



Seasoned! Lessons for and from Leaders

It's the trials, the story behind the story, that makes a leader seasoned, and like salt on a steak, the seasoning makes them better.

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Resolute look

Silver streaks

Confident gait

Crow's feet

These are the subtle visual signs of a seasoned leader. They are the signs that he or she has been through something—a lot of something—and lived to tell about it. It makes them interesting and wise and, hopefully, courageous. They've had success and those are the tales they tell on their impressive bios, but it's the stuff they don't say in the bio that really makes a gripping story.

- It's the time they were fired or demoted
- The days of leading immediately after 9/11
- The failed acquisition
- The bankruptcy
- The months of breath holding while working to turn cash flow to a positive
- The lawsuits
- The affair
- The alcohol or prescription drug addition
- The wife or husband who left them
- The children who follow them

It's the trials, the story behind the story, that makes a leader seasoned, and like salt on a steak, the seasoning makes them better. Because it is in the trenches that they learn to keep getting up. And that is the lesson most of us need to learn during this extended time of corporate and financial uncertainty. We need to learn how to keep getting up, to bounce back, to survive, and to go on to tell the story to others one day. We all dream of having it easier, safer, and steadier, but maybe that isn't what we need. Maybe what we need is the turbulence.



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If you visit the Biosphere 2, a planet Earth research center at the University of Arizona, as you walk through the exhibits, the guide will point out that the trees are harnessed in place to allow them to stand upright and tall. While almost every force of nature such as the rainforest and ocean waves has been replicated inside the glass structure, the one missing is the force of a strong wind. Without the stress of the wind, the trees can't grow strong and will fall to the ground.

And perhaps it's that way with people, too. Without the trials and the struggles, we can't grow strong; our roots don't go deep enough to handle the pressure when the storm comes. Thus, it's not a life without stress that we should seek but instead, the wisdom to create a life that can withstand the stress and the fortitude to stick it out when the wind is blowing on us especially hard. While some stressful experiences in the workplace can be daunting, without these experiences leaders are unable to stand on their own, learn resilience, and grow stronger.

We often evaluate our elected officials, presidents, and even corporations by the way they handle crisis. Franklin D. Roosevelt, FDR, led the United States during a time of worldwide economic depression and war. His message, "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," reminded citizens that we have the strength, resilience, and optimism to endure challenges and have a lot to be thankful for.

In 1982, Johnson & Johnson recalled and destroyed 31 million capsules of Tylenol after seven people were killed by cyanide found in bottles on store shelves. The staggering cost of \$100 million dollars was a lot to overcome, but the quick, decisive action and introduction of tamper-resistant packaging enabled the company to earn trust and bounce back after the tragedy.

Apple Computer CEO and co-founder Steve Jobs said, "I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired by Apple was the best thing that could ever have happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life." In 1985, Jobs resigned and the following year purchased Pixar Animation Studios.

Even athletic superstar Michael Jordan attributes his ultimate success to failing over and over again in his life.

The [American Psychological Association](#) says resilience is a process that can be practiced and learned. It's not a trait of an individual, team, or corporate culture. Learning from the past and maintaining flexibility and balance in life is important.

How does a leader learn resilience, one of the key characteristics of a seasoned and successful leader? What are some of the strategies? Well, it isn't a one-size-fits-all answer.

Different approaches work for different people depending on the personality and leadership style of the individual. Here are a few approaches that may work for various leadership styles:

1. **Do what must be done.** The practical, matter-of-fact-type leader might find comfort in doing. They are more likely to accept the things that can't be changed and focus on the problems that CAN be solved. They will do best when they can establish a plan with a timeline and milestones, set goals, and get to work.
2. **Connect with others.** Relationship-oriented leaders can re-energize by reaching out to peers, customers, direct reports, friends, family, or even volunteering in the community to serve others. Seeking advice, communicating scenarios, and hearing stories of others' successes and failures helps this type of leader bounce back and move forward.
3. **Create a vision.** Enthusiastic, insightful leaders may find they are at their best when they can write down a vision, consider the big picture and establish a long-term strategy for achieving it. Communicating a vision helps them and others to visualize success in the present. Rallying others to the cause and beginning an exciting new journey or new direction in strategy gives this type of leader new energy and strength to move forward.

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4. **Problem-solve.** Leaders who consider themselves primarily logical thinkers who enjoy problem-solving may find relief from a set-back by attacking the issue with an exercise in critical thinking skills the same way we might work on a complex puzzle. In some situations, they may even benefit from creating a little competition either internally with a game or a prize for the team with the solution or externally by toying with the competition in some fun, healthy competition.
5. **Get creative.** Imaginative leaders may benefit from creative expression. They may find that their best ideas for solving a problem or recovering from a setback happen when they take a break and focus on something else, even totally unrelated, for a short while. Even when they are stuck, they can benefit with creative expression by going to a conference, going on vacation, calling a brainstorming session to get fresh eyes on the situation, creative writing, or listening to stories of how others have solved problems creatively. They can create their own, “aha” moment and trigger new approaches to the situation hours or even days after such an exercise.
6. **Reflect on key insights.** Introspective leaders may gain new energy by focusing on lessons learned after a tough moment, event, or project. Taking time to debrief is a key military tactic and works in the corporate world, as well. Focusing on what to do differently next time helps maintain a positive outlook and focus on future success rather than dwelling on what didn't work. It's a continuous improvement mindset minus the over-emphases on perfection the first time. By doing this, the leader gains confidence, as he or she learns and applies new learning when faced with a similar situation again,

Benjamin Disraeli said, “There is no education like adversity” and before inventing the light bulb, Thomas Edison is said to have “found 10,000 ways that don't work.” It's through failures, stormy days, and turbulence that leaders discover their ability to get back up, their inner strength, and learn to live the stories that inspire us today and guide future leaders as they, too, weather the storms and struggle by struggle grow into seasoned leaders.

Bonnie Hagemann is the CEO of Executive Development Associates (EDA), a global leadership consulting firm that specializes in executive assessment, development, and coaching. Hagemann specializes in leadership development, executive assessment, and executive coaching. To date, Hagemann has conducted full coaching programs for more than 65 leaders in medium and large organizations, including seven organizational presidents. She has delivered 250-plus presentations and speeches on leadership, teambuilding, communication, conflict, and behavior. She has 13 published works and a book, “Decades of Differences: Making it Work,” released in 2010 by HRD Press.

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