

LEADERSHIP Excellence



Warren Bennis

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Learn from a Big Fall

Set new and different priorities.



by Andrew Blum

IN BUSINESS, AS IN LIFE, there are *big falls*—and they change you.

We need look no further than *The Great Recession* for examples. The *trauma* is mostly behind us, but the *reality* is still upon us—as the effects linger.

On the *personal side*, one year ago I experienced my *own big fall*: While helicopter skiing in Alaska, I lost my footing and fell 500 feet down a steep slope. I suffered a severe tibia-fibia break, but was fortunate to have escaped more serious injury.

There are *parallels between leading a life and leading an organization*. So, here are *five learnings from my big fall* that could be *relevant to you and your team*:

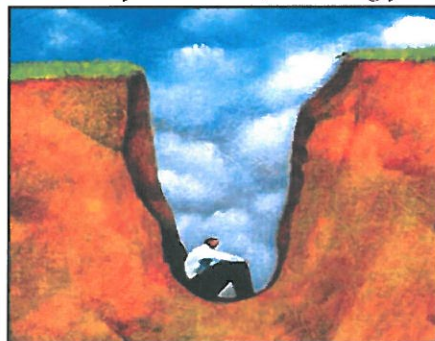
1. *Settle in to the reality of the circumstance*. After medevacs and surgeries, I faced at least six weeks of zero mobility and a long, painful recovery and physical therapy. As a classic *Type A*, I resisted this new reality. Of course, my resistance was futile—my leg was broken, and *denial did me no good*. Once I begrudgingly accepted the reality of the circumstance, remarkably I began to see myriad new opportunities. Thinking about these helped put my mind at ease, and provided new personal and professional inspirations.

Most leaders resist, deny, or become upset when they take a major hit to the stock price, downsize, or restructure. The natural, emotional reaction often triggers leaders to *pull in and focus on the trauma* at the exclusion of everything else—often causing productivity to halt and the negative effects of the disruptive event to amplify and persist. *The sooner you, as a leader, can empathetically and effectively move from reaction to acceptance, the sooner productivity, morale, and profitability will resume*.

2. *Adopt a highly responsible mindset*. It's easy to be a victim. The alternative—admitting *you played a role in the fall and its resulting disruption*—can be a bitter pill to swallow. In my case, I first questioned the judgment of my helicopter pilot guide in putting me on a tough mountain with particularly challenging conditions. I wondered if

the skis my guide had recommended were inappropriate for the conditions. Yet with reflection, I realized that *I was ultimately responsible*: I climbed into and out of the helicopter on that fateful day, I heeded my guide's ski recommendation, even though my experience told me to choose different skis, and *I was the one who lost my footing*. This responsible mindset *helped me feel much better*, not worse, because it served to remind me of the broader influence I can have when I act with thought and intent.

Accepting circumstance is crucial, but *truly owning it with a mindset of responsibility is key in recovery*. This attitude enables you to learn more from your falls than if you write these falls off as being entirely the result of external happenings. When you responsibly own what you've done, including your



accountability in falls, you're more likely to *responsibly own* what you'll do to address them moving forward—and this advances your organization. Since you as a leader *model mindset and behavior, the responsible mindset starts with you*.

3. *Question your beliefs and assumptions*. I'd always believed that I could never be happy or realize my potential without daily exercise. Activity gave me strength and identity. Yet with *ability to exercise off the table for months*, I had to revisit my belief. I then found it easier to reinvent how I viewed myself and transition from being a determined triathlete to being a reflective leader. Now, I think most people who know me well would say that my accident led to a reinvention through which I have become calmer, more centered, and consistently more compassionate.

Much of what we do in business is based on our fixed beliefs and assumptions. Crisis or failure can often high-

light flaws in our *beliefs and assumptions*, and give us the space to question them. The recent financial crisis stemmed from a deep *consensus reality* that huge companies like Lehman Brothers could not fail and disappear—a reality we now know to be false. How many of *your beliefs, assertions, and assumptions* that guide your actions are inaccurate? If you can question your *essential truths*, new possibilities arise. What belief do you hold about your organization, competition, or bench strength that are false?

4. *Set new and different priorities*. Instead of dwelling on the fear of being away from leading the firm I'd run for 12 years, I turned my focus and energy towards my children. It was special to be there in the morning when they left for school, and there in the afternoon when they returned home. My immobility gave us time for quiet connection. This *down time* also enabled me to develop my firm's leadership team—by giving people more space to step up and lead in my absence. My recovery became as much about the organization growing and advancing without me as it did about me taking the time to heal.

Business falls and failures can be repurposed as opportunities to streamline and strengthen your operation, or refine your direction for longer-term advantage or to make your leadership development a priority. *Learning to lead through crisis is essential for anyone with bold aspirations*. So when one strategic priority closes, be open to *growth opportunities in new and unexplored ground*.

5. *Don't let the fall entirely change you*. My accident changed my reality, helped me challenge my *sacred cows*, and led me to develop new priorities. But *I am still me*. Through all difficulty, I didn't abandon my commitment to *authenticity* or move away from relationships rooted in *the old me*. I found new common ground with people whom I'd known only from triathlons. And I didn't let my fall undermine my need to look beyond *what is to what could be*.

When you have a big fall (*major trauma*), the change will be stressful. Avoid *overcorrecting unintentionally*—going from one extreme to another. Be *thoughtful in deciding what must change and what must not*. Articulate *what is changing and what is holding constant (and why)*—so everyone has a shared clarity, appreciation for what remains, and fewer stress-inducing questions. Embrace the opportunities that emerge from crises. **LE**

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ACTION: Redirect to rise above big falls.