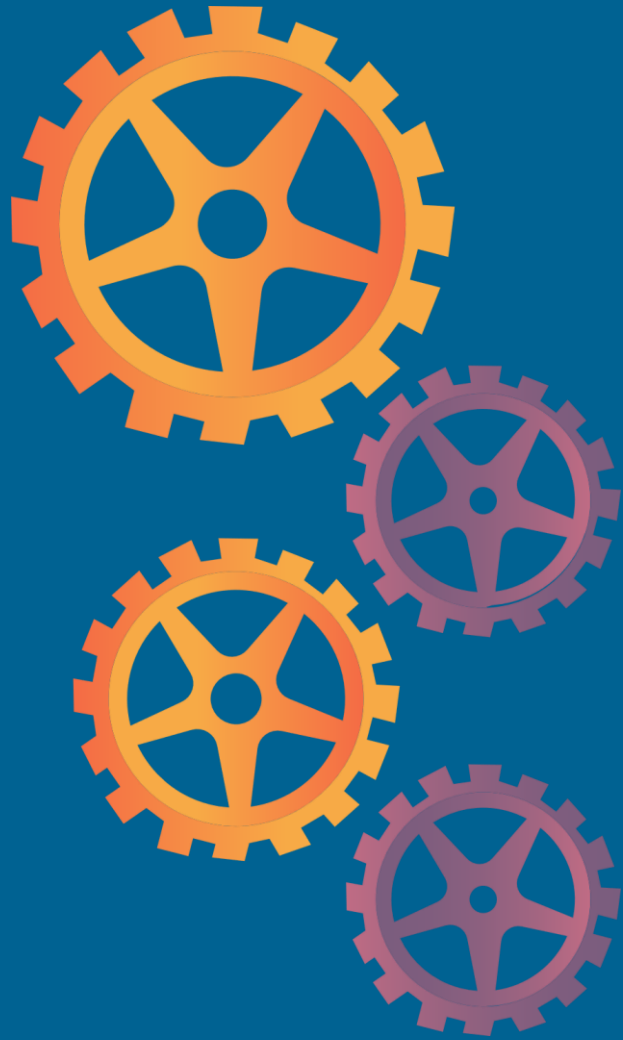# Tackling Ambiguity

How to embrace ambiguous situations and master them

Maximilian Plag – Helliwood media & education
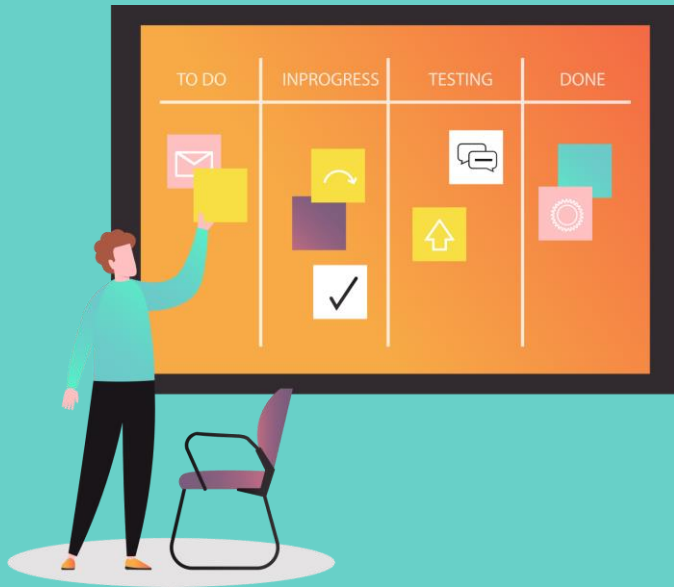
# *Content Overview*

- Building a Tolerance of Ambiguity
- How to deal with ambiguous situations in a project.

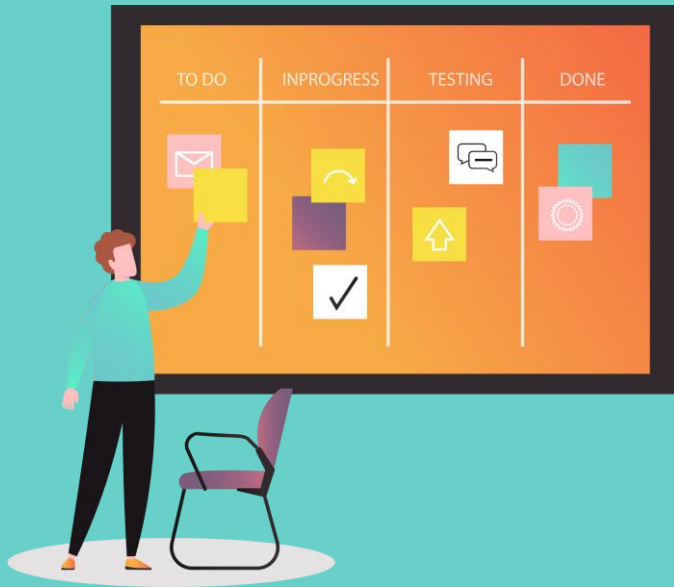# *Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) (1)*

In order to be prepared for ambiguous situations during the project lifecycle, one needs to build a Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA). TOA is the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable and to competently manage these situations. TOA comprises three dimensions: (I) comfort with ambiguity, (II) desire for challenging work, and, (III) managing ambiguity.

I. Comfort with ambiguity
Comfort with ambiguity reflects the extent to which project managers remain calm and composed when confronted with ambiguous and uncertain situations in their projects. Project managers with a high level of comfort with ambiguity are not afraid to experience ambiguity. They stay calm and relaxed when exposed to complex issues. Project managers with a low level of comfort with ambiguity prefer working on clear and familiar tasks, and often feel stressed and anxious when confronted with ambiguous or complex tasks in their projects.
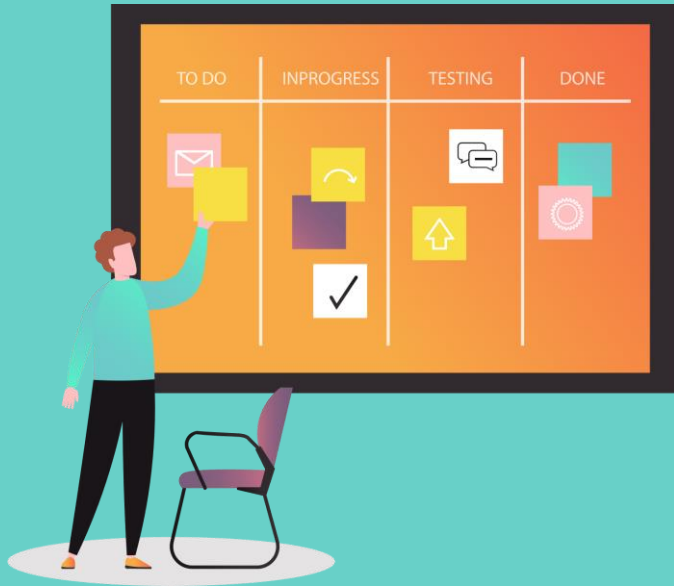
# *Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) (2)*

II.   **Desire for challenging work**
Reflects project managers' tendency to seek out novelty and challenge in their work. Project managers with a high desire for challenging work like engaging with complex situations, are comfortable taking on tasks they have not done before and seek new and challenging opportunities. They are not afraid to take risks and tend to experience boredom easily. Project managers with a low desire for challenging work tend to seek more repetitive tasks with well-defined and clear goals. They tend to be more cautious when confronted with risky situations.
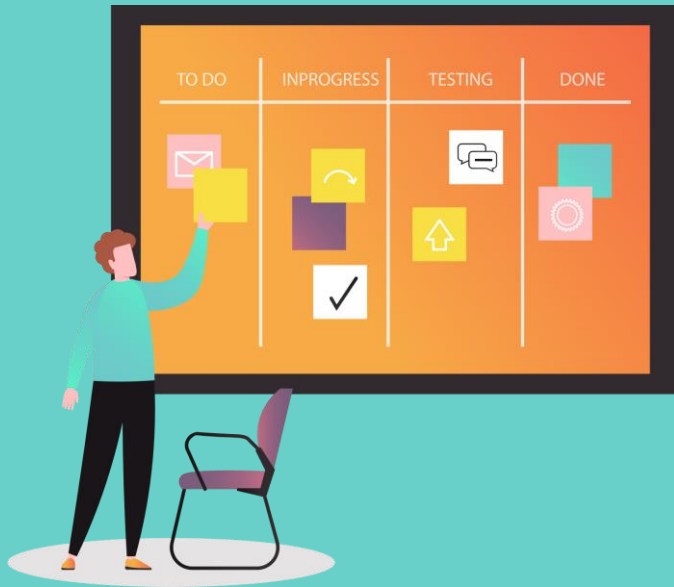
III.   **Managing ambiguity**
Reflects project managers' ability to navigate ambiguity when it occurs. Project managers with high scores in this dimension are also able to better recognize ambiguous situations and take steps to know specific details about the situation. They are good at planning how to best respond to ambiguous situations by drawing from their networks, being open to different solutions and applying problem-solving tactics. Project managers with low scores in this dimension tend to struggle when dealing with ambiguous and complex situations in their projects.

# How to deal with ambiguous situations in a project

This guide offers practical strategies, tips, and exercises that will assist you in dealing with complex and ambiguous situations in your projects. It is divided into three domains designed to assist you in recognizing challenges in your projects, remaining calm when faced with challenging tasks, and providing tools to more effectively deal with these challenges. These strategies will assist you in gradually building a TOA.

## *Strategy 1: Mastering knowledge and informationseeking capability*

Access to knowledge and information helps in better understanding and dealing with challenging situations. Without sufficient information about ambiguous situations, you may feel stressed and anxious. Talking to others, researching, reading, referring to past experiences and lessons learned from fellow teachers or students, using peer networks, and utilizing communities of practice can help you locate relevant information about the situation and minimize uncertainty.
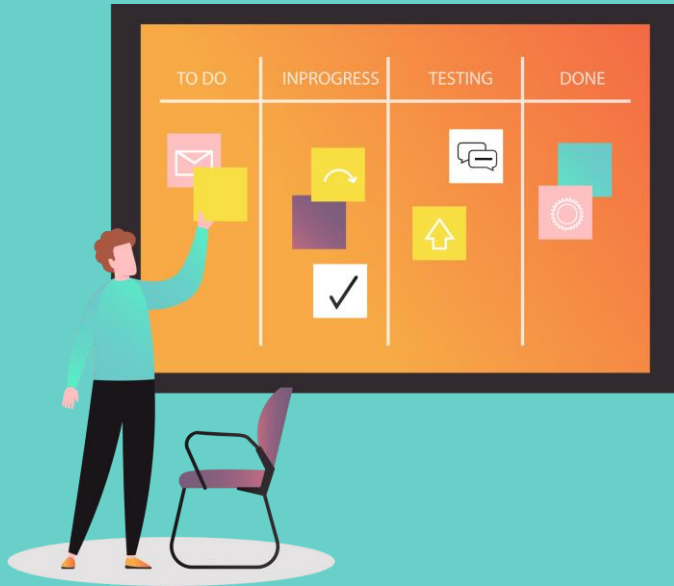
# *Strategy 1: Mastering Knowledge and Informationseeking Capability*

## I.    Tap into your networks

Network use is a highly effective strategy you can use to deal with ambiguities in projects. When experiencing ambiguity in projects, use existing networks to gain relevant knowledge and information that will assist you in dealing with such situations. We recommend consulting peers inside and outside your organization. Below is a list of specific activities that you can do to use networks effectively.
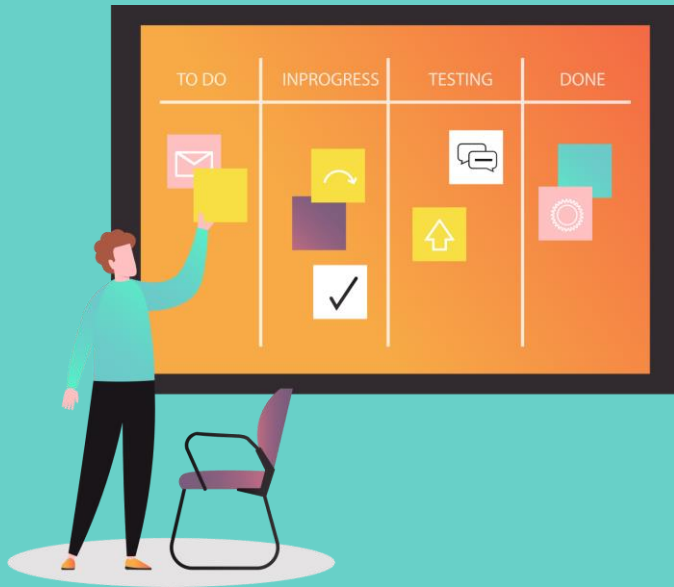
**You should be proactive in terms of the following**:

1.    Connect with diverse experts or relevant stakeholders to reduce unknowns about ambiguous situations and seek information about the situation (e.g., when dealing with a novel task or using a new process).

2.    Use networks to bounce ideas off and assist with agile brainstorming solutions to potential problems caused by ambiguity.

3.    Be open to ideas from others and challenge their own assumptions.

4.    Maintain networks by periodically touching base and providing assistance to colleagues and peers.

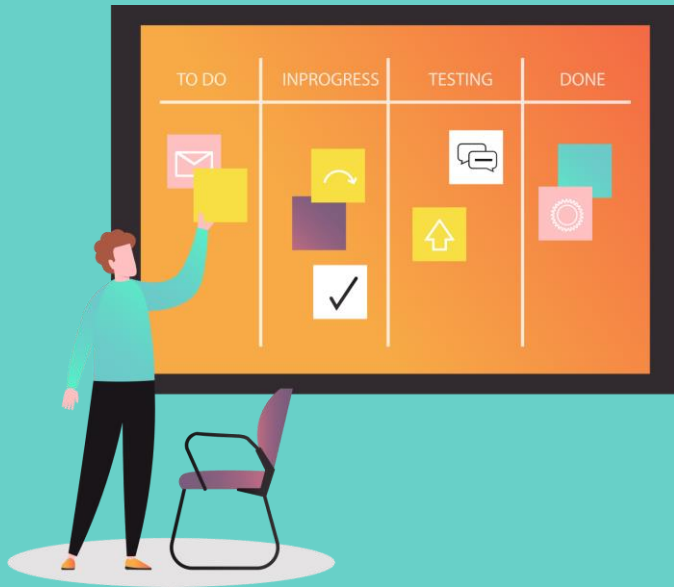# *Strategy 1: Mastering Knowledge and Informationseeking Capability*

II.     Encourage transparent communication

Transparency reduces ambiguity. Transparent communication can be used to effectively manage project ambiguities such as those around project expectations, stakeholders' requirements, and timeline uncertainties. Honest and transparent communication can help to obtain clarifying information and reveal issues that may arise during projects. Here is the list of actions that can help you ensure more transparent communication in your projects.
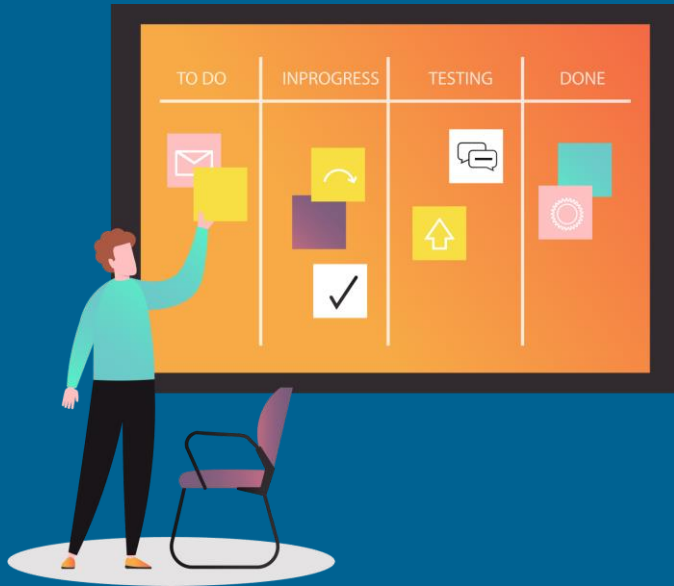
1.     Encourage face-to-face interactions. Whenever possible, encourage frequent face-to-face interactions, both formal and informal, with team members and project stakeholders.

2.     Provide honest and constructive feedback to team members and relevant stakeholders.

# *Strategy 1: Mastering Knowledge and Informationseeking Capability*

3. Share knowledge. Give team members and relevant stakeholders access to project information, for example, information about project progress, resources assigned to tasks, and project risks. That information can be stored on a shared online document where team members and stakeholders have access.

4. Clearly describe the situation. Use clear and concise terms to describe what you want. Don't ask: "Could you fix this problem?" Do ask: "Would you talk to the client and find out more about the requirement?"

5. Be clear and assertive. Say what you need to say and clearly get your point across.

6. Show interest by listening to the other person without interrupting. Don't forget to project positive body language and say "thank you" to acknowledge the work well done.
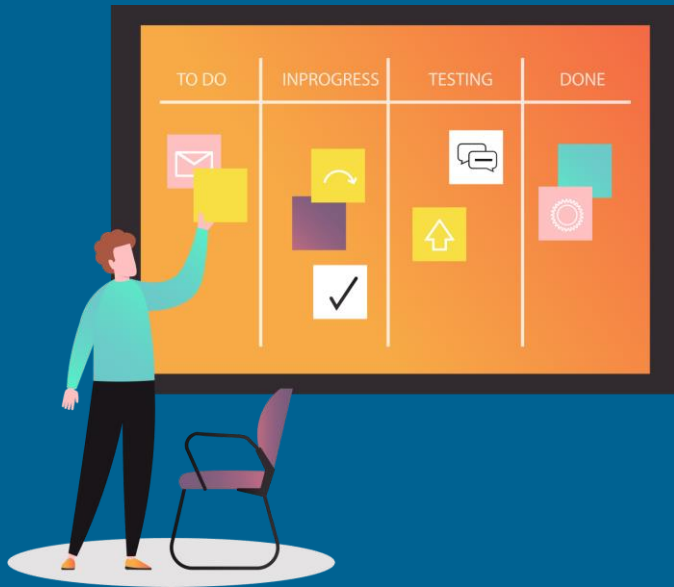
## *Strategy 2: Mastering Emotional Capability*

The ability to recognize and modify emotions in yourself and others can help you more effectively deal with ambiguities you experience in projects. This is particularly the case when ambiguities were related to people issues. A well-balanced and empathetic teacher or learner, who is aware of the surrounding social dynamics is more effective in remaining calm when faced with ambiguity, navigating through uncertainty, and creating trusting relationships. People of high emotional intelligence are able to actively listen and effectively participate in communication while staying aware of the more silent nonverbal cues and body language. There are two aspects of emotional capability that help you in dealing with ambiguities in projects: (I) emotional regulation and coping with stress and (II) practicing empathy.

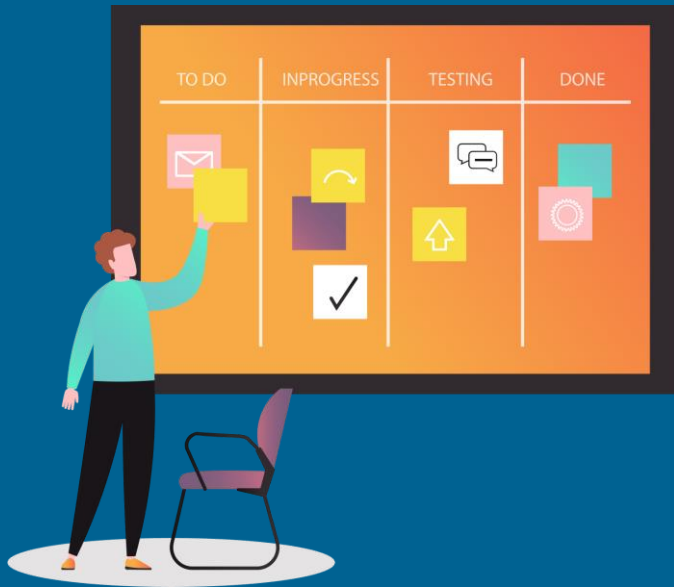# *Strategy 2: Mastering Emotional Capability*

## I.    Emotional regulation

Reflects the extent to which individuals are able to control and manage their emotions and impulses. It involves awareness of inner feelings and reflecting and learning from their own and others' successes and mistakes. Similarly, coping with stress is the ability to manage one's own stress and destructive feelings (such as anxiety, anger, or sadness) by stopping negative thoughts, stepping aside, reframing problems, gaining perspective, and taking time to relax and reenergize.

Research on self-regulation and insights from positive psychology suggest a range of practical tips to help regulate one's emotion:

1.    Observe your emotion. Acknowledge that it exists, stand back from it, and get yourself unstuck from it. Do not necessarily act on the emotion; having the emotion does not mean that you have to act. You may just need to sit with the emotion.
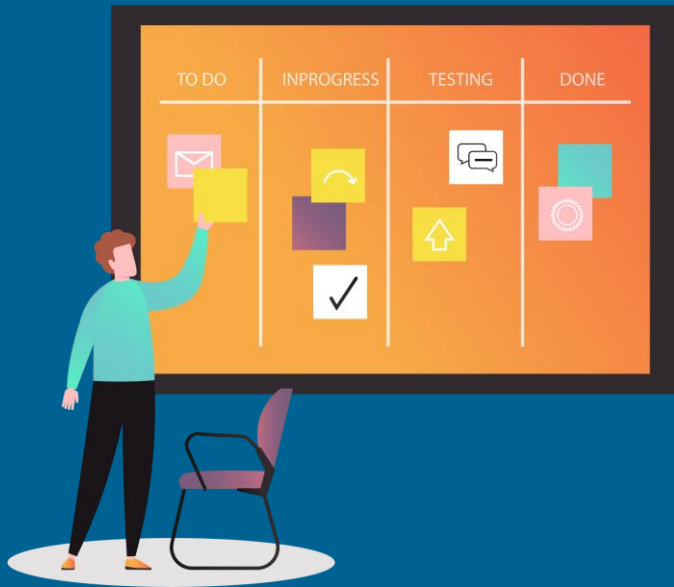
# *Strategy 2: Mastering Emotional Capability*

2.  Change the way you think about the situation to stay calm. Gain perspective of the situation. If required, leave the room or go for a walk to collect your thoughts and gain perspective.

3.  Practice mindfulness to become more aware of your emotions and feelings. Breathing exercises are very helpful in assisting people to remain calm. When you are experiencing a negative emotion, such as stress or anxiety while working on your project, take 10 deep breaths before reacting to the situation. This will help you calm your emotions, gain perspective on the situation, and see the situation more clearly.

4.  Avoid blaming others; instead acknowledge that people make mistakes because it is a part of the learning. Instead of getting angry and blaming others, tap into your network. Consider who and how they can help you resolve the situation.

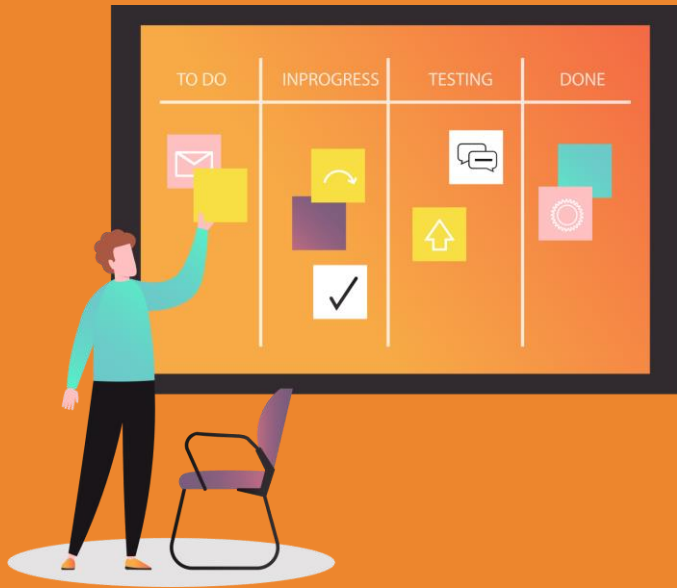# *Strategy 2: Mastering Emotional Capability*

## II.        Practicing Empathy

Practicing empathy is an integral aspect of emotional intelligence. Understanding others through practicing empathy can you in being more sensitive toward others and better communicate with others by identifying their emotional cues through active listening.

1. Empathize with your team members. Try placing yourself in the shoes of your students and try to understand their point of view. Try not to interrupt or use judgment; instead, show concern and interest. This will help in creating a congenial and trusting environment where project team members or stakeholders will be encouraged to share knowledge.

2. Listen actively. When communicating with others, pay attention to the other person very carefully. Show your desire to listen by maintaining eye contact and using signs to acknowledge that you are paying attention. Focus on the nonverbal cues, put aside distractive thoughts, ask clarifying questions, take notes, be open-minded toward the speaker and give them time to express themselves. Provide feedback to make sure you have understood the content as intended by the speaker and ask for more information if required.

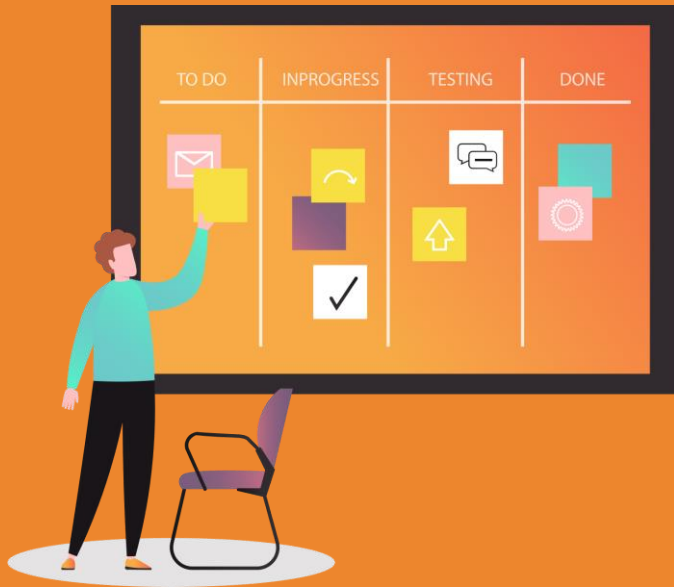# *Strategy 3: Mastering Critical Thinking and Problem-Focused Coping*

The ability to select, categorize, and infer information helps people in dealing with complex and ambiguous situations. Using roadmaps, diagrams, and drawings, and built visual plans to unpack complex problems is a great way to master challenging situations. Using the following tools assist you in categorizing ambiguous situations and divide complexities of the situation into more manageable pieces.

# *Strategy 3: Mastering Critical Thinking and Problem-Focused Coping*

## I. Use mind mapping tools and digital whiteboards

Mind mapping and creating digital whiteboards are useful techniques to visually unpack a complex and ambiguous situation. A mind map provides a visual diagram that captures, organizes, and links components of the situation. Breaking complex situations into smaller components can help you understand root causes of problems, factors affecting ambiguous situations, and options for solving such situations. There are easy to use and free to access mind-mapping tools available online. You may also use a digital whiteboard such as Miro to organize your ambiguous situation. You should engage team members, relevant stakeholders, and experts to jointly work on the tool you select. They will help you identify the ambiguous situation's components, its causes, and can add ideas for dealing with the situation.
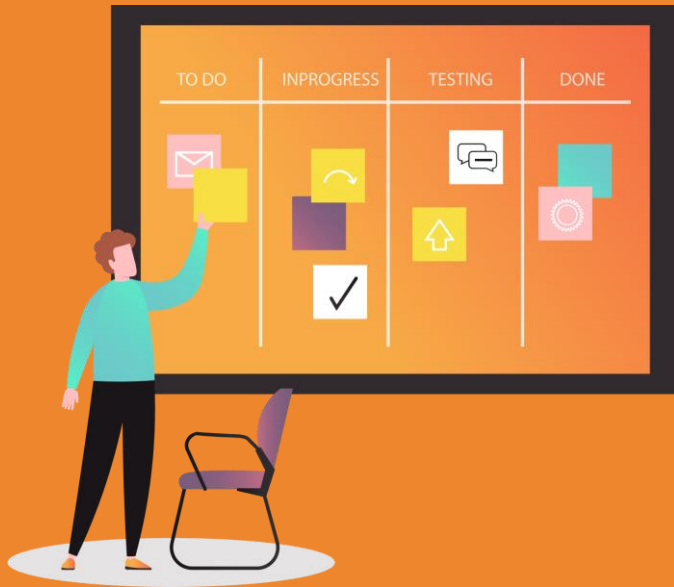
# *Strategy 3: Mastering Critical Thinking and Problem-Focused Coping*

## II. Problem-focused coping activity

Problem-focused coping can help you in dealing with ambiguous and complex situations. It involves efforts to explore the problem, generate various options to solve the problem, evaluate the pros and cons of different options, and implement steps to solve the problem. Simply follow these steps:

1. Find a quiet space where you can focus

2. Think about an ambiguous situation you are currently experiencing in your project.

3. Consider different options for dealing with this situation and briefly write these options on a piece of paper.

4. Consider the pros and cons for each of these options. Write these down.

5. Spend 10 minutes evaluating these options and their advantages and disadvantages.

6. Select the most plausible option.

7. Now provide more detail about the option you have chosen. Specify time frames, resources required, specific people required, and relevant short- and long-term goals.

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