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## **Leading in Crises - And Lessons From The Falls**

Recently I attended the *Summit On Leading In Crisis*, an excellent panel discussion moderated by Bill George, former Medtronic CEO and Harvard Professor of Management Practice; the panelists were John Donahue - Chair and CEO of eBay, David Gergen - CNN commentator and Director of Harvard's Center for Public Leadership, Anne Mulcahy - Chair and former CEO of Xerox, and Marilyn Carlson Nelson - Chair and former CEO of Carlson Companies. Here are some of my take-aways:

- Time is an important dimension of crisis leadership. Some crises require immediate action, and in those cases preparation and practice pay dividends; reactions to some crises need to be measured and thoughtful. A sudden crisis with a sense of urgency can be easier because it motivates action; we need to be wary of the "boiled frog phenomenon," when deep problems build up and people aren't concerned until it's too late.
- Ingrained values and a strong sense of purpose are assets and excellent preparation; people who are sure about what's most important can respond to crises more quickly and appropriately. A good question to ask when facing a crisis is "How do we respond here from our values?"
- People need things to do in a crisis; a leader's job is not necessarily to jump in and solve problems, but to engage others and help them be part of solutions. Multiple perspectives and a leader's ability to draw out different points of view are important.
- Two-way communication is critical. Keep listening, and pay attention to customers. Keep all stakeholders informed about what is being done to resolve a crisis, and look for opportunities to remind others of how actions are aligned with purpose and values. Leaders need to be direct and truthful in their communication, and assure others that they get it - that they understand a problem and its seriousness.

Panelists agreed that crises and adversity serve as the best crucibles for leadership, and that our current economic situation will test what America is all about - self-reliance, adaptability and innovation. They said that courage will be required to survive and thrive in this climate, including courage to invest in people and long-term innovation given Wall Street's short-term mind set, and that collaboration, civility and a high capacity for learning and adaptation will also be important.

You can hear a replay of the Summit on [Minnesota Public Radio](#).

For me the Summit's timing was interesting; I had just returned from Minnesota's Boundary Waters wilderness area where a friend and I experienced a different kind of crisis: almost losing our canoe and

getting flushed down the rapids of Basswood Falls. From reflecting on that experience, let me add these suggestions to those of the Summit's panelists:

- Pay attention, and know where you are. We almost failed the first test here, since in our exuberance fishing we momentarily lost track of how close we were to the falls. Once in white water, though, we kept our canoe pointed in the right direction so we didn't swamp.
- Stay focused and don't panic. As far as we were concerned, not escaping the falls wasn't an option; staying focused on what we had to do to get out of there was much better than imagining the alternative.
- Dig in and paddle like hell. Like the current challenges for some of our businesses, doing nothing, doing what we always have or over-analyzing won't help; we need to dig in, keep moving, try new things and if that doesn't work try something else.
- Encouragement helps. Our doctor friend watched this from his canoe and was already planning what medical attention might be required. He and his canoe-mate talked later about how helpless they felt; in fact they were very helpful shouting encouragement and expressing confidence that we would get out of our jam.

Another lesson from our Boundary Waters adventure was that such experiences can provide perspective and balance - part of what we aim for with [SeaChange Ventures](#).<sup>\*</sup> Time away doing something very different can help us keep whatever crises we're dealing with in perspective and offers insights that otherwise would escape us.

Here's wishing you the best with whatever crises you are contending with; I hope that these Summit take-aways and lessons from the Falls are useful.

This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Remember that in a fierce storm, only the tree with both deep roots and flexible branches survives unharmed.

*C. Michael Thompson*

Pray to God, but row to shore. \*\*

*Russian proverb*

\* Check out inTEgro's [SeaChange Ventures](#) and our special Puerto Villarta promotional trip Jan 23-30, 2010.

\*\* Visit inTEgro's [Quote Collection](#) for hundreds of quotations to use in your next presentations.

\*\*\* You can find the Summit panelists' books - [True North](#) and [7 Lessons For Leading In Crisis](#) (Bill George,) [How We Lead Matters](#) (Marilyn Nelson) and [Eyewitness To Power](#) (David Gergen) at inTEgro's on-line [Bookstore](#).

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