



Leading In Crisis: Turn Fear Into Adrenaline

In the elite forces of the military, there is no room for paralysis—the forces move forward regardless of the unknown. We must do the same in business.

By **Damian McKinney**

Unless you are an essential business, you have been forced into some version of paralysis coupled with genuine fear. To understand human behavior around fear, it is important to recognize that it is not just the risks that create fear but also the unknown: When will this be over? How will I ensure my employees are safe? How can I maintain customer engagement and keep my business afloat?

Employees are in danger of slowing down as fear sets in and leads to inaction. In times of crisis, humans resort to creature comforts. Our homes become our caves of respite from the chaos of the world. While tempting, there is an inherent danger of a long-term work slowdown. As business leaders, this is a complicated dance of lending support in the face of fear, maintaining momentum, and inspiring employees to create and envision a future. Ultimately though, the C-suite sets the pace, and there is no way to win any race without keeping a steady one.

The key is to turn the heightened sense of fear into adrenaline. A hormone secreted especially in conditions of stress, adrenaline increases rates of blood circulation, breathing and carbohydrate metabolism and prepares muscles for exertion. Studies show that habits take 20 days to set in. Habits of inertia resulting from fear must be transformed by adrenaline into preparing our teams for the exertion needed to survive long-term business challenges.

Fighting the (Invisible) Enemy

As a CEO with a former life as a Royal Marines Commando, I often draw from military experience to address challenging business situations. There is a reason the national reserves and military are deployed in times of humanitarian crisis. In the elite forces of the military all ranks are taught to “expect the unexpected.” There is no room for paralysis, the forces move forward regardless of the unknown. Fear is relegated to the background as the mission unites everyone in motion.

When the enemy starts shooting, the human instinct is to lie down. In wartime soldiers must resist this urge. Thanks to a biological rush of adrenaline, excellent training and leadership, they are able to do the unthinkable: get up and fight. Right now, the entire global workforce are those soldiers on the front lines fighting an invisible enemy. Like the generals who inspire their troops to get up and fight, it is our job as business leaders to channel their fear from paralysis into an adrenaline-fueled will to fight. To that end, we should draw on the following tactics used by military and business alike.

- **Unify behind mission.** We are not accustomed to operating in such uncertain and potentially dangerous conditions. The current state of the pandemic coupled with the threat of a second wave that “may be worse than the first” has everyone questioning how long we need to remain quarantined and if we can survive a second lockdown following reopening. Businesses can support their employees and create opportunities for teams to unify and work toward common goals. An environment of strategic planning and innovation replaces stagnation and paralysis with productivity and hope. Long-term projects that require space and thought can thrive in this environment. This not only serves long-term business goals, but it reminds people that they are not alone. As a leader, you can’t take away your employees’ fear of getting sick, but you can comfort and deepen your loyalty to each other by reassuring them that they are a critical part of a dynamic organization that will support them during times of crisis.

- **Create purpose.** Knowing that we are all in this together is reassuring and motivating. Furthering that connection through clarity of purpose assures each employee that they are a critical part of a dynamic organization that comes together in times of crisis, more than ever. A longtime client, global beverage leader Diageo, has turned Covid-19 into an opportunity to give back. They have committed to producing 8 million bottles of hand sanitizer to frontline healthcare workers. By converting what they do best, with alignment behind meaningful production, the organization is creating purpose. This connection to a greater good creates the adrenaline needed to push through dark times.

- **Understand and communicate inherent risks.** By reorganizing responsibilities to take high-risk tasks away from vulnerable employees, organizations can demonstrate strategy to managing risk. The result is employee confidence in safety and the process behind it. The catastrophizing of the unknown is replaced with solid communication that demonstrates strategy. Creating a Covid response team that develops, maintains and communicates protocols helps turn fear into adrenaline. Rumors travel fast and fear is contagious. As such, this team should communicate daily both to share information and hear concerns. This also allows teams to move on from Covid anxiety and turn to the tasks at hand.

- **Empower entrepreneurial spirit.** Recognizing that this is not business as usual, leaders must rethink teams and functions. They must help the entire organization to adapt according to dynamic situations. By empowering their teams to innovate and create, leaders make them partners in establishing the new vision.

- **Visualize success.** Commandos training to parachute out of a plane are not just handed parachutes and expected to succeed. They are provided thorough training and inspirational insights about the values and rewards of their efforts. This detailed and calculated approach turns their justified terror into a critical and valuable mission. They become more confident as they learn each step and visualize success. As we ask employees around the globe to do the impossible, we must help them envision the

outcome. Working across multiple horizons, knowing what success looks like at every step, converts fear into objectives and attainable milestones.

How your organization responds to Covid-19 will solidify, enhance or destroy loyalty. Ideally, in the months and years ahead, employees will remain confident and succeed under new operating conditions. As some might say, “never waste a good crisis.” While navigating with compassion, intent and courage, the crisis is an opportunity to realign mission, create purpose, empower your organization's insurgents and build loyalty all with the ultimate goal of keeping and growing market share.

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