

IF YOU CAN KEEP YOUR HEAD....

By Naeem Bhamjee

Greek shipping billionaire Aristotle Onassis once said that if you wanted to succeed in business the first thing you should do is get a tan! Translated this means you should project an image of someone who is so in control and ahead of the game you can afford to take time out to lie in the sun.

In business, as in everything else in life, self-belief is key and this will show up in body language. Inner calm manifests itself in outer calm and quiet authority, just as a mind in turmoil will show up in a fidgety demeanour and a lack of focus. And the best leaders are always the calm, collected ones. So if you plan on being a future leader or you're looking for ways in which you can improve your present leadership skills, take a good, hard look at yourself and how you conduct yourself in the office, in meetings and in your interaction with staff and subordinates.

Make sure that when others look at you, they always get the impression that you are totally relaxed and in control. Think of a captain of a 747. He is completely at ease in the cockpit. It is his natural environment, he has trained long and hard to be where he is and he has mastered both the machine he pilots and the skills needed to be the captain. He exudes confidence and he passes this on to his crew and his passengers. Everybody feels safe in his hands because not only is he competent at his job, he makes it obvious to all around him. They know just by his manner and behaviour that this is someone they can have faith in, someone who won't panic in a crisis but who will think things through calmly and take the necessary action. Their lives are literally in his hands and they know they are good ones.

A person who always looks stressed will not inspire others. You want to ensure that you are seen as comfortable,, easy, and totally in control. Just like the 747 captain you never seem to panic and nothing ever catches you unaware.

I remember when I started my career in audit, I always loved working for managers who had the air of being 'totally in control'. They never appeared to be stressed by the deadlines, budgets and targets that dominated the industry. Of course, they always delivered on time, and always gave the impression that they were always one step ahead. As a trainee, these 'cool' managers appeared to be mentors – aspirational and inspirational leaders. I always thought of them as managers who saw the big picture and never allowed themselves to get stressed or distracted by the minor stuff. In times of high pressure or uncertainty, the last thing that people need is a manager who reacts like everyone else – in a panic. When your plane hits a bit of turbulence, you need a captain who is calm, measured and totally in control. He turns off the auto pilot, switches to hands-on flying and minimises fusilage stress, crew concerns and passenger discomfort.

To borrow a football analogy (as a football fanatic, I often look to the beautiful game to illustrate key points), the great players always have the ability to make time stand still when they have the ball. They are never flustered and always see moves a couple steps ahead of everyone else on the pitch. Time seems to freeze when they take control and as a result, their team-mates automatically relax and play with more confidence.

A classic example of just such a leader is Richard Branson. He obviously spends a lot of his time doing paperwork, researching, hiring, firing, chairing meetings and a whole lot of other administrative duties required of the CEO of a diverse, global group. However, we always see him taking time out to relax - flying in hot air balloons, attending sporting events and generally just having a good time. He sends a message to his employees, his clients, his stakeholders and most important of all to his competitors that he's so ahead of the game and ahead of them he can afford time out to chill. It's a clever strategy. Employees and clients are imbued with confidence and trust, rivals are rattled and unsettled – what is he doing right that we're doing so wrong when he can afford to take all that time off and we're working an 8-day week?

There aren't a lot of Richard Bransons around but there are plenty of successful smaller-scale CEOs who are confident enough in their own abilities and in their managers and staff that they can take the afternoon off to play a round of golf. It's a stress-reliever and has the added bonus of offering invaluable networking opportunities. So another lesson to learn is that what appears to be leisurely and lazy can also be an important part of the job. Many a deal is closed before the 19th hole!

Obviously for them to do this they need to be very good at their job in the first place and if you aspire to be like them you must first hone your skills and know that you are completely on top of your duties and responsibilities. The secret is to constantly and consistently deliver and even over-deliver, despite your air of never being stressed.

There are a few rules to remember:

- never give the impression that you've lost control
- never panic
- always meet your deadlines
- delegate effectively
- always look for ways to ease your workload and ways to speed things up

And work on that tan!

