

Leading in Tough Times (Lessons from a Hurricane)

Description

Deciding what to write in this space every week can be a challenge. Itâ??s not for lack of ideas. In fact, itâ??s the opposite: There are too many to choose from. This time choosing a topic was a no-brainer.

Hurricane Sally hit Pensacola hard. We are feeling our way through the aftermath right now and will be for a while. I try to look for insights and lessons in every situation. When an unexpected disaster strikes, we get to experience and observe leadership under stress.

For sure this hurricane was unexpected. It was predicted to hit as a Category 1. However, just before landfall, it strengthened to a strong Category 2. Even though we are hurricane veterans and generally know what to do, this one caught us off guard. For the most part, there was no evacuation.

As two feet of rain drenched Pensacola, massive flooding took place. On Wednesday morning, we woke up to our new â??hurricane-proofâ?• Three-Mile Bridge severely damaged. Trees were down. Barges were stuck in peopleâ??s yards. It was a catastrophic scene.

Lots of people are saying, â??How much more can we take?â?• Yes, we lived through Ivan, and by most accounts, that was considered more severe. But this time weâ??re also in the middle of a pandemic that is presenting all sorts of challenges: medical, financial, emotional, etc. It is a lot to handle. But we can and will get through it. We *are* getting through it.

What I see all around me is the â??Pensacola Strongâ?• slogan being brought to life. When you choose this kind of slogan, you have to make it real. Within hours of daybreak, neighbors were checking on neighbors. Chainsaws roared to life as people worked to free people from blocked-in homes. Local businesses geared up to supply fresh water as a â??boil waterâ?• notice was put in place.

We talk a lot about the value of authenticity in leadership. Well, what I saw happening around me after the hurricane is a great example of authenticity in action. It got me thinking about other lessons from the hurricane that also apply to leaders who are helping people navigate tough times in a business setting:

A Few Insights for Leading in Tough Times

1. Leverage the sense of connection and community. If there is a â??silver liningâ?• in tough times, this is probably it. When people are in the mood to pull together, as we saw in Pensacola right after the hurricane hit, we need to give them common goals to work toward. Put that energy to good use to move forward and create positive change.

Itâ??s great how in a crisis people who donâ??t normally pull together *do* pull together. Tragedies bring out this primal need in us to work as a group. We realize we need each other, and that brings out the best in us. People donâ??t worry so much about what political party youâ??re in. All that stuff goes away, even in times when there is a lot of divisiveness.

Also, with the power out, people have spent more time outside, getting to know neighbors, helping each other, and doing things they donâ??t normally do. Neighbors become more than someone who lives nearby. They become fellow human beings, and thereâ??s a sense that everyone is in this together.

As we recover, how can we not lose that better sense of neighborhood? How can we keep that better sense of collaboration and cooperation? Letâ??s all think about that as we move forward and remember that we are better together and that we really do need each other.

2. Tell people the truth. Donâ??t sugarcoat or minimize. In a community you might hear, â??We have a major bridge out, and this is what you can expect,â?• or, â??This is how long the power may be out.â?• In a business it might be, â??We may have to furlough some people after the next quarter. Here is what you can expect.â?•

Thereâ??s a real art to communicating in a crisis, and transparency is a big piece of it. In fact, please be on the lookout for next weekâ??s Busy Leaderâ??s Podcast featuring Mark Clement, who will talk about how to effectively communicate during hard times. (Also, check back here next week to read a column on what he had to say.)

3. Understand this is going to impact people for a while. Any community that goes through a hurricane knows that the power might be back on and the water may have receded, but the trauma will impact them long term. In business and in every area of life, trauma upends our usual way of coping. The old methods donâ??t work anymore. As leaders, we need to be aware of this. For some people, their lives will change forever.

In times like these, small business owners, especially, are deeply impacted. If there is ever a time to support local businesses, itâ??s now. Local businesses were already reeling from COVID-19 when Hurricane Sally came through. Itâ??s like theyâ??re in a boxing ring and keep getting punched, and it doesnâ??t take much to tip them over. Many small biz people are absolutely traumatized right now.

Letâ??s say I run a nail salon. All my equipment is ruined because of the flood, and itâ??s going to be hard to get new equipment because of COVID shortages. Will my insurance cover anything? And if it does, what will it cover? These are the kinds of incredibly tough issues small businesses are facing. They need their community now more than ever**.**

4. Ask employees what they need. Take a quick survey. Depending on their situation, everyone has different challenges. Some may need a different place to work if power is out at home. Some may need

flex time to work around family issues. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Donâ??t assume. Ask**.**

5. Know that optimism plays an important role in rebuilding. Back at the start of the pandemic, I wrote a column for Strong Towns on what Churchill taught us about enduring hard times. During WWII, he truly made the British people believe they could endure the nearly unendurable. Thatâ??s what real optimism is. Itâ??s realism mixed with hope. Itâ??s telling people the tough truth while at the same time helping them see that they *do* have the strength to persevere and come out stronger on the other side.

Finally, find ways to practice gratitude in hard times. Fred Rogers famously quoted his mother as saying that when disaster strikes to â??look for the helpers.â?• In times of trouble, we become more grateful for the helpers we see all around us. Take the time to say thank-you and to *feel* thankful. Itâ??s the village, the tribe, that gets us through.

Photo Credit: Sam Perry

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