

## Strategic Leadership and Change in Crisis – 5 Principles

*“You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.”*

- Heraclitus, pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, circa 460 B.C.

Trafalgar, off the coast of Spain, 1805: Admiral Horatio Nelson realized that he had a major threat on his hands and those of his British naval fleet. He was heavily outnumbered (and out-resourced) by Napoleon’s French and Spanish fleet and faced two options. He could stick with the usual naval tactics of that time and keep his fleet in an opposing line to fire broadside at his enemy, (which is what most commanders would have done). Or, he could develop and execute a new strategy which involved risk and uncertainty but could also allow him to damage and incapacitate the relatively massive combined French and Spanish fleet in front of him.

After analyzing the situation, he decided to change tactics and embrace that risk by breaking his own columns into two and attack perpendicularly, simultaneously splitting the larger enemy lines into three parts, surprising their leadership, disorienting them, and ultimately allowing for the unexpected British victory. The defeat was overwhelming as the French-Spanish coalition lost two-thirds of their fleet, while Admiral Nelson lost none of his.

There was no precedence for this type of a strategic decision, implementation, or tactic, and there was no guarantee it would work. It was not in the naval battle plan books, military guidelines, nor was there a previous rehearsal. It was the result of a leader taking a fresh, holistic view, identifying a few critical challenges to be addressed, then taking swift, agile action. Then followed the leveraging of available resources to focus on and execute the new plan.

What can we learn and what does it mean for a strategy of today and tomorrow, particularly in a time of tremendous change and crisis?

We (humanity and the global community) currently stand in the middle of a historical inflexion point, which will affect megatrends and the way we live our lives going forward, both personally and professionally. We must have or strengthen the ability to recognize this and begin to think of new strategies and tactics for attacking the threats and challenges now facing us. It also forces us to ask difficult questions of ourselves as leaders, and sometimes, to embrace vulnerability when testing a theory but may not be entirely sure of the outcome.



## 5 Principles:

- 1) People, Teams, and Trust first:** No great or authentic military or business leader has ever won a battle or a war on their own. Regardless of how god-like or heroic he or she may have appeared, the truly great ones ensured the right people surrounded them and developed trust with them foremost. They chose people who were better than themselves at executing either the deliberate (previously planned) or the emergent (evolving new plan) strategy, or a hybrid of both. Build that trust by being authentic, serving, and taking care of your team members, and they will be there to execute your strategy in times of disruption, stress, and change.
- 2) Former strategies may no longer be effective:** Like Admiral Nelson in the historical story above, we must come to understand that what made ourselves, our teams, or our organizational performance successful before, may no longer be applicable or relevant. Leaders must have the courage to challenge assumptions and previous tactics. Team members must be willing to learn, adapt, and change with the context and the external environment. Together, they develop new emergent strategies based on the facts and information available.

- 3) **Context is everything:** This one follows directly after the second principle. Regardless of the best strategy, planning, and processes currently in place for the situation (which may have changed yesterday or a moment ago), we must understand that the blistering pace of a battle or a war demands us to realize that context is everything. The decisions we as leaders take must account for and reflect the current situation and environment.
- 4) **Analyze, synthesize, then decide and act with agility:** Taking the context and environment around us into consideration, strategic leaders objectively analyze the facts in front of them, by breaking the issues/facts up. Then they synthesize those facts by putting them all back together for an action-oriented solution. They then take focused (and adaptive) agile action to address the root causes, iterating as the situation demands. When one principal threat is neutralized (whether viral, physical, economic or otherwise), others may appear which need attention.
- 5) **Opportunity hidden in every crisis:** In the consulting world, there is a tool used called a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, where we evaluate each primary risk to formulate an actionable strategy. The best leaders understand that in the middle of risks, threats and crises, there also lie opportunities. One requires a vision and firm resolve to push through the obstacles in the way and to step back from the chaos to view the horizon. As the well-worn cliché states, spring always follows even the darkest winter.

*“In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity”*

- Sun Tzu, circa 500 BC (2,500 years ago)

Effective, authentic strategic leadership is not easy in times of crisis, heightened risk, and change, but it is possible. We must realize that now, more than ever, it is not only needed but required on a global scale. This is a must for ensuring future high performance in any area of life or field of work or service. Leaders who can navigate the rough, rapidly flowing waters we find ourselves in, as Admiral Nelson was able to do well over 200 years ago, will emerge as the new leaders of the future.