



WHITEPAPER

Embracing adversity: How great leaders make the best of bad times.

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These are difficult and very challenging times for many right now. Depending on your stage in life and the company you are working for, you will be experiencing adversity to a lesser or greater degree. Of all the factors that most strongly influence your sense of well-being and how you will experience the next few years there will be none more powerful than the perspective and inner skills that you take with you through these challenging times. It can be difficult and sometimes very tiring to choose and re-choose a useful perspective.

And what, exactly, is a useful perspective? There are three aspects to a resilient perspective that will help you not only get through tough times but flourish during them. The first is to embrace the adversity for what it is: a challenge you must rise to rather than a threat from which to contract. The second aspect is a commitment to act rather than give up. Third, it is an imperative to take control of those things you can and to let go of those you cannot. This is easily said but very hard to do—particularly on a continuous basis.

PERSPECTIVE MATTERS MOST

The harsh truth is that we will not know the winners and the losers in the current crisis until three or four years from now. Research shows that a major factor in how we emerge on the other side of adversity has more to do with the perspective we took to what we had to face than what actually happened to us. For example, one of the most significant pieces of longitudinal research done on humans and how they live their lives was the Grant study, which started decades ago with the study of a select group of Harvard graduates. The researchers wanted to examine a group of people who gave every indication, on every scale, that they were destined for success and good health. They wanted to study this group to see who had best outcomes and why. A very brief summary of over 50 years of research indicated that it wasn't what people faced in their lives that determined how successful they were, it was how they dealt with what they faced that made the biggest difference. Some people had faced real tragedy and unusual challenge—and yet they were successful, felt fulfilled and lived longer than average. But others, who had faced lesser tragedies and challenges, were not as successful, healthy or happy. It came down to how each had dealt with what life handed out. Some had very adaptive methods for moving ahead regardless of obstacles, and some felt defeated and could not move forward. (Some had not faced much real tragedy or challenge and yet indicated that their lives had not been all that fulfilling or satisfying.)





USE THE ADVERSITY

On another front, one of the important lessons learned from psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach and other great teachers with whom we have studied is that beneath every reaction lies the energy to transform. This is a critical piece of self-knowledge in the face of adversity when some of the feelings we experience can be debilitating, discouraging, or defensive.

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Emotions do not come out of the sky and invade our body, they come from the stories we are telling ourselves and the accompanying images. Beneath the storyline and the reactions created by the story lay deep feelings that, when tapped, give us the energy to transform and move forward. These deeper feelings—sadness, anger or fear—when acknowledged, contain the impetus we need to take that first step up and out. Embracing these deeper feelings is what motivates us and grounds us. I am sad. I am scared. This self-knowledge tells us where we actually need to begin. They tell us the truth of our experience. Knowing the truth always gives us the courage to move from ‘what is’ to ‘what ought to be.’ Granted, it does take some consciousness and fearlessness to explore these deeper feelings rather than go with our reactions, but it is this ability to face and own what is really ours that propels each of us toward real growth.

I know that this may sound somewhat incomprehensible to some of you, but actually it is a truth. When we do not notice how we are speaking to ourselves, what story we are telling ourselves, what truth we are missing, especially in difficult and challenging times, we often dig a deeper hole. Given that we have to climb out of this hole, depth matters. Therefore who we hang around with at challenging times is also critical. It is easy to get caught up in, as Joan Borysenko put it, “awfulizing”—complaining and commiserating with a negative or reactive critic. Roz Stone Zander



called this “the conversation of no possibilities.” She points out that these conversations may draw us closer to other people but they don’t take us anywhere.

IDENTIFY THE THINGS YOU CAN CONTROL

The key skill in dealing with adversity is to first of all to acknowledge what is true for you. What is your emotional reality when all of the layers are peeled away? Once you know this, you can then sort out what you have control over and what you do not have control over. If you do not get that right you will be digging a very deep hole for yourself. Continuing to fight against or for something over which you have no control is to tie yourself up in ceaseless striving. To paraphrase a quote I read years ago, “adversity, like an unwanted guest, may come through the door but you needn’t give it a chair to sit in.”

You didn’t invite it in but there it is. You don’t have to make it comfortable or give it a chair but you have to manage it as much as possible. For those of you who have read my most recent book, *Igniting the Third Factor*, this is familiar ground: anticipate what’s coming, check your perspective, reframe. The challenge for you as a coach/leader is that, while you experience adversity along with everyone else, you also need to guide others through it. All the self-management skills need to come into play as a result. You need to act big, be empathetic (not sympathetic) and paint as believable a picture of the ‘path’ as soon as possible for those under your guidance.



Keeping people focused on the next step, building confidence in others and your course of action, and celebrating the small successes along the way are key in helping others through adversity at work. One trick is to remind people that they have dealt with such matters successfully before. Reviewing that history with them can be helpful. Often a group, when looking back from the vantage point of past experience, decides they want to go through adversity with less angst than the previous time. Anything a leader can do to help focus the group on what can be done, can be controlled, is also very helpful. And of course remember to engage your sense of humour. It can be a wonderful ally when slaying dragons!

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