



From Adversity to Advantage

By Richard Martin

As a student of history, and military history in particular, I have always been impressed with the ability of famous leaders to seemingly bounce back from just about any difficulty or adversity. This is also true in the fields of sports, politics and business. In some ways, great leaders are also great survivors. They often thrive on chaos and adversity. No adversity seems too great to prevent them from finding some advantage. While I certainly don't believe in deliberately creating difficulty, there are nonetheless some principles that you can apply to turn adversity to your advantage.

1. **Keep things in perspective.** Things are rarely so bad – or so good for that matter – as they appear initially. I'm not talking about tragedy and death, but rather the day-to-day mundane events that seem to create setbacks for mere mortals but that great leaders thrive on. If you are facing adversity it is probably because you are pushing yourself and your organization to achieve greater goals. This is a good thing.
2. **Keep the big picture in view.** The military has institutionalized this idea by giving every commander at every level a second-in-command. This way, the commander can focus on leading the troops and keeping his eye on the enemy and the evolving situation, while the deputy takes care of administrative matters and the "rear area". How many civilian organizations do this? My assessment is not many, and they would surely be more effective and, yes, even more efficient if they did so. An added benefit is that the deputy can replace the boss in some circumstances, thereby giving a chance for much needed rest and recuperation during difficult times.
3. **Stay calm and don't overreact.** When I was on the staff of the Royal Military College of Canada, one of my colleagues was a naval officer. One of his favourite principles of leadership was expressed thus: "The sailors get nervous when their officers start running." This is a very succinct way to say that leaders should project calm and resolve no matter what the situation; lest they unnerve those they are leading. Judging by his demeanour, I think my friend had learned the value of that principle first hand. I certainly did as a young military officer.
4. **Build on core values and beliefs.** U.S. airline JetBlue had a major crisis in February 2007 when operating management made poor decisions about how to manage flights and passenger relations during a major ice storm on the Eastern seaboard. David G. Neeleman, the founder and CEO of the airline, apologized to the airline's customers and promised to compensate them in the future for the same type of incident. Up to then, the low-cost airline had had a reputation for excellent customer service and Neeleman didn't want to jeopardize that. He has created a "Passenger Bill of Rights" that promises to compensate passengers for such inconveniences in the future and company employees were mobilized en masse afterwards to contact passengers inconvenienced by the debacle. This kind of leadership by the CEO could only come about because Neeleman focused on the core values and beliefs of the company and took them seriously. Only time will tell if JetBlue can recover from the crisis, but at least the company has a roadmap with its core values and principles as signposts.
5. **When in doubt, go with your gut.** My observation of dozens of senior military officers and other high-level leaders is that they all trust their instincts and are highly intuitive decision-makers. When all is said and done, reason can only take you so far in your decision-making. Information is never perfect in any case, especially when faced with adversity. Intuition is

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simply an inner knowing that comes from years of practice and reflection on a particular subject. Great leaders usually have well developed intuition because they have so much experience and are used to considering the emotional aspects of a problem in their decision-making. Even more important though, is that they listen to the little voice that tells them that something is wrong or is good and they act on it.

6. **Build on lucky breaks.** Uber-consultant Alan Weiss says it is sometimes better to be lucky than good. I have found this to be very true. When I was commanding a peacekeeping force in Bosnia, I sometimes had my troops set up vehicle check points to control movement and to check for illegal weapons and smuggling. One day, we set up some check points and the UN resident envoy congratulated me for my excellent use of a decoy tactic to quell an incipient demonstration by local military personnel, which could easily have turned into rioting and looting. His information network had obviously tweaked him to something I had been unaware of. I let him and everyone else in my area of responsibility believe that my tactic was intentional. That lucky stroke contributed to our credibility by sowing the idea that we knew everything that was happening in the area. Afterwards, representatives of the international community were also more forthcoming in providing us with information because they believed we would act on it to keep the civil peace.
7. **Communicate and lead with emotion.** In May 1940, Britain faced its most trying circumstances of the Second World War. Winston Churchill gave an address to the nation. His words? "I have nothing to offer but blood, sweat, toil and tears." In a series of stirring speeches over the weeks and months of that difficult summer, he appealed to the emotions of Britons and rallied them using the values and beliefs they held dear as a people. He didn't sugar-coat the situation and because of that he was able to create an overarching sense of purpose and mission to their struggle. Had he simply listed the balance of forces it might have demoralized the people. Instead he made them truly believe that Britain was a beacon of hope and right for the oppressed peoples of Europe and that they would come to their defence.
8. **Reinforce success and build on strengths.** In war and in other adversarial endeavours such as sports and politics, victory can only come from relentlessly using one's strengths against the opponent's weaknesses. No country ever won a war by focusing on defence. No sports team ever won a championship by focusing on their own weaknesses. No politician ever won office by admitting to his or her weaknesses. We may not like that, but that's the way the world works. You may think I'm only looking at adversarial situations, but the same principle applies to business and economics. Peter Drucker is widely credited with the concept that managers should build on strengths rather than constantly attempting to correct weaknesses. He believed and taught this over many decades but many managers still focus on the negative side of life rather than the positive side. In economic terms, this is known as comparative advantage and it is the fundamental logic underpinning international commerce and free trade.

As a manager and a leader, the next time you are faced with a difficult situation, make a commitment to apply these principles. Even if you can't do it well the first time, persistence will pay off. It will allow you to build resilience in yourself and your organization, and it will also contribute to making you a much more inspiring and effective leader.