

STUCK *in the* MIDDLE

Why the Toughest Decisions Are
Never Black and White



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CHAPTER 1

Living Between Opposites

Fear and the Flight from the Middle

“

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

— *Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest (1895)*

”

The COVID-19 Crisis, Binary Stances and Personal Impact

In March 2020, Malaysia announced the Movement Control Order (MCO), shortly after the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The restrictions came into force on 18 March. By then, the share market was in freefall. To me, it looked like the world was ending. Two of our public-listed companies, which I had founded and built over the years, were no exception to the panic selling.

I remember watching the numbers fall from roughly twenty sen toward one and a half sen. In a few hours, millions in market capitalisation evaporated. Decades of effort compressed into a red line on a trading screen.

Then came the margin calls from the financial institutions, adding even more pressure to an already collapsing market. Needless to say, it was frightening. I was not alone. A friend held a visible shareholding in the company. He was heavily geared. When prices fall in ordinary times, markets adjust

gradually. In a crisis, banks remember that they are in the business of managing risk. They began the sell-down. The drop by each sen was no longer a number but increasing pressure. As the price declined, my friend's forced selling compounded the fall, in turn, intensifying my own margin exposure. It became a spiral — mechanical and unforgiving.

Anyone who says they felt no concern when markets collapsed is probably not being truthful. Every sen the market fell felt, metaphorically, like a missed heartbeat—a reminder of the responsibility we carried for those who had placed their trust in us. My family stood beside me throughout those long trading days as we watched the screens and made the difficult decisions that each day demanded.

There are moments in business when theory disappears, strategy retreats, and philosophy feels indulgent, and all that remains is arithmetic and anxiety. During those difficult times, I remember once, breaking down one morning quietly. The weight of it — decades of work, obligations to employees, shareholders, debt exposure, family responsibility — compressed into a single line on a screen. We dug into reserves; every buffer and every contingency was taken. Survival was no longer conceptual. It was visceral.

Shortly afterwards, my mother fell ill. She would later die of COVID. However, grief does not wait for liquidity planning, and leadership cannot pause long to give way to grief.

While managing collapsing markets and tightening cash positions, I was also sitting on an emergency committee appointed by His Majesty, the King of Malaysia. I was one of nineteen independent members debating whether the national health emergency should be lifted. The question

before us was stark: Should we reopen Parliament and restore political normalcy or let the government maintain extraordinary powers because the health crisis remained severe? Publicly, it was framed as policy. Privately, it felt existential. Livelihoods versus life. Lockdown versus reopening. Vaccination versus Vaccine scepticism.

It was in that season that I understood something unsettling. The virus was biological, but the destabilisation was psychological. Fear was not merely present. It was governing, but it did not govern well. The pandemic did not simply test our healthcare systems or our economies. More than that, it tested our capacity to think clearly under fear.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not simply present a medical crisis; it created a psychological one. It was a time when fear permeated communities. Fear narrowed public thinking, and as a result, complex policy trade-offs were quickly reduced to binary choices: lives or livelihoods, lockdown or freedom, vaccine or scepticism. The pandemic forced societies into stark binaries where positions hardened as quickly as public discourse narrowed. People passionately took sides, often without expertise. Conspiracy theories were everywhere. What began as a biological threat quickly evolved into a psychological and social one.

Individual, Social and Psychological Fallout

Years earlier, in a psychology class, I had learned about the fight-or-flight response — an ancient survival mechanism that narrows attention when danger appears. Fear is a primary survival emotion triggered by perceived threat. When activated, attention narrows, time compresses, and the mind seeks immediate resolutions. We either confront the danger or we escape it. The mechanism evolved to protect us from physical harm. In evolutionary terms, this

response served us well. For most of human history, threats were immediate and physical — a predator, an enemy, a sudden environmental danger. The body's rapid shift into fight-or-flight increased the chances of survival.

Modern crises, however, are rarely physical in that immediate sense. They are financial, political, institutional, reputational or a combination of one or more of these. They unfold slowly, across systems and institutions, through markets, public health systems, political structures, and media narratives. Yet the brain still reacts with the same ancient wiring. When uncertainty rises, we instinctively search for clarity and control.

What happens when an entire society enters fight-or-flight mode at once? In markets, it looks like panic selling. In politics, it looks like positioning. In institutions, it looks like hesitation. In public discourse, it looks like outrage.

What we see in crises, more often than not, is not fight, but flight: flight from trade-offs into certainty. Faced with the unknown, society lowers its tolerance for ambiguity and instinctively reaches for certainty, even where none exists.

The pandemic stress-tested institutions. Universities, governments and businesses discovered that systems built for stability often struggle when uncertainty strikes. As Prof. David Whitford, our Vice Chancellor at the University of Cyberjaya, observed, the crisis forced institutions to adapt overnight, revealing both hidden fragilities and unexpected resilience.

Leadership in a Crisis

When fear is triggered at scale — across markets, institutions, and societies — rational deliberation narrows.

This is where leadership becomes difficult because governing requires holding complexity. In a crisis, the media ecosystems, particularly social media, amplify conflict, and information travels faster than verification. Political actors frame choices as moral absolutes, and public discourse becomes compressed into headlines, slogans, and fragments of expertise that often lack context.

Leadership, therefore, becomes as much an exercise in emotional management as in policy judgement. The real task is to absorb anxiety without amplifying it, to acknowledge uncertainty without surrendering to paralysis, and to hold competing truths long enough for thoughtful decisions to emerge. This is rarely visible in public discourse. The loudest voices tend to reward conviction, not reflection. But governing well often requires resisting the pressure to simplify what is inherently complex.

This dynamic situation creates pressure on leaders as the public demands clarity when it is least available. Leaders are forced to make policy decisions with incomplete information as the leadership of every country found out during the crisis. As every decision carries consequences that will only become visible later, leadership becomes less about control and more about navigation. While control assumes predictability, navigation assumes uncertainty. The leader must listen to experts but also recognise that expert understanding evolves as new data emerges. Early assumptions may be overturned, and strategies that appear sensible today may prove inadequate tomorrow.

This is deeply uncomfortable for political systems that reward decisiveness and punish hesitation. That is why the middle is often misunderstood. From the outside, it can appear indecisive. In reality, it is the most intellectually

demanding place to stand. It requires holding competing truths without collapsing them prematurely.

Leadership rarely lives at the extremes. It lives in the uneasy space between competing truths — between caution and courage, freedom and responsibility, lives and livelihoods. The challenge is not to escape this tension, but to learn how to navigate it with judgement and humility.

Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah, our Chancellor at the University of Cyberjaya, who was the Director General of the Ministry of Health during the pandemic, once reflected that leaders do not merely confront the crisis. Instead, they confront the fear surrounding it. Calm communication, transparency, and presence often matter as much as technical expertise.

The Middle Path

In public debate, the middle is often caricatured as weakness — a failure to choose sides, a reluctance to commit, a desire to appease everyone. However, thoughtful leadership rarely operates in such simplistic terms. The middle is where trade-offs are acknowledged rather than denied. It is where complexity is recognised rather than suppressed. It is where decisions are made, not because they satisfy every constituency, but because they reflect the best available judgement under imperfect conditions.

People are not irrational. When things go wrong, they are frightened and require immediate and clear answers that policy makers are not in a position to give. When policy oscillates between overcorrection and paralysis, institutions hesitate. The middle requires a pause, accepts trade-offs and tolerates competing truths, unlike fear. The middle, therefore, is not a position of convenience. It is a discipline.

Great leaders throughout history have faced this tension between choosing sides and making trade-offs. At one of history's most perilous moments, Abraham Lincoln confronted the fracture of a nation while balancing moral conviction with political survival. In a different struggle of the century, Mahatma Gandhi mobilised millions through disciplined non-violent civil disobedience, constantly restraining the pull of violence — a philosophy later amplified by Martin Luther King Jr. in the American civil rights movement. Decades later, Nelson Mandela emerged from twenty-seven years of imprisonment with the extraordinary ability to resist both revenge and capitulation, choosing reconciliation over retribution. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, Lee Kuan Yew often spoke of the necessity of governing in the difficult space between ideological extremes.

Different histories, different circumstances — yet a common leadership challenge. Across eras and cultures, they remind us that great leadership rarely lives at the extremes. It is found in the discipline of holding the middle.

The middle is rarely a comfortable position. It demands patience when others demand speed. It demands restraint when others demand certainty. It demands humility when others demand declarations. Most of all, it demands the courage to accept that leadership is rarely about choosing between right and wrong. More often, it is about choosing between competing goods, imperfect options, and uncertain consequences.

This is the terrain where real leadership resides. In the midst of that turbulence, some leaders attempted something different. The Director General of Health, Malaysia at the time of the crisis, Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, sought to anchor the

moment with steadiness. His message was consistent: social distancing. At first, it was epidemiological advice. Over time, I began to see it as a psychological discipline from panic, hysteria and toxic amplification.

Even today, he speaks of “social distancing” more broadly — not as avoidance, but as containment. Toxic people are part of life. There is no need to fear them. But one must manage proximity to remain sane and steady. One must choose measured distance instead of confrontation or escape.

The discipline of the middle is not the absence of fear. It is the refusal to let fear dictate certainty and to push towards stability even when all the answers are not available.

History suggests that fear rarely disappears once a crisis passes. It simply changes form. Financial crises generate fear of collapse. Technological disruption produces fear of irrelevance. Geopolitical tensions create fear of instability. Each era believes its own crisis to be uniquely overwhelming. In such moments, the temptation is always the same — to retreat into certainty, to divide the world neatly into allies and adversaries, solutions and enemies. But societies rarely progress through such simplifications. Progress more often emerges from those willing to sit with complexity long enough to understand it.

Leadership, therefore, is not the elimination of fear. It is the capacity to prevent fear from becoming the organising principle of public life.

This book begins there.

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