

ANYTHING BUT PLANE SAILING

In 1972 an Eastern Airlines Lockheed Tristar went down in the Florida Everglades killing all on board. When accident investigators examined the wreckage and the flight recorder data the cause was found to have been a malfunctioning undercarriage light which had so distracted the pilot, his co-pilot and the flight engineer that all three had failed to notice the aircraft was losing altitude and descending to a dangerous level, eventually catastrophically hitting the ground. Ironically it was proved that although the light had been malfunctioning, the undercarriage was in fact fine.

That might be an extreme example but as managers we're all guilty of allowing ourselves to be sidetracked by similar trivia whether we like it or not and whether we care to admit to it or not. We constantly find ourselves in a put-out-the-fire-now situation, having to respond to and deal with the little eruptions that happen on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis. In hindsight they prove to have had very little real impact for the simple reason that we concentrated on the symptoms and ignored the cause, at the same time neglecting all our other important duties. It's hard to shy away from it. Similarly we get engrossed in insignificant trivial activities – busy work, some mail, some calls, a few time wasters. Mini crises, routine work and resolving problems when they arise are only part of a manager's job and the lesser part at that but if we are not careful we forget it all too easily. We involve ourselves in too much that could and should be delegated. I keep having to remind myself almost daily that my job as a leader is more to do with scanning the business landscape, assessing the economic weather and socio-political climate as opposed to worrying about why more paper clips have been used during the last quarter compared to the same time last year. I forget the bigger picture and often trudge to work, open my e-mails and get caught up in operational drudgery that basically adds no value to my business, the local economy, the world, whatever. Let's face it, I am on the brink. Tired of the mundane, looking for the new challenge and trying to remember (as if someone told me) the meaning of business life.

I did find some inspiration recently as I have been completely engrossed in the book 'Endurance'. It is the story of Ernest Shackleton, an English explorer who set out to lead the first expedition to traverse the Antarctic continent. He found a crew of 27 men willing to endure the harsh journey, small wages and bitter cold and set sail in 1914.

The trip did not go as planned, to put it mildly. Their ship, HMS Endurance, found itself lodged in ice only a day away from the continent. Shackleton, who excelled at commanding men and maintaining their morale, had them wait several months for the thaw which never happened. Instead the ice grew thicker, eventually crushing and sinking the boat. The men then embarked on a gruelling journey that led to Shackleton and a select few crossing glaciers and mountains to reach a remote whaling village some 600 miles away and fetch help. Remarkably every single man made it back home and except for a few lost and frostbitten toes on the youngest crewman, all were in remarkably good mental and physical shape.

It's an awe-inspiring tale that has many lessons for business leaders today and reinforces for me how good leadership is no different now than it was almost a century ago. From the book I am gaining an important insight on how to better manage, from motivating people to leading with great integrity in moments of crisis. Shackleton was challenged by bringing together workers of diverse backgrounds and talents, keeping everyone focussed on a goal, putting down challengers, helping those falling behind, battling boredom and fatigue, working with limited resources and in general bringing order to a chaotic and adverse environment. Let's face it – it just sounds like a slightly more dangerous day at the office, here and now.

Sir Ernest Shackleton had many attributes of the natural-born leader and there are countless examples in the book about the man and his style which in no way were extraordinary. It reinforces my belief that good management is little more than common sense, although good management is rarely common. What struck me as the most important leadership characteristic he possessed was the ability to respond to his current reality, accept the change and then react accordingly. As soon as that ship was frozen Shackleton figured out that the goal of the enterprise was no longer to walk across the continent of Antarctica. The new goal was to survive.

The situation had changed for him and his crew and instead of bemoaning his lot in life and complaining about the tricky situation he responded by tackling the crisis head-on, being upbeat, positive and refocussed. I know it's not easy but that is the job of a leader - to lead people in a direction, oftentimes a changing one, and to do so in such a way that it looks like you know where you are going. Shackleton had a crisis and oh boy, was it a big one. And it was the big crisis that allowed his true leadership qualities to come to the fore.

A crisis fills you with purpose, purpose creates energy and energy translates into action. When you have action with energy you have motivation and results. It makes perfect sense that when you have management which is preoccupied with small, meaningless tasks leaving them no time to undertake audacious plans it might well be because of their perceived lack of crisis in the workplace. It's not unusual for business leaders to engineer such a crisis to force change in the form of a 'burning platform'. This term got its name from an incident on the North Sea oil platform, Alpha Piper. The platform caught fire, trapping a worker on the edge of the platform. Rather than face certain death in the fire, he chose probable death by jumping 100 feet into the freezing sea. It is now used to describe a situation where people are forced to act by dint of the alternative being somewhat worse. Without crisis in your organisation don't expect leaders to emerge, nor change to happen. Without crisis there is complacency and this is nicely illustrated by the urban legend that if you throw a frog in boiling water he will quickly jump out. But put a frog in a pan of cold water then raise the temperature ever so slowly and the gradual warming will make the frog doze happily – in fact the frog will cook to death without ever waking up.

Every business that doesn't think it's in crisis probably is. It's either descending pilot-less towards the ground like that Eastern Airlines plane or just drifting off happily into oblivion like the frog. Either way it's certain death unless we as managers let others put out the small fires while we play Red Adair with the huge conflagrations. It's our job to fly the plane – someone else can change the fuse.

