

Why deal calmly with a situation when you could instead fumble around until you've created a proper crisis? **JEREMY PALMER**, Chairman of MerchantCantos, ponders

How to dig a deeper hole

A CRISIS IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE, we are told – a turning point, an opportunity as well as a risk, a moment for innovation and creativity to spring to life, a chance to look at fresh ways of doing things and solve intractable problems that have arisen out of unthinking adherence to old practices – so let us not miss the moment. Let's make sure we don't miss an opportunity to turn an innocuous reputational molehill into an existential mountain, and transform and re-energize ourselves by climbing it. We need a plan.

FIRST MAKE SURE NOBODY FAILS TO NOTICE IT. We must avoid the risk that people might be lulled into a false sense of security by the thought that we, the leaders, are in control and on top of things. It would be such a waste if a potential crisis actually ran out of steam all by itself. What we need now is a masterly combination of random bad actions and carefully chosen bad words.

The best thing about random bad actions is

that they happen organically – all it takes is a combination of inertia and an uncoordinated response, which everyone knows is satisfyingly easy to achieve. Basically, do nothing and let everybody involved, and ideally lots of people who are not involved, respond to the situation in whatever way they see fit. Once the molehill has been identified, stand back with Olympian detachment as molecatchers, landscape gardeners, earth removers, gardening columnists, and bandwagon-loads of neighbors and passers-by all enjoy themselves with opinionated enthusiasm.

As to the carefully chosen words, all the hot air from the commentariat is an excellent source of oxygen to feed the fire, but at the same time it is always a good idea to have a little extra fuel ready for when the momentum of events seems to be slowing. Just in case people have missed the fast-growing molehill, a judicious "Crisis! What crisis?" deftly fed into a carefully chosen ear should be just enough to ensure it is brought to public attention.

The next phase requires real judgment and →



"It would be
such a waste
if a potential
crisis actually
ran out of steam
all by itself"

forethought. A short delay will ensure that benign neglect takes its course and that things will get visibly worse – then our next intervention. It has been asserted that confidence is what you have before you understand the problem. It will be axiomatic to the audience we care about, that if we display unshakable confidence in our ability to understand and deal with the situation, we are in fact incompetent and stupid. Now we are really on our way.

Note that real commitment is required here – any facts or judgment, any evidence of careful analysis of cause and effect, or genuine empathy, could seriously damage our chances of elevating the situation into a real crisis. So it is essential to restrict ourselves to something facile – “Everything is under control. I am completely confident that everything will be back to normal once we have finished rearranging the deckchairs” should suffice.

At this point, momentum should be building nicely. The molehill is now a decent-sized hillock and on it flames are starting to flicker around the funeral pyre of the Old Order. But we cannot afford to relax now. We need a lot more energy and fuel to build a really satisfying blaze of glory.

What we need now is a carefully timed one-two, a double whammy knock-out, after which we really can stand back and warm ourselves beside the conflagration. The two vital ingredients at this stage are blame avoidance and insouciance, ideally mixed with a dash of inappropriate humor.

Experienced practitioners will have their own preferred techniques and tropes, from the sarcastic aside to the journalist (“I am sure you are better equipped than I am to run this multinational corporation”) to the blatant *mea ex culpa* (“How am I possibly supposed to read the thoughts of all the thousands of minions under me?”).

At this point we should be able to stand back

and congratulate ourselves. The existential mountain of opportunity stands before us, the blazing bonfire on top standing as dramatic evidence that the Old Order yields to the New, and we could never be accused of wasting this crisis. Perhaps a

hilariously inappropriate quote from Mark Twain or Sun Tzu, or the latest airport-bought guide to secrets of leadership, just as the wailing dies away, and the *schadenfreude* of the commentariat is finally silenced by our brilliant plan.

Alternatively, we might discover the truth in the old warning against arrogance and complacency: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.”

HOW CONFUSING IT ALL IS. Maybe we should have remembered that *we* are, by default, part of the Old Order. A crisis is indeed a terrible thing to waste. The challenge for leadership is to approach it with alertness, humility, and responsiveness – the essential qualities to harness the energy it can release; but we must never forget that the very essence of a crisis is that it represents a transition, a pivot, a moment which divides two different states of reality. If we want to play a role after, as well as before, that moment we have to demonstrate our own understanding of the need for different behavior once we find ourselves on the other side of the divide.

And a sense of perspective always helps. As the great playwright and optimist Anton Chekhov said, “Any idiot can face a crisis – it’s day-to-day living that wears you out.” ♦

.....

JEREMY PALMER is Senior Adviser to Brunswick and Chairman of MerchantCantos, the firm’s creative agency. He has experienced at first hand several crises in his career, including the Salomon Brothers Treasury bond scandal in 1990, the bankruptcy of Barings in 1995, and the financial crisis of 2008. He also loses his car keys regularly.

ILLUSTRATIONS: KOTRYNA ZUKAUSKAITE

