Leading Through Adversity

By Dr. John C. Maxwell

Had Chesly B. Sullenberger known that US Airways Flight 1549 would fly through a flock of geese and lose both engines, then he likely would have stayed out of the cockpit that day. After all, who in their right mind wants to pilot an engineless aircraft? Thankfully for the 155 passengers on board, however, the veteran airman was at the controls to safely crash-land the plane in the Hudson River.

Although he never would have volunteered for the adversity he faced in the skies above New York City, Sullenberger’s influence soared as a result of his leadership in the midst of harrowing circumstances. Before January 15th, Sullenberger was an accomplished, but anonymous pilot. Afterward, he was recognized as an American hero, drew a captive audience whenever he spoke, and was highly sought after by federal aviation officials for his safety recommendations.

Going through adversity, though not pleasant at the moment, opens the door to new levels of influence. By staying poised and keeping a positive attitude under pressure, leaders can pass through adversity having grown in stature more than they ever could have in comfortable times. In this article, I’d like to focus on the potential benefits that can be gained by triumphing over adverse conditions.

Overcoming Adversity Creates Resilience

A study in *Time* magazine in the 1980’s described the incredible resilience of a group of people who had lost their jobs on three occasions due to plant closings. Researchers expected them to be discouraged, but they were surprisingly optimistic. Their adversity had turned into advantage. Because they had already coped with job loss and found employment at least twice, they were better equipped to handle adversity than people who had always worked for the same company and found themselves unemployed for the first time.

Overcoming Adversity Develops Maturity

During more than four decades as a pilot, both with the Air Force commercial airlines, Chesly B. Sullenberger had to weather his share of storms and mechanical glitches. When questioned by Katie Couric about his heroic landing of US Airways Flight 1549, Sullenberger credited his past experiences for giving him the maturity to steer the plane. "One way of looking at this might be that, for 42 years, I've been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience: education and training. And on January 15 the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal."

As an African proverb says, "Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors." The bumps in the road may seem only to be nuisances, but they’re often the best instructors on the leadership journey. If we’re observant, the lessons learned during hard times can be mined at a later date for our advantage.

Overcoming Adversity Creates Greater Opportunities

Just about every successful entrepreneur I’ve met has numerous stories of setbacks that opened the door to greater opportunities. Consider these not-so-flattering moments from the lives of famous Americans.
• Early in his career, Walt Disney’s Laugh-O-Gram studio went broke, leaving the talented man out of work.
• Abraham Lincoln plummeted into financial ruin as a young shopkeeper.
• Milton Hershey failed dismally in his initial attempts to open a candy store.
• Henry Ford’s Detroit Automobile Company went bankrupt before reorganizing as Ford Motor Company.
• H.J. Heinz’s venture to sell horseradish flopped before his recipe for ketchup met with commercial success.

In the middle of adversity, it can be difficult to stave off feelings of hopelessness, but oftentimes a bright future waits on the other side of hardship. The mental strength acquired in dealing with misfortune can be an invaluable asset in pushing forward into new ventures.

Overcoming Adversity Wins Respect

Respect almost always is gained on difficult ground. In the words of Plutarch, “The measure of a man is the way he bears up under misfortune.” No one sees your courage in the sunshine. It takes difficulty and darkness to prove bravery. When others see your character and persistence during the rough stretches in leadership, they walk away with an enhanced opinion of you.

SUMMARY

The economic crunch creates adversity, and leaders feel its pain and pressure acutely. While no one hopes for adversity, it can actually serve to benefit a leader. By bearing in mind the potential upside of leading through difficulty, it can be easier to deal with our present troubles.