
LEADING YOUR TEAM IN TIMES OF CRISIS—PART 1

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Put Your Own Mask on First

“Stick forward and neutral lateral, lock harness...”

That is the first, immediate action burned into the memory of every F-14 naval aviator in case their Tomcat fighter jet enters a spin. The procedure prioritizes locking the aviator firmly into their seat before any other steps are taken. Why?

Because it is more difficult to control 30 tons of aluminum, titanium and jet fuel plummeting to Earth when your face is smashed against the instrument panel. More specifically, you can clearly see all your indicators and access your controls from a place of stability. It's our version of “Put your own mask on first” from the safety briefing we get on the non-stop bus to LAX.

This is relevant for the world we find ourselves in now—trying to assess what is going on and determining what to do next—in an environment of great uncertainty. The analogy is apt because in most spins, your plane is perfectly fine, except that it's not flying. You just need to stabilize it and get it flying again. There's a good chance most of us will be fine on the other side of this crisis, but the actions we take now will influence how fine and how soon.

Before we can lead our teams effectively, we first need to ensure our own harness is locked. That way we are stabilized and can clearly see the data and access the controls.

What does locking our harness look like?

It is reducing fear, strengthening our confidence and finding clarity about what lies before us. Our biggest enemy is fear. When we see a threat, our fight-flight-or-freeze response shrinks the brain to the size of a pea, limiting its focus to identifying and dealing with threats.

But fear doesn't just degrade the intellect we need to solve problems; it also magnifies threats. Fear causes us to interpret things as threats whether they are dangerous or not. Our shrunken brains react the same way to real threats, a client's email or a colleague's comment and leads us to attack them, run from them or freeze in inaction.

Making things worse, fear makes us terrible collaborators since emotional intelligence is one of the first casualties of our threat response. This further handicaps our ability to solve problems and engage clients, who are also likely fearful.

In light of these challenges, three steps can stabilize us and get us in a position to make the most positive impact for ourselves and those we serve:

1. **Reduce our own threat response:** As long as fear is dominating our brains, no other steps will amount to much. Reducing our fear must be a priority. It might sound new-agey, but physiologically, slowing our breathing is the best way to throw a wrench in the threat machine's gears. There are tons of techniques online, but basically if you can take just a minute or two to take slow, deep, two-second breaths, you'll likely feel the difference and find yourself able to focus on your instrument panel more clearly.
2. **Strengthen our confidence:** While this might be the first time you've been to this

rodeo (you're not alone), it's not the first rodeo you've been to. Whether the financial crisis, for many of us, or some other professional or personal experience, we have all been in crises before. Remember them and how you got through them. Reflect on your accomplishments and skill sets; there's a reason that clients have trusted you with their family's savings, or employees have trusted you with their careers. Remember, you are not where you are by accident. You have proven talents that justify your believing that you will succeed. Start imagining it's a year from now—what do you want your clients, employees and family members to be saying about you? Let that focus you on the opportunity for greatness before you. You've got this.

3. **Focus on what we can control:** In this age of distraction, focus is a rare and powerful asset. In a crisis, it is vital. Start gaining focus by sorting the mass of things swirling around your brain into three buckets: (a) the stuff that's already happened that you can't do anything about, (b) the stuff that's happening that you can't control but that could inform your actions, and (c) the stuff you can control. Write them down if it helps. Take the stuff in (a) and put it in a mental box to be reopened post-crisis for harvesting lessons learned. Otherwise do your best to ignore it and turn to (c), the stuff you can control and (b), stuff that could inform your actions. This is how we can best identify and seize the opportunities before us.

In a crisis, this process is not a one-and-done thing, but rather a skill set we must leverage repeatedly. And, just as recovering from a spin requires pointing the nose of the aircraft farther down towards the Earth that is terrifyingly racing up at us, recovering from a crisis sometimes requires us to stare right at it, in all its ugliness. If we do so with fear under control, confidence in our capabilities and a clear focus on what we can control, we can be in a place of stability to take the actions that our clients, team and family need us to do. We will explore these actions in subsequent installments.

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