Eye of the Hurricane

I was lying on my back. Standing around me were four people who, only two weeks before, had been teaching a class on appropriate emergency response in jujitsu.

The fact that I was flat on my back on the ground was not, in one sense, unusual. A friend of mine was taking his black belt exam and I had volunteered to let him demonstrate his throws on me. Things went slightly off the rails when he threw me, lost his balance, and ended up kicking me in the head.

The “thwock!” echoed through the gym.

One of the instructors was supposed to take charge. They stared down at me. I stared up at them. Eventually, I said, “Someone get me an ice pack.”

One of the men jumped slightly, turned, and ran out of the room. A moment later, he ran back in with one of those first aid kid chemical cold packs in his right hand.

“It’s not cold,” he yelled.

“You have to squeeze it,” came a voice from somewhere in the room.

In case you were ever curious, yes, it is possible to squeeze one of those cold packs too hard.

For such a small cold pack, the contents covered a remarkably large area.

I looked at my now soaking gi. I got to my feet.

“I’m fine now. Please don’t help me any more.”

Fortunately, in this situation, there was no permanent harm done and the fact that several people froze at the moment of crisis was merely embarrassing. My gi wasn’t even stained.

Unfortunately, many businesses are not so lucky. Even more unfortunately, it’s not the actual disasters that freeze them: handling the rare fire or power failure is barely a blip in the proverbial routine. Rather, the “disasters” that throw everything off balance and freeze decision making in its tracks are those that could have been anticipated or for which management thought that they had prepared.

Despite all their training, when the accident occurred, the four jujitsu instructors metaphorically lost their balance by focusing on the image of how bad it could be. That prevented them from acting immediately to determine how bad it actually was.

At Lacunae Software, the ship date was two days off when QA found a major bug in the software. Rather than stop, investigate the severity, and determine an appropriate course of action, the CEO announced that delaying the ship would clearly doom the company. He castigated QA for disloyalty and ordered the product to ship on schedule. Customers were not happy, costing the company more than the delay would have. Acting out of fear of how bad it could have been made the situation worse.

When things are going well and something suddenly goes wrong, it can be very easy to focus on all the potential negatives. That doesn't help. Successful companies have the habit of focusing on what can go right. Developing that mindset takes practice:

- Take a deep breathe and recognize that you have more time than you think. This is quite probably the hardest step.
- Remind yourself of the vision for your product and company (you do have a vision, right?).
- Review the steps necessary to manifest that vision. It can help to write them down as you go through them.
- List the things that can go right to move you forward from where you are. Be realistic, but also optimistic.
- Any time you find yourself focusing on what can go wrong, stop and shift back to what can go right. Evaluate the problems later.

Far too many companies never define their vision nor do they map out the path to success. The secret to success is staying on balance. The secret to not losing balance is knowing where you're going, reminding yourself how you'll get there, and focusing on the positive.

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