

# DON'T WAIT FOR A CRISIS



How to remain calm and clear-headed, sorting through possible step in a crisis and also in everyday business.

How is it that in a crisis, certain people seem to know exactly what to do? How do they remain calm and clear-headed, sorting through possible steps, seemingly instantaneously and without effort?

For example, legendary test pilot Chuck Yeager, the first to fly a jet faster than the speed of sound and the role model of the "right stuff" has described his experience when all engines failed. Hurling toward the earth with just seconds to avoid becoming a stain on the landscape, Yeager had no time to fret about why things weren't going as he expected, or to sift through instruction manuals. Rather, he opened his mental channel, allowed ideas to pop into his head, and then followed through on them deliberately, one by one: "Try A, Try B, Try C" until something clicked.

Although his plane was spinning at hundreds of miles an hour, Yeager described a sensation of thoughts coming methodically, almost slowly, in heightened focus. He harnessed the power of clarity: a blinding glimpse of the obvious, accompanied by a feeling of utter confidence in one's perspective.

When we or our businesses face situations that threaten our very survival, we may experience Yeager's kind of steadfast determination. Crisis can shock us to a kind of mental stillness. We are forced to admit that what we thought we knew isn't enough and to put aside our usual concerns. That allows the mental space for a fresh thought to emerge. Connection to the inner resources that all of us have, call it gut instinct, is just a thought away. The distance between despair and elation is literally the gap between one thought and the next. Can you measure that?

The key is to pay attention. Let insight focus your thinking and guide your actions. But don't wait for a crisis; far better to use the power of insight when things are going well. Begin by becoming aware of your habitual ways of thinking. Do you find yourself going over and over, for example, all the reasons something can't be done? We can get mentally stuck just thinking about all we have to do: "Oh, my gosh," goes the mental chatter, "Woe is me. I have so much to do and no time to do it." Again and again and again, these thoughts drone on. Along with them comes the emotion of being tired, of feeling weighed down by the world. In that frame of mind, it's difficult to find a fresh thought.

Turning things around can begin with the awareness: "I am never going to have the energy to accomplish anything if I just keep dwelling on all the chores I have to

complete." This may seem unnatural at first. But re-tuning your internal guidance system to recognize and act on insight will get easier. And those old busy-minded, energy-sapping images will no longer occupy all your working day.

In addition, turn your back on attachment to always having the right answers. Have the willpower to stay with "not being sure," hard as that might be at first. Instead of rushing to act in typical "ready/fire/aim" fashion, take a mental breath and see what occurs to you.

Paradoxically, the more we are willing to admit what we don't know, the better chance we have at calm problem-solving. But most managers believe that they get paid for having the right answer. The idea of "not knowing" seems contradictory, foolish.

And so much of our early educational experience centers on true/false kinds of tests; the kid that gets the right answer out first is acknowledged, praised. That reinforcement, acted out over 12, 16, even 20 years of educational experience is like a deep river channel. Hard to see over the bank, much less climb out.

Freedom from having the right answer is the path to use the collective brainpower of everyone around you. When people see that you are serious about "not knowing," they will contribute their best thinking to the issue at hand. They will understand that you are counting on them. Help focus their mental energy by asking questions in a straightforward way, not in a testing or challenging tone, but with genuine curiosity.

Not, "What are you *thinking?*" but, "What are *you* thinking?"

Human thought processes are built for generating powerful insights. As a leader, your number one job is to sustain an environment that encourages the clear-headedness to leverage fresh thoughts. That means you must insulate your team from fatigue, stress, worry, anger, burnout. And therefore, the most important thing you can do is to attend to your mental well-being. Don't get overly tired; don't take on too many commitments; exercise; eat well; get enough rest. The benefits will ripple out to your entire team.

Clarity, as we discussed in our column last September, springs from insight: the doorway to an infinite consciousness, to the wisdom of the ages, to the knowledge that spiritual advisors, prophets, mystics, philosophers keep pointing toward. As Socrates said: "All knowledge is just remembering." The veil lifts, our mental fog clears; the serendipity of events, the small miracles of everyday life, and the hidden connections between people come to our aid.

What is truly necessary to be a leader is to have clarity about your own purpose: an unwavering commitment to understanding human values, having respect for all of life, a set of personal values that reflect purpose and universal laws, integrity, for example, and the willpower to live them.

Wisdom is knocking on your door. Act on it!

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