

## How Leaders can Turn Adversity into Advantage

By Jack Keogh

When I wrote my memoir, *“Driving Straight on Crooked Lines: How an Irishman found his heart and nearly lost his mind”* I decided to share my own personal journey and the special circumstances that helped shape who I am today. One of the themes relates to learning to turn adversity into an advantage. I had to learn from my mistakes, getting in touch with my heart and my emotions, and follow the principle that it’s” better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

Managers and leaders have to face difficult situations all the time. I learned that it is essential to be able to rely on a series of well articulated principles when faced with adversity. These are principles that I was able to think about and develop which served me in good stead in times of adversity. I think the process is akin to learning to drive an automobile on quiet roads before venturing out into traffic. Learn to drive straight first, then you can adapt to crooked roads.

When you are faced with an adverse situation, you need to know what principles to fall back on. To do this, you need to be able to articulate them and incorporate them into your life and leadership style. Being in touch with your principles will do wonders for your self-confidence which, in turn will make you a much more inspiring and effective leader. Humility and resilience are two qualities you need to cultivate. Knowing your values and principles will help you.

Here are some principles, in no particular order, which I believe in. You can think about them and make some of them your own, so that when the time comes they can help you turn adversity to your advantage:

1. **Trust and Integrity.** “Guard your integrity as a sacred thing” is how Ralph Waldo Emerson put it. To my mind it is the essential quality of leadership. It is manifested in an absolute devotion to keeping one’s word. The glue that holds all relationships together - including the relationship between the leader and the led - is trust, and trust is based on integrity. Success in global business is ultimately a question of managing relationships.
2. Understand that **global leaders know they don’t have all the answers.** The trick is learning how to learn from, and with, your subordinates.
3. **Identify your core values and beliefs.** Help your team identify theirs. Your shared values will give your company its roadmap with the core values and principles as signposts. A company’s values are those of the managing team – no matter what the company says in its brochures and motivational posters.
4. **Keep things in perspective.** You know that things are rarely so bad, or so good, as they first appear. Great racehorses are nervous at the starting gate. If you push your organization or team to achieve greater goals you will have to deal with setbacks and adversity. That’s a good thing.

5. **Trust your intuition.** Information and facts can only take you so far. In my experience, business people do not trust their intuition nearly enough. Indeed one of the failings of detail and fact oriented leaders is they tend to hire people just like themselves. The result is teams that rarely use their intuition. The result is a massive lack of creativity and an obsession with facts and details. When all is said and done, reason can only take you so far in your decision-making. When dealing with adversity a time comes when you can be overcome by excessive information. If you ever read my book you'll see that I learned the hard way to eventually trust that little interior voice that tells you that something is wrong or is good so that you can act on it.

6. **Stay calm and don't overreact.** "Team members get nervous when their leader starts to panic." I used to be part of a major international organization that, as I write, is going through an unbelievable period of adversity. Although, I'm glad that I left in time, I can see how the current leaders must project calm and resolve, no matter what the situation, so that they lead their teams to a better place rather than unnerving them.

7. **Develop your emotional intelligence.** Use it to communicate and lead. Learn to understand and manage your own emotions – where they come from, what is their normal progression – and then work on understanding and managing the emotions of your colleagues.

8. **Focus on strengths.** Peter Drucker is widely credited with the concept that managers should build on strengths rather than constantly attempting to correct weaknesses. Despite this, I find it's very common for managers to focus on the weaknesses and the negative side of life rather than the positive side.

9. **Understand the "shadow" side of your personality.** Every great leader has a "dark" side which is usually one of his or her greatest strengths. These are the personality traits that emerge in moments of adversity, frustration and stress. The unidentified and uncontrolled shadow personality derails good leaders. I worked for a world-class leader for twenty years. He came crashing down in the most calamitous way, causing great damage to his followers. I believe he was totally derailed by the unchecked shadow side of his charismatic and narcissistic personality.

10. **Never lose sight of the "big picture."** "Keep the end in mind" as Stephen Covey says. It can help if you learn to delegate administrative tasks to a trusted deputy.

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