

Higher Ground

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Several times in the past few years I've been in the process of writing a column when an event has occurred that either made my original topic inappropriate or the event made such an impact on me that I abandoned my original thought and through the event found new meanings, learned new lessons, and wrote a completely new column. I was working on a column when the tsunami struck. The thousands of reports on the tragedy inspired me to write this column instead.

Television reports had a particularly deep impact on me. The first reported the tsunami's effects on wildlife in one area of Sri Lanka's biggest national park. Officials responsible for wildlife in that recently flooded region searched on the ground, by boat, and by air for bodies of animals. After several days of searching, they found few if any dead wildlife; rather, they found the animals safely in other areas of their habitat. Although initially surprised, experts realized that the animals had sensed danger and following their natural instincts had fled to higher—and safer—ground.

The second report concerned an island population who had fished along the coast for their livelihood for many decades. They had fled their homes before the tsunami arrived. Using dozens of years of expertise, they read the natural signs. They observed that the water receded much more quickly and to dramatically different levels than in usual circumstances. Oral tradition told them that in such situations the water would return to the coast at the same or greater speed and to typically higher levels. The report explained that while other island populations ran to the beaches to collect exposed fish and drowned, this island population—trusting their history and expertise—fled to higher ground. All of them were saved.

Work environments are never overturned by anything on the massive scale of the recent tsunami. However, workplaces are not always well-ordered or smooth running, and can certainly be affected by tragedy. We can draw some lessons for the workplace from the two stories above.

It is certainly rare for a cataclysmic workplace event to occur in the workplace; however, more and more serious events *are* occurring in workplaces today. While many events

cannot be easily anticipated—other than through assessing the impact of the law of averages (staff illness, the economy, etc.)—many serious, wrenching events can be dealt with and even planned for—by seeking and moving to higher ground.

How do we recognize a cataclysmic, or “higher-ground,” event? First we have to define terms. *Cataclysmic* is defined as “a momentous and violent event marked by overwhelming upheaval and demolition” and “an event that brings great changes.”¹ From these two definitions it's clear that facts and perspective are everything:

- An event of magnitude might have a major impact in one area of the workplace but not another, or on one staff person and not another.
- An event of magnitude may affect all staff at first and then significantly fewer as the event progresses.
- What one person sees as cataclysmic, another might see as less serious, perhaps much less serious.
- An event in and of itself may not be cataclysmic, but the impact of the event may be significant.
- An event may not be cataclysmic, but, given how it is handled, may turn into an event of major import.
- An event may be cataclysmic but may be handled so well by management or staff that the impact is significantly minimized.

How do you plan for higher-ground events? Operational planning and strategic planning are clearly the most significant ways to ready an organization for catastrophic events. However, the lessons learned from recent news stories on the tsunami indicate a critical need for managers to hone and follow intuition, to listen to their instincts, and to read signs and work with traditions.

Why Follow Intuition and Instincts?

Although an obvious statement is that managers should not manage solely on intuition and instinct, a less obvious statement is that managers should rely more on their intuition and their instincts than they typically do. Current management literature provides data on intuitive and instinctive decision making based on past lessons, the accuracy rate of intuitive decision making, and information about aspects of disciplined

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instinctive decision making. The general consensus is that listening to intuition and instincts is effective. However, all too often, managers shy away from identifying management techniques of “using intuition,” as it is often associated with terms such as “gut feelings”; many feel that using intuition and “gut feelings” is similar to—at best—personal guessing.

Intuition, however, is having and using quick and ready insight and is defined as “immediate cognition and knowledge gained by intuition or history” as well as “the power or faculty of attaining to direct knowledge or cognition without evident rational thought and inference.”² The key element of the definition is “evident,” as intuition actually involves rational thought and inference, just not *readily apparent* rational thought and inference.

Intuition and instincts can be among the most powerful of personal management tools. Often taught in management courses through case method and simulation, managers bring to bear their experience, their education, and their lessons learned quickly and rationally as new situations have familiar elements, and they react—based on prior activities and experiences. Although these reactions may seem to stem from feelings, they are truly based on real experiences.

Reading Signs and Observing Traditions

Information to make decisions is gathered by managers in a wide variety of ways including scientifically and intuitively, as well as through reading signs or symbols, and knowing history and observing traditions. Managers need to know scientific methods and how to read and recognize signs and symbols to use them in running organizations. Many managers—based on their background, culture, or age, to name just a few elements—react specifically and consistently to some signs and symbols; however, many signs are universal and can be studied and learned. Although many signs and symbols aren’t the facts and issues themselves, signs and symbols can identify the state or status of facts and issues, as well as a direction or purpose of workplace concerns.

Reading signs and observing traditions to make management decisions involves careful study of the issues at hand, of similar issues, of the organization at hand, and of similar organizations with same or similar issues. Often managers read signs themselves and become familiar with traditions, while others use institutional folklore or knowledge from others to make decisions. Whatever the method or approach, and whether or not the approach is used to make decisions or to form the basis for application of management techniques to make decisions, reading signs, and knowledge of and observation of traditions are critical to successful management.

What Is the “Higher Ground?”

In the literal sense “higher ground” generally has (other than in a thunderstorm or wind storm) been the safest

place to be. Water, molten lava, and approaching armies aside, higher ground has always been the location to strive for, the best real estate, the most impressive vista. It also refers to a morally superior position. Higher ground in the workplace has been the better place to be. That is, managers—typically those who are both organized and effective managers and also good leaders—have sought to provide an environment where employees feel safe and feel free to take risks, are treated as fairly as possible and treat others fairly, are handled with great respect and treat others with respect and the workplace operates always by the letter of the law. A “higher ground” environment creates an ongoing sense of well-being rather than one where—situation by situation—things are only or strictly handled according to rules and guidelines or worse yet decisions are made and situations are handled with no guidelines or consistently at all.

What do we look for in organizations when deciding if it is time to move to higher ground? In the absence of specific instructions, managers should watch out and take action when the following occur:

- Changes in the atmosphere of the umbrella organization (calmer? too calm? suddenly chaotic?)
- Changes in the style and direction of upper level management (sudden unaccessibility? sudden micro-management?)
- Changes in the atmosphere of the library (negativity? uncertainty?)
- A change in the work rhythms of the organization (shifting deadlines? changing goals?)
- A change in the work rhythms of the library (staff no longer on target?)
- A shift in communication styles (no memos, fewer meetings)
- A shift in management styles (an “open door” management style closes)
- Inconsistency where consistency is the norm
- Consistency where inconsistency is the norm
- Shifts in work products
- Shifts in patrons: expectations, needs and demands

Managers as leaders identify issues and changes, intuit needs, and then—while choosing and implementing solutions—lead staff safely to higher ground, restoring sanity, following policies, confirming procedures, and calming influences. Even without the perfect decision or perfect answer to a problem, higher ground is always the best place to be.

References

1. “Cataclysmic,” Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, 2005. Accessed Feb. 14, 2005, www.mw.com/netdict.htm.
2. “Intuition,” Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, 2005. Accessed Feb. 10, 2005, www.mw.com/netdict.htm.