

Courageous Leadership by Dale Collie

Taking your organization through tough times and bouncing back are critical elements of leadership. The most successful leaders know how to prepare for unforeseen ambushes, deal with problems as they develop, and do even better after each crisis.

Get ready now for the next crisis. You don't know what it is, but your experience tells you that a huge problem is on the horizon. Even if you enjoy these ever-changing obstacles, there are three essential elements for success.

— Be Prepared —

Customers, employees, equipment, and economic conditions are all in motion, and good leaders prepare ahead of time for the problems that are sure to develop.

The best strategy is to avoid the problem, but experience shows that even the best leaders are often ambushed by situations beyond their control. Good leaders prepare for these eventualities ahead of time.

One of the best lessons I've ever had in dealing with business ambushes came from my training as a US Army Ranger — one of America's elite soldiers.

The Ranger cadre emphasized the fact that no one can escape a well-planned ambush because of the heavy weapons placed at the front and rear of the ambush, the explosives placed in any position that could be used for cover by those in the trap, and the effectiveness of the surprise. No one can get out if everything is set up properly.

Then, the instructors taught us how to break out of a well-planned ambush if our own unit was ever trapped by the enemy. Only a few seconds were required to teach what should be done, but days of practice were required for us to perfect the action.

Essentially, the only way to escape such an ambush is for every member of the trapped unit to turn immediately and attack directly into the shooters, the weakest part of the ambush, firing every weapon while running straight at them. It isn't easy, but the only way out is to embrace the danger and run through the fire.

And this is the same way to survive business ambushes. We must embrace the danger because problems only get worse if we try to escape. Ignoring the problem will not help. Taking a half-hearted approach won't do any good. We have to confront the problem as soon as we identify it.

Equipment problems – fix 'em right away. Personnel problems — take action. Customer problems — don't delay. You know the basics. You know what needs to be done. Just do it!

— Focus on the Solution, Not the Problem —

When we are ambushed in business, we often focus on the problem instead of focusing on the solution. One of my early lessons about focusing on the solution came when my infantry company was ordered to rescue another company pinned down in a very narrow, v-shaped valley in the jungles of Vietnam.

The harrowing approach through enemy gunfire was enough to turn most people back, but a hasty plan involving helicopter gunfire and smoke generators made the enemy duck for cover and gave us a chance to jump from helicopters right into our sister company's position.

A quick survey of possibilities showed that our easiest route of escape was to climb a very high, undefended rock cliff to our rear. Darkness hid our exposed soldiers as they climbed the cliff, and we were long gone when the enemy attacked just before dawn the next morning.

The trapped company commander initially objected to the plan, but he had only praise for our success. He had been so busy defending his position and protecting his troops in that valley that he overlooked an escape route that was obvious to us as soon as we arrived.

If you have a persistent problem or an overwhelming crisis, be sure to get an outsider to help you evaluate solutions. Of course, you might object to their "obvious solutions" because you are close to the problem and influenced by many surrounding factors. In the end, the outsider will probably give you advice that will alleviate the problem and position you for success.

— Bounce Back —

We've all been wounded by business ambushes, but the most successful leaders are resilient and know how important it is to turn things around immediately.

On a night patrol in a coastal Vietnam village, my small group of six soldiers encountered an enemy force about eight times our size, and they gained the upper hand immediately. I was seriously wounded, twice, but quick thinking and the excellent response of our entire company helped me survive.

After a year in recovery, I had an artificial leg and felt ready to continue with my military career. You can imagine how disappointing it was when a Colonel told me that they would not even review my request for a waiver to stay on active duty as an amputee.

Old-fashioned perseverance was required to push through the red tape and Washington bureaucracy. In the end, I was rewarded with a personal recommendation by Norman Schwarzkopf to continue on active duty, but it didn't come easy.

Every officer in a position of authority told me it couldn't be done, but none of them had the same passion that I did for achieving my goals.

It's the same way in the business arena. You have a lot more riding on success than any of your detractors. There's a lot more than profit riding on your bottom line — it's the success of your organization. You've worked for years to build this operation into something dependable, something you and your employees can count on to meet your dreams for the future.

— Take it to the Top —

Focus on the solution, prepare for those downturns and ambushes, and bounce back no matter how badly you're wounded. You have a lot invested in the organization, and you deserve only the best.

- Plan now to overcome problems.
- Embrace the danger, no matter how great the difficulty.
- Don't take *no* for an answer.
- Don't let temporary problems block your path.
- Don't give up just because an obstacle seems like certain failure.
- Find ways around obstacles.
- Get the advice of successful outsiders who know your industry.
- Persist and persevere!

Dale Collie, author and professional speaker, named by Fast Company as one of America's Top 50 innovative leaders. Experienced as Fortune 500 executive and business owner, US Army Ranger and professor at West Point. More articles as well as utility leaders blog and discussion forum can be found at www.CourageBuilders.com

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