

This Is The Leadership World *(Do Not Be Afraid)*

By Dan Holden

This article for business leaders and consultants begins with an admonition that curiously shows up in all the world's religions: Do Not Be Afraid. Author and minister Frederick Beuchner summed it best when he wrote, "*Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid.*" I remembered this when a colleague asked me recently how I made sense of the mass shootings, which too frequently make the headlines. I answered, "This is Earth. Things like that happen here." The call to "Not Be Afraid" is offered, repeatedly, to a world where it seems more than reasonable to be very afraid.

Sometimes, there is real danger it alerts us to. Other times, it is uncertainty and the risk that accompanies new behavior and strategies. The call to Not Be Afraid could also awaken us to another real possibility: many of us spend more time reacting in fear than we realize. Leadership research bears this out, but more on this later.

ORGANIZATIONS TODAY: BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE THINGS HAPPEN HERE.

Several years ago I read Jon Krakauer's book, *Into Thin Air*, a detailed account of a climbing expedition gone horribly wrong on Mount Everest. Several of the world's elite climbers (and others) died in the same storm on the same night. I remember how strange it was to read about these bright, accomplished professionals who lost awareness of foundational safety procedures. With each successive error in judgment they came closer to what would become their own death. Real danger. But I also remembered something more troubling. The account of this incident seemed to be oddly familiar to me. I had experienced similar conditions myself. Not on mountaintops but in organizations, where uncertainty prevails and where beautiful and terrible things routinely happen.

CONDITIONS FAVORING TERRIBLE THINGS IN ORGANIZATIONS

In Krakauer's book elite climbers made increasingly foolish decisions under dangerous and quickly deteriorating conditions. The conditions included: Too much time spent at dangerous (life threatening) altitude; diminishing physical stamina; limited oxygen that effected brain functioning and decision making; poor food intake and reduced ability to metabolize food for energy; wounds or injuries that could not heal given the above conditions. Amazingly, none of the decisions these professional climbers made seemed crazy or improper to them at the time. How present are you and I to what drives the small, seemingly rational decisions we make each day?

In organizations the results may not always be as dramatic and fatal, but they often qualify as terrible. It is tempting to think of terrible things in business as primarily including plant closings, layoffs, operational safety incidents, financial pillaging, wrongful termination cases and unforeseen global financial shifts that impact all of us. These can certainly be catastrophic. Leadership behavior that happens on a daily basis can be just as terrible even though it may be subtler and easier to overlook.

Leaders today face unprecedented daily demands on their energy and resources. The pace of change, escalating complexities and uncertainties, rapidly changing consumer and workforce dynamics, and information overload all

make the two-fold business of continuously delivering high quality products and services while continuously innovating in a volatile market an exceedingly high standard to reach.

When we are under duress—and without much awareness—it is as if we put on a pair of glasses that distort reality. Actions that are terrible and threatening look normal and necessary. Behavior that is foolish and destructive looks proactive and wise! If you wonder how you and other wise people can at times act so foolishly it may be because conditions have changed without your knowing it. And, of course, you may think you're invincible. Or should be.

TOO MUCH TIME SPENT AT (HARSH) ALTITUDE WHERE LIFE-SUPPORTING CONDITIONS DO NOT EXIST...FOR LONG.

In many organizations the daily routine looks like this: meeting after meeting after meeting. When surveyed about the relevance of their meetings, most agree that 70% of the time is largely wasted but no one wants to miss out on the splinter of time that is useful. Often, there is a badge of courage for those who deny being unusually worn out by the demands placed upon their important time by important others. Meetings are often one directional, with information flowing from the front of the room while others duck for cover and hope they are not called on, or don't feel invited to show up by the leader who is the expert in everything.

To either make oneself unavailable or to suggest a more relevant shift in content

and agenda are considered heretical acts. Countless time spent in a defensive, alert posture takes a toll. We require time for recovery and replenishment but renewal time is exactly what we don't have or take. Neither did our climbers.

DIMINISHED PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL STAMINA.

In many organizations taking lunch, going for business walks, leisurely strolling outside for working breaks are considered signs of weakness. You're not on board. Your commitment to the team is questionable. Just keep working. But long hours, the expectations you are always on call, that weekends or vacations are just conveniences to assuage outside regulators are the prevailing, albeit unexamined, assumptions. Consider the amount of time needed to relax and you will glimpse how something great—work and performance pressure—have laid siege around your life and spirit.

SURVIVAL FEAR AND OXYGEN DEPRIVATION.

When we are under stress or threatened in some way our breathing changes. It becomes shallower; we take in less oxygen. Our brains don't work as well as they do with ample oxygen. Sadly, the consistent message our brain sends under conditions like this is: *"Everything is OK."* But everything is not OK. There is troubling research that suggests upwards of 65-70% of leaders operate from such a stance of fear. More disturbing is the reality that so many deny this is so. Don't you?

We have already joined our climbing colleagues on a slippery slope when we lose sight of the fact we can no longer believe what our head tells us is true. Perhaps it's the face of fear that makes it difficult to acknowledge. If it were to show up as knees buckling, hands wringing, sweat pouring from the forehead while a look of panic swept across our eyes it would be reasonably easy to acknowledge. It's typically much more subtle.

Observing how I allow fear to influence my behavior, here are things to look for in yourself and others.

HOW TO KNOW YOU'RE OPERATING FROM A STANCE OF FEAR.

You—

- Delegate tasks to the same people because you know they will deliver. The possibility of an error is unacceptable.
- Keep your handle on other tasks, too, coming in at the end to offer your brilliant critique. It's up to you alone, after all, to insure high quality outcomes.
- Over commit yourself and others because you know no one does it better than you and your team.
- Feel on top of the world when you've achieved desired outcomes and devastated when you don't.
- Spend time quietly or not so quietly being bitter, castigating others for their stupidity and foolishness, proud that you are not at all like them.

- Feel best when others know how smart you are, when you speak fast, cover a lot of ground quickly, and leave others lagging behind or confused. “They don’t have what it takes,” you think to yourself.
- Give perfectly logical explanations for why you did or didn’t do things. They make perfect sense and usually end the conversation you are in. Often, however, they are not completely accurate. You unknowingly leave out matters of the heart and emotion, with their concomitant vulnerability and courage.
- Pride yourself on not getting drawn into conversations you deem too dramatic and emotional. Your own arrogance escapes your awareness along with the myriad ways it creates the drama you then pretend to rise above.

Keep seeking approval and you will be chained.
(Lao Tzu)

- Dismiss, discredit and deny (rationally, of course) points of view and people that upset you. You seek a return to comfort rather than truth.
- See yourself as a student of life, connected to important things and always learning. You overlook the reality that you cannot recall the last time your being was rocked to the core by new learning.
- Find it hard to acknowledge any glimpse of the current circumstances that, to you,

reflects anything less than positive about you. You distract yourself and your organization with other things while simultaneously lamenting how hard it is for others to stay focused and drive results.

A close friend asked me once whether I could feel my heartbeat. Secretly, I was embarrassed to find I could not. I didn’t confess to my embarrassment; rather, I said sarcastically, “What does that have to do with anything?”

He said, “It’s very close to you. If you can miss something that close, what else might you be missing?” I hated the question and the truth it revealed. Over the course of 18 months I found my heartbeat and, with it, began to pay attention to the more subtle aspects of behavior—my own and others’.

Leaders often have no awareness of their fear, denying it altogether. Our elite climbers on Everest ignored or didn’t recognize many instances where they violated their own code of climbing behavior and safety protocols.

The secret to building greater awareness, and with it wiser, more responsive strategies, is to look closely at the moment you are in. Now. It’s the last place we think to look, especially when it upsets us to do so.

CONDITIONS FAVORING BEAUTIFUL THINGS

Why change? This is a valid question posed to me by virtually all of my executive clients at some point. All of them are successful by any standard you might use. All are smart, savvy, and highly skilled. And all are people who secretly long for something more intrinsically satisfying that would bring not just more achievement and reward but greater fulfillment and meaning. Many miss or are embarrassed by this deeper yearning.

Mary Oliver (in her poem, *Raven with Crows*) invites us to live from this essential place of yearning or presence, calling it an advertisement for the “...*More than ordinary life, for the remembrance of the gorgeous, the powerful and the improbable*”. In the quiet moments of the day you might learn to track a similar remembrance in yourself. I found it on the other side of fear, next to my heartbeat, and knew immediately I had been hungry for its company for a long time.

THREE WAYS TO LEAD IN A MORE THAN ORDINARY WAY

The great German poet, Rainier Maria Rilke, compares this essential presence to an enemy lying outside the walls of our fortified lives:

All of you undisturbed cities, haven't you ever longed for the enemy? I'd like to see you besieged by him for ten endless and ground shaking years until you were desperate and mad with suffering. Finally, you'd feel his weight.

...He lies outside the walls like the countryside.

He knows very well how to endure longer than those he comes to visit.

Climb up on your roofs and look out: his camp is there. His morale will not falter

His number will not decrease, he will not weaken.

He sends no one into the city to threaten or promise and no one to negotiate.

He is the one who breaks down the walls and when he works, he works in silence.

((Rainier Maria Rilke, 1919))

This quiet and solemn poem, written in the ruins of WWI, asks a penetrating question. *Haven't you ever longed for the enemy?*

I have lived through times when I felt that my work, my business and all the effort I put in to building and sustaining it had consumed my life. There simply was nothing left to give. Empty, exhausted and unfulfilled, I would have argued that my work had laid siege to my life and spirit. Rilke reverses this! He speaks to the ruins of a civilization and seems to imply there is a superior force still out there laying siege. It is not here to destroy what is already in ruins. It is here to restore.

1. CULTIVATE PRESENCE—IT IS YOUR ORIGINAL ANCHOR AND BRAND

There is an underlying spiritual presence within, beneath and around us that Rilke calls us to consider. It is the truest part of you and me. Perhaps standing in the ruins of our life helps prepare us to be ready to see it. It need not be God or something others have identified. It is best

understood to be the essential aspect of yourself. That part of you that is larger than, and holds, all other aspects.

The *more than ordinary life* is what the most effective leaders learn to presence and embody. It captures how I want most to live. Find it by quieting yourself, little by little each day, and tracking your heart beat. Essential presence is your original anchor and brand—the consistent and unmistakable impact you leave. It is a calm interior place in the midst of an endless storm. Find it resting and available on the other side of your fear.

2. RELEASE THE GIFTEDNESS IN OTHERS.

One of the consistent themes I've seen in organizations is weak or non-existent bench strength. People are not developed or mentored. In place of conscious development, a sink-or-swim, Darwinian approach serves as the default way to build the next generation of leaders. The best leaders I have known have an eye for talent. In fact, they are always on the lookout for top talent, those special players who combine intellectual prowess with a skill set and drive that speaks to the current and future needs of the business. It lies latent in many of those closest to us, not far from our own heartbeat. Seeing and releasing talent requires that we apprehend the invisible.

Things are seldom as they appear. Our best talent for the future often comes dressed up in hard to recognize costumes. It looks different than we do. An 800-

year-old Sufi poem (*Stop Calling Me A Pregnant Woman*) tells a story of a young man, Hafiz, who would one day become a world-renowned Muslim mystic and scholar. His teacher, Attar, began to challenge him by calling out, "*Hafiz, how did you become a pregnant woman?*" An odd way for two Muslim men to greet! When, after many months of embarrassment, Hafiz finally demanded that his teacher stop, Attar simply said, "*...The whole world is germinating in your belly. One day beautiful words will flow from your lips and be cradled against the hearts of thousands of people.*" One of these hearts is my own.

Here are sample indicators that can help you spot those nearby whose greatness currently germinates inside them.

- They demonstrate prolonged periods of frustration, agitation, boredom, or restlessness.
- They seldom fit in and see no reason to do so.
- They may fail to live up to or pass the standards you have set for them; they are very busy doing other things.
- They are quietly attracted to personal mastery and to those who are great masters themselves.
- They show no particular interest in calling attention to themselves; they are quietly or not so quietly caught up in doing what matters to them.

- The lenses through which they view their life, work and impact may strike you as particularly strange, i.e., they may appear to waste too much time on things that seem foolish to you.

- Their impact is unquestionably positive or more pronounced than most others.

- They seem to be easily distracted by small things, as if something within distracts them and guides them somewhere more important.

My son is one of these strange people. He spent countless hours with video games as a teenager, even while struggling through school. He mercilessly defeated me in video war games; my karate chops were no match for his machine guns, shoulder-fired missiles and grenade launchers. He was always a quiet, wise soul, who kept his own counsel. Today, he is a college graduate and an award winning video producer.

A Fortune 100 CEO client said something recently that captures this shift towards seeing the invisible greatness in others. A classic command and control executive, he invited a team to suggest ways of making the leadership culture more engaging and collaborative. They came back with a risky, vulnerable demonstration (no PowerPoint's) in which they mapped out a revision of a core business process. The revision would build on the experience of the executives (at the front end, not back end) but engage those

closest to the customers in critical decision-making intersections. It was a powerful demonstration, a complete reversal of the current process that implicitly challenged the role of leaders themselves.

The CEO, after a long silence, finally spoke: *"All these years I thought my business knowledge and market expertise was my leadership. After seeing this awesome work you've done, I realize this wasn't leadership at all. I need to release others to do the kind of work I've just experienced here. That's leadership."*

You and I are here to be the Attar for others, to see and call out the latent gifts in them. Our organizations and the world await our effort!

3. DEEPEN AND EXPAND YOUR CONVERSATION WITH THE WHOLE SYSTEM, NOT JUST THE PARTS YOU KNOW.

Leadership is essentially an ongoing conversation. The most effective leaders make time to reflect on and improve the quality of this conversation. Strategy, execution, accountability, innovation and trust all hinge on the authenticity of it. The best leadership teams learn over time how to refine and deepen this conversation, with its own disciplines of study and practice. Three disciplines, in particular, require courage and vulnerability to learn and gain competence in. Each requires an uncomfortable (at

times) new relationship with NOW, the present. These three disciplines are:

- Get clear about purpose and vision: What outcomes do we want to create and why do these matter to us? How clear are we, at any given moment, about these outcomes? Are they important enough to us to cause us to reset any meeting, on any given day, where we seem to drift away towards something else? Are they clear enough that we could use them as a litmus test for decisions we are making now? How much of what we want serves only us, our egos? How much serves something greater than us? Our Everest climbers held visions that were, at best, mixed. Egos at times got in the line of sight of clear, courageous, purpose-driven action.

The critical difference between mere activity/busyness and real achievement is purposeful action. Action that moves us closer to outcomes that matter.

- Get clear about current reality: Where are we now relative to these desired outcomes. What inner fears, doubts and concerns are we holding that may impede our work together? What's currently working well or not so well? How much of this are we willing and able to speak about with each other without lapsing into denial, finger pointing and blaming? How much do we keep hidden?

Current reality, in complex, uncertain times, always contains an inner and outer component, the irrational as well as the rational. What we don't talk about controls us. Sometimes the most

important things are those closest to us—the hidden, unspoken assumptions driving our behavior. It may be their proximity that makes them most difficult to grasp. *"My mind is telling me things I know to be untrue."* The most powerful of these assumptions are those not held as assumptions at all. We hold them as the truth, never examining or questioning them. Our elite climbers left many important assumptions unexamined and unspoken.

- Speak authentically about the first two things: If leadership is a conversation then this is where the rubber meets the road. The challenge is to learn how to bring authentic presence into this conversation, bringing clarity to what and why something is important and accurately discerning what's actually happening in the current circumstance from what our imagination, insecurities and fears might otherwise have us believe.

Together, these three conversational practices—a.) Getting clear about what matters, i.e., purpose & vision; b.) Developing the courage and vulnerability to look fully at external/internal current reality, the rational components as well as the irrational; and c.) Authentically speaking about these issues with others constitute three disciplines that deepen and expand the system conversation. Fear that goes unexamined will keep you in a stagnant conversation that spins and spins but goes nowhere. Real dialogue requires vulnerability and courage but can transform an organization.

The Fortune 100 CEO (above) learned to poke fun at his own critical and controlling bent, even while he was actively learning about and experimenting with new, more collaborative skills. Because he was willing to publicly learn and practice new behaviors, others also followed suit. He led from his own development rather than allowing fear to limit his—and the organization’s—growth. Even though his fear is difficult for him to see and feel, he is wise enough to track its impact on others. That is enough of a doorway through which he can move towards a greater future.

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THE LEADER’S ROLE IN BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE THINGS

Beautiful and terrible things happen in the leadership landscape today. Consider this: The systems we live and work in are living organisms. They pre-date us. They were, in all likelihood, here before us. Perhaps they have chosen you and me explicitly for this time we now face. They remind us of our work: *Do Not Be Afraid*. Let’s become authors of beautiful things as yet unseen yet longed for. Let’s commit ourselves to finding ways to acknowledge and then minimize the terrible things we are each capable of.

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