

# HOW TO BE AT YOUR BEST WHEN THINGS ARE AT THEIR WORST

By Nick Craig

## Current Situation

We are currently operating in a world that looks very different from just 12 months ago. Many of us are involved in lay-offs, cutting production/services, selling in a buyer's market, closing offices, having to take care of the remaining scared employees, disappearing investments that were the intended escape from the loony bin, walking into work and not knowing if you're going to be the next one to go, etc., etc., etc. Even if none of these things are happening to you or around you personally, reading the paper these days requires a tough skin.

## Challenge

On the other hand, what better time than now to really lead? It's when it's easy to lose one's head that we most need to step up. It's obvious that many of the people we left in charge the past 10 years haven't really led. Inauthentic leaders have gotten us into this mess (Thain, Fuld, Madoff, Auto Exec's, etc.). It's going to take the authentic leaders to get us out.

Here is the fundamental question each of us has to answer to lead in these times:

- How do you stay calm when most of the external definitions of success are negative (profit, revenue, etc.) and none of the tools we use to "predict" the future work any longer?

The alternative has been to manage out of fear. Fear has become the common denominator impacting many corporate decision makers. In my dialogue with senior exec's, most have told me about draconian decisions being made above. Unfortunately, fear doesn't create leadership; at best it is the other side of the coin from arrogance. None of us fully know how things will turn out in the next couple of years. However, doing what everyone else is doing won't be your finest moment. As Warren Buffett said recently about his experience of the herd mentality, "When everyone is greedy, I am fearful. When everyone is fearful, I get greedy."

## What's Your Version of Resilience?

What we have discovered in our work is that each of us has the ability to be our best when things are at their worst. We have all been tested at key times in our life. The resilience we need now isn't something we are going to get from reading a book or from the latest PowerPoint presentation. Even if we had the time, taking someone else's approach isn't going to work fast enough or address the complex and unprecedented issues we are facing. On the other hand, what has helped us be resilient in the past is well developed and effective; if you look at your most challenging life experiences it may be fair to say that if you hadn't found your resilience, your life today would be very different. Much of what has made us who we are is the gold that, if mined from those past challenges, will allow us to lead when others are running for the door.

My most challenging experience happened about 10 years ago. At the time, I was a high flying consultant working for a very prestigious consulting firm. I was running a huge change effort, I had a beautiful wife, a daughter, a dog, etc. Three months later, I couldn't get out of bed. I literally slept for 3 months. I had been fired by my client, fired from my job, and fired by my wife. In the face of this, the current news and economic events don't seem that bad.

In reality, what happened 10 years ago was the best thing that could have happened. Today, I have a great home life and run a very successful organization. We deliver programs on authentic leadership at Wharton and several Fortune 50 companies.

Now, think about what your 2 or 3 challenging life experiences have been. These can be from your personal or professional life.

Once you have reviewed your experiences, you can now access your version of resilience. For me, my version of resilience that worked when it seemed that all had been lost went as follows:

- Take each day as it comes and don't worry about all of it at once. In small chunks it's always okay.
- Only work with clients with the highest integrity and values. Walk away from the money if you have any doubt.
- My colleagues need to be my best friends and closes confidants.

As you can see, my version of resilience probably isn't similar to yours. We have found from our research that there are common patterns and themes that different people leverage; each person's combination and how they relate to their approach is different, no two people have the same strategy, and reading someone else's list has little value.

Now it's your turn: As you look at these experiences, what were the key elements of your resiliency (actions you took that helped you deal with the challenges you faced)?

Now that you have your list, turn around and help those around you find theirs. Welcome to leading in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.