

NEVER SHOUT FIRE IN A CROWDED THEATER



Good outcomes depend on clear thinking. Cultivate mental balance to keep panic at bay.

The quintessential corporate cog is unflappable. She flits from call to call, flips files easily from in- to out-box, has every answer at her fingertips, even makes sure there's sugar in the coffee room. Lily Tomlin portrays such an achiever in *Nine To Five*, the 1980 satire about women coping in business.

Other stereotypes depicted in the movie are the sweet housewife who re-enters the work force and conquers the ever-malfunctioning copier (Jane Fonda); and the smarter-than-she-looks secretary who handles a lecherous boss (Dolly Parton). But calm and confident Lily is the linchpin of the office. Until...

A series of mishaps and coincidences convinces Lily's character that she has accidentally killed her boss. Suddenly, the buttoned-up worker imagines she'll go to prison if her crime is discovered. Eyes darting, scarf whirling behind her, she hijacks a body on a gurney and careens down hospital corridors. In short, she panics.

Lily's antics drew laughs. But in the past 18 months, we've seen that there's nothing funny when panic is set loose among the cubicles.

You know the drill. Business is soft; you're surrounded by the desks of colleagues who have been laid off, and the boss who used to emphasize long-term mission and fundamental values is in your face, demanding weekly updates on performance against financial goals. "I can't get anything done!" wailed one of Betsy's clients recently. "The company lost a couple of big accounts. Now, not only is my supervisor looking over my shoulder every minute; her boss is, too. I can't even breathe."

- What's the point?
- What good does compulsive oversight do?
- Can anyone really affect, or even effectively assess, an annual plan by trying to massage one week's numbers?
- And can anyone do his best work under the twitching eye of an anxious boss?

Panic is contagious. That's why an oft-quoted Supreme Court decision regarding the First Amendment admonishes that one must never shout "Fire!" in a crowded theater. Panic severely limits our ability to make good decisions. It stampedes our thinking, and

that of those around us, often compounding disaster with bad decisions that leave bodies lying in the aisles.

Full-on panic attacks in individuals manifest uncomfortable symptoms: chest pains, dizziness, shortness of breath, profuse sweating. The corporate equivalent may include cost reductions that hurt the heart of the culture, dizzying changes in direction to pursue quick income, short deadlines with short staffs, and profuse reports.

However well intentioned, all of this is ultimately counter-productive. Good outcomes depend on clear thinking, but nobody thinks clearly when they're panicked. Our thoughts seem to get louder and louder, spinning in a vortex with no way out.

We've all experienced moments of panic - even over something as simple as losing our car keys when we're late for work. We flail about, tossing papers aside in our frantic search, moving faster, going over the same ground three and four times as our desperation mounts.

How much good does it do to storm about the house screaming for the car keys? And how many times have those keys turned up only after you've calmed down and quieted your thinking until a picture of where you left the keys simply popped into your head?

As a matter of fact, there is scientific evidence that the ability to quiet one's thinking can ameliorate panic attacks. For example, "mindfulness," built on meditation, is a centerpiece of the program developed by the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Doctors there undertook a careful study of 23 people referred to the clinic for anxiety and panic attacks. Patients were assessed weekly while being trained in the clinic's "mindful" program, and for three months after that program ended. Results: anxiety and depression dropped "markedly" and stayed low, as did the frequency and severity of their panic attacks.

What magic did these patients learn? Simply: the ability to notice their thinking. To quiet down enough to gain perspective, to distinguish between an actual, immediate, physical threat and an escalation of insecure thoughts. In short: perspective pulls the plug on panic. We are able to stay calm through crises when we tap into the reserves of insight, common sense, and wisdom that are present in all of us.

A textbook example was the flight of Apollo 13 in 1970, intended to land the third team of Americans on the moon. On its way, 205,000 miles from home - and from rescue - an explosion ripped through the capsule, spewing most of the oxygen supply into the void. The next three days dramatically demonstrated the power of the human mind to find solutions under the most extreme conditions. The three astronauts trapped in the crippled craft hurtling through the loneliness of space and their earthbound colleagues improvised and innovated, finding solutions to the unexpected in a truly life-and-death crisis. Insight and creativity surfaced because of the team's training and their talent - and, most important, their leaders' sheer determination to keep panic at bay.

Everyday heroes accomplish more mundane achievements with the same resolve. Anyone can do it.

First, effective leaders cultivate mental balance by not taking things personally. When the going is good, they resist grandiose claims of credit. When times are tough, they waste little energy in blame and second-guessing. If it's not "all about me," if we don't feel the need to defend an image of ourselves, we stay open to fresh ideas - ours, and others'.

Second, effective leaders don't take things too seriously. Of course, business deals with serious matters; the money exchanged allows the people who earn it to take care of themselves and their families. But dwelling on the risks spawns fearful thoughts. No matter how grim a situation seems, a little levity can clear the mental registers and restore productive effort. Ronald Reagan's 1981 quip to the surgeon preparing to remove a would-be assassin's bullet from his chest - "I hope you're a Republican" - inspired calm confidence in the operating room, and in a shaken nation.

Another case in point: Super Bowl XXIII, 1989, in which the San Francisco 49ers found themselves behind late in the game, 92 yards from their end zone. The mood in the huddle was anxious. Star quarterback Joe Montana turned to a particularly keyed-up player and said, "Hey, isn't that John Candy sitting in the stands?" At that moment, other 49ers have reported, they knew that Montana would lead them to victory. The team beat the Cincinnati Bengals, 20-16, thanks to a precision drive culminating in a touchdown pass from Montana to John Taylor with 34 seconds left to play.

That championship points to the ultimate way to lead through panicky times: unshakable presence of mind. As Montana brought his team near to the goal line, he found himself thinking about what it all meant - the biggest game of year; millions of people watching; time running down; just three more chances to try to make a touchdown, to win football's greatest prize or to spend the off-season mulling over what went wrong. All those thoughts threatened to push Montana out of "the zone" as he came up to the line of scrimmage. So he deliberately threw the ball away. His action wasted a down, a precious chance to score. But it allowed Montana to quell his turbulent thoughts and to get back his feeling for the game. On the next play, Montana threw the quick pass that won the championship.

Anxiety is nothing neither more nor less than a thought habit. The leader who indulges it undercuts her power. As diarist Anais Nin wrote, "Anxiety ...makes others feel as you might when a drowning man holds on to you. You want to save him, but you know he will strangle you with his panic."

To avoid strangling your team, pay attention to your own state of mind - as indicated by your emotions and physical reactions. If you feel anxious or panicky, tread carefully; follow the rule taught to medical students: "first, do no harm." Warning signs include:

* You see possible outcomes in black-and-white, one extreme or another, complete dominance or utter ruin.

* You are absolutely convinced there is only one possible solution to a problem.

* You have completely lost your sense of humor.

What workers need and want from their leaders is resolve - a firm hand on the tiller that steers the corporate ship away from rocks, a steady eye holding course toward the far horizon. When the captain shows confidence that the ship will weather any storm, the collective thinking of the crew remains collaborative and productive.

In short, the leader's primary task is to foment clear thinking. Paraphrasing Rudyard Kipling, to lead in troubled times you must "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you." Above all, you must see that you are the thinker shaping your fate: "meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same."

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