal set in, the emotions changed to disappointment and concern, particularly when participants understood the impact of the huge debt situation on the business, in relation to servicing the debt and being cash-strapped. This uncertain context was captured by a participant as one of: “Disappointment, feeling helpless – yet hoping they [the dealmakers] would resolve it. And gradually it did start impacting us…we had massive debt to cover.”

Likewise, in Company P, the temporary secondment of the MD to The City changed as he was appointed permanently in The City after 6 months. When the participants heard, most were positive, especially having experienced the positive leadership approach of the acting MD. However, the acting MD was not appointed, heralding a period of rotation
of different acting executives for another year, triggering a period of uncertainty, as captured by a participant, who said: “The [executives] acting. So that's when the actual uncertainty came in”.

In brief, while participants in both companies generally were positive about the organisational changes in the beginning, this response shifted as events unfolded in the companies, triggering felt uncertainty in the participants. Furthermore, other changes occurred in both companies’ contexts as outlined earlier in Table 25.

**Transitions**

Against the backdrop of these organisational changes, all participants in both companies also experienced or were affected by various forms of transition, as follows:

- There were participants who joined the organisations (referred to as newcomers).
- There were participants who moved into new roles, either acting or in a permanent capacity (that is, a promotion).
- There were participants that experienced uncertainty triggered by transitions resulting in them reporting to a new executive (or ‘acting’ executive) or reporting to several acting executives over a period of time.

Taken together, the above transitions all involved a transition period in moving from one state to another. Transition, referring to the ‘in-between’ period, was a key trigger for personal uncertainty experienced by the participants. Examples of this personal uncertainty will be discussed in depth under the category of ‘felt uncertainty’ (as depicted in Table 26 above).

**Delay**

The delay in the unfolding of the organisational changes and transitions, with the accompanying decision-making processes, was an additional trigger for uncertainty as it prolonged the uncertainty for all the participants. In Company R, the uncertainty became extremely prolonged due to the dealmakers not being able to resolve the deal, and after it was resolved, it took time to find a viable way to re-structure the financial debt. As described by one participant: “I felt frustration and disgust with the dealmakers and the process – that is why it dragged on.” Frustration was also experienced in relation to the
extension of acting positions; for example, one participant said: “It dragged on for over a year. It was the most difficult period for me…and very frustrating.”

Those in Company P also experienced a hiatus in decision-making during the period of acting executives, which extended into eighteen months. The resulting frustration is captured in these extracts:

“It was frustrating because we were not getting anywhere.”

“We were living in this limbo space. A long period of time – let’s just keep the wheels turning…how long will it take?”

The imagery in the last quote captures the impact of delay on prolonging the experience of uncertainty suggesting a sense of being stuck in time, in limbo, and just maintaining things by keeping the wheels turning, but not moving forward with purpose.

The emotion of frustration therefore appeared to be associated with the experience of delay. Delays in decisions and the drawing out of the uncertain situations seemed to result in prolonging and intensifying participants’ overall uncertainty, increasing their sense of not being in control, thus fuelling their feelings of frustration.

5.3.2 Category 2: Felt uncertainty

The different triggers sketched above resulted in uncertainty being experienced by the participants, termed ‘felt uncertainty’, to capture the emotional state of uncertainty in relation to two sub-categories, personal uncertainty and challenges in the leader role during the organisational uncertainty, which was the focus of research objective 1. The key themes are divided into the two sub-categories, captured in Table 27.

Table 27

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Themes of Felt Uncertainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Uncertainty</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identity uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Anticipatory uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenges in the Leader Role</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Experienced complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Managing peoples’ uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Corporate politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the study being retrospective, I observed that all the participants were able to recall and express their felt uncertainty during the interviews. However, I need to highlight that the participants experienced different degrees and combinations of the above types of uncertainty, unique to their situation and/or context. The key themes in each sub-
category of felt uncertainty, in the above table, are reviewed next, starting with participants’ personal uncertainty and followed by their leadership challenges.

5.3.2.1 Sub-category: Personal uncertainty

The personal uncertainty felt by most of the participants appeared to be related to two generic types of uncertainty, identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty, the findings of which will be presented next.

Identity uncertainty

A key finding was that participants experienced issues of identity as a type of personal uncertainty, mostly triggered by transitions. While the participants themselves did not refer to this type of uncertainty as being an issue of identity, or did not reference the word ‘identity’, my sense was that the term ‘identity uncertainty’ seemed to capture the essence of this type of felt uncertainty. It described participants’ range of felt uncertainty about whom one is and who one is becoming, resulting in decreased personal agency. Overall this felt uncertainty was mainly due to some loss of or diminished sense of identity, concerning different and overlapping aspects of one’s identity, such as: self, role identity, leader identity and/or social identity.

The findings highlight the range of identity uncertainty felt by different participants, in the following sequence: when in an acting executive role, when reporting to acting executives over a period of time, as a newcomer to the organisation, and lastly, in relation to personal meaning.

As reflected in Table 28, for some participants who transitioned into an executive acting role, their felt uncertainty was related to issues of leader identity.

Table 28

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Nothing was coming to a head. Everything was still hanging in the air...and I mean you’re not yourself. You try and maintain more or less ...the way things have been done in the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Now I am acting, which is a terrible situation, because ... you have no power at that time – and they [the board] made it clear ...you are just keeping the seat warm ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above quotes indicate that both Frank and Peter felt a lack of agency when in their acting roles, suggesting a diminished leader identity. In Frank’s case, his acting role was extended beyond what had initially been expected. His metaphor, of “everything was still hanging in the air”, depicts him feeling suspended, of being betwixt and between his previous role and being appointed in the new role, conveying a sense of feeling out of control. Moreover, in saying that he was not himself in the role (as he was generally maintaining things as they had been done by the previous incumbent in the role) suggests his leader identity and agency were adversely affected. For Peter, his metaphor of being restricted in his role to “keeping the seat warm”, made him feel powerless, affecting his sense of agency when he started in the acting role.

For other participants, such as Gavin, Bruce and Colin in Table 29, they seemed to experience uncertainty related to a diminished sense of leader and/or role identity when they reported to acting executives over an extended period of time.

Table 29
Identity Uncertainty when Reporting to Acting Executives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>So by the time you are saying, “Okay, I've been engaging with this particular [acting executive] and we are trying to get headway” … and then the next thing it [the acting period] is – is up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>So it was a frustration to me, or an uncertainty, to say, “will I survive in this role - if there's no leadership?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gavin</td>
<td>And that [having several acting executives] cast a lot of uncertainty onto me, or made it difficult, because I'm the face of the company. When there's a problem, they [key stakeholders] look at [his function]… Then – then you start feeling unsure… it got worse and worse and worse – which also impacted on me. I also was getting worse and worse and worse, and eventually … more and more unsure, or more negative, if you can call it that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The extracts relating to Bruce and Colin above suggest they both felt frustration in gaining ground in their roles because key decisions and approvals kept being postponed, implying felt uncertainty due to a diminished sense of agency in their roles. Gavin emphasises how the lack of decision-making and support by acting senior executives affected him, being “the face of the company” as he was responsible for a core, visible function. Gavin conveys how his uncertainty grew in intensity over time when he says it got “worse and worse and worse”. His “feeling unsure” in himself, coupled with the criticism he received and lack of support, implies that he experienced a diminished sense of leader identity.
Furthermore, there were participants who were newcomers to the companies, some of whom experienced identity uncertainty, as illustrated by participant quotes in Table 30.

### Table 30
*Identity Uncertainty as Newcomers to the Organisation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>…as you come into an organisation like this…it's not readily welcoming to outsiders… I felt a bit side-lined and lonely. Things were being said, that ended up coming through to me…some were fellow executives - and were not over complimentary. And at the same time I had to focus on the job …you need time to really actually learn it…and there was no time…The expectations were high.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>…some initial shock - the first thing that hit me was the culture…people were not very embracive. I felt very excluded [in the executive team]…It’s a very disheartening position to be in…“Is it the right place? Is this what I really, really wanted?”…Very frustrating. Very, very frustrating …you know, what I was expected to do [initially] and what I’m doing now are completely two different things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above quotes indicate the particularly intense personal uncertainty felt by Luke and Dave as newcomers, because they experienced a lack of social identity due to feeling unsupported and excluded by their colleagues. In addition to Luke’s expressed sense of isolation, he felt overwhelmed by the learning curve he had to go up and needing to meet expectations of others. Hence, the psychological weight of Luke’s challenges became heavy to bear, resulting in him starting to doubt his decision to join the company, as evidenced in this extract:

“You know, all those things, I mean they weigh so heavily on you that um, you know, sometimes you ask yourself, did you make a right decision to – to join.”

Similar to Luke, Dave explicitly stated (in Table 30) his felt exclusion in the executive team, resulting in him feeling disheartened and doubting his decision to join the company. Dave was also frustrated because the executive who appointed him left shortly after he joined, and his successor had a different expectation of Dave’s role, leading to him perceive a devaluation of his role, thereby affecting his role identity.

Finally, there was one participant, Allan, whose personal uncertainty, as an issue of identity, was different. He had over the recent years become disillusioned with business and leadership (seeing these as being “dark and dirty”), resulting in Allan’s realisation that: “I found I was doing so many things that I thought didn't add value to anybody”. Hence, his uncertainty, as an issue of identity, appeared to have a pronounced existential dimension to it because it was about a lack of personal meaning in his role.
In summary, identity uncertainty, experienced by most participants and triggered primarily by transitions, manifested as felt uncertainty - an emotional state. This emotional state encompassed a range of feelings, such as feeling in limbo and powerless, feeling unsure or having self-doubt, feeling frustration and/or feeling excluded. Many participants also used metaphors when describing their felt uncertainty to convey the sense of their experienced uncertainty more fully. Their felt uncertainty primarily suggests a diminished personal, role and/or leader identity, which affected their personal agency. Delays in participants’ uncertain situations prolonged and intensified their felt uncertainty, resulting in frustration. In addition, identity uncertainty may have an existential dimension to it when one’s uncertainty is a perceived lack of personal meaning. Thus, identity uncertainty relates to a devalued sense of identity. However, for some newcomers, who experienced more intense identity uncertainty, this was exacerbated by felt exclusion, an issue of social identity.

**Anticipatory uncertainty**

Most participants also experienced another type of personal uncertainty, which was felt in the present, as anticipation or worrying about possible future events or changes, and the impact of these on oneself. Given its nature and future orientation, I therefore referred to this type of felt uncertainty as anticipatory uncertainty. The findings highlight the range of anticipatory uncertainty experienced by different participants, to be presented in this sequence: anticipation of possible job loss; anticipation of the appointment of a new MD in the company; and finally, anticipation of a potential promotion

Some participants anticipated the possibility of job loss associated with events in their companies, as depicted in Table 31.

<p>| Table 31 |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <strong>Anticipation of Possible Job Loss</strong> |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>It was the biggest shock…and …it was my one lifeline now gone. The worrying component …what would happen to me if this whole thing went problematic …I mean it's a fear. If you think that in two days – or two months, you might not have a salary, it's a fear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan</td>
<td>…I was actually more worried about my share options than anything else, and the fact that – that I couldn't really trust my boss to look after me …and look after me with regard to my share options. So that was more stressful than the [organisational changes] really, for me ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen above, Kevin and Allan both worried about possible job loss and the financial impact on themselves. Kevin, a newcomer to the company, experienced “shock” when a plan, to resolve the current uncertainty in the new company, did not materialise. Thus, his use of a metaphor “my one lifeline now gone”, illustrates how this resulted in him experiencing a high degree of uncertainty, describing his fear about the possibility of losing his job. Kevin’s anticipatory uncertainty is evident in the ‘if that happens, what then?’ type of worrying, expressed as “what would happen to me if this whole thing went problematic?”. For Allan, his personal uncertainty, related to his lack of trust in the executive he reported to at the time, was experienced by him as more stressful than the organisational changes. Allan therefore anticipated the possibility of losing his job and/or his share options.

On the other hand, several participants were worried about the appointment of a new MD in the company and the impact of this, because both companies had acting MDs for a period of time. Table 32 contains examples of such anticipatory uncertainty.

Table 32
Anticipation of the Appointment of a New MD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>At an executive level it is different…a new MD can walk in and say “I want to pick my own team”…you ask yourself: “oh my word, am I going to be part of that?”….it adds to uncertainty and it happens all the time. For me personally, it was a big uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>And that is my biggest worry because we don't know the person [the new MD] …hopefully it [referring to a particular management style] won't happen, but that would be my biggest worry…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>So…in the back of my head, “Now what's going to happen if somebody decides they bring XYZ from whatever?” I mean we didn't know…For me – that was the most uncertain thing in all of this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quotes in the above table suggest the participants’ uncertainty was of a high intensity, reflected in the superlatives they used to describe the degree of uncertainty they felt: “it was a big uncertainty”, “the most uncertain thing”, and “my biggest worry”. They worried about the impact of the new MD on themselves and/or the company. Hence, the uncertainty seemed to be more intense because they were anticipating a possible future threat. Interestingly, Luke implied that this type of uncertainty was common at executive level, because new MDs frequently change the executive teams, by saying that “it happens all the time”.

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Lastly, John and Allan (in Table 33) both felt anticipatory uncertainty when they were approached to apply for promotions to more senior executive positions, in that they anticipated the impact of the promotion.

Table 33
Anticipation of a Potential Promotion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>You ask yourself ... “do you really need to be part of this?”...There are all these changes that are going to be happening...and you say to yourself, “Is this the right decision to move into this space?” There were various factors. In other words, I was saying “if this happened, what about this?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan</td>
<td>…the odd nights caused me pause and I thought about it .... you know, about really how badly I want it, how I didn't want it and – you know, one of my big complaints is the time demands with a young family and, you know, I've seen how hard [the current incumbent] worked…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

John explained that he had been reluctant to apply for a more senior executive position, as he anticipated imminent changes to the board with an increase in politics, and how that would affect him. He anticipated possible events that might unfold, if he was promoted, and the impact of these, evidenced in his “if this happens, what then..?” questions he asked of himself. Similarly, Allan’s felt uncertainty is reflected in his anticipation of the impact of a promotion on his work-life balance, having a young family. Hence, even though promotions tend to be thought of as being positive, they clearly fostered uncertainty in relation to the demands of a more senior position and the impact of such demands.

In summary, anticipatory uncertainty was often described by participants as an emotional state in the form of worrying, being apprehensive or even fearful about some event or situation occurring in the future, and the impact of this event on oneself. The felt uncertainty was mostly evident as worrying about ‘if that happens, what then?’ The anticipation of potential job loss and the appointment of a new MD, including the impact of these, seemed to be associated with particularly high levels of personal uncertainty in those participants who felt it. Overall, anticipatory uncertainty appears to be particularly intense as it is felt in the present - about a possible future threat to oneself, which implies issues of identity, albeit possible ones in the future. The next sub-category focuses on felt uncertainty in relation to the participants’ leadership challenges during organisational uncertainty.
5.3.2.2 Sub-category: Challenges in the leader role

A key finding was that the challenges experienced by the participants in their leader role during organisational uncertainty also added to their overall felt uncertainty. The recurring leadership challenges were: experienced complexity, managing other peoples’ uncertainty and corporate politics; the findings of which are reviewed below.

Experienced complexity

Complexity was experienced by all the participants in their leader role. It was expressed in the degree of change being experienced; that is, the number of variables in their contexts (internal and external) and the amount of change happening concurrently, all of which was exacerbated by delays in both companies, more so in Company R (where the period of uncertainty had persisted for five years), as described by one participant: “It [the uncertainty] was prolonged, year in, year out” and “… the company survived several years of turbulent times”.

How the experienced complexity added to participant’s felt uncertainty in both companies is reflected in these extracts:

“There were lots of challenges…” (Allan)

“You need to be not only aware of all these things but … also aware of the impact they could have… So it's a – ja, it's a minefield. (Luke)

The combination of these elements…it just became a nightmare…” (Bruce)

“Which route do you follow? … It was too much at the same time.” (Gavin)

The number of variables that had to be dealt with is apparent in the above quotes. They portray a sense of feeling overwhelmed and out of control, adding to these participants’ felt uncertainty. Luke’s metaphor of the context being “a minefield” illustrates his uncertainty in having to anticipate and deal with many unpredictable factors that could ‘blow up’ at any time, affecting him and others. Similarly, Bruce experienced the complexity as “a nightmare”, suggesting a high degree of discomfort, even horror.

The participants’ experienced complexity also manifested in different tensions or polarities that needed to be managed, which appeared to be leadership paradoxes. While common leadership paradoxes across both companies were not clearly evident, one key leadership paradox was emphasised by all participants in Company P (the
state-owned company). As a result of recent local elections, a change was being experienced in the new management of The City towards Company P. Hence, the paradox was managing the tension between the independent approach of Company P and the emerging centrist view of The City, as reflected in these participants’ quotes:

“They – The City – is very centrist in its approach. So they want to control from the centre, which makes it totally different to the way the company was managed. And it’s put us under huge pressure. So it’s a completely different management style... It’s clouded lines...It’s hugely frustrating.”

“We thought our priorities were key, but we’re now trying to marry the two. They [The City] have the new vision, but not really factoring in the current realities.”

In Company R, the private company, several different leadership paradoxes were highlighted by the participants. For example, one participant stressed the challenge of managing the current business operations, while learning and implementing a new business strategy, which involved expansion into Africa:

“We are trying to catch up with all of those things [referring to learning about doing business in Africa], and in parallel [to running the current operations], go and build and grow - and do all of the things ... [to implement the new strategy].”

In addition, with the change-of-ownership deal being based on black empowerment in Company R, there was a focus on accelerating the transformation of the company in terms of employment equity targets. One participant perceived the balancing of business performance with transformation targets to be challenging, as follows:

“...one of the toughest things to deal with at the moment for me is – is balancing a high-performance organisation against transformation objectives... so that is one of my frustrations that I have to manage at the moment.”

Taken together, experienced complexity, in having to deal with the number of changes and variables at the same time in the company contexts, was a common leadership challenge. This experienced complexity, conveyed as a feeling of being overwhelmed and out of control, increased the uncertainty felt by most participants, which affected their personal agency in their leadership roles. Participants also used metaphors to describe their experienced complexity, thereby conveying their felt uncertainty. Further, different leadership paradoxes formed part of their experienced complexity, manifesting as frustration with trying to manage the contradictory tensions of such paradoxes.
Managing other people’s uncertainty

A key challenge experienced by most participants in their leader role during the period of uncertainty was managing other people’s uncertainty, which is the theme for these findings based on how it was articulated by Allan:

“…managing the uncertainty…managing the request for information and managing the request for clarity…and asking me to try and give people some idea of what was going on - in the face of my own uncertainty.”

Allan described the leadership challenge as “managing the uncertainty” in relation to people’s need for information and clarity. What he found particularly challenging was communicating clarity to others, in the face of his own uncertainty. Although this leadership challenge was experienced in both companies, it was emphasised more by Company R due to the prolonged period of uncertainty (five years), and the impact of this on their people, as described by one participant:

“It went on for a long time…everyone was negatively affected by the huge debt and the associated uncertainty… So there was massive uncertainty…”

Examples of other participant quotes across both companies, supporting the leadership challenge of managing peoples’ uncertainty, are:

“The company was…unsettled and it was somewhat difficult to answer the people’s questions…there were many questions.” (Peter)

“It puts you as a leader…in a difficult situation because people will ask you questions you don’t always have the answers for.” (Gavin)

“The worst thing is - you’re showing this concerned expression in your face, the stress…and people, they’ll read very quickly into that…” (Luke)

“The difficult part was you get questions…and you can’t share your own uncertainties, because you realise how detrimental that could be.” (Frank)

The above participants were keenly aware of the uncertainty people were feeling in the many requests received by them for more information and clarity regarding their companies’ uncertain contexts. Some participants, such as Peter and Gavin, found it challenging in their leader role to provide clarity and answer peoples’ questions, particularly when feeling uncertain themselves. In addition, as depicted by Luke and Frank, some participants did not want to foster uncertainty in others, knowing that people tend to observe their leaders’ emotional state to gauge what is going on. The
challenge of managing people’s uncertainty therefore seemed to engender additional felt uncertainty regarding participants’ leadership approach during the period of uncertainty.

**Corporate politics**

Navigating corporate politics was a key challenge experienced by most participants in their leader role. In contrast to Company R, all the participants in Company P experienced a high degree of frustration with politics in needing to pander to and accommodate the politicians and their political agenda in The City. Table 34 contains examples of participants’ experience of the challenge of politics.

Table 34

**The Challenge of Politics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politics in dealing with key stakeholders and within Exco</th>
<th>Political dynamics experienced by newcomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And you can fall out of favour so easily. So these are the pressures…It’s hugely frustrating”. <em>(Evan)</em></td>
<td>He [a senior executive] believed that I am connected politically with someone. So he didn’t trust me at all …I am not good in politics, I wouldn’t know how to play that game. <em>(Dave)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every time we talked about reallocating Exco responsibilities it breaks out into a big political uproar. <em>(Allan)</em></td>
<td>They [his colleagues] won’t confront you…about anything. They would, for instance, want to undermine you through your subordinates…you know, that kind of thing…it’s politics. I don’t play politics. It’s a weakness… <em>(Luke)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There’s big war in boardrooms … <em>(John)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The shareholders had personal meetings with them [some Exco members]; that’s how they tried to run the show. I think it created a bit of a shadow <em>(Peter)</em>.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most participants experienced political challenges in dealing with key stakeholders and/or in their executive teams within their changing organisational context, as depicted in the left hand column of the above table. These participants’ quotes imply a high degree of frustration felt in having to navigate corporate politics, otherwise one “can fall out of favour”, as stated by Evan. Others’ descriptions of politics as being “big war in the boardrooms” and “a big political uproar” emphasise the level of conflict and tension associated with politics. The reference to politics creating a “bit of a shadow” by Peter, hints at a dark side of politics, creating distrust among colleagues. Overall, there seemed to be a predominant negative experience of and discomfort with corporate politics, which clearly added to participants’ felt uncertainty.
For those newcomers, such as Dave and Luke (in the right-hand column of the above table), who experienced highly uncertain transitions into their new companies, they also encountered political challenges. Dave felt that he was not trusted by a senior executive, which added to his personal uncertainty and devalued role identity. For Luke, his perception that his colleagues used political tactics to try to undermine him, added to his felt exclusion and personal uncertainty. In both cases, these political dynamics and trust issues hampered their integration into the executive teams they were part of. Both participants also emphasised that they were not good at, or did not play politics, which may be a weakness, as suggested by Luke.

In sum, while participants generally alluded to the frustration of corporate politics in their changing contexts and in their roles, they also indicated a level of discomfort with politics and the adverse effect of politics on trust among colleagues. Furthermore, some participants felt they did not have political skill and/or did not want to play politics.

5.3.2.3 Integrative summary on felt uncertainty

The felt uncertainty of participants was one of flux, of periods of more intensely felt uncertainty and periods with less uncertainty. It was an emotional state, of varying intensity, triggered by organisational change, transitions and delay. Both personal uncertainty and the challenges experienced in their leadership roles during the period of organisational uncertainty resulted in participants' felt uncertainty, an emotional state which was often described using metaphors. This felt uncertainty, primarily related to two types of personal uncertainty, that is, identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty, was experienced by all participants to some degree: Three key challenges in their leader role were experienced by participants during organisational uncertainty, which added to their felt uncertainty; namely, experienced complexity, managing other people’s uncertainty (in the face of their own uncertainty) and navigating corporate politics.

The findings also suggested that there is an inter-relationship and over-lap between personal uncertainty and the challenges experienced in the leadership role during organisational uncertainty, which added to participants' overall felt uncertainty, suggesting that it is a complex phenomenon, as depicted in Figure 11.
The above inter-relationship is best explained in how it seemed to occur. As such, identity uncertainty affected participants’ leader identity, and hence their agency in dealing with the leadership challenges experienced; for example, their experienced complexity. On the other hand, their experienced complexity, in itself, affected participants’ personal agency, adding to their identity uncertainty. The net affect being that felt uncertainty is a complex emotional state, which overall seemed to come down to issues of identity and decreased personal agency. On reflection, I also wondered whether this was the reason why participants, during their research interviews, found it difficult to differentiate between personal uncertainty and the challenges experienced in their leader role.

5.3.3 Category 3: Making sense of uncertainty

The participants’ emotional state of felt uncertainty generally motivated them to make sense of their uncertainty, as illustrated in Figure 12.

**Figure 11.** Inter-relationship between personal uncertainty and leadership challenges

**Figure 12.** Felt uncertainty motivates making sense of the uncertainty
The participants’ sensemaking seemed to focus on developing their own interpretation or understanding of what was going on in relation to their experienced uncertainty and/or their context of uncertainty, which then served as a basis for developing strategies and actions to manage their uncertainty. Participants’ sensemaking was found to involve five components as shown in Figure 13 below, which will serve as a guide for the findings.

Figure 13. The components of uncertainty sensemaking

The participants’ mental frames, acting as perceptual filters, form the outer circle of Figure 13, because these frames influenced the other four components of their sensemaking, namely, seeking understanding, interpreting, meaning-making, and emotion-focused coping. While the components in the inner circle did not occur in a strict sequence and were iterative over time, the participants’ sensemaking appeared to commence with seeking to understand what was going on in their context and in relation to their felt uncertainty. As the sensemaking progressed, at some point, participants generally interpreted the understanding they reached about their context of uncertainty and experienced uncertainty. Most participants also seemed to engage in meaning-making to find some personal meaning as a driver for persevering with and moving forward in the uncertainty. Finally, given the emotional state of felt uncertainty, the circle at the centre of Figure 13 depicts the emotion-focused coping mechanisms adopted by the participants to assist with regulating their stress and emotional state throughout their sensemaking. Importantly, while the current mental frames influenced the sensemaking, the interpreting and meaning-making arising from the sensemaking, also influenced and updated the current mental frames for future sensemaking (as depicted by the larger two-way arrows in Figure 13).
The key findings of each of the five components illustrated in Figure 13 are presented next. Examples of felt uncertainty, due to both personal uncertainty and leadership challenges during organisational uncertainty, are weaved into the findings to portray how these were made sense of.

### 5.3.3.1 Component 1: Mental frames as filters

The key mental frames which influenced participants in making sense of their uncertainty were self-view, view of others, worldview and past experience. I also acknowledge that a key belief of mine is that mental frames are perceptual filters which influence individuals’ subjective reality, so this was a lens which informed my interpretation. Table 35 contains examples of participant quotes for each mental frame.

**Table 35**

*Mental Frames influencing Participants’ Making Sense of Uncertainty*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental frame</th>
<th>Examples of participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-view:</strong></td>
<td>Resilience and optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to one’s dispositions and one’s identity (self-identity &amp; leader identity)</td>
<td>• There was resilience from my side. <em>(Evan)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I can’t control the fact that happened, but I can control how I react to this. <em>(Frank)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• … because I’m one person, I don’t have a victim mentality. <em>(Luke)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I’m a fairly optimistic, positive person. <em>(Peter)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• … you know I’m more of a kingmaker, I’ll rather support people. <em>(Evan)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I think the emotional bank balance is in favour of myself – with a lot of the people that worked with me before. <em>(Peter)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>View of others:</strong></td>
<td>…and you can’t share your own uncertainties, because you realise how detrimental that could be [to his people]. <em>(Frank)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to one’s views and beliefs in working with and relating to other people</td>
<td>• …so we had a lot of discussions and I think that helped in a way. <em>(Gavin)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And … I found I was in an EXCO where…we were not challenging or criticising each other. <em>(Dave)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worldview:</strong></td>
<td>I always fall back on my core values if I have to make a tough decision. <em>(Allan)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to one’s values, beliefs and/or perspectives about life</td>
<td>• There are always opportunities in uncertainty. My approach is to be part of the change. <em>(Ian)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past experience:</strong></td>
<td>I think what prepares me for this kind of thing, I’ve been in transition since … and you actually learn how to operate … even in a period when there was a hiatus. <em>(Ian)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to one’s past experience</td>
<td>• …because I had that experience …I was thinking that mustn’t repeat itself. <em>(Kevin)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above table, participants’ expressions of their **self-view** related mostly to dispositions such as resilience and having an optimistic outlook, which seemed to contribute to their resolve to stay the course. Participants also referred to their identities,
which influenced their sensemaking. For Evan, his leader identity as a kingmaker was crucial in how he positioned his leadership approach when asked to act in a more senior role. Peter refers to his credibility as a leader in the company, which garnered support for him when he transitioned into a more senior executive role.

Participants' mental frames pertaining to ‘view of others’ were evident in their making sense of their uncertain context, particularly relating to their leadership approach and working with others. Their frames of reference influenced their perceptions of others and way of working with other people. Frank’s quote in Table 35 related to his view that as a leader he could not share his personal uncertainties with his people, because he believed this could affect them adversely. Gavin shared how discussions with people in his team were valuable, reflecting his belief in involving others during uncertainty as a leader. For Dave, as a newcomer, he observed that the new executive team that he was part of did not challenge each other, which was different to what he believed was necessary for an effective executive team.

Personal values, part of one’s worldview in Table 35, were also evident in most participants’ sensemaking, particularly in their meaning-making. Allan, for example, used his values as a guide for making tough decisions, both personally and as a leader. Participants also expressed personal beliefs or views in relation to life or uncertainty. For example, Ian shared his perspective about seeing opportunities in uncertainty and the importance of “being part of the change”, which influenced his positive response and leadership approach in his company’s context of uncertainty.

Past experience appeared to be a significant frame of reference when experiencing personal uncertainty, in that if one had relevant experience, it built one’s confidence – and if one did not, it fostered personal uncertainty. Ian emphasised how his experience of much change in the past had equipped him to deal with organisational change. Furthermore, when joining a new company or moving into a new role, participants made positive and negative comparisons with their positive or negative experience in a previous company or role (for example, Kevin, in Table 35, refers to a negative experience in his previous company), appearing to increase or reduce their personal uncertainty.
In summary, the participants’ mental frames, which related primarily to their self-view, their view of others, their worldview and their past experience, acted as perceptual filters which influenced their making sense of uncertainty.

5.3.3.2 Component 2: Seeking understanding

A key finding was that when participants felt uncertainty, due to one or more triggers in their organisational context, this emotional state appeared to motivate the need to understand what was going on in their context, through three different approaches as summarised in Table 36.

Table 36
Approaches to Seeking Understanding - adopted by participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading the situation</th>
<th>Conversations with others</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picking up cues in one’s context by observing, noticing and listening to what is going on.</td>
<td>Having conversations with individuals, teams, or both – to gain more perspective</td>
<td>Stepping back from the ‘doing’, and thinking about the context and one’s experienced uncertainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table describes the emphasis of each approach used by participants to seek more understanding of their context of uncertainty in relation to their felt uncertainty. The findings in relation to each of these approaches are presented below.

Reading the situation

All participants indicated that they read the situation to better understand the context in relation to their felt uncertainty. Evan captured the essence of how his felt uncertainty focused him on reading the situation, as follows:

“The uncertainty, it’s so subjective, it’s so personal … it focuses you, certainly - because you start observing more closely, why is it like this, is this meant to be?”

What emerged in the findings was a different emphasis on reading the situation by those participants who were newcomers, compared to those participants who were in the company at the time of the onset of the organisational uncertainty. The latter were intent on understanding the changing context, while the newcomers were initially more focused on understanding the culture and dynamics of the new company and their executive teams they were part of. Examples of participant quotes in Table 37 depict these different emphases of reading the situation.
Table 37
Different Emphases of Reading the Situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus by newcomers on understanding the culture and dynamics of the new company</th>
<th>Focus on understanding the changing organisational context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So the culture was such that people are very much to themselves and … everybody was guarded … one could feel the underlying tension. (Dave)</td>
<td>Because you…you can read signs. You know what people are saying and…there's a lot of rumours. (Gavin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can sense the atmosphere, I can sense the tension... and that helps me to be prepared – and I think it's instinctive….it depends on who, you know, passes those kinds of remarks. If it's your colleagues, then you have to take notice. (Luke)</td>
<td>We could see all the signs...we started hearing that …there might be those board members that will stay, some they'll go. (John)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>…there was a period of time…they were debating this thing [who the new MD would be]...so you could pick up some who were for, and some were against … (Kevin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Dave and Luke, both newcomers to their organisations (in the left-hand column of the above table), they focused actively on reading the situation, to pick up cues about how things were done, to facilitate their integration into the new company. Their intense personal uncertainty and felt exclusion made them both sensitive to dynamics in their contexts, in feeling and sensing tensions. Luke believed that his sensitivity helped him to “be prepared”, and that it was an instinctive reaction by him - portraying the sense that it was a survival instinct in a new environment perceived as being hostile.

On the other hand, participants also focused on reading the situation to understand the changing organisational context (see the right-hand column in Table 37). They read the uncertain and unfolding context through hearing things, rumours, reading the signs and observing behaviour in meetings to reduce their own personal uncertainty, such as anticipatory uncertainty in relation to the appointment of a new MD, as in Kevin's case.

In contrast, Ian, who was positive about the changes because he saw opportunities in change (his worldview), emphasised needing to read the situation with a different intent:

“Now you have to read people...If I had to do a presentation, I would adjust it. The previous MD wanted detail…but they're [the current EXCO] not as detailed driven. So the way I approach them is...to get more into concepts with them…”

Thus Ian’s purpose, in reading the situation, was not to gain more understanding to reduce his own uncertainty, but rather to find opportunities in the change and how to influence people accordingly. Consequently, his sensemaking, by virtue of being positive, appeared to be channelled more creatively in the uncertain context.
Taken together, the findings suggest that reading the situation was a key component of all participants’ making sense of their uncertainty, to gain more understanding, thereby helping to reduce their felt uncertainty. For newcomers, particularly those who felt uncertain and excluded, reading the situation was done more actively to facilitate their integration into the company. However, for one participant, who perceived opportunities in the uncertainty, the intent of his sensemaking was more creative.

**Conversations with others**

A key finding was that for most of the participants, their sensemaking process had a social dimension to it, in that the participants conversed with other people to gain more understanding, both in relation to their personal uncertainty and the challenges in their leadership role. In having conversations, most of the participants engaged with their teams and/or with individuals, as illustrated by their quotes in Table 38.

Table 38  
**Using Team or One-to-one Conversations to seek understanding**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using team conversations</th>
<th>Using one-to-one conversations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It's my team [crisis committee]. We'll debate….at the end of the day I'll say, &quot;This is what we need to do and this is how…” …I had to listen, make the decision, listen, make the decision. (John)</td>
<td>I have professional networks that I… I draw strength from all the time… It's more of – of discussing with them (Dave)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We [his team] had a lot of discussions, you know, &quot;That's wrong, that's what we need to do”…. that helped… (Gavin)</td>
<td>I had long and hard discussions with my wife … it's good to speak to someone that you know is a hundred percent in your corner. (Allan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So the rest of the management team…. if they come in here we are actually able to debate &quot;what's impacting this journey of ours?” (Kevin)</td>
<td>I'm now talking of people reporting to me … use them to get a bit of perspective … If you trust someone, you can share. (Frank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>So you come and say, &quot;Look, this is what I'm thinking, what do you think?” (Bruce)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The team conversations, in the left-hand column of the above table, generally pertained to seeking understanding or different perspectives for making sense of leadership challenges during the organisational uncertainty. For instance, John (who was new in his role) found value in debating with the crisis team and listening to their views to make sense of how to approach a major crisis facing the company. In addition to conversing with teams, many participants, like Bruce, also engaged with individuals or colleagues to make sense of business problems and challenges.
However, when it came to making sense of personal uncertainty, one-to-one conversations (in the right-hand column of Table 38) seemed to be preferred by participants, with trusted individuals inside or outside the organisation. For Dave, a newcomer who experienced exclusion and a devalued identity, he tapped into his professional network outside of the company. For Allan, when he experienced anticipatory uncertainty about a potential promotion, he discussed it with his wife. Frank, on the other hand, shared his personal uncertainty with trusted individuals in his team.

In contrast to most of the participants who used conversations for their sensemaking, Luke and Evan adopted a more solitary approach in their sensemaking. These two participants experienced intense identity uncertainty, including felt exclusion. In Luke’s case, being a newcomer, who felt exclusion coupled with criticism from his colleagues, he used a form of internal dialogue. His sensemaking was peppered with expressions suggesting his internal dialogue: “I told myself the best way of…” and “I said to myself …”. Similarly, for Evan, who experienced intense personal uncertainty when he reported to a previous executive, resulting in a loss of his leader and role identity, he perceived that it was “like having leprosy, people steer clear”. Evan’s metaphor conveyed a sense of feeling stigmatised, therefore withdrawing and trying to make sense of what was going on, mostly on his own.

In sum, most participants engaged in a social process, through conversations with teams and/or individuals, to gain more understanding through different perspectives. For participants experiencing personal uncertainty (both identity and anticipatory uncertainty), it was important to engage with trusted individuals inside or outside the organisation. When considering business challenges in their leadership roles, many participants tapped into teams and/or individuals, depending on their preferences. An interesting difference, and in contrast to social sense-making, two individuals (who experienced more intense identity uncertainty, including felt exclusion), exercised more of a solitary approach. In addition to having conversations with others, participants also used a form of reflection, which is discussed next.
Reflection

A key finding was that reflection by participants was adopted to gain more understanding. When reflecting, the participants stepped back from their ‘doing’, asking themselves questions about their context and their experienced uncertainty. As seen in Table 39 below, they used reflection to understand what was going on in relation to both their leadership challenges and their personal uncertainty.

Table 39
Using Reflection for Leadership Challenges and Personal Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using reflection in relation to challenges in the leadership role</th>
<th>Using reflection in relation to personal uncertainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’ve continually asked myself… what I should be doing in my position as a leader… really what is it that I should be doing? (Allan)</td>
<td>If I’m feeling uncertain…I try to find reasons why…just mentally identifying what’s disturbing you. (Allan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are driving, you know, you – you reflect on all those issues … to say - what happened? … (Colin)</td>
<td>Again I’m in a space where, you know, I got the negative feedback. How do I deal with it? I internalise and… I’m able enough to sift what – what I think is true. (Dave)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m working on things all the time … a calm state - and my mind is always busy. (Peter)</td>
<td>It [doing physical exercise] gives me time to think … about difficult things… things I can't get my mind clear about. (Frank)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In using reflection to seek more understanding of challenges in their leadership roles, participants in the above table referred to questions they asked of themselves, that they were ‘thinking’, or the mind was busy processing certain challenges. Participants also used reflection in relation to their personal uncertainty, like Dave, who felt excluded in his team and therefore reflected on feedback received from his colleagues to understand how they perceived him.

A noteworthy difference was Allan, whom I observed (during my interview with him) as having a strong reflective capability. He also described his learning orientation, as follows:

“I mean,…there's many sources of learning in leadership. And, you constantly learn. I'm constantly asking myself…I mean that's the thing about me, I learn all the time - and I watch people.”

Allan therefore displayed a particular self-directed learning orientation which fosters reflection, suggesting that he reflected with the intention of learning. His strong reflective capability is further supported in Table 39, where he referred to reflection when feeling uncertain to understand the reason for his feelings, which is indicative of more in-depth
reflection aimed at increasing his self-awareness. Hence, it appears that the practice and quality of reflection varied across participants, ranging from thinking about things to in-depth reflection (as for Allan), which may have been influenced by their learning style or preferences. I also realise that as a coach, I am more attuned to noticing how people reflect, and that I was possibly paying more attention to this aspect of the participants’ sensemaking.

In summing up the sub-section on seeking understanding, all participants adopted different approaches to seek understanding, mainly through reading the situation, engaging in conversations with others and through reflection. However, the use of these approaches was individualised to the participant’s own learning preferences, mental frames (about working with, involving and trusting others) and the type of and level of intensity of their felt uncertainty. After participants adopted different approaches to seek more understanding of their experienced uncertainty, their sensemaking seemed to progress to interpreting and/or meaning-making, as illustrated in Figure 11 above. The findings for interpreting are presented below.

5.3.3.3 Component 3: Interpreting

Within the iterative sensemaking process, a key finding was that all participants appeared to reach a point when they interpreted what was going on in their context and their experienced uncertainty. They articulated their interpretation as an understanding, often expressed as a realisation, a form of reasoning, an explanation or rationalisation. Their interpretation appeared to be crucial in serving as a plausible explanation or account, which formed the basis of and platform for taking decisions and implementing strategies or actions to move forward in their context of uncertainty. Hence, how participants used ‘interpreting’ in making sense of their personal uncertainty, will be considered first, followed by their interpretation pertaining to their leadership challenges.

Personal uncertainty

The findings will be reviewed for identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty, in turn, which were the key types of personal uncertainty felt by the participants. Table 40 illustrates participants’ interpretations concerning their identity uncertainty.
Table 40
*Interpretations pertaining to Identity Uncertainty*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of identity issue</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issues of identity when in an acting executive role</td>
<td>Now you're also not authentic …that's where the frustration was…as I was dying to move into that direction [adopting his own leadership approach]. When [the chairperson] told me they need more time [to extend the acting role for a longer period] …I then accepted, but I decided, &quot;You know what, I can't continue like this&quot; and …there's certain things that I would like to change… (Frank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of identity as a newcomer</td>
<td>Quite frankly, I felt I was being attacked. I told myself people are wanting to find something…to give credence to their misplaced perceptions about me. …what I did was to make sure that I work hard, do my job… that's the biggest shield you can have (Luke)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of their identity uncertainty, Frank and Luke (in the above table), reached a point where they made interpretations which were plausible accounts of their experienced identity uncertainty, which helped them to promulgate actions for moving forward. Frank realised that because he was in limbo, and was therefore not being authentic in his acting role, it was a key source of his frustration as it affected his leader identity and personal agency adversely. Thus, when he was asked to act for a longer period, he took the decision to change his approach to be more congruent with his preferred leader identity. For Luke, a newcomer who felt excluded, he interpreted that he was being attacked by his colleagues, suggesting that he felt his identity being threatened or devalued. This interpretation led him to adopt a defensive strategy to protect or restore his identity (reflected in his metaphor of “the biggest shield you can have”) by ensuring he delivered in his role. Hence, both Frank and Luke’s interpretations helped them make sense of who they needed to be in their contexts of uncertainty, leading to decisions and/or strategies.

Two participants, whose sensemaking appeared to be different, were Gavin and Evan. They both felt intense identity uncertainty, and initially struggled to make sense of their uncertainty. However, with unfolding events over time, they reached a point when they were able to make sense to move forward, as depicted in Table 41. The table illustrates (in the left-hand column) how Gavin and Evan initially struggled to make sense of their experienced identity uncertainty, yet over time, both were able to reach a point when they did make plausible interpretations (in the right-hand column of the table) that enabled them to move forward.
Table 41
Participants who struggled to Make Sense of Intense Identity Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial struggle to make sense</th>
<th>Sense made (or interpretation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I also was getting worse and worse and worse, and eventually ... more and more unsure, or more negative, if you can call it that... “What can I do? There’s nothing more I can do”...which for me it’s a problem because ... you fall into this reactive mode. (Gavin)</td>
<td>...I came to a stage – “Listen here, but we can’t allow this ... We need to rethink... “We know we’re uncertain, but what do we do in the meantime?” (Gavin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I couldn’t, I couldn’t [understand] – I took it personally. It was just a totally different experience...I could not see where I’m going wrong…I withdrew... (Evan)</td>
<td>I really saw it as attrition - someone was going for me slowly and deliberately –That was my experience of it...Um what I wasn’t going to allow - was for me to resign under conditions like that. (Evan)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Gavin, who was one of the youngest and least experienced executives, he experienced identity uncertainty associated with a lack of support and direction (when reporting to senior acting executives over a period of time), coupled with a diminished sense of leader identity due to criticism from key stakeholders. His words convey the increasing intensity of his felt identity uncertainty, which hindered his sensemaking, resulting in him being more reactive in his approach due to a decreased sense of agency. However, after some time and with the unfolding of events and conversations with others, he got to a point when he accepted the uncertainty in his context. This acceptance led him to appreciate that he needed to find ways to move forward as a leader, with his team, in their context of uncertainty.

Similar to Gavin, Evan experienced intense identity uncertainty due to a profound loss of identity under a previous senior executive, resulting in him withdrawing, adversely affecting his sensemaking and leadership approach. Evan got to a point, after the unfolding of certain events, when he interpreted what was going on as attrition, that he was being targeted. This interpretation of the potential threat to his identity led to his resolve to not resign under those conditions, enabling him to move forward with a sense of conviction about what he needed to do.

In sum, participants who experienced identity uncertainty appeared to get to a point when they interpreted, what was going on in terms of their identity uncertainty, differently – thus focusing on who they wanted to be or needed to be in their context. In doing this, it helped to generate decisions and actions for moving forward. However, a high degree of felt identity uncertainty seemed to hinder constructive sensemaking initially for two participants, leading to reactive behavior by one, and withdrawal by the other. Yet with
time, and the unfolding of events, their sensemaking became more constructive as they both reached a point when they made sense of, or plausibly interpreted, their context of uncertainty in ways which increased their personal agency.

Moving on to anticipatory uncertainty, a selection of quotes in Table 42 illustrates participants’ interpretations pertaining to their anticipatory uncertainty, about a possible future threat, which might impact them adversely.

Table 42
Interpretations pertaining to Anticipatory Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of anticipatory uncertainty</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation of possible job loss</td>
<td>… so go back to the drawing board. And it’s then that I started to realise that I need to make the decision that I’m going to sit it out or leave…what I then did is I checked my options on the outside… (Kevin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation of a potential promotion</td>
<td>… You cannot have control of everything. As long as you are aware of what is likely to happen, which can derail you…and how you are going to deal with it….That's what helped me to make that decision, because I got to a point…a decision had to be made. (John)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation of the appointment of a new MD in the company</td>
<td>You feel so helpless because, you know, it's not - it's not your decision. So … you can't control it because you don't decide. (Luke) I am hoping for someone who will assess what's on the ground and be careful about what you change. (Ian)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Kevin, a newcomer who anticipated possible job loss in his organisational context, he realised the need to make a decision to stay or leave, which resulted in him assessing options in the market for him to pursue, should he need to. In John’s case of anticipatory uncertainty in relation to a potential promotion, he got to a point where he acknowledged that he could not control the outcomes in the future. This realisation helped him to make a decision, knowing he had considered possible scenarios, that is, he tried to make sense of the future scenarios which might unfold. Hence, both participants realised the need to make a decision, while accepting the uncertainty of the future based on having considered and prepared for possible alternative scenarios.

In making sense of anticipatory uncertainty about who the new MD would be, Luke realised he could not influence the appointment. These participants therefore appeared to be ‘hoping’ for a positive outcome, as expressed by Ian, and other participants. It seems that in this type of anticipatory uncertainty, which was about a ‘definite’ future event that the participants could not influence, all they could do was hope for the best, realising they needed to wait it out and see what would unfold.
In summing up, in terms of personal uncertainty, participants seemed to get to a point when they interpreted their reality of their experienced uncertainty differently, articulating this in some form of plausible interpretation (realisation or explanation), thus registering their 'making sense'. For identity uncertainty, participants interpreted the reality of the context affecting their sense of identity differently. Their interpretation enabled them to approach their uncertainty as “given this reality, who do I need to be or who do I want to be?” thus leading to “what am I going to do or what do I need to do?” However, two participants, who experienced intense identity uncertainty, struggled to make sense initially, with one becoming reactive and the other withdrawing. The intensity of one’s felt uncertainty therefore may hinder one’s sensemaking ability or effectiveness. On the other hand, for anticipatory uncertainty about uncertain future events (or threats) and the impact of these on oneself, participants got to a point where they accepted that the future was unknown. Then, given their acceptance of future uncertainty, they realised the need to make a decision; for example, “will I stay or leave, or will I accept the promotion or not?” Their making sense of and preparing for possible scenarios assisted them in their decision-making. However, in certain instances, like the anticipation of the appointment of a new MD (an intensely experienced uncertainty), participants realised they could not influence the appointment, and would therefore hope for the best, waiting to see what would unfold. Attention now shifts to the findings on how participants interpreted their leadership challenges in making sense of them.

**Challenges in the leader role during organisational uncertainty**

Three key challenges were identified, namely, experienced complexity, managing other people’s uncertainty, and politics. How participants made sense, through interpreting in relation to each of these, will be discussed.

In terms of interpreting their **experienced complexity**, most participants got to a point where they acknowledged that they could not influence or control all the variables. Examples of quotes illustrating such acknowledgement are:

> “I think you’ve got to decide what you can influence and what you can't influence. That which you can influence...you try to influence - and that what you can't influence, you've got to leave …and move on.” (Allan)
“…we are concentrating on things that we're in control of…. And we've made peace that there's uncertainty,…to concentrate on those things and – and to take that forward.” (Gavin)

The participants’ acknowledgement really implied an acceptance of the uncertainty (or complexity), as described by Gavin that they had made peace with the uncertainty. Such acceptance resulted in Allan and Gavin focusing on what could be influenced or controlled within their contexts of complexity, thereby energising their moving forward.

In dealing with leadership paradoxes, which formed part of their experienced complexity, participants appeared to reach a different interpretation of the paradox, realising the need to find a way to manage the polarity to move forward. For example, one participant in Company R, who was frustrated in having to achieve business performance while meeting transformation targets, gained a different perspective through really listening to a black colleague’s story. Hence, his change in perspective led him to finding a balanced approach in doing both, as follows:

“It [listening to his colleague’s story] gives me a perspective…There’s a reality we can't get away from. It's just something that we've really got to do our best to deal with and I've got to engage it as best I can …”

In Company P, where the key paradox was managing the tension between the independent approach of Company P and the emerging centrist view of The City (their shareholder), participants faced up to the reality of the deteriorating working relationship between their company and The City. Acknowledging the reality got participants to start re-thinking their approach in working with The City, as expressed by two participants:

“This kind of leadership is [the centrist approach from The City]…it’s emerging and we have to deal with it.”

“Now you can either kick against that [the change in approach of The City], or you can join it, and see what difference you can make.”

Moving on to the leadership challenge of managing other people’s uncertainty, a key challenge for most participants was providing clarity for others, particularly when feeling uncertain themselves. This leadership challenge was emphasised more in Company R, where participants’ personal interpretations of their company’s context of uncertainty appeared to help in managing their own uncertainty as leaders, as expressed by two participants:
“It [referring to his conviction that the company would survive] definitely helped me. There’s no question about that. It’s part of giving you a bit of — a bit of certainty in uncertain circumstances.”

“And I think the fact that I sort-of in my head knew that there would be a turning point [when the company’s financial situation would be resolved] - um that was why I could park it [he could stop worrying about it].”

In addition to assisting with their own uncertainty, it was evident that participants’ articulation of their own sense of what was going on seemed to influence their sensegiving (or content of their messages communicated to their people). Table 43 has examples of participants’ sensemaking and their messages communicated to others.

Table 43
Participants’ Own Sensemaking and related Sensegiving

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sensemaking (participant’s personal interpretation)</th>
<th>Sensegiving (message communicated to their people)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company R Participant</td>
<td>What helped me deal with it…I have a pretty decent understanding of corporate finance. I was confident, that despite on-going threats, <strong>all parties knew that the Co needed to be protected as a going concern.</strong></td>
<td><em>let's focus on the positive of what we do know - mainly that it did boil down to the fact that operationally we're a very good organisation, and we were operationally very sound, even in the middle of a really steep downturn in the economic recession.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company P Participant</td>
<td>...with my engagement with the City, it became quite clear ... we are not going to be managed as an arm's-length company. ... It's no longer like that....</td>
<td><em>The change&quot; - is the message that gets brought back to this company...to understand who the shareholder is, to understand what they want, ...and let's play the game.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples in the above table provide evidence of the link (depicted by the arrows and the comments in bold) between the participants’ personal sensemaking of their context and their sensegiving to others.

When considering corporate politics in their contexts, the following are examples of participants’ interpretations:

“...the higher you go, the more you start understanding the corporate politics.” (John)

“I'm not a good politician. Um ...I had to exercise a bit more of that skill.” (Peter)

“It's corporate politics...I don't play politics. I think that's — that's one of my weaknesses. I find it difficult ...” (Luke)

The above quotes suggest that participants reached a different interpretation of their reality of politics in their companies’ changing contexts and in their roles as executives. Some participants, like Luke, acknowledged the difficulty of political skill. For Peter,
while he acknowledged that he was “not a good politician”, he realised it was necessary to exercise political skill when he moved into a more senior executive role during the organisational changes. Overall, in facing up to the reality of politics, participants could then think about their approach to politics going forward, particularly in Company P, where this was a major challenge in their relationship with The City. As one participant articulated: “It’s no use telling them [The City]...to butt out. It doesn’t work like that… There’s a far more pragmatic approach”, which he suggested could be adopted going forward to improve their working relationship with The City, also their shareholder.

In summing up, most participants, in relation to challenges in their leader role during organisational uncertainty, appeared to reach a point where they articulated different, plausible interpretations of what was going on in their contexts. In terms of their experienced complexity, many participants acknowledged that they could not influence or control the different variables in their contexts of complexity and uncertainty, realising the need to focus on what they could influence. A key finding was that participants made personal sense of their uncertain context which also assisted them in managing their own uncertainty as leaders, thereby helping them in their leadership role of managing the uncertainty of their people (which was emphasised more in Company R due to the prolonged period of uncertainty). Moreover, the participants’ personal sensemaking appeared to inform the messages they communicated to their people. Hence, their personal sensemaking seemed to enable them to lead with more conviction during the uncertainty. Participants also interpreted politics differently in their contexts and in their roles, while some acknowledged that political skill was difficult.

This concludes the section on interpreting, the third component of sensemaking. The findings on participants’ meaning-making, the fourth component of their sensemaking, are presented next.

5.3.3.4 Component 4: Meaning-making

A key finding was that most participants appeared to find meaning in relation to their personal uncertainty, as part of their sensemaking, yet this seemed to be distinct from their interpreting of their experienced uncertainty. The meaning derived appeared to motivate participants to take action and/or gave them the resolve to persevere in their
uncertain context. Essentially, most participants found meaning through a sense of purpose (or personal goal/s), and to a lesser extent, through a sense of alignment of their personal values with the company’s values. Many participants therefore spoke about wanting to make a difference, to do something meaningful or to make a contribution. Examples of participants’ quotes, in Table 44, illustrate their meaning-making and how this was a driver in motivating them to persevere in their context of uncertainty.

Table 44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of purpose</th>
<th>Alignment of personal and company values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I made this decision [to stay] …and I felt if I were to retreat, I was going to be letting those people down [family and community]. And asked myself… do I want to be part of the growth story of this company? And the answer was yes. Those are the things that carried me forward … It became a mission (Luke)</td>
<td>By that time I figured out the type of culture, the type of people, the – the values of the company, that it's a place where you like to be. …but there was something for me that was worth going through… (Kevin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okay, let me find something that I can do …It – it adds value. I need to make it count … (Bruce)</td>
<td>I feel a strong alignment with those [the company] values … Very much so, very much so. … if there’s – there’s an alignment …, then uncertainty becomes less important …(Frank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My primary driver was I was not going to leave the company under those conditions. More importantly, I knew that I hadn't done anything wrong. (Evan)</td>
<td>I must admit the reason I've stayed … is because my personal values are fairly well aligned to the organisational values. (Allan)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above participants, in the left-hand column of the table, used specific words that conveyed they had found a sense of purpose to motivate them during their uncertainty, such as: “a mission”, “I need to make it count”, and “my primary driver”. For Luke, a newcomer who felt intense exclusion and identity uncertainty, he decided to stay on even though “it was tough”. He did not want to let his family or community down, and he wanted to be part of the company’s success, referring to these factors as “things that carried me forward … It became a mission”. Cleary this mission provided meaning for him, which motivated his perseverance to stay and see it through. In contrast, another newcomer, Kevin (in the right-hand column of the above table), felt anticipatory uncertainty about the organisational changes and possible job loss. Yet he experienced positive integration with the new company, feeling an immediate alignment with the company’s culture. This was a key consideration in deciding to stay, as he realised that “there was something for me that was worth going through…”. This gave him a reason
to persevere, particularly as his past experience (a mental frame) had been one of mis-
alignment with his previous company’s culture.

Taken together, meaning-making was a key component of how participants made sense of their experienced uncertainty, particularly their personal uncertainty (both identity and anticipatory uncertainty). The meaning provided the motivation to persevere in their uncertain contexts. In relation to forms of identity uncertainty, finding meaning also occurred through seeking ways to add value or make a contribution in their roles, as for Bruce in Table 44.

5.3.3.5 Component 5: Emotion-focused coping

The final component, at the core of the participants’ sensemaking (as depicted in Figure 11), was emotion-focused coping. With uncertainty being an emotional state, this form of coping appeared to help them in facilitating their stress and emotional state management while making sense of their uncertainty. Although a few participants mentioned the benefit of physical exercise, the most prevalent emotion-focused coping mechanisms used were self-regulation and support from others, as shown in Table 45.

Table 45
Self-regulation and Support Coping Mechanisms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-regulation</th>
<th>Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During the crisis, the one thing I kept telling myself was: “I need to be strong here, because I need to provide the leadership. (John)</td>
<td>She [my wife] was very supportive with that as well. (Frank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When feeling very frustrated – he told himself “let’s take it day-by-day …as it comes”. (Colin)</td>
<td>It is those networks that give you a kind of support. One needs that, otherwise probably I would have fallen down completely…they are a lifeline. (Dave)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When threatened, I go into a calm state …and ask what is a solution to get out of it? (Peter)</td>
<td>Obviously I shared some of it with my wife. (Evan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You know, I think it is really about just giving yourself a pep talk…to put it in perspective …to reframe your current situation … (Allan)</td>
<td>Just moan and groan sessions …so we had a lot of discussions and I think that helped in a way. (Gavin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most participants used a form of self-regulation when feeling frustrated, stressed or demotivated. Self-regulation, as seen in the left-hand column of Table 45, involved a form of self-talk, to help them to focus on the positive, or on what they needed to do, as a way of managing or shifting their emotional state. Participants also tapped into a support system for emotional support, as depicted in the right-hand column of the above
table. They appreciated the value of being able to share their feelings and concerns. While some shared with their spouses, others spoke to their teams or personal networks. Trust (a mental frame related to view of others) appeared to be a key factor in whom participants shared with, articulated by Frank as: “…if you know you can trust someone then you can share things without being threatened … that helped a lot”.

A key difference was that two newcomers chose not to share their personal uncertainty with their spouses or family to protect their families. For example, Luke used a metaphor to illustrate his protective stance in deciding that he was going to “shield them [his family] from this”. In addition, there were two participants who specifically chose to separate work and home, and therefore did not share with their spouses. For example, Gavin explained:

“Personally, I … I don’t like to mix the two [work and home] …And – and I think it was also a good thing…that you can start concentrating on something else,…not cloud that environment [home] as well with work.”

In not wanting to cloud his home environment with work issues, meant that Gavin could concentrate on different things at home, thereby helping him to forget about work issues for a while. Hence, some people may choose not to share with close ones in order to protect them or to keep a boundary between home and work for themselves.

Taken together, the experience of uncertainty is an emotional state. Most participants used two emotion-focused coping mechanisms, self-regulation and support, to assist with managing and shifting their emotional state. Self-regulation was done through self-talk to shift their emotional state. On the other hand, support, through tapping into trusted support systems, enabled them to share their feelings of uncertainty with others. However, the choice of support was based on personal preferences, beliefs and values, that is, their mental frames relating to ‘view of others’.

In concluding the section on sensemaking, it was evident that all participants made sense of their personal uncertainty and their leadership challenges through an iterative process of seeking understanding, articulating an interpretation and/or meaning-making, which was influenced by their mental frames and supported by emotion-focused coping. The components and effectiveness of sensemaking were influenced by participants’ types of uncertainty, the concurrence of and inter-relationship between these, and the
overall intensity of their felt uncertainty. Moreover, the overall findings indicated that
when participants' made a plausible interpretation and/or when they made meaning, this
generated strategies and actions which they implemented, as depicted in Figure 14.

![Making sense of uncertainty diagram](image)

*Figure 14. The link between sensemaking and implementing strategies and actions*

In other words, as illustrated above, the participants' strategies and actions were the
outcome of their interpreting and/or meaning-making. Thus, when presenting the
findings above on these two components of the sensemaking process, many of the
participant extracts also included some of the initial decisions and/or actions they took
as a result of their interpretation and/or meaning-making.

### 5.3.4 Category 4: Implementing strategies and actions

Against the backdrop of the findings up to this point, I turn to the most prevalent
strategies and actions implemented as a result of participants' making sense of their
uncertainty. The findings will be summarised in terms of the key strategies adopted for
each sub-category of felt uncertainty; firstly, personal uncertainty and secondly,
challenges in their leadership role during organisational uncertainty.

#### 5.3.4.1 Sub-category: Personal Uncertainty

Findings for the strategies implemented in relation to personal uncertainty have been
grouped into two themes as seen in Table 46, and will be reviewed in this sequence.
Table 46
*Strategies adopted in relation to Personal Uncertainty*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of personal uncertainty</th>
<th>Strategies adopted in relation to personal uncertainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity uncertainty</td>
<td>Strategies for developing identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipatory uncertainty</td>
<td>Strategies for managing anticipatory uncertainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strategies for developing identity**

The key finding was that participants, who experienced identity uncertainty, generally managed their uncertainty by adopting strategies to add value in their roles, or as leaders, and/or to develop their personal agency. These strategies therefore focused primarily on developing their identities, as their uncertainty was rooted in a sense of a devalued identity (that is, self, role, leader and/or social identity) and decreased personal agency.

Participant strategies adopted are summarised in Table 47 for the different types of identity issues experienced.

Table 47
*Key Strategies adopted in relation to Identity Uncertainty*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of identity issue</th>
<th>Participants’ strategies (including examples of quotes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issues of identity when in an acting executive role</td>
<td>Participants, who felt decreased personal agency in their acting roles, took decisions to play a more active leadership role as they wanted to make a more meaningful contribution. They therefore negotiated some latitude from the executives they reported to. These strategies helped to establish a sense of agency, thereby strengthening their leader identity in their acting capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• … and I said to him <em>[the executive he reported to]</em> there’s certain things that I would like to change… and then I started implementing certain things. <em>(Frank)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I decided to do something meaningful …I convinced the board at the time. <em>(Peter)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of identity when reporting to ‘acting’ executives over a period of time</td>
<td>Participants who felt unsupported by a lack of decision-making by more senior acting executives, realised they needed to upward manage, by becoming more assertive in what they required, in order to be effective in their roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I started putting my foot down. <em>(Gavin)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I was firm. <em>(Colin)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of identity issue</td>
<td>Participants’ strategies (including examples of quotes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of identity as a newcomer</td>
<td>Participants who felt exclusion and devalued as newcomers made decisions to stay and persevere. They adopted strategies to better integrate with their executive teams and to add value in their roles to build credibility. These strategies focused on developing their role and social identities with the executive teams, wanting to be respected and included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I found it my responsibility to actually reach out... I booked meetings with executives and I started asking them ... &quot;What is it that you are expecting from me? (Dave)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I had to make a choice, am I getting out or am I going to withstand this heat. I elected to withstand it. I told myself the best way of dealing with negative perceptions was to focus on what I'm doing. Do it properly and add value to the company... And I told myself over time...people will start to take notice of what I'm capable of. (Luke)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants who were in extended acting roles or reporting to more senior acting executives over an extended period (in the above table), adopted strategies to increase their personal agency and/or a sense of meaning in their roles in the face of the ongoing uncertainty, thereby developing their role and/or leader identity. These strategies included being more assertive and/or negotiating with their colleagues or senior executives to achieve ways of adding more value in their roles and as leaders. For newcomers, who experienced exclusion and devalued identities (in the above table), they adopted strategies to better integrate with the executive teams and through gaining credibility by delivering in their roles. Taken together, most of the strategies for developing identity, related to different approaches to their roles and their deliverables, mainly through ways of working with key stakeholders in their contexts, such as their bosses, their peers and their own teams.

**Strategies for managing anticipatory uncertainty**

The key finding was that participants, who experienced anticipatory uncertainty, generally managed their uncertainty by adopting strategies that would assist them to be more prepared for a possible future threat they anticipated. Participant strategies adopted are summarised in Table 48 for different types of anticipatory uncertainty experienced, that is, anticipation of possible job loss, and anticipation of a potential promotion.
Table 48

*Key Strategies adopted in relation to Anticipatory Uncertainty*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of anticipatory uncertainty</th>
<th>Participants’ strategies (including examples of quotes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation of possible job loss</td>
<td>Participants who anticipated potential job loss (and the financial implications of this), took actions to be prepared for different options, in the event of job loss, thereby reducing their uncertainty or worrying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I decided to contact the network. ...so I knew there was a good chance that if I ... need to leave there'll be something ...there's options out there. So let me now park that. So then I parked it. <em>(Kevin)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I decided to rather take my money and be prepared ...and it's one battle you don't have to worry about. <em>(Allan)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation of a potential promotion</td>
<td>Participants considered the pros and cons of the new position, or the different scenarios that could unfold if in the new position, to help them to decide whether to accept a promotion (if offered). In the case of those who were acting in positions, they came to terms with either getting the position, or not, by seeing benefits in both options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• As long as I was able to come up with probably three scenarios ...As long as you are aware of what is likely to happen, which can derail you.....and you need to know how you are going to deal with it. ...That's what helped me to make that decision. <em>(John)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It doesn't matter...even if I go back <em>[to previous role]</em> or I stay here <em>[be promoted]</em>, I'm still enjoying what I'm doing and I will continue enjoying it&quot;. And that – I made peace. Honestly, I just made peace. <em>(Frank)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that participants implemented strategies, or contingency plans, in the present, to prepare themselves for possible threats (such as job loss) that they anticipated in the future. While Kevin did this by ensuring there were job opportunities available in the market, Allan sold his shares to provide a financial buffer. For participants who experienced uncertainty in relation to possible future promotions, they considered the pros and cons of these future promotions, as illustrated by John’s quote. This approach assisted them to be prepared to accept the promotion if offered, and also to come to terms with the possibility of not being offered the promotion, as depicted by Frank. This form of preparation helped to reduce their personal uncertainty or worrying.

The one exception, not included in the above table, was participants’ anticipation of the appointment of a new MD in both companies. While they acknowledged their concerns or fears regarding possible negative outcomes if the ‘wrong’ person was appointed, this was a definite future event over which they had no influence. Thus they could not develop strategies; instead seeming to hope for a positive outcome and therefore waiting to see what would materialise.
5.3.4.2 Sub-category: Challenges in the leader role

Findings for the strategies implemented in relation to leadership challenges have been grouped into three themes as seen in Table 49, and will be presented in this sequence.

Table 49
Strategies adopted in relation to the Leadership Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of leadership challenge during uncertainty</th>
<th>Strategies adopted in relation to the leadership challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced complexity</td>
<td>Leadership focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing peoples’ uncertainty</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate politics</td>
<td>Adopting more political skill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leadership focus

This theme refers to the leadership focus adopted as a strategy in relation to the challenge of experienced complexity. Through their sensemaking and acceptance of the complexity, mentioned earlier, participants realised the importance, as leaders, of focusing on what they could control or influence within the complexity. This approach gave them the sense of moving forward and being able to accomplish something.

However, the overall leadership focus in the two companies had different emphases due to their different contexts of change and uncertainty. In Company R, the participants focused on “stabilising the ship” in the initial phases of the organisational change, as stated by one participant: “…we did what was required…to stabilise the organisation. We understood the requirement to keep things going…. We had…a responsibility to the company”. Later, in their new roles, while the financial situation still required resolution, they developed strategies over time, to address business goals and to position Company R for the future, as captured in this participant’s extract:

“How…we’re going to move forward in this uncertainty…we took control of the business…and we put together a proper business plan.”

What challenged the leadership in Company R were their frustrations with the board, the different stakeholders and the protracted process of resolution of the financial debt situation, which was severely compromising the company. A few participants, who had more experience and were more senior in the executive committee, thereby having a positive leadership identity, showed courageous leadership in representing the company’s interests. One participant described his perspective:
“I tried to be courageous, tried to do the right thing...and always really very clearly stated management's position and – and my position in terms of representing management. What I don't support is not being true to your set of values... if something is not right...I'm not going to pretend...for my career.”

This extract reflects how the participant’s values guided his leadership focus during the uncertainty. He was striving as a leader to do the right thing for company and its people. These more experienced and senior executives took more risks in their roles, for which some were threatened with possible dismissal, as shared by one participant: “...at a stage [the participant’s boss] was told he must fire me because I was overly critical of...the dealmakers”. It was apparent that these more experienced and senior executives were confident they would manage should anything happen to them, conveying their self-efficacy (their self-view), as described by two of them:

“I've looked after myself well enough not to be too concerned about not having a job for a year or two, or whatever the case may be, I'm fine.”

“...I've always been very comfortable in my ability to actually look after myself, you know, wherever it may be, you know.”

Turning to Company P, during the hiatus in decision-making due to a series of acting MDs, participants primarily focused on improving their functional areas by addressing systems and inefficiencies, for example: “We put in a lot of time and effort in ... the implementation of the opportunities to improve efficiencies”. However, as time passed and their frustrations grew, there was a growing realisation that “there’s no leadership in the company”. A wider and more inclusive sensemaking process (involving all senior management) was initiated by a few participants to identify focus areas during the uncertain period. As described by one participant:

“We suggested...that...here’s a perfect opportunity to have a meeting [with all of senior management] with no agenda and think completely out the box ...see what the guys have got to say...and let's focus on those areas.”

Hence, this collective sensemaking process emerged in Company P as an adaptive approach to leadership during the organisational uncertainty. Participants referred to the shift in leadership as being collective and horizontal in approach, as follows: “…it became more horizontal leadership” and “We...we’re doing it as a collective...”. In addition, the board decided that the acting MD of Company P, at the time, would stay in the role until the appointment of the new MD, to provide continuity in leadership. The
leadership focus at that stage was expressed as being: “We as a group have to work together to proudly hand over a company that is functional”. This account reflects a strong ethical tone and responsibility to ensure they handed over a functional company to the new MD.

Taken together, participants realised the importance, as leaders, of focusing on what they could control or influence within the complexity, giving them the sense of moving forward and being able to accomplish something worthwhile. The overall leadership of the two companies adopted a leadership focus during the time of uncertainty, appropriate for their context of uncertainty, to move forward. They were guided by their values and ethics in leading their companies, conveying their responsibility and commitment in their leadership roles. Moreover, a sense of positive identity as an experienced and more senior leader, coupled with a moral compass (one’s guiding values and ethics), seemed to facilitate more courageous leadership during uncertainty in company R. Finally, while the participants in Company R gave clear leadership and direction, Company P needed to establish leadership in their company, as a result of the hiatus experienced, which they did over time by drawing together as a collective.

Communication

Communication was the key strategy adopted by participants to address the leadership challenge of managing other people’s uncertainty in both companies, but was more pronounced in Company R, as the uncertainty felt was company-wide and prolonged over five years. Whereas in Company P, the period of uncertainty was about 18 months, and was experienced more in the senior levels of management due to the series of acting MDs and other executives, coupled with changes in the relationship with The City.

Company R, therefore, had a formal communication protocol informing their communication approach company-wide. On the other hand, Company P did not, with participants largely adopting their own communication efforts with people in their units. However, one participant in Company P perceived that the company needed a more formal communication approach during the uncertain period as he perceived that “the whole company is being left behind”.
As stated previously, the leadership challenge of managing others’ uncertainty was exacerbated for many participants by having to communicate in the face of their own uncertainty. This challenge seemed to be addressed largely by participants’ personal sensemaking and interpretation of their own uncertain contexts, discussed earlier. Such sensemaking seemed to give participants more conviction and clarity in how to convey their messages to other people.

Overall, in both companies, participants were guided by similar values and goals in their communication approach with people, as follows:

“Telling them it’s not going well… but this is what we are trying to do.” (Gavin)

“I tell them as it is – I don’t mould it.” (Colin)

“And I try and allay their fears by talking to them a lot.” (Ian)

“So they would ask… and then I would say, “You know what, I don’t know, but this is what I can tell you”.” (Kevin)

“You couldn’t lie to the staff but you needed to create that balance, to be able to …say to people, ‘Yes, this is where we are, but…’.” (Dave)

These extracts suggest that most participants focused on being honest or realistic, while being positive, with the intent of confirming progress and reassuring people. Allan captured the essence when he said:

“…communicating, you know,…honestly and truthfully, and being true to my values - while at the same time trying to put as positive a spin on the way things were going - as possible”.

**Adopting more political skill**

A key leadership challenge experienced by most of the participants was the frustration and discomfort in having to deal with increased corporate politics during the period of uncertainty in both companies, with certain differences in each company. Politics was clearly seen as a way of life in Company P and was very focused on relationships with The City, including having to deal with an increased political agenda by the politicians in the city. In Company R, participants experienced an increase in politics in having to deal with the board, shareholders and dealmakers - and within their executive team.

Most participants adopted more political skill when interacting with their key stakeholders, as suggested in these extracts:
“…having to choose your answers very carefully.” (Gavin)

“…not confrontational, but rather collaborative. We have to feel our way through it obviously, but um I think it's a whole lot better.” (Evan)

“I mean I also had the – the odd bad clash with some of the shareholders…But I've come to learn that I can manage that better and I can say things better.” (Allan)

“…how to pull different people in at different times to – to have the desired outcome. …and it's critical to – to bring them in at the right time.” (Peter)

The above participants appeared to adopt more political skill in dealing with their key stakeholders, mainly though developing more collaborative approaches, being sensitive to the timing of bringing different parties together, and being more diplomatic in certain forums. Adopting more political skill was seen as a necessity to move forward in their contexts of uncertainty, even though the notion of ‘playing politics’ seemed to be uncomfortable or difficult for many. Certain participants, such as Evan and Peter (who were in more senior roles), even acknowledged the value of adopting more political skill, as evidenced in their extracts above.

In sum, while there were certain contextual differences between Company R and Company P which influenced the strategies the participants adopted for their leadership challenges, there were common themes across both companies. Participants generally adopted a leadership focus in dealing with their experienced complexity to move forward in their contexts. Participants also concentrated on communication to manage their peoples’ uncertainty. Their communication was facilitated by managing their own personal uncertainty, enabling them to communicate with more clarity and conviction. Their intent in communicating was to confirm progress and reassure people; hence, they tried to be honest and realistic while being positive. Participants also adopted more political skill with stakeholders in their contexts.

In concluding the section on strategies that were implemented, participants clearly adopted strategies in relation to their personal uncertainty and their leadership challenges, the effect of which seemed to be inter-related, because the felt uncertainty was inter-related. For example, when adopting leadership focus in relation to experienced complexity (a leadership challenge), it influenced the sense of agency of the leader, which in turn alleviated identity uncertainty (personal uncertainty).
5.3.5 Category 5: Adapting

A key finding was that participants also adapted their strategies, actions and/or behaviours in relation to new information, new developments or feedback received in their uncertain contexts. Such adaptation required them to make further sense of the new information or feedback, which then informed how they adjusted their approaches going forward. A participant, who demonstrated such adaptation, was Allan, who was the participant who experienced existential uncertainty (a form of identity uncertainty). He was questioning the meaning of his role in business and had decided to take a sabbatical to think about what he really wanted to do. The extract below illustrates how Allan changed his decision as a result of the global financial crisis:

“And I, in actual fact – I was considering exiting the company… And all of a sudden … the world was turned on its head [referring to the global financial crisis]. .. it changed my plans completely. I - I was definitely going to take a sabbatical….to try and write something, do some more thinking, do things differently … [He then decided to stay with the company]… I've read different books and I've got a different perspective and … You know, my perspective has changed…And so currently… I'm actually enjoying what I do much better.”

Allan therefore adjusted his plans due to changes in the economy, and continued to explore his existential uncertainty. His exploration, or further sensemaking, coupled with changes in his role and the leadership approach in the company, led to a change in his perspective.

Table 50 contains further examples of participants’ extracts depicting their adaptation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participants’ extracts illustrating their adaptation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>• What I did – the thing that I did when this happened was um - I approached the new guy [his new boss]. And um I cognitively said that I would um support and help where I can because that is my role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>• …I reversed my decision [to accept a promotion].There was an issue … So, as a matter of principle… I had to withdraw. I told them …to give me time … to go and think about this…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>• I took it [referring to certain feedback he received from his boss]…. It's true. It's – it's irritating, one can't do that and I think I did that. So I don't do that anymore.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evan, in the above table, uses the word “cognitively”, to suggest that he actively made sense of how to approach his new boss, after having had a negative experience under his previous boss. For John, after reversing his decision due to certain developments,
he requested time to think, which implied he needed to make further sense before committing to his next decision. In the case of Dave, he made sense of feedback he received from his boss and adapted his behaviour accordingly.

Taken together, participants also adapted their actions and behaviours in relation to new information, developments in their contexts and/or feedback received from stakeholders. Their adaptation was based on further sensemaking, or thinking and/or developing a different perspective. Thus, sensemaking, implementing actions and then adapting (based on further sensemaking), appears to be a continuous and iterative process over time, and crucial for managing experienced uncertainty in uncertain contexts.

5.3.6 Integration of the findings for research objective 1

The over-arching theme was that executive leaders' lived experience of uncertainty over time was one of flux, with peaks of increased felt uncertainty and troughs of less uncertainty. Figure 15 integrates the key findings on how the executives made sense of and managed their experienced uncertainty.

![Figure 15](image.png)

*Figure 15. How executives make sense of and manage experienced uncertainty*
Starting at the top left side of the above figure, when the executives experienced felt uncertainty, in relation to certain changes in their context, it manifested as an emotional state with feelings ranging from self-doubt, being in limbo, discomfort, worry or fear, to frustration and feeling overwhelmed. The felt uncertainty comprised of personal uncertainty (identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty), challenges in their leadership role (experienced complexity, managing others’ uncertainty and corporate politics) and the inter-relationship between these. Their overall felt uncertainty seemed to come down to issues of identity and/or decreased personal agency.

Their ‘felt’ uncertainty seemed to motivate the executives to make sense of their uncertainty. The type of, and intensity of, participants’ emotions affected their sensemaking. Most participants’ uncomfortable feelings of uncertainty fostered sensemaking to try and reduce their felt uncertainty. In contrast, one participant, who saw opportunities in the change, approached his sensemaking in a more creative way to harness the opportunities. On the other hand, for two participants who experienced intense uncertainty, their emotions seemed to hinder their sensemaking (by reacting or withdrawing). Further, two participants adopted a more solitary approach to sensemaking of their intensely felt uncertainty.

In general, when making sense of their uncertainty, most executives adopted approaches to seek more understanding of their uncertain context and/or experienced uncertainty, through reading the situation, conversations with others and reflection. At some point, they interpreted their reality differently and plausibly, which equated to ‘making sense’ of what was going on for them. For most, it was about accepting the uncertainty in their context and/or making sense of their identity in terms of who they needed to be or become in their context. In addition, most participants engaged in meaning-making, which seemed to give them the motivation to persevere.

Their iterative sensemaking was influenced by their mental frames, such as their self-view, view of others, worldview and past experience. The participants’ past experience seemed to be a key mental frame influencing their sensemaking. Given the emotional state of uncertainty, the participants also used emotion-focused coping mechanisms to facilitate their stress and emotional state management, primarily through self-regulation (in the form of self-talk) and tapping into support systems (people whom they trusted).
The executives’ interpretations and meaning-making then promulgated strategies and actions that were implemented and adapted over time - in relation to new developments in their contexts, requiring further sensemaking. These actions were aligned with the type/s of uncertainty felt, for example; identity development strategies were implemented to develop or repair one’s devalued identity, mostly through adopting different approaches to working with and approaching key stakeholders.

5.4 Findings for research objective 2

The findings in this section are addressing the following research objective:

**Research objective 2: To understand what capability for uncertainty the executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty**

In addressing the above objective, the participants reported the ways in which they had developed through their lived experience of uncertainty, lessons they learned and what they had found to be important for moving forward in their context of uncertainty. The key themes and sub-themes (representing \( n = 8 \) or more), resulting from the analysis of the interviews are outlined in Table 51.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 51</th>
<th>Findings to address Research Objective 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sub-themes &amp; density (( n ))</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of mental frames</td>
<td>Positive identity development (( n=10 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance of uncertainty (( n=11 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key dispositions: resilience and optimism (( n=9 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of effective sensemaking</td>
<td>Factors promoting effective sensemaking: time, being calm and reflection (( n=8 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conversations for sensemaking and/or support (( n=8 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership during uncertainty</td>
<td>Leadership through engaging others (( n=8 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The importance of focus and adaptability (( n=9 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication principles (( n=9 ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political skill (( n=4 ))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above key themes and sub-themes form the structure of how the findings will be presented. All the above themes were identified in eight or more of the participants across both companies, except for the development of political skill which was reported by four participants. I included political skill as a theme because corporate politics was identified as a key leadership challenge by most participants.
5.4.1 Key theme: Development of mental frames

A key finding was that all participants experienced personal growth through their lived experience of uncertainty, to a greater or lesser extent. In particular, participants developed their sense of positive identity and their orientation to uncertainty. Participants also acknowledged key dispositions that were crucial and which were further strengthened through their experience, namely, resilience and optimism. Thus, personal growth was manifested in the development of their mental frames.

5.4.1.1 Positive identity development

Even though participants did not use identity as a term, most of them clearly developed their personal, role and/or leader identity through their lived experience of uncertainty, suggesting that positive identity development occurred. What emerged was variation in the type of identity development which occurred for less experienced executives and more experienced executives, as illustrated in Table 52.

Table 52
Degree of Experience and Identity Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of participants</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants who had less experience</td>
<td>• It made me stronger, you know, to deal with these things. In a way that...I'll say ...in a way, you know, it brought out the assertiveness in me. (Colin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• You know, experience is work-related, but it's also experience in...in this type of thing [uncertainty]...you know, that you need to build experience in - how to handle it or to go through it and see what impacts you in person or, as...a leader. (Gavin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants who were more senior and/or had more experience</td>
<td>• It reconfirmed that what I believe in is right. That's the first thing.... (Frank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I've also learnt that I can still be true to my values and true to my belief, and honour my sense of courage. (Allan)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Gavin and Colin, who had less experience in their executive roles, they had experienced personal uncertainty and frustration in their roles during the organisational uncertainty, when reporting to more senior acting executives. Both acknowledged personal growth, resulting in development of their leader identities. While Colin became more assertive and ‘stronger’, Gavin perceived the lived experience of uncertainty had been worthwhile and important in giving him essential experience as a leader.
Related to Gavin’s point, a noteworthy quote from Bruce (a less experienced executive, not quoted in the above table) implies the crucial role of the lived experience of uncertainty in progressing his personal development:

“So in this [uncertain period] – you can actually tabulate that I did this, I did that, so it actually grows your portfolio…Your ability to have ridden the tide of uncertainty promotes you to the next challenge. Your experience of uncertainty is what qualifies you for the next challenge…You get prepared for your next challenge. So…I would say …it was actually a growth period.” (Bruce)

Bruce clearly saw “the ability to have ridden the tide of uncertainty” as essential experience gained in terms of preparing him for his next challenge. He viewed the uncertainty as a growth experience, conveying a strong sense of positive identity development in how his “portfolio” had grown through different accomplishments. Interestingly, Bruce described the experience as “a tide of uncertainty”. He also suggested that there would be future tides to ride, thus supporting the over-arching finding of my study that the lived experience of uncertainty is one of flux, of tides of uncertainty, which ebb and flow over time.

For participants, who were more experienced leaders, they recognised that their leadership approach during their contexts of uncertainty was appropriate and aligned to their existing leadership beliefs and values. They therefore perceived that their experience re-affirmed their leadership approach, thereby further strengthening their leadership identities. Referring to the above table, Frank emphasised that his leadership beliefs were reconfirmed. Allan, who experienced existential uncertainty about the meaning and role of leadership, saw the experience as a ‘test’ of being able to lead in a way that was congruent with his values. Allan therefore realised that he could be true to his values, and importantly, to his sense of courage, implying these were important to his sense of leader identity.

Turning to the newcomers, one of them (Kevin) articulated positive identity development due to the autonomy given to him in his new role, expressed as: “…so from a role point of view it was a very exciting role. It actually gives you the opportunity to do a lot of things…it gives you that – that sense of empowerment and that you can do what you believe is required…”. However, in contrast to Kevin, positive identity development did not seem to occur to the same extent for other newcomers, as shown in Table 53.
Table 53
Newcomers’ Experience not clearly illustrating Positive Identity Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newcomers</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Luke</strong></td>
<td>1. And I told myself over time… gradually people will start to take notice of … what I’m capable of…. And gradually I could actually see, you know, the shift in certain people's attitude and perception towards me [referring to his own management team].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. But there are certain people [referring to his Exco colleagues] that …um – that you – you know, they’re naturally pessimistic … You – You sort-of deal with them in a different way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dave</strong></td>
<td>1. There were positive things….on a personal level that I achieved. I reached out more and I actually got involved in areas that I otherwise wouldn’t have…I know for sure that I’m appreciated significantly because of the benefits from doing that …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. “You know, extremely frustrating because you are not only under-utilised,…you’re excluded”… We – we do talk…but it’s just when you have to actually get to a point of decision making…, you know, the empowerment doesn’t happen, it doesn’t.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These two newcomers, who experienced intense personal uncertainty and exclusion, suggested that there was some development of their identities through their lived experience of uncertainty. For Luke, as per his first quote in the above table, he felt his credibility grew gradually over time, particularly as perceived by the managers reporting to him. In contrast, his second quote depicts his response to how his executive colleagues’ perceptions changed over time, which did not come across convincingly to me during the interview. His response seemed to rationalise why he was still not accepted by some of his colleagues. Considering three years had passed since he joined the company, I interpreted that Luke did not clearly experience positive identity development. I felt this was further verified when he shared with me, after the interview, that he had found it difficult to draw out his learning from his experience, suggesting that he was still experiencing personal uncertainty in his context.

In the case of Dave, he acknowledged some positive progress. His first quote in the above table indicates that, in reaching out to others and finding different ways to add value in his role, he felt he was appreciated by certain people for his efforts. However, at the time of the interview, he was at the point of considering his options to leave the company. He was also emotional during the interview, clearly reflecting his state of disillusionment as a result of still feeling “under-utilised … and excluded” and not being empowered to make decisions in his role. Taken together, these two newcomers, while experiencing some growth through their experience and lessons learned (especially those that would inform their choice and approach in joining a new company in the
future), they did not portray clear positive identity development. These two examples imply that identity development, through executives' own efforts, may not be achieved when not affirmed or recognised by key stakeholders in the executives' contexts.

In sum, while participants encountered personal uncertainty and leadership challenges in their roles, most of them appeared to experience personal growth through the lived experience of uncertainty, resulting in positive identity development. The implication is that there was a strengthening or updating of the participants' self-view mental frames, which in turn would influence further sensemaking when riding their next tide of uncertainty. Yet for two newcomers who experienced intense identity uncertainty, they did not seem to achieve positive identity development, largely due to their identity development efforts perceived as being thwarted by their executive colleagues. Hence, identity development appeared not to be simply a result of the participants' own efforts, as it required reciprocity and affirmation from other key stakeholders in their context.

5.4.1.2 Acceptance of uncertainty

Most participants felt they had learned more about uncertainty as a result of their lived experience of uncertainty, including its pervasiveness in the world, and therefore the need to accept it, which then opened up opportunities for working more effectively with uncertainty and change. Examples of participant extracts reflect this acceptance:

“First of all uncertainty is a constant, it will always be there. You're not going to wish it away. So first again, make peace with that..." (Luke)

“Then you make peace with the uncertainty. You say, "You know what, I can't control that"." (Frank)

“What I've learnt is there's always going to be uncertainty....uncertainty must not become a worry...that's clouding your own judgement. And that you need to make peace with uncertainty..." (Gavin)

“So it's not about taking away uncertainty, but managing it, which is important. So that's...that's why I'm saying 'there's always uncertainty in business, in life...” (Bruce)

These extracts indicate how participants’ mental frames in relation to uncertainty developed further. There was a realisation that the uncertainty in most instances could not be eliminated or reduced, that is, uncertainty could not be wished away, it could not
be controlled, and it could not be eliminated. This acknowledgement resulted in a shift in participants' worldview towards acceptance of uncertainty.

5.4.1.3 Key dispositions: resilience and optimism

While most participants acknowledged that resilience and optimism were key dispositions crucial for persevering in and coping with the uncertainty, most felt they had strengthened these dispositions through their experience, as reflected in Table 54.

Table 54
Key Dispositions for Coping with Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resilience</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success and failure is going to be determined by the resilience that you…have in this kind of uncertainty. (Luke)</td>
<td>I am overwhelmingly an optimist…even when I'm unhappy, I still believe there can be good outcomes. So that …helped a lot, personally and professionally. (Allan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So I became resilient … I survived and that was the way I survived. (Evan)</td>
<td>To become more positive regarding change or to – to make this mind shift … (Gavin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One participant, Allan, captured the essence of this theme:

“I think attitude is a – is a massive, massive thing, you know….I think I coped very – fairly well because of my whole makeup….”

Allan emphasised the importance of attitude and one’s makeup in helping him to cope with uncertainty. In other words, one’s attitude is shaped by one’s makeup or dispositions such as resilience and optimism. These dispositions therefore form part of the executives’ self-view, which influences their making sense of uncertainty.

In concluding this section, the participants’ positive identity development, the shift in their orientation to uncertainty and strengthening of key dispositions, through their lived experience of uncertainty, resulted in development or updating of their self-view and worldview mental frames. Taken together, these more developed mental frames suggest a more developed capability for uncertainty – which would tend to influence the participants’ sensemaking when riding their next tide of uncertainty.

5.4.2 Key theme: The value of effective sensemaking

Most participants spoke about how important it was to understand their context of uncertainty and/or experienced uncertainty. For example:
“...You need to make peace with uncertainty, and the way that I've done it personally is – try to understand it to the best of your ability... As soon as you understand the uncertainty, you become more certain in your response and your approach towards it." (Gavin)

“You need to distil out of that uncertainty what it is...that is so uncertain that is impacting on your company, or on you, as an individual. By so doing you'll be in a position to...better respond to..." (Luke)

These two participants acknowledged the importance and value of their sensemaking in order to understand their context of uncertainty and/or experienced uncertainty. They emphasised the need to search for more understanding or perspective, before responding or making decisions related to their felt uncertainty. More specifically, participants referred to certain factors, such as reflection and conversations with others, which facilitated more effective sensemaking, to be discussed next.

5.4.2.1 Factors promoting effective sensemaking: time, being calm and reflection

Most participants realised that there were factors which helped or hindered making sense of their uncertainty. They acknowledged the need to delay one’s response or decision-making to felt uncertainty, and to rather spend more time observing and reflecting to gain more perspective on their context of uncertainty. They stressed the need for being calm or unemotional when reflecting. Table 55 contains examples of participant quotes illustrating these factors.

Table 55
Factors which foster Effective Sensemaking during Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The need to delay decisions</th>
<th>The need to be calm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like to make quick decisions and then move on...I've learned a bit of a – tolerance for uncertainty. So if... things are uncertain, sometimes it's necessary to postpone it ...or just stand back a bit, assess - because there might be new information coming along. (Frank)</td>
<td>It [being calm] helped me ...in that when you're calm you take one step back and think things through...rather than just jumping in. (John)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I also would say - don't rush to make decisions in change because change can overtake your choices...I think when everything's in – in such a state of flux it's actually good just to sit tight and observe for a while..., I am too quick to make decisions. (Allan)</td>
<td>Don't deal with it emotionally, you get nowhere. I just sit down and think about it. (Evan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...be able to step out of the movie that you're in and look at the movie playing. And then, without being emotionally attached,...then say, &quot;okay, if you now look at this thing playing, what do you need to do?&quot; (Kevin)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frank and Allan (in the left-hand column) both acknowledged their tendency to want to make quick decisions, and therefore learned that they need to consciously delay their
decision-making to allow themselves time to reflect, observe and assess; in other words, to allow more effective sensemaking. Other participants (in the right-hand column) referred to the need for being calm, or not emotional, either when reflecting on business challenges, as in the cases of John and Kevin, or when dealing with personal uncertainty, as emphasised by Evan. These three participants implied that being calm enabled their thinking and sensemaking to be more constructive. Hence, the converse is implied, that is, feelings of intense uncertainty might hinder effective sensemaking.

When participants described reflection, several in the above table used terms such as: to “step back”, to “stand back”, or to “step out” from one’s immediate context of uncertainty, suggesting the need for gaining emotional distance and objectivity. However, this type of reflection is challenging to do, and as an executive coach, I have also noticed how reflection does not come easily to many individuals, including executives.

Of relevance to the subject of reflection, most participants said that they derived value from the interview, when I asked them to reflect back on the content and value of their interview. They generally felt that the interview allowed them to reflect on their lived experience and how they had approached it, including identifying lessons learned. A few perceived the interview as an opportunity for them to re-focus on their personal and leadership intentions going forward. However, what was striking to me was that most participants said they had not really reflected on or thought about the whole experience due to time pressures, for example:

“…it's not something that you really get time to really reflect on…” (John)

“You know, often you don't have time to ask yourself questions… and it's not that easy to have a conversation with yourself.” (Ian)

Ian, above, made the point that reflection was not easy to do on his own, highlighting that the interview provided the opportunity to do this. His point also resonates with my observation in my coaching practice that reflection, specifically in-depth reflection, is difficult. The implication is that reflective ability possibly needs to be developed in executives to enable more effective sensemaking during uncertainty.
In sum, delaying decision-making and being calm were suggested as crucial for more effective sensemaking and reflection, implying that feelings of intense uncertainty might hinder constructive sensemaking. Reflection did not seem to come easily for participants, exacerbated by time pressures in their contexts. In addition, most participants had not really reflected on their lived experience of uncertainty, which begs the question as to how to extract and optimise the learning gained from experience for leadership development. Thus, reflective ability and emotional regulation are factors which need to be considered in developing more effective sensemaking, essential for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty.

5.4.2.2 Conversations for sensemaking and/or support

Most participants reported on the value of having conversations with others when making sense of their uncertainty. It emerged that for many participants they appreciated conversations for sensemaking and/or as a form of support. Table 56 depicts participant quotes of the sensemaking and support benefits of conversations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversations for sensemaking</th>
<th>Conversations for support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like to – to have a conversation, because while talking you're thinking and when you – when you hear yourself out loud, things becomes clearer, you know, for me as a person. (Gavin)</td>
<td>You know what I — I do think you need to have somebody that you talk to. You need to have some form of a sounding board but you need to be able to choose the sounding board… (Kevin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ll go back to communication because most of the time – I believe that when you’ve got these issues, talking about them time and again, makes you come up with new methods of dealing with them. (Colin)</td>
<td>…If you don't have a support structure, I'm telling you it is ten times more difficult. The home front - and at work. … Where you can share your frustrations, or your concerns, or your opinions, or those type of things. (Frank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I need to get different perspectives…the only way you can do that is when people trust you and you trust them, and you can engage and lobby … (Bruce)</td>
<td>I – I think I have – I've appreciated the support that I got from many people in the organisation, that helped quite a bit. (Peter)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above quotes suggest that some participants had a preference for sensemaking through conversations, such as Gavin, who stated this explicitly. For Bruce, Colin and Frank, they sought different perspectives by engaging with others. Frank and Bruce emphasised the importance of trust, also stressed by Kevin, who said that one needed to be able to choose one’s own sounding board. The value of support from others during their lived experience of uncertainty was also acknowledged as being important. For
example, Frank described his relationships and support structure as critically important. Taken together, the value of conversations (in sensemaking and/or as a form of support) was acknowledged as contributing to the participants’ capability for uncertainty. Such conversations appeared to be determined by their preferences, relationships and trust. It therefore seems that realising the value of sensemaking, through conversations with others, led to the reinforcement or development of participants’ mental frames relating to their ‘view of others’.

5.4.3 Key theme: Leadership during uncertainty

All participants had views on which leadership principles or approaches were of value to them when leading during uncertain times. Key themes clustered around developing a leadership approach which engages others, the need for leadership focus and adaptability, adhering to certain communication principles during organisational uncertainty and using political skill in dealing with key stakeholders.

5.4.3.1 Leadership through engaging others

Most participants acknowledged that, as a result of leading through organisational uncertainty, they had developed aspects of their personal leadership approach, with an emphasis on involving and engaging their people more, as captured in these examples:

“There are certain fundamentals and you…follow through on that, you know, be honest, understand what integrity is… And so you have to get people engaged and get – keep them involved.” (Evan)

“You know …I find involving people, it makes communication easier…but also [asking people]…“what can we do regarding this uncertainty?” (Gavin)

“But as a leader, the trick was not to let my people get despondent or uncertain. … just to keep saying to them that all of this is an opportunity, all of this is to experience different things, all of this will prepare you for other periods …” (Ian)

These participants therefore involved or engaged their people on the issues and way forward in their context of uncertainty. Ian’s leadership approach focused particularly on engaging his people and encouraging them to get involved so that they would gain experience from “this opportunity” to develop their confidence for future contexts of uncertainty. Thus Ian’s own perspective of seeing change as an opportunity influenced his sensegiving to his team.
The findings did, however, suggest there were some differences in how the executive leadership of the whole organisation developed in the two companies. In Company R, although there was clear leadership from the top (albeit with a few acting executives), several participants described challenging dynamics in the executive committee. This ultimately led to a strategy to develop the overall leadership approach, using an external facilitator, to focus on building more cohesion – as follows:

“We started with the EXCO first…to try and get that sorted…working together and it's much better… It's not perfect… but he's [an external facilitator] now also working with the senior managers to…build up this cohesion …”

On the other hand, participants in Company P experienced high levels of frustration and uncertainty during the hiatus in leadership due to a series of acting MDs, from which a ‘self-organised’ collective leadership approach emerged among the executive committee, and including senior management, with positive results, as observed by one participant:

“There’s certain things that might not have happened if the uncertainty didn't exist. So things have changed, things actually start evolving, people start thinking differently,…and that now defines…good leadership. And I think…that's a good thing because… We've actually done quite a bit.”

In sum, participants developed their personal leadership approach through their lived experience primarily by engaging their people more. This developed leadership approach also reinforced and/or developed their mental frames in relation to ‘views about others’ as a leader. However, the executive team leadership, as an entity, in the two companies experienced different dynamics with their emergent leadership approaches being shaped by their different contexts of uncertainty. However, both companies’ leadership approaches, at the time of the research, were focused on more engagement of other people in the process of moving forward.

5.4.3.2 The importance of focus and adaptability

The importance of focus was identified by most participants as essential for leadership when dealing with experienced complexity. The focus was usually on what could be influenced or controlled in their context, while needing to adapt their plans as new information emerged. Examples of participant quotes depicting the importance of focus and adaptability are shown in Table 57.
Table 57
The Importance of Focus and Adaptability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Adaptability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…a big thing that helped me always was … limit yourself to trying to impact on the things that you can actually impact on, and leave alone the things…that you are not going to be able to influence. (Allan)</td>
<td>I mean it's a process. As you – as you move along you – you find solutions for these things. (Peter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…be able to clearly identify priorities to say, &quot;As a leader, what are my priorities? And what are those things that I want to make sure that I push…irrespective of uncertainties? (John)</td>
<td>Keep focussed… because… uncertainty can …move you off track…. Have a plan, execute it… Look you have to adapt along the way, make no mistake (Luke)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…the lesson learned is you need to understand the change you are in. And then decide which of those things you need to leverage (Kevin)</td>
<td>You make a conscious decision… this I can do something about…Let me make a plan…how I'm going to take this forward and then you make peace with that…If the uncertainty gives me new information, or new scenarios… let's adapt the plan. Then you adapt. (Frank)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above quotes in the left-hand column suggest that leadership focus was about having priorities, so providing a common purpose to align others' efforts and keep moving forward in the uncertainty. As Evan stated (not in the above table): “…we're more focussed now,…so I don't think that fear is there and everyone is involved”. However, the importance of balancing the focus (such as strategy and plans) with adaptability was also emphasised, as evidenced in the right-hand column.

5.4.3.3 Communication principles

Most participants in both companies appreciated the importance of communication in their leadership role during organisational uncertainty. For example:

'I think sharing information is hugely important. Telling people every inch of the way what's going on, getting them involved in running the company.' (Evan)

'Look, I think communication is vitally important …you have to talk about it honestly …to acknowledge it, and you have to try put it in context.' (Allan)

As suggested by the above examples, participants learned that the key principles for effective communication in times of uncertainty are to be regular, open and honest. However, several participants in Company R, where there was a formal communication protocol, felt there was scope to be more transparent. For example, one participant expressed this as follows:

“Communication could've at some stages, in my opinion, been more transparent because we were concerned that we upset people...Even if it is bad news, just share it...The problem is these things tend to come out - and then trust becomes an issue. …I've really seen that people are more tolerant than what you think.”
The above participant learned that people are more tolerant of uncertainty – and able to deal with honest, even bad news – thereby updating his ‘view of others’ (a key mental frame as a leader). For him, this was a key learning. Other participants in Company R acknowledged that they chose to share more with their senior people, who understood the business challenges at the time, as one individual said “especially communication with people that know and understand, you need to give them information”.

Several participants in Company R (where communication was emphasised more due to the prolonged uncertainty of five years) acknowledged, through their experience, that leaders need to come to terms with their own personal uncertainty as it will tend to influence their communication with their people. For example:

“Um in this protracted period of uncertainty …So that's…what I learnt…So don't just preach it, whilst you don't believe it - believe it first. If you believe it, it will be easier for you to – you know, to communicate.”

“…from a leadership point of view, …what helped me as a person and…as a leader, was the fact that we constantly knew what was going on…and we were…being told that it's fine…and because I really believed that it was fine, I could, in an honest way, sort-of give the people the same feedback.”

Both participants above suggest that when they believed in a positive outcome, through their personal sensemaking and understanding of their context of uncertainty, they were able to convey that message to their people. Again, the inter-relationship between the participants’ personal sensemaking and their sensegiving as leaders is evident.

In sum, communication was seen by most participants to be important during times of uncertainty. Key principles for communication were being open, honest and regular. Adopting these principles, would most likely have reinforced or developed their mental frames pertaining to ‘view of others’. Furthermore, as leaders, they realised the need to face up to their personal uncertainty and make sense of it, to be able to facilitate effective and genuine communication to their people.

5.4.3.4 Political skill

Before discussing this theme, I need to emphasise that four of the executives (two from each company) acknowledged that they had also developed their political skill through
their experience and saw value in exercising improved political skill. Examples of participants’ quotes depicting their learning are:

“… talking about choosing your battles, choosing your battles. …um … do it a bit more calmly…and a bit more diplomatically…” (Allan)

“I have a better understanding of how to … pull different people in at different times to – to have the desired outcome. And I think I’ve managed that probably quite well, learnt quite a bit out of that. So getting the timing right, if I can call it that. … And although I'm straight and frank and so on, I think – I learned to be very careful in how I take the matter forward. …You know, politics has got a – an incorrect connotation. I think it's more a case of um – how do you bring the right people together at the right time.” (Peter)

The above examples refer to learning to be more diplomatic and using different approaches in dealing with and influencing key stakeholders. While Allan referred to choosing his battles, Peter’s learning also resulted in him reframing politics more pragmatically, after acknowledging that politics had “an incorrect connotation”. He now saw the value of political skill, defining politics more positively as influencing the timing and bringing together of key stakeholders to get effective results.

Taken together, what was interesting and surprising to me, was that only four participants identified political skill as an area of development, although most of them had identified corporate politics as a key challenge in their leadership role. My sense of this discrepancy is that the four participants, who acknowledged development of their political skill, did so because they were in a more senior role which required more political skill in interfacing with key stakeholders. The other participants, even if they developed their political skill, did not highlight it. This, in my view, was possibly due to their negative perception of and discomfort with politics, emphasised earlier by most participants as being part of their challenge in having to navigate corporate politics.

5.4.4 Integration of the findings for research objective 2

The capability for uncertainty that was developed by participants through the lived experience of uncertainty is summarised in Figure 16.
The above figure depicts a key overall finding which was that capability for uncertainty was developed by the executives as a result of their lived experience of uncertainty, to a greater or lesser extent. The developed capability for uncertainty related to the following:

- The development of their mental frames, particularly their self-view through positive identity development, their worldview through acceptance of uncertainty and their ‘view of others’ through their sensemaking and leadership approaches (as depicted by the dotted arrows in the above figure).
- An appreciation of factors which promote more effective sensemaking, that is; making more time for sensemaking, the need for being calm and more in-depth reflection to gain perspective – and the importance of conversations for gaining different perspectives and emotional support.
- Leadership during uncertainty – with emphasis on adopting a leadership approach which engages others, the need for focus (coupled with adaptability), adopting certain communication principles (open, honest and regular communication) and political skill in dealing with key stakeholders.

These findings therefore indicate what some of the crucial components may be for developing capability for uncertainty in executive leaders. Although political skill did not emerge as a prevalent finding, possibly due to its negative connotation, its value was
acknowledged by four participants who were in more senior executive roles during their organisational uncertainty. On this basis, I suggest that political skill may also form part of a capability for uncertainty for executives in their leadership role during organisational uncertainty. Moreover, the findings suggest that development of capability for uncertainty through experience would most likely equip the executives in making sense of and managing future experiences of uncertainty, as illustrated in Figure 14 above.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings for Phase 1 (executive leaders) to address research objectives 1 and 2.

The overall finding for research objective 1, is that executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty over time, was one of flux, with peaks of increased felt uncertainty and troughs of less uncertainty. The findings give an in-depth understanding of the complexity and dynamics of executives’ experienced uncertainty (comprising of different types of uncertainty, with overlaps and inter-relationships between these) and how they approached their uncertainty through sensemaking and adaptation over time. Overall, executives’ felt uncertainty seemed to come down to issues of identity and decreased personal agency, suggesting that these are at the heart of felt uncertainty. While the executives in both companies experienced similar types of uncertainty, there were different degrees of emphasis in their leadership challenges related to their different contexts. Hence, contextual factors are relevant to executives’ felt uncertainty, particularly in relation to their leadership roles during organisational uncertainty.

For research objective 2, the overall finding was that capability for uncertainty was developed by the executives as a result of their lived experience of uncertainty, to a greater or lesser extent, with development of positive identity being a key outcome. Components crucial for developing a capability for uncertainty were also clarified. The findings for research objectives 1 and 2 have implications for executive coaching focused on developing clients’ capability for uncertainty, to be discussed in chapter 6.

In the next chapter, the findings for research objectives 3 and 4 are presented for Phase 2 of the study, namely, the executive coaches.
CHAPTER 6
FINDINGS FOR PHASE 2: EXECUTIVE COACHES

6.1 Introduction

The findings of Phase 1 (executive leaders) were reviewed in the previous chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of Phase 2 (executive coaches) to address research objectives 3 and 4, using the structure outlined in Table 58.

Table 58
Framework for Structure of the Findings for Phase 2: Executive Coaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research objectives</th>
<th>Structure of findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty</td>
<td>• Setting the context for Phase 2 findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’.</td>
<td>• Findings for research objective 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Findings for research objective 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders), reviewed in chapter 5, and the findings from Phase 2 (executive coaches) to be presented in this chapter, will be further interpreted in relation to literature in the discussion in chapter 7. Thereafter, Phase 3 of the study, which is informed by an integrative analysis of the key findings across Phase 1 and Phase 2, will address research objective 5 in Chapter 8. The fifth research objective was to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.

6.2 Setting the context for the findings

The profile of the sample of six executive coaches was described earlier in chapter 4 under section 4.3.1. A key criterion was to have coaches with a range of different types of coaching training and/or qualifications. For the purpose of ensuring anonymity, the participants were randomly allocated an identifier code, ranging from C1 to C6. Being a sample of six, the IPA guidelines proposed for the analysis and writing up of findings for a sample size (n) of four to eight were adhered to (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The criterion I used to establish prevalence of a theme (that is, representing most of the
participants) was that it needed to be evident in at least four of the participants. In certain instances, themes of less prevalence are also highlighted in the findings, to illustrate breadth and depth within this sample. To demonstrate evidence for each theme in these findings, verbatim quotes from at least three participants were required to represent the essence of the theme, and to illustrate individual variation within the theme (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Of note, some of the coaches’ extracts also include reference to or examples of quotes expressed by their executive clients, which results in having clients’ extracts nested within the coaches’ extracts in places.

6.3 Findings for research objective 3

The findings in this section address the following research objective:

Research objective 3: To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty

The analysis of the participants’ interviews resulted in four categories, with subcategories and/or key themes identified within some of these, as shown in Table 59.

Table 59
Findings to address Research Objective 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub category</th>
<th>Key themes &amp; density of the theme (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Types of uncertainty emerging in executive coaching</td>
<td>Personal uncertainty</td>
<td>• Identity uncertainty (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Anticipatory uncertainty (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges in the leader role</td>
<td>• Experienced complexity (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Corporate politics (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How issues of uncertainty arise during coaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Uncertainty emerges during the coaching (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The importance of trust in the coaching relationship (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Approach to working with uncertainty</td>
<td>Use of general coaching approach</td>
<td>• (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key strategies for working with uncertainty</td>
<td>• Developing the client’s self-awareness (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Facilitating the client’s shift towards acceptance of uncertainty (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assisting the client to focus on what can be controlled (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Generating actions in the client’s context of uncertainty (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positive identity as a key coaching outcome for clients</td>
<td></td>
<td>• (n=6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table provides the structure for the presentation of the findings.
6.3.1 Category 1: Types of uncertainty emerging in executive coaching

After the initial textual analysis of the coaches' interview transcripts, and review with my peer researcher, we noticed the similarity in types of uncertainty the participants raised with the types of uncertainty experienced by the executive leaders in Phase 1. For this reason, we agreed to apply the same sub-categories and themes identified in Phase 1 to this category of the findings, which proved effective. Table 60 depicts the two sub-categories of the findings for the types of uncertainty which the participants' experienced as surfacing in their executive coaching practice.

Table 60

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Uncertainty emerging in Executive Coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identity uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Anticipatory uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in the leader role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Experienced complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Corporate politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3.1.1 Sub-category: Personal uncertainty

As depicted in Table 60, similar to the executive leaders in Phase 1, two types of personal uncertainty were identified by the executive coaches in their coaching practice.

**Identity uncertainty**

All the participants observed issues of uncertainty being experienced by executive leaders (that is, their clients), mostly triggered by transitions such as promotions, moving into a new organisation or being in an acting role. Although the coaches did not use the term, ‘identity uncertainty’ seemed to be an apt way of describing this type of uncertainty. The reason was that this type of uncertainty appeared to manifest as a result of a devalued sense of personal, role and/or leader identity.

The findings highlight the range of identity uncertainty observed by the different participants in their executive coaching practice, that is, relating to transitions, relating to role and/or leader identity, and relating to personal meaning. In Table 61, more than three participant quotes are given in total, to illustrate the range of identity uncertainty observed in their executive clients.
Table 61
Range of Identity Uncertainty observed in Executive Clients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity uncertainty in relation to:</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Transitions                         | • How do I make my shift from being a – a medical doctor to being in a COO role? That’s where he [client] felt most vulnerable …at the peer level, because he didn’t have any power in the sense of control and ownership …. he wasn’t as confident as he used to be. (C1)  
• He [client] was promoted from an operational role to a consulting strategic role - “Am I still contributing at that level?” …he couldn’t see the direct results of his work. A lot of uncertainty …. self-doubt creeping in…”Can I really do it?”; “Do I have what it takes?” (C6) |
| Role and/or leader identity          | • This CEO I’m working with now is someone who…is tentative - and I think the tentativeness is a sign of uncertainty…. if he’s got to take decisions that…are not going to be popular with others, he’d rather postpone…. And very indecisive and very indirect. He’s realising that it’s started to affect his credibility. (C2)  
• They’re scared [referring to a client who was a new venture team]. “What happens if this business fails?” … they’re not convinced they’re going to get the numbers that are expected… And they don’t know how to do it. They’ve never run businesses before. They’re IT geeks. (C3) |
| Personal meaning                    | • One of the issues that has come up quite a bit… So people [clients] have reached a certain level of success in their career and… they’re starting to relook at, is this really…the way I want to continue with my life? …. to do work that is more significant as opposed to successful? - so that’s created some uncertainty for them…. (C5)  
• The dissonance that he [client] experienced was because of the clash of values, and that sometimes the pain that he experienced was because there was a values clash in terms of certain things that he had to do … (C4) |

The above quotes by C1 and C6 depict identity uncertainty they observed in their executive clients, pertaining to transitions these clients made into new roles. Their clients seemed to experience identity uncertainty as an emotional state, being expressed in emotional terms by coaches C1 and C6, such as vulnerability, decreased confidence and self-doubt. Participants C2 and C3 shared examples of clients who experienced role and/or leader identity. Again, identity uncertainty observed in their clients’ roles, suggests an emotional state, conveyed through the coaches’ words, that is, their clients being tentative and feeling scared.

Turning to personal meaning, C5 and C4 (in Table 61) gave examples of this type of identity uncertainty observed in their clients. C5 had encountered several examples of executive clients reaching a stage of career success, and then experiencing uncertainty as to the significance or meaning of their careers. C4, on the other hand, refers to “pain” felt by a client relating to non-alignment of his personal values with the organisation he worked for. These examples suggest that this type of identity uncertainty was a form of
existential uncertainty, concerned about meaning in the executive clients' career or work, forming a core part of their life.

In sum, participants clearly observed personal uncertainty experienced by their executive clients, mostly in relation to transitions, which seemed to be identity uncertainty. This identity uncertainty manifested as an emotional state encompassing feelings of self-doubt, fear or being unsure. These feelings reflected a sense of devalued personal, role and/or leader identity, accompanied by reduced personal agency. Some participants also identified issues of personal meaning, or existential uncertainty, as being experienced by their executive clients.

**Anticipatory uncertainty**

All the participants observed anticipatory uncertainty being experienced by executive leaders in their coaching practice. This type of personal uncertainty was felt in the present by their clients, as anticipation about possible future events, and the impact of these on themselves. The findings clustered around two themes of anticipatory uncertainty, namely, anticipation of possible job loss and anticipation of the appointment of a new CEO or board of the company. Participant quotes in Table 62 depict these two themes of anticipatory uncertainty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipatory uncertainty</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Job insecurity**       | • So… "What does this mean? Where am I [the client] going? Am I now heading for retirement or …to just be moved out of the operation?" (C6)  
• "What if that happens to me? How prepared am I?"[the client in relation to retrenchments in the organisation] (C1) |
| **Appointment of a new CEO or board** | • But the rest of the team [the client] hasn't been told so they don't know who's coming in … as CEO. They all want coaching right now. Right now - because it's in their face. "Now … my world has hit this space" and the coaching is "How do I deal with what's happening? I can't control it". (C3)  
• The uncertainty about … who will lead me in future - and that is sometimes because of mergers and acquisitions, changes of management, changes of boards that occur and not knowing what will be expected of me, and will I be able to cope, and will I have sustainability of employment. (C4) |

C6 and C1, in Table 61, spoke about executive clients who experienced job insecurity due to re-structuring in their organisations and the possible impact on them. Participants
also mentioned examples of executive clients who experienced uncertainty about the appointment of a new CEO or a new board and the implications thereof. Interestingly, C3’s example captures an intense uncertainty among a team of executives who specifically wanted coaching to deal with this type of uncertainty, which was “in their face”, suggesting it was emphatic and real for them, having heard that a new CEO was going to be appointed shortly, with no control over it.

Taken together, participants observed that executive clients’ experienced anticipatory uncertainty in the form of job insecurity and in relation to the appointment of a new CEO or board. The participants also seemed to convey that executives generally were dealing with more structural changes and turnover at executive level, which increased their uncertainty. The anticipatory uncertainty appeared to manifest in the present as concern or worry in anticipation of a possible future event, which may be a threat to themselves (implying future issues of identity).

Anticipatory uncertainty and identity uncertainty were therefore the key types of personal uncertainty that participants noticed in their executive clients, similar to the executives’ experience in Phase 1. Next, participants’ observations about the type of challenges their clients experienced in their leadership roles during uncertainty will be outlined.

6.3.1.2 Sub-category: Challenges in the leader role
All the participants spoke about challenges which executive leaders experienced in their leader role during times of increasing uncertainty in organisations. Experienced complexity and corporate politics were identified as the key themes across the participants. Although managing other people’s uncertainty was not a prevalent theme, it is worth noting that two participants, C1 and C5, did mention this as a leadership challenge experienced by their clients, because this was a challenge that was experienced by the executive leaders (in Phase 1). The findings for the two key themes are presented.

**Experienced complexity**
All the participants mentioned uncertainty felt by executive leaders that related to an overall sense of experienced complexity in their leader role. This experienced complexity manifested in the felt pressure to deliver, while having increased
organisational changes and needing to deal with many variables and unknowns in their
contexts. Participant quotes in Table 63 depict the experienced complexity noted in their
executive clients.

Table 63

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>…certainly in an executive role …because there's always this pressure…what you can deliver around the results… the role of a leader, and working with people …there are many things that play out… it's dealing with constant changes… [so for executives] “that's where I'm feeling the pressure”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>And so she [the client] went out there [into Africa] knowing this – exactly what they needed to do - and then found that Africa doesn't work like that. They don't have the infrastructure for it to work that way. And her boss said this is stuff that she should just be dealing with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>So living up to commitments to the board and team in spite of budget constraints and staff turnover, but feeling stressed and a sense of helplessness in terms of achieving this [referring to a client’s experience]…. He [the client] lost his internal compass …almost lost that sense of identity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C1, in the above table, observed in general how executives were feeling constant pressure to deliver, while having to deal with many demands and constant changes in their contexts. On the other hand, C3 and C4 referred to specific examples of executive clients experiencing complexity. C3’s client was required to drive the implementation of business systems in African countries, and then discovered there was no suitable infrastructure in these countries, resulting in experienced complexity. This client’s felt uncertainty was exacerbated by her boss expecting her to be able to deal with this type of “stuff”, suggesting the unknowns and different variables in new contexts. For C4, he observed his client’s stress and helplessness about not being able to meet his commitments, given many challenges and constraints in his context. C4 perceived that his client had also lost his sense of identity as a result of his experienced complexity, implying an inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty.

As part of experienced complexity, the participants also mentioned tensions that their executive clients struggled with, as captured in these two extracts:

“…another level of uncertainty comes with the….the challenge of having, as the executive, to run the business whilst at the same time taking care and making sure that the shareholder interests are also met.” (C2)

“So there is uncertainty, how do I get the best out of my people - and still hold them accountable? …that does seem to be a battle sometimes.” (C6)
The above extracts depict the experienced complexity of clients in finding ways to manage certain tensions or paradoxes in their leadership roles. C1 refers to executives needing to manage the paradox of running the business and meeting the shareholders’ expectations. C6 highlighted the “battle” executives have in bringing the best out in their people, while needing to hold their people accountable. The word “battle” conveys a sense of challenge and difficulty in managing this tension.

Taken together, the participants clearly noticed felt uncertainty in their executive clients as a result of experienced complexity, including leadership paradoxes, in having to deal with many variables and changes. The experienced complexity manifested in feelings of stress, pressure and even helplessness, thus, portraying decreased personal agency at times. C4’s perception of a loss of sense of identity in his client, suggests an inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty, also evidenced in the executive leaders’ lived experience in Phase 1 of the present study.

Corporate politics
Participants spoke about the corporate politics that executives faced, particularly within their own executive teams due to increasing competitiveness. These politics are illustrated by participants’ quotes in Table 64.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>… you find that there is a great, negative impact on the relationships amongst the members of EXCO. …it’s like the executives are looking at outshining each other … its power issues, power plays … and perpetuates insecurity, doubt… Then also one issue [referring to a specific client] was the issue of managing stakeholder relations…how to work diplomatically with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>…I’m seeing the sense of competitiveness actually increasing….“who do I trust in the role …that I’m playing in?” [referring to his clients’ experience] And… that comes from a competitive environment. It certainly feeds it [their uncertainty]. It feeds it … because it’s – it’s a lonely environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>There was another guy who … who actually… almost utilised the opportunity a lot more effectively than her. So she [the client] would do all the groundwork to present at EXCO and he would pick it up and kind-of work with it at EXCO… So he got… a lot more mileage out of that than what she got. She was feeling somewhat disenchanted …she did the work but wasn’t really getting the recognition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although participants did not refer to this type of leadership challenge observed in their clients as ‘corporate politics’, it was clearly implied, as illustrated by the quotes above. C2 used the terms “power plays” and “power issues” to describe the politics experienced among executives, as a result of competitiveness, which fostered insecurity and doubt,
suggesting felt uncertainty. C1’s extract in Table 64 also inferred that competitiveness led to distrust and uncertainty. For C5, one of his clients felt unrecognised, due to being usurped by the politics played by a peer, alluding to a diminished sense of identity.

Participants therefore observed politics as increasing distrust among peers at executive levels, resulting in felt uncertainty possibly affecting their clients’ sense of identity. C2 also highlighted the issue of executives requiring political skill to deal with key stakeholders. On reflection, I noticed that the executive coaches did not highlight the discomfort and negative perception of politics and political skill, which was emphasised by the executive leaders in Phase 1. The coaches’ focus was more on their clients’ uncertainty resulting from politics.

6.3.1.3 Integrative summary on uncertainty emerging in executive coaching

All participants clearly observed clients’ issues of uncertainty in their executive coaching practice. Similar to the felt uncertainty experienced by the executive leaders in Phase 1, the participants noticed both personal uncertainty and challenges in their clients’ leadership roles during organisational uncertainty.

In terms of personal uncertainty, both identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty were prevalent themes. The identity uncertainty manifested in their executive clients as an emotional state expressed as self-doubt, fear or being unsure, occurring mostly in relation to transitions. Anticipatory uncertainty was also observed in the participants’ clients, about potential job loss and/or the appointment of a new CEO or board. Hence, this type of felt uncertainty was anticipation, in the present, about a possible future event, which was a potential threat to them (implying future issues of identity).

Turning to the challenges in their executive clients’ leader role, the participants perceived experienced complexity and corporate politics as fostering felt uncertainty. Experienced complexity was observed in their clients as pressure, stress and helplessness in dealing with many variables and constant change in their contexts. This experienced complexity included the challenge of managing paradoxes. While corporate politics was observed as increasing the uncertainty felt at executive level among peers, particularly due to increased competitiveness and distrust, the negativity and discomfort of politics and political skill were not emphasised, as in Phase 1. A few examples were
given by participants demonstrating the inter-relationship between their client’s personal uncertainty and the challenges experienced in their leader role. More specifically, experienced complexity and corporate politics seemed to foster identity uncertainty.

In summing up this section, the findings from the executive coaches’ observations of types of uncertainty in their coaching practice appear to support the overall findings from the executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty in Phase 1 of the study. Although managing other peoples’ uncertainty was not a prevalent theme across the executive coaches, it was identified by two of them as a leadership challenge experienced by their clients. Attention now shifts to the findings on how the executive coaches experienced clients’ issues of uncertainty arising during coaching.

6.3.2 Category 2: How issues of uncertainty arise during coaching

The findings in terms of how the participants perceived clients’ issues of uncertainty to arise during executive coaching centred around two key themes: uncertainty emerges during the coaching, and trust facilitates the emergence of uncertainty.

**Uncertainty emerges during the coaching**

A key finding was that participants observed that executive clients’ issues of uncertainty generally did not present as an explicit coaching issue when the coaching commenced. Instead, issues of uncertainty tended to emerge during the coaching process or as the coaching progressed. Table 65 contains examples of participant quotes.

**Table 65**
*How Executive Clients’ Uncertainty emerges in Coaching*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>…most of the time coachees [clients], they come to us, and though we are there to be of service to them … they have to prove to us that they are handling it, they are altogether and everything – “I'm this perfect leader, this perfect executive”. So I listen to what is not said… and then other things now surface [referring to clients’ uncertainty and other issues].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>So there are many things that one needs to be mindful of that plays out, even though it's not accentuated or not spoken about, it's there [referring to clients' uncertainty]. …You [the coach] have to understand and be aware of these dynamics and nuances that play out. …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>…and also they'll [referring to clients] come in and present with whatever the situation is, which isn't always specifically ‘uncertainty’ and it doesn't get stated as that, but it'll come out on reflection and when we, you know, stand back and look at what's going on …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The three participants in the above table all felt that executive clients did not generally present uncertainty as an issue when the coaching commenced. They emphasised that executive clients did not share their uncertainties easily. The reason possibly being, as highlighted by C2, was that executives find it difficult to be vulnerable because they need to maintain the facade of being a perfect leader. Consequently, C2 explained that she listens for “what is not said” by her clients. The implication is that clients’ uncertainty surfaces in their voice tone, body language and/or emotional state - and the coach needs to be mindful of these nuances when working with uncertainty, as stated by C1.

Two specific examples shared by participants, C1 and C6, provide further evidence of this finding:

“…when I met him [the client] the first time I didn't get that impression …So I had this view that here's a really confident individual...However, what came through when we got into more detail…was I could see that he was …really bruised…and he felt insecure …not knowing how to deal with…” (C1)

“…it's interesting because it's not like you would ever say that this guy was unconfident...to start with… And that's why I suppose on the surface level if you looked at this guy you would say “uncertainty?” But actually it is that … It's something that takes… time to come out in the process.” (C6)

These examples referred to clients, who clearly were experiencing personal uncertainty, but initially presented as being confident when the coaching started. The uncertainty actually manifested as decreased confidence or insecurity as the coaching progressed, suggesting that these clients had possibly adopted an initial façade of confidence.

Taken together, the participants clearly suggested that issues of uncertainty were generally not the presenting issues when coaching commenced with an executive client, because executives felt vulnerable to share their personal uncertainty. Some clients even appeared to present a facade of confidence at first. The participants therefore felt that issues of uncertainty tended to emerge during the coaching process, as it progressed. They also implied that, as a coach, one needed to be aware of how uncertainty emerged and to be mindful of this in one’s coaching approach; for example, listening for what was not said by clients. What struck me was that all of the participants seemed to be flexible about their clients’ initial coaching goals or presenting issues, realising that different issues emerge during the coaching as it progresses, with uncertainty being one of these.
**Trust facilitates the emergence of uncertainty**

Participants emphasised the importance of establishing trust in the coaching relationship for executive clients to feel safe in sharing and exploring their issues of uncertainty. Table 66 depicts examples of participant quotes in relation to this theme.

Table 66

*The Importance of Trust for Uncertainty to emerge during Coaching*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>It's that safe space. So if they feel safe and comfortable enough that they're not being judged...then they can open up about their uncertainties. And I think obviously it's about the atmosphere that you create, then they can open up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>...it takes a lot of trust building before they...possibly feel safe enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>And it's only when that relationship of trust gets developed that people [clients] are saying, &quot;You know what, I'm really so vulnerable. I don't know how to deal with this&quot;.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C6, in the above table, spoke about the need to provide a “safe space” for clients to feel comfortable to share their uncertainties, particularly through being non-judgemental as a coach. Both C4 and C1 stressed the building of trust to ensure safety for clients to be able to be vulnerable about their issues of uncertainty. Thus, it is important for coaches to develop a relationship of trust.

In sum, Figure 17 captures how participants perceived their executive clients' uncertainty to arise during coaching.

![Figure 17. The emergence of clients' issues of uncertainty in executive coaching](image)

The above figure indicates that at the start of the coaching process, issues of uncertainty do not generally form part of the executive client’s presenting issues, because they feel vulnerable in sharing these. What happens is that clients’ issues of uncertainty tend to emerge during the coaching process and, importantly, in relation to
the development of trust in the coaching relationship. Developing trust is therefore crucial to provide the safety for clients to express their uncertainty and vulnerability. The findings on the participants’ approach to working with their executive clients’ uncertainty are outlined in next the next section.

6.3.3 Category 3: Approach to working with uncertainty

While the sample included executive coaches with different coach training and theoretical underpinnings to gather rich data, the purpose of the study was not to compare the effectiveness of different coaching processes or models. Rather the intention was to understand ‘how’ the participants worked with issues of uncertainty experienced by their executive clients. Essentially I wanted to identify common themes or factors in the participants’ coaching approach to working with issues of uncertainty (that is, evidenced in at least four of the participants), while noting variation within these.

The participants were therefore asked to describe their coaching approach with reference to one specific example of an executive client’s issue of uncertainty they had worked with. After analysis of the interview data, it transpired that most of the participants’ in-depth examples related to identity uncertainty (a form of personal uncertainty) and experienced complexity (a challenge in their leadership role which fosters felt uncertainty). Consequently, working with the other types of uncertainty identified earlier by the participants; namely, anticipatory uncertainty and the challenge of corporate politics, was not addressed by them. The findings therefore focus primarily on the participants’ coaching approach adopted for identity uncertainty and/or experienced complexity, while acknowledging an inter-relationship between these as mentioned earlier, manifesting in issues of identity and decreased personal agency.

The findings on the participants’ approach to working with executive clients’ issues of uncertainty in their coaching practice were grouped into three sub-categories, as follows:

- Use of general coaching approach.
- Key strategies for working with uncertainty.
- Positive identity as a key coaching outcome for clients.
### 6.3.3.1 Sub-category: Use of general coaching approach

All the participants appeared to use their general coaching approach in working with clients' issues of uncertainty that emerged during coaching. This finding was evidenced in the way the participants described and expressed aspects of their approach to working with uncertainty, illustrated by quotes in Table 67.

**Table 67**  
*Coaching Approach in working with Issues of Uncertainty*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>I think that I can take a whole lot of the courses that I did, but I…combine my knowledge and skills in coaching with my intuitive sense. So… I am a…more of an intuitive coach um in terms of what I do… So my approach in my coaching is very much to work with a person on the ‘being’ level…. So that’s my starting point, understand yourself… and I think that is my general style …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>…I believe that the right thing is to…get all the outcomes [required from the coaching]. And then I, as a coach, I need to unpack what that means. I’ll coach to the underlying pieces … to the deeper levels which touch on the uncertainty - to purpose, to identity or their ‘being’ …. [Using] my favourite process, which goes to meaning and purpose - which is ‘logical levels’ [a neuro-semantics model]. And I do it in almost every coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>I work eclectically … It probably depends a lot on what the client presents and what the client brings, but I prefer a – a cognitive approach … and raising an awareness for them. …but that’s one of the things that are important for me [referring to Covey’s circle of influence &amp; circle of concern].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>I’m a gut person. I rely so much on my gut. …Because I think for me with a mindfulness approach … its [about] raising awareness…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken together, the extracts in Table 67 capture participants’ emphasis on raising self-awareness (C2 and C4) or focusing on the client’s ‘being’ (C6 and C3) as a key part of their general coaching approach. They also appeared to be eclectic in their general coaching approach, which was stated explicitly or clearly implied, and therefore used their general approach in working with clients’ uncertainty. For example, while C6 spoke about working more intuitively, she did explicitly refer to using her “general style” of first focusing on the ‘being’ of her clients, which she also did when working with clients' uncertainty. Hence, in dealing with issues of uncertainty, an eclectic coaching approach seemed to afford participants a repertoire to draw from, while showing preferences for certain techniques, based on their different training. As such, C3 used her “favourite process” and C4 acknowledged his preference for a cognitive approach in his coaching.

Although participants described their coaching approach in working with uncertainty, I had a distinct impression that most of them were making sense, during their interviews, of how they actually worked with uncertainty. This sensemaking was acknowledged by some of the participants during the closing question in their interviews, as shown in
Table 68. The closing question asked them to reflect on the content of their interview, on what was striking to them about working with uncertainty and/or of value to them.

Table 68
Acknowledgement of Making Sense of their Approach to Uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>I think, you know, your questions have really helped me to … to sort-of put my approach into a – a perspective because, you know, thinking about it [working with uncertainty] and all that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>And um I just thought it was interesting to reflect on – you know, so how – how do I work with that [uncertainty] and what is sort-of specific to my coaching style?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>So in thinking about this session and trying to prepare for it, I eventually got to the point that I wasn't going to because I…couldn't unpack it myself. So the value for me … is unpacking my thinking of it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As reflected in the above table, participants suggested that the interview questions assisted them to think about, reflect on and unpack their coaching approach in working with clients’ issues of uncertainty. Thus the implication seemed to be that uncertainty was not an explicit focus of their coaching, but was rather viewed as being implicit within their coaching approach. They therefore tended to work eclectically or intuitively with uncertainty when it emerged, using their general coaching approach.

However, a noteworthy contrast was C5, who had much experience in coaching on change, renewal and transition, as captured in this extract:

“So quite a bit of the work that I do, has to do specifically with uh change, renewal - but also this idea of going through some kind of a transition.” (C5)

Moreover, C5 articulated an overall rationale for his coaching approach in working with his clients’ uncertainty (related to transitions) early in the interview, suggesting that he did not really have to make sense of it during the interview. This is how C5 described his approach before being prompted to describe an in-depth coaching example:

“So often what I found happens is that the clients have…had a certain idea of what reality looked like for them. And then because there's been a change in their context or there have been some internal changes for them - that map, as it were of reality, no longer looks exactly the same. So part of the process that I use then …to help them to understand – I take them through … three broad, sort-of phased steps.”

In addition, C5 had developed some specific models and tools in relation to transition and uncertainty, forming part of his general coaching approach and repertoire, for example:
“Then I also use um something else called the transition curve …I've almost adapted that and developed that even further, and take him [the client] through a process that I call 'framing transition' [which he described in-depth].”

In sum, the participants tended to use their general coaching approach in working with their executive clients’ issues of uncertainty when they emerged. Although the participants seemed to be eclectic or intuitive in their approach, many referenced their preferences for certain approaches and techniques, and also used these in working with uncertainty. Most participants seemed to be making sense of their approach to working with uncertainty during their interviews, which was acknowledged by several of them, suggesting that it was not an explicit or intentional focus of their coaching. In contrast, one participant (C5) had a general coaching approach which was specifically adapted to working with uncertainty because his coaching niche focused more on transitions and renewal. This participant was therefore able to articulate his coaching approach clearly from the outset of the interview.

6.3.3.2 Sub-category: Key strategies for working with uncertainty

Although the participants had different coach training and educational backgrounds, the findings suggest that there were common key strategies used by most of them for working with issues of uncertainty, namely:

- Developing the client’s self-awareness;
- Facilitating the client’s shift towards acceptance of uncertainty;
- Assisting the client to focus on what can be controlled; and
- Generating actions in the client’s context of uncertainty.

The findings on each of these strategies are presented, with emphasis on the participants’ approach to and rationale for using these strategies. As mentioned earlier, these strategies formed part of the participants’ coaching approach adopted for identity uncertainty and/or experienced complexity, as these were the types of uncertainty their selected coaching examples focused on.

**Developing the client’s self-awareness**

All the participants emphasised the importance of developing self-awareness in working with issues of uncertainty. They spoke about working on the beliefs, values and ‘being’
dimensions of their clients first, before moving on to the ‘doing’, that is, making choices, changing behaviours and other actions. Although most participants mentioned the general use of assessments and/or 360 degree feedback to develop self-awareness in their coaching practice, these findings focus on developing self-awareness in relation to their clients’ issues of uncertainty. Examples of participants’ approaches to developing self-awareness in relation to uncertainty and their rationale are given in Table 69.

Table 69
Approaches to and Rationale for developing Client Self-awareness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Approach to developing self-awareness</th>
<th>Rationale for approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>So we worked initially with …self-awareness…. And from there I went into … my favourite process, which goes to meaning and purpose - which is ‘logical levels’… because it goes into discovering what my real purpose in life is… what my purpose is and therefore my identity.. or my ‘being’… which leads to the ‘doing’.</td>
<td>It goes to, if I know who I am and – then being in uncertainty is so much less scary… So if I know what my purpose is and therefore who I am, … I’d know then that I can only control what I can control.. It is grounding … So for me it starts opening up the options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>My approach …is very much to work with a person on the ‘being’ level. What are my beliefs about myself? …. What do I need to look at in order to change that? What do I need to value about myself? … Then I’ll feedback some of the stuff I’m hearing - what’s not being said.</td>
<td>It’s – the – the anchor for dealing with that [uncertainty], is examining the person’s value system and beliefs about themselves. And when you’ve worked with that then you can … so what are the behaviours, what are the actions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>So it’s really around – ‘how am I showing up in the workplace…?’ So … one could explore with him [the client] and also to get feedback from his colleagues. .. we would listen to recordings of meetings that he would go to … [and consider] - how other people understand you?</td>
<td>It’s…important to be able to say that if you are in a leadership role, you must be comfortable with who you are, to be able to deal with all the other dynamics. So by creating this kind of awareness …for him [the client] to say, ”How do I start to engage? How do I need to relate?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quotes in the left-hand column in Table 69 demonstrate the range of approaches adopted in developing self-awareness, with their rationale in the right-hand column. C3 and C6, focused more on self-awareness of the client in terms of who the client is as a person. C3 took her client through a particular process to facilitate discovery of the client’s purpose and meaning, to create a sense of “who I am”, which the coach referred to as the identity or ‘being’ of the client. This process assisted in grounding the client in her context of uncertainty. C6 also focused on the ‘being’ of her clients, with an exploration of her clients’ beliefs and values, as these provide an anchor for the client to deal with uncertainty. In contrast, C1 emphasised developing his client’s awareness of “how he showed up” in his context through collecting feedback from his client’s colleagues and recording himself in meetings to listen to how he came across with his
peers. C1’s rationale focused on self-awareness within the client’s context, with emphasis on appreciating the dynamics in his context as a basis for making changes.

In sum, the focus on the ‘being’ of clients, by developing their self-awareness, formed a key part of the participants’ general coaching approach. In working with uncertainty, participants emphasised the importance of self-awareness. Most participants focused on self-awareness of who the client was as a person (their awareness of their values, purpose and beliefs) to foster the grounding or anchoring of their clients. This self-awareness or ‘being’ therefore provided an internal compass for guiding the clients’ choices and actions (or their ‘doing’) in their contexts of uncertainty. Furthermore, part of developing self-awareness was related to surfacing clients’ limiting beliefs, and then challenging these to enable them to move forward. On the other hand, one coach (C1) focused on both self-awareness and awareness of the client’s context. What was common across the participants’ rationale for focusing on self-awareness, and evidenced in the phrases in bold in the left-hand column of Table 69, was that increased self-awareness stimulated the client’s consideration of options for moving forward in relation to their issue of uncertainty.

**Facilitating the client’s shift towards acceptance of uncertainty**

Most of the participants stressed the need for shifting the executive clients towards acceptance of uncertainty or facing up to the reality of their context of uncertainty, given the pervasive nature and dynamics of uncertainty, as reflected in Table 70.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>…then teaching life is like this pendulum - at times we relax, at times we're uncertain , … but how do we become comfortable with both those states... So, for me that's the key in my coaching to managing…. the uncertainties. … And knowing that … there's this kind-of oscillation between their uncertainty and things becoming again more normal … It's managing that pendulum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>For me, personally, in terms of dealing with uncertainty is – is becoming comfortable with it. Ja. The way that the world of work has unfolded, the way life has unfolded, there is lots of uncertainty. So … to work on this continuum…. to realise that today is going to be up, tomorrow it's going to be down….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>So what we did was we used that process [framing transition] then. We looked at … what is it that she [the client]feels she needs to leave or to let go of? And so … things that she needed to leave were things like her expectations of what they said she would be getting in the organisation … Facing up to the reality … that her environment is very different to what she'd been expecting. There is a point where - where they start to accept their new reality - and that's a wonderful time then in terms of energy to start saying, &quot;…what are some of the steps for me in terms of moving forward?&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both C2 and C1 in the above table referred clearly to the pervasiveness of uncertainty and its dynamic nature. While C2 used the metaphor of the pendulum to describe the flux of uncertainty and certainty, and spoke about teaching this to her clients, it was not clear as to how she facilitated her clients shift towards acceptance of uncertainty. Likewise, C1 mentioned working on the continuum of uncertainty and certainty for clients to realise the dynamic nature of uncertainty, with the purpose of his clients becoming more accepting of the nature of uncertainty. However, he was also not explicit in how he approached this in his coaching.

On the other hand, C5 (as depicted in Table 70) was explicit in how he worked with a particular client to face up to the reality of her specific context of uncertainty. After his client joined the company, and some time had passed, she was unsure as to whether she wanted to stay or leave. C5 used his framing transition process to help his client interpret her reality differently, asking her to consider what she needed to let go of in terms of her expectations of the organisation. She then reached a point where she accepted her new uncertain reality. C5 also observed that reaching this point of acceptance tended to energise his clients to consider options for moving forward. Of note, C5 is the executive coach who had developed models and techniques within his general coaching approach for working specifically with transition and change. His experience in working with issues of uncertainty related to transition and change reflected in the explicit account of his coaching approach.

Taken together, the participants appreciated the pervasiveness of and dynamic nature of uncertainty. For this reason, they focused on shifting their executive clients towards an acceptance of uncertainty. However, the approach in how the participants did this was not explicit, although C2 mentioned teaching this through the use of a metaphor. One participant was explicit in how he worked with his client to interpret her reality differently, leading to acceptance of her uncertain context, and how that point of acceptance then led to the client generating options for moving forward.

**Assisting the client to focus on what can be controlled**
Participants used the approach of assisting executive clients to focus on what could be controlled, when their uncertainty was experienced complexity; that is, when clients experienced feeling out of control or overwhelmed in having to deal with many variables...
in their context. Essentially, as reflected in Table 71, the participants encouraged their clients to focus on what they could control, influence or do.

Table 71
Assisting Clients to Focus on what can be controlled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>You know, there are certain things externally that I can't control. ... Those are – those are things that we can talk about, but in essence I have to come back to say, &quot;So who am I leading? What role am I playing? Where can I influence? Where can I make a contribution?&quot; [approach with a client] ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>[Her client’s initial approach in terms of putting systems in Africa]... &quot;But I just want to go and tell people how to do it&quot;. And so it was unpacking [the client’s focus] - “This is just not going to work here. The systems that you’ve got to have [in Africa]... just can't work here right now&quot; - [and shifting the client towards] and so “what can we do to put the pieces in that we need to put in?”. And that's why I keep going back into - what can you control and what can't you control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>...that sense of helplessness played out in a big way [referring to a client]. ...my sense was ...that the external locus of control was very strong....I think he’s almost lost that sense of identity because of...uncertainty. My focus was first of all to get him back to his internal compass, to look at his identity, his own personal values...because he was focussed on things that he couldn't do...we started looking at the things that he could do...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All three of the above participants referred to their executive clients’ uncertainty (or experienced complexity) as being based on focusing on what they could not control, thereby exacerbating their felt uncertainty. The coaching approach in all three cases therefore shifted their clients’ focus to what they could control. C1 spoke about focusing his client on what he could influence, or where he could make a contribution as a leader. C3 also focused her client towards what could be done in her context of experienced complexity to enable her to move forward.

In the case of C4, he perceived that his client had lost his internal compass and his sense of identity. He therefore first helped his client to rediscover his internal compass by focusing on his client’s identity and values. This approach thus related to developing his client’s self-awareness, which all participants identified earlier as crucial in working with uncertainty. Thereafter, C4 assisted his client to focus on what he could control in his context of uncertainty. Of note, this example clearly illustrated the inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty, that is, how the experienced complexity resulted in a diminished sense of identity, which in turn affected the client’s sense of agency (resulting in feeling helplessness).

In sum, when participants were working with executive clients’ uncertainty, rooted in experienced complexity, they emphasised shifting their clients’ focus to what they could
control, which resulted in increasing their clients’ sense of agency. One participant (C4) depicted the inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty. In this instance, C4 focused on strengthening his client’s sense of identity, in terms of his internal compass (values), before focusing his client on what he could do within his context of complexity.

**Generating actions in the clients’ context of uncertainty**

The above three strategies adopted by the participants (that is, developing self-awareness, fostering acceptance of uncertainty and focusing on what can be controlled) all appeared to result in opening up options, or energising the client to generate options for moving forward in relation to their issue of uncertainty and/or their context of uncertainty, as shown in Figure 18.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 18. Key coaching strategies for working with issues of uncertainty**

The above figure depicts the three key strategies the participants adopted in working with executive clients’ issues of uncertainty. The fourth key strategy, generating actions in the client’s context, was energised or promoted by some or all of the previous three strategies, as illustrated. This section presents the findings on the executive clients’ generation of actions and changes, even experimentation, to move forward. Table 72 contains participant quotes capturing a range of the actions generated by the participants’ executive clients.
For C3 and C2 (above), their clients implemented a more facilitative or consultative leadership approach to obtain others’ input and buy-in to decision-making. C4 stressed the value of assisting clients to take action when experiencing uncertainty, as it built a sense of agency by being able to do something. He gave examples of how his client adopted more assertive behaviours (for example, saying no and negotiating his deliverables) in dealing with his boss. However, in the case of C1, he was more explicit in how he focused on supporting his client in relating to and working with his peers. His client’s actions were based on adopting an experimental approach and reviewing his progress in the coaching, followed by further adjustments. Some of the behaviours his client experimented with were listening skills and interactive skills.

Taken together, the clients’ actions generated in their context of uncertainty seemed to assist them in moving forward, giving them a sense of agency, which helped to reduce their felt uncertainty. Of note, most of the actions or skills being implemented, or experimented with by the clients, appeared to relate to leadership and/or interpersonal approaches or skills. These actions therefore seemed to support the identity development of their clients, even though the participants did not refer to it as such.

6.3.4 Category 4: Positive identity as a key coaching outcome for clients

The participants were asked what progress or changes their executive clients had made in relation to their issues of uncertainty, as a result of the coaching. Participants focused on the in-depth client examples they used for describing their coaching approach for
working with issues of uncertainty. Besides two participants (C2 and C5) noticing more of an acceptance of uncertainty in their clients, and one participant (C3) emphasising an increase in her client’s flexibility, the prevalent outcome observed across the participants was a shift in their clients’ sense of personal, role and/or leader identity, as illustrated by quotes in Table 73. I termed this shift in sense of identity as positive identity. However, I was puzzled that more participants did not mention increased acceptance of uncertainty as an outcome, because most participants spoke about shifting their clients towards acceptance of uncertainty, as a key component of their coaching approach.

Table 73
Positive Identity as a Key Coaching Outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>…he [the client] walked with a real different purpose, his language changed, his kind-of outlook changed, the way that he came across, you know, it ...showed that he was getting back some of the power that he felt that he was losing. But for him, the positiveness was that there was some positive feedback [from his peers – which was gathered by the participant]. &quot;That I'm doing something right and people are noticing it.&quot; - [in relation to] the way he engages, the questions that he's asking ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>…he's [the client] feeling that he has at least some control, even if at least it’s about who he is, and what he's presenting as a senior leader or as an executive to his team. Further, what he's presenting ... with greater integrity and with greater assertiveness when he talks to the board. ...he could actually take on the CEO...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>… for sure he – he [the client] just became a lot more confident and – and accepting of who he is and what his contribution is. And that level of just letting go some of that noise of &quot;Am I contributing?... Am I achieving?&quot; ... enabled him to just fly [in his role] ...and be recognised for it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quotes in the above table reflect the personal growth of the participants’ clients in relation to their issues of uncertainty they had experienced. Although the participants did not use the term ‘positive identity’, their quotes suggest that this was the key outcome for their clients, which was similar to the executive leaders’ findings in Phase 1. In the case of C1, he observed increased confidence in his client’s posture and way of engaging with others, coupled with regaining his power. Importantly, feedback gathered from the client’s peers by C1, was positive, thereby enhancing the client’s sense of role and leader identity with his peers. For C4, his client felt more in control and clearly showed a positive shift in his personal and leader identity, captured in his statement: “who he is, what he's presenting as a senior leader or as an executive to his team”. C6’s client became more accepting of the contribution he could make in his role, giving him an increased personal agency to deliver in his role. His developed positive identity was also reflected in increased confidence and recognition that he received from others.
In sum, participants observed an increase in confidence and in the personal agency of their clients, reflecting a sense of positive identity. In many cases, the sense of positive identity related to a combination of personal, role and/or leader identity. Participants also emphasised the role of positive feedback and recognition from key stakeholders in facilitating their clients’ sense of positive identity within their contexts, implying a social aspect of identity development. However, most coaches did not emphasise or make explicit the social aspect of identity development when describing their coaching approach in working with executives’ uncertainty, yet a social aspect of identity development seemed to be implicit in the type of actions generated for their clients.

6.3.5 Integration of the findings for research objective 3

The executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty is summarised in Figure 19.

![Figure 19. Integration of coaches’ experience in working with uncertainty](image)

As illustrated above, all participants observed issues of uncertainty experienced by their executive clients as an emotional state. While identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty appeared to be prevalent types of personal uncertainty, their clients also seemed to experience challenges in their leader role which added to their felt uncertainty; namely, experienced complexity and politics. Participants suggested that
these issues of uncertainty did not generally form part of the executive clients’ presenting issues at the start of the coaching process, because their clients tend to feel vulnerable in sharing these. Rather the client’s issues of uncertainty emerged during the coaching process in relation to the development of trust in the coaching relationship, as illustrated above. Hence participants viewed the development of trust as crucial.

In describing their approach to working with clients’ uncertainty, the participants chose examples that referred to identity uncertainty and/or experienced complexity, and the inter-relationship between these. Once their clients’ issues of uncertainty emerged, the participants used their general coaching approach in working with their clients’ uncertainty. While the participants used an eclectic or intuitive approach, many referred to preferred approaches and techniques, which they also used in working with their clients’ uncertainty. Interestingly, most participants appeared to be making sense of their approach to working with uncertainty during their interviews, acknowledged by several of them, thereby implying that this was not an explicit focus of their coaching, with one exception. One participant, who had focused on transitions as his coaching niche, articulated his approach to working with uncertainty clearly with the inclusion of specific models and tools in his repertoire for working with uncertainty.

Although the participants had different coach training backgrounds, the findings suggest that there were four common key strategies used by most of them for working with their clients’ uncertainty, as shown in Figure 19. These strategies were developing the client’s self-awareness, facilitating the client’s shift towards acceptance of uncertainty and assisting the client to focus on what could be controlled, all of which contributed to the fourth strategy of generating actions for the client to move forward. While the participants were explicit in how and why they developed self-awareness (with emphasis on the ‘being’ of the client - who I am, purpose and values) and how they assisted their clients’ with developing focus, most were not explicit in how they facilitated their clients’ acceptance of uncertainty. In terms of observed changes in their clients, most reported increased confidence and personal agency, reflecting a sense of positive identity. This positive identity was enhanced by recognition and positive feedback from stakeholders in the clients’ contexts, implying a social aspect of identity development, which was not explicitly acknowledged by the participants in their coaching approach.
6.4 Findings for research objective 4

The findings in this section address the following research objective:

**Research objective 4: To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’**

During the interviews, the participants were asked to give their view on a ‘capability for uncertainty’ in executive leaders, with emphasis on what they thought the indicators of such a capability were. Most participants also shared some reflections on the implications for executive coaching in developing a capability for uncertainty. Table 74 depicts the categories and key themes of the findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Key Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Indicators of a capability for uncertainty | - Openness to different perspectives  
- Sense of positive identity (self-awareness and self-confidence)  
- Acceptance of uncertainty  
- A learning orientation |
| 2. Implications for executive coaching | - Developing capability for uncertainty  
- Coaches’ orientation to uncertainty |

The above table provides the structure for presenting these findings.

6.4.1 Category 1: Indicators of a capability for uncertainty

Table 75 contains the range of indicators of a capability for uncertainty that were identified by the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An openness to different perspectives</td>
<td>All 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of positive identity (self-awareness and self-confidence)</td>
<td>All 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An acceptance of uncertainty</td>
<td>All 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A learning orientation</td>
<td>3 (C1, C2 &amp; C4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal abilities</td>
<td>2 (C1 &amp; C2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk-taking</td>
<td>2 (C3 &amp; C4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism and resilience</td>
<td>2 (C1 &amp; C4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom and intuition</td>
<td>1 (C3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As depicted above, the findings will focus on the most prevalent indicators identified across all six of the participants and the next prevalent theme, identified by three participants, as follows:

- An openness to different perspectives.
- A sense of positive identity (self-awareness and self-confidence).
- An acceptance of uncertainty.
- A learning orientation.

An openness to different perspectives

Participants viewed an openness to different perspectives as a key indicator of a capability for uncertainty, as captured in examples of quotes in Table 76.

Table 76
An Openness to Different Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>You need to be open…be able to – to look at different views and different perspectives. Being flexible, looking at possibilities, exploring differently…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>An openness … that ‘ability to deal with difference’ - that … my world doesn't have to look the same today as it did yesterday … I think it’s a diversity in thinking…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>You know, that ability to …have different perspectives on where they are. I think that ability to – to change perspectives and accept that there are many perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>…the first thing that comes to my mind is… flexibility and openness. So it really is about just being open to possibilities, open to …new ways of thinking,…being willing to adjust your views</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above extracts indicate that participants saw an openness to different views, perspectives and possibilities as important for a capability for uncertainty in executive leaders. Furthermore, this openness was linked with needing to have the flexibility to change or adjust their views or perspectives.

A sense of positive identity (self-awareness and self-confidence)

While some participants suggested that a key indicator of a capability for uncertainty would be self-awareness, others emphasised self-confidence. Table 77 depicts examples of quotes pertaining to self-awareness and self-confidence, which together seemed to convey a sense of positive identity for me.
The above extracts depict a focus on self-awareness, which participants tended to refer to as executive clients needing to know who they are and to have a sense of their beliefs, values and purpose. Participants suggested that self-awareness generates self-confidence or comfort in dealing with uncertainty. Thus, taken together, the participants’ meaning of self-awareness and self-confidence suggested that it was a sense of positive identity that would be important for executive leaders. It seemed to me that participants’ notion of identity appeared to focus more on personal identity (who I am), while other aspects of identity, such as leader and social identity, were not emphasised. Two participants (see Table 75) did, however, suggest that interpersonal abilities are crucial for a capability for uncertainty, which implies consideration of the social and relationship aspects of leadership.

An acceptance of uncertainty

Participants viewed an acceptance of uncertainty as a key indicator of a capability for uncertainty in executive leaders, as reflected in the examples of quotes in Table 78.
The above participant quotes articulated that an acceptance of uncertainty as part of an executive leader’s worldview would be an important indicator of a capability for uncertainty – and their reasons. C5 pointed out that an acceptance of “the reality of uncertainty” in one’s context is crucial as a springboard for generating options for moving forward. C3 and C6 emphasised that an acceptance of uncertainty would foster an acceptance of not having to know, or having to be in control of everything.

While most participants indicated that their coaching approach on issues of uncertainty included shifting their clients’ towards acceptance of uncertainty, most were not explicit in how they approached this, as mentioned above. Moreover, only two participants highlighted observing acceptance of uncertainty as an outcome of their coaching (in relation to their specific examples), yet all participants stressed an acceptance of uncertainty as a key indicator of a capability for uncertainty. A possible reason for these discrepancies in the findings may be that the focus of the research interview, in making sense of how the participants worked with clients’ uncertainty, made them more aware of the pervasiveness of uncertainty as an issue for executive clients, which was acknowledged by some of them below in section 6.4.2.

A learning orientation

A learning orientation was identified by three participants as an indicator of a capability for uncertainty. Being a small sample, I decided to include this indicator in the findings to add more breadth to the range of views on what was considered crucial for a capability for uncertainty in executive leaders. Table 79 contains quotes from the three participants who perceived a learning orientation as a key indicator.

Table 79
A Learning Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>...It's – it's also ..., you know, a learning agility fuelled by curiosity almost to say &quot;... I've fallen hard, I'm thinking about it&quot;. And it's ...like people ... can go through Kolb's cycle [experiential learning cycle] for themselves and – and be active learners in terms of saying... &quot;I'm going to learn from the experience, I'm going to do it differently...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>This one [a capability for uncertainty] becomes a lifelong kind of capability that you strengthen...It is a mental muscle that you train and there is no coming to an end. You have to.... it – it's part of being experiential about things ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>You need to be open to be a learner ... to be reflective and question...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both C4 and C2 above, pointed to the importance of experiential learning as part of a learning orientation. C4 placed emphasis on executives being active learners, suggesting that this would mean executives would be able to move through the Kolb experiential learning cycle themselves, to be able to do things differently. From my own understanding of the Kolb experiential learning cycle, this implies that executives would be able to step back from their experience, reflect on their learning and then apply the lessons learned going forward. C2 viewed a capability for uncertainty as a lifelong capability, “a mental muscle”, needing to be developed through life. Her metaphor suggests that one’s mental frames need to be actively developed through life, requiring executives to be experiential, implying an intent and ability to learn from experience. For C1, he emphasised that executives need to be reflective. Thus, all three participants perceived a learning orientation to include the ability to think about or reflect on one’s experience and to apply that learning going forward in their context.

In summing up this section, four prevalent indicators of a capability for uncertainty in executive leaders were identified as crucial by the participants. These were an openness to different perspectives, a sense of positive identity, an acceptance of uncertainty and a learning orientation. Next, participants’ key reflections on the implications for developing such a capability for uncertainty are discussed.

6.4.2 Category 2: Implications for executive coaching

Participants were asked to reflect on the content of their interview as to what was striking to them, in relation to working with clients’ uncertainty, and the concept of developing a capability for uncertainty. While there were no prevalent themes across all participants, certain themes are highlighted with implications for executive coaching.

Firstly, some participants reflected on the pervasiveness of uncertainty, as follows:

“I think actually what really stands out is the level of personal uncertainty that actually needs to …. be paid attention to. …And to actually realise – because for me uncertainty was a word – but it's very much there.” (C6)

“I think …something we've got to face up to is that there's a lot more of it [uncertainty] than what we'd like to initially accept. I have not found one individual that doesn't live with uncertainty… so it exists … I think we as coaches need to be quite aware of that and understand that it does impact the way people navigate their journey.” (C5)
What stood out for C6 and C5 above was the extent of uncertainty that clients are living with, and the need for executive coaches to be cognisant of the likelihood that clients’ experienced uncertainty will manifest or emerge within their coaching practice.

Other reflections of participants, in Table 80, related to implications for the development of capability for uncertainty and implications for executive coaches in working with clients’ uncertainty.

Table 80
Implications for Executive Coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implications for executive coaching</th>
<th>Participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaches’ orientation to uncertainty</td>
<td>And so I think we as coaches need to realise that… we’ve got to look at our relationship with uncertainty and how do we work with uncertainty. And be careful also not to just assume or dump onto the client that that's the way they will work with uncertainty, because they may not work with it at all like that. (C5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>… best ‘we’ can do uncertainty … That ‘we’ as coaches can do uncertainty. (C3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing capability for uncertainty</td>
<td>…It's [capability for uncertainty] such a wonderful concept because it is so real. It is for me…. and I think it's a concept that coaches should be taking out [there]. It should be part of every coaching programme … (C3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>…it's an acceptance of uncertainty … and – and that you can help clients to take on that perspective… if one can coach people to – to understand that - that I'm at the helm of my life, I've got the compass here that guides me, I can set the sails, I can change the rudder, even if the winds blow me in – in uncertain directions. And that's for me the metaphor that – that I'd like to coach leaders to. (C4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In relation to executive coaches’ orientation to uncertainty, C5 and C3, in the above table, stressed the need for coaches to be comfortable with uncertainty, in order to work effectively with their clients’ uncertainty. This was captured by C3 who argued that coaches need to be able to “do” uncertainty. C5, on the other hand, spoke about coaches needing to understand their relationship or orientation to uncertainty, while being careful not to impose it on their clients.

C3 and C4, in Table 80, emphasised the need for coaches to focus on developing capability for uncertainty. C3 found the concept of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ valuable, expressing the view that coaches should be working with it in their coaching practices to support the development of their clients’ capability for uncertainty. Likewise, C4 pointed to the role of coaches in helping clients to develop an acceptance of uncertainty, seemingly a crucial component of a capability for uncertainty. He also offered his view...
on how he might approach this with his clients, through the use of a nautical metaphor, which he described in Table 80. In particular, this metaphor suggests the importance of executive clients needing to steer their lives, while accepting that there would be periods of uncertainty, when they should use their internal compass (purpose and personal values) as a guide for making choices and taking actions. Focusing on one’s internal compass to engage with uncertainty was emphasised earlier by all the participants as being important when working with clients’ experienced uncertainty.

I was surprised that more coaches did not state the need to explicitly or intentionally develop executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty. On reflection, this may be due to the strong notion in the coaching profession that coaching must be aligned with and serve the clients’ agenda. I sense that coaches in general have difficulty with the idea of having their own purposes or intentions in their coaching, yet I believe that as coaches we need to consider how to add value to our organisational clients in these increasingly turbulent times. This is my personal view, which informs my interpretation of the findings and the development of the coaching framework for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (a key objective of this study addressed in chapter 8).

Taken together, the participants’ reflections, on the content and subject of their interviews, seemed to increase some participants’ awareness of the pervasiveness of uncertainty in their executive clients’ contexts, therefore acknowledging that clients’ uncertainty would likely emerge in their coaching practice. Certain participants also emphasised that coaches need to be comfortable with uncertainty and aware of their own orientation to uncertainty when working with clients’ experienced uncertainty. However, only a few participants highlighted the need for coaches to focus more explicitly on developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty.

6.4.3 Integration of findings for research objective 4

The executive coaches’ views on what a capability for uncertainty in executive leaders is, was reflected in four prevalent indicators, as follows:

- An openness to different perspectives.
- A sense of identity, reflected in increased confidence and self-awareness relating to personal identity.
• An acceptance of uncertainty.
• A learning orientation, which relates to the ability to learn from experience and to apply it going forward.

In their reflections on working with uncertainty and on the concept of a capability for uncertainty, the following implications (although these were not prevalent themes) for executive coaches were highlighted:
• To be more aware of the pervasiveness of uncertainty in their executive clients’ contexts and the likelihood of clients’ uncertainty emerging in their coaching practice.
• To be comfortable with uncertainty and aware of their personal orientation to uncertainty when working with clients’ experienced uncertainty.
• To focus more explicitly on developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty.

6.5 Conclusion
This chapter presented the findings for Phase 2 (executive coaches) to address research objectives 3 and 4.

The overall finding for research objective 3, was that executive coaches used their general coaching approach (being mostly eclectic) to work with their clients’ issues of uncertainty which tended to emerge during the coaching, rather than being presenting issues when the coaching commenced. The coaches, except for one, seemed to be making sense of their approach to working with clients’ uncertainty, implying this was not an explicit focus of their coaching. The findings did highlight the importance of trust in enabling their clients to share their uncertainties – and identified common strategies adopted by the coaches in working with their clients’ uncertainty. A sense of positive identity was a prevalent outcome of the coaching observed by the coaches.

For research objective 4, the overall finding was that the executive coaches identified four prevalent indicators of a capability for uncertainty. Some coaches acknowledged that, given the pervasiveness of uncertainty in their executive clients’ contexts, there is a need to focus more explicitly on developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty.

The next chapter focuses on a discussion of the key findings for Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches).
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters, the findings of Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches) were presented by giving an interpretive account, which stayed close to the participants’ experiences, aligned with the approach of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to further interpret the key findings in relation to the literature. The aims of the study were, firstly, to understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty, and what capability for uncertainty they develop through their lived experience (Phase 1); and secondly, to understand how executive coaches work with executive leaders’ (or executive clients’) uncertainty, and their views on what a capability for uncertainty is (Phase 2). The final objective was to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty (Phase 3), to be informed by the findings from Phases 1 and 2.

The discussion in this chapter therefore focuses on the findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders), to be followed by Phase 2 (executive coaches). The implications of the findings for executive coaching practice, towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, will be highlighted as these inform the production of the proposed coaching framework and guidelines (Phase 3) to be addressed in the next chapter.

7.2 Executive leaders’ experience of and approach to uncertainty

The discussion in this section relates to the following research objective in Phase 1:

| Research objective 1: | To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty - at a personal level and in their leader role |

The literature review revealed a paucity of in-depth qualitative research on the lived experience of uncertainty in organisational and social psychology (Brashers, 2001; Van den Bos, 2009), particularly on executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty (Preece & Iles, 2008). The findings of the present study therefore make a contribution to the uncertainty literature and to the executive and leadership development field. The discussion begins by reviewing the overarching theme identified in Phase 1.
Over-arching theme: The flux of experienced uncertainty over time

Irrespective of the different contexts and periods of organisational uncertainty, the over-arching theme is that the executive leaders’ experience of uncertainty in both companies was one of flux, of shifting between periods of feeling more uncertain and then periods of feeling less uncertain (or more certain). The periods of uncertainty may be longer or shorter, and more intense or less intense, depending on the individual’s specific context, different and/or simultaneous triggers for the uncertainty, coupled with unfolding events within the organisational context. My overall finding therefore concurs with phenomenological research conducted in the healthcare field (McGonigal-Kenney, 2011; Penrod, 2007), which established the dynamic nature of uncertainty, with fluctuations in the intensity of uncertainty experienced over time. The flux of uncertainty evidenced in my study may be due to emotional responses shifting over time, based on participants’ continuing appraisals of their context, as posited by some authors (Brashers, 2001; Liu & Perrewe; 2005), and their tallying of evidence (Penrod, 2007).

While acknowledging that the lived experience over time was unique for each participant, the overall findings of the executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty are synthesised in Figure 20.

**Figure 20.** Executive leaders’ experience of and approach to uncertainty
The discussion of the key findings will align with each of the five categories as illustrated in Figure 20: (1) triggers for uncertainty, (2) felt uncertainty, (3) making sense of uncertainty, (4) implementing strategies and actions, and (5) adapting.

### 7.2.1 Category 1: Triggers for uncertainty

Overall, three prevalent triggers for uncertainty were identified in the present study, that is, organisational change, transitions and delay. The last trigger, delay, was found to add to the intensity of uncertainty triggered by organisational change and transitions, confirming Smithson’s (2008b) view that delays tend to heighten the experience of uncertainty because they extend the uncertainty. Transitions were the key trigger for the executives’ uncertainty in the present study, for some, as newcomers to the companies, and for others, who moved into new or acting roles, or reported to new or acting senior executives. This finding is consistent with the consensus that transitions are key triggers for uncertainty (Beech, 2011; Bridges, 2002; Ibarra, 2004; Maitlis, 2005; Marsico, 2012).

The findings clearly indicate that executives do experience uncertainty, triggered by organisational change and transitions in these turbulent times. Limited research on executive uncertainty in relation to and after the global financial crisis of 2008 (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Day & Power, 2009) is supported by my findings. The implication for executive coaching is that coaches should anticipate that executive clients are likely to have issues of uncertainty, particularly for clients in contexts of organisational change and/or experiencing transitions.

### 7.2.2 Category 2: Felt uncertainty

Uncertainty was ‘felt’ in varying degrees by all executives in the study, that is, experienced as an emotional state as described in the uncertainty literature (Brashers, 2001; Hogg, 2009; Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009). Research on executive uncertainty during and after the global financial crisis (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Day & Powers, 2009) found that executives experienced a range of feelings from anxiety and frustration to feeling energised, which the findings of the current study confirm. Many participants also used metaphors to express their felt uncertainty, aligning with literature which suggests that metaphors are used to convey the quality and intensity of emotions that people find difficult to express or describe (for example, Shinebourne & Smith,
The implication for executive coaching is to recognise that uncertainty is an emotional state, with a range of feelings, which may be expressed indirectly through metaphors and other means when the client is feeling vulnerable.

The present study established that both personal uncertainty and challenges experienced in the executives’ leadership role, including the concurrence of and inter-relationship between these, resulted in their felt uncertainty.

7.2.2.1 Sub-category: Personal Uncertainty

Personal uncertainty was experienced by all the executives, with individual variation, manifesting mostly in feelings of an aversive or discomforting nature, as described by uncertainty theorists (Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). My study extends the current body of knowledge in having identified two predominant types of personal uncertainty, identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty, and how they manifested.

Identity uncertainty was experienced by the participants as feelings of self-doubt, being unsure, in limbo, and feeling frustrated or excluded, resulting in decreased personal agency, based on devaluation or loss of one’s sense of identity (self, role, leader and/or social identity). Executives felt uncertain about their identities in terms of who they were and who they were becoming. While the literature does not use the term ‘identity uncertainty’ to explain this type of personal uncertainty, ‘identity ambiguity’ was used to describe collective uncertainty of organisational members during organisational identity change (Corely & Gioia, 2004). On the other hand, while Dutton et al. (2010) and Petriglieri (2011) use the term ‘identity threat’ to describe experienced identity devaluation, the link with uncertainty is not explicit. Further, some authors argue that when individuals experience disruption or uncertainty in their context, their subsequent sensemaking is grounded in issues of identity (Marsico, 2012; Weick, 1995).

The present study thus provides evidence of ‘identity uncertainty’ being experienced by the executives, suggesting it is an apt term for describing this type of uncertainty. This finding of ‘identity uncertainty’ gives further substance to the ‘issues of identity’, ‘identity ambiguity’ and ‘identity threat’ referred to in the literature. Moreover, the term ‘identity uncertainty’ also conveys the link between these issues of identity (or devalued identity) and the personal uncertainty experienced as a result of these.
Besides identity uncertainty being experienced by one participant as an existential concern, in relation to the personal meaning of his role and business (Segal, 2011; van Deurzen 2012), identity uncertainty was mostly triggered by transitions in the current study, consistent with other authors’ views (for example, Beech, 2011; Maitlis, 2005; Marsico, 2012). The experience of transitions engendered a decrease in the executives’ personal agency in the current study due to devaluation or loss of identity. This devaluation of one’s identity supports the proposition of Dutton et al. (2010) that individuals devalue their identities based on perceived identity threats, such as criticism or changes to one’s role. When the acting periods were extended for executives, who were acting in positions or reported to more senior acting executives, they experienced feelings of being in limbo, coupled with heightened frustration, expressed by one as “hanging in the air… I mean you’re not yourself”. This in limbo experience is confirmed in the literature, referred to as ‘liminality’ (Beech, 2011) and as being in between identities (Ibarra, 2004), adversely affecting their leader identity and personal agency. Moreover, these extended acting periods were delays which clearly intensified the participants’ felt uncertainty in their contexts, as acknowledged by Smithson (2008b).

In addition, the transitions of two newcomers to their companies fostered intense identity uncertainty in them. They experienced exclusion by their colleagues, adversely affecting their integration into their executive teams. This form of uncertainty appears to be rooted in a lack of social identity (Hogg; 2001), or sense of belongingness (De Cremer & Sedikides, 2009). These two executives also experienced a devaluation of their personal and role identities, one in relation to being personally criticised by his peers, the other to his role being changed from what had initially been agreed. Such devaluation of identity is regarded by Dutton et al. (2010) and Petriglieri (2011) as a form of identity threat. Thus the identity uncertainty experienced by some newcomers appeared more intense than the uncertainty experienced by participants facing transitions within their current companies, which concurs with Day’s (2010) research on executive transitions.

My study found identity uncertainty to be a prevalent form of personal uncertainty experienced by the executives, triggered mostly by transitions of different types, resulting in feelings of doubt due to devaluation of one’s identity and frustration due to delays concerning transitions. Hence, one’s personal agency, rooted in a decreased
sense of confidence and/or sense of control, is adversely affected, as argued by Penrod (2007) and Van Den Bos (2009). The implications for executive coaching are to anticipate that transitions are fertile ground for identity uncertainty, and this may manifest as decreased confidence and/or sense of control in executive clients, particularly for newcomers to an organisation.

**Anticipatory uncertainty**, the other type of personal uncertainty identified, was intensely felt by the executives, reflected in their use of superlatives to describe it. This uncertainty was experienced in the present, about some possible future event or situation that could be a potential threat, such as job loss or the appointment of a new MD, and the outcomes or impact thereof. It therefore manifested mostly as worry or apprehension, even fear, in terms of anticipating ‘if that happens, what then?’ This finding confirms research which found that individuals experienced more intense emotions when anticipating events which could be potential threats (Liu & Perrewé, 2005; Van Boven & Ashworth, 2007).

The anticipatory uncertainty of participants in relation to the impact of the appointment of a new MD was particularly intense, because both companies had acting MDs for an extended time. One participant perceived this type of uncertainty as being common at executive levels, because new MDs or CEOs often like to appoint their own teams, thereby fostering job insecurity at the executive level. Hence, this finding supports the literature which suggests that increased uncertainty is being experienced at the executive level (Kets de Vries et al., 2009), particularly due to increased turnover and the shorter tenure of executives (Favaro et al., 2011; Manderscheid & Freeman, 2012).

In sum, although the findings have differentiated between identity and anticipatory uncertainty as types of personal uncertainty, they both seem to be associated with a perceived threat to oneself (Petriglieri, 2011), or issues of identity, triggering the felt uncertainty as advocated by Rock (2009) and Van den Bos (2009). Whereas identity uncertainty is related to a current and continuing threat, anticipatory uncertainty is experienced in the present about a possible future threat to oneself, which may or may not materialise. The distinction between the two types, and how they manifest, is potentially useful for executive coaches in assisting executives with uncertainty.
7.2.2.2 Sub-category: Challenges in the role of leader

The key challenges experienced by the executives in their leader role during organisational uncertainty, which added to their felt uncertainty, were found to be experienced complexity, managing other peoples’ uncertainty and corporate politics.

**Experienced complexity** was clearly felt by the executives in having to deal with an increased number of changes and variables in their contexts. They conveyed a sense of feeling overwhelmed and out of control, some using metaphors to describe this, as “…it's a minefield” and “it became a nightmare”. This experienced complexity added to their felt uncertainty, affecting their sense of agency in their leadership roles.

The present study’s findings emphasise the ‘experienced’ complexity felt by the participants, on which there is a scarcity in the literature. However, Beauutement and Broenner (2011) distinguished between contextual and experienced complexity, viewing the latter as that which is subjectively experienced by people, implying that it is a state, as evidenced in this study. The findings therefore suggest that with increasing contextual complexity, or objective complexity in one’s context, a corresponding increase in experienced complexity is likely, thereby increasing felt uncertainty of executives, with a potentially adverse impact on their personal agency.

Leadership paradoxes also emerged as part of the executives’ experienced complexity, expressed mainly as frustration in trying to balance contradictory tensions or paradoxes in their contexts. There is agreement in the literature that leadership paradoxes are an inherent part of what leaders have to contend with in times of increasing complexity (Bunker, 2010; Goffee & Jones, 2009; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006). Experienced complexity, including the frustration of managing paradoxes, therefore added to their felt uncertainty.

**Managing other peoples’ uncertainty** referred to the executives’ leadership challenge of managing other people’s need for clarity in their uncertain contexts, in the face of their own uncertainty. This particular challenge was emphasised more in Company R, the private company which had been going through prolonged uncertainty for five years. The executives in both companies were concerned about fostering uncertainty in others, knowing that people tend to observe and monitor their leaders’ emotional state to ascertain what is going on. This finding concurs with authors who have argued that
people tend to look to their leaders for direction to reduce their uncertainty and gauge leaders' emotional reactions during organisational uncertainty (Day & Power, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009). This challenge presents for many leaders when feeling personal uncertainty, yet believing they need to communicate calm and optimism to others, as suggested by Bunker (2010) and Heifetz et al. (2009), adding to their felt uncertainty.

**Corporate politics** was a leadership challenge experienced by most executives in both companies in dealing with key stakeholders. Company P, a state-owned company, experienced a higher degree of frustration with politics in having to pander to the politicians and their political agenda in The City (their shareholder). Overall, while participants in both companies generally alluded to their frustration with corporate politics in their roles, they also indicated a level of discomfort with politics and its adverse effect on trust among colleagues. Moreover, some participants in both companies did not want to play politics and/or acknowledged that political skill was difficult for them. These political challenges, coupled with an aversion to politics, therefore added to the executives’ felt uncertainty within their contexts of uncertainty. Consistent with my findings, the literature confirms that ‘politics’ is perceived negatively by many leaders (Ashraf & Iqbal, 2011; Buchanan, 2008; Buchanan & Badham, 2011).

In addition, two newcomers, who experienced highly uncertain transitions, emphasised that they were not good at politics, and did not play politics, yet both experienced certain political dynamics which seemed to hamper integration into their executive teams. This finding concurs with Day’s research (2009), which found newcomers experienced vulnerability in having to confront the power relations and political dynamics in the new organisation, while not understanding them. I therefore support Day’s (2009) view that newcomers need to understand the political dynamics to help them to exercise relevant political skill, thereby enabling more effective integration.

In sum, the study identified three prevalent leadership challenges in both companies, namely experienced complexity, managing other peoples’ uncertainty and corporate politics. The findings indicate how these specifically added to the executives’ own felt uncertainty during the period of organisational uncertainty, affecting their leader identity and their sense of agency. A key finding is that the concurrence of and inter-relationship between executives’ personal uncertainty and these leadership challenges added to
their overall felt uncertainty. For example, identity uncertainty affected participants’ leader identity, and hence their agency in dealing with the leadership challenges experienced. On the other hand, the experienced complexity affected participants’ sense of agency, thereby increasing their identity uncertainty. Thus, the overall felt uncertainty manifested in the executives’ devalued sense of identity, thereby affecting their personal agency, implying that issues of identity are a core aspect of felt uncertainty. Understanding how these leadership challenges may manifest and increase executives’ felt uncertainty is important for executive coaches to be aware of.

The executives’ felt uncertainty seems to be a complex and dynamic emotional state, with several interrelated and overlapping types of uncertainty being experienced in their contexts, as suggested by Brashers (2001). The overall result seems to be that felt uncertainty comes down to issues of identity (devalued or loss of identity) and decreased personal agency. Hence, identity uncertainty is a key aspect of the overall felt uncertainty, exacerbated by the concurrence and inter-relationship of the other types of uncertainty. Although there was a strong similarity in the types of uncertainty experienced across both companies in the study, there were some differences in the degree of the leadership challenges experienced, attributed to their different organisational contexts, concurring with Brashers (2001). While Company P, a state-owned company, subject to political processes, experienced more challenges and frustrations in relation to politics, Company R, a private company, with a much longer period of uncertainty due to repercussions of a change in ownership deal, experienced more challenges in managing people’s uncertainty, in the face of their own uncertainty.

7.2.3 Category 3: Making sense of uncertainty

Importantly, it was the felt uncertainty that generally motivated the executive leaders to make sense of their experienced uncertainty and/or their context of uncertainty. The key findings pertaining to this category are discussed under the following two headings:

- The role of emotion in making sense of uncertainty.
- The components of the sensemaking process (see Figure 20 on page 231).
7.2.3.1 The role of emotion in making sense of uncertainty

Overall, the executives’ felt uncertainty, being personal uncertainty, leadership challenges and the interrelationship between these, mostly appeared to motivate participants to make sense of their uncertainty, generally confirming the uncertainty and sensemaking literature. Some uncertainty theorists argue that it is the aversive emotional state of uncertainty which motivates one to reduce it (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). On the other hand, effortful sensemaking is energised by emotions when individuals experience a disruption or change, as argued by Weick et al. (2005), implying that the emotions experienced may be ‘felt uncertainty’. Thus, given increasing evidence of the importance of emotion in sensemaking, a theory on the role of emotion in sensemaking was developed by Maitlis et al. (2013), and was a key influence in interpreting the role of emotion in my findings, as captured in Figure 21. This figure was not constructed as a model, but simply represents the shift in experience of executives’ uncertainty in this study.

![Figure 21. Findings on the role of emotion in making sense of uncertainty](image)

Most executives in the current study (depicted above by the bold, solid curve), experienced discomforting feelings of uncertainty, which appeared to motivate them to engage in constructive sensemaking in relation to their experienced uncertainty. This key finding supports the theory of Maitlis et al. (2013) that a moderately negative emotional state is required for sensemaking to be effective, termed ‘integrative sensemaking’. In contrast, two participants, who felt intense uncertainty, clearly
struggled to make sense of their uncertainty, with one becoming reactive and the other withdrawing, thus hindering their sensemaking (depicted by the dashed line in Figure 21, above). However, they both did shift to more effective sensemaking over time and with unfolding events in their contexts of uncertainty. Again, my finding offers some support for the proposition of Maitlis et al. (2013) that intense negative emotion may interrupt or hinder cognitive processes required for effective sensemaking, yet it might shift to become more effective over time. On the other hand, one participant, depicted by the lower dotted line in Figure 21, who was mostly positive, except for some anticipatory uncertainty about the new MD, engaged in sensemaking with an intent to harness opportunities in the changing context. This finding also aligns with Maitlis et al. (2013), who proposed that positive emotions do energise sensemaking, but a more generative type of sensemaking that is creative.

The findings therefore suggest that the felt uncertainty, mostly being discomforting (as illustrated in Figure 21), stimulated the executives’ sensemaking, with the initial intent being to reduce their uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). However, most executives’ emotional responses shifted positively due to their sensemaking and the unfolding of events over time, concurring with several authors (Brashers, 2001; Maitlis et al., 2013; Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008b). Based on these findings, my view is that a sensemaking approach to uncertainty reflects the dynamic nature of the lived experience of uncertainty, confirming that uncertainty is a dynamic cognitive-affective state (Brashers, 2001; Smithson, 2008b).

Uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001; Smithson, 2008b), rather than uncertainty reduction, therefore aligns more with the sensemaking perspective because it caters for a range of possible emotional responses, which shift over time, through appraisals and reappraisals. In contrast, uncertainty reduction emphasises the aversive feeling of uncertainty which motivates one to reduce it (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Hogg, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009), and does not account for the dynamic unfolding nature of uncertainty responses, as established by phenomenological research in the healthcare field (McGonigal-Kenney, 2011; Penrod, 2007). Notably, Van den Bos (2009) has recommended that more in-depth qualitative research in the field of social psychology be conducted on the lived experience of uncertainty in different contexts.
In sum, the present study lends support to the theory of Maitlis et al. (2013), which emphasises the role of emotion in sensemaking. An understanding of the role of emotion, particularly the intensity and valence of emotion on executives’ sensemaking, can assist executive coaches in working with executive clients’ experienced uncertainty. My findings also suggest a sensemaking approach to experienced uncertainty, aligned with uncertainty management theory, rather than uncertainty reduction theory.

7.2.3.2 The components of the sensemaking process

The key findings are now discussed in relation to the executives’ process of making sense of their felt uncertainty, as depicted in Figure 20 (see page 231). The process of sensemaking was found to involve five components, one of which, the executive leaders’ mental frames, influenced the other four, that is, seeking understanding, interpreting, meaning-making and emotion-focused coping. While the current mental frames influenced their sensemaking, the components of their sensemaking (that is, seeking understanding, interpreting and meaning-making), also influenced and updated their mental frames for future sensemaking, as illustrated by the larger two-way arrows within the sensemaking process in Figure 20 (on page 231).

Component 1: Mental frames

Weick (1995) explained that sensemaking involves the connection of cues in context to one’s mental frames. The key mental frames which influenced the executives in making sense of their uncertainty were self-view, view of others, worldview and past experience.

Self-view, related mostly to executives’ dispositions such as resilience and having an optimistic outlook, contributed to their resolve to stay the course. This finding confirms the literature, in which authors have identified dispositions such as resilience (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002), self-efficacy and optimism (Bandura, 1997), and hardiness (Bennis & Thomas, 2002), as crucial for enabling leaders to adapt. Some participants, for example, the more experienced executives, also referred to their own leader identities, which influenced their approach to leadership challenges; for example, one’s credibility. A positive leader identity, reflected in confidence, credibility and reputation, has been found to facilitate leader effectiveness, particularly in uncertain contexts (Day et al., 2009; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Klenke, 2007).
View of others, pertaining to executives’ views and beliefs in working with and relating to other people, influenced their approach to sensemaking with others, for example, their beliefs about having conversations with others and their leadership approach. This finding concurs with Weick (1995), who argued that sensemaking is a social process, and that even if one is adopting a more solitary approach to sensemaking it is contingent upon one’s views or beliefs about others within one’s context.

World view, in the form of the executives’ values and perspectives towards uncertainty and life, informed their sensemaking. The executives’ personal values were relevant to their meaning-making, and in guiding themselves and their leadership approach during uncertainty. My finding is consistent with authors who advocate that values are able to provide a sense of meaning and guide one’s behaviour, decisions and choices when experiencing uncertainty (Steptoe-Warren et al., 2011; Van den Heuvel et al., 2013), because they transcend situations (Schwartz, 1992). Participants also expressed personal beliefs or perspectives in relation to life or uncertainty, which influenced their sensemaking. One’s orientation to uncertainty is considered a key factor in influencing one’s response to it (Clampitt & DeKoch, 2001; Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010).

Past experience was found to be a key frame of reference when experiencing personal uncertainty, in that participants’ past experience built capability for uncertainty, or did not. For example, the one participant who was mostly positive, emphasised how his past experience of change had equipped him to deal with organisational change and uncertainty. It is widely established that past experience influences one’s making sense of uncertainty (Parry, 2003; Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008b; Weick et al., 2005). Furthermore, when joining a new company or moving into a new role, the executives in the current study tended to make positive and negative comparisons with their positive or negative experience in a previous company or role, appearing to increase or reduce their personal uncertainty. This finding is consistent with Louis’s (1980) model of organisational entry and sensemaking by newcomers.

In sum, the executive leaders’ mental frames, in relation to self, others, the world and past experience, influenced their sensemaking. However, some authors have pointed out that, because sensemaking occurs through relating cues in one’s context to one’s
current mental frames (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), effective sensemaking may not occur because one may be unaware of current limiting mental frames or assumptions (du Toit, 2007, 2014; Schwandt, 2005), thus requiring critical reflection (Schwandt, 2005) and/or sensebreaking (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2014). Hence, the implication for executive coaching is for coaches to explore, surface and challenge executive clients’ mental frames, through fostering critical reflection and/or sensebreaking, to enable more effective sensemaking by their clients of their experienced uncertainty.

**Component 2: Seeking understanding**

A key finding was that the emotional state of uncertainty, or felt uncertainty, motivated the executives to seek understanding of what was going on in their context of uncertainty and/or experienced uncertainty, predominantly through using three different approaches, namely, reading the situation, conversations with others and reflection,

**Reading the situation** was pursued by the executives to better understand the context of uncertainty in relation to their felt uncertainty. They all read the uncertain and unfolding context through hearing things, rumours, receiving feedback and observing behaviour, to pick up cues. My finding is consistent with Penrod’s (2007) research into caregivers’ approach to uncertainty in the healthcare field. Extracting these cues, through reading the situation, is considered to be critical for sensemaking. According to Weick et al. (2005), these cues form the core seeds of one’s sensemaking, which involves the connecting of cues to one’s mental frames. All newcomers in the present study focused actively on reading the situation to facilitate their integration into the new companies. The two newcomers who experienced intense personal uncertainty and felt exclusion were acutely sensitive to the dynamics in their new contexts. This finding confirms the literature in relation to newcomers’ experience, in that when surprise is encountered in experiencing differences between their expectations and their actual experience in the new organisation, felt uncertainty is triggered, thereby energising their sensemaking to understand the culture and dynamics (Louis, 1980; Smerek, 2011).

**Conversations with others**, with teams and/or individuals, were engaged in by most executives to gain more understanding through different perspectives. My finding confirms a core property of sensemaking, that is, it is primarily a social process (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The present study also found that, for executives experiencing
personal uncertainty (both identity and anticipatory uncertainty), it was important to engage with trusted individuals inside or outside their companies, consistent with views in the literature. Brashers (2001) and Maitlis et al. (2013) argue that psychological safety, and hence trust, are important in social sensemaking processes for coping with uncertainty. In contrast, the two participants in my study who experienced more intense identity uncertainty (due to devalued identities and felt exclusion) exercised more of a solitary approach to sensemaking, which offers some support for a proposition of Maitlis et al. (2013). Their proposition is that solitary sensemaking may occur when an individual experiences intense uncertainty based on a threat to the self.

Reflection was adopted by most of the executives to understand what was going on in relation to both their leadership challenges and their personal uncertainty, which concurs with Parry’s (2003) finding that executives use reflection in their sensemaking. In the current study, however, it appeared that the practice and quality of reflection varied across participants, where many seemed to ‘think about things’ rather than practising in-depth or critical reflection, which was only evidenced clearly in one executive. Aligned with this finding, there is consensus in the literature that most leaders do not have time, or make time, for in-depth reflection (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Parry, 2003). While Schwandt (2005) advocates critical reflection, Lawrence and Maitlis (2014) advocate sensebreaking, both of which relate to the need for examining one’s current frames to gain new perspectives, essential for effective sensemaking.

In sum, the executive leaders adopted approaches to seek understanding of their experienced uncertainty and/or context of uncertainty, through reading the situation, through conversations with others and through reflection. Hence, the implication for executive coaching is to explore and challenge executive clients’ approaches to seeking understanding and gaining different perspectives within their contexts, for example, what cues are they paying attention to, and with whom and how they are having sensemaking conversations. Executive coaching in itself could be viewed as a sensemaking conversation, as posited by du Toit (2007, 2014), to help clients gain perspective. Moreover, executive coaching could play a role in developing executives’ reflective ability, as proposed by Stelter (2009), thereby enhancing their sensemaking as part of their capability for uncertainty.
**Component 3: Interpreting**

All executives in the present study reached a point in the iterative process of seeking understanding, and coupled with unfolding events, when they made a plausible interpretation of their experienced uncertainty and/or context. This was crucial as it formed the platform for implementing strategies or actions to move forward, as illustrated in Figure 20 (page 231). The executives’ interpretations formed a key part of their ‘making sense’, concurring with Weick (1995) that at the heart of sensemaking is finding a plausible, coherent and credible (not accurate) account as to what is happening, which energises one to act. Interpreting is also similar to certain concepts used in the uncertainty literature, namely, appraisals and reappraisals (Brashers, 2001) or the tallying of evidence (Penrod, 2007) by individuals in their contexts of uncertainty.

The overall key finding was that, although most of the executives were initially motivated to engage in sensemaking to reduce their uncertainty, in interpreting or realising that the uncertainty could not be reduced they interpreted the reality of their context differently, resulting in an acceptance or tolerance of the uncertainty. By doing so they were able to move forward in their given contexts of uncertainty, through implementing strategies and actions resulting in an increased sense of agency which ultimately reduced their felt uncertainty, that is, their level of uncertainty receded as shown in Figure 20 (page 231).

**Personal uncertainty**

In terms of personal uncertainty, executives reached a point when they articulated a plausible interpretation, realisation or explanation of their experienced uncertainty and/or context of uncertainty, registering their ‘making sense’, as follows.

**For identity uncertainty**, executives faced up to, or interpreted differently, the reality of the context affecting their sense of personal agency, which was a result of their devalued sense of identity. Their interpretation then enabled them to approach their uncertainty as ‘given this reality, who do I want, or need to be, in this role or as leader?’ in order to repair, restore or adapt their identity to increase their personal agency going forward. For example, one newcomer asked himself what he needed to do to survive and build his credibility. This type of sensemaking seemed to be identity sensemaking, confirming a key property of sensemaking as being grounded in issues of identity and grounded in identity construction (Marsico, 2012; Weick et al., 2005). This finding lends
support to authors who argue that when individuals acknowledge their identity devaluation they adopt strategies to restore or repair their identities (Beech, 2011; Dutton et al., 2010).

**For anticipatory uncertainty**, when anticipating uncertain future events which were a potential threat, through considering possible scenarios and their impact, executives reached a point at which they accepted that the future was unknown. Given their acceptance of the future uncertainty they realised the need to make a decision, for example, asking themselves whether they should stay or leave the company, or whether they should accept the promotion. Their consideration of possible future scenarios, which according to Weick et al. (2005) may be a form of prospective sensemaking, helped them with their decision-making. Hence, this finding aligns with past research findings that individuals do anticipate and respond to future uncertainty (Caroll, 2010).

In sum, these findings on interpreting to make sense of personal uncertainty imply that executive coaching could help clients in developing plausible interpretations of their context of uncertainty, in relation to their experienced identity uncertainty and/or anticipatory uncertainty. The emphasis would be on helping them face up to and interpret a different subjective reality, which is plausible to them, thereby helping them generate strategies and actions for moving forward.

**Challenges in the leader role**

In terms of the key challenges in their leader role during organisational uncertainty, the executives interpreted or made sense of these, as follows.

**For experienced complexity**, most executives reached a point at which they acknowledged that they could not influence or control all the variables in their context. Their acknowledgement implied an acceptance of the uncertainty or complexity in their context, resulting in focusing on what could be influenced and thereby increasing their sense of agency. This finding confirms the uncertainty literature, in that a sense of control is seen to be associated with increasing one’s personal agency (Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009).
In dealing with leadership paradoxes, which formed part of their experienced complexity, the executives came to terms with and accepted the paradox, therefore realising the need to find a way to manage the polarity to move forward. For example, in Company P, in which the key paradox was managing the tension between the independent approach of the company and the emerging centrist view of The City (their shareholder), participants realised that they needed to find ways of working with The City rather than resisting its new approach. This type of ‘both/and’ polarity thinking (Manderscheid & Freeman, 2012) is advocated for leaders to be able to hold contradictory tensions or paradoxes in balance (Bunker, 2010; Goffee & Jones, 2009; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006).

For managing other people’s uncertainty, a key challenge for most executives was providing clarity to others, particularly when feeling uncertain themselves. This challenge was emphasised more in Company R, in which the uncertainty among employees was pervasive due to prolonged uncertainty for five years. The executives’ personal interpretations of their company’s context of uncertainty helped in managing their own uncertainty. The approach, adopted by the executives, concurs with authors who argue that leaders must be able to regulate their own anxiety, in order to contain their people’s anxiety, thereby enabling them to engage constructively with the uncertainty (Day & Power, 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010).

In addition, most executives’ articulation of their own sense of what was going on (that is, their personal sensemaking) influenced the content, conviction and genuineness of the messages they communicated to their people, as advocated for leadership by Bunker (2010) and Heifetz et al. (2009). Hence, direct links could be made between the executives’ personal sensemaking and the content of their sensegiving to their people, confirming research by Gioia et al. (1994). Sensegiving involves providing a frame or viable interpretation of what is going on in the organisational context to others (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). My findings therefore confirm the literature, in that both sensemaking and sensegiving are key inter-related processes in the executive leadership role during organisational uncertainty (Gioia et al., 1994; Smerek, 2011, Weick et al., 2005).

For corporate politics, executives’ interpretations related to gaining a different perspective of politics in their companies’ changing contexts and in their roles as executives. For example, one participant acknowledged that he was not a good
politician, yet realised the need to exercise more political skill when he moved into a more senior executive role during the organisational changes. This finding aligns with authors who argue that leaders should also see the positive side of politics and that political intelligence is necessary in leadership roles, even more so in the context of organisational change (Ashraf & Iqbal, 2011; Buchanan, 2008; Cook et al., 2004).

In sum, these findings on interpreting, to make sense of leadership challenges which resulted in felt uncertainty, imply that executive coaching could help and challenge clients to interpret different and plausible subjective realities of their experienced complexity, managing others’ uncertainty and/or corporate politics in their leadership roles. Developing such plausible interpretations would then facilitate their clients’ development of strategies and actions for moving forward in their leader role.

**Component 4: Meaning-making**

Most executives in the current study engaged in meaning-making in relation to their experienced uncertainty, as part of their sensemaking, yet distinct from their interpreting of their experienced uncertainty and/or context of uncertainty (see Figure 20). The meaning derived served as a motivator for participants to take action and/or gave them the resolve to persevere. Most participants found meaning through a sense of purpose, or personal goals, and alignment of their personal values with their company’s values. Finding meaning in one’s situation, as evidenced in my findings, is suggested as enabling one to accept or tolerate uncertainty (Penrod, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009).

Whereas sensemaking and meaning-making are used interchangeably in the literature (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), Van den Heuvel et al. (2009) view meaning-making as being less immediate than sensemaking, with meaning-making occurring after the “primary interpretation processes” (p. 522). The present study’s findings therefore concur with Van den Heuvel et al.’s (2009) finding that the meaning-making is distinct from the interpreting component of sensemaking. However, with the present study being retrospective I cannot suggest that the meaning-making happened after the interpreting, therefore I included it as a component within sensemaking yet distinct from interpreting.

It was evident in my study that the meaning-making was about providing the motivation for the executives to persevere and/or to move forward with their actions, expressed by
participants as “it became a mission” and “my primary driver was …”. In relation to forms of identity uncertainty, finding meaning also occurred through finding ways to add value or make a contribution in their roles. Research by Van den Heuvel et al. (2013) which established that meaning-making may help individuals to build acceptance and resilience to persevere during the organisational uncertainty is supported by my findings. The implication for executive coaching is to focus on helping clients to articulate meaning, their sense of purpose and/or personal values, within their context of uncertainty to provide the motivation to persevere and move forward.

**Component 5: Emotion-focused coping**

Experienced uncertainty is an emotional state. A key finding was that most executives used two emotion-focused coping mechanisms, self-regulation and/or support, to assist with managing and shifting their emotional state while making sense of their experienced uncertainty. Interestingly, the theory of Maitlis et al. (2013), which focuses on the role of emotion in sensemaking, does not clearly address emotional regulation or coping mechanisms adopted during the sensemaking process. My findings therefore suggest that emotion-focused coping mechanisms play a role in emotional state management during the iterative process of sensemaking.

A form of self-regulation was used by the executives in the present study when feeling frustrated, stressed, demotivated or negative. Self-regulation involved self-talk to help them focus on the positive, or on what they needed to do, to shift their state. For example, one participant referred to this as “giving himself a pep-talk”. This form of coping therefore appears to be emotion-focused coping, suggested by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as being particularly relevant for coping in uncertain contexts. On the other hand, tapping into trusted support systems enabled executives to share their feelings of uncertainty. While some spoke to their spouses, others spoke to individuals in their teams or personal networks. The literature acknowledges the importance of social support for coping with uncertainty, particularly emotional support (Brashers, 2001; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002). Trust, which appeared to be a key factor in who participants shared with, is considered important for providing psychological safety (Brashers, 2001; Maitlis et al., 2013).
Some executives deliberately chose not to share their personal uncertainty with their spouses or family. Whereas two newcomers did this as a means of shielding or protecting their close ones in not wanting them to worry, two other executives specifically chose to separate work and home. These approaches to seeking support concur with Brasher’s (2001) notion of ‘dilemmas of social support’, which influence the choices an individual makes when seeking social support. Individuals make their choices in terms of who they share with in relation to their preferences, or competing goals, and the impact of doing this.

The significance for executive coaching from these findings is that it may assist clients in selecting and developing relevant emotion-focused coping strategies that work for them in their context of uncertainty. Coaches could help clients develop effective self-talk strategies and ways for developing and tapping into their support systems. Importantly, the coaching relationship itself can be a valuable support system, providing psychological safety and emotional support, while being balanced with challenging clients to enhance their sensemaking.

In concluding the section on sensemaking, the findings of the study have generated a more in-depth understanding of how executive leaders make sense of experienced uncertainty and the components involved in their iterative process of sensemaking. The findings highlight how emotional intensity and individual preferences might influence executives’ approach to such sensemaking. While the findings largely support the properties of Weick’s sensemaking (Weick, 1995, Weick et al., 2005), one difference emerged, namely the inclusion of meaning-making as a component within sensemaking yet distinct from interpreting. My findings also lend some support for the theory of Maitlis et al. (2013) on the role of emotion in sensemaking, and extend their theory by including emotion-focused coping to regulate one’s emotional state during sensemaking.

7.2.4 Category 4: Implementing strategies and actions

Strategies and actions were promulgated from the executives’ sensemaking, primarily from their interpreting and meaning-making, with continuing adaptations and sensemaking over time, resulting their felt uncertainty receding (Figure 20, page 231).
This section focuses on the key findings of the strategies and actions implemented in relation to the executives’ personal uncertainty, followed by those in their leader role.

7.2.4.1 Sub-category: Personal uncertainty

Two types of strategies were adopted by the executives in relation to personal uncertainty, namely, strategies for developing identity and those for managing anticipatory uncertainty (see Figure 20 on page 231).

Strategies for developing identity

The key finding was that executives who experienced identity uncertainty adopted strategies to add value in their roles and/or to increase their personal agency. These strategies therefore focused primarily on developing their identities, as their uncertainty was rooted in a sense of a devalued identity (that is, personal, role, leader and/or social identity), and/or a lack of agency due to transitions or changes in their context, for example, when reporting to acting senior executives over an extended period. Such strategies included being more assertive and/or negotiating with colleagues or senior executives to achieve ways of adding more value in their roles. Newcomers, who experienced exclusion and devalued identities, adopted strategies to better integrate with the executive teams and gain credibility by delivering in their roles. These strategies adopted by the executives align with approaches to identity construction in the literature, such as negotiation, developing roles and through making claims (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Klenke, 2007). Furthermore, the participants’ identity development strategies lend support for the proposition of Dutton et al. (2010) that pathways to positive identity construction involve strategies and tactics to restore or repair a devalued identity, and/or to adapt one’s identity to changes in one’s context.

However, in the case of two newcomers, who felt excluded and experienced intense identity uncertainty, although they tried various strategies over a period of time their attempts at identity development were thwarted. When interviewed for the study, one executive reported that he still felt disempowered, and the other suggested that he was still not accepted by some of his peers. These two cases provide evidence of the complexity of identity construction, or identity work (Brown, 2014), because it is rooted in a social process (DeRue et al., 2009; Sinclair, 2011). Thus, identity construction requires
reciprocity and recognition for the preferred identity to be achieved (DeRue & Ashford, 2010b), which did not occur for these two executives, resulting in a partial or incomplete identity (Beech, 2011, p. 287), a form of identity diffusion (Day et al., 2009) which aggravates or heightens one’s self-doubt or identity uncertainty.

A key implication for executive coaching, from these findings, is to help clients to develop strategies for identity construction, while assisting them to appreciate and to factor in social and contextual aspects of their strategies, to enable positive identity construction. With issues of identity and decreased personal agency being at the heart of felt uncertainty, facilitating strategies for identity construction will be crucial for executive coaches. They therefore need to adopt a social psychological lens in working with clients’ leader identity development efforts, as advocated by in the literature (Beech, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010b; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Sinclair, 2011).

**Strategies for managing anticipatory uncertainty**

The key finding was that the executives, who experienced anticipatory uncertainty, adopted strategies that would help them to be more prepared for a potential threat they anticipated. For example, in considering pros and cons of different scenarios that could unfold, including the worst case scenario, this helped participants to feel prepared and to make decisions and/or contingency plans, thereby alleviating their worrying or uncertainty about the future threats or risks, and giving them a sense of agency to move forward. One executive spoke about how his preparation allowed him to “park it”, meaning he could let go of his intense anticipatory uncertainty related to possible job loss, and therefore able to focus on his job.

Several authors confirm the use of these types of strategies in dealing with uncertainty in relation to future events (Carroll, 2010; Schoemaker, 1995; Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002). Of note, Schwarzer and Taubert (2002, p. 8) refer to these as anticipatory coping strategies pertaining to “an imminent threat in the near future”. The key implication for executive coaching is to facilitate clients’ sense of realistic preparation or contingency planning, so they are able to let go of their apprehension, thereby increasing their sense of agency and ability to move forward in their context of uncertainty.
7.2.4.2 Challenges in the role of leader

Three types of strategies were adopted by the executives in relation to the leadership challenges experienced during organisational uncertainty, namely, leadership focus and approach in relation to experienced complexity, effective communication in relation to managing others’ uncertainty, and adopting more political skill.

Leadership focus and approach

This finding refers to the leadership focus that most executives adopted in relation to their challenge of experienced complexity. They realised through their sensemaking the importance of focusing on what they could control or influence, in order to move forward and be able to accomplish something. They were therefore able to come to terms with both being in control and not in control (Karp & Helgo, 2008; Lane & Martin, 2010; Simpson, 2012), with most involving their teams in prioritising focus areas through participative leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), both of which approaches are regarded as essential for leadership in turbulent times.

While executives in both companies focused on keeping the company operations stable and improving efficiencies, they also developed different foci appropriate for moving forward in their contexts of uncertainty. Participants in Company R gave clear leadership and direction through developing a business strategy, although experiencing considerable financial and market pressures. Company P, on the other hand, realised the need to establish leadership and focus in their company, as a result of the hiatus experienced in their leadership due to rotating acting MDs and executives. Thus, the executive committee and senior management drew together and formed a collective leadership approach to identify priority areas for moving forward. These overall leadership approaches, although different in the two companies, confirmed authors who argue that leaders need to stabilise and manage the current operation effectively, and focus on approaches to meet future challenges concurrently (Heifetz et al., 2009; Lane & Martin, 2010). Interestingly, Company P exhibited a form of self-organising adaptive capacity within their leadership hiatus by developing a collective leadership approach. Such an adaptive response is seen as emergent in complex adaptive systems, which organisations are increasingly being viewed as in the literature (Heifetz et al., 2009; Lane & Martin, 2010; Obolensky, 2010; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).
The executives were clearly guided by their values and ethics in leading both the companies forward, conveying their responsibility and commitment in their leadership roles. As mentioned above, one’s values can be an important guide for a leader during uncertainty because values transcend situations (Schwartz, 1992; Steptoe-Warren et al., 2011). In Company R, a few of the more experienced and senior participants showed courageous leadership in representing the company’s and employees’ interests to the board and the shareholders, in the face of personal risks and threats of dismissal. A sense of positive identity as an experienced and more senior leader, coupled with a moral compass, one’s guiding values and ethics, therefore facilitated more courageous leadership during uncertainty, in the face of personal risks, termed ‘courage-based identity work’ by Koerner (2014). This finding also supports the notion of a virtuous identity, proposed by Dutton et al. (2010), as being a positive identity to which leaders may aspire, with virtuous attributes such as being courageous, having integrity, being compassionate or being ethical. Thus, a virtuous identity may also give meaning and motivation to one’s leadership approach.

There are several implications for executive coaching from these findings. Coaching can assist executives who are experiencing complexity to focus on what they can control or influence. For instance, they can encourage executive clients to adopt more adaptive leadership approaches, informed by a complex adaptive systems lens, to foster participation, innovation and experimentation to find ways to move forward in contexts of complexity and uncertainty, while emphasising stabilisation of their current operations. Coaches can facilitate their clients to articulate their values and ethics to use as a guide in their leadership role during uncertainty. The notion of developing a virtuous identity may also be useful for more experienced executives seeking meaning in their roles.

**Effective communication**

Communication was the key strategy adopted by executives to address the leadership challenge of managing other people’s uncertainty in both companies, but was more pronounced in Company R due to the prolonged uncertainty over five years. This leadership challenge was exacerbated for many participants by having to communicate in the face of their own uncertainty. The executives addressed this challenge largely by their personal sensemaking or interpreting of their contexts of uncertainty, as described...
above, thereby helping to contain their own uncertainty (Day & Power, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010) and bringing more conviction and genuineness to the messages they conveyed to their people (Bunker, 2010; Heifetz et al., 2009).

Overall, in both companies, executives were guided by similar values and goals in their communication approach with people. They therefore focused on being honest or realistic about their context of uncertainty, while being positive, with the intent of confirming progress and reassuring people. Their approach to communication aligns with what is encouraged in the change leadership literature (Buchanan, 2008; Karp & Helgo, 2008). Notably, the executives emphasised the principle of 'being honest or realistic, while being positive', which is consistent with research findings by Day and Power (2009) and Smerek (2011), who found that executive leaders believed they could not provide certainty to people, but could foster hope and confidence. The implication for executive coaching is to help clients to articulate their purpose and principles for guiding their communications in their leadership role during uncertainty, while being aligned with communication protocols within their organisational context.

**Adopting more political skill**

The key strategy adopted by executives, in relation to the challenge of corporate politics, was adopting more political skill in dealing with their key stakeholders during the organisational uncertainty. Political skill primarily seemed to be developing more collaborative approaches, being sensitive to the timing of bringing different parties together, and being more diplomatic in certain forums. Adopting more political skill was seen by participants as crucial to move forward in their contexts of uncertainty, even though the notion of 'playing politics' was uncomfortable or difficult for many. Certain participants, in more senior executive roles in both companies, even acknowledged the value of adopting more political skill in their roles in interfacing with key stakeholders. Taken together, these findings are supported by authors who advocate the positive aspects of political skill. Gardner et al. (2009) view political skill more positively as the ability to understand and to influence others to act towards certain objectives, essential for effective leadership. Political skill or intelligence is also seen as necessary in organisations undergoing change (Ashraf & Iqbal, 2011; Buchanan, 2008; Buchanan & Badham, 2011; Cook et al., 2004).
The key implication for executive coaching is to help executive clients to reframe their view of politics, if they have a negative connotation of politics. Executive coaches can also encourage clients to experiment with different approaches to develop their political skill meaningfully within their context, to realise the benefits of doing this.

7.2.5 Category 5: Adapting

A key finding was that the executives also adapted their strategies, actions and/or behaviours in relation to new information, new developments or feedback received in their uncertain contexts. Their adapting required them to make further sense of the new information or feedback, which then informed how they adjusted their approaches going forward. Such adaptation is considered a key property of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The implication for executive coaches is to be aware of the iterative and adaptive nature of sensemaking. Coaching also provides an opportunity to facilitate clients’ adaptive sensemaking of new developments and/or feedback received, devising further adjustments or experimentation to clients’ approaches for moving forward.

7.3 Capability for uncertainty developed through experienced uncertainty

The discussion in this section relates to the following research objective in Phase 1:

| Research objective 2: To understand what capability for uncertainty the executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty |

Research has established that executives perceive on-the-job development as the most effective form of leader development (McCall et al., 1988). The intent of the above research objective was to understand what components potentially comprise a holistic capability for uncertainty, through understanding what was developed and/or learned through the executives’ lived experience of uncertainty. These findings are interpreted in relation to literature which identified concepts and components that may be crucial for a capability for uncertainty. I also presented reasons for executive coaching being a viable option for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty in the literature review. In this discussion, further implications for executive coaching are highlighted as these inform the production of a proposed coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, a key objective of the study.
The overarching finding, in relation to research objective 2, was that the executives all seemed to develop some capability for uncertainty, to a greater or lesser extent, which would help them with future experienced uncertainty, at a personal level and in their leader role. Interestingly, most of the participants had not reflected on their overall lived experience of uncertainty or their learning from it. They therefore valued the research interview as an opportunity to do so. Whether this related to a lack of time and/or the ability to learn from their experience was not clear. My sense was that it could have been one or the other for some participants, and a combination of these for others. This finding is relevant because there is agreement that the ability to learn is essential as part of one’s learning agility (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; McCall, 2010), seemingly a crucial component within a capability for uncertainty. The three key themes identified from the executives' lived experience of uncertainty are depicted in Figure 22, which provides a frame of reference for the discussion of the findings.

1. Development of mental frames
   - Self-view:
     - Positive Identity
     - Resilience & Optimism
   - Worldview:
     - Acceptance of uncertainty
   - View of others:

2. Effective sense-making
   - Factors promoting effective sense-making: time, calm & reflection
   - Conversations for sense-making and/or support

3. Leadership during uncertainty
   - Leadership through engaging others
   - Focus & Adaptability
   - Communication principles
   - Political skill

Figure 22. Executives’ capability for uncertainty developed through lived experience

7.3.1 Key theme 1: Development of mental frames

A main finding was that all the executive leaders experienced personal growth through their lived experience of uncertainty, to varying degrees. The participants’ development of a sense of positive identity, the shift in their orientation to uncertainty and the
strengthening of key dispositions (resilience and optimism), resulted in the development or updating of their self-view and worldview mental frames, as shown in Figure 22. Some of the executives’ mental frames in relation to ‘view of others’ also appear to have been reinforced and/or updated through their lived experience of uncertainty. However, the development of these ‘view of others’ mental frames occurred within the other two key themes, and are therefore discussed under them, as illustrated by the dashed arrows in Figure 22. Taken together, these more developed mental frames (self-view, worldview and view of others) suggest a more developed capability for uncertainty.

7.3.1.1 Positive identity development

A key finding was that most of the executives developed their self, role and/or leader identity through their lived experience of uncertainty, suggesting that positive identity development occurred, resulting in development of their self-view mental frames. Thus, the executives developed a sense of positive identity through their lived experience of uncertainty, in which identity uncertainty was prominent. Identity uncertainty, related to a devalued identity, appears to be a key factor in initiating identity construction to repair, restore or further develop one’s identity, which concurs with Dutton et al. (2010). In contrast, there were two newcomers, who experienced intense identity uncertainty and felt exclusion, yet did not experience positive identity development. This was possibly due to their identity development efforts being thwarted by others, because identity construction is rooted in a social process (Beech, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010b).

There emerged in the findings some variation between less and more experienced executives. While the former acknowledged personal growth, particularly in their sense of confidence and agency, so developing their leader identities, the latter recognised that their leadership approach in their contexts of uncertainty was appropriate and aligned to their existing leadership beliefs and values. Hence, the more experienced executives perceived that their lived experience of uncertainty re-affirmed their leadership approach, thereby further strengthening their leader identities, concurring with Day et al. (2009) that experienced leaders build their expertise over time.

My findings therefore support authors who argue that positive identity construction is an important part of leader development and effectiveness, because it builds one’s social
resources (Dutton et al., 2010), giving access to other resources by virtue of one’s confidence, credibility and reputation as a leader (Day et al., 2009; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Klenke, 2013). Hence, the importance of a positive leader identity in developing one’s capability for uncertainty is implied by these findings. In addition, these findings are consistent with those of Bennis and Thomas (2002, p.63), who associated a “new or altered sense of identity” with adaptive capacity, developed through leaders’ crucibles of unplanned experience (or uncertainty), and which equips them for future crucibles.

Day and Sin (2011) suggest that a positive leader identity can promote further self-development through seeking out experiences, in a mutually reinforcing positive spiral. They do however caution that negative spirals may occur, when positive identity is not achieved. My findings show some support for Day and Sin (2011), captured by one of the less experienced executives who hinted at the positive spiral in his metaphor, when he said that “Your ability to have ridden the tide of uncertainty promotes you to the next challenge.” On the other hand, there were the two executives who appeared not to achieve a positive sense of identity, which could potentially lead to a negative spiral.

The key implication from these findings for executive coaching is for coaches to adopt an identity construction lens in working with executives’ uncertainty towards developing a sense of positive identity, seemingly a crucial component of a capability for uncertainty. I also agree with authors who argue for a socio-psychological perspective (for example, Beech, 2011; Sinclair, 2011) in facilitating executives’ positive identity development efforts, because identity development is rooted in a social process.

7.3.1.2 Key dispositions: resilience and optimism

While most executives acknowledged that resilience and optimism were key dispositions crucial for persevering in and coping with their experienced uncertainty, they felt they had strengthened these dispositions through their experience. The necessity for and value of these types of dispositions, in dealing with adversity or crucibles of experience, is well supported in the literature (Bandura, 1997; Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002).
7.3.1.3 Acceptance of uncertainty

Most executives felt they had learned more about uncertainty as a result of their lived experience of uncertainty, including its pervasiveness, and therefore the need to accept it. There was a realisation that the uncertainty in their contexts, in most instances, could not be reduced. The participants’ acknowledgement resulted in their reported shift in their worldview towards acceptance of uncertainty, or making peace with uncertainty. There is consensus that one’s personal orientation to uncertainty is an important factor in one’s capability for uncertainty (Szeto & Sorrentino, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010). On the other hand, there is disagreement as to whether this orientation is a fixed personality trait, or a malleable state which one can develop (Smithson, 2008b). The latter view is supported by my findings, namely that one’s personal orientation can be developed through experience, and concurs with the research findings of Bennis and Thomas (2002) and Penrod (2007). Hence, the recommendation for executive coaches is to explore their clients’ worldview in relation to uncertainty and to facilitate their shift towards an acceptance of uncertainty.

7.3.2 Key theme 2: The value of effective sensemaking

A key finding was that most executives acknowledged the importance and value of their sensemaking to understand their context of uncertainty and/or experienced uncertainty. They emphasised the need to search for more understanding or perspective, before responding, which concurs with Weick (1995) and Weick et al. (2005), who argue that sensemaking becomes more explicit and effortful when a disruption (or uncertainty) is experienced in one’s context. However, such sensemaking may not be effective (Ancona, 2011; Maitlis et al., 2013), therefore ‘effective’ sensemaking is core to one’s capability for uncertainty. My findings highlighted factors which are crucial for effective sensemaking (see Figure 22 on page 257), and the value of conversations for more constructive sensemaking and/or for support purposes.

7.3.2.1 Factors promoting effective sensemaking: time, being calm and reflection

Most executives realised that there were factors which helped or hindered their making sense of their uncertainty. Some acknowledged they had reacted too quickly and therefore emphasised the need to delay one’s response or decision-making to felt
uncertainty, in order to spend more time reflecting, observing and assessing, implying that more time for sensemaking was required. This finding supports authors who suggest that the discomfort of felt uncertainty often evokes a reactive threat response, which may motivate one to reduce the uncertainty by making a quick decision (Ancona, 2011; Van den Bos, 2009), particularly when the uncertainty is intensely felt, as proposed by Maitlis et al. (2013).

Some participants also reported on the importance of being able to step back, or reflect, to gain more perspective on their context of uncertainty. They emphasised that being calm was essential for more effective sensemaking and reflection, implying that feelings of intense uncertainty hinder constructive sensemaking, which concurs with Maitlis et al. (2013). Reflection did not seem to come easily for some participants, exacerbated by time pressures in their contexts. This finding confirms the literature, as there is consensus that leaders generally do not have or make time for reflection (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Parry, 2003), and may resort to rumination in times of adversity (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Moreover, in-depth critical reflection which focuses on surfacing and questioning one’s own assumptions and beliefs is difficult to do on one’s own, as stated by several participants in my study. This finding supports Brockbank and McGill (2006), who argue that dialogue is essential for critical reflection, and requires emotional regulation or being calm.

In sum, these findings suggest that making time for sensemaking and/or reflection, coupled with emotional regulation and reflective ability, are factors which need to be considered in developing more effective sensemaking, and in turn are crucial for developing one’s capability for uncertainty. The implication for executive coaching is to focus on these factors to foster more effective sensemaking in executive clients towards developing their capability for uncertainty. In particular, executive coaches could assist in developing their clients’ reflective practice and ability more explicitly, so they are able to reflect in more depth on their own.

7.3.2.2 Conversations for sensemaking and/or support

A key finding was that most executives appreciated conversations (one-to-one and/or in teams) for sensemaking and/or as a form of support. Stated differently, many saw a
double benefit in having conversations with others, which would have led to the
development of their mental frames pertaining to ‘view of others’, as illustrated in Figure 22 (see page 257). The value of sensemaking conversations was perceived in the different perspectives they gained rather than relying on their personal mental frames, which is regarded as essential for effective sensemaking (Ancona, 2011; Schwandt, 2005). Supportive conversations, on the other hand, were valued as a form of coping and for reassurance, which concurs with the importance of social support during uncertainty in the literature (Brashers, 2001; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002). However, participants’ choices, about whom to converse with for sensemaking and/or for support purposes, were determined by their preferences, relationships and trust, in support of Brasher’s views (2001).

In sum, the findings suggest that having conversations which foster meaningful dialogue and social support, both of which facilitate more effective sensemaking and emotion-focused coping, are crucial for one’s capability for uncertainty. The implication for executive coaching is that the coaching process can be perceived as one which facilitates sense-making conversations, as argued by du Toit (2007, 2014). In addition, the coaching relationship itself can be a source of support to executives. However, in terms of developing clients’ capability for uncertainty, coaches can assist their clients in thinking through their approaches adopted in their sensemaking conversations with others, to enhance their sensemaking. Further, coaches can encourage clients to tap into their support systems more effectively.

7.3.3 Key theme 3: Leadership during uncertainty

All executives had views on which leadership principles or approaches were of value to them when leading during the period of uncertainty in their organisational contexts. Key findings clustered around developing a leadership approach which engages others, the need for leadership focus and adaptability, and effective communication principles, which resulted in development of the executives’ mental frames regarding their ‘view of others’, as depicted in Figure 22 on page 257.
7.3.3.1 Leadership through engaging others

A key finding was that most executives had, as a result of leading through the uncertainty, developed aspects of their personal leadership approach, with an emphasis on involving and engaging their people on the issues and way forward in their context of uncertainty. This leadership approach concurs with an enabling leadership approach which some authors, with a complex adaptive systems perspective, suggest is crucial in increasingly turbulent times, to foster engagement that builds adaptive capacity within organisations (Heifetz et al., 2009; Lane & Martin, 2010; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The implication for executive coaches is to keep abreast of developments and trends in leadership approaches relevant to increasingly turbulent times. Adaptive complex systems theory developed by Stacy (1996) and the Cynefin framework of Snowden and Boone (2007) may be useful lenses for executive coaches, in working with executives’ leadership approach during organisational uncertainty.

7.3.3.2 The importance of focus and adaptability

The importance of focus was identified by most executives as having been essential for leadership in relation to their experienced complexity. This linked to their realisation that they could not control or influence all the variables in their context, hence needing to focus on what could be influenced. Such focus was achieved largely through developing strategies, priorities and plans. Yet the importance of balancing their focus with adaptability, given the context of uncertainty and complexity, was emphasised, for example, adapting their strategies or plans when new information emerged.

By providing focus, the participants were also facilitating sensegiving, viewed in the literature as providing sufficient direction, clarifying boundaries and what to focus on during uncertainty (Goffee & Jones, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009; Tichy & Bennis, 2007). However, such sensegiving needs to be coupled with processes of emergent strategy and adaptive course-correction by engaging people in these (Heifetz et al., 2009; Lane & Martin, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). My findings therefore support the literature in terms of the importance of focus, coupled with adaptability, for leadership during uncertainty. The implication for executive coaching, when assisting clients in their leadership role in dealing with experienced complexity, is to explore with them how to develop a focus for moving forward, while encouraging involvement of their people and
incorporating processes for adaptability. Again, the implication is that coaches need to update themselves on leadership development theories relevant to increasing turbulence, complexity and uncertainty, to enable them to challenge and support their executive clients more effectively.

**7.3.3.3 Communication principles**

Communication was perceived by most executives as being important during times of uncertainty. To be effective, the findings suggested that such communication must be open and honest, and regular, however, several participants in Company R, in which there was a formal communication protocol, felt there was scope to have been more transparent, and would aspire to do this in future. One participant in Company R, for example, learned that people were more tolerant of uncertainty than he expected, and realised that they were able to deal with honest, even bad news. These communication principles highlighted by the executives align with those espoused in the change leadership literature (for example, Buchannan, 2008; Karp & Helgo, 2008).

Furthermore, a key finding was that executives highlighted the need for coming to terms with their own personal uncertainty, as it would affect their communication with their people. This last point reinforces the need for effective personal sensemaking of one’s context of uncertainty and/or experience of uncertainty, in order to facilitate sensegiving for others. The importance of leaders being able to regulate their emotions to convey a calm demeanour to people, in order to contain their anxiety, has been emphasised (Day & Power, 2009; Gardner et al., 2009; Lane & Down, 2010; White & Shullman, 2010).

These findings therefore suggest that effective communication principles are crucial for guiding leaders in their approach to communication during organisational uncertainty. The implication for executive coaching is to be aware of approaches in change leadership, which one can draw from to challenge and support clients in their leadership roles during organisational uncertainty. More importantly, executive coaches can assist executives with their personal sensemaking of their context of uncertainty, to enable them to provide more effective sensegiving to others.
7.3.3.4 Political skill

A surprising finding was that only four executives identified political skill as an area of development, although most had identified corporate politics as a key challenge in their leadership role. My interpretation was that the four participants who acknowledged development of their political skill did so because they were in a more senior role, which necessitated more political skill in interfacing with key stakeholders. The other participants possibly did not highlight development of political skill due to their negative perception of and discomfort with politics, which was emphasised by most participants as being core to their challenge in having to navigate corporate politics.

While these negative perceptions of politics are evident in the literature (Ashraf & Iqbal, 2011; Buchanan, 2008), political skill is also seen as essential for leaders in organisations undergoing change (Ashraf & Iqbal, 2011; Buchanan, 2008; Buchanan & Badham, 2011; Cook et al., 2004). However, political skill is not focused on in leadership development programmes (Buchanan & Badham (2011), and is scarce in the executive coaching literature, as noted by Close (2013). The implication for executive coaching is to help executives reframe their perceptions of politics, and to learn the benefits of constructive political skill in their role, through active experimentation.

7.4 Executive coaches’ experience in assisting executives with uncertainty

The discussion in this section relates to the following research objective in Phase 2:

| Research objective 3: To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty |

The findings will be further interpreted in relation to the executive coaching literature, of which there is a paucity on the key concepts focused on in this study, as noted by specific authors in relation to these concepts, namely, personal uncertainty or self-doubt (Hindmarch, 2008), sensemaking (du Toit, 2007) and identity development (Butcher, 2012). The discussion of the main findings will align with the four key categories identified, as illustrated in Figure 23 below.
Figure 23. Executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with uncertainty

7.4.1 Category 1: Types of uncertainty emerging in executive coaching

All the executive coaches had clearly observed experienced uncertainty of executive leaders (their clients) in their executive coaching practice. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the categories and themes for the felt uncertainty experienced by the executive leaders in Phase 1 were adopted for the analysis of the executive coaches’ interviews in Phase 2. The key finding in Phase 2 was that the executive coaches reported similar types of uncertainty experienced in their executive clients as those experienced by the executive leaders in Phase 1. For this reason the executive coaches’ findings will not be discussed in depth for the sub-categories and themes as this would be a duplication of the discussion in Phase 1. Rather, a few of the main findings in Phase 2 will be discussed in relation to the executive coaching literature.

Similar to the felt uncertainty experienced by the executives in Phase 1, the executive coaches observed both personal uncertainty and challenges in their clients’ leadership roles, as depicted in Figure 23. The inter-relationship between their client’s personal uncertainty and the challenges experienced in their leadership roles was also similar to the findings for the executives in Phase 1.
7.4.1.1 Sub-category: Personal uncertainty

In terms of personal uncertainty, both identity uncertainty and anticipatory uncertainty were prevalent themes, although the uncertainty was not expressed by the executive coaches in these terms. The identity uncertainty manifested in their executive clients as self-doubt, decreased confidence, being unsure and even fear due to a diminished sense of identity, accompanied by a loss of personal agency. This finding supports the research by Hindmarch (2008), who explored self-doubt as a phenomenon in managerial coaching clients. The identity uncertainty experienced by the executive clients in the present study occurred mostly in relation to transitions, which confirms the studies of Buckle (2009), Hindmarch (2008) and Reynolds (2011). These three studies all identified the challenges of transitions as being a major source of uncertainty for executives or senior leaders, also a key finding of the executive leaders’ experience in Phase 1 of my study. Hence, the implication is that executive coaches need to be aware of the potential for identity uncertainty to arise when working with clients in transition within their organisational contexts.

Furthermore, a few executive coaches in the current study also spoke about uncertainty relating to personal meaning in their clients’ careers and/or life, which was more existential in nature and experienced by one executive in Phase 1. Existential uncertainty is widely referred to as a given in life, and may be a motivator for self-improvement (Segal, 2011; van Deurzen, 2012). Thus executive coaches also need to be aware of existential concerns manifesting as a type of identity uncertainty, triggered in clients’ organisational and/or personal contexts.

Anticipatory uncertainty was also observed in the executive coaches’ clients, particularly in relation to potential job loss and the appointment of a new CEO or board, similar to the executive leaders’ experience in Phase 1. This type of felt uncertainty appeared to be intense, manifesting as apprehension or worry, in the present, about a potential future threat to them, implying future issues of identity. While anticipatory uncertainty did not appear to feature explicitly in the executive coaching literature, executive coaches need to be aware of this type of uncertainty in working with executives, and its particular intensity.
**7.4.1.2 Sub-category: Leadership challenges**

The executive coaches’ most prevalent perceptions of uncertainty experienced by their executive clients, in relation to challenges in their leadership roles, were experienced complexity and corporate politics. These findings were similar to those of the executive leaders. Although managing other peoples’ uncertainty, a key finding in Phase 1, was not a prevalent theme across the executive coaches, it was reported by two.

**Experienced complexity** was observed in the participants’ executive clients as pressure, stress, feeling out of control and even helplessness in dealing with many variables and constant change in their contexts. This type of felt uncertainty was also observed in the study of Buckle and Slyce (2010), who differentiated between the uncertainty ‘felt’ by leaders and the external uncertainty and/or complexity in their contexts. The executive coaches in my study also reported that their clients’ experienced complexity included the challenge of managing paradoxes, which concurs with Buckle and Slyce (2010). Further, experienced complexity in transitions of newly-appointed senior leaders, was emphasised by Reynolds (2011), in terms of moving to a more strategic role, while needing to recalibrate working relationships with different key stakeholders. She also observed how the experienced complexity manifested in feeling overwhelmed and out of control (Reynolds, 2011), as observed by the executive coaches in my study.

**Corporate politics** was observed by the executive coaches as increasing the uncertainty felt at executive level among peers, mainly due to increased competitiveness and distrust. Although corporate politics is being acknowledged and debated in the leadership literature (Buchanan & Badham, 2011), there is a scarcity in the coaching literature, as acknowledged by Close (2013). Different from the findings of the executive leaders in Phase 1 was that the executive coaches did not emphasise the negative perceptions of corporate politics, or perceived difficulty of political skill, as sources of felt uncertainty for their clients. Thus, executive coaches should be aware of executives’ possible discomfort and negative perceptions about politics and political skill, and the need to explore these in more depth with them.
In sum, the executive coaches’ observations on the types of uncertainty emerging in their coaching practice largely support the executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty in Phase 1 of my study, with some variation noted. These findings (from Phase 1 and Phase 2) thus make a contribution towards a more in-depth understanding of the nature and types of uncertainty experienced by executive leaders, extending the knowledge about what types of uncertainty may arise in executive coaching and how these may manifest as felt uncertainty. Consequently, executive coaches should anticipate the possibility of these types of uncertainty when working with executive clients in changing organisational contexts and when experiencing transitions. Moreover, existential concerns may result in identity uncertainty related to personal meaning.

7.4.2 Category 2: How issues of uncertainty arise during coaching

The findings in terms of how the participants perceived clients’ issues of uncertainty to arise during executive coaching clustered around two key themes, namely, uncertainty emerges during the coaching, and trust facilitates the emergence of uncertainty.

**Uncertainty emerges during the coaching**

The executive coaches suggested that issues of uncertainty were generally not the presenting issues when coaching commenced with an executive client, mostly because executives felt vulnerable about sharing their uncertainty. Some coaches referred to clients even presenting a façade of confidence when the coaching commenced. The key finding therefore was executive coaches perceived that issues of uncertainty tended to emerge during the coaching process, or as it progressed, as shown in Figure 23. This finding also attests to the flexibility of the coaches in adapting to their clients’ emerging personal issues, as opposed to the presenting coaching purposes, stressed as being important for coaches by Fillery-Travis and Cavvichia (2013).

My finding, that issues of uncertainty tend to emerge during the coaching, is consistent with that of Hindmarch (2008), that self-doubt was not explicitly presented at the start of the coaching process. Cavvichia (2012) also argued that because there are high expectations of executives to be outwardly confident, they find it difficult to be vulnerable when entering a coaching partnership. Clients’ self-doubt was often hidden, according to
Hindmarch (2008), and needed to be teased out, and she noticed that many of the coaching clients used metaphors to describe their self-doubt. Likewise, many executives in Phase 1 of my study used metaphors to describe their felt uncertainty.

Some of the executive coaches alluded to the hidden nature of uncertainty, emphasising the need to be mindful of the nuances in how clients’ uncertainty showed up, and to listen specifically for what they were saying. The implication is that executive coaches need to be attuned to the vulnerable and emotional aspect of uncertainty. Hindmarch (2008) also recommended that coaches listen to their clients’ language and their use of metaphors in describing their state of self-doubt.

**Trust facilitates the emergence of uncertainty**

Given the preceding finding, that executive clients tend to find it difficult to share their vulnerabilities, the executive coaches emphasised the importance of establishing trust in the coaching relationship to provide a safe environment in which their clients can express and share their uncertainty. There is consensus in the executive coaching literature on the importance of the coaching relationship for building trust and safety to be effective and helpful to the client (for example, de Haan et al., 2011; Hill, 2010), yet appreciating that the trust builds over time (Alvey & Barclay, 2007). However, in working with uncertainty during coaching, the findings of the present study point to a trusting coaching relationship being even more critical for executive clients wishing to share their vulnerability, as depicted in Figure 23 on page 266. This finding is borne out in the work of Hindmarch (2008) and Reynolds (2011), who found that clients emphasised the value of the coaching relationship and trust when experiencing self-doubt due to transitions.

### 7.4.3 Category 3: Approach to working with uncertainty

The executive coaches were asked to describe their coaching approach with reference to one specific example of working with an executive client’s issue of uncertainty. Consequently, because of the nature of the examples selected by the participants, the findings focus primarily on the participants’ coaching approach adopted for identity uncertainty and/or experienced complexity. The inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty was highlighted in the findings of both Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches). The key findings on the executive
coaches’ approach to working with clients’ issues of uncertainty in their coaching practice are discussed next, under two sub-categories.

7.4.3.1 Sub-category: Use of general coaching approach

A key finding was that the executive coaches used their general coaching approach in working with their executive clients’ issues of uncertainty when they emerged, thus concurring with Hindmarch’s (2008) finding that coaches used their general coaching approach in working with clients’ self-doubt. All of the executive coaches in the present study emphasised raising self-awareness as a key part of their general coaching approach, which has been established as a core component of most coaching approaches (Grant, 2006; De Meuse et al., 2009).

A key observation was that most executive coaches made sense of their approach to working with uncertainty during the research interviews. This sensemaking was acknowledged by several of them, thereby implying that working with uncertainty was not an explicit focus of their coaching, particularly the notion of developing capability for uncertainty. Instead, most viewed uncertainty as being implicit, or an underlying theme, to their coaching. They therefore used their general eclectic or intuitive coaching approach in working with their clients’ uncertainty, adopting certain techniques within their repertoire. The benefits of having a broader repertoire of tools and techniques have been noted in the coaching literature (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011; Cox et al., 2014), particularly in enabling flexibility of coaches in adapting to clients’ needs or issues.

In contrast, one executive coach in the present study specifically adapted his general coaching approach for working with uncertainty because his coaching niche focused on transitions and renewal. This coach included additional models and tools that related to aspects of transitions and uncertainty. Notably, Reynolds (2011) advocated that executive coaches possess a wide repertoire of skills when working with senior leaders in transition, when a range of challenges and issues of uncertainty tend to arise. Supporting the broadening of one’s coaching repertoire, some authors (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Glunk & Follini, 2011) have suggested that executive coaches include additional tools or models in their coaching approach for working with clients’ paradoxes, which manifest as part of clients’ experienced complexity. Other authors argue that coaches
need to expand their perspectives and coaching approaches to better serve clients in an increasingly turbulent environment (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-travis, 2011). The key implication from these findings is that executive coaches need to consider expanding their general coaching approach and repertoire for working with their executive clients’ uncertainty, towards developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty more explicitly. Doing this would require coaches to be more intentional about developing executives’ capability for uncertainty.

7.4.3.2 Sub-category: Key strategies for working with uncertainty

Although the executive coaches in the study had different coach training and educational backgrounds, the findings suggest that there were common key strategies used by most of them for working with clients’ issues of uncertainty, namely:

- Developing the client’s self-awareness;
- Facilitating the client’s shift towards acceptance of uncertainty;
- Assisting the client to focus on what can be controlled; and
- Generating actions in the client’s context of uncertainty.

**Developing the client’s self-awareness**

While the executive coaches focused on increasing clients’ self-awareness in their general coaching approach, they all emphasised the importance of raising self-awareness in working with clients’ uncertainty. Most coaches made a distinction between the ‘being’ and the ‘doing’ of their clients. Their key rationale was that by first focusing on increased self-awareness (the ‘being’ of their clients) this stimulated their clients’ choices and options (or their ‘doing’) for moving forward in their context of uncertainty. However, there were some different foci and approaches adopted by the coaches in developing their clients’ self-awareness. Most focused on self-awareness of who the client was as a person, that is, their clients’ values, purpose and beliefs, to facilitate the grounding or anchoring of their clients. The rationale for this approach was that it provided an internal compass for guiding the clients’ choices and actions in their contexts of uncertainty. Such an approach is advocated by some authors when coaches are supporting clients to engage with uncertainty (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Hudson, 2008). Another key approach adopted by participants was helping their clients to become aware of their limiting beliefs or assumptions, then challenging these, to enable them to
move forward. This approach concurs with Hindmarch (2008) and Reynolds (2011), who found that clients particularly valued gaining a shift in their perspective and thinking patterns in dealing with self-doubt and/or transitions.

A key finding in the present study was that the executive coaches’ approach to developing their clients’ self-awareness suggests they worked more with clients’ identity, framed as a psychological construct, rather than a socio-psychological construct in which identity is mediated by social processes. My finding lends support to Butcher (2012), who found that many executive coaches emphasised the psychological construct of identity, with the social psychological aspect of identity construction being acknowledged less. The literature also suggests that the concept of identity should be viewed as more fluid and fragmented, comprising multiple identities, and in the process of ‘becoming’ rather than being a relatively stable and coherent concept (Alvesson & Wenglen, 2010). The focus on ‘being’ by the executive coaches in my study implies that executive coaches possibly need to adopt a lens of identity construction which is ongoing, more complex and in the process of ‘becoming’, because identity construction should not be viewed as a one-time process (Day & Sin, 2011; Sinclair, 2011).

One exception was a coach who focused on developing his client’s awareness of “how he showed up” in his context. This approach focused on self-awareness within the client’s context, with an appreciation of the dynamics in his context as a basis for making changes. His coaching approach aligns with du Toit (2007), who suggests that coaches could enhance their clients’ sensemaking by supporting them in raising awareness of their perspectives or assumptions pertaining to self, others and their context. Thus, the implication for executive coaches, in working with clients’ uncertainty, is to frame identity construction from both an individual and a social perspective, meaning the adoption of a socio-psychological lens (Butcher, 2012), and to view identity construction as a continuous, complex process of becoming (Sinclair, 2011).

**Facilitating the client’s shift towards acceptance of uncertainty**

All the executive coaches appreciated the pervasiveness of and dynamic nature of uncertainty, therefore stressing the need for shifting their executive clients towards acceptance of uncertainty or facing up to the reality of their context of uncertainty. This
finding concurs with Cavvichia (2012), who suggests that coaches normalise clients’ felt uncertainty and help them to accept their uncertainty within the flux of uncertainty in life. While most participants did not articulate clearly how they approached shifting their clients towards acceptance of uncertainty, one used a metaphor, the oscillations of a pendulum, to explain the flux of uncertainty and certainty in life to her clients.

The one participant who had developed his general coaching approach and repertoire for working specifically with transition and change was explicit in how he worked with a client to face up to the reality of her uncertain context, acknowledging that the culture was very different from what she had expected when she joined the company. After reaching a point of acceptance of her context she was then able to generate options for moving forward. Facilitating such interpretation of one’s context is core to sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Thus, du Toit (2007) suggested that coaches could enhance their clients’ sensemaking by exploring and challenging their mental models, particularly in relation to their clients’ past experience, expectations and illusions, which is what this executive coach did in the present study. Hindmarch (2008) and Reynolds (2011) also proposed that executive coaches support their clients to assess their contexts of uncertainty realistically. The implication for executive coaching is to assist clients with their sensemaking, challenging their illusions and expectations so that they face up to a different interpretation or reality of their uncertain context, helping them to foster acceptance of uncertainty to enable them to move forward.

**Assisting the client to focus on what can be controlled**

When executive coaches in the present study worked with executive clients’ felt uncertainty, which was experienced complexity, they helped their clients to focus on what they could control. Their clients experienced feeling out of control or overwhelmed due to dealing with many variables in their context. By encouraging their clients to focus on what they could control, influence and/or do, their clients’ sense of agency increased helping them to move forward. This finding supports Hindmarch (2008), who found that coaches adopted this approach when supporting clients who experienced a lack of control. Likewise, Buckle and Slyce (2010) advocated this approach for working with clients coping in contexts in which the uncertainty cannot be resolved. Consequently,
the implication for executive coaches is to help their clients to focus on what they can control or influence when their clients’ felt uncertainty is experienced complexity.

**Generating actions in the client’s context of uncertainty**

The above three strategies adopted by the executive coaches (that is, developing self-awareness, fostering acceptance of uncertainty and focusing on what can be controlled) all appeared to result in energising the client to generate actions for moving forward (as shown in Figure 23 on page 266). These actions increased the clients’ sense of agency, thereby helping to reduce their felt uncertainty. Most of the actions or skills being implemented or experimented with by the clients, related to leadership and/or interpersonal approaches in their contexts. These actions therefore seemed to support the identity development of their clients, although the executive coaches did not refer to it as such. The implication is that the executive coaches might be working implicitly with socio-psychological aspects of identity construction, as found by Butcher (2012). My findings therefore lend support for Butcher’s (2012) view that identity construction, based on a socio-psychological construct, needs to become an explicit lens adopted within executive coaching. Moreover, my findings suggest this lens is important for working with clients’ uncertainty, towards developing their capability for uncertainty.

**7.4.3.3 Sub-category: Positive identity as a key coaching outcome for clients**

When the executive coaches were asked to describe their coaching approach with reference to one specific example of working with a client’s uncertainty, they were also asked to share the outcomes they observed in that client. One prevalent outcome was observed across the participants, which was a shift in their clients’ sense of identity, which I termed ‘positive identity’. This finding supports what was found in Phase 1, that is, most of the executive leaders developed a sense of positive identity as an outcome of their lived experience of uncertainty. The executive coaches specifically observed an increase in confidence and personal agency of their executive clients consistent with the findings of Reynolds (2011) in coaching leaders through transitions, which reflected a sense of positive identity in their leadership roles, as described in the identity literature (Day et al., 2009). Several also emphasised the role of positive feedback and recognition from key stakeholders in facilitating their clients’ increased confidence and sense of agency within their contexts. This finding suggests that the clients’ social
context was a factor in developing their sense of positive identity, lending further support for having an explicit socio-psychological lens of identity construction in executive coaching (Butcher, 2012; DeRue et al., 2009; Sinclair, 2011).

The executive coaches did not seem to view their coaching as facilitating their clients' identity construction, although many were doing so implicitly. This finding supports Butcher's (2012) assertion that the lens of identity construction has not been integrated within the executive coaching field, a concept that has become increasingly important in leader and executive development (Day et al., 2009; Nicholson & Carroll, 2013; Sinclair, 2011), suggesting it be included within executive coaching education and practice.

7.5 Executive coaches’ views on a capability for uncertainty

The discussion in this section relates to the following research objective in Phase 2:

Research objective 4: To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’

The executive coaches were asked to give their view on indicators of a ‘capability for uncertainty’ in executive leaders, my intention being to explore their perspectives and to draw implications for executive coaching towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. The findings will be discussed under two sub-categories.

7.5.1.1 Sub-category 1: Indicators of a capability for uncertainty

The four most prevalent indicators of a capability for uncertainty are listed in Figure 24.

Figure 24. Executive coaches’ views on indicators of a capability for uncertainty

- An openness to different perspectives
- A sense of positive identity (self-awareness and self-confidence)
- An acceptance of uncertainty
- A learning orientation.
The discussion of the indicators of a capability for uncertainty follows the sequence in the Figure 24. The findings will be interpreted in relation to the literature on factors considered to be crucial for a capability for uncertainty and relevant executive coaching literature. I will also highlight where the executive coaches’ views align with the capability for uncertainty developed by the executive leaders, through their lived experience, as found in Phase 1 of the study.

**Openness to different perspectives**

Executive coaches saw the need for an openness to different views and perspectives as important in a capability for uncertainty in executive leaders. Furthermore, this was linked with executives needing to have the flexibility to change or adjust their own views or perspectives. This finding concurs with authors who argue that effective sensemaking is essential for leaders (Ancona, 2011; du Toit, 2007; Schwandt, 2005), which requires the broadening of mental frames and perspectives through engaging with others. This indicator is aligned with my findings from Phase 1, in which executives emphasised the value of having conversations with others for more effective sensemaking. Further, the HR sponsors of coaching, in research by Buckle (2009), viewed flexibility in perspectives as important when developing senior leaders to engage with uncertainty.

**Sense of positive identity (self-awareness and self-confidence)**

The executive coaches spoke about self-awareness and self-confidence, which taken together suggested that it was a sense of positive identity that would be important for executive leaders. The HR sponsors of coaching in Buckle’s study (2009) saw confidence as being essential for senior leaders to engage with uncertainty, an indicator referred to in the literature as a sense of positive identity (Dutton et al., 2010), that aligns with the positive identity which most executives developed through their lived experience of uncertainty in Phase 1 of my study. A positive leader identity is essential for effective leadership in uncertain contexts (Day et al., 2009; Karp & Helgo, 2009; Klenke, 2007).

It was noticeable that the executive coaches’ notion of identity focused on personal identity (who am I, or the ‘being’ of the client), whilst other aspects of identity, such as leader, were not explicit. However, two participants did view interpersonal abilities as being an indicator of a capability for uncertainty, inferring the importance of leadership skills and relationships and possibly alluding to aspects of leader and social identity.
Thus, the implication for executive coaches is to have a broader theory and socio-psychological lens of identity construction informing their coaching approaches, as advocated by Butcher (2012), in developing executives’ sense of positive identity, crucial for enhancing their capability for uncertainty.

**Acceptance of uncertainty**
While most executive coaches indicated that their coaching approach focused on shifting their clients’ towards acceptance of uncertainty, they generally were not explicit on how they approached this, as mentioned above. Only two participants spoke about observing acceptance of uncertainty as an outcome of their coaching, in relation to their specific examples of working with clients’ uncertainty. However, all stressed that an acceptance of uncertainty would be a key indicator of a capability for uncertainty. A possible reason for this apparent discrepancy was that the focus and content of the research interview made the executive coaches more aware of the pervasiveness of uncertainty as an issue for executive clients, acknowledged during their interviews.

This indicator of a capability for uncertainty was emphasised by the executive leaders in Phase 1 of my study, who highlighted that they learned to accept or make peace with uncertainty in their contexts. The literature suggests that acceptance of uncertainty, as an orientation or worldview, is essential for leadership in turbulent times (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Day & Powers, 2009; White & Shullman, 2010). The implication for executive coaching is to explore clients’ worldviews in relation to uncertainty, as suggested by Buckle and Slyce (2010). Coaches need to assist clients with shifting their orientation towards acceptance of uncertainty, by normalising the flux of uncertainty in life, as proposed by Cavvichia (2012), possibly using relevant metaphors which was suggested by two participants in the current study.

**A learning orientation**
The executive coaches perceived a learning orientation to be an indicator of executives’ capability for uncertainty, which would include the ability to think about or reflect on one’s experience and then to apply that learning going forward in one’s context of uncertainty, implying experiential learning. While this indicator was not an explicit finding in Phase 1, one aspect of a learning orientation focused on by the executive leaders was realising the importance of taking a step back and reflecting on one’s context of
uncertainty, while acknowledging that this was difficult to do and that time constraints hindered them.

Lombardo and Echinger (2000) have argued that the ability to learn from experience is essential for leadership in uncertain contexts, yet people differ in their ability to learn from experience (DeRue & Myers, 2013; McCall, 2010). Of note, the executive coaches in my study did not emphasise developing the learning orientation of their clients, and related abilities, such as reflective ability, in their coaching approach. The reason for this lack of emphasis may be that experiential learning and reflection occur implicitly as part of the coaching process (Cox, 2006; Griffiths, 2009), but begs the question as to whether coaches could be doing this more explicitly to develop their clients’ learning abilities. Hence, the implication for executive coaches is to consider ways to further develop the learning orientation of their clients, as suggested by DeRue and Ashford (2010a), towards enhancing their capability for uncertainty; for example, by focusing on developing their clients’ experiential learning and reflective abilities more explicitly.

7.5.1.2 Sub-category 2: Implications for executive coaching

The key implications, from the participants’ reflections on the content of their research interviews and the concept of a capability for uncertainty, for executive coaching were:

- The extent of uncertainty with which clients are living, and the need for executive coaches to be cognisant of clients’ experienced uncertainty potentially emerging within their coaching practice;
- The need for coaches to focus more explicitly on developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty or their acceptance of uncertainty; and
- The need for coaches to be comfortable with uncertainty and aware of their own orientation to uncertainty when working with clients’ experienced uncertainty, which aligns with the views of Buckle and Slyce (2010).

While these were not prevalent themes in my study, the participants’ views lend some support for authors who argue for executive coaches to adapt their perspectives and coaching approaches to better meet the changing needs of clients in an increasingly turbulent and demanding environment (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). Given the scarcity of literature on
the subject of executive uncertainty (Preece & Iles, 2009), coupled with executives' increasingly turbulent environment, the present study points to the need for more consideration of uncertainty in the executive coaching field. This finding concurs with Day and Power (2009) and White and Shullman (2010), who proposed that executive coaching be one option for developing leaders’ capability for uncertainty.

The findings of my study also suggest that when working with clients’ experienced uncertainty, executive coaches need to adopt a more explicit intention of assisting their clients to further develop their capability for uncertainty. This requires coaches to have longer-term purposes of their coaching, as suggested by Flaherty (2006) and Peterson (2006), which aligns with my view. Further, these findings make a contribution towards clarifying what a holistic capability for uncertainty is, thereby possibly assisting HR sponsors (of coaching in organisations) and executive coaches in understanding the development needs for executives and senior leaders in times of increasing turbulence.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter focused on a discussion of the findings for Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches) through interpreting them in relation to the extant literature. Implications for executive coaching were also drawn.

The findings of Phase 1 of this qualitative study make a contribution to both the uncertainty literature and the leadership literature, by giving an in-depth understanding of the nature and dynamics of the phenomenon of experienced uncertainty by executive leaders in two companies with different time periods of organisational uncertainty. The executives’ range of emotional responses (with shifts in these over time) and approach to making sense of their uncertainty, all appeared to align more with uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001) and sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005), rather than uncertainty reduction theory (Van den Bos, 2009). My findings suggest that the executives’ overall felt uncertainty, due to concurrent and inter-related types of personal uncertainty and leadership challenges, came down primarily to issues of identity and decreased personal agency, confirming that sensemaking is filtered through issues of identity, as posited by Weick (1995). Hence, identity sensemaking, that is, sensemaking
in relation to issues of identity, and identity construction are a key part of approaching and managing executives’ felt uncertainty.

The current study’s findings therefore add to the body of knowledge by conveying more understanding of how the processes of sensemaking and identity construction in relation to felt uncertainty unfold and relate to each other, which was not clear in the literature (Brown, 2014). For example, as illustrated in Figure 25 (below), in experiencing issues of identity and decreased personal agency, executives faced up to who they needed to be, or wanted to be in their context of uncertainty, that is, identity sensemaking, as a basis for building or restoring their identity (identity construction).

![Figure 25. Linkages between uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction](image)

These findings therefore contribute to linkage across uncertainty management, sensemaking and identity construction, implying that an integration of these theoretical lenses would be useful in executive coaching that focuses on developing capability for uncertainty.

The findings, on what capability the executives developed through their lived experience of uncertainty, identified potential components for developing a capability for uncertainty.
These identified components were generally confirmed in the literature, and this study integrates them within the concept of a holistic capability for uncertainty. Of note, the development of a sense of positive identity from the lived experience of uncertainty was a key finding, confirming the identity construction component of sensemaking and managing uncertainty, as depicted in Figure 25. This positive identity construction appeared to be rooted in a social process of negotiation, recognition and reciprocity with key stakeholders in the executives’ contexts, giving credence to a socio-psychological construct of identity construction (Beech, 2011; Sinclair, 2011).

The findings of Phase 2 make a contribution to understanding how executive coaches perceive and work with executive clients’ uncertainty, on which there is a scarcity in the coaching literature. While the coaches used their general coaching approach and certain common strategies flexibly, a key finding was that they viewed uncertainty as being implicit to their coaching. In working with their clients’ uncertainty, the coaches emphasised raising their clients’ self-awareness, seemingly based on a psychological construct of identity. Yet the actions that the coaches facilitated with their clients to move forward mostly involved interpersonal approaches, suggesting an acknowledgement of the social factors in identity construction. However, the coaches did not refer explicitly to the concepts of sensemaking and identity construction, concurring with the paucity in the coaching literature on these concepts (Butcher, 2012; du Toit, 2007, 2014). The executive coaches identified four prevalent indicators of a capability for uncertainty, which are confirmed in the literature. A prevalent outcome observed by the coaches, after working with their clients’ uncertainty, was a sense of positive identity, which aligns with the executives’ lived experience in Phase 1 of my study. While some coaches saw value in focusing on developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, my findings suggest that coaches need to have a longer term view of their coaching purposes and to expand their repertoires to develop such capability more explicitly, which is required in these turbulent times (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

The next chapter will present the proposed coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.
CHAPTER 8
COACHING FRAMEWORK AND GUIDELINES

8.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter the findings of Phase 1 (executive leaders’ experience of uncertainty) and Phase 2 (executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive clients’ uncertainty) were discussed and interpreted in relation to the extant literature. This chapter addresses the final research objective in Phase 3 of the study:

| Research objective 5: To propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty |

This chapter presents the coaching framework and guidelines informed by the integration of findings across Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches), and drawing from relevant literature and theory. The integration of the findings was explained in the analysis for Phase 3 of the study in the methodology chapter (chapter 4, section 4.3.7.3). The meaning of a coaching framework will first be explained, followed by an outline of the specific framework proposed towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, that is, the ability to engage with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty. Lastly, guidelines for facilitating a coaching process for developing such capability are presented.

8.2 The meaning of a coaching framework

A coaching framework is different to a conceptual framework. A conceptual framework “lays out the key factors, constructs, or variables, and presumes relationships amongst them” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 440). In the coaching profession, a coaching framework is a structure which gives coaches a systemic way of formulating their coaching approach to facilitate certain outcomes for their clients (Stout-Rostron, 2014). The structure I used to develop the coaching framework in the current study is guided by the formulation framework developed by Lane and Corrie (2006) in applied psychology, as shown in Figure 26 below. These authors, since then, have advocated that this formulation framework be used in the field of coaching (or coaching psychology), and may therefore be adapted or tailored to different coaching purposes and/or contexts (Corrie & Lane, 2010; Lane & Corrie, 2009).
The above coaching framework is systemic, suggesting that the coaching approach needs to be fit-for-purpose. Being ‘fit-for-purpose’ means that the perspectives inform the process to facilitate the desired outcomes aligned with the purpose (Lane & Corrie, 2009). The framework has feed forward and feedback loops between its components (as depicted by the arrows above), so that the process can be adapted to meet the clients’ needs, or changing needs, in their contexts. The purpose of the coaching approach is relevant to whom one coaches (the clients), their context and their stakeholders. The tangible outcomes, in behaviour, learning and results, are those which clients achieve as an outcome of the coaching process. The perspectives are those of the coach, which inform the coaching process towards achieving the desired purpose and outcomes. These perspectives relate to the coach’s values, beliefs and stance – and their theoretical perspectives, or lenses.

A key benefit of this coaching framework is its adaptive systemic nature in terms of being designed towards a purpose and desired outcomes, while being adaptive in doing so. Moreover, it lends itself to an eclectic coaching approach, which a coach develops over time (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011), and in relation to different outcomes required by clients in a changing environment (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). Thus, coaches can add new perspectives and evolve their coaching process, by including new foci, tools and techniques informed by the new perspectives, to broaden their repertoires for delivering different outcomes aligned with clients’ changing needs. Developing an eclectic approach is advocated by Clutterbuck and Megginson (2011) and Cox et al. (2014). The evolution of one’s coaching framework therefore potentially fosters flexibility...
in a coach’s approach to meet different clients’ needs, while being informed in a systemic manner.

8.3 Coaching framework and guidelines towards developing capability for uncertainty

The coaching framework proposed towards developing executive leaders’ capability is outlined in Figure 27 below. Although this coaching framework appears as a stand-alone framework, this is not my intention. It has been designed systemically so that the different components (perspectives, process and purpose) are aligned with the purpose of developing different components within a holistic capability for uncertainty. However, I suggest that this framework, or aspects of it, be adapted by executive coaches, into their own coaching frameworks, approaches and repertoire. This would enable them to flexibly draw from a broader repertoire when working with clients’ experienced uncertainty, towards developing components of their clients’ capability for uncertainty.

![Figure 27. Coaching framework towards developing capability for uncertainty](image-url)

The above figure illustrates the purpose and the perspectives, with the proposed coaching process linking these. The coaching process is illustrated in more depth in Figure 28, later in this section. The components of the framework are outlined next.
8.3.1 Purpose

The crucial components for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, identified in the literature review, were used as the basis for an integrative analysis of the findings from Phase 1, on what capability for uncertainty the executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty (research objective 2); and from Phase 2, on executive coaches’ views as to what a capability for uncertainty is (research objective 4). Based on this integrative analysis, summarised in Appendix 10, I concluded that my findings mostly confirmed the components identified in the literature review, as being crucial for a holistic capability for uncertainty, which are outlined in Table 81.

Table 81
**Crucial Components for developing a Holistic capability for uncertainty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crucial component</th>
<th>Description of component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A sense of positive identity</td>
<td>• A positive sense of self and leader identity, fostering confidence and personal agency to engage with uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. An acceptance of uncertainty</td>
<td>• A worldview of acceptance of uncertainty, based on an appreciation of the pervasiveness and flux of uncertainty in life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3. Effective sensemaking                               | • Emotional regulation  
  • Gaining new and different perspectives through conversations with others  
  • Challenging own assumptions and thinking patterns  
  • Generating different and more plausible interpretation/s of one’s experienced uncertainty and/or context of uncertainty |
| 4. Learning agility                                    | • More time for reflection and more in-depth, critical reflection  
  • Willingness and ability to learn from the experience of uncertainty (learning orientation and experiential learning) |
| 5. Leadership approach during uncertainty              | • Dealing with experienced complexity, influencing key stakeholders (political skill) and leading people during uncertainty. |

There was strong alignment across the literature review and the findings across the executive leaders (Phase 1) and the executive coaches (Phase 2) for the first three components in Table 81. There was partial and sufficient alignment on the last two components in the above table, to warrant their inclusion. A key finding is that a sense of positive identity is considered an essential component of a capability for uncertainty,
because it fosters the confidence and personal agency for engaging with current and future experiences of uncertainty. The above indicators of a capability for uncertainty therefore make a contribution to the executive coaching field by providing more clarity to organisational sponsors of coaching and executive coaches. By understanding what a holistic capability for uncertainty is, and what components constitute this, leader development outcomes may be better articulated for developing such capability in executive leaders, that is, the ability to engage with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty.

The five components in Table 81 therefore formed the basis of the possible outcomes, towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, in the purpose section of the coaching framework, depicted in Figure 27 (page 285). The intention of this coaching framework is not to drive the coaching agenda to develop all of these possible outcomes of a holistic capability for uncertainty. Of critical importance, executive coaches need to focus on their client’s agenda. Hence, my suggestion is that coaches focus on those aspects of the coaching process, and related outcomes of a capability for uncertainty, that are more pertinent to the client’s needs or agenda. Coaches therefore need to focus on developing these aspects of their clients’ capability for uncertainty more explicitly, based on the key finding that most of the executive coaches in this study were not doing so. Being more explicit, means that coaches make transparent what they might be doing implicitly in their coaching process – together with making explicit to their clients, the links with a capability for uncertainty, and the benefit of such a capability for them.

### 8.3.2 Perspectives

Based on the findings and the extant literature, the key theoretical lenses of the coach, associated with the development of the outcomes of a capability for uncertainty, are listed in the perspectives component of the coaching framework in Figure 27 (see page 285). These lenses are uncertainty management, sensemaking, identity construction, experiential learning and critical reflection, and leadership theory for turbulent times. The relevance for inclusion of these lenses is explained in Table 82.
Given the theoretical lenses in Table 82, suggested as crucial for facilitating a coaching process which develops executives' capability for uncertainty, the implication for executive coaches is to deepen their understanding of the above theories and to extend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical lens</th>
<th>Relevance for coaching process</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Uncertainty management**  | • Informs the development of an acceptance of uncertainty  
• In working with clients’ experienced uncertainty, it is important to have an appreciation of uncertainty as an emotional state and to understand the flux and dynamics of uncertainty. In addition, coaches need to understand the types of uncertainty and how people respond to uncertainty, yielding a range of possible responses which shift over time. |
| (Brashers, 2001; Buckle, 2009; Penrod, 2007; Smithson, 2008b; Van den Bos, 2009) |                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| **Sensemaking**             | • Informs the development of effective sensemaking  
• Uncertainty energises more effortful sensemaking, but its effectiveness may be hindered. It is crucial for coaches to understand what sensemaking is, the iterative process of sensemaking and what may hinder or enable it - to facilitate clients' effective sensemaking. |
| **Identity construction**   | • Informs the development of a sense of positive identity  
• Felt uncertainty, as a result of concurrent and inter-related types of uncertainty, comes down primarily to issues of identity and decreased personal agency. Hence, identity sensemaking is energised by felt uncertainty, particularly in relation to transitions – and due to challenges in the leadership role. The sensemaking fosters identity construction to build a positive sense of identity (personal, role, leader and/or social ), thereby increasing one’s personal agency. Coaches need to adopt a socio-psychological lens of identity, leader identity - and identity construction, which is a process of 'becoming', rooted in a social process. |
| (Alvesson & Wenglen, 2010; Beech, 2011; Brown, 2014; Butcher, 2012; Day et al., 2009; Dutton et al., 2010; Ibarra, 2004; Ibarra et al; 2013; Sinclair, 2011) |                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| **Experiential learning and critical reflection** | • Informs the development of learning agility  
• Coaches need to focus on clients’ learning orientation and making the experiential learning cycle more explicit, so they learn how to apply it themselves to learn from their experience - a key aspect of learning agility. Coaches also need to explicitly develop the reflective ability of their clients (a step in the experiential learning cycle) – and to encourage them to learn the value of more critical reflection (examining one’s own assumptions), because many executives find reflection difficult to do effectively. |
| (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Cox, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; Kolb, 1984; Lombrado & Eichinger, 2000, 2002; Mc Call, 2010; Mezirow, 2001) |                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| **Leadership theory for turbulent times:** | • Informs the development of intra- and interpersonal frames and abilities essential for leadership in increasingly turbulent and uncertain times  
• In these increasingly turbulent times, coaches need to be aware of other theoretical perspectives which factor in more complexity. Increased complexity engenders experienced complexity by leaders (or felt uncertainty). This can assist coaches to be more effective in supporting and challenging the perspectives of their clients. For example, understanding different leadership approaches for varying degrees of turbulence and stability, the implications for change leadership and how to develop political skill for influencing multiple stakeholders. |
| • Adaptive leadership and complex adaptive systems  
(Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Heifetz et al., 2009; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Stacey, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007)  
• Change leadership (Karp & Helgo, 2008)  
• Political skill or intelligence (Buchanan & Badham, 2011) |                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
their coaching repertoires to include them, or aspects of them. In addition to the above theories, the coaches’ stance is also an important part of their perspectives informing their coaching approach. As suggested by some of the coaches in the study, coaches need to be aware of their orientation to uncertainty, but not to impose it on their clients. My findings concur with Buckle & Slyce (2010), implying that a stance of acceptance of uncertainty and a willingness to engage with uncertainty would be of value to coaches in developing clients’ capability for uncertainty.

For this proposed coaching approach to add maximum value for clients in these times of turbulence, coaches need to view their role as one of developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty in a sustainable way. This means that coaching needs to be approached with a longer-term intention being held by the coach, as argued by Flaherty (2006) and Peterson (2006). Coaches therefore should have an intention of developing clients’ capability for uncertainty which extends beyond the coaching assignment. Such an intention will assist the coach in making explicit certain aspects of the coaching process to the client, which link with and foster a longer-term capability for uncertainty. However, some coaches might view this suggested intention as imposing the coach’s agenda on to the coaching process. My view is that such an intention of the coach is focused on serving the clients’ agenda, while fostering additional outcomes for the client in terms of capability for uncertainty, thereby serving the client beyond the coaching. Thus, the coach is required to flexibly blend the development of the client’s capability for uncertainty with the client’s agenda, when issues of uncertainty emerge in coaching.

8.3.3 Process

In developing the process part of the coaching framework, I integrated key aspects of the two diagrams which synthesised the findings from Phase 1 (executive leaders) and Phase 2 (executive coaches), as illustrated in Appendix 11. My rationale was to integrate the executive leaders’ approach to managing uncertainty (which includes making sense of uncertainty, implementing strategies and actions, and adapting these through further sensemaking) with the executive coaches’ coaching process for working with uncertainty, to generate the coaching process shown in Figure 28 below. This coaching process therefore takes into account the complex phenomenon of executives’ experienced uncertainty, made up of inter-related and concurrent types of uncertainty,
while acknowledging that issues of identity and decreased personal agency form the core aspect of executives’ overall felt uncertainty. Consequently, facilitation of identity sensemaking and identity construction towards developing clients’ sense of positive identity, are a key focus of this coaching process.

Figure 28. Coaching process towards developing capability for uncertainty

Although there are five stages depicted in the above coaching process, it is not a linear process. It therefore needs to be viewed as being iterative and fluid. When working with clients’ experienced uncertainty, the coach must be aware of a key principle in sensemaking, which is that individuals are always in the middle of things (Weick, 1995). The implication of this principle means that when commencing coaching with clients experiencing uncertainty, the clients have most likely been carrying out sensemaking and implemented actions already. Coaches therefore need to meet their clients where they are, in the middle of things, suggesting that the coaching process, or aspects of it, must be applied flexibly from that point.
8.4 Guidelines for facilitating the coaching process

The coaching process towards developing capability for uncertainty is not a prescriptive coaching approach. Rather, it suggests a process, aspects of which may be integrated and used flexibly within executive coaches’ different coaching repertoires. Guidelines are outlined for each of the five main stages of the coaching process, as illustrated in Figure 28 on page 290. While these guidelines are not specific, they suggest key principles, areas of focus, leverage points, and some options to consider - for each stage. In addition, these guidelines assume a level of experience as an executive or leadership coach, with an established and evolving repertoire of skills and techniques.

The rationale for the guidelines is based on an integrative analysis of the implications for executive coaching drawn from the findings related to:

- **Phase 1** – understanding how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty, at a personal level and in their leadership role (research objective 1); and

- **Phase 2** – understanding executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty (research objective 3).

The integrative analysis (see Appendix 9) used the understanding of the executives leaders' lived experience of uncertainty, and what they learned from this (Phase 1 of the study), as the basis for determining implications and leverage points for the proposed coaching process. Thereafter, the executive coaches’ findings were examined to establish how they aligned with or differed from the implications drawn from the executive leaders’ findings. The executive coaches’ strategies and coaching skills, used in working with executive clients’ uncertainty in Phase 2 of the study, are also harnessed within the coaching process, to better leverage clients’ abilities towards developing their capability for uncertainty. An example of this would be developing executive clients’ self-awareness through reflection to enhance their sensemaking, because most executives in Phase 1 did not focus on in-depth self-reflection, due to time constraints in their roles and the difficulty of doing it on their own.

The coaching guidelines for each stage of the coaching process are outlined in Table 83, with reference to the diagram of the coaching process in Figure 28 (page 290).
### Table 83

**Guidelines for Coaches for Each Stage of the Coaching Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidelines for each stage (as per Figure 28 on page 290) – principles and leverage points, with supporting rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAGE 1: DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST IN THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches need to establish a trusting relationship, fostering psychological safety, which will support and enable clients to be vulnerable and share their experienced uncertainty. Executive or senior leaders may present a facade of confidence when they enter into coaching. Issues of uncertainty are therefore not always presented when the coaching commences (that is, when presenting issues or desired outcomes are being discussed). With the establishment of trust, issues of uncertainty are more likely to emerge and to be shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STAGE 2: EXPLORING FELT UNCERTAINTY</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Coaches are encouraged to focus on the following:  
  - To anticipate or expect uncertainty to emerge when coaching clients who are undergoing transitions or organisational change. Transitions are a key trigger for uncertainty (for example: a promotion, being a newcomer, in an acting role, a new boss and/or an acting boss). When organisational change occurs, these tend to initiate re-structuring and such transitions. Leadership challenges, which add to felt uncertainty, will also arise when the organisation is going through change.  
  - To be aware of uncertainty being an emotional and vulnerable state. To listen for, and observe the emotional state of uncertainty and its intensity. To also listen for what is not being said by the client.  
  - To notice clients’ metaphors used to describe their uncertainty – and to explore their metaphors to help clients to articulate their felt experience. Clients own metaphors could be used, or built upon, or reframed, into future or desired metaphors in this coaching process.  

**Overall guiding principles in relation to felt uncertainty:**  
- Coaches need to understand and be aware of the complexity of felt uncertainty – that there are several types of uncertainty which may occur at the same time – and that there is an inter-relationship between personal uncertainty and leadership challenges, which adds to clients’ overall ‘felt’ uncertainty. For example, experienced complexity can result in a decreased sense of agency, leading to identity uncertainty – and vice versa.  
- Overall, the net effect is that the executives’ felt uncertainty primarily comes down to issues of identity and decreased personal agency.  
- In addition, coaches need to appreciate that felt uncertainty is one of flux – of shifting from periods of more intensely felt uncertainty to less felt uncertainty over time. Coaches therefore need to normalise the flux of experienced uncertainty, possibly by getting clients to reflect on their experienced uncertainty in the past – and what they observe about this- and their views about uncertainty in life. Using metaphors which represent this flux of uncertainty might be of value. |
While acknowledging the complexity of uncertainty, it is useful for coaches to appreciate the different types of uncertainty and how they manifest as felt uncertainty.

**Personal uncertainty:**
- To identify **identity uncertainty**, be aware that it manifests as self-doubt, lack of confidence, feeling in limbo, unsure, frustrated, feeling excluded, resulting in diminished personal agency - due to devaluation or loss of one’s identity (pertaining to self, leader and/or social identity). This uncertainty is mostly triggered by transitions, which may be more intense for newcomers to organisations and for individuals in acting roles, who are also contenders for the position. Existential uncertainty related to personal meaning in one’s work and/or life may also manifest as a form of identity uncertainty.
- To identify **anticipatory uncertainty**, be aware that it manifests as worry or apprehension in the present, about a future possible event, which is a potential threat to oneself - and results in a decreased sense of agency. This uncertainty typically is triggered by potential job loss or the appointment of a new boss.

**Leadership challenges during organisational uncertainty:** (which may add to a client’s overall felt uncertainty.
- **Experienced complexity** (due to contextual complexity) manifests in a client as feeling overwhelmed and out of control, resulting in a decreased sense of agency. Frustration in having to manage or balance paradoxes also emerges as part of experienced complexity.
- **Managing other peoples’ uncertainty** tends to manifest as managing other peoples’ need for clarity and information during uncertainty, in the face of the client’s own uncertainty - as leaders tend to be aware of other people monitoring their emotional state during periods of organisational change, using this as a gauge.
- **Uncertainty associated with corporate politics** manifests as a discomfort with politics and diminished trust among peers. Coaches need to be aware of possible negative perceptions about politics – not wanting to play politics, feeling they lack political skill and/or the perceived difficulty of political skill.

**STAGE 3: MAKING SENSE OF UNCERTAINTY**

**The role of emotion in sensemaking**
Uncertainty manifests in a range of emotions with varying intensity, and it is the emotion of felt uncertainty which energises clients to make sense of their felt uncertainty (or sensemaking). Hence, the clients’ sensemaking becomes more conscious and effortful, as opposed to the ongoing more unconscious sensemaking which occurs. The emotion of uncertainty, therefore, is a potential force for personal change.
Guidelines for each stage (as per Figure 28 on page 290) – principles and leverage points, with supporting rationale

It is important to be aware of the intensity (high, moderate or low) and valence (positive or negative) of clients’ emotions – as follows:

- More negative and intensely felt uncertainty may hinder effective sensemaking by a client, resulting in the client reacting (for example, making a hasty decision to leave the company or withdrawing from others in their context). It is therefore crucial to hold the space for clients to express and explore their emotions in a safe space, which will enable them to shift towards more effective sensemaking. This may take some time. Here the coach needs to spend time on the emotion-focused coping component of the client’s sensemaking, outlined below.
- Those clients who experience moderately negative uncertainty, their sensemaking will be energised, often with the initial intent to reduce their uncertainty. The coaching can assist them to make sense of their uncertainty more effectively, towards acceptance of uncertainty.
- For those clients who are positive in their context of uncertainty, they can be assisted to explore opportunities and ways to be innovative or opportunistic in their context.

The components of the sensemaking process

- Coaches need to be aware of sensemaking as a concept and as a process, because it is more conscious and effortful when someone experiences uncertainty. Coaching may also be viewed as a sensemaking process – and in itself can facilitate the clients’ improved sensemaking in relation to their uncertainty.

- However, the intent of this coaching process, when working with clients’ uncertainty, is also to use the opportunity to develop the clients’ capability for uncertainty - to assist them to engage with other and/or future experiences of uncertainty. Hence, a guiding principle for coaches is to make the clients’ sensemaking process more explicit to them. Such explicitness will help clients to understand how they approach sensemaking – and what enables or hinders more effective sensemaking for them. By doing this, the clients will become more conscious of what sensemaking is - and how to harness it within a capability for uncertainty.

- Coaches need to be aware of the five components of sensemaking identified within the sensemaking process of the executive leaders in the present study, because these offer leverage points for the coach to enhance the client’s sensemaking. Coaches also need to make these components more explicit to their clients. The five components are: the clients’ mental frames as filters, the clients’ approaches to seeking more understanding of their experienced uncertainty and/or context, the clients’ interpreting of what is going on in relation to their experienced uncertainty and/or context, the clients’ meaning-making to enhance their motivation to persevere and move forward - and the clients’ emotion-focused coping mechanisms to help regulate their emotional state (crucial for being more calm, which facilitates effective sensemaking). In the case of a client experiencing intense uncertainty, the coach will need to first spend time on the fifth component, emotion-focused coping, which is at the heart of the sensemaking process (see figure 26), because it is essential for shifting the emotional state of the client in order to carry out more effective sensemaking.

Pointers for each component are highlighted next.
Guidelines for each stage (as per Figure 28 on page 290) – principles and leverage points, with supporting rationale

1. Mental frames as filters

- To be aware of clients’ mental frames which filter or influence the clients’ other four components of their sensemaking process in relation to their experienced uncertainty and/or context – and to foster clients’ self-awareness in relation to their mental frames. In particular, their world view (orientation to uncertainty and personal values), self-view (sense of identity, resilience), view of others (orientation to working and relating with other people) and past experience.
- To pay attention to clients’ references to past experience, as this is a key filter - because there is a tendency to compare and contrast past experience with current experience.
- The focus of coaching is to explore, surface and challenge clients’ mental frames, particularly limiting ones in relation to their sensemaking, thereby enabling them to ‘reframe’ their mental frames for more effective sensemaking, in order to move forward. When clients’ reframe their mental frames, the updated or new frames form part of their capability for uncertainty in dealing with future uncertainty, which could be explicitly pointed out to them. Coaches can also help clients to articulate their moral compass (or core values), which may serve as a guide for their clients’ sensemaking and leadership approach in their context of uncertainty.

2. Seeking understanding

To assist clients with how they approach seeking understanding of what is going on in relation to their experienced uncertainty and/or their context of uncertainty. It is important to challenge clients’ approaches to seeking understanding and gaining different perspectives. Coaches need to focus on developing their clients’ self-awareness, awareness of others (key stakeholders in their context, their relationships and social processes in relation to these) and awareness of their context.

There are three iterative and inter-related processes that may be adopted by clients in seeking more understanding:
- **Reading the situation:** To be aware of the cues or patterns which the client notices or pays attention to - and how these inform their sensemaking (especially for newcomers to organisations who may be overly sensitive to dynamics). Could the client be omitting important cues? How reliable are these cues? To what extent is the client generalising and/or distorting in noticing certain cues? What other cues or patterns need to be considered?
- **Engaging others in sensemaking conversations:** To consider who the client is engaging with – and who they are not engaging with in their context, and why. How effective are these conversations? How could these conversations be improved to gain understanding, or a different perspective? Who else needs to be engaged with in sensemaking conversations?
- **Reflection:** Coaching provides an opportunity for the client to step back and reflect more in-depth. Importantly the coach can facilitate increased self-awareness through facilitating their clients’ critical reflection on their own limiting beliefs, assumptions or thinking patterns in relation to their experienced uncertainty and/or context. To specifically develop capability for uncertainty, coaches can explicitly develop the reflective ability of their clients, by making what is being done in the coaching explicit and transparent (for example – highlighting the type of questions to ask that foster critical self-reflection) so that the clients learn how to do it themselves more effectively (that is, developing their learning agility).
### Guidelines for each stage (as per Figure 28 on page 290) – principles and leverage points, with supporting rationale

#### 3. Interpreting

It is important to understand that at the heart of clients’ sensemaking, is ‘interpreting’ (or making an interpretation of) their experienced uncertainty and/or context of uncertainty, so as to develop a plausible account of what is going on - which then promulgates action/s to move forward. For example, in the study, most executives got to a point where they accepted the uncertainty in their contexts, which assisted them to move forward. Coaches need to assist clients to develop plausible interpretations, with the emphasis being on helping clients to reach a different interpretation of reality (and possibly dispelling illusions in doing so).

**NOTE:** While some pointers in terms of the different types of uncertainty are given below, coaches need to be cognisant of the concurrence and inter-relationship of these in their clients’ felt uncertainty. The implication is that coaches will often be working with several of these simultaneously and/or iteratively.

**Sub-category: Personal uncertainty**

- **Identity uncertainty:** To help clients address the questions of ‘who do I want to be, or need to be – or who am I becoming?’ in their context – and aligned with their core values. This forms the heart of identity sensemaking – and will give clients a plausible explanation in order to build, restore or repair their devalued sense of identity.

- **Anticipatory uncertainty:** To help clients to explore and interpret possible scenarios in the future and the impact of these on them (future issues of identity) - in order to make a decision, to take action or to do nothing (wait it out and see what materialises). In other words – to decide, do or delay.

**Sub-category: Leadership challenges**

- **Experienced complexity:** To assist clients to interpret their complexity differently, towards acceptance of complexity and paradox in their contexts; to assist clients to focus on what can be achieved or influenced - and to develop their clients’ polarity or paradoxical thinking (that is, ‘both/and’ thinking to manage paradoxes that they are struggling with).

- **Managing others’ uncertainty:** To assist clients to make sense of and articulate their own plausible account of the uncertain context facing the organisation. This will enable them, as leaders, to manage their own uncertainty, so they are able to communicate or give sense to other people with more conviction, yet in a genuine manner (revealing their vulnerability appropriately).

- **Corporate politics:** To help clients to interpret or gain a different perspective of corporate politics in their context and in their roles. Coaches can also help clients reframe political skill more positively, thereby encouraging them to see value in adopting more political skill (appropriately).
### Guidelines for each stage (as per Figure 28 on page 290) – principles and leverage points, with supporting rationale

#### 4. Meaning-making
In addition to interpreting, coaches need to assist clients to identify some personal meaning in relation to their experienced uncertainty and/or their context of uncertainty, which may help to motivate them to take actions and/or to persevere in their context of uncertainty. For example, such meaning may relate to: a goal or purpose, believing that they are adding value in a particular way/s, or finding ways to add value, and/or taking actions which align with their personal values. This meaning-making therefore also forms a key part of clients’ identity sensemaking - as it pertains to the meaning of their roles, adding value in them, and/or feeling congruence with personal values.

#### 5. Emotion-focused coping
Coaches need to explore their clients’ coping mechanisms, options and resources for managing and shifting their emotional state in their context of uncertainty. This will facilitate emotional regulation which fosters more effective sensemaking. For example, using self-talk or reframing, to shift their emotional state (focusing on what is positive, or reminding themselves of their personal meaning or purpose for persevering) – and tapping into their support systems (which may be cathartic and/or reassuring for them). Coaches must be aware of, and respect their clients’ choices in terms of who they choose to share with for emotional support, with trust being an important consideration in their choice. Coaches also need to realise that they potentially play an emotional support role to their clients – as their coach.

**Note:** The sensemaking, particularly the interpreting and/or meaning-making components, lead to the promulgation of strategies and actions by clients for moving forward in their context of uncertainty. These stages 4 and 5 are iterative and inter-related, and have therefore been grouped together.

#### STAGE 4: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

#### STAGE 5: ADAPTING

Coaches need to assist clients with generating their strategies, actions and/or decisions – and to consider the implications of these in their contexts. Coaches need to encourage clients to implement their chosen strategies or actions in an experimental manner, so that they adapt these - as they learn, as events unfold or in relation to new information or feedback, which emerges in their contexts. Thus, coaches can assist clients with adapting by re-cycling back into further sensemaking when necessary (as depicted in Figure 26). This process of adapting, involves experiential learning, which incorporates reflection on their experience/s to extract their learning, contributing to further sensemaking. Coaches could therefore make this experiential learning cycle (which occurs in most coaching processes) explicit to clients to help foster their learning agility – a key component of developing their capability for uncertainty.
As per stage 4, coaches can assist clients with developing their strategies and actions for moving forward in relation to their experienced uncertainty and/or context of uncertainty. The focus and type of strategies relevant for the different types of uncertainty are outlined next. However, it is important for coaches to be cognisant of the complexity of their clients’ experienced uncertainty, which may involve one, a few and even all these types of uncertainty – requiring a range, or combination, of these strategies over time. Of note, the net effect of the concurrence and inter-relationship of different types of uncertainty is felt uncertainty - which taken together seem to boil down to issues of identity and decreased personal agency. Strategies for developing identity (or identity construction) are therefore crucial, because developing a sense of positive identity is a key component within a capability for uncertainty.

Sub-category: Personal Uncertainty

Strategies for developing identity (in relation to identity uncertainty – and often impacted by the other types of uncertainty; for example, experienced complexity)

- To adopt a lens of identity construction more explicitly in helping clients to generate practical and realistic strategies to develop a sense of positive identity, particularly strategies that add value in their roles and as leaders and/or develop their personal agency.
- To adopt a socio-psychological lens of identity construction, which factors in the complexity of the social and systemic process of positive identity development within their clients’ contexts; that is, reciprocity and recognition from others needs to occur for the client’s preferred identity to be achieved. For example, to focus on strategies which build relationships with key stakeholders in the clients’ context - and strategies which gain credibility in the stakeholders’ eyes are critical.
- To think about identity, and particularly leader identity, as being more fluid, around a core self, and that identity is in the process of ‘Becoming’ (rather than a one-off event, and rather than viewing people as having Being and Doing parts to them in a static sense).
- To have a broader and more explicit repertoire of identity construction in relation to clients undergoing transitions, as transitions are key triggers for identity uncertainty. For example, needing to deal with the in-between phase explicitly in terms of what the client needs to let go of (in the previous role or organisation) – and who the client wants and/or needs to be in the new role and/or organisation, with strategies to make this happen, particularly in relation to building constructive working relationships with key stakeholders.
- To be more explicit and transparent about the process of positive identity construction as a social and contextual process, so clients understand and learn about this for their ongoing journey of uncertainty, transitions and ‘becoming’.

Strategies for managing anticipatory uncertainty (in relation to anticipatory uncertainty)

- Coaching needs to focus on facilitating clients’ sense of realistic preparation or contingency planning, particularly in relation to the clients’ worst case scenario.
- This approach will assist clients to let go of their apprehension (or worrying), thereby increasing their sense of agency in the present (by being more fully in the present).
### Guidelines for each stage (as per Figure 28 on page 290) – principles and leverage points, with supporting rationale

**Sub-category: Leadership challenges**

#### Leadership focus and approach
Coaches are encouraged to adopt a lens of viewing organisations as complex adaptive systems, and the associated type of leadership approaches that may be adopted. Coaches may focus on assisting clients to generate these type of strategies or actions to assist clients with experienced complexity in their leadership roles:

- Assisting the client to articulate their values and using these as a moral compass to guide them as a leader.
- A focus on generating priorities and actions in relation to what can be controlled or influenced in the client’s context.
- Encouraging clients to adopt adaptive and enabling leadership - which involves setting up processes and having conversations to engage others in their organisation to engender sensemaking, to generate ideas and to identify priorities – thereby building adaptive capacity in the organisation.
- Helping clients to focus and think through how to stabilise their current operation, while concurrently exploring innovative and adaptive strategies for moving forward (their leadership approach in doing both).

#### Effective communication
- Coaches may help clients to tease out their purpose, guiding values and principles for guiding their communication strategy and content during organisational change and uncertainty.
- Importantly, clients need to also foster involvement strategies in their communication approaches, to give people a voice.
- Note: The purpose of leaders’ communication should not be focused on reducing peoples’ uncertainty, but helping people to accept and engage with the uncertainty in their organisational contexts.

#### Dealing with politics
- Coaches may assist clients to develop their political skill through experimentation with tangible actions relevant to their goals, their role and their interface with key stakeholders in their context.
- It is important to build this political skill incrementally, so that clients feel comfortable with adopting political skill, yet congruent with their values.

#### TERMINATION OF COACHING
- When ending the coaching partnership with a client, and reviewing the learning and changes achieved during the coaching journey, coaches could use this opportunity to tease out (with the client), and make explicit the learning and outcomes achieved, in relation to the client’s capability for uncertainty.
- In addition, coaches might explore how clients may use their developed capability for uncertainty to assist with future experienced uncertainty.
- A longer termination session is therefore recommended to do justice to this part of the coaching process.
In sum, the guidelines in Table 83 suggest key principles, areas of focus, leverage points, and options for executive coaches to consider, in each stage of the proposed coaching process (depicted in Figure 28 on page 290), towards developing components of a capability for uncertainty in executive leaders more explicitly.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined a proposed coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, that is, their ability to engage with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty. The coaching framework offers an approach for meeting changing needs of executive leaders in these turbulent times, in that executives are experiencing increased uncertainty at a personal level and in their leader role during organisational uncertainty. Experienced uncertainty is an emotional state, which potentially is a force for personal change. The proposed coaching framework and guidelines identify leverage points for coaches, within their executive clients’ experienced uncertainty and their sensemaking, which might be harnessed more effectively and explicitly towards developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty.

This coaching framework is therefore aligned with authors calling for coaches to evolve their coaching approaches to meet leaders’ changing needs (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Cavanagh & Palmer, 2009; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Stelter, 2009). Using this framework, however, requires coaches to have an intention of developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty. The coaching framework and guidelines are flexible, and may be adapted within executive coaches’ repertoires. The implication for such adaptation is that additional theoretical lenses need to be adopted within the executive coaching field and hence, the training and education of coaches.

The next and final chapter concludes the thesis, which presents the main findings, implications of these for practice and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Introduction
Having explained in the previous chapter the proposed coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (Phase 3 of the study), this chapter concludes the thesis, with its focus on closing the circle of my inquiry. I therefore return to the beginning, by giving a brief overview of the study. The main findings and conclusions for each of the five research objectives are then outlined, followed by the contribution of the study to the body of knowledge and the implications for practice. The limitations of the study, recommendations for future research and my reflections as the researcher are addressed, before concluding.

9.2 Overview of the study
In returning to the beginning, the background to the research problem was based on the increasingly turbulent context in which executive leaders are operating, with increased uncertainty being experienced. Given this context, the implication is that executive leaders need to develop their capability for uncertainty, yet what constitutes such a capability is not clear. While executive coaching was suggested in the literature as an option for developing capability for uncertainty, there is no integrated coaching framework or set of guidelines for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty.

The purpose of the study, as stated in chapter 1, was to propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty (Phase 3), based on making sense of:

- Executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty and what capability for uncertainty they develop through their experience (Phase 1); and
- Executive coaches’ experience of assisting executive leaders with uncertainty and their views on what a capability for uncertainty is (Phase 2).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the qualitative, interpretive research approach adopted for the study. The study design was multi-perspectival, cross-sectional and retrospective, utilising a three-phased strategy aligned with the research objectives, as shown in Figure 29 (below).
Data was collected from the executive leaders in Phase 1 and the executive coaches in Phase 2 as above, using semi-structured interviews, to address research objectives 1 to 4. The interview transcripts were analysed according to the IPA guidelines (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). In Phase 3, an integrative analysis of the findings from Phases 1 and 2 was then used to address research objective 5 to develop the coaching framework. Given the phased-strategy sketched above, conclusions and implications were already drawn from Phases 1 and 2 in the preceding chapters as this was essential to inform the development of the coaching framework.

9.3 Summary of the main findings and conclusions

The main findings and key conclusions for each research objective are presented.

**Research objective 1: To understand how executive leaders experience and make sense of uncertainty - at a personal level and in their leader role**

The executive leaders’ overall lived experience of uncertainty in both companies was one of flux, shifting between peaks of more intensely felt uncertainty and troughs of less felt uncertainty. The peaks of felt uncertainty were triggered by organisational change and transitions, exacerbated by delays in their contexts. Transitions were identified as
key triggers for executives’ experienced uncertainty, particularly for newcomers to organisations. Uncertainty was ‘felt’ by all the executives, meaning it was experienced as an emotional state, reflected in a range of feelings from self-doubt, discomfort, apprehension, even fear, frustration and feeling overwhelmed or energised.

The executive leaders’ felt uncertainty comprised of personal uncertainty and challenges experienced in their leadership role during organisational uncertainty. Two types of personal uncertainty were experienced by the executives, as follows:

- Identity uncertainty, which related to a devalued sense of identity, manifesting as self-doubt and decreased personal agency.
- Anticipatory uncertainty, which was experienced as worry in the present about a possible future threat to them (a future issue of identity).

Three key challenges were experienced by the executives in their leader role during organisational uncertainty, adding to their felt uncertainty, due to deceased personal agency and/or issues of role and/or leader identity, as follows:

- Experienced complexity, which manifested in executives as feeling overwhelmed and out of control in having to deal with an increased number of changes and variables in their contexts, including the frustration felt in managing paradoxes.
- Managing other peoples’ uncertainty, which related to the challenge of managing their peoples’ need for clarity, in the face of their own experienced uncertainty, knowing that people observed their emotional state to gauge what was going on.
- Corporate politics, which manifested in executives’ feelings of discomfort and frustration, due to the adverse effect of politics on trust among colleagues, their aversion to politics, and their own perceived lack of political skill.

While there was similarity in the types of uncertainty experienced across both companies in the study, there were some differences in the degree of the leadership challenges experienced, attributed to their different organisational contexts, suggesting that contextual factors are relevant to experienced uncertainty. Whereas the executives in the state-owned company experienced more challenges in relation to politics, those in the private company, with a longer period of organisational uncertainty, experienced more challenges in managing their people’s uncertainty, in the face of their own uncertainty.
The executives’ felt uncertainty was therefore found to be a complex and dynamic phenomenon, comprising overlapping types of personal uncertainty and challenges in their leadership roles, with inter-relationships between these. The net effect was that the executives’ overall felt uncertainty primarily came down to issues of identity (devaluation of identity) and decreased personal agency.

My findings suggest that the felt uncertainty, mostly being discomforting, motivated the executives’ sensemaking, with the initial intent being to reduce their uncertainty. The intensity and valence of the executives’ felt uncertainty (an emotional state) affected their approach to and quality of sensemaking. While the discomforting feelings of uncertainty seemed to motivate effective sensemaking for most of the executives, intensely felt uncertainty hindered sensemaking and/or fostered more solitary sensemaking for a few. One executive, who was mostly positive, approached sensemaking with a view to harness opportunities in his context of uncertainty. Overall, the executives’ emotional responses shifted positively over time due to their sensemaking and the unfolding of events in their contexts.

The executives’ sensemaking of their experienced uncertainty and/or context of uncertainty was an iterative process, involving five components. Their mental frames, that is, self-view, view of others, worldview and past experience, were perceptual filters which influenced the next four components of their sensemaking, outlined as follows:

- **Seeking understanding** – trying to understand their experienced uncertainty or context through reading the situation, conversations and/or reflection.
- **Interpreting** – reaching a point in their iterative sensemaking, when they made a plausible interpretation of what was going on (which equated to ‘making sense’), forming the basis of generating actions to move forward.
- **Meaning-making** – finding personal meaning to motivate them to persevere in their context of uncertainty, yet it was distinct from their interpreting.
- **Emotion-focused coping** – using coping mechanisms to assist in managing their emotional state during their iterative process of sensemaking, through tapping into trusted support systems and through self-regulation.
The executives’ sensemaking promulgated strategies and actions for moving forward in their contexts of uncertainty. The key strategies executives adopted in relation to their personal uncertainty were:

- Developing their identity, by adding value to their roles and/or increasing their personal agency, mostly by negotiating, asserting, relating with and influencing key stakeholders.
- Managing their anticipatory uncertainty, by preparing themselves for a possible future threat, through making contingency plans and/or making decisions, thereby alleviating their worry about the future, so they could increase their personal agency in the present.

The strategies used by the executives in relation to their leadership challenges were:

- Leadership focus and approach (in relation to the executives’ challenge of experienced complexity), which referred to focusing on what they could influence or control, involving their teams in prioritising and developing strategies to do so. They also learnt to manage the tension of paradoxes in their contexts. The overall leadership in both companies adopted approaches to stabilise and manage their current operations effectively, while also focusing on developing strategies for meeting future challenges. The executives were guided by their values and ethics.
- Effective communication (in relation to the executives’ challenge of managing their peoples’ uncertainty, in the face of their own uncertainty), which referred to adopting a communication approach with their people, based on being honest or realistic about their context of uncertainty, yet balanced with being positive. Of help to executives in containing their own uncertainty was personal sensemaking of their context, thereby assisting them to convey messages more genuinely and with conviction.
- Adopting more political skill (in relation to the executives’ challenge of dealing with corporate politics), which referred to some executives using more political skill in dealing with their key stakeholders, through collaborative approaches, being more diplomatic and being sensitive to the timing of bringing different parties together. However, the aversive perception of politics prevailed for most of the executives.

The executives also adapted the above strategies and actions in relation to unfolding events, new information and/or feedback received. Such adapting required them to carry
out further sensemaking of the new information, which then influenced how they adjusted their strategies going forward, leading to the receding of their felt uncertainty over time.

Key conclusions from the findings are as follows:

- The executives’ felt uncertainty was a complex and dynamic emotional state, supporting the qualitative research on experienced uncertainty in the healthcare field (McGonigal-Kenney, 2011; Penrod, 2007). Their felt uncertainty comprised overlapping types of personal uncertainty and challenges in their leadership roles, with inter-relationships between these, concurring with Brasher’s (2001) views about uncertainty in the organisational context.

- The net effect of the executives’ overall felt uncertainty (due to the concurrent and overlapping types of uncertainty) was that their uncertainty manifested primarily as issues of identity and decreased personal agency, which supports the notion of sensemaking being filtered through issues of identity (Maitlis, 2005; Marsico, 2012, Weick 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

- The executives’ lived experience of and approach to making sense of their uncertainty aligned more with uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001) and sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005), rather than uncertainty reduction theory (Van den Bos, 2009).

- At the core of the executives’ approach to managing their experienced uncertainty, was an inter-relationship between the executives’ felt uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction. While this inter-relationship has been alluded to in the literature (Brown, 2014), these findings further clarify it.

**Research objective 2: To understand what capability for uncertainty executive leaders develop through their lived experience of uncertainty.**

All the executives developed some capability for uncertainty through their lived experience of uncertainty, to a greater or lesser extent, that is, their ability to engage with uncertainty in their context, while managing their experienced uncertainty. The capability for uncertainty that was developed by them pertained to the development of their mental frames, acknowledging the value of effective sensemaking and developing or re-affirming aspects of their leadership approach during organisational uncertainty, as follows:
• The development of their mental frames, particularly their self-view through positive identity development, their worldview through acceptance of uncertainty, and their ‘view of others’ through adopting sensemaking and leadership approaches in working with others.

• Their learning from what had hindered or enabled their sensemaking, translated into an appreciation of crucial factors for enabling more effective sensemaking, that is, making more time for sensemaking and reflection to gain perspective, the need for being calm, and the importance of conversations for gaining different perspectives and for emotional support. Besides one executive, most executives had difficulty in making time for and doing in-depth reflection.

• Leadership during uncertainty – with emphasis on adopting a leadership approach which engages others, the need for focus (coupled with adaptability), adopting certain communication principles (open, honest and regular communication), and political skill, which was developed by more senior executives in dealing with key stakeholders.

While positive identity development was a key outcome for most of the executives, for two newcomers to their organisations during the period of organisational uncertainty, it was not. Their efforts were thwarted by executive colleagues in their contexts, suggesting that positive identity development also requires reciprocity and affirmation from other key stakeholders in one’s context. The implication is that social and contextual factors need to be considered in identity development.

Key conclusions from these findings are:

• Executives’ capability for uncertainty is, and therefore can be, developed through the lived experience of uncertainty, which is consistent with the consensus in the literature that leadership development mostly occurs through experience (DeRue & Ashford, 2010a; DeRue & Myers, 2013; McCall, 2010).

• A capability for uncertainty comprises of crucial components, identified in the study and confirmed in the literature, which need to be developed towards fostering a holistic capability for uncertainty in executive leaders.

• A sense of positive identity is potentially a key outcome of the lived experience of uncertainty, and it is a core component of executives’ capability for uncertainty,
Research objective 3: To understand executive coaches’ experience and approach in working with executive leaders’ uncertainty.

The executive coaches had all observed and worked with executive clients’ experienced uncertainty in their coaching practice. The types of uncertainty noticed in their executive clients, pertaining to personal uncertainty and leadership challenges during uncertainty and the inter-relationship between these, were similar to the types of uncertainty experienced by the executive leaders in Phase 1, as outlined for research objective 1 above. Certain differences between the coaches’ observations and the executives’ lived experience in Phase 1 were observed. While existential uncertainty, a form of identity uncertainty relating to personal meaning about one’s career and/or life, was reported by several executive coaches, it was only experienced by one executive in Phase 1. In addition, the negative perceptions and perceived difficulty of political skill as sources of felt uncertainty were emphasised by the executives but not the coaches.

The coaches perceived that their clients’ issues of uncertainty tended to emerge during the coaching, rather than being presenting issues when the coaching commenced, because their clients felt vulnerable about sharing their personal uncertainty. The coaches, therefore, emphasised the importance of establishing trust in the coaching relationship to provide the safety needed for clients to be vulnerable. The executive coaches used their general eclectic coaching approaches to work with their clients’ issues of uncertainty, drawing on techniques within their repertoires, implying their broader repertoires afforded them flexibility. Besides one coach, whose niche focused on uncertainty related to leader transitions, working with uncertainty did not seem to be an explicit focus of their coaching. Hence, most coaches seemed to be making sense of how they worked with uncertainty during their research interviews.

Despite the coaches having different training and educational backgrounds, they were found to use four common strategies in working with their clients’ uncertainty, as follows:

1. Developing the client’s self-awareness (their ‘being’ and/or internal compass), which was a key coaching strategy.
2. Facilitating the client’s shift towards acceptance of uncertainty, but they did not describe how they approached this in their coaching (besides one coach).

3. Assisting the client to focus on what can be controlled, particularly when assisting clients with experienced complexity.

4. Generating actions in the client’s context of uncertainty, focused on by coaches as a result of their clients being energised from the above three strategies. Most of the actions implemented by their clients related to experimenting with their leadership and/or interpersonal approaches with stakeholders in their contexts.

Given the above common strategies adopted by the coaches, they appeared to be using a psychological construct in working with their clients’ identity, with their emphasis on self-awareness and the being of their clients. None of the coaches referred explicitly to identity construction, yet their focus on developing leadership and interpersonal approaches in their clients’ actions suggests they were working implicitly with a socio-psychological logical lens of identity construction. In support of this, the prevalent outcome of working with their clients’ uncertainty was observed as being increased confidence and personal agency, which seemed to be a sense of positive identity in their clients, although the coaches did not refer to it as such.

The key conclusions from these findings are:

- The executive coaches view uncertainty as being implicit in their work with executive clients and they therefore flexibly adapt their general eclectic coaching approaches for working with issues of uncertainty. This conclusion concurs with literature encouraging coaches to develop broader repertoires so they are able to adapt their approach to working with clients’ uncertainty when it emerges during coaching (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Glunk & Follini, 2011; Reynolds, 2011).

- While the executive coaches’ clients seemed to develop a sense of positive identity as an outcome of the coaching, the executive coaches did not explicitly view their coaching as facilitating identity construction from a socio-psychological perspective, although it might have been implicit in their work. This conclusion supports Butcher’s (2012) view that identity construction, based on a socio-psychological construct, needs to become an explicit lens adopted within executive coaching, as its prominence is increasing in the leadership development literature (Day et al., 2009).
Research objective 4: To understand executive coaches’ views on a ‘capability for uncertainty’.

The four most prevalent indicators of a capability for uncertainty for executive leaders, as viewed by the coaches, were: an openness to different perspectives; a sense of positive identity, based on self-awareness and self-confidence; an acceptance of uncertainty; and a learning orientation, based on experiential learning and reflection.

While all the coaches emphasised an acceptance of uncertainty as an indicator, they were not clear as to how they developed such an acceptance in their coaching approach. In addition, only two coaches observed an acceptance of uncertainty as an outcome of their coaching. This apparent discrepancy might have been because the focus of the research interview made the coaches more aware of the pervasiveness of uncertainty as an issue for executive clients, which was acknowledged by several of them. Moreover, the executive coaches did not emphasise the development of reflective ability in their coaching approach, although they perceived a learning orientation as a key indicator of a capability for uncertainty.

The executive coaches also acknowledged key implications for executive coaching in relation to developing a capability for uncertainty. Taking their views together, they argued that coaches need to be more cognisant of clients’ uncertainty emerging in their coaching practice, that coaches need to focus more explicitly on developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty – and that coaches need to be aware of their own orientation to uncertainty when working with clients’ uncertainty.

The key conclusions from these findings were:

- The executive coaches’ views on indicators of a capability for uncertainty aligned with key components identified in the literature review.
- The notion of developing executive clients’ capability for uncertainty, and its components, was not an intention of the executive coaches in the current study, which is consistent with the subject of executive uncertainty being scarce in the coaching and leadership development literature (Buckle & Slyce, 2010; Preece & Ilies, 2009). This conclusion suggests that coaches need to express a longer term view of their coaching purposes, in relation to their clients’ changing needs in these
turbulent times, as advocated in the coaching literature (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

**Research objective 5: To propose a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty.**

The previous chapter outlined the framework and guidelines proposed for developing executive leaders' capability for uncertainty, with supporting rationale. The coaching framework explains (1) the perspectives needed by the coach to inform the coaching process, (2) the actual coaching process (stages and guidelines for each of these), and (3) the outcomes of a holistic capability for uncertainty, which is the purpose of the coaching process. The outcomes of a holistic capability for uncertainty were determined from an integration of the findings from the executive leaders (Phase 1) and the executive coaches (Phase 2), with the literature review. These outcomes are acceptance of uncertainty, effective sensemaking, a sense of positive identity, learning agility, and relevant leadership during uncertainty.

A key feature of the proposed coaching framework is that it incorporates theoretical perspectives or lenses, based on the inter-relationship between managing uncertainty, sensemaking and identity construction, as established from the executive leaders' lived experience of uncertainty. The executives' lived experience, and what they developed or learned from this was used as the basis for identifying leverage points to be focused on in the proposed coaching process. The executive coaches’ strategies were also harnessed to better leverage clients’ approach to managing uncertainty, towards developing their capability for uncertainty more explicitly. The guidelines for using the coaching process are not prescriptive, meaning that aspects may be adapted into executive coaches’ own repertoires.

Key conclusions from the findings are:

- The proposed coaching framework for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty is one approach for evolving coaching repertoires to meet leaders’ changing needs in the current turbulent times, as advocated in the literature (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Cavanagh & Palmer, 2009; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Stelter, 2009).
• To use this framework, coaches must have an intention of developing their clients’ capability for uncertainty, which concurs with Flaherty (2006) and Peterson (2006), who argue that coaches need to have long-term views of their coaching.

• The coaching framework and guidelines, or aspects of these, may be adapted within executive coaches’ repertoires. The implication for such adaptation is that additional theoretical lenses need to be adopted by coaches in doing so.

9.4 Contribution to the body of knowledge

Certain gaps in the current level of knowledge were highlighted in chapter 1. How the findings of the present study make a contribution to these gaps is discussed as follows.

**In-depth understanding of executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty**

A key contribution is the in-depth account of the complex, multi-layered and dynamic phenomenon of executive leaders’ experienced uncertainty as one of flux over different periods of organisational uncertainty in two different companies. This understanding extends the uncertainty management literature (Brashers, 2001) and the body of knowledge on executive uncertainty in the leadership and executive development literature (Preece & Iles, 2009). In addition, the understanding of the executives’ different types of uncertainty, and the inter-relationship between these, specifically contributes to understanding the complexity of executives’ felt uncertainty in an organisational context (Brashers, 2001; Lane & Klenke, 2004; Van den Bos, 2009).

The findings on the role of emotion in the executive leaders’ felt uncertainty, and subsequent sensemaking, also lend support for the theory of Maitlis et al. (2013), specifically in relation to the valence and intensity of emotion playing a role in motivating the approach and quality of sensemaking. The present study also adds to their theory in identifying emotion-focused coping as a component of the executive leaders’ sensemaking, used to manage and/or shift their emotional state. The finding that meaning-making was a component of the executive leaders’ sensemaking, yet distinct from their interpreting, concurring with Van den Heuvel et al., (2009), helps to clarify that meaning-making is a part of sensemaking, because they are often used interchangeably in the literature.
How the executives experienced uncertainty, made sense of their uncertainty and developed strategies to move forward contributes to understanding the inter-relationship between uncertainty management, sensemaking and identity construction, which has not been clear in the literature (Brown, 2014). Hence, this study makes a contribution to knowledge by establishing linkages and further understanding across these three bodies of knowledge. Furthermore, the participants’ identity construction strategies lend support for the proposition of Dutton et al. (2010) that pathways to positive identity construction involve strategies and tactics to restore or repair a devalued identity, and/or to adapt one’s identity to changes in one’s context.

**Clarifying the meaning of a holistic capability for uncertainty**

The study contributes to the clarification of what may constitute a holistic capability for uncertainty, towards developing such capability in executive leaders, thus contributing to the executive and leader development literature. Hence, the study extends and integrates different concepts and components identified in the literature, with the findings from the study, both the executive leaders’ and the executive coaches’ perspectives, into a holistic capability for uncertainty (Lane & Klenke, 2004).

A key finding was that a sense of positive identity formed a core part of the executives’ capability for uncertainty. A sense of positive identity was a key outcome for the executive leaders (in Phase 1) – and was also observed by the executive coaches as a key outcome of their clients (in Phase 2). Taken together, these findings reinforce the centrality of issues of identity and decreased agency in executives’ experienced uncertainty, and the role of identity construction in developing a sense of positive identity, as part of a capability for uncertainty. Hence, positive identity construction is an important factor in developing executives’ capability for uncertainty, supporting the more recent focus on identity construction in leader development literature, but which has been missing in the executive coaching literature (Butcher, 2012).

**A theoretical coaching framework for developing capability for uncertainty**

The increased understanding of the inter-relationship between, and linkage across the bodies of knowledge on uncertainty management, sensemaking and identity construction, contribute directly to the key theoretical lenses used in the coaching framework proposed towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty. This
theoretically informed coaching framework contributes to and extends the executive coaching literature in relation to developing capability for uncertainty, which is scarce. It incorporates theoretical lenses that have been recommended by others to be included in executive coaching theory and practice; for example, sense-making by du Toit (2007, 2014) and identity construction by Butcher (2012). This coaching framework also suggests one approach for adding more value to executive clients and their organisations in these turbulent times, as called for in the executive coaching literature (Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

9.5 Implications for practice

Implications for different stakeholders in the executive coaching and leadership development fields are considered.

Executive coaches

The coaching framework and guidelines produced towards developing executives’ capability for uncertainty (as outlined in chapter 8) may be adapted by executive coaches into their own coaching repertoires. However, the coaching process suggested within this framework does require an intentional stance of the coach to develop capability for uncertainty more explicitly. Coaches are also encouraged to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the theoretical perspectives used to inform the coaching process towards developing different outcomes of a capability for uncertainty, as clarified in this study.

Organisational sponsors of executive coaching

The clarification of what constitutes a holistic capability for uncertainty may assist the organisational sponsors of coaching (often being HR) in determining coaching purposes for developing their executives’ and senior leaders’ capability for uncertainty, a key requirement of organisations in these turbulent times. Sponsors could use executive coaches to work with executives during organisational change and/or when executives are undergoing transitions into new roles or as newcomers to an organisation, towards explicitly developing their capability for uncertainty through and from these experiences.
**Education and development of executive coaches**

Executive coaching is a multi-disciplinary field which has grown rapidly, requiring new perspectives to inform the education and development of coaches, which is the subject of debate (Grant, 2011). This study identifies linkage across three bodies of knowledge that have been largely absent in the executive coaching literature, and by inference, in the education and development of coaches. The recommendation is therefore for these three bodies of knowledge, uncertainty management, sensemaking and identity construction, to be focused on in more depth in the education of coaches towards developing clients’ capability for uncertainty. My findings also support Butcher’s (2012) recommendation that a socio-psychological lens of identity construction be adopted in the education of coaches, as identity construction is rooted in a social context.

**Executive and leader development in organisations**

The above implications for executive coaching practice are also relevant for those responsible for designing executive and leader development interventions in organisations, with the intent of developing leaders’ capability for uncertainty. For example, the content could focus more explicitly on developing components of a capability for uncertainty. In addition, executive coaching needs to be integrated with and used to supplement executive or leader development interventions towards developing components of a capability for uncertainty; for example, effective sensemaking, critical reflective ability and positive identity construction.

**9.6 Limitations of the study**

A number of limitations of the study were noted. Firstly, it was cross-sectional and retrospective, collecting data from participants which relied on their memory, particularly in relation to the executive leaders. Of concern was the long-term period of uncertainty in the private company, over which executives were asked to recall their lived experience of uncertainty. Nonetheless, all the executives were able to recall their experienced uncertainty in detail, from a retrospective view, which implies their remembered experiences were most likely more structured than their lived experiences.

Secondly, the sample sizes in the study suggest that the findings are not generalisable. These findings do, however, offer theoretical transferability (Smith et al., 2009). The findings may also have relevance in similar contexts, to be gauged by the reader.
Thirdly, a key ethical consideration was ensuring anonymity for the participants in the findings, even more so for the executives in Phase 1, as they were members of the same teams in their companies. This resulted in my decision to combine the two samples of executives, and randomly allocate them English male names. In doing this, certain findings were not revealed; for example, in relation to race and gender, although this was not the focus of the study.

Lastly, my prior professional relationship (elaborated on in chapter 4) with some of the participants might have hindered the quality of the data, yet I believe this was more of an advantage in understanding their contexts. I also acknowledge that the findings were subject to my interpretation, an inherent part of IPA. Several measures, aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, were adopted to ensure quality, as explained in chapter 4.

9.7 Recommendations for future research

A longitudinal in-depth qualitative study, with several interviews at time intervals, to understand the lived experience of executive uncertainty as it unfolds over a period of time (at least a year) would extend the findings of the present study. A smaller sample is suggested, possibly including journal data from the participants to supplement the interview data.

The proposed coaching framework and guidelines developed in this study create an agenda for a variety of research opportunities, as follows:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of the coaching framework and guidelines, or selected aspects of these, and the related outcomes of a capability for uncertainty, through longitudinal research using coach-client dyads.
- Developing specific approaches and tools for developing the different components within a holistic capability for uncertainty; for example, developing critical reflective ability in executives and then evaluating the effectiveness of the coaching approach in developing such critical reflective ability.
- Exploring how executives, who have developed capability for uncertainty through coaching, have transferred their enhanced capability to future experiences of uncertainty.
• Identifying and/or developing relevant assessment tools for measuring the components making up a holistic capability for uncertainty, which may be useful for assessment, feedback and/or evaluation purposes.

• Exploring how the coaching framework and guidelines may be adapted into a team coaching intervention towards fostering collective leadership capability for uncertainty; for example, more effective team sensemaking and team learning. This is important given the trend towards collective leadership development in the literature (Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Myers, 2013).

Other interesting avenues for research are:

• Understanding executives’ lived experience of and approach to corporate politics, with the intention of using the findings to inform executive coaching practice, would be valuable, as politics is scarce in the executive coaching literature (Close, 2013).

• Understanding the lived experience of uncertainty of executives representing minority groups (for example, gender and/or race), would be insightful in relation to transformation intentions and challenges in companies, a key issue in South African organisations, possibly focusing on transition into a new company at executive level.

9.8 The researcher’s reflections

My study has been a personal journey of experienced uncertainty which yielded profound learning and growth. I experienced identity uncertainty manifesting as self-doubt in my abilities. At other times I lacked a sense of agency, overwhelmed by the amount of data and needing to make sense of it. I was also acutely aware of my anticipatory uncertainty at times, worrying about whether my findings would add value. Then there were times of exhilaration and a sense of accomplishment. My own journey thus reflects the complex and dynamic phenomenon of experienced uncertainty towards developing a sense of positive identity as a researcher.

Reflecting on my journey, I valued using IPA, appreciating how its in-depth approach could yield findings able to extend theory and inform practice meaningfully. However, I also realise that my key challenge was in using IPA effectively with a sample size larger than recommended (Smith et al., 2009). I therefore struggled with having so much rich data. In particular, I grappled with needing to capture both the group themes, while reflecting idiographic depth (core to IPA), resulting in lengthy findings. I now understand
why IPA researchers are actively encouraged to use smaller samples, but are resisted by the prevailing positivist paradigm. Thus, one thing I would have done differently would have been to use a smaller executive sample, which would still yield rich data, but be more manageable and allow me to honour the idiographic aspect of IPA even more fully. I would again use a peer researcher to carry out independent analyses for dialogue purposes. The dialogue afforded me the opportunity to give voice to and challenge my interpretations, therefore facilitating my own sensemaking and plausibility thereof.

As a leadership coach, I have learned from both my participants’ experiences and the findings of the study. I am more aware of the complexity of experienced uncertainty and how it manifests in my clients. I have also been experimenting with some of the approaches informed by my findings. For example, I am working more explicitly with positive identity construction, using a socio-psychological lens of these and sharing these concepts with my clients relevant to their learning and to their contexts. Going forward, I will focus more intentionally on developing clients’ capability for uncertainty, experimenting with and refining the framework and guidelines. Finally, I also wish to publish my findings as a stimulus for further review and debate.

9.9 Conclusion

The current study succeeded in proposing a coaching framework and guidelines towards developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty, based on gaining an in-depth understanding of executive leaders’ experienced uncertainty and executive coaches’ experience of working with executives’ uncertainty. The meaning of a holistic capability for uncertainty was also advanced, with a sense of positive identity being at its core. Taken together, these contributions offer an approach for executive coaches to add value to executive clients and their organisations in these times of turbulence.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this study was developing insight into executives’ experienced uncertainty, a real, complex phenomenon, mostly hidden for fear of being vulnerable. Experienced uncertainty is part of the human condition, and a potential force for personal growth, as evidenced in this study. Uncertainty management, and its inter-related processes of sensemaking and positive identity construction, therefore require more emphasis in executive coaching and leader development, towards fostering executives’ capability for uncertainty.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Kathy Bennett as part of her doctoral programme with the University of Johannesburg. Taking part in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

The purpose of this document, in accordance with the requirements of the University’s code of research ethics is to make explicit the nature of the proposed involvement between the researcher and the person agreeing to participate - and to record that the research participant understands and agrees with the proposed arrangements.

The Researcher: Kathy Bennett
Contact details: Telephone 011 782 0625
Cell 083 650 0319
e-mail kbennett@global.co.za

Purpose of the research study:
The overall purpose is to develop a framework and coaching guidelines for developing executive leaders’ capability for uncertainty - based on gaining an understanding of:

- Executive leaders’ lived experience of uncertainty and how they develop their capability for uncertainty through experience; and
- Executive coaches’ lived experience of working with executive leaders’ experienced uncertainty

You will be asked to take part in a 2-hour interview to explore your experience of prolonged uncertainty, over the last few years, as an executive leader.

The interviews will be recorded digitally and then transcribed verbatim. The researcher will also take some notes during the interview.

You will be provided with an electronic version of your interview transcript and asked to verify the contents. You will be requested to give any comments or thoughts you wish to share on further reflection of the interview contents.

Once analysis of the interviews commences, a few participants may be requested to participate in a brief follow-up interview for clarification purposes.

All participants will receive a summary report of the findings of the study.
Anonymity of Participants
Anonymity is assured to all participants. Your name and your company will not be associated with the content of the interview. Transcripts of the interviews will be prepared with names and any personal identifiers changed.

All data for this study will be kept safely on the researcher’s property in a locked, secure office.

Being a qualitative study, the dissertation report will include selected verbatim excerpts from the interview transcripts to highlight key findings and the basis of the researchers’ interpretations. This report will mask the identity of the individuals and any features which might make identification possible.

All references in subsequent publications or presentations about the findings from the study will be anonymised and any features, which might make identification possible, will be removed.

Declaration by the research participant:
“I am willing to take part in this study and am satisfied with the arrangements as set out above.”

________________________________ ________________________________
Name of Participant Signature of Participant

Date_____________________________

NOTE: Queries or complaints about the conduct of the research may be addressed with the researcher’s supervisors:

Study leader: Dr. A. M. Verwey Cell: 082 853 8603
Co-Supervisor: Dr. L. van der Merwe Cell: 082 875 4345

___________________________________________________
Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management
Faculty of Management
University of Johannesburg
APPENDIX 2: Interview Guide for Sample R (Phase1)

Introduction to the study & participant details

- Thank person for agreeing to participate & explain the purpose of my study.
- Ask if comfortable with the contents of the informed consent form; whether have any queries or concerns.
- Ask participant for these details - which I will note: years of experience at executive level, duration in current position, educational background, age.

The interview has 4 sections (A-D) to it. I have a few questions prepared for each, but my intention is to hear about and understand your experience – so the interview will be flexible.

*Switch on the recorder.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of interview</th>
<th>Key questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. The beginning</strong></td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Your company has been through a prolonged period of uncertainty related to the change in ownership since 2007….. | - When you go back in time to the early stage of this change in ownership, what personal uncertainty did you experience? (Prompts: What was on your mind? How were you feeling?)
- How did you approach this personal uncertainty? (Prompts: How did you process it or make sense of it? Tease out specifics) |
|                                  | As a Leader                                                                 |
|                                  | - At this early stage of the change, what were the key challenges you experienced as a leader in relation to the uncertainty in the organisation? |
|                                  | - How did you approach this uncertainty in your role as a leader? I.e. what did you do? (Prompt for specifics & examples) |
| **B. The interim phase – and up to now** | Personal                                                                     |
| Now let us move on to the period after the early stage of the change/s – to the interim period – and then up to now. | - Tell me about your experience of personal uncertainty over this period? (Prompts: Were there particular challenges or concerns that you personally faced during this time - that triggered your personal uncertainty? What stands out for you?)
- How did you approach the uncertainty at a personal level? (Prompt for specifics and examples) |
|                                  | As a Leader                                                                 |
|                                  | - Tell me about your experience of uncertainty in your role as a leader over this period? (Prompts: Key challenges or concerns? What stands out for you? Certain experiences?) |
|                                  | - How did you approach the uncertainty in your role as a leader?             |
|                                  | (Prompt for specifics and examples)                                          |
| **C. Reflecting back on your experience** | What have you learned or developed from this experience of uncertainty?   |
| NOW, when you reflect back on this experience of uncertainty that you have been through (from the beginning up to now)…. | Personally?
And as a leader? |
|                                  | How do you think your approach to uncertainty has changed through this experience (over so many years….)? |
|                                  | Personally? 
And as a leader? |
| **D. When reflecting on this interview conversation** | What value, if any, did you get from this interview? Is there anything you would like to add? |
**APPENDIX 3: Interview Guide for Sample P (Phase 1)**

**Introduction to the study & participant details**

- Thank person for agreeing to participate & explain the purpose of my study.
- Ask if comfortable with the contents of the informed consent form; whether have any queries or concerns.
- Ask participant for these details - which I will note: years of experience at executive level, duration in current position, educational background, age.

The interview has 4 sections (A-D) to it. I have a few questions prepared for each, but my intention is to hear about and understand your experience – so the interview will be flexible.

*Switch on the recorder.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of interview</th>
<th>Key questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. The beginning</strong>&lt;br&gt;Your company has been through a period of uncertainty since the MD was seconded to The City last year … related to the having Acting MDs, changes in The City, political pressures …</td>
<td>Personal&lt;br&gt;• When you go back in time to that stage last year - when the MD was assigned to the City, what personal uncertainty did you experience, if any? (Prompts: What was on your mind? How were you feeling?)&lt;br&gt;• How did you approach this personal uncertainty? (Prompts: How did you process it or make sense of it? Tease out specifics)&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;As a Leader&lt;br&gt;• At this early stage of the change, what were the key challenges you experienced as a leader in relation to the uncertainty in the organisation?&lt;br&gt;• How did you approach this uncertainty in your role as a leader? i.e. what did you do? (Prompt for specifics &amp; examples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. The interim phase – and up to now</strong>&lt;br&gt;Now let us move on to the period after the early stage of the change/s – to the interim period – and then up to now.</td>
<td>Personal&lt;br&gt;• Tell me about your experience of personal uncertainty over this period? (Prompts: Were there particular challenges or concerns that you personally faced during this time - that triggered your personal uncertainty? What stands out for you?)&lt;br&gt;• How did you approach the uncertainty at a personal level? (Prompt for specifics and examples)&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;As a Leader&lt;br&gt;• Tell me about your experience of uncertainty in your role as a leader over this period? (Prompts: Key challenges or concerns? What stands out for you? Certain experiences?)&lt;br&gt;• How did you approach the uncertainty in your role as a leader? (Prompt for specifics and examples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Reflecting back on your experience</strong>&lt;br&gt;NOW, when you reflect back on this experience of uncertainty that you have been through (from the beginning up to now)…</td>
<td>Personal&lt;br&gt;• What have you learned or developed from this experience of uncertainty? Personally?&lt;br&gt;And as a leader?&lt;br&gt;• How do you think your approach to uncertainty has changed through this experience (over so many years…)?&lt;br&gt;Personally?&lt;br&gt;And as a leader?&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. When reflecting on this interview conversation</strong>…</td>
<td>Personal&lt;br&gt;• What value, if any, did you get from this interview? Is there anything you would like to add?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 4: Interview Guide for Sample C (Phase 2)

Introduction to the study & participant details

- Thank person for agreeing to participate & explain the purpose of my study.
- Ask if comfortable with the contents of the informed consent form; get person to sign.
- Ask participant for these details - which I will note: years of experience of coaching at executive level, educational / training background and coaching qualifications, professional membership, age.

The interview has 5 sections to it. I have a few questions prepared, but my intention is to hear about and understand your experience, approach & views – so the interview will be flexible.

Switch on the recorder.

Setting the scene: Given the context of an increasingly turbulent and uncertain business environment – and the challenges facing executive leaders…. In this interview, I would like you to reflect on your lived experience of assisting executive leaders (your clients) with Uncertainty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>What kind of issues, relating to uncertainty, are being raised in the coaching process by executives you have coached? (focus on the last 6 months to a year) (Prompts: Aspects or issues relating to personal uncertainty? Aspects or issues relating to uncertainty in their leader role?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>What is your approach to working with uncertainty being experienced by an executive client? Could you describe an example in detail? (Prompts: How did you approach it? What did you specifically do as the coach? What processes and techniques did you use? How did your client respond, change or develop?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>In your view, how would you describe a ‘capability for uncertainty’? (Prompt: What, in your experience, are indicators of a ‘capability for uncertainty’?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>At the end of the interview: Now when you reflect on this interview - what comes to mind OR what is striking to you - in terms of assisting executive leaders to develop their capability for uncertainty – through coaching?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 5: Analysis of Company R (Phase 1)

This appendix contains examples aligned with key steps of the analysis as described in chapter 3 (Table 20) – using a few examples to illustrate the process:

- 5.1. An example of initial themes from one participant from Company R
- 5.2. An example of a chart of a participant’s lived experience of uncertainty
- 5.3. An excerpt from the analysis across first three participants
- 5.4. An excerpt from the comparison of themes across all six participants in Company R
### 5.1 Example of initial themes from one participant from Company R

**NOTE:** Emergent themes were identified within each of three interviews in Step 1 of the analysis.

Below is one example of emergent themes supported by the participants’ quotes for part of research objective 1 (RO1), which emphasises the participant’s lived experience of uncertainty overtime.

**RO1: Experience of personal uncertainty – responses, contextual issues, triggers & types of personal uncertainty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dynamics of response to the Uncertainty - over time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Context leading up to change (BEE Deal):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SA law about BEE esp. in Mining sector not being addressed - p.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frustrations with international holding company’s dictatorial style – p.2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Initial positive response to announcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Saw business opportunities opening up – felt excited that something was being done - p.1 (no personal uncertainty; it was ...I was more interested in how this thing was going to work out – p.1.) So the change came as a pleasant change –p.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Recognition of impending failure / reality of change setting in – p.2(…it became clear that the deal was not going to work, but focus on business as usual, while expecting dealmakers to resolve deal – we weren’t too worried)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Impact of change - results in disappointment –p.2 (reality of the deal – huge debt) gradually it did start impacting us , the deal got done....and we had a massive debt to cover. It was really...desperately disappointing that you couldn’t do anything - other than sort-of lobby and hope sanity would prevail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Helpless, yet hoping for resolution by dealmakers? - p.2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Impact of debt: infighting between shareholders / dealmakers about how to fix this led to prolonged uncertainty – that’s why it dragged on forever –p.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bedded down the deal (end 2009) – new board, serious cash constraints .... we felt cash strapped –p.3. It was on a fairly even keel, even though it was under water p.14.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Personal uncertainty related to making several personal decisions re. his career and financial security – over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• At the same time as commencement of BEE deal negotiations, personal uncertainty experienced due to a poor working relationship with his boss (a trigger) – p.3. - this was more stressful than the deal, which led to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unhappiness in job / lack of trust in boss – decision: should he leave? ...considering exiting (to take a sabbatical – consider future career options).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Existential uncertainty – seeking meaning in career &amp; role in business?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial insecurity – decision: should he sell his shares? I was more worried about my share options than anything else. I couldn’t really trust my boss to look after me .. with regard to my share options – p.3. (Financial independence important to him)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Decision to stay on for 2 more years** – his boss left, new CEO – asked him to stay. p.4, p.15

• **Global financial crisis (GFC) in 2008 (a trigger)** – resulted in more personal uncertainty (and self-flagellation – p.5.) - due to quick decision to sell shares (lost 40% - a terrible mistake). Also pleased to have a job – given the GFC: job security. *The world changed, it was good to have a job after 2008 – p.3.*

• CEO left – after a year; another Exco member appointed as acting CEO p.15

• **Considered leaving - another decision** – felt he had stabilized the ship – I did resign again to pursue other options p.15 – not really enjoying himself – wanted a change p.16

• **Decision to stay** - offered a new role (p.16).….. *with new challenges* – key projects, develop a business strategy – it was a positive change; with new learning p.23

• Considered promotion to a more senior executive role - another big decision – approached by others to consider – caused personal uncertainty: should he? Impact on work/life? Vs. Opportunity to do things differently? p.16 *(odd nights caused me pause and I thought about it …and hard discussions with my wife p.17).* Accepted the outcome – agrees that the other candidate was stronger - p.17. Me too, I wasn’t too unhappy either way p.17.

**6. Looking back – up to now:** *Looking back, I’m not unhappy I’ve stayed. I mean things have improved a lot* - p.4. *I am actually enjoying what I do much better* - p.7.

*Looking back, Must concede it was massive uncertainty - we started (2007) before the financial crisis – and we’ve come out the other side (mid-2012). P.31*

### 5.2 An example of chart of lived experience of uncertainty (based on example above)
5.3 An excerpt from the analysis across first three participants

NOTE: Some key themes identified across the first three participants (in step 2 of the analysis) illustrated in the excerpt below – part of addressing research objective 1 (R01). This theme template was then used for analysis of the remaining three participants in Company R. Gender has been changed to all male to facilitate anonymity. Titles and other identifiers have been removed.

**RO1: Experience of Uncertainty (triggers, emotional states, types of uncertainty & the dynamics over time)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>R1</th>
<th>R2</th>
<th>R5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEE deal: Initial response</td>
<td>Positive – business opportunities</td>
<td>Joined an ‘uncertain’ business</td>
<td>When joined company – excited, opportunities, yet uncertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality of deal &amp; process</td>
<td>Emotional States: Disappointment; helpless – yet hoping they would resolve it. Frustration &amp; disgust with dealmakers &amp; process – that is why it dragged on. Approach to deal: Also tried to find possible solutions – proactive Relevant expertise – past experience &amp; senior Exco member.</td>
<td>Emotional States: At some stage felt so uncertain at a time – wondered if Co. would find a solution? Approach to deal: Saw potential in company (close to the numbers) – need to focus on finding a solution for the debt Relevant expertise - part of his role</td>
<td>Emotional States Some initial concern – spoke to his boss. Approach to deal: Saw it as the responsibility of the shareholders Did not have relevant expertise re. the deal / financing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States / triggers for Personal Uncertainty - also cues</td>
<td>Job dissatisfaction: Unhappiness in job (poor relationship with boss, lack of trust &amp; feeling role is non-value-adding) – “more stressful than the deal” - leading to financial insecurity (boss not look after him? &amp; his shares? – and later, the Global Financial Crisis) 2nd time considered resigning – ‘stabilized ship’; not enjoying himself (marking time’); wanting a change. (Job dissatisfaction)</td>
<td>Transition - adjusting Feeling lonely / sidelined - not welcomed / supported in role. Criticised. Aware of others’ reaction to him. Feeling overwhelmed (learning the job – no time, job demands).</td>
<td>Transition - adjusting &amp; anticipating Adjusting: ‘Hanging in the air’ in “acting” role – in limbo -affecting his leadership approach &amp; impact down the line of “acting” roles. Still “acting” after 6 months, when expectation was for 3 months. Personal life – also in limbo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transition - anticipating Anticipation of changes to Exco by new CEO – Really wanted to stay – this caused him anxiety. (another potential transition issue?)</td>
<td>Transition - anticipating Anticipation of changes to Exco by new CEO – Really wanted to stay – this caused him anxiety. (another potential transition issue?)</td>
<td>Transition - adjusting &amp; anticipating Adjusting: ‘Hanging in the air’ in “acting” role – in limbo -affecting his leadership approach &amp; impact down the line of “acting” roles. Still “acting” after 6 months, when expectation was for 3 months. Personal life – also in limbo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anticipating: Will he be appointed into role OR not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>R1</td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>R5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of personal uncertainty:</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Issue of identity&lt;br&gt;• Job insecurity&lt;br&gt;• Financial insecurity&lt;br&gt;• Self-doubt</td>
<td><strong>Issue of identity</strong> - related to personal meaning / career uncertainty?&lt;br&gt;- Disillusioned with business / leadership – and not meaningful to him. What to do going forward?&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Financial insecurity</strong> – related to need for financial independence to give him options</td>
<td><strong>Issue of identity</strong> - not fitting in; an outsider&lt;br&gt;Aware of needing to meet others’ expectations&lt;br&gt;- leading to <strong>Self-doubt</strong> in decision to join &amp; his capability re. demands of the situation?</td>
<td><strong>Issue of identity</strong> – not using own leadership style in “acting” role; more maintaining&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Self-doubt</strong> – not making decision to appoint him - his competence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Over time: Outcome/s</strong>&lt;br&gt;• BEE deal&lt;br&gt;• Personal Uncertainty&lt;br&gt;• Identity development</td>
<td><strong>BEE deal:</strong> Very pleased about final outcome – the good guys won!&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Pers Unc:</strong> Looking back – happy he stayed – enjoying his role. Has had a change of heart about business &amp; leadership role.&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Identity:</strong> Strengthened sense of identity in his role – aligned with his values &amp; personal meaning.</td>
<td><strong>BEE deal:</strong> Pride in outcome – “we did it”&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Pers Unc:</strong> Gradually improved – noticed a shift in others’ perceptions. Also new CEO kept him on.&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Identity:</strong> Is developing – bolstered by credibility linked to outcome of BEE deal. But acceptance by colleagues questionable?</td>
<td><strong>Pers Unc:</strong> Dissipated – as appointed into permanent role after 1 year.&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Identity:</strong> Strengthened – using own authentic leadership style - now he could ‘really, really’ start implementing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTE: An excerpt from the analysis across all six participants in Company R is illustrated below – as part of addressing research objective 1 (RO1). This excerpt relates to the perceived outcomes after going through their period of organisational uncertainty – up to the time of the research interviews.

### 5.4 Comparison of themes across all six participants in Company R

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Outcome/s over time</th>
<th>Key findings identified across six participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BEE deal</td>
<td>The <strong>overall theme</strong> was a strong <strong>feeling of pride &amp; accomplishment</strong> in finally solving the financial problem in the Company – “we did it”; “the good guys won”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Uncertainty</td>
<td>Over the period of prolonged uncertainty in the business, the participants’ own personal uncertainty appeared to be a dynamic – <strong>showing an ebb and flow of experienced uncertainty (or peaks and troughs)</strong> brought on by different triggers. <strong>In 4 out of the 6 – participants’ key personal uncertainties had dissipated over time – and with certain events not materialising</strong> e.g. a new CEO was not appointed – and the Acting CEO was appointed, who kept the Exco team as was. R5 (who acted in a more senior role) was also appointed. R1 – had a ‘change of heart’ about business &amp; his role as a leader, and also was offered a new role – with new challenges for him. R3 – loved his job &amp; the company – and was happy he stayed on after the initial hiccup he experienced (just after he joined). R6 – was focused on moving forward. Only R4 &amp; R2 – still seemed to be experiencing some personal uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity development</td>
<td><strong>NOTE:</strong> All six individuals appeared to develop their identities through this experience of prolonged uncertainty – but some more than others. Credibility in their leadership was enhanced in the resolution of the business &amp; financial situation, particularly for R6 and R2. R1 was enjoying a more strategic role, being a more senior member of Exco. R5 was appointed into a new role - and could focus on implementing his own strategies &amp; leadership approach. R3 felt recognised and supported in his role by Exco – and managed to accomplish much in the time he had been there. Only R4 – although he felt that he had added some value (and gained recognition for this in some areas), he mostly had not developed his identity in his role at executive level – and as a member of Exco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The company – going forward</td>
<td><strong>4 out of the 6 – (R1, R3 &amp; R6 &amp; R5) – felt that there were major challenges &amp; business uncertainties going forward.</strong> One of the disadvantages of what they had been through – almost a form of being in survival mode – meant that the people in the Company would need a change in mindset to address the new challenges going forward. Although much effort went into developing a new business strategy (with input from key stakeholders). R2 &amp; R4 – did not really place emphasis on the business strategy going forward.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 6: Analysis of Company P (Phase 1)

This appendix contains examples aligned with key steps of the analysis as described in chapter 3 (Table 20) – using a few examples to illustrate the process:

- 6.1. An example of initial themes from one participant from Company P
- 6.2. An example of a chart of participant’s lived experience of uncertainty
- 6.3. An excerpt from the analysis across first three participants
- 6.4. An excerpt from the comparison of themes across all six participants in Company P
NOTE: Emergent themes were identified within each of three interviews in Step 1 of the analysis.

Below is one example of emergent themes supported by the participants’ quotes for part of research objective 1 (RO1), which emphasises the participant’s lived experience of uncertainty overtime.

**RO1: Experience of personal uncertainty – responses, contextual issues, triggers & types of personal uncertainty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamics of response to the Uncertainty - over time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Background / Context – when previous MD was appointed:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- He wanted to discuss his experience of personal uncertainty in relation to the appointment of previous MD. ‘I became very uncertain in myself because he changed everything, not completely, but a lot of things changed. The management style changed, the structure of the company changed etc…’ – p.1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- He became uncertain - due to three key things (p.5-6) that happened over the space of a year ‘because my – my own position was under threat… and that kind-of traumatised me in that period and I felt incredibly inadequate ’ –p.2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- He felt inadequate and experienced self-doubt. Appears to be related to job insecurity &amp; an issue of loss of his identity. ‘Coming from a position where I was part of establishing the company, …the setting up of the company….it was – it was just a totally different experience. So I felt inadequate. I started doubting myself and I withdrew completely.” –p.2. Felt like he was on his own (p.3, p.7) - “it’s like having leprosy, people steer clear” – p.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Made a decision not to resign – and to see it through. (Resilience) A matter of pride – but more importantly, “I knew that I hadn’t done anything wrong. I mean, at that stage, I had over 20 years’ service… – p.5. Was courageous – insisted on taking performance issue to the board – p.6 (when he was at an all-time low - also p.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Compromise reached after that. Structure resolved by chairperson of the board –p.11. Level of anxiety improved – and his approach was “putting my head below the radar, um I wasn’t involved”. - p.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. When the MD was seconded to the City – and Acting MD appointed:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- He was relieved – “A huge change. There was – there was relief”. – p.12. The acting MD had a different style &amp; “people started engaging.” “it was a pleasant atmosphere” p.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- He re-established his identity through his approach to the acting MD – offered to support him - “that’s who I am.. “He would ask me things, I would do it, it was great. So the leadership … devolved into the management of the company, and everybody started making a contribution …. –p.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Anticipation of return of MD:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- He acknowledged he had much uncertainty about this: &quot;there was a lot of uncertainty about that. Because um you come from a position - realising but, you know, this is what it can be like .... you know. And we went through this period, gee whizz, you know, are we going to go back to this, you know? - p.13 -14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- When heard the MD was not returning: his response was: “You can get on with the job” – p.14 After this, he “could um take a different approach to – to my office situation, which I did” - p.15. - referring to his leadership approach re. his own team. Spoke about systems he introduced - “the positivity from it all is - I think people feel more secure, um it’s more fair because everyone has been dealt with in the same way” - p.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dynamics of response to the Uncertainty - over time

4. Prolonged period of Acting MDs: Plus changes to Board, chairperson & institutional arrangements of the City (due to municipal elections) –p.16
   - Much uncertainty due to: “rumour-mongering” about the City’s institutional arrangements, the Board changed, the chairman changed, there was no MD (p.16).
   - Spoke about there being no real leadership – at executive level in terms of collective leadership of the company. (p.16).
   - The board took a decision to rotate the “acting” MD role – for inclusivity – and for short periods – until a new MD appointed –p.17 “This was flawed”
   - Period of ‘Acting’ in a more senior executive role: He felt flattered, but was aware of the situation the company was in (fear it could fall apart) - p.20
   - The company is “under huge pressure” due to a change in management style of the City - not arms-length approach anymore - due to Centrist approach of ruling party –p.18.
   - He was also aware of there being “no leadership in the company” –p.20. (Hence, his fear it could fall apart – p.20.)

5. Outcomes:
   - Personal uncertainty: Much improved when he heard the previous MD was not returning - p.14.
   - Re. organisation: Uncertainty among Exco and senior mngt is a whole lot better – collective understanding in wanting to hand over a company to the new MD that’s functional & to be proud of it - p.22 Also a more positive collaborative relationship with the City – “so that antagonism has now gone” - p.18.
   - Identity development: significant development in his identity - from losing it, to regaining it & and then evolving it when acting in more senior executive role D – but congruent with his view of being a supportive leader (participative).

6.2 An example of chart of lived experience of uncertainty (based on example above)

![Diagram of Experience of Uncertainty](chart.png)
6.3 Comparison of themes across first three participants: P2, P4 & P6

NOTE: Some key themes identified across the first three participants (in step 2 of the analysis) are illustrated in the excerpt below – part of addressing research objective 1(R01). This theme template was then used for analysis of the remaining three participants in Company P. Gender has been changed to all male to facilitate anonymity. Titles and other identifiers have been removed.

A personal reflexive note: I realised I needed to incorporate more of the verbatim quotes in this schedule than I had when doing the Company R analysis, as I found that I needed to go back to the transcripts for doing the analysis across all six participants, which cost me in time.

RO1: Experience of Uncertainty (triggers, emotional states, types of uncertainty & the dynamics over time)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous Context – under previous MD</strong></td>
<td>Much anxiety / insecurity: <em>I became very uncertain in myself</em> – p.1. 3 key events - kind-of traumatised me in that period and I felt incredibly inadequate –p.3 (&quot;an all-time low&quot; - p.7.) Mentioned anxieties and worrying – p.10. You don’t know what the hell is going to happen next - p.10. <em>I withdrew</em>. After a year – reached a compromise – level of anxiety improved a bit. (p.4)</td>
<td>He had started to understand the previous MD – <em>&quot;I was able to work with him&quot;</em> even though he did not report to him, he did need to interact with him regularly. But had some ‘worry’ about the MD’s leadership – and that he was <em>&quot;not necessarily respected&quot;</em> – p.5</td>
<td>When joined the Co. – he found it to be <em>a bit different</em> – compared to his past experience – p.2. <strong>Key emotion - Frustration</strong> – not being able to do what he wanted to do in his role – p.2 (due to a combination of previous MD’s controlling style –p.3 - and the reporting structure in terms of the City –p.2). Found himself starting to dis-engage - I’m not listening to the boss – p.3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional states</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When MD seconded to the city - response</td>
<td>Fairly positive – a sense of <em>relief</em> (p12) that previous MD was gone, with all the negativity that was associated with his leadership style. Initial relief and growing optimism re new MD’s leadership style (p12); “<em>an unbearable lightness of being</em>” – p.13. - but fear of going back to the previous unpleasant situation when previous MD returned.</td>
<td>Positive – said he we were all <em>excited</em> (for the first 6 months or so) as believed their MD would be able resolve some of the key problems in the City, which were also impacting on the Company – p.1.</td>
<td>Positive – it was an <em>opportunity</em> to do things differently – p.1 &amp; p.3. He celebrated it – as an opportunity to make things different as an organization. There’s <em>hope</em> –p.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When heard MD not returning to Co:</td>
<td>Positive - his response was: “<em>You can get on with the job</em>”p.14. (Regaining his identity?)</td>
<td>Mixed response. Spoke about ‘that’s where uncertainty started. – p.1, .... when he was around, as a company we were doing very well.. But also not sure about him returning – some ‘worry’ about his leadership approach - (p.3, p.5)</td>
<td>Did not refer to this – assume it was positive as per above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged ‘Acting’ period &amp; other changes (board, city)</td>
<td>Emotional States: <em>Positive experience initially</em> with first acting MD “the person that acted did very well” (p12), “started looking at things more strategically” and “people started engaging” (p12) so started <em>engaging himself “a little bit”</em> (p13) because it was “a pleasant atmosphere (p13).”</td>
<td>Emotional States: Felt <em>frustration</em> during the Acting period - re. change of City’s perception towards the Co. (p.2). Things were “bad” in the meetings with the City (politics!) Considering whether to apply for more senior position: I was <em>not comfortable</em> – “<em>is this the right time for me to move to</em></td>
<td>Emotional States: With the series of “acting” MDs, the dynamics changed – p.3. <em>Things did change.</em> But it did not take away the fundamental issue - A new dynamic which was <em>even more uncertain</em> – p.4. – the changes in the City (municipal elections) – new</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

354
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>When appointed into a more senior executive role – felt flattered</strong> – but also had some <strong>fear</strong> about Co falling apart – due to being without leadership – p.20. Saw opportunity to focus on essentials – to keep Co. functional.</td>
<td><strong>this space ? – p.5.</strong>, when waiting for new MD to be appointed, <strong>politics</strong> with the City etc. Some frustration re. the “acting” situation – been <strong>problematic</strong>, especially when acting for a short-term, as “they don’t make decisions” – p.21. Not getting the support you need …to do your job.</td>
<td><strong>councilors and new structuring</strong>. In terms of his role, he found it was <strong>almost chaotic</strong> – p.4. (because his job is dealing with the uncertainty in the business). No MD to engage with the City; only “acting” MDs – and just when making some ground, the two-month acting period is up – p.5. <em>It became a nightmare</em> - p.5. He <strong>disengaged</strong> a couple of times – p.7.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phases</strong></td>
<td><strong>Org change:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Org change:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Org change:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td>Change in management style – p.1-2 (under previous MD) was <strong>a key trigger.</strong></td>
<td>City’s perception of the Co changed – from “the shining star” to “right on the bottom” (p.2) &amp; <strong>negative interactions</strong> with the City – during that 6 month period. <strong>Transition – adjusting</strong></td>
<td>A <strong>new dynamic which was even more uncertain</strong> – p.4. – <strong>the changes in the City</strong> (municipal elections) – new councilors and new structuring. Referred to these as <strong>big changes</strong> - p.9. <em>The new administration came up with</em>… the 2040 vision - p.10 – with specific priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Delay:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Delay:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Delay:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Delay:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Had 3 key events with previous MD over a period of 1 year</strong> (p.5-6) – which traumatised him.</td>
<td><strong>When appointed in current role, he was concerned about the new Board’s direction</strong> – p.11. After being in the position for just 2 months, there was a <strong>major crisis</strong> which he needed to take lead of as the key people who should have were all “acting” in their positions – p.11.</td>
<td><strong>The prolonged period of “acting” MDs</strong> – delayed him getting momentum in <strong>his role</strong>. Would just be making some ground, then the acting MD would be swopped (p.5 &amp;7). <em>While we are waiting for things to happen</em> – p.8. <strong>Also a delay in “mobilization” of the approach to strategy</strong> – because of the new mayor &amp; councilors in the City – it stopped the process - p.9. So we waited… we stalled… for the new guys to come on board to engage with them – p.10. So everything actually stopped.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Also - a delay in appointing permanent MD, so prolonged period of rotation of acting MDs – p.17.</strong> Lacking leadership in the Co. due to this.</td>
<td><strong>Delay: the crisis</strong> went on for longer than anticipated - p.13. It seems not to be ending – p.16. The <strong>acting MD period</strong> has been long – a year and a half is a lot – p.22.</td>
<td><strong>Transition – adjusting ???</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-doubt</strong></td>
<td><strong>Transition - anticipating</strong></td>
<td><strong>Transition - anticipating:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Transition – adjusting ??</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>He acknowledged he had much uncertainty about anticipating the return of the previous MD</strong> - p.13-14 – and it went on for 6 months (delay)</td>
<td><strong>A key trigger for per unc was considering whether he should apply for a more senior role (p.2)</strong> he did not apply first time because of uncertainties’ … – and he did not want to deal with increased politics required in this position. Mentions uncertainty re. the new MD - what his direction will be? (P.24)</td>
<td><strong>Issue of identity:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition- adjusting</strong></td>
<td><strong>Transition - adjusting:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Issue of identity:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When appointed as in more “acting” senior role – also had fears about the Co. falling apart – and many challenges / changes to deal with in this role (but was more positive uncertainty for him – saw it as an opportunity to focus on certain things)</strong></td>
<td><strong>A key trigger for per unc was considering whether he should apply for a more senior role (p.2)</strong> he did not apply first time because of uncertainties’ … – and he did not want to deal with increased politics required in this position. Mentions uncertainty re. the new MD - what his direction will be? (P.24)</td>
<td>**Frustration experienced due to not being able to carry out his role (under previous MD) as he felt he was supposed to. – p.2. This extended into the “acting” period. <strong>NOTE:</strong> <strong>The combination</strong> of changes in the City &amp; delays in decisions- led him to feel uncertain about his role &amp; contribution. He <strong>disengaged</strong> a couple of times – p.7. When referring to <strong>his interface with the City</strong>, he said that was one relationship “I’ve resigned from.” – p.16.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Types of personal uncertainty:**
- Issue of **identity**
- Job insecurity
- Financial insecurity
- **Self-doubt**
- Other?

- **Issue of identity:** Experienced a loss of identity under pervious MD p.2.
  
  **Self-doubt:** So I felt **inadequate. I started doubting myself and I withdrew completely** - p.2.

- **Issue of identity:** He really loved his current job – and had a strong role identity with it as an Engineer (p.7; p.10). Whereas moving to the COO position, he saw the Politics and problems (which he had recently experienced some of this) – and asked himself “do you really need to be part of this?” – p.3. (Role identity?)
  
  **Self-doubt:** some doubt in his decision he made to take up promotion, because he reversed this decision – due to “boardroom politics now happening” before he was to start in the new role – and this was the key thing he had concerns about moving into that role. – p.9

- **Issue of identity:** (His Role) Frustration experienced due to not being able to carry out his role (under previous MD) as he felt he was supposed to. – p.2. This extended into the “acting” period. **NOTE:** The combination of changes in the City & delays in decisions- led him to feel uncertain about his role & contribution. He disengaged a couple of times – p.7. When referring to his interface with the City, he said that was one relationship “I’ve resigned from.” – p.16.
<table>
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<th>Themes</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over time: Outcome/s</td>
<td><strong>For organisation:</strong> Uncertainty among execs and senior mngt - <em>is a whole lot better</em> - p.22 Also a more positive collaborative relationship with the City – “so that antagonism has now gone” - p.18.</td>
<td><strong>For organization:</strong> Successful handling of the crisis – and this built credibility of the Co. in the eyes of the City. (p.20).</td>
<td><strong>For organization:</strong> An opportunity was presented for people to engage and air their views - due to the change in leadership style under the “acting MDs” (p.13). The dynamic in Exco has changed positively (p.12) - There’s more leadership &amp; decisions are being made. – p.24. <em>Unc is good</em> – because of it, things have changed, evolved –p.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Uncertainty</td>
<td><strong>Pers Unc:</strong> Personal uncertainty reduced when appointed as the final “acting” MD – saw opportunity to influence things. <em>There was definitely a big down and now there’s a big up again</em> - p.35</td>
<td><strong>Pers Unc:</strong> He said he was moving towards certainty now definitely, but still there is an element of uncertainty re. the new MD. – p.24?</td>
<td><strong>Pers Unc:</strong> And he saw momentum gained in his role – and he thought “this is what I want to do” - p.7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Development</td>
<td><strong>Identity:</strong> significant development in his identity - from losing it, to regaining it &amp; and then evolving it when acting in more senior executive role</td>
<td><strong>Identity:</strong> His leadership identity in his exec role developed – particularly after leading the crisis – and successfully. P.19-20. Recognition for this (from the Mayor) –p.19. This also helped build positive relationships &amp; his credibility with the City.</td>
<td><strong>Identity:</strong> He said there was a lot of value added – and it also <em>profiled what I do</em> - p.8. A definite shift in his role identity – and credibility gained.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 6.4 An excerpt from the comparison of themes across all six participants in Company P

**NOTE:** An excerpt from the analysis across all six participants in Company P is illustrated below – as part of addressing research objective 1 (RO1). This excerpt relates to the perceived outcomes after going through their period of organisational uncertainty – up to the time of the research interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Outcome/s over time</th>
<th>Key findings identified across six participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Personal Uncertainty</strong></td>
<td>For all six participants, there was a reduction in their personal uncertainty over time. In particularly as the latest acting MD had been in place for longer, the team was collaborating and decisions were being made. However, no MD had yet been appointed and there was agreement that relationships with stakeholders would continue to be problematic, that shareholder personnel would still be changing on a cyclic basis and there was no certainty that the company would remain an independent entity. Political issues would continue to create on-going uncertainty for everyone. Therefore it would be expected that people would continue to experience some negative emotional states into the future, even once more certainty had been created with a new MD. <strong>Hence, Four individuals (P1, P2, P3 &amp; P6) specifically referred to the “flux” of uncertainty – when reflecting on their experience of uncertainty over time.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Identity development</strong></td>
<td>There was an overall sense of accomplishment and personal growth within all six participants – to a greater or lesser degree. This related to having created collaborative leadership that enabled decisions to be made and the company to continue as a viable entity. There was a sense of preparation for the incoming MD and having created a potentially consistent leadership approach at top level. There was also general agreement that much uncertainty remained, but that they had found opportunities within the uncertainty they had experienced. P1 stepped more fully into his leadership role of his functional unit, perceiving that his confidence grew. P2 spearheaded collaborative leadership process and preparing the ground for the new MD. P4 handled a crisis successfully, building his credibility. <strong>P5 became more assertive in dealing with the ‘acting’ directors to gain resources for his functional area. P6 found ways to add value in his role, while decision-making was in limbo, thereby building his role identity. For P3, his identity solidified – as he had no identity issues &amp; was open to the change. He was pleased that he was able to progress certain key initiatives during the period of uncertainty – and worked effectively with Exco in doing this.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• The company – going forward</strong></td>
<td><strong>All the participants</strong> were proud that they had kept the organisation going and made progress to improve its internal operations, as well as relationships with the City. <strong>P3 – EXCO kept going, not waiting for new MD. P5/P3</strong> Decisions were made, especially when final acting MD was in place. Everyone acknowledged the uncertainty was far from over and would continue into the future particularly regarding the relationship with the shareholder and their political agendas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 7: Integration of Company R and Company P analyses (Phase 1)

- 7.1 Excerpts from the analysis across Company R and Company P
- 7.2 Progression of themes identified during the analytical process
NOTE: The excerpts below relate to research objective I (RO1) in understanding the types of personal uncertainty experienced by participants – across both the companies. This analysis focused on identifying common themes across the two companies, while highlighting any differences. Common themes needed to be based on being evident in at least eight of the participants (that is; with 4 + 4, or 5 + 3 in each company).

Felt Uncertainty - was related to two types of personal uncertainty:

1. Issues of Identity

Co R – 5 people experienced uncertainty due to issues of identity related to transitions. 4 participants experienced issues of identity in relation to transitions, affecting their personal, leader and/or role identity. And one person, had an issue of identity related to his identity with leadership & business (personal meaning?)

Co P – 5 people experienced issues of identity – mostly “loss” of leadership or role identity, also related to transitions in their context.

TOTAL = 5 (Co R) + 5 (Co P) = 10

NOTE: 2 people (both newcomers) showed more extreme personal uncertainty related to being excluded.

Mostly the personal uncertainty related to some loss or diminished sense of identity - therefore this type of uncertainty could be termed ‘Identity Uncertainty’.

2. Anticipation of future events and outcomes thereof

Co R – 5 people were uncertain about the organisational uncertainty and future transitions and the impact of these – related to job/financial insecurity, potential promotions and who the new CEO would be?

Co P – 3 people had anticipatory uncertainty relating to future transitions and their impact – 1 related to a potential promotion ; 2 related to the appointment of MD.

TOTAL = 5 (Co R) + 3 (Co P) = 8

This personal uncertainty was about anticipating / worrying about possible events & the impact of these on oneself - therefore this type of uncertainty may be termed ‘Anticipatory Uncertainty’.
7.2 Progression of themes identified during the analytical process

**NOTE:** After integrating the analyses across Company R and Company P for research objective 1, I realised that:

- The flux of experienced uncertainty was a common over-arching theme, with peaks of ‘felt uncertainty’; and
- The participants’ felt uncertainty comprised of both their personal uncertainty and leadership challenges (in their leadership role during organisational uncertainty), with an inter-relationship between these.

Based on the above findings, I merged the personal uncertainty and leadership challenges to form part of the key theme ‘felt uncertainty’. For this reason, the theme ‘implementing strategies and actions’ for moving forward in their contexts of uncertainty was aligned with their ‘felt uncertainty’ – meaning the strategies adopted to address their types personal uncertainty and the different leadership challenges they experienced. This change is reflected in the themes in the third column below (after integration).

**Research Objective 1 (RO1): Experience of Uncertainty (triggers, emotional states, types of uncertainty & dynamics over time)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P - under final five categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Response to changes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Initial Response to changes</strong></td>
<td>Note: The change in responses over time suggested a flux in experienced uncertainty over time; thus supporting the over-arching theme mentioned before this table.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positive</td>
<td>• Positive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negative</td>
<td>• Negative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reality &amp; approach</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reality &amp; approach</strong></td>
<td>Note: The emotional state of uncertainty would be included under the category of ‘felt uncertainty’ below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emotional states</td>
<td>• Emotional states</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Approach to deal problem</td>
<td>• Approach to organisation changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relevant Expertise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Triggers for Personal Uncertainty</strong></td>
<td><strong>Triggers for Personal Uncertainty</strong></td>
<td>Category 1: Triggers for Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Job dissatisfaction</td>
<td>• Delay</td>
<td>• Organisational change (Note: included as a trigger – as it sets in motion the dynamics and other triggers for experienced uncertainty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transition –adjusting</td>
<td>• Transition –adjusting</td>
<td>• Transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transition - anticipating</td>
<td>• Transition - anticipating</td>
<td>• Delay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Delay</td>
<td>• Other triggers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other triggers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of personal uncertainty:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Types of personal uncertainty:</strong></td>
<td>Category 2: Felt uncertainty (see note before this table) Sub-category: Personal uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Issue of identity</td>
<td>• Issue of identity</td>
<td>• Identity uncertainty – issues of identity and self-doubt (related to transitions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Job insecurity</td>
<td>• Job insecurity</td>
<td>• Anticipatory uncertainty – anticipating impact of future event on self (job and financial insecurity; appointment of new MD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial insecurity</td>
<td>• Financial insecurity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-doubt</td>
<td>• Self-doubt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other types - appointment of new MD</td>
<td>• Other types - appointment of new MD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

360
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P - under final five categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-category: Leadership challenges</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Experienced complexity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Managing other peoples’ uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Corporate politics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Rationale explained below)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Note: This theme became subsumed within what was developed through their experience (that is, research objective 2 – RO2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Over time: Outcome/s
- Re. BEE deal
- Personal Unc
- Identity development

### RO1: Approach to Personal Uncertainty – making sense of it, approach to it, coping mechanisms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sensemaking</strong> - developing own understanding of what is going on</td>
<td><strong>Sensemaking</strong> - developing own perspective or understanding of what is going on</td>
<td><strong>Category 3: Making sense of uncertainty</strong> - developing own perspective or understanding of what is going on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Perceptual filters of the individual – which influence sensemaking
- Self-view
- World view
- View of others
- Past experience

#### Seeking understanding - processes for gathering information & other perspectives
- Reading the situation (e.g. Picking up cues, observing, intuition, listening)
- Conversations with others (one-to-one or in group/s)
- Reading
- Reflection
- Other?

#### Reasoning - to make what is going on plausible – and may include rationalization.
Examples in relation to:
- BEE deal
- Personal uncertainty

#### Search for personal meaning – motivation or driver for accepting uncertainty & seeing it through.
- Meaning
- Values

#### Interpreting - to make what is going on plausible – and may include rationalization, reasoning, a new perspective.
Examples in relation to:
- Personal uncertainty
- Leadership challenges during uncertainty

(This aligns with notes above.)

#### Meaning-making - which provides motivation or driver for accepting uncertainty and persevering
### Themes after analysis of Co R
- Managing Uncertainty – approaches to managing the uncertainty being experienced
- Focus on sphere of influence - to manage uncertainty, by accepting that there are things you cannot influence
- Decisions & actions - to manage the uncertainty
  - Examples (to indicate strategy & intent)
- Being adaptive – making changes based on new developments or information
  - Examples
- Coping Mechanisms – to facilitate stress and state management
  - Self-talk and reframing
  - Support system
  - Exercise
  - Other coping mechanisms

### Themes after analysis of Co P
- Managing Uncertainty – approaches to managing the uncertainty being experienced
- Focus on sphere of influence - to manage uncertainty, by accepting that there are things you cannot influence
- Decisions & actions - to manage the uncertainty
  - Examples (to indicate strategy & intent)
- Being adaptive – making changes based on new developments or information
  - Examples
- Coping Mechanisms – to facilitate stress and state management
  - Self-talk and reframing
  - Support system
  - Exercise
  - Other coping mechanisms

### Themes after integration of Co R and Co P
- Emotion-focused coping adopting mechanisms – to facilitate stress and emotional state management (self-regulation & support)
  (See note under coping mechanisms in table below)

### Category 4. Implementing strategies & actions
- Sub-category: Personal uncertainty
- Strategies for developing identity uncertainty
- Strategies for managing anticipatory uncertainty

### NOTE:
Due to my decision to combine the participants’ personal uncertainty and leadership challenges into the category ‘felt uncertainty, I re-examined the analysis up to that point in terms of identifying strategies and actions implemented in relation to the participants’ personal uncertainty and their leadership challenges. Hence, the themes in the third column below changed quite significantly, from the themes in the previous two columns, to align with my emerging interpretation.
**RO1: Challenges experienced in leadership role during period of uncertainty (types of challenges)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complexity - added to the uncertainty</td>
<td>Experienced complexity - added to their felt uncertainty, experienced in relation to complexity in their context. Leadership paradoxes - managing paradoxes was part of their experienced complexity.</td>
<td><strong>Note:</strong> These leadership challenges, that is; experienced complexity, managing other peoples' uncertainty and corporate politics - have been included in the category 'felt uncertainty' above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing other peoples’ uncertainty</td>
<td>Managing other peoples’ uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with resistant people / teams</td>
<td>NOTE: Dropped this theme – not found to be common.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership paradoxes - dealing with different types of paradoxes</td>
<td>NOTE: Moved up – to be part of experienced complexity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Politics</td>
<td>Corporate Politics - the challenges of navigating politics and the adverse effects of politics. Stakeholder Management seemed to be part of politics – needing to work with and influence key stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other challenges: Stakeholder Management</td>
<td>NOTE: Moved up – as part of the challenge of corporate politics during organizational change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RO1: Approach to leadership challenges – how they made sense of leadership challenges and their leadership approach during organisational uncertainty.**

**Sensemaking** – developing own perspective or understanding of what is going on

**NOTE:** The general approach to sensemaking for leadership challenges is similar to making sense of personal uncertainty. Therefore need to identify examples of sensemaking in relation to specific leadership challenges identified e.g. experienced complexity, leadership paradoxes & corporate politics (could be using any of approaches e.g. seeking understanding, reflection and interpreting).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Managing Uncertainty – approaches to the uncertainty being experienced | Managing Uncertainty – approaches to the uncertainty being experienced | **Category 4: Implementing strategies & actions**
Note: To align with leadership challenges (as explained earlier |
| Leadership sphere of influence | Leadership Focus: | Leadership Focus |
  • Purpose & strategies |
  • Leadership approach | • Purpose & strategies |
  • Leadership approach | Includes purpose, approach and strategies adopted - in relation to the challenge of “experienced complexity” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Purpose &amp; Approach</td>
<td>• Purpose &amp; Approach</td>
<td>Includes purpose and approach to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Key message (communicated to staff / people)</td>
<td>• Key message (communicated to staff / people)</td>
<td>communication during organizational uncertainty – in relation to the challenge of managing other peoples’ uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dealing with politics &amp; resistance – examples of approach adopted</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dealing with politics – examples of approach adopted.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Adopting more political skill – examples of approach adopted - in relation to the challenge of politics.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The category ‘adapting’ was identified to reinforce the ongoing adaptive process of managing uncertainty – which aligned more with the participants’ experience. The theme adapting was identified previously under ‘managing uncertainty’ earlier – but not as a stand-alone category, as in table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category 5: Adapting</strong></td>
<td><strong>Category 5: Adapting</strong></td>
<td><strong>Category 5: Adapting</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Category 5: Adapting - which refers to adapting their strategies, due to unfolding events or new information, based on further sensemaking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**In conclusion:** The final categories, sub-categories and key themes for research objective 1 were identified after the integration of the analyses of Company R and Company P, which aligned with the flux of uncertainty – and felt experience comprising of both personal uncertainty and leadership challenges (and the inter-relationship between these).

**NOTE:** After the integration of the analyses across companies R and P, with the resulting categories depicted above, the key themes for research objective 2 (RO2) were re-visited – as indicated on the next page.
**Research Objective 2 (RO2): Development or learning from the experience of Personal Uncertainty (e.g. new approaches learned, self-development)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development of Perspectives in relation to Uncertainty</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• World view regarding uncertainty</td>
<td>Development of Perspectives in relation to Uncertainty</td>
<td>Key theme: Development of mental frames</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-view</td>
<td>• World view regarding uncertainty</td>
<td>• Acceptance of uncertainty (world view)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-view: Development of identity – and being positive &amp; resilient</td>
<td>• Positive identity development (self-view):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Key dispositions: resilience &amp; optimism (self-view)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Sense of Uncertainty</td>
<td>Making Sense of Uncertainty</td>
<td>The value of effective sensemaking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The need to allow more time for sense making</td>
<td>• The need to allow more time for sensemaking</td>
<td>• Factors promoting effective sensemaking: time, being calm and reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflection - as a means of gaining perspective</td>
<td>• Conversations for sensemaking and/or support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Uncertainty</td>
<td>Managing Uncertainty</td>
<td>Note: the value of support has been included above.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coping mechanisms - The value of supportive relationships during uncertainty</td>
<td>• Coping mechanisms - The value of supportive relationships during uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RO2: Development or learning in relation to Leadership Role during organisational uncertainty (new approaches learned, self-development)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership approach during uncertainty</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co R</th>
<th>Themes after analysis of Co P</th>
<th>Themes after integration of Co R and Co P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The importance of leadership focus</td>
<td>Leadership approach during uncertainty</td>
<td>Leadership during uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Development of leadership approach</td>
<td>• Development of leadership approach</td>
<td>• Leadership through engaging others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reaffirmation of leadership</td>
<td>• The importance of leadership focus</td>
<td>• The importance of focus and adaptability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approach adopted during uncertainty</td>
<td>• Reaffirmation of leadership approach adopted during uncertainty</td>
<td>• Development of leadership approach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political savvy</td>
<td>• Political savvy</td>
<td>• Communication principles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Political skill (aligns more with participants’ language and literature)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication approach</td>
<td>Communication approach</td>
<td>Note: Communication principles has been included above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Effective communication is essential</td>
<td>• Effective communication is essential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Importance of honesty</td>
<td>• Importance of honesty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**In conclusion:** The final key themes for research objective 2 seemed to align with the categories and themes identified for research objective 1, bringing more coherence to the overall analysis, and interpretation thereof.
APPENDIX 8: Analysis of executive coaches (Phase 2)

This appendix contains examples of steps of the analysis as described in chapter 3 (Table 20) – using a few examples to illustrate the process.

- 8.1 An excerpt from the analysis across first three participants
- 8.2. Excerpts from the comparison of themes across all six participants
NOTE: After the initial textual analysis, I made the decision to use the themes from Phase 1 (executive leaders), applied for their types of experienced uncertainty, which the coaches observed as being raised by their executive clients. This was found to effective – as evidenced in the examples below.

**RO3: Personal uncertainty issues raised during coaching by executive clients**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C5</th>
<th>C6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity uncertainty:</strong> Individual threats vs. team approach of Exco: insecurity within Exco - p.1</td>
<td><strong>Identity uncertainty:</strong> Transition points – lead to executives asking questions or choices. Meaning of career &amp; work/life balance? – p.1. (Existential uncertainty? A form of Identity Uncertainty?) “what should I do?” – p.2 (significance? p.2. … “and the thing is, … that transition didn’t just happen quickly, you know, it took three years” – p.3. (In limbo? increases identity uncertainty?) Newcomer expectations not met re. culture &amp; role – p.8. Not being recognised for contribution</td>
<td><strong>Identity Uncertainty:</strong> …. then some of that self-doubt will definitely surface, but it doesn’t come out initially… - p.1. <strong>Promotion</strong> from operations role to a consulting strategic role… And then as we got more involved in the coaching also, I think a lot of self-doubt, you know, creeping in - in terms of &quot;Can I really do it?&quot;. - p.4. These leaders, who find it very hard to really be themselves in their outside world… you know, express their insecurities and express their lack of confidence&quot; [in the coaching sessions] – p.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Doubt &amp; lack of confidence</strong> when there is robust debate within Exco – p.2. (personalising issues)</td>
<td><strong>Anticipatory Uncertainty:</strong> Executive turnover &amp; transitions – p.1. Some job insecurity – due to orgsn change – p.1. Financial implications of change in job &amp; on family? - p.2. “And so constantly plagued with the idea of uncertainty because he’s not sure what tomorrow looks like, how is it going to work out …. “ – p.3.</td>
<td><strong>Anticipatory uncertainty:</strong> Am I being moved out? (job insecurity?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being tentative</strong> - affecting agency as a leader - p.14. Delaying decisions, not wanting to be unpopular, credibility affected adversely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anticipatory uncertainty:</strong> More job insecurity after economic crisis – p.1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RO3: Uncertainty in relation to executive clients’ leadership role raised during coaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C5</th>
<th>C6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experienced Complexity</strong> – “a lot of things”” - to contend with, esp. managing different stakeholder relationships &amp; expectations, also balancing these with running the business (paradox). – p.1</td>
<td><strong>Experienced Complexity</strong> Degree of organisation change &amp; how to engage this as leaders – because “they are responsible at their level of leadership” – p.1. Increased complexity – now cannot predict beyond 6 months? Implications for clients &amp; business. ‘..there’s obviously quite a bit of anxiety around that (p.4).… anxiety … about what do we do, what decisions do we make … p.4.</td>
<td><strong>Experienced Complexity</strong> You know, a lot of the stress elements I think do come from uncertainty - but it presents more as, you know, “it’s just too much, it’s too overwhelming”. - p.1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics</strong> Relationships, politics &amp; power plays with different stakeholders – p.2 - 3</td>
<td><strong>Politics</strong> Competition from colleagues - p.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing Uncertainty of others</strong> “And so they’re not only dealing with their own uncertainty, they’re dealing with “how do I create certainty out of uncertainty for people - clients?” – p.3. Shielding her staff, which increased her own anxiety – p.10.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTE: Examples of the analysis across all six executive coaches are illustrated below - for two key themes identified.

**Theme: Trust in the coaching relationship is crucial for issues of uncertainty to emerge**

Most coaches (n=5) emphasised the importance of having trust in the coaching relationship for coachees to feel safe in sharing and exploring their uncertainty, which makes executives feel vulnerable. **Hence**, this may be a factor in why uncertainty does not present early in coaching, but emerges during the process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Different</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1: And that's why it's important for that relationship to develop. And <strong>it's only when that relationship of trust gets developed</strong> that people are saying, “You know what, I'm really so vulnerable. I don't know how to deal with this. I don't have an answer. I don't know what to do” – you know. It's not the kind-of language I can use in an organisation. - p.5</td>
<td>C2: Different – did not mention this specifically, but was implied. You know, most of the time coachees, they come to us, and though we are there to be of service to them but they have to prove to us that they are handling it, they are altogether and everything – “I'm this perfect leader, this perfect exec”; p.11.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3: Importance of trust – to be able to work at a deeper level (logical levels – 4th session) ....so it <strong>took a little while to build the trust</strong> that I needed to do – p.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4: But some are not used to it, I think it's habitual - it's uncertain for them. And I think it's some – some really are fearful to do it. – p.11. .... <strong>it takes a lot of trust building</strong> before they – possibly feeling safe enough – p.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5: “One of the strong assumptions I have is that if people are given .... **a safe place to explore ...themselves but also ...their uncertain world ... for them to actually surface some of the things that are key ...and receiving a certain amount of <strong>validation</strong> on those things...that I think helps them to cope, ...and in actual fact then make decisions...” – p.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6: It's that safe space. <strong>So if they feel safe and comfortable enough that they're not being judged.</strong> You know, in an organisation at that level they have to project a certain image... Then they come into the coaching and there's no threat, ....<strong>then they can open up about</strong> their uncertainties. – p.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Theme:** Use of general coaching approach in working with clients’ uncertainty

*All six coaches* appeared to adopt their general coaching approach (which seemed to be eclectic for all of them) for working with issues of uncertainty which emerged during coaching. This was noticed in how they described and expressed aspects of their approach to working with uncertainty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Different</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>C1:</strong> that’s certainly my training, is that we worked on language,…we work on body, um and then we work on emotions – p.9.</td>
<td><strong>C5 - was different</strong> in that he also developed specific models and tools for coaching to uncertainty &amp; transitions, which were part of his generic coaching approach. The reason being that he focused his coaching on change, renewal &amp; transition- almost as a niche. Hence, he articulated an overall rationale for his coaching approach up front (that is, he did not really have to make sense of it during the interview) ...“So quite a bit of the work that I do has to do specifically with uh change, renewal - but also this idea of going through some kind of a transition” – p.4. So often what I found happens is that um the clients have – have had a certain idea of what reality looked like for them. <strong>And then because there’s been a change in their context or there have been some internal changes for them - that map, as it were of reality, no longer looks exactly the same.</strong> So part of the process that I use then quite a bit to help them to understand – or firstly, there’re three basic steps that I take them through – broad, sort-of phased steps. – p.5. Also <strong>C5 has developed</strong> some specific models &amp; tools in relation to transition &amp; uncertainty e.g. Then I also use um something else called the transition curve which ... but I’ve almost adapted that and developed that even further, and take him through a process that I call ‘framing transition’ …... - So that would then effectively create a frame around the transition and that's what I call ‘framing transition’.- p.5.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C2:</strong> I also get my clients to meditate – meditate and ground themselves. -p.7 and I bring a lot of meditation into the coaching –p.12. I just come with the intention that this is what I intend to do and I don’t how it will pan out, what the outcomes will be. I will just dance with the outcome as it is. Because I think for me with a mindfulness approach, with raising awareness, with the consciousness approach, we can never be sure of what would come out of a situation.-p.8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C3:</strong> so it took a little while to build the trust that I needed to do – my favourite process, which goes to meaning and purpose - which is ‘logical levels’. And I do it in almost every coaching. – p.12</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C4:</strong> It probably depends a lot on what the client presents and what the client brings. Um … but I prefer a – a cognitive approach um and – and raising an awareness for them - p.8. That is a model that I use often –p.8 (MILLER’s model). I like to do a few things, base-lining with them, you know, understanding typical life story things –p.10.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C5:</strong> So quite a bit of the work that I do has to do specifically with uh change, renewal - but also this idea of going through some kind of a transition. <strong>So often what I found happens</strong> is that um the clients have – have had a certain idea of what reality looked like for them – p.4-5 <em>(See DIFFERENCE)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C6:</strong> So my approach in my coaching is very much to work with a person on the 'being' level…. So that's my – my starting point, understand yourself… p.5. … and I think that is my general style … p.6 ….</td>
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**NOTE:** It seemed that most of the coaches were making sense of how they worked with uncertainty in their coaching during their interviews, which was even acknowledged by some of them during the closing question of their interviews (C2, C6 & C3).

*C2:* I think, you know, your questions have really helped me to … to sort-of put my approach into a – a perspective because, you know, thinking about it and all that. – p.17.

*C6:* And um I just thought it was interesting to reflect on – you know, so how – how do I work with that [uncertainty] and what is sort-of specific to my coaching style? – p.15.

*C3:* So the value for me … firstly is unpacking my thinking of it which is a capability that – you know, it really helped me unpack what I think about it. - p.34
**APPENDIX 9: Integrative analysis in Phase 3: Implications for executive coaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category or Theme from Phase 1: Executive leaders’ findings in relation to research objective 1</th>
<th>Implications for executive coaching towards developing capability for uncertainty – based on key findings from Phase 1</th>
<th>Alignment with Phase 2: Executive coaches’ findings in relation to research objective 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implications for executive coaching towards developing capability for uncertainty</strong> – based on key findings from Phase 1</td>
<td>The need for more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of executives’ lived experience of uncertainty over time (its temporal and dynamic nature), with periods of more uncertainty and periods of less uncertainty. This can be used to inform the coaching approach to assist in developing executives’ capability for uncertainty more explicitly and intentionally. For example, normalising the flux of uncertainty</td>
<td>Some alignment: 3 coaches spoke about the flux (e.g. a pendulum, the continuum of uncertainty, uphills and downhills) – but they were not clear how they worked with this in coaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Over-arching theme:</strong> the flux of experienced uncertainty over time</td>
<td>Organisational change and transitions: <strong>Transitions are the key trigger</strong> for uncertainty (promotion, being a newcomer or in an acting role, a new boss, an acting boss etc.). Coaches need to anticipate / expect uncertainty to emerge when coaching clients who are undergoing any of these transitions. Also when organisational change occurs, as these tend to initiate re-structuring and such transitions.</td>
<td>Some alignment: Transitions are a key trigger for uncertainty. Transition and change were a key focus of 1 coach (his niche area).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category 1: Triggers for uncertainty</strong></td>
<td>Uncertainty was described as an <em>emotional state, of varying intensity</em>. It was often described using metaphors. In coaching – the need to be aware of uncertainty being an emotional and vulnerable state. Listen for and observe the emotional state and its intensity. Pick up on any client metaphors used to describe their uncertainty.</td>
<td>Alignment – There was alignment about emotional states. Coaches saw uncertainty as nuanced and as an underlying issue. The focus was on listening to what was not said.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-category:</strong> Personal uncertainty</td>
<td>For coaching – the need for awareness of <strong>two types of personal uncertainty</strong> and how to distinguish between these. <strong>What triggers them and how they manifest</strong> – as follows: <strong>Identity uncertainty</strong>: Manifests as self-doubt, lack of confidence, feeling in limbo, unsure, frustrated, feeling excluded. There is a diminished sense of agency due to devaluation or loss of identity or being in-between identities. It was mostly triggered by transitions. In coaching – the need to anticipate that transitions are fertile ground for identity uncertainty. With regard to newcomers to organisations there is more potential for identity uncertainty (more intense, more sources of uncertainty and more complex). Acting roles – people may experience liminality (feeling in limbo), especially when actions are delayed. <strong>Anticipatory uncertainty</strong>: Manifests as worry in the present about possible future events (which may or may not materialise) and the impact thereof. This results in a decreased sense of agency. In relation to potential job loss or appointment of new boss (e.g. MD) – is a potential threat.</td>
<td>Alignment – Coaches identified identity (transitions were a key source) &amp; anticipatory uncertainty (potential job loss &amp; new CEO/boss) <strong>Difference:</strong> 3 coaches referred to <em>existential uncertainty</em> (relating to personal meaning) but this was a key issue for one executive in Phase 1.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-category:</strong> Challenges in the leader role during organisational uncertainty</td>
<td>For coaching – the need for awareness of <strong>three types of leadership challenges which foster felt uncertainty</strong>, to understand how they manifest, thereby enabling their identification. <strong>Experienced complexity</strong>: (as opposed to objective, contextual complexity out there) Manifests as being overwhelmed, out of control and a decreased sense of agency. It also manifests as frustration in having to manage or balance paradoxes.</td>
<td>Alignment regarding. experienced complexity and politics.</td>
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<td><strong>Managing other peoples’ uncertainty</strong>&lt;br&gt;Manifested as managing other peoples’ need for clarity and information during uncertainty (they are seeking certainty), in the face of their own uncertainty. Leaders are aware of others monitoring their emotional state.&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Corporate politics</strong>: Manifested as discomfort with politics and an adverse effect on trust among colleagues. There were negative perceptions about politics, therefore individuals not wanting to play politics or feeling they lacked political skill. For coaches – a need to be aware of perceptions of politics being negative. Also the perceived difficulty of political skill, and especially the need for political skill for newcomers.&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>NOTE</strong>: Key Finding: the inter-relationship between personal uncertainty and leadership challenges, one leads to the other and vice versa – that is, concurrence and an inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty. For coaches – a need to be aware of the complexity of felt uncertainty, several sources of uncertainty and the inter-relationship between these, and, overall, how they seem to manifest in issues of identity and decreased personal agency.</td>
<td><strong>Difference</strong>: only 2 coaches mentioned managing other peoples’ uncertainty. <strong>Some alignment and difference</strong>: Coaches saw politics affecting trust among clients’ peers. But: they did not focus on the negative connotation of politics. <strong>Alignment</strong>: coaches gave examples where inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty was evident.</td>
<td>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Difference</strong>: only 2 coaches mentioned managing other peoples’ uncertainty. <strong>Some alignment and difference</strong>: Coaches saw politics affecting trust among clients’ peers. But: they did not focus on the negative connotation of politics. <strong>Alignment</strong>: coaches gave examples where inter-relationship between experienced complexity and identity uncertainty was evident.</td>
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<td><strong>Category 3: Making sense of uncertainty</strong>&lt;br&gt;The role of emotion in sensemaking</td>
<td>The emotions of felt uncertainty tend to motivate sensemaking. Uncertainty manifests in a range of emotions.&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;For coaching – the need to be aware of the intensity of the emotions of felt uncertainty. High uncertainty may impede sensemaking (clients may over-react or withdraw – similar to a fight / flight response). Therefore coaches first need to develop a trusting relationship to hold the space to explore and support emotions, encourage emotions to be expressed – to enable a client to engage in more effective sensemaking around uncertainty. For those who are positive, coaches can assist them in exploring the opportunities in uncertainty.</td>
<td><strong>Some alignment and difference</strong>: Coaches did not really focus on the range of intensity of the emotional state, but recognised the emotional state and the vulnerability of clients, also the need to build trust to allow clients to express their emotion. <strong>Key finding</strong>: Coaches did not mention sensemaking as a concept or process (it is not a lens used in coaching). They refered more to self-awareness and gaining perspective. Coaching can add value here.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The components of the sensemaking process</strong></td>
<td>For coaching – they need to be aware of sensemaking as a concept and as a process, as it manifests more consciously and with more effort when someone experiences uncertainty or disruption. Hence, the implication for coaching is to facilitate the client’s sensemaking to be more effective. Therefore, to make the clients’ sensemaking more explicit to them (reflect it back) and bring awareness to what constitutes more effective sensemaking.&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;Coaching as a process may also be viewed as a sensemaking process. Coaches need to be aware of the 5 components of sensemaking identified within the sensemaking process of the executive leaders (Phase 1), as the coach may lever these five components to enhance the client’s sensemaking. Coaches need to help clients develop awareness of their sensemaking - and any limiting aspects of it - and the need to challenge these.</td>
<td><strong>Some alignment and difference</strong>: Coaches did not really focus on the range of intensity of the emotional state, but recognised the emotional state and the vulnerability of clients, also the need to build trust to allow clients to express their emotion. <strong>Key finding</strong>: Coaches did not mention sensemaking as a concept or process (it is not a lens used in coaching). They refered more to self-awareness and gaining perspective. Coaching can add value here.</td>
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| Mental frames: Coaches need to be aware of which clients’ mental frames influence the clients’ sensemaking, and to foster clients’ self-awareness in relation to these. In particular, their world view (orientation to uncertainty and values), self-view (sense of identity and resilience), their view of others (orientation to working and relating with other people) and past experience. In coaching – to pay attention to past experience which the client references – as there is a tendency to compare and contrast this. Seeking understanding: (Coaches need awareness of the 3 processes adopted)  
- **In reading the situation** - coaches need to be aware of the cues which clients pay attention to and how these inform their sensemaking (esp. for newcomers who may be overly sensitive to cues).  
- Coaches need to be aware of how clients are engaging others in sensemaking conversations or not and the effectiveness of these conversations. Trust is an important factor. Hence, coaching relationship and trust will be important for client’s sensemaking  
- Coaches could enhance the reflective ability of clients, as leaders indicate a lack of time and ability. They could focus on developing more in-depth critical reflection (learning how to), and challenging client assumptions and beliefs. But: this is a difficult skill to learn and will depend on the learning style and preferences of a client. Interpreting: Most executives arrived at a point where they interpreted the reality of their context of uncertainty differently, where they accepted or made peace with it (it was a plausible interpretation, in order to move forward). Coaches need to assist clients to develop plausible interpretations of their context of uncertainty and/or their experienced uncertainty. The emphasis needs to be on helping clients to face up to a different reality and possibly dispelling illusions. **Sub-category: Personal uncertainty**  
- **Identity uncertainty**: Coaches need to help clients to address the questions of who do I want to be or need to be in this context? (to build, restore or repair a devalued or diminished sense of identity)  
- **Anticipatory uncertainty**: Coaches need to help clients face up to the reality of an unknown future, to assist in exploring possible scenarios and their impact, in order to make a decision, take action or do nothing (wait it out & see what materialises). | Some alignment: Seeking understanding – the focus is on helping clients to step back (or reflect) on what’s going on. This was not really covered by the coaches, except 1. May be implicit when working with client?  
But: While coaches helped their clients to reflect during coaching, they did not focus on developing reflective ability. Alignment: Coaches spoke about fostering the acceptance of uncertainty in their clients during coaching – but: most were not explicit in how they did this (except for 2)  
Some alignment: Coaches focused on identity uncertainty in the examples they selected to share. The focus was on personal identity (who am I, purpose and values) But: There was less focus on social process and context (except 1 coach).  
Some alignment: Coaches only focused on experienced complexity in the examples they selected. Agreement – coaches emphasised a focus on what could be controlled by their clients.  
Coaches did not select politics in their examples. |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-category: Challenges in the leader role</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Experienced complexity: Coaches need to focus on fostering clients’ acceptance of complexity and paradox; to assist clients to focus on what can be achieved or influenced, and on developing client’s polarity thinking (both/and thinking re. paradoxes that they are struggling with).</td>
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<td>• Managing others’ uncertainty: Coaches need to assist clients to make sense of and articulate their own plausible account of the uncertain context facing the organisation, to enable them to face up to and manage their own uncertainty, so they give sense to others with more conviction and in a genuine manner.</td>
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<td>• Politics: Coaches need to help clients to face up to the reality of corporate politics, and to help them frame politics more positively to encourage them of the value of having political skill.</td>
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<td>Meaning-making: this component occurred as part of sensemaking, yet was distinct from participants’ interpreting. The meaning-making helped provide motivation for participants to move forward or persevere. Coaches need to assist clients to identify some personal meaning in taking actions and/or persevering in their context of uncertainty - such as a goal, purpose, adding value, alignment with personal values.</td>
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<td>Emotion-focused coping: Leaders used two emotion-focused coping mechanisms - self-regulation and tapping into support systems to regulate their emotional state. Coaches need to explore their clients’ coping mechanisms, options and resources for managing and shifting their emotional state in their context of uncertainty, e.g. using self-talk or reframing. Coaches need to realise that they potentially play a support role as the coach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-category: Challenges in the leader role</td>
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<td>The sensemaking, particularly the interpreting and/or meaning-making components, led to the leaders generating actions and strategies for moving forward. Coaches need to assist clients with generating these actions, then encouraging them to implement them in an experimental manner, so they adapt them as they learn, as events unfold or as new information or feedback emerges. Then this can be re-cycled back into sensemaking when necessary (i.e. adapting) Coaches – could make this experiential learning cycle explicit to clients to help foster learning agility.</td>
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<td>Category 4: Strategies &amp; actions</td>
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<td>Category 5: Adapting</td>
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<td>Developing identity: The leaders did not refer to these actions as developing identity, as such, but the actions adopted appeared to be related to identity construction. Coaches need to adopt a lens of identity construction more explicitly in helping clients to generate practical and realistic strategies to develop their identities, factoring in the complexity of the social process of identity development. For example, coaches need to be aware of how identity development can be thwarted by others in their clients’ contexts. Hence, a</td>
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<td>Sub-category: Personal uncertainty</td>
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<td>Some alignment: Coaches referred to developing their clients’ moral compass but more as an anchor or grounding to enable them to engage with uncertainty, or for using these values to guide them in uncertainty.</td>
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<td>Difference: The coaches did not mention coping mechanisms – such as self-regulation or support. Maybe they were implicit?</td>
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<td>Some alignment: Coaches spoke about developing identity, but more as “who am I, values &amp; purpose” as part of self-awareness, but: did not refer to a process of identity construction explicitly, or to the notion of leader identity or</td>
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</table>
| **Sub-category:** Challenges in the leader role | **Leadership focus & approach:** Coaches may focus on assisting clients to generate these type of strategies or actions to assist clients with experienced complexity in their leadership roles:  
- A focus on generating priorities and actions in relation to what can be controlled or influenced.  
- Assisting the client to articulate their values and using these as a moral compass to guide them as a leader.  
- Helping them to focus and think through how to stabilise their current operation, while concurrently exploring innovative and adaptive strategies for moving forward (their leadership approach in doing both)  
- Encouraging adaptive leadership - which involves others in prioritising and generating ideas in complex adaptive systems.  
**Effective communication:**  
Coaches need to help clients to tease out their purpose, guiding values and principles for guiding their communication strategy and content  
**Adopting political skill:**  
Coaches need to assist clients to develop political skill through experiment with tangible actions relevant to their goals & role. | **Some alignment:** Some coaches highlighted the development of more participative and consultative leadership approaches in their clients. Some focused on priorities & actions which client could control. Also focusing on clients’ moral compass to guide them, but focus on leadership role during organisation uncertainty not explicit.  
**Different:** Not focused on by the coaches in their examples.  
**Different:** Not focused on by coaches in their examples. |

**Overall conclusion:** This integrative analysis highlights where and how executive coaching could facilitate the coaching process towards developing clients’ capability for uncertainty. Using the lived experience of the executives as the foundation (that is, their enacting of capability for uncertainty), this analysis identifies potential leverage points within the executives’ lived experience. Moreover, the analysis highlights the executive coaches’ strategies and skills that can be used to enhance their clients’ sensemaking and approach to experienced uncertainty in their context. For example, coaches fostered self-awareness and in-depth self-reflection of their clients, suggesting this can be harnessed because the findings of the executives (in Phase 1) suggested that self-reflection was difficult for executives to do effectively on their own. Moreover, this analysis highlights where executive coaches could be more explicit in their process, thereby helping to develop some of the outcomes of a capability for uncertainty more proactively, as a key finding was that the coaches did not do this.
### APPENDIX 10: Integrative analysis in Phase 3: Capability for uncertainty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature review: Components of a capability for uncertainty</th>
<th>Executive leaders: What capability for uncertainty they developed from experience (research objective 2)</th>
<th>Executive coaches: Their views on indicators of capability for uncertainty (research objective 4)</th>
<th>Alignment &amp; implications for executive coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A tolerance / acceptance of uncertainty</strong> (worldview) … also appreciating the pervasiveness, nature of and flux of uncertainty</td>
<td>Acceptance of uncertainty. There was a tendency to want to reduce uncertainty, but over time, with continued sensemaking and unfolding of events, reached a turning point – which led to acceptance of uncertainty and its pervasiveness. They developed this through their experience, and recognized the importance of it for moving forward.</td>
<td>Acceptance of uncertainty. (But: coaches were not explicit in how to foster acceptance for uncertainty in their clients).</td>
<td>All align, but most coaches were not explicit in how to foster acceptance for uncertainty. They need to help clients to normalize uncertainty – and to face up to the reality of their uncertain context – to enable them to move forward, rather than trying to ‘resolve’ uncertainty.</td>
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</table>
| **Learning agility:**  
  - Ability & willingness to learn from experience of uncertainty,  
  - Reflection (time and quality) | Importance of being able to step back – to think & reflect  
  But: some acknowledged time constraints and difficulty in being able to reflect alone.  
  Only 1 had clearly reflected in-depth; and on his learning from experience. Most valued the research interview – as an opportunity to distill learning from their experience, which many said they had not really done.  
  All acknowledged learning from their experience… but was this assimilated? | A learning orientation.  
  Only 3 coaches highlighted this indicator. 2 coaches emphasized the need to become experiential learners, which implies the ability to reflect and learn from experience. The other 1 spoke about being reflective. But: the coaches did not focus on developing experiential learning and reflective capability in their coaching process. However, this may be done implicitly? | Some alignment, on a learning orientation, but with different emphases.  
  Implication for coaching are to more explicitly develop the experiential learning and reflective ability of their clients. |
| **Effective sensemaking:**  
  - Emotional regulation  
  - Generating plausible interpretation/s,  
  - Challenging own assumptions,  
  - Gaining new and different perspectives | The need to be calm for effective sensemaking. The need for time for sensemaking; therefore they learned the importance of delaying actions / decisions.  
  The need to search for more understanding and perspective. They saw the value of conversations with others for gaining different perspectives.  
  The need for adaptability – going back to sensemaking, if more changes or new information arose. | An openness to different perspectives - and the flexibility to adjust one’s perspective or views.  
  HR sponsors (Buckle’s research) – identified flexibility to different perspectives | All align – but the leaders and coaches do not themselves use the term: sensemaking. Implications for coaching is to be more aware of coaching as a sensemaking process – and assisting clients to be aware of sensemaking and to help them to do more effective sensemaking, with focus on emotional regulation. A key role for coaches is challenging clients ‘frames, assumptions and perspectives. |
## Literature review: Components of a capability for uncertainty

### Executive leaders: What capability for uncertainty they developed from experience (research objective 2)

**A positive identity:** Self and Leader identity, confidence and personal agency (individual strengthening - and builds social resources one has access to)

They did not refer to it as identity but definite growth in this was expressed, personally and as leaders. This was a key common outcome (except for 2 leaders – newcomers who were excluded). Also led to the fostering of resilience and optimism, aspects of self-view.

**NOTE:** Reference was made to how this experience built confidence to face the next challenge or next round of uncertainty, demonstrating development of their capability for uncertainty.

### Executive coaches: Their views on indicators of capability for uncertainty (research objective 4)

**A positive identity**

They did not refer to it as identity, but observed an increase in self-confidence and self-awareness. This was also the key common outcome they observed in the coaching examples they shared. **NOTE:** Coaches referred more to personal identity, than leader / social identity and did not refer to the concept of identity construction.

### Alignment & implications for executive coaching

**All align.** Identity was not the term used by both leaders and coaches, yet this is what was conveyed. The implication for coaching is to focus more explicitly on the social process and complexity of identity construction (i.e. “becoming”), as well as to focus more on leader identity, particularly regarding clients' transitions and change, where identity uncertainty is likely to manifest.

## Leadership approach during uncertainty:

Dealing with complexity, influencing key stakeholders (political skill) and leading people during uncertainty

### Most used focus & adaptability to deal with experienced complexity

The value of sensemaking and support conversations with others, the leadership approach of engaging others and communication principles. Some executives (4) developed political skill & changed their view of politics, which implied their view of working with others had become more effective.

### Only 2 coaches mentioned interpersonal abilities as an indicator (therefore this was not a prevalent theme in the findings) - but: many of the strategies and actions their clients adopted were related to developing interpersonal abilities and aspects of leadership, albeit more implicit. **HR sponsors** (Buckle's research) – referred to confidence!

**Some alignment.** But more so from the leaders with literature. Coaches need to focus on using adaptive complex systems as a lens to inform relevant leadership approaches more explicitly during these times of turbulence. Also principles of change leadership and political intelligence need to be focused on more explicitly.

## Overall conclusion:

Integration of findings across Phase 1 and Phase 2 suggest alignment with the key components of a capability for uncertainty identified in the literature review. The strongest alignment (where all aligned clearly) were: a positive identity, effective sensemaking (particularly in relation to gaining different perspectives) and acceptance of uncertainty. There was partial alignment with the rest of the components, with some different emphases between the executive leaders and the coaches, but sufficient alignment, to warrant these being included in a holistic capability for uncertainty.
APPENDIX 11: Design of coaching process for developing capability for uncertainty

Phase 1 findings – executive leaders’ experience

Phase 2 findings – executive coaches’ approach

Phase 3: Coaching process for developing executives’ capability for uncertainty