

## leadership instalments

### Strong Under Fire

By Dan Gaynor

**From time to time, all leaders are called to lead through rough waters.** The way you respond to challenge has a big impact on everyone you lead. Leaders are tested through adversity, not the smooth sailing of business as usual. In the movie, *We Were Soldiers*, Mel Gibson portrays the real life Col. Harold G Moore, a man who led his troops through one of the largest and deadliest battles of the early days of the Vietnam War. Vastly outnumbered, Moore and his men had unwittingly dropped into the middle of a large North Vietnamese base camp. While the end is not historically accurate, (Moore's troops did not fix bayonets and charge to victory) the character sketch of a leader holding his men together through crisis serves as a worthy illustration. Moore's strength under pressure kept his soldiers strong. A moment of panic or uncertainty at the wrong time from a leader, or leadership team, can spell disaster for everyone. When you remain strong others will as well.

Every leader faces storms – moments of truth when his or her measure is tested in a very public way. For the leadership team at the Calgary Herald, there were many such moments during an eight-month strike. Although there were about 150 journalists on strike, more than 500 people worked through many challenging days, crossing daily picket lines with sometimes large and threatening crowds pressing in. This was the reality for everyone who worked through the dispute. One evening an unruly mob of about 700, many of whom were bussed in from places far and wide, massed to try and stop delivery of the newspaper. Police advised everyone in the building to stay inside for their own safety.

The strong and confident example our leaders set kept everyone else confident and focused that night. Had we panicked I have no doubt the night would have turned out very badly. Leaders made an extra effort to be visible and strong as they closely and confidently directed our team. I was proud of the way our team took on that challenge one step at a time and prevailed. We got the newspaper through the picket lines very early the next morning. It was a little late, but we didn't miss a single day publishing in the eight months it took to put the dispute behind us. That evening proved to be a confidence builder for everyone.

At these moments there is nowhere to hide and no exit ramp. People are worried and sometimes fearful, and they look to their leaders to carry them through. From time to time we all find ourselves under this kind of spotlight, with what feels like the whole world watching. This is when we build or lose the

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confidence of our teams. Teams emerge from these experiences much stronger, or much weaker. The leader's example exerts a powerful influence. When you meet these tests they become periods of accelerated team building. Lose your cool, hesitate, or worse yet, turn on one another, and you will accelerate decline. This type of failure can be very public and is usually fatal to leadership. The teams involved encounter big setbacks that are difficult to recover from.

The best leaders are confident. Under pressure they are strong, focused and calm. They take these tests a moment at a time, their unshakeable values serving as the compasses that guide them through all storms. During these challenging times they channel their emotional energy into purposeful action and sharpened focus – into a constructive force that pulls people together and gets the job done.

Discussion Questions:

1. Recall a crisis you experienced. How did leaders respond and how did it affect the team?
2. Do you agree that it's important to lead from the front - to be visible - in crisis? Why?

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Dan Gaynor can be contacted at:  
403.880.1780