

Overcoming Adversity: 3 Steps Great Leaders Take

How a leader responds to adversity reveals how effective that leader is. Reactions to setbacks or crises not only test leadership character, but define it.

Some difficulties are devastating, and unfortunately, they are compounded by leadership responses. There's no real training for adversity on the leadership ladder, except experience. A leader who doesn't effectively deal with a trial will succumb to it. The rest of the organization won't be far behind.

Leaders can prevent this. There are specific methods that can defuse setbacks, allow subsequent crises to be more manageable, and make leaders stronger. Leaders can learn to conquer setbacks by using simple, logical steps to make their way through each difficulty.

Better yet, with the right approach, setbacks can provide advantages that would not have been possible otherwise. Leaders with these skills will weather any storm, regardless of its cause.

From Setback to Success

Ryan Holiday, in his book, *The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumphs* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2014), claims that leaders can turn the roadblock they face into a path to success. Ironically, the impediment is a gift.

When a leader is hit with a crisis, fear and anger may be triggered. A leader who remains in this state is paralyzed and derailed.

Instead, leaders can view obstacles as self-motivating challenges. They can tap into determination to turn a weakness into a strength. Leaders can view challenges as a test that can be utilized to thrive, not just during a crisis, but in spite of it.

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



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To defeat obstacles leaders can use a three-part weapon system, according to author Holiday.

1. A mindset or perception on how to view the situation.
2. The motivated action plan on how to address the specific issues.
3. An inner drive or will that keeps the mindset and action plan going.

The Right Mindset

When a leader gains a rational perception of a situation, it's put into proper perspective. A useful perspective of a setback is one that doesn't focus exclusively on negative emotions, but looks at the facts. A leader's healthy viewpoint has logic and a sense of discernment to see things as they really are, not what they may appear to be.

The first step in dealing with a crisis is to remain calm. Composure not only helps with clarity, it has a positive effect on others. Worry only feeds on itself, and then it feeds on the leader.

A shaky emotional state, one of fear or anxiety, only makes the problem seem much worse. Instead, leaders who redirect distracting thoughts build the strongest mental positions.

The second step is to frame the trial accurately. Correct decisions can't be made if the understanding of the issue is flawed. A leader's thoughts must be stable and reliable. This takes discipline, but it can be learned, especially with the help of a seasoned coach.

Gathering data, other perspectives, and root causes are exercises a wise leader undertakes to get the facts and the most accurate picture of the problem. Without these prerequisites, no decisions or plan will be effective enough.

The third step is to make the situation as manageable as possible. A leader who breaks a crisis down into workable chunks finds the most effective solutions, fixing simpler things, one at a time. This permits even small successes to appear larger than the trial itself, which is a positive perspective.

An effective leader gets in the pattern of reevaluating after each chunk is dealt with. A day-by-day approach will keep emotions, tactics, and activities in check. They focus on today: tomorrow will be addressed tomorrow.

With a positive outlook, the entire challenge is seen as an opportunity to learn, correct, prevent, and get better. Failure is not final, but a step to the next success. Every leader fails. Great leaders don't let failure take them down.

Author Holiday encourages leaders to allow the trial to push them to be something greater, to grow their capabilities to think around roadblocks, and defeat things most people deem undefeatable. Let setbacks create a champion in you. In a sense, this ends up being more important than the trial itself. The trial is simply an advantage to be used by a crafty leader. This is perhaps the toughest mindset to adopt, but invaluable to do so.

A Solid Foundation

A leader with a healthy mindset takes the most prudent steps. Too many leaders regard immediate action, any action, as a step in the right direction. This is dangerous thinking.

Before any action plan is initiated, a leader needs to establish the proper foundational conditions within the organization. Steadiness in the culture—in the corporate mentality—is essential. As the leader enhances their own mindset, they inspire staff, especially management.

The leader's initiative must become everyone's initiative. Everyone needs to take ownership and have the dedication needed to see things through. The obstacle needs to be removed, and it's going to take persistence. The roadblock won't go away by itself, and no one has a magic wand to make it disappear. Only facing it head on will suffice. The effort will not be a sprint but a marathon, so a leader needs to prepare everyone for endurance. Quitting is not an option.

The BP Deepwater Horizon oil platform disaster of 2011 was a classic example of leadership not following this principle. Responses were stalled, uncoordinated and unaccountable to the public, the government, and the families. A solid foundation of initiative and prudence was clearly missing. Trust in BP plummeted, and the poisoning of the environment far exceeded what was considered up to that point as tragic.

A leader who charts a strong course will have staff that can follow structured steps, stick to a plan, make things more manageable, and less stressful. If more leaders would learn this preliminary process, more crises would be overcome well. This is the meat of an effective setback defeat.

The Best Action Plan

With a leadership team in sync on their mental and emotional approach, solutions can be derived and put into place. But again, a careful and deliberate method yields the best results. Taking action for the sake of action often makes things worse. Action is not needed. Prudent action is.

Leaders who follow the most deliberate and manageable process are the most successful. Trying to slay the entire beast with one sword thrust is detrimental. Gradual, proportional steps are best, tackling one sub-issue at a time. This requires discipline, and it must come from the leader.

The downturn in Kodak's analog photography business exemplifies a leadership plan that didn't fully respond to the threats of disruptive technologies. Legacy products were not phased out in time to make way for new ones. Innovation wasn't ramped up enough to transition the company. An effective, systematic strategy was not implemented. The company is a fragment of its former self.

The leader must also keep everyone focused. Staff can get anxious and want to jump ahead too soon. They may want to quit. Competing issues tempt managers to spread themselves too thin. People can struggle with shaking off disappointment or a sense of failure. The leader's task is to encourage, empower, and escort.

A leader aiming for ideal solutions will be frustrated and will frustrate their team. Many crisis situations are not the time for ideal, but for making due. They are a time for rolling with the punches.

Leaders who get results consider non-traditional approaches. Attacking a problem through the side door can be the most effective way to find a solution. By preparing teams to step out of their comfort zones, they are open to new ideas. This can be a humbling experience, and that's often helpful. Pride has no place in this process.

Teaching the staff to embrace the struggle brings out the best in them. A leader who takes things seriously, but holds them loosely, demonstrates what wisdom is.

With these action plans, the leader will direct everyone to an effective resolution in ways that

were never initially thought possible.

The Will to Win

As solutions are attempted, ups and downs will occur. Leaders often take their people into new territory. Things don't always follow the plan. Defeating setbacks requires humility, resilience and flexibility from the leader, according to author Holiday. This is manifested in the inner will.

Leaders must reflect this for their people, and inspire it in them. They should demonstrate the desire to apply themselves in the most effective way, and maintain this energy until the setback is overcome.

Being an encourager is part of leadership responsibility. The things most worth doing are difficult, and difficult things take time. The leader prompts everyone to be determined not to give in or give up. This is the will to win.

HP's purchase into touchscreen consumer products offered them a solid opportunity amongst the top competitors. But underdeveloped hardware, software and relationships with carriers caused the walls to close in. After spending billions of dollars, the strategy was abandoned just months after launch, instead of pressing forward with the will to overcome. Their prospects for tablets and smartphones vaporized, as the market for them soared.

A strong will also calls for wisdom and discernment. The solutions being tried need to be weighed to minimize the chance of bad surprises. Smart leaders oversee the planning of alternate routes, just in case. They anticipate what can go wrong, accept the outcomes that can't be controlled, and maneuver toward the ones that can.

Leaders who can stand up to stiff opposition, whether circumstances or people, will forge a strength in their staff, and inspire them to respond boldly. Unity builds a force more powerful than can come from the same number of individuals.

The tragedy is not that things go wrong or crises knock you down. The tragedy is that when a leader doesn't have the skills or the will to take their organization through the trial, they miss the opportunity to learn from it, and grow because of it.



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